

SUSTAINING SISTERHOOD:
THE POWER OF SPIRITUAL RETREATS FOR WOMEN LEADERS
IN THE CHILDREN'S MOVEMENT

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Advisor: Traci C. West

Shannon Daley-Harris

Drew University

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ABSTRACT

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Shannon Daley-Harris

The Children's Defense Fund, Washington DC

What is the role of sisterhood in the struggle for justice, especially for women in the children's movement? Women child advocates work in a context of intersecting and multiplying pressures of sexism, racism, leadership responsibilities, and organizational challenges. They bear the emotional weight of serving and advocating for vulnerable children with the urgency that comes with experiencing it—for many—as a calling.

Coming from this context, women child advocates yearn for the company of women, safe space in which to be vulnerable and open, an experience of “just hospitality” which unites across difference with mutuality and a common sense of purpose, in a “welcoming place” that feels like holy ground.

Select biblical texts from Hebrew scripture and the New Testament point to the power of sisterhood in resistance, lament, support, shared theologizing, and worship, some centering those typically marginalized, disrupting oppressive systems, theologies, and practices, and offering insights to inspire, renew, or sustain justice work.

When we attend to women's lived experiences in their vocation as child advocates, we hear sacred stories that enlarge our understanding of who God is and how God works in and through us in a sisterhood of resistance, lament, support, shared theologizing, and worship. These sacred stories from lived experience offer a starting

place for doing theology, as they emerge from and lead to committed action and struggle with and for children and others on the margin.

Listening to women child advocates offers insights into the vital intersection of women's leadership, child advocacy, and movement-building. It reveals the need for sustaining sisterhood and spiritual renewal to resist, reimagine, and respond to changing and divisive political, religious, social, and cultural contexts in order to create new visions, relationships, strategies, and resources for a more just future.

Retreats for women child advocates advance the children's movement by forging supportive, authentic, and trustworthy sisterhood across difference, affirming a collective vision for the work we do, and sustaining and strengthening leaders to persist in that calling.

DEDICATION

To the sisters sustaining me and each other in the children's movement: Marian Wright Edelman, Janet Wolf, Emma Jordan Simpson, Oleta Garrett Fitzgerald, Rebecca Davis, Gina Jacobs-Strain, Donna Lawrence, Eileen Lindner, Jalaya Liles Dunn, Nelba Marquez-Greene, Mary Nell McPherson, Naomi Post, Wendy Purifoy, Michele Smith, and a constellation of others—like stars in the sky too many to name but whose light shines brightly, illumining the way forward on this journey to justice for our children.

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INTRODUCTION

For the past twenty-five years the Children's Defense Fund (CDF), a nonprofit, nonpartisan multi-issue child advocacy organization, has held a January women's spiritual retreat at CDF Haley Farm in Clinton, Tennessee. The first retreat involved just four women—CDF's founder, Marian Wright Edelman, CDF's director of religious affairs (this author), an ecumenical leader, Eileen W. Lindner, and a seminary professor, Diana Garland. Since that time, the retreat has grown to include two dozen women annually, a mix of CDF staff, denominational leaders, heads of women's organizations, organizers, and other child advocates. The retreat aims to advance the children's movement by strengthening the women through an experience of sisterhood in sacred space, as we share stories, insights into scripture and other texts and resources, meals, conversation, ritual, rest, and renewal.

The retreats have evolved organically over time, shaped by participants, leaders, and reading the work of other practitioners. This time of great demands on women leaders engaged in justice work, deepening struggles for children and families, and pandemic and cultural forces that are pressing for greater distance underscore and amplify the call to explore the role of sisterhood in sustaining women leaders in the children's movement and how spiritual retreats and sacred stories can help to sustain them.

The methodological approach for this exploration is centered, first and foremost, in attending to the voices of women child advocates who have participated in the retreats. Qualitative interviews provide richer insight grounded in the particularities of each

woman's experiences and identity than quantitative surveys or questionnaires would. I interviewed five women who represented a cross-section of participants—varied in age, race, ethnicity, religious tradition, professional role, relationship to CDF, and number of times participating in CDF's retreat. Each was interviewed over Zoom for thirty to sixty minutes. The second resource for this study was my own experience leading CDF's women's retreats over the past quarter-century. My perspective is conditioned by my identity as a white woman who has been deeply enriched and shaped by three decades of serving the Children's Defense Fund and mentoring by Marian Wright Edelman. Most recently my perspective has been deepened by partnership with Janet Wolf who is rooted in partnership with people most marginalized. Planning for and facilitating the most recent retreats collaboratively with her has enriched the process and result immeasurably. Working together has catalyzed far greater creativity, brought different perspectives, experiences, resources, approaches, and insights, stretched us, and provided treasured support. Also as part of my process for this study, I engaged as a participant in a variety of spiritual retreats (and was unable to participate in several canceled due to the pandemic), hoping they would provide useful comparisons and insights. Those experiences allowed me to more clearly identify the niche that CDF's women's retreat fills and the uniqueness of the women who have participated in CDF's retreats for women in the child advocacy movement. Finally, my approach is informed by and indebted to feminist and womanist scholarship across the fields of theology, ethics, biblical studies, and practical theology.

How might the children's movement be advanced through women's spiritual retreats that nurture supportive sisterhood? Listening to women offers insights into the

vital intersection of women's leadership, child advocacy and movement-building, and the need for sustaining sisterhood and spiritual renewal to resist, reimagine, and respond to a changing and divisive political, religious, social, and cultural context in order to create new visions, relationships, strategies, and resources for a more just future.

The pages that follow aim to heed and amplify women's voices speaking to the essential role that sisterhood in sacred space plays in strengthening and sustaining leadership in movement-building. Child advocates encounter a hostile political climate, pressing needs in populations they serve and for whom they advocate, and, often, institutional religious settings that do not center marginalized voices, speak powerfully to their justice concerns, embody diversity, or address their spiritual needs. Providing powerful spiritual retreats has the potential to meet this pressing need and strengthen and sustain those child advocates. There is a pervasive, urgent, and enduring need to listen to and learn from women's voices and create sacred spaces that center their experiences, connect them in sisterhood, provide an opportunity to develop theology that disrupts oppressive traditions and interpretations, and join them in lament, worship, and support.

We turn first to scriptural stories of sisterhood in resistance, mourning, support, shared theologizing, and worship to glean insights from them for the sisterhood of women child advocates today. Next, we look to the context in which women child advocates pursue their vocation to understand the challenges and dynamics that affect them in this work. Given that context, then, we look at how retreats may provide what women child advocates seek, through the company of women and the experience of just hospitality in a welcoming place experienced as holy ground. With that setting, what are the sacred stories that emerge from women's experiences that speak to sisterhood in

resistance, mourning, support, shared theologizing, and worship? Lastly, in light of these stories we consider the meaning of retreat space and how retreats for women child advocates may sustain and support them to advance the children's movement.

CHAPTER ONE: SISTERHOOD IN SCRIPTURE
INSIGHTS FROM BIBLICAL TEXTS ON GAINING STRENGTH FROM
SISTERHOOD TO ADVANCE THE CHILDREN’S MOVEMENT

What is the role of sisterhood in the struggle for justice, especially for women in the children’s movement? How do sacred stories point to the power of sisterhood in resistance, lament, support, shared theologizing, and worship? Do those stories center those typically marginalized, disrupt oppressive systems, theologies, and practices, and inspire, renew, or sustain justice work? What insights might we find in these sacred stories that speak to the role of sisterhood in the children’s movement today?

Hebrew scripture and the New Testament were shaped by male writers and editors for male-led religious practices, and are dominated by named male characters, perspectives, experiences, and theologies dating back millennia to an even more patriarchal culture. This creates a dual challenge: gleaning stories of sisterhood from the male-dominated narrative and looking beneath the male-constructed texts for hidden, resistant or alternative interpretations. This paper employs a hermeneutic of suspicion, acknowledging what is problematic in the texts while striving to draw valuable insights for women today seeking to advance the children’s movement.¹

The following discussion explores four passages of scripture, each with a particular focus: 1) Sisterhood in Resistance: Shiphrah and Puah (Exodus 1:15-22); 2)

¹Per Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza, “A hermeneutics of suspicion seeks to explore the liberative or oppressive values and visions inscribed in the text by identifying the androcentric-patriarchal character and dynamics of the text and its interpretations.” Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza, *But She Said: Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), 57.

Sisterhood in Lament: The Weeping Women (Jeremiah 9:17-22); 3) Sisterhood in Support and Shared Theologizing: Mary and Elizabeth (Luke 1:39-56); and 4) Sisterhood in Worship: Lydia and the Women Who Had Gathered There (Acts 16:13-15, 40). Two of the passages are from Hebrew scriptures—one from the Torah, the other from the Nevi'im/Prophets, and two are from the New Testament—one from the Gospels, the other from Acts. The texts represent a cross-section of scripture, women in different relationships—related by vocation, by family, and by faith, and take place in a variety of contexts—public square, private home, and place of worship. Taken together, the texts point to the varied and valuable ways that women have strengthened each other and still may strengthen each other in shared resistance, lament, support, shared theologizing, and worship in the pursuit of justice.

The exploration of each traditional sacred story is bookended with modern stories that relate to the passage, honoring the insights available in women's current experiences of sacred sisterhood and inviting connection and conversation between scripture and the narratives of our lives.

SISTERHOOD IN RESISTANCE: SHIPHRAH AND PUAH (EXODUS 1:15-22)

The late Diana Garland was a professor of church social work at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary (SBTS), and creator/convener of the Southern Baptist Child Advocacy Committee during the denominational and seminary take-over by religious conservatives who denied the call of women to the pulpit. Garland's defense of a prospective colleague against the conservatives' hiring litmus test—which required affirming that women are not called to preach—put her under great pressure. She remained at SBTS long enough to ensure that her last class of students could graduate

and then departed from SBTS for Baylor University. Baylor named its School of Social Work after Garland shortly before her death, honoring the impact she had inspiring, affirming, teaching, and mentoring generations of faithful women and men to heed their calling to social work that serves and protects the most vulnerable children and families.²

Garland was one of the four women at the first CDF women's spiritual retreat. Three of us were working on CDF's Lenten devotional guide, *Holding Children in Prayer*. We wrote during the day and in the evening one of us would read aloud what she had written. One night, Garland read to us her reflection on Exodus 1:6-22, focusing especially on verses 15-17. She wrote,

[Shiphrah and Puah] acted where they were in the ways available to them on behalf of children, the smallest and least powerful. They were probably frightened and overwhelmed with the task and the risk before them. Nevertheless, they were strong and unwavering, cunning and creative in defending the children. They were not alone, they had one another. Advocates need partners to share in the awesome work.

Most child advocates did not start out to be advocates, just as Shiphrah and Puah did not start out to become rescuers when they became midwives, nor did they imagine that their work would bring them into confrontation with the king. The time comes, however, when we realize that, indeed, we seem to be the only ones standing in defense of the health and well-being of children. We must decide: Whom do we fear? Whose laws and purposes will govern our actions? What if everyone, in their daily work, whatever it is, determined to make God's order their order, to put the smallest first, to take account of the children, even when it brings them face to face with Pharaoh?³

Although Exodus 1:8-2:10 appears in the Revised Common Lectionary for Year A Proper 21, neither Edelman nor I as the CDF's Religious Affairs Director—and both preachers' kids—were familiar with the midwives Shiphrah and Puah. Once Garland

²Katie Lauve-Moon, "The Case of Dean Diana Garland: Taking a Stand at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary," in *Women Leading Change*, Newcomb College Institute, n.d.

³Diana Garland, "Thursday: Fourth Week in Lent," in *Holding Children in Prayer: A Lenten Guide*, ed. Shannon Daley-Harris (Washington, DC: The Children's Defense Fund, 1997), 35.

introduced us to them, they became and remain vital scriptural touchpoints for our work. They exemplify courage in the face of injustice, the power of partnership or sisterhood in defying evil and oppression out of concern for children, and the smarts, strategy, and spiritual conviction that combine to protect children.

What do Shiphrah and Puah have to teach us about the power of sisterhood in resistance to oppression and the call to child advocacy? Shiphrah and Puah are identified by name in a passage in which the “king of Egypt” (Ex 1:15 NRSV) is unnamed—an unusual reversal in biblical tradition which much more frequently names men and leaves women unnamed and often unmentioned. Shiphrah and Puah are described as “Hebrew midwives” (Ex 1:15). Numerous commentators mention the ambiguity of the designation; it is not clear whether they are Egyptian midwives to the Hebrew women or Hebrew midwives to other Hebrew women.⁴ The names are Semitic in origin—Shiphrah means “beautiful,” suggesting that the midwives are Hebrew themselves.⁵ If they were Egyptian, the story would suggest the power of sisterhood and solidarity across ethnic and religious lines. If they are, as seems more likely, Hebrew women, the story offers the message of the power of those in and of the impacted community leading the resistance and standing up to oppressive powers on behalf of children.

⁴ Among those noting the ambiguity is Alice Ogden Bellis in *Helpmates, Harlots, and Heroes: Women’s Stories in the Hebrew Bible* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 84.

⁵ Interestingly, according to Mayer I. Gruber, Puah’s name could mean either “girl” or “shining one” if it derives from the Hebrew root *yp’* meaning “to shine” or it could mean “speaker” if derived from the Hebrew root *p’h* meaning “to cry out.” “Puah” in *Women in Scripture: A Dictionary of Named and Unnamed Women in the Hebrew Bible, the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books, and the New Testament* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2000), 137. Either meaning adds a layer of significance to the passage.

The designation “Hebrew” is more nuanced than simply meaning a neatly defined, ethnically and historically related people—offering new possibilities for considering the current relevance of this text. *The Torah: A Modern Commentary* explains: “‘Hebrew’ is a term generally agreed to come from the name of a group called Habiru (or ‘Apiru), people who had lost their status in the community to which they originally belonged. They were not necessarily related except by common fate, and such may in part have been the case in their Egyptian slavery.”⁶

In a further departure from typical references to women in scripture, the midwives Shiphrah and Puah are not described in relation to men in their lives (fathers, husbands, brothers, sons) but in their own right. Leading up to and during their courageous political acts of resistance, they are known as individuals and their voices are heard.

After the events, Exodus 1:20-21 notes that “God dealt well with the midwives; and the people multiplied and became very strong. And because the midwives feared God, [God] gave them batim”—which the NRSV translates “families” and the New Jewish Publication Society (NJPS) translates “households.” On one level, the text with the translation “families” may be heard regressively, as defaulting to childbearing as a woman’s reward. It is notable, however, that even in the context of being given families, specific men are not mentioned in relation to Shiphrah and Puah. Further, the Hebrew text translated “gave them families” is used in other passages (e.g., 2 Sam 7:11) to denote

⁶W. Gunther Plaut, General Ed., Dave E. S. Stein, General Ed. Revised Edition, *The Torah: A Modern Commentary Revised Edition* (New York: Reform Judaism Publishing, Central Conference of American Rabbis, 2005), 347. *A History of the Jewish People* adds, “...[T]his appellative [Haibiru] does not denote any specific people or ethnic group but rather a social concept...at all events the term connotes an inferior social class that, owing to either the foreign elements it contained or other causes, was outside the normal social pale and legal framework, much like the gerim (‘strangers’) of the Bible.” A Malamat, “Origins and the Formative Period,” in *A History of the Jewish People*, ed. H.H. Be-Sasson, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1969), 41.

dynasties—that is, rather than suggesting that Shiphrah and Puah’s reward is the gift of childbirth, it may mean instead that their reward was a more lasting and powerful legacy of lineage and generations known by their foremothers and not forefathers.⁷ The Torah: A Modern Commentary posits “this notice seems to be explaining the later presence of households with the unusual names ‘Beit-Shiphrah’ and ‘Beit-Puah’—claiming descent from these heroic midwives. (In ancient Israel, most households were named after men, as in 1:1, 2:2....)”⁸

Shiphrah and Puah acted together. They did not face and defy the edict of the most powerful person in their world alone. While the text only mentions these two midwives by name, it is likely that their act of resistance and defiance was joined by even more women given the scope and scale of subsequent births that the new king decried.

Carol Meyers, Wilda Gafney, and other scholars have described the existence of contemporaneous “guilds”—of prophets, midwives, mourners, and others. The guild of midwives would have connected midwives to each other to share information, skills, and practices. The midwives’ guild was a women-centered, women-led group that provided connection, leadership, expertise, authority, independence, and intergenerational mentoring. The midwives attended to women’s physical and emotional needs during vital life experiences fraught with fear and joy, risk and possibility, life and death. Shiphrah

⁷Wilda C. Gafney, *Womanist Midrash: A Reintroduction to Women of the Torah and the Throne*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017), 91. Tamara Cohn Eskenazi concurs: “Perhaps this notice [‘established households’] means to suggest that a lineage was named after each midwife; elsewhere in the Bible, the word *batim* (‘households’) refers not merely to progeny but to heading a lineage.” *The Torah: A Women’s Commentary*, (New York: Reform Judaism Publishing, 2008), 310.

⁸Plaut and Stein, *The Torah: A Modern Commentary*, 347.

and Puah, then, may have headed two of the guilds of midwives and led the other women in their guilds in the act of resistance.⁹

While Moses is popularly understood to be the leader of the Israelites' resistance to Pharaoh's oppression, Shiphrah and Puah are the first leaders of the Israelite resistance according to scripture. As Gafney puts it, "Shiphrah and Puah become the first deliverers in the book of deliverance."¹⁰

Not only does their resistance precede that of Moses, it predates the liberative acts of the divine in the text. Old Testament scholar Jacqueline Lapsley, in *Whispering the Word: Hearing Women's Stories in the Old Testament*, comments,

... The women's decision to deliver the vulnerable against all odds, to preserve the life of the weak, introduces the values of deliverance even before YHWH or Moses has begun to think of leading the Israelites out of Egypt. When God enters the scene and in a sense takes over the task of deliverance from the women, at that moment the transgressive "women's values" become the normative "divine values," values that point toward the liberation of all humanity, no matter what the boundaries defining human identity may be, in defiance of all socially and politically and culturally constructed limitations. The women's "deliverance values," embodied in their courageous boundary-crossing actions, foreshadow the divine salvific action to come.¹¹

Such a powerful and liberating theological insight that speaks to women's leadership has effectively "hidden in plain sight" for thousands of years; it underscores

⁹Carol Meyers, "Guilds and Gatherings: Women's Groups in Ancient Israel," in *Realia Dei: Essays in Archaeology and Biblical Interpretation in Honor of Edward F. Campbell, Jr. at His Retirement*, ed. Prescott H. Williams, Jr., and Theodore Hiebert (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1999), 164-165.

¹⁰"The liberation of the Israelite people in Egypt begins with Shiphrah and Puah. They are the mothers of a revolution waged by women. They likely enlisted untold numbers of birthing-women and expectant mothers in their resistance movement. It is not clear whether they deliver Moshe (Moses), Ahraron (Aaron), and/or Miryam (Miriam). In any case their act of resistance sets the stage for those to follow. Shiphrah and Puah become the first deliverers in the book of deliverance." Gafney, *Womanist Midrash*, 91.

¹¹Jacqueline E. Lapsley, *Whispering the Word: Hearing Women's Stories in the Old Testament* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 87.

the urgent imperative for women to bring their own analysis and theology to these ancient texts and even to more modern commentary, teaching, and preaching.

The new king's tactic was the essence of cruelty: targeting newborn babies—the most vulnerable, defenseless innocents. He believed his strategy of oppression to be “shrewd” (Ex 1:10), yet it was driven by lack of knowledge, fear, and prejudice, and so was ultimately ineffective. His fear of the Israelites focused on the males as the most dangerous threat—but it was the women who defied him first and more females than males are needed for the greatest number of births and expansion of future generations. Had the king's genocide been successful, he would also have depleted his enslaved labor force. His prejudice made him susceptible to the midwives' explanation for the baby boys surviving at birth.

The midwives, by contrast, employed a strategy informed by their knowledge of the oppressor that was courageous, faithful, and ethically nuanced. Their resistance had its origins in their faith which shaped their commitment and fed their courage to defy the evil policy. Their strategic response employed their knowledge of their oppressor and used his prejudices against him—offering an explanation that played on his belief that those he oppressed were unlike his own people and animal-like. They were willing to take ethically nuanced action (civil disobedience)—disobeying an unjust law and lying to the oppressor for the greater good.¹²

¹²Drorah O'Donnell Setel suggests that the lie here reinforces biblical depictions of women as deceptive. “Their work entails an understanding of the connection between transformation and risk, although the means by which they rebel against Pharaoh reiterates a biblical pattern of female deception [1:19; cf Gen 27:5-17; 31:34-35].” Drorah O'Donnell Setel, “Exodus,” in *The Women's Bible Commentary*, ed. Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1992), 30.

Their strategy was realistic. They did not oppose the king to his face, something that surely would have failed and prevented them from their rescue efforts. Drorah Setel in *The Women’s Bible Commentary* discussion of Exodus notes that the “[Hebrew midwives] are the only women in Exodus to act in an overtly political sphere, having direct contact with Pharaoh.”¹³ Jonah Dov Pesner reflects, “The presence and power of Puah and Shiphrah make the point clear: resistance to injustice is always possible. In the case of our Exodus, even the least powerful are able to thwart a seemingly omnipotent tyrant.”¹⁴ While their strategy was successful in the short term, however, it did not eliminate the evil; after the midwives’ civil disobedience, the “Pharaoh commanded all his people” (Ex 1:22a) to carry out the genocide. From that perspective, it points to the need for sustained and growing resistance and the development of new strategies for ultimate success in ending oppression. Too, it underscores the importance of remembering for resistance—passing stories of strength and struggle from one generation to the next.

Returning to the core questions, how does the story of Shiphrah and Puah point to the power of sisterhood in resistance? On the face of it, it reminds us that two women can stand together and strategically undermine oppression, interacting directly with the powerful and protecting the most vulnerable. But the deeper look suggests that more than those two catalytic women are needed—that the success of the resistance is likely reliant on a much broader number of women with the collaboration of those most immediately

¹³Setel, “Exodus,” 30.

¹⁴Jonah Dov Pesner, “In Every Generation: The Obligations of Our Exodus,” in *Moral Resistance and Spiritual Authority: Our Jewish Obligation to Social Justice*, ed. Seth M. Limmer and Jonah Dov Pesner (New York: Central Conference of American Rabbis, 2019), 92.

impacted (like the birthing mothers) and those with position to support the resistance (like the midwives). Pre-existing networks of women help enable the successful spread and implementation of a strategy of resistance.

It seems instrumental, not incidental, that midwives were at the center of the resistance—the birth experience was a uniquely woman-only space in ancient culture, which impacted women and professional women in immediate, intimate, emotional relationship without imposition of male dominance or perspective. One wonders what other spaces could possibly have allowed the leadership, partnership, decision-making, and strategy of women to be the focus. Proximity matters, and midwives were ones with long experience of the risks and possibilities, life and death, fears and hopes, courage and struggle that attended even ordinary births; perhaps that prepared them for courageous action on a larger scale when the time came.

The story centers those typically marginalized: the minority Hebrew people during a time of Egyptian oppression. As discussed, the designation “Hebrew” specifically denoted a group that had lost community, who were bound into new community by the very fact of their separation from community and bondage.

The story further centers those typically marginalized by naming and focusing on women in a broader biblical narrative dominated by men—and focusing on them not as the objects of others’ action or compassion but as the key actors and catalysts for courageous action.

The story points to the disruption of oppressive systems, theologies, and practices. The midwives’ actions disrupt the king’s initial plan for the midwives to be instruments of the genocide of male Hebrew babies. It affirms the value of prioritizing love of God

and what we understand to be God's intentions for our life together over corrupt or evil political leaders and authorities. It unsettles the common theology that assumes Moses was the first to act as liberator and leader of the Israelites in response to Egyptian oppression and even offers a new image of the women's values or actions presaging or setting the model for scripture's subsequent depiction of divine liberative values and actions.

Juliana Claassens, in *Mourner, Mother, Midwife: Reimagining God's Delivering Presence in the Old Testament*, goes further to suggest that "midwife" may be a potent metaphor for God as Deliverer, part of Claassens' work to move beyond Liberator-Warrior divine images. In addition to the Hebrew midwives embodying and preceding God's delivering action in the Exodus, Claassens identifies several texts that use midwife imagery for God.¹⁵

This story's capacity to inspire, renew, or sustain justice work is captured by Lapsley in *Whispering the Word: Hearing Women's Stories in the Old Testament*, as she affirms, "To read Exodus 1-4 as Scripture is to read for the values the stories embodies, to rejoice in the possibility of engaging in the work of God across the boundaries that separate us, and to acknowledge the challenge of it. Women who work together to protect the vulnerable and to defy violence do the work of God, and it is our work."¹⁶ Lapsley

¹⁵ Claassens identifies the following texts with divine midwife imagery: Psalm 22 ("Yet it was you who took me from my mother's womb..."), Psalm 71 ("Upon you have I leaned from my birth; it was you who took me from my mother's womb,") and Isaiah 66:9 ("Shall I open the womb and not deliver? Says the Lord: shall I, the one who delivers, shut the womb? Says your God.") Julia L. Claassens, *Mourner, Mother, Midwife: Reimagining God's Delivering Presence in the Old Testament* (Louisville; Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), 64-65.

¹⁶ Lapsley, *Whispering the Word*, 87-88.

also contends, significantly, that the most powerful examples of women's action in scripture are found in the stories of women acting together. She affirms,

Thus where we really see “women's values” at work in the Old Testament is when women are working together in groups, and significantly these groups often do not allow ethnic or class differences to prevent their uniting across traditional boundaries that would normally keep them apart. In our own time when “identity politics” fractures people into smaller and smaller (and less and less effective) groups, the Old Testament makes a strong contrary claim, while still preserving the idea that women in particular find their power when they band together.¹⁷

The story of the midwives has been a powerful source of discussion and discernment during some of CDF's women's spiritual retreats as we strive to protect children, birth new possibilities amid death-dealing empire, and struggle together in the face of oppression, sustained by faith. Just as the Hebrew babies were the most vulnerable targets for Pharaoh's cruel oppression, our focus centers on the children who bear the brunt of our nation's injustice—especially children of color, children whose families are impoverished, children impacted by our nation's mass incarceration. And I can imagine, as Garland faced down the authorities that denied the life-giving calling of women to ministry, that she found comfort and courage in her sisterhood with Shiphrah and Puah.

SISTERHOOD IN LAMENT: THE WEEPING WOMEN (JEREMIAH 9:17-22)

At a recent CDF retreat, one participant was a woman who had lost her young daughter to a public massacre that had captured the nation's horrified attention years before. Because my co-leader and I knew that she was among us and the other women for

¹⁷Lapsley, *Whispering the Word*, 88.

the first time we had put thought into the content of the program so that she would not be “ambushed” by texts forcing her to discuss or disclose her grief if she did not want to.

The first evening centered on sharing in a circle in response to a prompt—“Introduce us to someone who....” In the past, we introduced each other, through stories and recollections, to grandmothers, mothers, a child who had led us to or kept us in this work. This year we displayed a poster of the Harriet Tubman Museum & Education Center mural titled “Take My Hand,” depicting Tubman reaching her hand toward the viewer. We invited the women to respond to the prompt, “Introduce us to someone who reached their hand out to you and helped you start or continue on your journey to seek justice.” From experience, I had a box of tissues ready.

As the sharing began, I was aware of the grief-stricken mother sitting to my left. One by one, when they were ready, women shared their stories of someone who had reached out their hand, lighting small tea candles placed on the table in the middle of us after they did. After a few shares, one participant told through tears of her childhood in an orphanage, and a teacher who had reached out. A young woman spoke of childhood in a country with few family resources, and being welcomed into the home of a woman she now called “Mom.” More tears flowed. “Mom” went to the bathroom and grabbed a roll of toilet paper to supplement the box of tissues. A professor spoke, voice breaking, of losing her advisor and friend Christian ethicist Katie Geneva Canon. Women shared stories of an aunt, an uncle, a mentor, a mother.

By the time the grieving mother shared the tragic loss she had sustained—telling how her congregation had reached out its hands to her and her surviving son—she was in no way the “designated mourner,” an object of pity, called on for public, performative

grief. Here, her grief, her tears, her loss were personal and profound but companioned by that of the women around her. She was not alone. After she shared, the stories continued—of being homeless, of being held up at gunpoint, of being hopeless and encouraged to carry on in a march for civil rights.

Lament is crucial on multiple levels: personally, psychologically, theologically, publicly, politically, prophetically. As an expression of pain, grief, and regret, lament declares that what has happened is not right, that there is pain and sorrow, that what is now is worse than what was and not as good as what should or could be.

Lament occurs throughout scripture—the solitary wailing of Hagar (Gn 21:16); the cry of Rachel the mother and the symbolic mother of a nation (Jer 33:15-17); even Pharaoh “and all his officials and all the Egyptians; and there was a loud cry in Egypt, for there was not a house without someone dead.” (Ex 12:30). It is a perennial human experience.

Lament may be personal or communal. In scripture and human experience, sometimes lament is for an individual or family loss. Other times lament expresses grief for the people as a whole, for a community or nation. It varies according to circumstance—some lament is for the accidental or unavoidable which nonetheless provokes grief. Other lament is for harm and loss inflicted deliberately, with unjust and evil intent... grinding hearts down to another level of pain accompanied by outrage, regret, horror, and anger.

Lament is not only the voicing of emotional pain; it can serve as prophetic expression and has a public, political, and theological dimension.¹⁸ Christian social ethicist and theologian Emilie Townes observes,

Suffering that moves us to pain that can be named and then addressed is, in a word, formful. By extension, it has a deep moral character that helps the discipline of social ethics do its work. For a communal lament happens in community, and this corporate experience of calling for healing makes suffering bearable and manageable in the community. When we grieve, when we lament, we acknowledge and live in the experience rather than try to hold it away from us out of some misguided notion of being objective or strong. We hurt; something is fractured, if not broken. A foul spirit lives in us and among us. We are living in structures of evil and wickedness that make us ill. We must name them as such and seek to repent—not out of form—but from the heart. It is only then that we can begin to heal.¹⁹

Women in modern times have been derided, diminished, and discounted for displaying emotion—especially tears and grief—in professional and public settings. Rather than lament being seen as a valuable skill and contribution to public life, women have been taught to refrain from any show of emotion in professional settings if they want to be taken as seriously as men. When lament is replaced by more clinical analysis or dispassionate description of crises, oppression, and suffering, we lose the prophetic protest and potential for healing and change that the “mourning women” of biblical times helped usher in.

The passage refers to mourners as “skilled women” (Jer 9:17). Like midwives, mourners were members of guilds—benefitting from the same kinds of connections and

¹⁸ Wilda C. Gafney, *Daughters of Miriam: Women Prophets in Ancient Israel* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 160.

¹⁹ Emilie M. Townes, “The Doctor Ain’t Taking No Sticks,” in *Embracing the Spirit: Womanist Perspectives on Hope, Salvation, and Transformation*, ed. Emilie M. Townes (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997), 183.

from intergenerational transmission of knowledge and skills.²⁰ The Jeremiah passage affirms the powerful, primary relationships that can be born of shared concerns and commitments rather than blood. In the instruction “teach to your daughters a dirge, and each to her neighbor a lament” (Jer 9:20b), “daughter” refers not to biological family but one who becomes as family through the shared vocation. The English translation “neighbor” in this verse obscures the Hebrew which denotes a specifically female neighbor.²¹

The relationship of these mourning women to the divine is affirmed in several ways. It is God—“Thus says the Lord...” (Jer 9:17)—who who calls for the mourning women, according to the prophet. It is the women’s own ears which will hear God’s word: “Hear, O women, the word of the Lord, and let your ears receive the word of [God’s] mouth” (Jer 9:20). The women are entrusted with sharing the divine message, words and ways of lament to other women—daughters and neighbors. Although the book of Jeremiah purports to capture the words of a male prophet conveying this message, it nonetheless is a prophetic utterance that affirms women’s own direct communication with the divine and own action as divine calling and public service.

²⁰ Carol Meyers writes, “Women mourners summoned for funeral rituals are denoted by terms indicating group or guild associations.... ‘[D]aughters’ signifies a group or guild of practitioners. The same can be said for the women called up on Jer. 9:16-19 to recite dirges for Zion. Those mourning experts are called ‘skilled’ women, i.e., women with a trade; and they teach their ‘daughters’ and ‘neighbors’ the appropriate laments. The mentoring aspects of guilds of women mourners is clear in this text, in which ‘daughters’ may represent novice mourners and ‘companions’ indicate peers. These passages reveal that ritual mourning was a profession to be learned and transmitted in guild associations so that women keepers, who could draw upon existing laments and also compose new ones to fit the occasion, would be available when needed.” Meyer, “Guilds and Gatherings,” 168.

²¹ Of interest is that the same Hebrew word for neighbor, transliterated *reuth* from the root *raah*, appears six times, including Exodus 11:2 reiterating God’s instruction for Hebrew women to ask Egyptian women/neighbors for gold and silver for the exodus. The Hebrew shares the same root as the name Ruth which means “friendship.” [Hhttps://biblehub.com/Hebrew/7468.htm](https://biblehub.com/Hebrew/7468.htm)

Returning to the core questions, this passage speaks to the power of sisterhood in lament—one woman was not called to be a solo voice of lament, but instead a community of women were called to share in the lament. It acknowledges the importance of women in teaching, mentoring, supporting other women in joining the expression and profession of lament. For grief so deep, problems so huge, injustice so intractable, scripture recognizes the need for women to come together to lament.

This passage centers marginalized voices—women literally give voice for the community, are asked to cry out and be heard. It affirms the role of women in naming and responding to public injustice in a way that intends to change public behavior and systemic injustice. As Christian ethicist Traci West observes, “They play an authoritative pedagogical role for the community that is intergenerational—they must teach that public participation to their children, specifically their daughters, so that the resistance speech-act of lament is continued in the next generation and the unique role of women/daughters is preserved” (Traci West, email message to author, May 1, 2020).

This passage disrupts oppressive theologies by affirming direct communication between the divine and women in scripture which more often depicts men as God’s go-betweens. It lifts up grief and lament as powerful and prophetic, rather than promoting vapid “God never gives us more than we can bear” theologies.

The passage of the mourning women is a powerful resource for us to sustain ourselves as women in the work of child advocacy. It affirms that our work rightly begins in lament and grief about the injustice that afflicts our children. Until we reckon with the grief, proclaim the injustice, lament the systems and world that is, we cannot effectively move to healing and transformation into the world that God desires.

At a recent retreat, not led by CDF, the first evening began with a circle time during which each person introduced themselves and shared an object of meaning. Most of us had already spoken when one woman began to share, with her voice breaking and tears spilling out, about how sad she was that her teenage children would soon be leaving home for college and moving on to adulthood. We sat in supportive silence as she gave her grief voice, lamented.

Two days later, at the closing circle of the retreat, one of the facilitators expressed appreciation for that participant's vulnerability from the very first night, and affirmed that he believed it helped set the tone and open up the deeply vulnerable and honest sharing that had ensued for the following two days. As each person offered their own thoughts in this closing circle, the grieving mother said, again with tears welling but now with gratitude in her voice, "The 'sad' is still there; but I needed a place to be sad."

SISTERHOOD IN SUPPORT AND SHARED THEOLOGIZING: MARY AND ELIZABETH (LUKE 1:24-55)

Some thirty years ago, a woman named Liz invited me to join a newly forming women's prayer group which included a mutual friend as well as Liz's sister Mary, her cousin, and long-time friends. We met over the next fourteen years, each of us at different and changing places in our lives: married with children, newly married, engaged, single, employed, at home raising their families. We supported each other through job challenges and career changes, miscarriages and births, ordinations and crises of faith, marriages and marital challenges, parenting our children and caring for our aging parents.

At one gathering during a year when I was struggling to conceive, Liz called the women into a circle around me to offer palpable support, love, and prayers that I might become pregnant as I so fervently hoped. Some months later when we gathered, I offered

to pray before our meal. I included thanks for the new life growing in me—enjoying the sudden raising of heads and delight of my sisters. At a later meeting, as my pregnancy progressed, those who had given birth spoke candidly and intimately from their varied experiences of home births and births in hospitals. There is deep strength and profound sustenance in sisterhood, finding time and sacred space for spiritual renewal and sharing wisdom and experiences unique to our lives as women.

The passage in Luke 1:24-55 speaks to the strength and sustenance that is to be found in such sisterhood, as Mary and Elizabeth connect in mutual support during their pregnancies. Their pregnancies are in many ways opposite—one in youth, before marriage, before even desired; the other in old age, after decades of marriage, long desired. Yet the pregnancies are alike in being unexpected, connected to a sense of the divine, and cherished. Elizabeth and Mary experience profound spiritual connection to each other and to God who is experienced as available in a new way through the new life growing in their wombs. Elizabeth, in fact, becomes the first person in Luke's gospel to make a Christological affirmation.

Elizabeth, according to Lk 1:24, “remained in seclusion” for five months after she conceived. What is one to make of this seclusion? Was it customary in early Jewish tradition or was this unique to Elizabeth's circumstance? Many sources do not mention or explain the seclusion; others address the seclusion only for its relevance to Mary or as a narrative device.²² Barbara E. Reid, in *Choosing the Better Part? Women in the Gospel of*

²² Alan R. Culpepper, for instance, writes: “Elizabeth's five-month seclusion sets the stage for the angelic revelation of Elizabeth's condition to Mary (1:36). Because of Elizabeth's seclusion, the reader will understand that Mary did not learn that Elizabeth was expecting a child until Gabriel revealed it to her.” Alan R. Culpepper, “Luke,” in *The New Interpreters Bible Vol IX: Luke, John*, ed. Leander Keck (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 47-48.

Luke asserts, “From a sociocultural perspective, Elizabeth would be seen to behave correctly by secluding herself in her condition. She would be acting according to the attitudes deemed proper for females: inwardness, submission, shyness, passivity, timidity, and restraint” as well as using the seclusion as “a time of contemplation.”²³

New Testament scholar Eric Barreto offers a different insight into Elizabeth’s seclusion. Barreto describes his and his wife’s anguish after a miscarriage. When they shared their grief with church members, they were surprised to learn how many others had suffered the same loss—but in silence, without the knowledge or support of the church. Barreto wonders if this passage was not, as commonly assumed, about Elizabeth’s first, miraculous pregnancy. Could it be, he asks, that she had suffered the loss of many pregnancies before this one? Was her “seclusion” a weary retreat and guard against a new round of questions, new expectations or skepticism, from a community to whom she might need to say, yet again, that she had lost a pregnancy? It offers a very different insight into what Elizabeth’s seclusion—with a mute husband, no less—might have been like; bearing hope and fear alone, away from a community that had not established itself—in her experience—as a supportive place to share grief or fragile hope.²⁴

Imagine, then, the impact of young Mary’s arrival and stay for the last three months of old Elizabeth’s pregnancy—shattering the solitude and creating supportive sisterhood in which they could share the hopes and fears around their unlikeliest of

²³Barbara E. Reid, *Choosing the Better Part? Women in the Gospel of Luke* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1996), 63.

²⁴Eric Barreto, “Promise Fulfilled: Jesus Saves Us from Hopelessness to Hope,” lecture, Nassau Presbyterian Church, March 1, 2020, audiorecording, <http://nassauchurch.org/adult-education-archive>

pregnancies, give voice to the faith-filled experience and insights they found in the babies they carried and in each other. To whom else could each confide the divine and miraculous circumstances without fear of scoffing or skepticism?

While Mary and Elizabeth's mutual support was centered in the culturally approved female sphere of the home, their theologizing had more far-reaching implications and understanding of their import. The importance of their experiences, they understood, were not confined to the domestic sphere but had political, theological, prophetic, and salvific impact.²⁵

Reid notes the contrast between Mary and Elizabeth's mutual support and more common depictions of female rivalries in scripture: Sarah and Hagar, Rachel and Leah, Peninnah and Hannah.²⁶ Mary and Elizabeth, Reid writes, "are mutually supportive and understanding, each accepting her own role in salvation history, and not threatened by that of the other. They serve as models of the power of cooperation over the destructiveness of competition."²⁷

How, then, does this passage point to the power of sisterhood in support? It alludes to women's strength and persistence in seeking out sisterhood when needed; Mary travelled approximately one hundred miles to reach Elizabeth and to return home.

²⁵Nonetheless, feminist and womanist theologians wrestle with traditional theology focused on the use of Mary and Elizabeth's bodies as "vessels," especially in light of America's racist history in which the bodies of women of color were used with impunity by white men while white women were lauded for their presumed gentility, femininity, and motherhood. Women too have been dichotomized by patriarchy as either "virgin or whore" with scripture weaponized against them.

²⁶Reid, *Choosing the Better Part?*, 73.

²⁷Reid, *Choosing the Better Part?*, 74.

We see in Mary and Elizabeth’s experience the power of women theologizing together—theology deeply rooted in personal experience, embodied particularity, and conviction of God’s commitment to justice. We are reminded of the power of sisterhood that bridges different life experiences and unites women in shared conviction that our lives, theological insights, and truths matter. This Lukan passage centers those typically marginalized—women, each of whom was vulnerable to community derision or disgrace as a result of her female biology: Mary for becoming pregnant unmarried, Elizabeth as one who had “failed” to become pregnant for so long. It affirms as valid and valued their theological proclamations.

Elizabeth’s own theologizing is heard in her Christological pronouncement and her recognition of herself as blessed by God for her own faith. Mary’s Magnificat is one of scripture’s clearest statements of faith that challenges oppressive systems, theologies, and practices as it affirms women’s theological insights. Mary’s Magnificat affirms her own blessedness and that God has done “great things for me.” Mary’s Magnificat, using the present tense for God’s reversals and fulfillment of God’s promises, predates and is echoed by Jesus’ later reading Isaiah’s declaration of God’s liberative, justice-loving intention for those most oppressed and asserting that “today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing” (Lk 4:21).

Their other theological sister is the Syrophenician woman whose persistent and insistent theological claims as she advocates for her child—marginalized by Jesus initially just as the child and she were marginalized in the culture—changed Jesus’ own theological conviction of who is worthy of blessing. As Wolf writes in *Practicing Resurrection: The Gospel of Mark and Radical Discipleship*, “...the Syrophenician

woman's faith breaks through the theologies and structures of cultural norms and expectations (Mark 7:24-30). She defies established customs, upsets religious and society boundaries, and in doing so she dismantles the structures that prevent healing from happening."²⁸ As a result of her advocacy and theological conviction, Wolf writes, "the Syrophenician woman in the Bible invites Jesus to enlarge his theology and create a table where no one waits for crumbs but all are welcomed to feast at the banquet table, to sit side by side."²⁹

West, in *Disruptive Christian Ethics: When Racism and Women's Lives Matter*, urges attention to the particularities of the text and resistance to "universalizing" interpretations; when we lose the details, we may lose meanings that could illuminate current realities and experiences. For example, regarding the historical details of Mary's life, West writes, "Insofar as it is possible to reconstruct and imagine them, Christians could find courage for countercultural support of poor women [being villainized in 1990s welfare reform discourse] from these particular realities of the historical Mary's life."³⁰ Considering the Magnificat, West writes,

Attentive listening can, perhaps, allow Mary to have liberative significance in the midst of restrictive intentions and could open the way for the listener to be affected by her challenging message.

As she serves God's interests, Mary prophesies about God's power. The significance of her pregnancy is asserted with this pronouncement about how God exercises divine power in society. Mary explains that God is concerned with the poor and lowly as well as the rich and the powerful. Her prophecy indicates a

²⁸Janet Wolf, *Practicing Resurrection: The Gospel of Mark and Radical Discipleship* (New York: United Methodist Women, 2019), 35.

²⁹*Ibid.*, 37.

³⁰Traci C. West. *Disruptive Christian Ethics: When Racism and Women's Lives Matter* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 99.

direct relationship between what the rich and the poor deserve, and what the powerful and the lowly deserve.³¹

This scholarship is not merely an intellectual exercise but points to the import for vital contemporary ethical and public policy conversations and decision-making. West writes, “This message guides Christians to look for this kind of parity in contemporary public policies,” pointing out the hypocrisy in the welfare reform debate which called for “the birth rate among welfare dependents [to be] zero” while ignoring the corporate welfare and tax breaks reaped by the wealthy.³²

What insights might we find in this story of Elizabeth and Mary that speak to the role of sisterhood in the children’s movement today? Successful organizing and movement building requires cooperation over competition. Connection across difference can be profound and supportive. The passage lifts up women’s embodied, incarnational theological knowledge, and affirms women’s naming and claiming their blessedness. This passage depicts the power of a woman-only space for profound theological sharing and mutual support without male intrusion, permission, or perspectives.

My graduation from seminary fell the day before I was due to give birth to my second child. Afterward, I stood in my graduation robe, daughter shifting in my womb, holding my diploma. My women’s group sisters greeted me with a graduation gift—a framed picture of a cross made by the hands of their children dipped in paint. With diploma in one hand, symbolizing years of academic study, and the cross made of children’s handprints, gift of a sisterhood, in the other, I was reminded the theological

³¹ West, *Disruptive Christian Ethics*, 99.

³² *Ibid.*

work of faith-based child advocacy springs from not one alone but both sources of support, sustenance, and wisdom. The first contractions began which would lead to the birth of our daughter Sophia (wisdom) the next day.

SISTERHOOD IN WORSHIP: LYDIA AND THE WOMEN WHO HAD GATHERED THERE (ACTS 16:13-15, 40)

CDF's spiritual retreats take place inside the gates to CDF Haley Farm. When one passes through the gates, one is leaving behind the rapidly growing town of Clinton, Tennessee, site of one of the earliest school desegregation battles and a community with confederate flags still flying over homes, businesses, and from the back of pickup trucks. As the gates swing closed behind you, the gravel drive wends through the grounds along a creek to Haley Lodge, where we gather for the women's spiritual retreats.

Any mention of Lydia in Acts commonly brings to mind her identity as a "dealer of purple cloth" (Acts 16:14)—her role as a businesswoman, and her role in opening her home to Paul, Silas, and a nascent church. The unnamed women who were with Lydia the first time she is mentioned in Acts are easily overlooked. "On the Sabbath day, we [Paul and Timothy] went outside the gate by the river where we supposed there was a place of prayer; and we sat down and spoke to the women who had gathered there" (Acts 16:13). So who were the women gathered by the river outside of town, what did it mean for them to be at a place of prayer together, and how did Paul and Silas' insertion of themselves into this all-female gathering change, disrupt, or destroy the experience of sisterhood that centered women's experience, theology, and leadership?

Craddock, Wall, and others note that the “place of prayer” could have been a synagogue but may have been a less formal location. The gathering would have been for worship in Jewish tradition.³³

Lydia’s designation as a “Godfearer” or “worshiper of God” (Acts 16:14) is the term for Gentiles who participated in Jewish worship without having converted.³⁴ It is not known how many of the other women gathered with her were “Godfearers” and how many were Jews. What difference might it have made that she was neither fully in nor fully out of the Jewish tradition of worship when Paul arrived? Might that have made Lydia more susceptible to his preaching than the others? Was she one who was open to discerning truth or meaning in various traditions?

The gathering—until Paul arrived—was only women. Amy L. Wordelman, in “Everyday Life: Women in the Period of the New Testament,” describes a variety of co-ed and single sex private religious associations (including but not limited to synagogues), and notes, “In a world that barred women from direct political power, these religious associations provided an arena in which women could and did exercise leadership

³³Robert W. Wall notes, “The term ‘place of prayer’ (proseuche) is synonymous with ‘synagogue,’ even those in this case the term designates a marginal location outside the city gates and beside a small river on the southern edge of town.” “Acts” in *The New Interpreters Bible Vol X: Acts, Introduction to Epistolary Literature, Romans, I Corinthians*, ed. Leander Keck (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002), 231.

³⁴“Godfearers’ was a semitechnical term for those interested and supportive Gentiles who formed a penumbra around the synagogue community without become Jewish proselytes. ‘Fear’ here means ‘worship,’ as often in the Bible. They were impressed with Jewish monotheism and ethics and sometimes attended the synagogue, but remained Gentiles, were not circumcised, and did not keep the Jewish food laws.” Fred B. Craddock and Eugene M. Boring, *The People’s New Testament Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 401.

roles.”³⁵ Gail R. O’Day muses on the passage in Acts, “Even this brief reference, however, opens up a whole new way of envisioning the lives of first-century Christian women. Were there other gatherings of women that have gone unreported? This Sabbath gathering suggests that as early as the first century, women believers sought ways to hear their own voices and stories in worship, freed from the dictates of the male-dominated church.”³⁶ To uncover the existence and powerful potential of women-only worship spaces, one needs to peel back and peer beneath the patriarchal text to even glimpse the possibility. The passage as it is presented in Luke and commonly taught highlights Lydia’s conversion after Paul’s preaching and teaching, her hospitality to Paul and the new church that gathered in her home, and her identity as head of household and catalyst for the conversion of those in it.³⁷

Notice, however, how the women recede still further from view. The New Revised Standard Version translation of Acts 16:40 reads “After leaving the prison [Paul and Silas] went to Lydia’s home; and when they had seen and encouraged the brothers and sisters there, they departed.” However, this translation acknowledges that it has

³⁵ Amy L. Wordelman, “Everyday Life: Women in the Period of the New Testament,” in *The Women’s Bible Commentary*, ed. Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1992), 395.

³⁶ Gail R. O’Day, “Acts” in *The Women’s Bible Commentary*, ed. Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1992), 308.

³⁷ Robert W. Wall, for example, enthuses, “...The case of Lydia is especially invigorating as an example of the church’s counterculture. She makes her entrance into Acts as a religious person without permission of or reference to her husband. The first place mentioned is not her home but a ‘place of prayer,’ and when she does mention her home it is by self-reference: It is ‘my’ home. The impression is given that she is self-sufficient, a successful businesswoman with a decent income whose hospitality demonstrates her fine character. In all these ways, Luke has Lydia play the role of an ideal convert. His depiction of the early relations between a male religious leader and a female outsider symbolizes a counterculture that remains impressive even for our modern liberal democracies.” “Acts” in *The New Interpreters Bible Vol. X*, 235.

inserted “and sisters;” the Greek only mentions “the brothers” (adelphous). Luke does not use “and sisters” (kai adelphas) as Mark does in places (“ἀδελφοὺς καὶ ἀδελφὰς”); it is not that the formulation does not exist as an option. And, the author of Luke-Acts frequently uses the formulation “men and women.”³⁸ The omission of “and sisters” would appear, then, to be intentional, not unavoidable. Here, when the men are included, the women disappear.

Rather than seeing Lydia’s conversion as countercultural, as does Wall, more persuasive is Mary Rose D’Angelo’s contention that Luke’s emphasis on women reflects a balancing act of “catechizing women converts who are still of real importance to the church” at the time while reassuring political authorities that women were not exercising church leadership in ways that would be “un-Roman.”³⁹

In sum, the story of Lydia has a different word about the power of sisterhood in worship than one might have imagined. Looking beyond the pedestal the lone woman is placed on—first European converted by Paul, financial success in a man’s world, hospitality extended to men—the real story is a cautionary tale. The power of sisterhood lies in the gathering of women by the river when, before Paul’s spontaneous arrival and insertion of himself into the leadership, the women lead their own time of prayer. When the men insert themselves into the situation, the circle is disrupted, one of their number is drawn away, and she (and any who followed her conversion and/or who join her house

³⁸Mary Rose D’Angelo, “Women in Luke-Acts: A Reactional View,” in *Journal of Biblical Literature*, Vol. 109, No. 3 (Autumn, 1990), 445.

³⁹*Ibid.*, 443.

church) disappear in the text as Paul “saw and encouraged the *brothers*.” [emphasis mine.]

This passage offers insights into the power of worshipping community among those on the margins—as Lydia and the women who gather are literally and socially on the margins, with the benefit of distance from male-dominated formal and organized worship life. It doesn’t name any one of them, in the original gathering, as the single appointed “leader” but instead seems to suggest a model of shared leadership.

This passage also points to the costs in moving to the center when worship life is defined and dominated by male leadership.

With attention, this passage disrupts oppressive practices and theologies by affirming the existence and value of women-only gatherings for prayer in ancient times as well as our own. It belies the myth that only men held leadership in Jewish tradition. At best, it centers a woman head of household and wage-earner who housed the first church in Europe. However, at the same time it reminds us to notice what happens when men enter what were previously all-women worship spaces, and it asks who is unheard, overlooked, and unencouraged in mixed-gender worship and other settings that privilege male leadership.

Carefully considered, this story in scripture may inspire and renew justice work through its affirmation of women’s leadership in women-only gatherings for worship and other purposes, and its acknowledgment of Lydia’s pivotal role in the beginning of Christianity in Europe. Its deepest support to sustaining the justice work of women, however, may be its reminder to stand with and by each other, to resist the call to join the men if and when it means abandoning the sisters and subsuming our visibility, voice, and

agency in worship and other aspects of conversation and connection. It urges us to be sustained by the power of the collective and to recognize the dangers of being the token woman in worship or any setting that otherwise ignores the presence and leadership of women.

An early mentor offered many good forms of support and guidance but also some lessons that needed to be unlearned. As I remember it, after I invited her to join the leadership of CDF's women's retreat, she told me that participants are more comfortable when just one person is clearly in charge. Due to her age and much greater experience, we both understood her to mean that she would be the only leader. I submissively stepped into the background of an event I had created and watched her assume the leadership...until I was no longer even invited to the event in any capacity.

Years later, another mentor emerged, who gently taught me by example and word how much more powerful shared leadership is that draws on the gifts of every person in the circle, how much more meaningful for participants, and more sustainable for facilitators. It helped me loosen my clutch on the visible "Lydia" role, and value instead what it means to be one of the "women who had gathered," extending the invitation to come through the gates, holding the space by the river, but ready to listen and learn from the wisdom that emerges from every woman there.

INSIGHTS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR ADVANCING THE CHILDREN'S MOVEMENT THROUGH WOMEN'S RETREATS

How do the insights found in these biblical stories speak to ways the children's movement can be advanced through women's spiritual retreats that nurture supportive sisterhood? The women's spiritual retreats conducted by CDF tap into many aspects of powerful sisterhood identified in the passages of scripture, as women come together to

strengthen each other for resistance, through lament, support, theologizing, and worship. At the same time, exploration of these passages suggests ways that women's retreats might be enhanced to provide even more sustenance.

The women who come to CDF's women's retreats bring diverse life experiences, like Mary and Elizabeth. Like the midwives, the women who come are often from marginalized communities or serve and advocate for people bound together by their very lack of community—such as those without homes, incarcerated, formerly incarcerated, or in the foster care system. Still, the ability to attend a three-day, out-of-town retreat depends on support systems at home to care for children, aging parents, or others who may rely on the women participants, and presumes a work flexibility that more typically applies to women in more senior roles or white collar professions. Nonprofit work is often lower-paid than for-profit employment, limiting personal and professional funds for travel. Offering the retreats free of charge and even paying for transportation makes them more accessible but does not address these other barriers.

Like Shiphrah and Puah, Mary and Elizabeth, and Lydia, being known by name—in retreats inviting each woman to share the name by which each wants to be called—is an important honoring of identity, individuality, and history and stands in intentional contrast to the life experiences of many who are not given the respect or opportunity to claim the name by which they wish to be known. Our lineage, household, and families chosen and those of birth in all of their complexity are invited into our sharing and story-telling. Reflecting back on the previous night's introductory story-telling and sharing, women at a recent retreat named the gifts they took from that experience, with words like

“recognition,” “sisterhood,” “acceptance and love,” “powerful women,” and “seeing and being seen.”

Sacred space for women-only gatherings is important. Like the midwives in their connecting as guild members or in the intimate setting of a birthing space, like Mary and Elizabeth in the seclusion of Elizabeth’s home, like the women who gathered outside the city gates (before Paul intruded), when women gather in such spaces it creates breathing room to learn and plan for resistance, to support and theologize and lead together. CDF Haley Farm has offered such sacred, women-only space through our retreats. There, women child advocates find the same gifts of strategizing and support, collaborative leadership, and honoring the creative, embodied, particular theologizing that happens in such gatherings. While the “space apart” aspect of CDF Haley Farm fosters a sense of breathing room and absence of distraction, it is not without its challenges. In addition to airtravel to a relatively minor airport (often necessitating an additional flight through a major hub), and a forty-minute drive from the airport to CDF Haley Farm, the property itself can be challenging for those with mobility difficulties.

Like the guilds of midwives and mourners, CDF’s women’s retreats value and help create or strengthen connections among the “guild” of faith-based child advocates—offering mentoring and intergenerational support, sharing knowledge, experience, skills, and insights, recognizing that we are stronger together and networks are necessary for powerful resistance and proclamation of pain and protest. The retreats are times of strategic planning for building resistance movements. Just as midwives’ resistance did not solve the oppression once and for all, child advocates are engaged in an on-going resistance movement that continues year after year, decade after decade, generation after

generation. Thus, we are called to even greater commitment to multi-generational participation in retreats. Until now, the retreats have mostly drawn women in their forties, fifties, sixties, seventies, and eighties—missing the opportunity to support and be enriched by even more women child advocates in their twenties and thirties. Too, the ongoing nature of the resistance struggle underscores the need for us to sustain better the connection and support after the retreats end.

CDF's women's spiritual retreats have the particular intention of renewing participants for faith-based child advocacy through an experience of sisterhood that strengthens them for resistance through support, theologizing, lament, and worship. At the conclusion of the most recent retreat, the women were asked what word they would take with them from the time together, as a reminder, sustenance, or encouragement for the journey ahead. Responses included: "strength, sisterhood;" "encouraged for action;" "heed the signposts of intuition and dream;" "stay together; can feel like on a journey alone. Reminder of Beloved Community supporting us on this journey;" battle and blessing; this journey gets lonely; feel strengthened;" "We are not alone;" "Commitment and hope;" and "Strength. God's love. Phenomenal women."

CHAPTER TWO: SEEKING SISTERS

What do women child advocates contend with as women, as people of faith, and as leaders and advocates called to this particular work with and for the most vulnerable children? What is the context in which they work and how does that impact them? What are the specific challenges in their contexts and calling that create a yearning for retreat so that they can continue the movement forward?

Women leaders in the children's movement encounter intersecting and multiplying pressures that are draining and make it difficult to sustain their work and calling: racism and sexism, the loneliness and burden of leadership, organizational dysfunction, the division of faith and work (or disregard for the spiritual basis of their vocation), and a particular calling that feels both urgent and overwhelming, intimate and immense, fraught with failure and too massive to ever fully "succeed."

Some of these pressures are not unique to child advocacy. However, the fierce nature of the work—the urgent, compelling sense of calling to alleviate suffering and end injustice—can make the drains and drags especially discouraging. The high sense of morality or ethical imperative can make the shortcomings and the stumbling blocks deeply disappointing. The vision of a more perfect community and nation can make the division and distrust painfully disillusioning.

The work of child advocacy has a particular weight. Attention to, and immersion in, the reality of suffering and injustice is painful. That is true of other vocations, of course, but what adds an additional emotional impact is that the suffering and injustice are inflicted on children—the most vulnerable, innocent, and powerless of all. Added to that is that child advocates are working for nationwide, systems-level change and

transformation of cultural priorities and political investments; there is the overwhelming knowledge of the vast scope and depth of the crises affecting our nation’s children and intransigence of the forces working against them. And then there is a relentless sense of urgency and responsibility, especially for people who feel it to be a calling—a moral, spiritual, and human imperative and not just a “job.”

That scope and urgency of the crises is starkly apparent in the data compiled by the Children’s Defense Fund in the *The State of America’s Children 2020*. They document that each day in America:

- 5 children are killed by abuse or neglect.
 - 8 children or teens die by suicide.
 - 9 children or teens are killed with a gun.
 - 22 children or teens die from accidents.
 - 50 children or teens are injured with a gun.
 - 59 children or teens are injured or killed with a gun.
 - 61 babies die before their first birthday.
 - 126 children are arrested for violent crimes.
 - 248 children are arrested for drug crimes.
 - 589 public school students are corporally punished.*
 - 773 babies are born into extreme poverty.
 - 826 babies are born without health insurance.
 - 860 babies are born with low birthweight.
 - 1,683 babies are born into poverty.
 - 1,844 children are confirmed as abused or neglected.
 - 1,995 children are arrested.
 - 2,956 high school students drop out.*
 - 14,640 public school students are suspended.*
- * Based on 180 school days a year¹

A colleague shared an account of a time when she didn’t feel she could continue with her child advocacy work—the pain of being immersed every day in the depth and scope of the harm being done to children and the injustice of our nation were simply too

¹Children’s Defense Fund, *The State of America’s Children 2020*, <https://www.childrensdefense.org/policy/resources/soac-2020-each-day/>, accessed 3/4/21.

much for her. Doubting she could persevere, she went to her boss, Edelman, to discuss resigning. Edelman responded saying, in effect, if you feel this badly knowing about the problems we're working to solve, imagine how much worse you would feel if you weren't trying to solve them at all. It was a difficult but helpful word to hear, the colleague recalled to me, and enough to sustain her in the work for many more years. That dogged determination to make a difference runs deep in child advocates, but it comes with a cost and a need for sustenance.

The steely, driven determination not to quit is heard in a quote that Edelman refers to, in a Child Watch column and elsewhere, writing: "Albert Camus, speaking at a Dominican Monastery in 1948 said: 'Perhaps we cannot prevent this world from being a world in which children are tortured. But we can reduce the number of tortured children.' He described our responsibility as human beings 'if not to reduce evil, at least not to add to it' and 'to refuse to consent to conditions which torture innocents.' 'I continue,' he said, 'to struggle against this universe in which children suffer and die.'" Adds Edelman, "So must all of us." With that painful and persistent conclusion, no wonder Edelman began that same Child Watch column noting, "I begin each year with a women's spiritual retreat at CDF Haley Farm's leadership development center in prayer, silence, and song seeking God's guidance for the year ahead."²

Naomi Post, former director of CDF's New York office, describes the weight of the work this way: "[Y]ou get so down, worn down, not just from the intensity of the work, and the degree to which, you know, it feels like you're swimming upstream, and

²Marian Wright Edelman, "Pursuing Justice for Children and the Poor," Child Watch column, 3/2/12, <https://www.childrendefense.org/child-watch-columns/health/2012/pursuing-justice-for-children-and-the-poor-now/>, accessed 3/4/21.

things are getting worse instead of better for the kids that you really care about, and the families who are so fragile in the communities that are already disenfranchised.”³ Women child advocates engage in this work because they care about the well-being of children, recognize injustice, and are determined to resist and work for the end of it; and yet the very reason they do the work is what makes it hard and depleting and painful. Balancing the open-hearted, often broken-hearted, empathy and compassion that motivates the work with strategic, effective, long-range work is difficult and requires recalibration and shared acknowledgment with kindred spirits of just how hard it is. The problem is never “caring too much,” but figuring out how to care and keep at it, eyes and heart open and feet moving forward.

There is a weariness that women child advocates carry, that needs time and space for tending. This is true in ordinary times, and even more so during times of heightened need or crisis, like the coronavirus pandemic. Nelba Marquez-Greene, a licensed marriage and family therapist and founder of the Ana Grace Project, reflects on unforeseen pressures that layer on existing burdens and exhaustion of the work. She says of the gathering in January 2020, “I remember also how tired the women in the room were, some of them, that they were tired. And that was hard, right?”⁴—and that was before the coming coronavirus pandemic and new, widely publicized, and traumatic police killings of unarmed black children, women, and men.

³Post, Naomi. Interview by the author. Zoom. January 6, 2021.

⁴Marquez-Greene, Nelba. Interview by the author. Zoom. January 19, 2021.

Donna Lawrence is a nonprofit leader who previously led CDF's New York office before moving to foundation and other nonprofit work. A frequent participant in CDF women's retreats, she reflects on the 2019 women's retreat. She describes the impact of MaryLee Allen, long-time CDF director of policy, facilitating a segment of the retreat:

[MaryLee was] leading us through CDF's vision for that for the legislation [to end child poverty], and I remember... thinking, it was so powerful. You know, it was like... really concrete, like, "this is what we're gonna do and this is how we're going to do it." And like, we were in the midst of ... one of the worst administrations in our lifetime, the worst probably, and I walked out of there thinking "we can do this." And that, to me... epitomizes the strength of the work part of the retreat, you know, the more kind of vocational part of it.⁵

Women child advocates bear the double burden of fighting against the systemic injustices arising from and worsening the "isms" that harm our children—racism, sexism, elitism, heterosexism, and more—while also being hindered and hurt in many ways by the same systemic and cultural violence.

Women child advocacy leaders encounter sexism in their work as well as in other aspects of life. Advocacy work engages women in negotiations with elected officials who are still predominantly white men. Nonprofit organizations rely on external funding from foundations, corporations, and individuals, the wealth and control of which is still largely in the hands of white men. While women may be affirmed and accepted in traditionally caregiving roles and professions, including directly serving children in crisis and fragile families, the move into advocacy puts them in a context far more resistant to women's leadership and authority.

⁵Lawrence, Donna. 2021. Interview by author. Zoom. January 22, 2021.

White supremacy and racism are powerful and pervasive forces confronting women child advocates. The problems that child advocates seek to alleviate and prevent disproportionately impact children and families of color and lay bare the reality and terrible impact of white supremacy and pervasive racism. Women child advocates bear the heart-crushing contrast between what they know is children of color's sacred, precious belovedness and the cruel disrespect, disregard, and discrimination children of color face in our nation. The Children's Defense Fund puts it starkly,

Even more damning [than the crises facing all children] is that as we reach a critical turning point in 2020, when children of color will become the majority of children in America, we are failing these children worst of all.

Of the nearly 12 million children living in poverty, 73 percent are children of color. One in six children in America lives with food insecurity, with Black and Hispanic children twice as likely to not have enough nutritious food to eat. Our schools have slipped backwards into deep and damaging patterns of racial and socioeconomic segregation, perpetuating achievement gaps. Children of color are targeted by a discriminatory school discipline and youth justice system that fuels a cradle-to-prison pipeline. At our borders and around the country, we tear immigrant and refugee children from their parents and put them in cages.⁶

For women child advocates of color, the pain is more personal as racism and white supremacy affect them, their families, and those close to them. Yolanda Pierce, professor and dean of Howard Divinity School, previously served as founding director of the Center for the Study of African American Religious Life at the National Museum of African American History & Culture, and before that as associate professor of African American Religion and Literature and the director of the Center for Black Church Studies at Princeton Theological Seminary. She describes the affect of racism on her as a Black professional woman:

⁶Children's Defense Fund, "Introduction" to The State of America's Children 2020, <https://www.childrensdefense.org/policy/resources/soac-2020-introduction/>, accessed 3/4/21.

... [M]icroaggressions sting like a thousand paper cuts. There are the small ways your work is dismissed and belittled, and all the tiny acts of disrespect and disregard. You are seen, but you are somehow still invisible. You are hypervisible and yet constantly silenced. These small cuts wound, and those wounds weep. And you realize, again and again, that your education or expertise will not protect you from the racist and sexist jabs that undermine your confidence and authority. So sometimes you cry... Overwhelmed by the weight of four hundred years of white supremacist evil still active in the world, you cry.⁷

Gina Jacobs-Strain is the executive director of American Baptist Women's

Ministries and a recent participant at one of CDF's women's retreats. She candidly shares,

I've been in places... where there are... women's groups and... people are very concerned about what you're wearing and what you have on and... who your husband is or isn't, or what college you went to, and what kind of degrees... you have or don't have, and, and I don't, you know, sometimes—not that education is not important, because I am a perpetual learner, so it's not I don't think that—but I just think that there are settings in which barriers are put up, and I don't think it's always intentional.⁸

Jacobs-Strain speaks specifically to her experience as a woman of color:

So I will say that I think that... women often have not had the—I don't know if I should say often—but sometimes women have not had the best experiences, either in the corporate world or just in the way life treats women of color. And so sometimes in settings, people are not prepared to be vulnerable, be genuine. And certainly there are settings in which I am in that I'm certainly not prepared. Nor do I ever intend to be, in those settings, because there is a way that I understand that I have to be in certain places. I think that that is also a difference. I think you know, if you're setting a goal, it depends on what the goal is that is set for the meeting, right? I think that sort of determines how people may engage or interact in that.⁹

⁷Yolanda Pierce, *In My Grandmother's House: Black Women, Faith, and the Stories We Inherit* (Minneapolis: Broadleaf Books, 2021), 88.

⁸Jacobs-Strain, Gina. 2021. Interview by author. Zoom. January 11, 2021.

⁹Ibid.

The intersection of racism, sexism, heterosexism, and elitism create the need for spaces safe from that harm. Some of those needed spaces are where those with shared experiences can support each other. Auburn Theological Seminary’s Sojourner Truth Leadership Circles, for instance, connect cohorts of women of color in a mission “to make the ordinary care of the bodies, minds and spirits of black women a priority in their own lives—and within the social justice spaces where black women leaders disproportionately serve. All of our work is steeped in the lived experience and intellectual expression of women of color.”¹⁰ Tewa Women United, an organization founded and led by Native women, affirms that “through Relational-tivity, we embody courageous spaces that center Indigenous women and girls to connect with ancestral knowingness, healing strengths, and lifeways for the wellbeing of ALL.”¹¹

Spirit in Action is a nonprofit founded and led by Linda Stout who is the daughter of tenant farmers from Appalachia. She leads a variety of organizing trainings including “Rise Up: Developing the Leadership of Low-Income and Disenfranchised People” described this way: “As someone who started working as a poor non-college educated organizer, Linda never believed she could become a ‘leader.’ In order to reach and support low-income and working class people, we need to understand how internalized oppression operates, redefine what ‘shared’ leadership means and develop popular education models of building leaders.”¹² While children of color are disproportionately poor, until the last few years there were more impoverished white children in our nation

¹⁰ <https://auburnseminary.org/stlc/>, accessed 2/24/2021.

¹¹ <https://tewawomenunited.org/about-us>, accessed 4/1/2021.

¹² <https://spiritinaction.net/trainings/>, accessed 4/1/2021.

than children of color.¹³ White supremacy has been cultivated and leveraged within white populations to separate, divide, and have some lower-income whites working against their own economic and other interests—in addition to perpetuating the racist lie.

Too, there is a need for white people—including child advocates, leaders, and self-described “progressives”—to join with each other to recognize the evil of white supremacy and the insidious and tenacious reality of racism, and begin the necessary work of dismantling white supremacy and pursuing antiracism work within themselves and at a systemic level.

Yet there is also unique healing and supportive potential in gathering women across differences when boundaries and commitments are established which make the space safe and trustworthy—explored in more depth in the next chapter.

In addition to the terrible undertow of -isms that women child advocates must work amid and against, there are organizational, cultural, and leadership challenges with which to contend. Laura Dean Friedrich and Diane C. Olson are two long-time faith-based child advocates. Olson is a United Methodist minister of education. Friedrich serves as director of Protestants for the Common Good, after long-time leadership at ChildServ (recently renamed Kids Above All), a child welfare agency in Chicago providing direct services to children and families and advocating and organizing for program and policy improvements. Together they wrote *Weaving a Just Future* for

¹³ In 2020, 32.8 percent of our nation’s children in poverty were Hispanic, 30.9 percent were white, and 27.3 percent were Black, according to the Center for American Progress. <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/poverty/reports/2021/01/12/494506/basic-facts-children-poverty/>, accessed 3/22/21.

Children: An Advocacy Guide. In a chapter titled “Taking Risks for Children” they acknowledge,

Making a difference for children is difficult to do. There are times when it feels like all of society works against child advocates: money is inaccessible, resources are unavailable, and positive changes seem to be only distant dreams. Further, there are often risks in advocacy, in stepping out in an often countercultural way to take action for children. These risks include: effects of alternative use of resources; being viewed by one’s peers, staff, or society in general as single-minded or different; questioning authority with possible repercussions; and sometimes facing failure. It isn’t always easy. It is often risky. It is an expression of faith.¹⁴

Women child advocacy leaders speak to the particular loneliness and weight of leadership. Mary Nell McPherson, the founding executive director of Freedom School Partners in Charlotte, North Carolina, a community organization directly serving children, reflects,

... [B]eing a leader in an organization is [being] without peers. One of the gifts of the retreat and of other sisterhood support is that you have a place where you have peers, even if they aren’t at the same level of their organization, people may or may not be, or the same kind of organization. It’s like you’re on common ground with equal footing in a place of trust, and care and nurture. We need that, especially those of us who can’t say to people who work for us, “Oh, man, it’s a bitch of a day and I really got to have you hold me up,” right? That’s one of the great gifts.¹⁵

Post reflects on the “politics of work,” and feeling unsupported in a bureaucracy:

I consider Marian... my inspiration and a mentor and a friend, and I love her dearly. When I talk about the bureaucracy, it didn’t really involve Marian. It involved other leadership... in the national office... The culture of the national office seemed unhealthy to me. And myself, as a leader in New York, very well respected in the community, I love my staff. I mean, I just, I adore them, they are just brilliant... They just are so extraordinary. I felt so blessed to have them there. But I found myself trying to shelter them, minimize the degree to which they had to interact with the national office because it was never positive, only negative, and then you had to navigate. And, you know, I’ve been managing nonprofits for

¹⁴Diane C. Olson and Laura Dean F. Friedrich. *Weaving a Just Future for Children: An Advocacy Guide* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 2008), 147.

¹⁵McPherson, Mary Nell. Interview by author. Zoom. December 29, 2020.

almost forty years, you know, or working in philanthropy, but you had to manage people who maybe didn't have your best interests in mind and whose ambitions may have compromised their moral campuses. I mean, it was just like a lot, Shannon, and it was like a lot going on. And you didn't feel necessarily that people were as invested in preserving Marian's legacy, and strengthening the work. And I felt they were dismissive of the spirituality.¹⁶

Denominations and religious organizations are not immune from the organizational challenges of secular institutions. In fact, the changing religious landscape has in many instances made leadership and child advocacy within and through denominations even more difficult. Thirty years ago, well-staffed and resourced denominations had staff with child advocacy and justice work as a designated part of their portfolios. Denomination-wide efforts included The United Methodist Church "The Bishops' Initiative on Children in Poverty" in 1996 leading to the creation of a denomination-wide "A Church for All God's Children" program. The Presbyterian Church (USA) followed its "Year of the Child" with a "Decade of the Child" from 2001-2011. The National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA (NCC) had a Justice for Children and Families working group that provided a table at which denominational child advocacy staff could collaborate, share, and support each other. The downsizing and narrowing focus of the NCC in the past decade resulted in the elimination of the child advocacy working group, despite its members making an impassioned case for why the work was central and necessary. One of the foci selected for the narrowed scope of the NCC was ending mass incarceration; one wonders how that work could have been aided by a continued Justice for Children and Families table with its intersecting commitments. Most denominations have eliminated the staff positions which were dedicated to child

¹⁶Post, interview.

advocacy, as well—perhaps accelerated by the loss of the convening table to advance their individual and collective work.

Jacobs-Strain, whose work is based in a national denominational office, thinks back to the CDF Women’s Retreat gathering of women child advocates in January 2020. She recalls,

I left there really feeling like, you know, rejuvenated, hopeful. And... was really grateful given what we walked into—and not only the pandemic, but just some significant changes within the national landscape of American Baptists, unexpected changes and so forth, that I was glad that my year got started in that way. Because I think it helped for me just lay a good foundation to kind of every now and then reflect back on having been there and having had that time.¹⁷

Even when there are not extraordinary crises in the political landscape or organizational changes and challenges, women affirm their desire for supportive, nurturing spaces. Jacobs-Strain comments,

Women’s retreats have an ability for healing, right? Places that we know about that we need healed within us, but also places that we may not be conscious of. And in that storytelling time, in that time of what we don’t have to plan—we’re not in charge of anything, it was just show up and be here... —that in and of itself can be a release and... can be a source of healing so that you can stay strong in the work. And I... left there feeling that maybe there was some healing that was taking place within my own soul and in places that maybe I was aware of, and maybe places that I wasn’t. So I found this helpful.¹⁸

Post also affirms the need for women’s retreats in “ordinary time,” to borrow a liturgical term:

But I want to say this, beyond all [the challenge with bureaucracy], even though I felt it was an oppressive environment, navigating it. I think that the women’s spiritual retreat would always have value for me, even if I weren’t battling... I think that, I think life is messy. And I think that, you know, even if I’m not

¹⁷Jacobs-Strain, interview.

¹⁸Ibid..

navigating that kind of insanity, there are day to day stressors, even pre- or post-COVID that we have to manage.¹⁹

Child advocacy may be experienced as a calling and a ministry. I was on my way to seminary when I took what was supposed to be a one-year fellowship with the Children's Defense Fund. I requested a deferral of my admission, fully expecting that I would be on campus the following year. However, after just a month at CDF as a fellow I wrote to the seminary that I would not be attending after all. I felt so completely that I had found my calling, my ministry, at CDF that I could not imagine leaving it to pursue academic study. (I later earned my M.Div. attending part-time while still working for CDF.) For me, preaching a pastoral and prophetic word didn't need to come from a pulpit but could be shared through writing, through preparing Children's Sabbath sermon notes that others would use to develop their own preaching, and through opportunities to travel and preach to many different congregations in my CDF role. Ambassador Andrew Young wrote about the charge at his ordination being to "preach with your bags packed, for if you are ever fortunate enough to be used by the Spirit to share the full power of the gospel, you will probably be run out of town."²⁰ Guest preaching as CDF's Religious Affairs director provided the ability to offer a more challenging word of justice than, perhaps, a local congregational pastor might be able to do—although I do not claim to have been used by the full boldness, courage, and power of the Spirit every time. For me, at CDF, "children's ministries" and "youth ministry" were not confined to attending to the nurture of one congregation's children and youth alone, but could focus on the

¹⁹ Post, interview.

²⁰ Andrew Young, *A Way Out of No Way: The Spiritual Memoirs of Andrew Young* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1994), 138.

potential of resourcing hundreds and thousands of congregations with materials that would engage their young ones in hearing the call not only to compassion but also to justice, seeing in them not only the recipients of teaching and the “church of tomorrow” but ones who had insights, agency, and were the church right now. For me, pastoral care would not primarily be sitting with an individual who had suffered abuse, job loss, death of a child, or illness. Instead, at CDF I saw the opportunity to care pastorally by working to prevent abuse (and better equip congregations to prevent and address it), to increase family income, to prevent needless child deaths, to work for child health coverage. I was raised in a church that had a “Crisis Ministry” to meet the immediate needs of impoverished families; at CDF I could live into the reality that the real crisis in ministry is when we restrict our effort and attention to meeting immediate needs and don’t tackle the systemic injustice.

Child advocacy may be experienced as an expression of faith even when carried out in secular organizations and institutions. The faith basis of one’s work can provide motivation and strength, but at the same time the secular organization and its staff may not see or support that perspective, setting up a conflict of perspective and purpose. Post describes that clash or disconnect:

... I would say, by and large, [I’ve] been through a lot of different positions and spirituality wasn’t something that was shared in the workplace. I mean, it always, that was nurtured in church, but not in the workplace. CDF was the first organization which I’ve been associated where there was, you know, a component of spirituality, because of who Marian is, but also because of a factor in you. And it’s interesting, you know, to see how things unfold with [CDF’s new president and CEO] because he’s very open about his spirituality and it causes a level of discomfort amongst some staff. So that’s gonna be very interesting to see how that’s navigated.²¹

²¹ Post, interview.

Edelman speaks to the pain and exhaustion that come with a lifetime of child advocacy, and the need for spiritual sustenance. She writes in the preface to her book

Guide My Feet: Prayers and Meditations for Our Children:

As I have grown older and wearier trying to help get our nation to put children first and become more worried about my own and other people's children growing up in an America where moral and common sense and family and community values are disintegrating, I pray more and more. I know that only with God's help and only with prayer, which Gandhi called "the key of the morning and the bolt of the evening," can some mountains be moved. In this book, I share my struggles through prayer as a parent, as a person of faith, and as a child advocate.²²

McPherson, who led Freedom School Partners in Charlotte for nearly two decades, reflects on the necessity of spiritual grounding for enduring the emotional toll:

And then I don't know how people do this work without deep and abiding hope—particularly in the resurrection, for me; it is "all else fails, God's got this," right? And you can go and go and be happy and go on the stories of the children that you've cared for, and the families whose lives are better. But at the end of the day, it's awful, you know, and people die, and they won't be redeemed on this side of heaven, you know, and so, you got to have a hope beyond just that you're doing good work or that you believe in the work that you do. So I am grateful for the spiritual connection of that community that enables us to be reminded that the God who flung the stars in the sky knows all of our names, and will hold us all. And that our faithfulness is what we're called to, not our success, but that we are held in that faith.²³

In sum, women child advocates persist in their work because it is to many a sacred calling and a moral, ethical charge with an urgency borne of the suffering vulnerable children are enduring unjustly—whether caused by poverty, hunger, homelessness, abuse and neglect, other violence, incarceration, or any of the other harms rampant in our nation today. Yet that advocacy comes at a cost, as women experience the

²²Marian Wright Edelman. *Guide My Feet: Prayers and Meditations on Loving and Working for Children* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), xiii.

²³McPherson, interview.

emotional burden of facing children's pain and the scope of the crises which will not end soon despite their efforts; and as they contend with the impact on their own lives and work of racism, sexism, homophobia, elitism, and other systemic and pervasive harms and hindrances. This leadership can be lonely and misunderstood, with organizational pressure for perfection and a divide between secular work and the faith that fuels it.

This work of women's child advocacy brings to mind the Hebrew word "*rachamim*," most frequently translated as "compassion" or "mercy." *Rachamim* is closely linked to the word for womb; one could translate it as "womb-love." In almost all of its instances in Hebrew scripture, it is used to describe God—God's womb-love shown in active response to recognize and alleviate or end the suffering of God's beloveds.

One of the few times *rachamim* applies to a human emotion, it is the mother who came before Solomon seeking justice in a dispute with another woman over who was the child's parent in 1 Kings 3:16-18. Both women experienced oppression first-hand, exploited sexually and economically. One then knew grief in the death of her infant. The societal, cultural, economic system had already failed them both and their only recourse was to turn to the political and legal power vested in one male. When that ruler suggested a violent solution that would kill the child, it was the "womb-love" of the mother which led her to speak out against any action that would harm the child she loved (1 Kgs 3:26a). That emotion and resulting action, speaking out for the welfare of the child, resulted in a measure of immediate justice—although leaving in place the broader systemic oppression that created the presenting problem. This passage is titled "Solomon's Wisdom in Judgment" putting the focus on the male "hero." But importantly, it is a depiction of women's suffering and desperation caused by unacknowledged and unaddressed systemic

economic and sexual exploitation. It highlights the limitations of appealing to male-dominated political and legal structures that do not address root causes and systemic inequities. Most importantly, it reveals the essential and life-saving impact of women's womb-love in action—disrupting deadly responses that are not solutions and prioritizing the well-being of children.

Without suggesting that one without a womb can't have these emotions and commitments, and not to say that only those who have birthed children can experience them, *rachamim* perhaps points us to that experience that women child advocates have of love, care, compassion that is embedded within their very beings. Child advocates' womb-love protects, nourishes, and brings justice and child well-being to life with struggle and effort and—at best—ultimately joy. Child advocates' womb-love protects, nourishes, and still sometimes faces the devastating death of the ones for whom they care, yearn, and hope. Child advocates' womb-love is impacted by the toxicities that surround them, harming them and the lives they seek to protect. Child advocates' womb-love may be observed by others, but can only be understood by those who experience it themselves in its fullness, in its weight, in its hope, in its responsibility. Child advocates' womb-love with its basis in the very nature of God may be experienced as a divine gift and calling.

Valerie Kaur, a Sikh American who founded the Revolutionary Love Project, offered a prayer after the 2016 election in which she said,

In our tears and agony, we hold our children close and confront the truth: The future is dark. But my faith dares me to ask: What if this darkness is not the darkness of the tomb, but the darkness of the womb?

What if our America is not dead but a country still waiting to be born?
What if the story of America is one long labor?

What if all the mothers who came before us, who survived genocide and occupation, slavery and Jim Crow, racism and xenophobia and Islamophobia, political oppression and sexual assault, are standing behind us now, whispering in

our ear: You are brave? What if this is our Great Contraction before we birth a new future?

Remember the wisdom of the midwife: “Breathe,” she says. Then: “Push.”

Now it is time to breathe. But soon it will be time to push; soon it will be time to fight—for those we love—Muslim father, Sikh son, trans daughter, indigenous brother, immigrant sister, white worker, the poor and forgotten, and the ones who cast their vote out of resentment and fear.²⁴

Women child advocates have named the ways in which their work is difficult and costly, yet something they are determined to persist in as an urgent, necessary vocation. How, then, do women child advocacy leaders sustain themselves for work they cannot abandon? We turn to that in the next chapter.

²⁴Valerie Kaur. “A Sikh Prayer for America on November 9th 2016.” <https://valariekaur.com/2016/11/a-sikh-prayer-for-america-on-november-9th-2016/> Accessed 3/22/2021.

CHAPTER THREE: PRACTICING JUST HOSPITALITY ON HOLY GROUND

As explored in the previous chapter, women child advocates bear the burden of leadership, organizational challenges, and a culture of pervasive racism, sexism, and elitism, all while experiencing the emotional toll of seeking justice for children. That advocacy work is difficult with the painful reality of child and family suffering and our nation's gross injustice, and presses with the urgency of a moral and spiritual calling—even when others don't perceive it as such.

If women child advocates experience that as the context in which they live and work, day in and day out, what do they yearn for that will ease the burden and sustain them to fulfill their calling? What are the unique and necessary elements of support that will feed and sustain them?

THE COMPANY OF WOMEN... BUT NOT JUST ANY WOMEN

Women child advocates hunger for the company of other women...but not just any women. Time and again, across age, race and ethnicity, organization and denomination, women named the desire to be in the company of other women. Some of them worked in organizations primarily staffed by women, others in male-dominated workplaces. Either way, time apart just with women was named as a priority. Jacobs-Strain affirms,

... I think, in general, I tend to think that there is this great benefit and growth and nurturing when women gather together, whether you're in a big group or small group, or however that happens to be. And so when those opportunities come up... my tendency for many of them, not all of them, but if I have an opportunity, I tend to gravitate towards that because I think that there is a way that we can be with each other as women if we're being genuine.¹

¹Jacobs-Strain, interview.

Reflecting on her annual participation in CDF’s women’s retreats, Lawrence says, “And there was just such a sense of connection and sisterhood. Like, I really felt like people were there to be supportive, and be the best they could be for the other women around them. And that is such a rare experience or a deal. Like that was such a big part of the retreat was just the sisterhood of coming together.”²

McPherson, another regular CDF retreat participant, affirms of the experience, “... that it is just women. The difference, you know, women carry things differently. And we can be so together and honest about that.”³

Post ponders the appeal of women-only retreat spaces, saying,

And there’s something about a community of women that is so nurturing and so liberating, you know, and I thought about it, even with my office structure, you know, we only ever had one man [in the] office. And I was thinking back, and in many of the nonprofits and the legal service office I ran, I was surrounded by women. I hired women; I hired young women and tried to mentor them up, [I] hired women who were smarter than me in certain areas. And, you know, they just, you know, they were like, beacons... I tend to gravitate toward women. And that might be because I grew up in an all-female household. My father died very young. I had three siblings, all of them were women, and I had my mother and, you know, maybe that’s my comfort.⁴

The desire for time in a women-only space is clear, but not just any “women only” space. The women interviewed named in various ways their desire and gratitude for women-only spaces which they felt were safe to be vulnerable and authentic, and contrasted that with other women-only and mixed gender spaces that were not.

²Lawrence, interview.

³McPherson, interview.

⁴Post, interview.

Jacobs-Strain generously and candidly explores what makes the difference and reflects on how her experience of CDF's women's retreat felt like genuinely safe space:

So I don't know that I came [to the retreat] with any particular goals as much as it was that I was curious, and interested in being in a setting with women, and hope[d] that we would be like-minded enough that I can also grow and learn but also that I would feel comfortable. Because I think when you go into a setting like that, you also you make yourself a little vulnerable. To be in a space like that. And so I... think, you know, that it's not always easy to be vulnerable. So... I was hoping that I would be in a space where I would feel comfortable enough to have a [inaudible] to take in the experience.⁵

Asked to reflect on what creates the conditions where it feels genuine or like a safe space to be vulnerable, or experiences where that has been absent and what accounted for that, Jacobs-Strain offers these insights:

I don't know, I think that sometimes you can be in spaces where titles and who you know create insiders and outsiders. And there can be spaces in which you can feel, you know, that... you're there, but you're not really welcomed. Here because you were invited, but you're new, you haven't been here long enough to know. Or, you know, you're not part of the inner workings of here. So, um, and I think that that you can find that in any circle, you can find that in clergy circles, you can find that in women's groups, you can find that anywhere. And I think unless you are intentional about setting a tone of inclusiveness and not tolerance, because that's very different.⁶

Marquez-Greene, who founded the Ana Grace Project after her daughter was murdered in the Sandy Hook Elementary School massacre in Newtown, Connecticut, reflects on the appeal of or hopes for a "safe enough" space to be genuine and vulnerable.

So I, you know, I don't know what it says about me that when I first saw the invitation [to come to the retreat], I thought it was spam or something weird, because what am I going to contribute to something like this, but then the woman sent it again, and I thought, Oh, this, this may be real. And maybe I do have something to contribute. And while I don't see myself a spiritual leader, or a, you know, a leader in this way, like some of these other people, maybe it will be a safe enough place to connect so I can get some ideas, maybe it will be a safe enough place to connect, to relax, maybe it would be a safe enough place to share the

⁵Jacobs-Strain, interview.

⁶Ibid.

good work going on in Connecticut. Maybe it would be, you know, so just kind of taking a risk.⁷

Lawrence also names the importance of a safe, trustworthy space to be vulnerable.

Recalling how women would share from their experiences on the very first night together, she remarks,

So yeah, you know, the willingness of everyone to just share and be open and vulnerable. And, you know, there were so many times when people would talk about a person or an experience that was... so moving. And, you know, also the thing that that I always appreciated was, you didn't have to say anything, you know, you could feel it.... I think it's been pretty unique. I mean... I have friends... from work experiences... that over years... kind of created a little grouping. It's not in the same, it's not as consistent. And, you know, no, I don't think I've ever experienced something like that.... That's why you have to keep doing it, Shannon.⁸

The yearning for space that is safe to be open and vulnerable includes a place and community of women with whom we can share struggles and failures, letting down our guard and the pressure to appear perfect and professional. Post relates a powerful connection that she made with another New York woman leader—a connection that theoretically could have been made back in New York but was made meaningfully and possible by shared time in retreat. She reflects: “I was so grateful... that... one year (I mean, I think I only went twice), but one year, Winnie Varghese from Trinity joined me. And I think it was that retreat that pulled us together, and she has become such a dear friend. I care for her, she is just a remarkable woman.”⁹ Asked if once the connection was

⁷Marquez-Greene, interview.

⁸Lawrence, interview.

⁹Post, interview.

made in retreat that the two women recognized a need to continue to be connected in friendship and support, Post responds,

Absolutely, absolutely, I would say that. And I stay in touch with her, you know, even today, even in my retirement, and even as she has thought about other opportunities. And, you know, I think people, some people are struggling with their vocation... and it's just a wonderful thing to be vulnerable. And to have someone with whom you can share... not your glory of success or victories, but... your insecurities, and... you can be open.¹⁰

Many of the threads of what the women child advocates hunger for—the company of women, safe space to be vulnerable, open, and authentic, and sisterhood and emotional and spiritual support to bear the emotional weight of the work—are pulled together in the words of Post:

I wouldn't say [I was looking to the retreat for something] vocationally, but I would say, you know, emotionally and spiritually. For me, it's really, really important to connect to women, and to have that sense of sisterhood and shared support. So the women's retreat, being as intimate as it was, was an opportunity to come together in a very safe and trusted environment with people who were really authentic, and to be vulnerable, and to be renewed, because you get so you get so down, worn down, not just from the intensity of the work, and the degree to which, you know, it feels like you're swimming upstream, and things are getting worse instead of better for the kids that you really care about. And the families who are so fragile in the communities that are already disenfranchised.¹¹

What all of the women name, then, is desire for the company of women—but not just any women. Women-only space is necessary but not sufficient. What makes the woman-only space meaningful is when the women who gather trust the space enough to be genuine and authentic.

What makes the space trustworthy includes women who are committed to dismantling white supremacy and if they are white working on their own racism so that

¹⁰Post, interview.

¹¹Ibid.

the space does not inflict microaggressions on women of color and, more importantly, stands for undoing systemic oppression.

Even more than that, the space becomes safe when it proactively and consistently celebrates the past, present, and future wisdom, contributions, and wealth of experience of Black women, children, men, and communities of color. Space becomes safe when the focus isn't just on the problem of white supremacy but on the gifts of Black people.

What makes the space safe includes an invitation issued by a trusted leader, like Edelman, and participants who are invited because of their shared commitments to child advocacy and prioritizing children of color and others pushed to the margins. What makes a space safe includes balancing the participants so those who are white and accustomed to being in the majority are in the minority and appreciate the gift of being present with women of color who are willing to share honestly with them.

What makes the space safe are facilitators who are mindful of the responsibility for planning the time and holding the space in a way that keeps it safe, and are willing to notice, name, and change it if it is not. What makes the space safe is facilitation that invites deep sharing and is prepared to hold the silence, the tears, the anger and anguish, and any other emotions that arise without stifling, shaming, or spotlighting. What makes a space safe is attention to and taking seriously the sacredness of our lives and experiences.

JUST HOSPITALITY

The women collectively described what feminist theologian Letty Russell has termed “just hospitality.” The word “hospitality” has in modern usage taken on a superficial and formal meaning or even evokes the commercial hotel and event industry.

But Russell and Christian social ethics professor Christine Pohl have excavated the deeper biblical meaning of hospitality and developed a theology that holds current import, especially, I would contend, for sustaining women child advocates.

In *Just Hospitality: God's Welcome in a World of Difference*, edited by J. Shannon Clarkson and Kate M. Ott, Russell offers this powerful definition of hospitality: "I understand hospitality as the practice of God's welcome embodied in our actions as we reach across difference to participate with God in bringing justice and healing to our world in crisis."¹²

Russell expands on hospitality as far more than social niceties, but as a practice that addresses systems and structures, active, collaborative work for justice, and decentering the traditionally dominant voices and powers: "... [W]e must also look at hospitality in terms of social structures of justice and of partnership across barriers of difference. When we decolonize our minds, we begin thinking from the margins rather than from the center. We reframe hospitality as a form of partnership with the ones we call the 'other'..."¹³

Pohl, in *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition*, also addresses the essential place of diversity in biblical hospitality which undergirds this reclamation, but in more problematic terms: "Early Christian hospitality was offered from within this overlap of household and church... . Worship, care, and hospitality in early Christian household included believers from different political, ethnic, and

¹²Letty M. Russell, *Just Hospitality: God's Welcome in a World of Difference* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 2.

¹³*Ibid.*, 82.

socioeconomic backgrounds, and early congregations developed a translocal and transethnic identity.”¹⁴ Meaningful practice of just hospitality calls for more than assembling diverse persons in a space, of course. The Latin prefix “trans-” can mean “across,” “beyond,” or “through.” A “transethnic” group label could be valuable if it means “across” ethnicity, acknowledging, celebrating, appreciating different ethnic and other identities that together comprise the whole. If it means “beyond” ethnicity, it falls into the fallacy of “color-blindness” and does not represent our experience of just hospitality. Achieving a singular “identity” is unrealistic and undesirable. Ignoring or minimizing difference does not forge a collective identity, it just invisibilizes and silences the realities of our lived, embodied, wisdom-giving experiences that are our strength and our truth. More meaningful is recognizing kindred spirits or the shared commitments that unite us—such as child advocacy—while not imagining that the other dimensions that we bring could be boiled down to a singular “identity” that accurately labels all.

Russell better connects current practice of hospitality to biblical understanding, writing,

One way to go about this metanoia, or conversion in our thinking, is to reexamine the biblical tradition in order better to understand what God’s welcome and hospitality are all about. In the Bible, God’s welcome—hospitality—has at least four overlapping central components: 1) unexpected divine presence; 2) advocacy for the marginalized; 3) mutual welcome; and 4) creation of community.¹⁵

¹⁴Christine D. Pohl, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999), 42.

¹⁵Russell, *Just Hospitality*, 82.

Marquez-Greene also names many of the elements that Russell and Pohl identify, in response to a question about what elements constitute a safe space and the extent to which she found it at CDF's women's retreat. She observes,

Here was a group of I don't know how they got knitted together, obviously, everybody comes from different places and from different and, you know, just kind of walks and, you know, with a different set of values, but here was this group of folks uniquely knitted together, all with the same vision in mind that, that our children deserve better, that our children deserving better required us speaking in truth, and being bold, and also not feeling alone. So I think that was the beauty of the bringing those folks together. It's, oh, look at... what's happening in California, look at what's happening in New Jersey, look at what's happening in... and you're not alone and listen to that person. You know, and so there's a spiritual component, there's a work component, there was just the breaking bread. And there was this slowness... that's not typical in this world and in this environment, right. There was all of a sudden, a slowness that we just got to savor in that time, at least I did. And it was really important to me.¹⁶

She speaks to a vital aspect of this particular gathering of women child advocates: an appreciation of the many kinds of diversity the women represented—racial, ethnic, generational, denominational, geographic, and more—and at the same time the unifying element of being committed to child advocacy. In her comments and those of the others, the diversity was not incidental or a barrier to the experience of sisterhood, but was in fact a meaningful component of it.

McPherson, who is white and whose long-time home church membership is predominantly white and affluent, comments about the retreats, “And so being grounded, particularly with Black folk, and to be a minority [as a white person] is a wonderful thing, even if I don't count the numbers, but you know, it feels like we're not the power structure at Haley, we white folks.”¹⁷ Now, she shares, her “best Sundays” are when she

¹⁶Marquez-Greene, interview.

¹⁷McPherson, interview.

worships at 9:30 a.m. at a predominantly Black church “that is wide open and wonderful” and then attends her long-time church at 11 a.m.; by attending both “I feel like I have all of my life wrapped up in that.”¹⁸

Another participant echoes that sentiment in an anonymous survey about a recent retreat, saying, “It was great to be a minority as a white woman, which I have experienced in India leading with three hundred Indians, but to be with American Black and Hispanic women connects me to the incredible spirit... .”

The experience of diversity—and for whites of not being in the majority—is named as a meaningful and valued experience, even transformational. Yet after the retreat ends the women are returning to unchanged congregations and communities. The continuing question and challenge is whether and how women seek out the spaces back home that are already practicing just hospitality, or if they try to transform their existing congregations and communities, or if they engage in multiple settings, or if they accept the status quo and merely anticipate the return to the rare experience of retreat.

Lawrence observes, “... I would say unequivocally, the expectations were exceeded—just the richness of the people, but the depth and richness of the group of women, the coming together of women from so many different experiences, to sit together for a period of time. And for me, anyway, be so unaware of those differences and really know that on a very deep and spiritual level, we were all connecting.”¹⁹

Lawrence is not claiming to be “color-blind”—she names that there are very real

¹⁸McPherson, interview.

¹⁹Lawrence, interview.

differences among the women gathered, but is identifying a spiritual connection that is not impeded by those particular differences.

Jacobs-Strain affirms,

... I left there feeling refreshed. And I left there hopeful. And you know, and to be able to see that you can,... that you brought together this cross-section of women with different experiences and different ideas and different ways of living and being. And we were able to very quickly feel very comfortable with one another to be supportive of one another. And I think just the value of listening.”²⁰

A WELCOMING PLACE: HOLY GROUND

While hospitality may be practiced anywhere—from home to church, refugee camp to community center—the experience of it is deepened significantly by the context of a “welcoming place.” Pohl adds further dimensions of hospitable space:

A welcoming place is rich with stories, rituals, and a history. It is valued, and it nurtures life. It is never simply a physical space, but a place alive with commitments and relationships... Hospitality is fundamentally connected to place—to a space bounded by commitments, values, and meanings. Part of the difficulty in recovering hospitality is connected with our uncertainty about community and particular identity.²¹

What does such a “welcoming place” look like in practice today and how does it support women child advocates? CDF Haley Farm is a potent example of a “welcoming place.” From its earliest days, the greeting from CDF Haley Farm staff, leaders, and participants to those arriving—whether for the first time or not—has been “welcome home.” But that welcome goes beyond lip service and is meaningful because it includes

²⁰ Jacobs-Strain, interview.

²¹ Pohl, Making Room, 135-136.

the elements that Pohl names as significant to the experience of a “welcoming place” which in this instance centers on nurturing and sustaining child advocates.

For the child advocates who gather, CDF Haley Farm history matters. Its history as the former home of Alex Haley is a powerful draw to many who come for the first time. Haley himself, of course, tapped the urgent need for all Americans to understand and reckon with our entwined history beginning in the enslavement of Africans and African-Americans. Those who come to CDF Haley Farm know that history will not be ignored, whitewashed, or discounted, but reckoned with and understood. More recent history also plays a meaningful role in the experience of welcome at CDF Haley Farm.²²

The rituals of CDF Haley Farm and more specifically of CDF’s women’s retreat point to Pohl’s observation about the role of ritual in creating a “welcoming place.” On the first evening of every retreat, we sit in a circle by the fireside and get to know each other by sharing a response to a prompt and then lighting a small teacandle in a center table. Often the prompt is “introduce us to someone who...” Every women’s retreat concludes with a ritual of reflection and sharing, often centered on a metaphorical object. One year, for example, each woman received a small glass jar filled with seeds that looked like manna. Each was invited to write on the jar’s tag what would serve as her “manna” to sustain her in the wilderness times ahead, and then share with the group. Another year, each woman wrote words on a stone for the next generation to hear about

²²For example, the Dale Andrews Freedom Seminary at CDF’s Proctor Institute for Child Advocacy Ministry begins with a tour of the grounds, stopping at places of symbolic and historical significance. Different leaders share stories recounting the history or meaning of the spot, whether the fountain at the Maya Lin-designed Langston Hughes Library, rocking chairs bearing plaques memorializing movement leaders, or a grove where the ashes of children’s movement leaders are interred. The beginning of CDF’s Proctor Institute traditionally begins with showing first-time participants a video of Samuel DeWitt Proctor’s sermon at the institute the year before he died, so they might understand who he was and how he shaped the institute.

how we “got over.” The stones were placed in a special spot at the Farm so young people could read the messages from those who came before. Central to the CDF Haley Farm’s history and ritual are stories. Stories are shared, attended to, and valued—something explored in greater depth in the following chapter.

Pohl names shared “commitments and relationships” as vital to a welcoming place, and names “certainty about community and identity” as difficult to attain as we seek to reclaim hospitality.²³ For many child advocates, CDF Haley Farm’s unequivocal and steadfast focus on justice for children, especially those who are most marginalized, has provided a powerful anchor and plays a central role in its being experienced as a “welcoming place.” That shared commitment to child advocacy supersedes all others and, to use Marquez-Greene’s metaphor, knits us together. McPherson observes,

There’s something about the the mixture of welcome home from those—well, for me, because I’ve been several times—with those I’ve come to know, like ongoing relationships with you and with Janet, and with Emma. And new folks—you know, the fact that Ms. Edelman collects people along the way and, and to meet inspiring young women or the latest whoever at the United Methodist Church uptown... . And so I’m grateful for both the grounding and the ritual of old friends, and even the physical space of the Farm that is renewing and familiar. But then the newness too, like the first year when Nambhu was there with the art; the first time the art was there and the way that enhanced. And so always being open to a different kind of gift from the time.²⁴

Child advocates Friedrich and Olson speak to the ways that CDF Haley Farm as a “welcoming place” feeds the hunger of child advocates. They write,

One place both of us have felt the powerful presence of the beloved community is at the Proctor Institute for Child Advocacy Ministry, sponsored every summer by the Children’s Defense Fund. Weith equal parts of family reunion, spiritual renewal, and skill building, the gathering is an inspiring week of sermons, workshops, and reflection groups focused on the needs of children and celebrating

²³ Pohl, *Making Room*, 82.

²⁴ McPherson, interview.

our calls to advocacy. Held at the lovely [CDF] Alex Haley Farm in Clinton, Tennessee, the Institute provides a hospitable learning environment in an atmosphere of inclusion and celebration of diversity. The Proctor Institute is a place where we can articulate our dreams for children and be “fed” intellectually and spiritually so that we continue our advocacy journeys with joy and conviction.²⁵

Countless people across the spectrum of age, race, ethnicity, religion, income, sexual orientation and gender identity, geography, and life experience have described an experience of “beloved community” at CDF Haley Farm. That said, like many places CDF Haley Farm has room to improve in that extension of welcome—especially in larger gatherings where it is more challenging to recognize and attend to individuals’ experiences. The physical terrain and dispersed buildings on the grounds of CDF Haley Farm make it difficult for some people with physical challenges to navigate or attend at all. Some members of the LGBTQ+ community who have been harmed by religious institutions and their members in the past come with trepidation and some are more anxious about sharing their full selves with the gathered community. Frequently, some of the older youths and young adults feel like their voices and experiences remain marginalized and the format of some the programming may appeal more to the older adults present. Those with less familiarity with religious traditions or those who have moved away from it may feel distance from some of the religious content of the programming. Those from traditions other than Christianity have almost always been in the minority. Parents or caregivers of the youngest children—infants and toddlers—must make their own arrangements for care while on the grounds which can be difficult or preclude their participation. Thus, in the “already and not yet” sense in which Jesus

²⁵Friedrich and Olson, *Weaving a Just Future*, 159.

declared that “the realm of God is among you” (Luke 17:21), so too it might be said that the Beloved Community is present—experienced and not fulfilled.

Mutual welcome is a component of biblical hospitality and by extension just hospitality. John Koenig, in *New Testament Hospitality: Partnership with Strangers as Promise and Mission*, notes:

[T]he noun *xenos* denotes simultaneously a guest, a host, or a stranger, while the verb *xenizein* means “receive as a guest” but also “surprise” and hence “present someone or something as strange.” Correspondingly, *philoxenia*, the term for hospitality used in the New Testament, refers literally not to a love of strangers per se but to a delight in the whole guest-host relationship, in the mysterious reversal and gains for all parties which may take place. For believers, this delight is fueled by the expectation that God or Christ or the Holy Spirit will play a role in every hospitable transaction.²⁶

McPherson describes a moment when she realized she was host as well as guest:

“... I know I have a distinct memory of a time you said to me thank you for the way I did something there and realized that I had crossed over from one of the new people to one of the holders of that [space]. And thank you for that.”²⁷

Women child advocates are seeking the company of women in space that feels safe to be vulnerable and open, that creates an experience of just hospitality in a welcoming space. That is not an experience that can be found in an office, in a hotel, in a convention center that lacks, especially, those “welcoming place” elements of history, ritual, story, and commitment. In the midst of the current pandemic, organizations are finding ways to “gather,” but there is a need—when it is again safe to gather in person—

²⁶John Koenig, *New Testament Hospitality: Partnership with Strangers as Promise and Mission* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2001), 8.

²⁷McPherson, interview.

to identify and support places (like CDF Haley Farm) that provide that unique and necessary context and experience.

Lawrence sums up the appreciation for many elements of this experience of a welcoming place that feels like holy ground when she says,

I think the, this size [of the retreat gathering, at two dozen] has been really important, that it hasn't gotten too big. And the sharing of meals, you know, which is so much a part of, of the course of Haley Farm and, but a part of my experience of, you know, being with others, like sharing meals, sharing time together, living together. And just, of course, being at Haley Farm, which I think, you know, this kind of experience could be a wonderful experience anywhere, but having it at Haley Farm, I think, brings a whole other element of being on really on sacred ground. And I also think it there were so many times when, when we were when we were struggling with outside forces in the world, you know, when when the world was changing in ways that were really challenging for people personally and professionally with government, and, you know, the last four years, and I think it was a, it was so important and helpful to have that place during those times.²⁸

Child advocates gathering at CDF Haley Farm yearn for sanctuary and affirm experiencing Haley Farm as holy ground and beloved community. Russell connects this desire for a safe, trusted space in which to be vulnerable and open with theological and biblical constructs. She notes the linguistic roots of “sanctuary” are the Latin for holy (sanctus) which derives from the Hebrew (kiddush). “The right of protection for all persons is derived from God’s holiness and provides the basic theological understanding of hospitality in both Hebrew and Christian scriptures: Human beings are created by God and are to be holy, and to be treated as holy or sacred...”²⁹

²⁸ Lawrence, interview.

²⁹ Russell, *Just Hospitality*, 87.

Given the name CDF Haley Farm, it is interesting to note the Old English root of the word for wholeness is “hale” which also shares linguistic roots with the word for holy. A space that does not ignore our histories, no matter how painful, allows us to be whole and there is holiness in that. A place that names the brokenness of our present allows us to be whole, without hiding parts of ourselves or our experiences, and that is a holy experience. A space that embraces anger and confusion, despair and doubt, scars and failures nurtures our wholeness and is holy. A space that confronts, addresses, is devoted to preventing and ending harm is holy and beckons us toward wholeness. A space that envisions what must be repaired, or dismantled, or replaced allows us to be whole.

Wholeness does not mean erasing the reality of harm past or present or possibly in the future. In one aspect, wholeness calls to mind the Japanese tradition of *kintsugi* in which broken vessels are not discarded or glued back together to make invisible the places that were harmed. Instead, with *kintsugi* gold is used to repair that which was shattered, making distinct the places that had been broken and needed healing. In other instances, of course, for child advocates wholeness means not repairing what was broken but putting in its place something different and more just and healing. A space that nurtures our wholeness, that treats each one who enters as holy, is indeed a place that women child advocates seek. If that space is the frame, the sacred stories drawn from experience fill the canvas, which is the focus of the next chapter.

CHAPTER FOUR: SACRED TEXTS—SISTERS SHARING STORIES

Women child advocates are working and living in a context of intersecting and multiplying pressures of sexism, racism, heterosexism, elitism, leadership pressures, organizational needs and dysfunctions, all while bearing the emotional weight of serving and advocating for vulnerable children with the urgency of a calling. There is a yearning among women child advocates for the company of women, for safe space in which to be vulnerable and open, the hunger for an experience of “just hospitality” which unites across difference in a common sense of purpose, made especially easy in a “welcoming place” that feels like holy ground. The decision to respond to a retreat invitation is not without risk. There is risk especially for those who have been harmed, invisibilized, or marginalized in such spaces before. It speaks to both the depth of need and courage that women decide to attend.

What, then, emerges when we attend to women’s lived experiences in their vocation as child advocates when they are gathered in that welcoming place? What do we hear in those “sacred texts” that enlarges our understanding of who God is and how God works in and through us? What is the place and significance of resistance, lament, support and shared theologizing, and worship in these sacred stories? What do these sacred stories teach us about resistance, lament, support, shared theologizing, and worship, that extends or challenges what was learned from the traditional sacred texts of scripture?

OUR LIVES AS SACRED TEXTS: WOMANIST AND FEMINIST THEOLOGY

In seminary and sanctuary we are, typically, taught by word and example that the most important sacred texts to focus on and excavate are scriptural. The “lived

experience” that is deemed most important for theological interpretation and shaping the Church is that of biblical figures who lived thousands of years ago. Our present day lived experience may become an illustration in a sermon but is rarely accorded the attention and import of scripture—not reflected on to develop theology so much as to be the recipient of theological reflection and measured for how it exemplifies or not the biblical teaching and doctrinal norms. In child advocacy organizations, data and policy analysis are often accorded the most credibility or influence, with the lived experience of children and families brought in not to shape policy but to describe its potential or impact, to give emotional punch to a report, article, or speech, or to tug heartstrings in a fundraising appeal. While neither approach may have evolved maliciously, they nonetheless have harmful consequences at worst and miss extraordinary richness at best.

Womanist theologians and feminist theologians have sought for nearly sixty years to change the way we do theology to center lived experience—including the particular experiences of people of color and women—and to move from experience to theological insight rather than using traditional texts as the starting point. So too child advocacy organizations are learning to center the lived experience of children and families on the margins as the starting point of developing child-centered public policy to help all children thrive.

M. Shawn Copeland, professor emerita at Boston College’s Department of Theology, summarizes the feminist theological “spiral” conceptualized by Russell, which moves from commitment to engaged experience to critical analysis to theology to action. The spiral begins with,

“commitment to the task of raising up signs of God’s new household with those who are struggle for justice and full humanity” [then moves to] “sharing

experiences of commitment and struggle in a concrete context of engagement” [which] “leads to a critical analysis of the context of these experiences” and aims to understand more comprehensively the interconnectedness of historical, political, and economic factors that “affect the community of struggle.” The theologian’s “commitment to action in solidarity with the marginalized” also involves dialogue and clarification of social analysis with those of differing perspectives. The results of this dialogue provide “questions about biblical and church tradition.” These questions, generated by this spiral of inquiry, “help us gain new insight into the meaning of the gospel as good news for the oppressed and marginalized. This new understanding of tradition flows from and leads to action, celebration, and further reflection in the continuing theological spiral.”³⁰

The contexts in which women are grounded and experience the movement through that theological spiral are varied. Professor Mary Catherine Hilbert, OP, notes,

The experiences in which feminists locate the discourse of the passionate mystery of love at the heart of the universe are rich and diverse women’s friendships with one another as well as with men and children; gatherings of Women-Church; women’s solidarity with the suffering and marginalized; women’s political efforts to change social, ecclesial, and global structures of injustice; women’s connection with nature, the body, and the earth; and women’s mystical experience even in the mode of the dark night. What remains a common thread, however, is the firm conviction that women’s experience can be, and is, revelatory of the divine. Beneath that claim is the belief that human experience, history, and indeed all of creation have the potential to disclose the divine.³¹

Womanist theologians provide a still more focused lens on the particular life experiences of women of color and the Black community as a whole. Theologian Delores S. Williams, in her ground-breaking and foundational *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk*, speaks to the intersection and tensions of womanist and feminist theologies:

³⁰M. Shawn Copeland, “Journeying to the Household of God,” in *Liberating Eschatology: Essays in Honor of Letty M. Russell*, ed. Margaret A. Farley and Serene Jones (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999), 31-32. Copeland quotes Letty M. Russell in *Church in the Round: Feminist Interpretation of the Church* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993), 30-31.

³¹Mary Catherine Hilbert, “Experience and Tradition: Can the Center Hold?” in *Freeing Theology: The Essentials of Theology in Feminist Perspective*, ed. Catherine Mowry LaCugna (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993), 60.

Our black communities are engaged in a terrible struggle for life and well-being. All of our talk about God must translate into action that can help our people live. Womanist theology is significant only if it contributes to this struggle. We must, like Hagar, obtain through our God-given faith new vision to see survival and quality-of-life resources where we have seen none before. Since feminists and womanists come from many cultures and countries, womanist-feminist dialogue and action may well provide some of the necessary resources. Recognizing and honoring our differences and commonalities can lead in directions we can perhaps both own.³²

Williams expands on the role of feminist-womanist connection: "... [T]he purpose is for all feminist-womanist women to exchange ideas, enlarge definitions and concepts and plan political strategies. Women must learn to help each other see when and how they are instruments of their own and other people's oppression."³³

The sisterhood of child advocates draws on feminist and womanist theology. However, just as other women's movements—notably, suffrage and women's liberation in the seventies—privileged white women's experience and exhibited and embodied racism and white supremacy, so too feminist theologians and all white women need to grapple honestly with the persistent and pernicious reality of white supremacy and racism in the past and present, in communities of faith, and in themselves. White women child advocates who come to retreat in diverse gatherings with the commitment of just hospitality need to arrive having done some of that difficult, long-time work with themselves, and at the same time to recognize that it is never done and so remain attentive to how they show up in such a space.

³²Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 180.

³³*Ibid.*, 165.

Townes also addresses the differences between womanist theology and other theologies. She names the important discourse that must happen between and among these communities and emphasizes the active outcomes or implications of womanist theology:

Perhaps the most common understanding of womanist is that she is a woman committed to an integrated analysis of race, gender, and class. This arises from a deep concern to address the shortcomings of traditional feminist and Black theological modes of discourse. The former has a long legacy of ignoring race and class issues. The latter has disregarded gender and class. Both modes of discourse have begun to address these internal flaws. Yet womanist reflection maintains its critical perspective of feminist and African-American traditional ways of analytical reflection.

This critical perspective extends to Eurocentric discourse as well. Much of what womanist thought seeks to debunk is the notion of universals and absolutes. Womanist thought is intentionally and unapologetically biased. Its bias is for a diverse and faithful community of witnesses. These witnesses are an active force for love and justice in the midst of oppression and fallenness. With such a bias, all forms of theological discourse are open for reconsideration and critique. This includes womanist discourse as well.³⁴

Womanist theology's starting point of commitment to justice, especially justice for people of color, is where women child advocates begin too, joined in commitment to children of color and other children and families who are pushed furthest to the margins. Children in our nation have the highest rates of impoverishment of any age group, and children of color disproportionately so. Children of color also experience hunger, homelessness, lack of health coverage, failing schools, poor quality child care, exposure to violence, incarceration, police brutality, and racial profiling at a disproportionate and higher rate than white children. No wonder, then, that women child advocates share

³⁴Emilie M. Townes, "On Creating Ruminations from the Soul" in *A Troubling in My Soul: Womanist Reflections on Evil and Suffering*, ed. Emilie M. Townes (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 2-3.

Williams' commitment to theological discourse that leads to action to improve the lives of children of color.

Women child advocates affirm womanist and feminist theologies' valuing of lived experience and commitment to listening to and privileging the voices of those who have first-hand experience of the oppressions we seek to address. Attending to that lived experience is the starting place of doing theology; the experiences of women and children are not "illustrations" to be appended to scriptural texts and perceptions to be contorted to conform with abstract doctrine.

Commitment to an "integrated analysis of race, gender, and class"³⁵ (Townes' words describing womanism) and "historical, political, and economic"³⁶ analysis (Copeland's words describing feminist theology) are needed for and show up in women child advocates' conversation; those factors fundamentally impact the current status of children and must be acknowledged and addressed if we are to make progress in child well-being. Retreat settings can and should include systems analysis but, importantly, as it emerges from and follows on the primary voice of lived experience.

The movement to translate these theological understandings into action and political struggle for structural change is central to feminist theology and womanism and for women child advocates. The purpose of theological conversation when women child advocates are gathered in retreat is to discern and prepare to enact new understandings of how God calls us to seek justice with and for children.

³⁵Townes, "On Creating Ruminations from the Soul," 2.

³⁶Copeland, "Journeying to the Household of God," 32.

The common denominator for women child advocates who gather in retreat has been justice for Black children, children in impoverished families, and others pushed to and systematically kept on the margins. As such, the primary theological tradition has been womanism. While white supremacy and racist structures and culture in our nation are often the focus of discussion, there have been admittedly few conversations directly discussing where feminist theology has been a justifier or upholder of some white supremacist understandings. Far more common has been a theological critique of traditional, patriarchal theology. The womanist theologians quoted above offer an important reminder and invitation to ensure that any feminist theological tendency toward universalizing or absolutizing white perspectives and experiences does not creep in to these retreat settings.

Common to both feminist and womanist theology is the affirmation that women's lived experience is a source of revelation and the starting point, not recipient, of theology. Women's experiences serve not only as secondary source material to compare and contrast to scripture, but as primary sacred texts revealing new understandings of God and how God works in and through us. Old Testament scholar Renita Weems writes, "... [W]hereas before [in *Just a Sister Away*] I relied upon Scripture's stories about women to help me unravel women's experience, this time in *I Asked for Intimacy* I allow my own experience as an African-American woman to help me in some places interrogate Scripture and in other places reconceive what faith is."³⁷

³⁷Renita Weems. *I Asked for Intimacy: Stories of Blessings, Betrayals, and Birthings* (San Diego, CA: LuraMedia 1993), 12.

The “enoughness” of women’s own lived sacred texts was made especially clear to me at a long-ago women’s retreat. The original plan was for a closing ritual in which women would reflect on the messages they wanted to share with the coming generations, inscribe them on stones, and then share aloud what they had written. After that we would move to the chapel for a closing worship service including a sermon based on a scriptural text that I had labored over many days before the retreat began. As the sharing during the ritual progressed, tears flowed and the spirit moved among the group with extraordinary power. We took all the time we needed and listened to the testimony of each voice there. When that sharing concluded and we walked toward the chapel, my heart knew we had just heard a sacred word and my preaching on a scriptural text would not add to and only take away from the holy experience. Still, my head counted the time spent and my ego hoped perhaps my voice was still needed for a preaching moment. I walked to the chapel with Emma Jordan Simpson and shared my questioning; she wisely and rightly affirmed that we had already had the “word proclaimed” and did not need a traditional sermon on traditional scripture. My labored sermon set aside, we used our time in chapel as a continuation of the worship that had begun in the circle celebrating every woman’s voice. A few years later, the first evening’s sharing—as each woman talked about an item she brought that “says something about you and the work you do”—was profound and sacred, went deep and lifted us high, moving the women to tears and laughter. It again became clear that there was neither time nor need for my carefully prepared sermon on a biblical text. Although with a small measure of angst at the work that would be unused, I recognized more readily that a single voice preaching from a traditional text was

unnecessary and that the sacred stories shared by all the voices in the room were more than sufficient and indeed holy.

Wolf, with whom I plan and co-lead retreats, embodies a deep commitment to and recognition of the wisdom in the room. She consistently shows how to de-center oneself as a leader in such situations and instead to hold the space so that other voices are invited in. With her example and mentoring, I no longer prepare sermons, recognizing that the lived experience expressed by each woman in her own words is in these retreats the sacred word proclaimed that illuminates who God is, who we are as God's people, and how God works in and through as we seek justice for God's beloved children. We still explore scriptural texts that may speak to us of our calling as child advocates, but always in a context in which each voice and interpretation may be heard.

In Chapter One we explored scripture for what insights it might offer about sisterhood in resistance, grief, support, shared theologizing, and worship. Now we turn to women child advocates' own experiences as sacred texts that offer new perspectives on sisterhood in resistance, grief, support, shared theologizing, and worship that may help us gain new understandings of who God is and who we are as God's people. Reformed tradition often prefaces the reading of scripture by saying not "Listen *to* the word of God," but "Listen *for* the word of God." That single word change makes a difference: instead of perpetuating the perception that scripture was inerrantly scribbled down by a divine hand it instead implicitly nods to the distinction of what humans have recorded and honors the active and unique role of those hearing to discern and find illumination.

Jordan Simpson, at a retreat on January 7, 2020 as the group explored a passage attributed to Third Isaiah in traditional scripture, said, "We need to see ourselves as

Fourth Isaiah.” What prophetic word will we share and will we hear? Listen for the word of God....

SACRED STORY OF RESISTANCE: “BOTTLING HOPE” –NELBA MARQUEZ-GREENE

Listen for the word of God in these words from Marquez-Greene describing her experience at a women child advocates’ retreat:

There’s just a respect that you have, from people who have been there a lot longer than you that is healthy. That, you know, you have to learn from and you...just admire it, you...how do I want to say this, I wanted to marinate in that wisdom. The...length of the retreat, I wanted to bring that back with me, somehow bottle it in my heart. So that when I got back to work, and had to deal with the things I had to deal with, or the moment called for courage, I can bottle up the moment.

One of the women [Edelman] said, “Our ancestors went through so much more,” you know, ...our ancestors, you know, they dealt with this and [more].

So that’s what that moment felt like, it felt like you have this, if I had to give it a physical picture, say I had this beautiful tiny glass jar with a cork, with a cork that you could cover it, like I took the cork off. And I was just trying to take that glass jar around, bottling up all the goodness, and then quickly put it back so that when I got back to my own life, I could take it off a little bit and, and spread it around when I need it or spread it on onto me, you know, that anointing that was in the room? Every time we met so that I could, does that make sense?

You know, I have to tell you that the beginning of the pandemic... and the riots this summer were incredibly difficult, because I thought about us gathering, imagining we had been through the worst, and then not at all seeing all of this coming. And I remember also how tired the women in the room were, some of them, that they were tired. And that was hard, right? Because I’m like this [inaudible] on hope, you know, this, this hope I keep having and then we’re here.

But again, it was just not a hope that everything would be perfect. But a hope that there was still at least some people who saw, had the vision for what it should be in the future. Right? And would speak out loudly that this was wrong. You know, whether it be, you know, what happened to George Floyd, or racial tensions in general or, you know, police brutality in general, gun violence in general, you know, students and poverty in general. It was wrong, so, so it wasn’t a hope like, “okay, everything’s gonna be magically better now,” but a hope that there were still people speaking truth to power. There are still women ready, willing, able to say, hey, this isn’t—it doesn’t matter what’s happening.

So that’s what I tried to cling on to when all that stuff happened in the summer. And I actually was happy to hear from the communications director from CDF. And I said to her, I said to her, ... “We got to get together, we got to do something,” because I really wished we were still able to get together, right,

because I needed that whole bottle filled up again, so, so I was really grateful to hear from you.³⁸

The question we asked of the scriptural text about sisterhood in resistance was “what do Shiphrah and Puah have to teach us about the power of sisterhood in resistance to oppression and the call to child advocacy?” Now we have a new sacred story from Marquez-Greene and ask of it, what does it have to teach us about the power of sisterhood in resistance to oppression and the call to child advocacy? What does this text reveal of who God is and how God works in and through us?

This sacred story speaks to the need for the guild of child advocates—as the midwives had a guild—for intergenerational transmission of skills, experience, and insights. Marquez-Greene affirms a recognition of and respect for the wisdom of elders.

In this sacred story, Marquez-Greene quotes Edelman, who then at nearly eighty years of age had been in the struggle for more than sixty years. Edelman, after a childhood in the segregated south, as a young adult faced threats, endured arrest, and was deeply engaged in the struggle as a leader in the civil rights movement, and then persisted through decades of grinding, intense, exhausting advocacy on behalf of our nation’s children. But her own words look still further back, to her ancestors and their struggles through enslavement, reconstruction, and more. Edelman takes strength from knowing that those who preceded her had endured and overcome; Marquez-Greene takes strength from Edelman’s perspective of the long view.

McPherson also inscribes those words of Edelman in her own sacred text of experience. She says,

³⁸Marquez-Greene, interview.

How humbling it has been to be with Oleta telling stories and Emma telling stories and Janet telling stories and ... things like Ruby Sales being there or Wendy's experiences through the years³⁹... But anyway, just it also is a reminder of the long view. Marian is like, "Oh, it's been this bad before." It's like, well then why the hell is it this way now? But still, you know, it helps to have a long view and the... prayer about the long view... So yeah, it's just... a good reminder.⁴⁰

The phrase "the long view" which stayed with both women comes from a prayer shared in the women's retreat written by Father Ken Untener for Cardinal John Dearden.

It reads in part:

It helps, now and then, to step back and take a long view.
 The [K]indom] is not only beyond our efforts, it is even beyond our vision.
 We accomplish in our lifetime only a tiny fraction of the magnificent enterprise that is God's work.
 Nothing we do is complete, which is a way of saying that the [K]indom] always lies beyond us...
 This is what we are about.
 We plant the seeds that one day will grow.
 We water seeds already planted, knowing that they hold future promise.
 We lay foundations that will need further development.
 We provide yeast that produces far beyond our capabilities.
 We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that.
 This enables us to do something, and to do it very well.
 It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way, an opportunity for the Lord's grace to enter and do the rest.
 We may never see the end results,
 but that is the difference between the master builder and the worker.
 We are workers, not master builders; ministers, not messiahs.
 We are prophets of a future not our own.⁴¹

³⁹"Oleta" refers to Oleta Garrett Fitzgerald, director of CDF's Southern Regional Organizing Office. "Emma" is Emma Jordan Simpson, executive director of the Fellowship of Reconciliation and former Executive Director of CDF's New York Office. "Janet" is Janet Wolf, former director of CDF Haley Farm and now CDF consultant for Nonviolent Direct Action Organizing and Dean of the Dale Andrews Freedom Seminary. "Wendy" is Wendy Puriefoy, former Director of the Public Education Network and CDF Board Member.

⁴⁰McPherson, interview.

⁴¹Ken Untener, "Prophets of a Future Not Our Own." <https://www.usccb.org/prayer-and-worship/prayers-and-devotions/prayers/prophets-of-a-future-not-our-own>, accessed 2/26/21

Sisterhood in resistance and the guild of child advocates relies on mutuality and intergenerational connections. As an adult and mother in the gun-violence prevention movement, Marquez-Greene thinks about the high school students thrust into public activism after the 2018 massacre at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, in which seventeen students, teachers, and coaches were murdered and seventeen more injured. She asks, who will help these young people—and others like them reeling from the aftermath of violence and shouldering the responsibility of activism—to find their footing and stay on the journey? With her appreciation of the wisdom and value of elders in the guild of child advocates, Marquez-Greene raises the question of “succession planning.” Typically applied to organizations, Marquez-Greene uses “succession planning” to raise the much bigger question of how we not only sustain ourselves but how we support the next generation of leaders:

I think it is important to think about succession planning, when we no longer have Marian as the physical anchor in the room, to galvanize us all through her spirit and her legacy and her... How do we plan for succession and instilling hope, and love and fierce protection of the younger leaders in the next generation? That is something I do? See, I see we burden, I look at the children—and that’s what they are: they are children. We tend to forget, but they are children—leaders in March for Our Lives, that we really quickly rushed to put superhero capes on when they experienced their tragedy.

And, okay. But my immediate concern at that time was: who will be there for those children in five years, in ten years, when the cameras have moved on? When they no longer, you know, when... the cameras [leave], nobody cares about... Newtown in the same way that they did... eight years ago? Nobody is, you know, after a while there’s an expiration date. What are they? One of my favorite sayings is “grief lasts longer than empathy.” Right? And if we’re not holding people—and I don’t mean physically, I mean, in the spiritual sense—when they’re hurting, how can we train them really to be... So Marian saw an injustice and experienced them and... transformed that, right, but she didn’t do that by herself. A lot of people worked with her, work for her, supported her, loved her, cared for her. How do we do this for the next generation is my question. How do we develop the next Marian?⁴²

⁴²Marquez-Greene, interview.

Like Marquez-Greene, McPherson is aware of the mutuality that is involved in being in the guild of child advocates. She muses,

What would it mean for us to commit to this... to experiences of sisterhood-in-community in our own communities? ... [A]nd so... all of us will, as we get to be these old women, we look at young talent coming up and watching women who we know are going to do great things, or who could, or who are in need encouragement or whatever, and how do we bind ourselves together in love and in hope and [stewardship] of what could be by helping create smaller communities?⁴³

How do we continue to sustain ourselves so that we can support the next generation of young leaders? The sacred story offers us a potent metaphor of bottling wisdom, courage, goodness, and hope. It stands in contrast to the scriptural metaphor in Psalm 57:8: “You have kept count of my tossings; put my tears in your bottle. Are they not in your record?” Marquez-Greene’s sacred story names an experience that seems palpable in its power, one that she knows is present in a particular way in that gathering, in that moment, and that requires intention to bring with her to times and places where it is otherwise absent. In addition to attentiveness and intention, her image evokes active involvement—corking and uncorking, and moving around which also implies that the wisdom, goodness, and strength come not from one of the women but from many. She describes “quickly” corking the bottle—suggesting that the experience is precious and elusive, and she is determined to preserve all that she can.

It describes what transpired in the gathering of women as an “anointing.” As with any sacred text, readers will bring to it their own theologies. Marquez-Greene comes from an evangelical upbringing and only she could unpack her understanding of that

⁴³McPherson, interview.

anointing. The Presbyterian Church (USA)—less accustomed to the practice of anointing than Pentecostal or Roman Catholic traditions, for example—tiptoes toward the topic, cautioning “When a service for wholeness includes anointing and the laying on of hands, these enacted prayers should be introduced carefully in order to avoid misinterpretation and misunderstanding. Healing is to be understood not as the result of the holiness, earnestness, or skill of those enacting the prayers, or of the faith of the ones seeking healing, but as the gift of God through the power of the Holy Spirit” (W-3.5400).⁴⁴ This sacred story, however, does not need anxious hair-splitting... or splitting human and divine, God’s action and our being. Surely we can just hold the words of our text, “the anointing that was in the room” in its fullness and let the mystery move in and through us.

Like any sacred story, Marquez-Greene’s does not arise in a vacuum but in a specific historical context—recounted after a year of a deadly pandemic that hit communities of color and impoverished people the hardest, after the continued heart-breaking killings of unarmed people of color, after a deadly insurrection that took over our nation’s Capitol, in the waning days of the reign of Trump. Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann points out of the scripture text on the midwives and resistance, while Shiphrah and Puah are named, the new king is not: the “lack of historical, factual specificity about the king permits the account to become a paradigmatic presentation that, in every generation... can be reapplied and reasserted against whomever is the agent of

⁴⁴<https://www.presbyterianmission.org/ministries/worship/faq/faq-pastoralrites/>, accessed 2/26/21

abusive power.”⁴⁵ Being prepared to resist empire is a perennial challenge, even as the historical details change.

Nonetheless, the concrete historical context of Marquez-Greene’s sacred story—the time of such visible pandemic and persistent pain—makes it especially prophetic and theologically important. “It was just not a hope that everything would be perfect. But a hope that there was still at least some people who saw, had the vision for what it should be in the future. Right? And would speak out loudly that this was wrong.”⁴⁶ This a sacred text of the power of sisterhood in resistance. What sustains us in resistance is not a false hope or shallow theology that everything will be perfect, that we are about to solve all the crises afflicting our nation’s children, that suffering will end any day or year now. When nearly 12 million children in our nation—one in six—are living in poverty, women child advocates know that everything won’t be instantly perfect, but at the same time we know we must proclaim loudly that this is wrong. When in the most recent year for which we have data more than four million children lack health coverage in our nation, more than 673,000 children were reported abused and neglected, 3,410 children and teens were killed by guns, 43,580 children were in juvenile facilities and 935 children were in adult jails, the women child advocates gathered know that it won’t be solved perfectly tomorrow, and speak out loudly that this is wrong.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Walter Brueggemann, “Exodus,” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, Vol. I, ed. Leander Keck (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 695.

⁴⁶ Marquez-Greene, interview.

⁴⁷ Children’s Defense Fund, “Overview” in *The State of America’s Children 2020*. <https://www.childrensdefense.org/policy/resources/soac-2020-overview/>. Accessed 3/5/21.

This passage reminds us that we do not need flimsy hope or false prophets; what we do need are others who with us hold fast to the prophetic vision of what should be and who dare to speak out, to advocate, to name injustice and oppression, and persist. That is what fills our bottles as women in the guild of child advocates whose ancestors include Shiphrah, Puah, and Edelman.

SACRED STORIES OF GRIEF AND LAMENT: “NOBODY BLINKED”—NELBA MARQUEZ-GREENE

A profound sacred text on mourning is offered in the sharing of Marquez-Greene. Marquez-Greene, as has been previously mentioned, tragically lost her six-year-old daughter Ana Grace in the horrific massacre at Sandy Hook Elementary School on December 14, 2012, in which twenty children between the ages of six and seven and six adults were murdered.

Marquez-Greene describes her first experience of CDF’s women’s retreat: “It was supportive. It’s interesting. It was always, it was the picture of what I always felt like a supportive spiritual community should be.”⁴⁸ Marquez-Greene then describes the difference between the American church response to her tragedy and that of the church her family had attended in Canada, from where they had recently moved.

Listen for the word of God speaking to you in this sacred story from Marquez-Greene:

I remember very strongly after my daughter died, I’m feeling really let down by the church, feeling very much like the church response to what happened—and it’s interesting, only [let down] in the US, because we had just come back from Canada and our Canada church was fantastic; they really knew how to sit with and through grief. They were really like, “Listen, this is not God’s punishment of you. This is not God’s way of making a point, like we are going to sit with you in

⁴⁸Marquez-Greene, interview.

this terrible unknown. And we don't know why this has happened. But we are going to journey with you and your family.” That was our Canadian church.

It felt like here, it, we received outreach from people asking us to stand up to advocate for prayer in the schools, from people asking us to stand up for a ... while we very much believed in prayer, and it looked a certain way, we knew better than to be used by a particular agenda to advocate for something that would have hurt other people. So my faith in what was then familiar to me, which was American evangelical white Christianity, was really shaken by our experience.

And we very much learned that very few people in that group knew how to offer comfort in the face of tragedy; in the face of hurt to just sit.⁴⁹

Marquez-Greene then returns to her experience in the CDF women's retreat when we gathered in a circle on the first night, sharing stories of someone who had reached out their hands to us on our journeys as child advocates. Marquez-Greene had shared with the group about losing Ana Grace and how her Canadian church had extended its hand to her family. Marquez-Greene recalls,

And it was a marked difference in the circle, while every woman, every person, there had a story. And we didn't necessarily delve into anyone's stories, it was clear that people were comfortable sitting. And I think if we can teach more people the art of just sitting, we would be better communities. And we can teach the art of sitting along with. Does that make sense?⁵⁰

Marquez-Greene speaks further to her experiences of sharing her account of grief (and whether she chooses to share it at all) and the varied reactions it generates, including how she experienced it at the women's retreat:

And it just depends on the circumstance and the time and where and how you share and do you share, even, and [at the retreat] my favorite thing was that nobody blinked. It was another story. And nobody... and I could still just be normal.

And the only reason to share, honestly was because I was so frazzled, because that was also the weekend that Puerto Rico was experiencing all of those earthquakes in rapid... succession and there was incredible damage. So I had taken this great risk to leave my family to fly to this beautiful place. And I was just getting phone calls from my mom saying “we're okay, we're okay. We're okay.”

⁴⁹Marquez-Greene, interview.

⁵⁰Ibid.

So I was feeling incredibly frazzled. I may or may not have shared if... I didn't have that additional thing going on. But I just honestly felt really fragile. And the pickup was quite beautiful.

And I remembered so much. I think Marian may have been wearing the same green jacket [at the retreat as] when she showed up in Connecticut to meet at the high school in Newtown, and then showed up at my very, very humble house [in the aftermath of the Sandy Hook massacre]. You know, I didn't even have a friend—she showed up like... she'd been there a thousand times, like grief was familiar, like loss was not a stranger to her. And she was not afraid of walking... It's one thing to go give a speech in a community where there has been loss. It's another thing to walk into the house of a mother whose child has been killed, and she walked in. Just like the ladies [at the retreat], when I shared my story, it was like, Okay, here now, what are we going to do? So I don't know. There's just something beautiful about her spirit that just kind of emanated through. That energy and that force just kind of emanated through all the women [at the retreat]. And there was, it just, it just seemed very cocoon-like and respectful, respectful.⁵¹

The scriptural exploration in Chapter One examines the “women who mourned.”

It suggests that in biblical tradition women connect through a guild of mourners for intergenerational mentoring and support in the practice of lamentation, giving witness and voice to communal and individual grief. The cultural expectations around the expression of grief then, and even now, are often gendered. Weeping is often seen as “women's work,” and frequently regarded as weakness not as strength.

This new sacred text affirms old insights and offers new ones. Unlike the biblical guild of mourners who take up the cry to express others' grief, this sacred story from Marquez-Greene names the importance of knowing how to be in silent witness to and companionship with another in their grief. Marquez-Greene's story reminds us of the ways in which one's grief is personal and that it is a great affront when others try to use that grief for their own political or ideological ends. It reminds us that bad theology and

⁵¹ Marquez-Greene, interview.

unhelpful pastoral practice abound when it comes to tragedy and grief, and also affirms different theology.

Marquez-Greene's text echoes the ancient idea that there is need to teach this skill. However, unlike the ancient mourners' guild in which women were taught to take up weeping themselves on others' behalf, in this sacred story we hear that women need to "teach the art of sitting along with,"⁵² honoring another's grief and companioning her in it, not fleeing, silencing, or drowning out her cry with one's own.

Jacobs-Strain affirms how valuable that teaching is and the lasting impression it makes. More than a year after being in the same circle that Marquez-Greene describes, when asked to reflect on an experience at the retreat that exemplifies sisterhood for her, Jacob Strain shares this:

I think another moment was when the young woman from Sandy Hook shared with us her story. And she shared some experiences that I don't think I had never, I had not considered like—and I don't know why I hadn't considered it but I just hadn't considered it—you know, that in the midst of her grieving people reaching out to her, and, and sort of suggesting to her, "Well, now you need to do this," like, "because this has happened, you must feel this way about a certain thing."

And just it made me very, very mindful. And certainly as clergy, we know this, right? But as people we know this, right, that people grieve differently. But it also just, it made me think a little bit about the experiences that people have when they are grieving.

And so, so that was just something that kind of, it really stayed with me. Because I just, you know, I felt that people certainly would have been compassionate, but not also that people would have tried to place a responsibility on her in the midst of that.

And so, you know, it just spoke to... sort of how, even when you might mean well, how you can do harm. And so just being very mindful of that.⁵³

⁵² Marquez-Greene, interview.

⁵³ Jacobs-Strain, interview.

There is something evocative, like a biblical passage describing the strangers approaching Abram and Sarai's tent or the stranger accompanying Cleopas and his companion, in Marquez-Greene's language: "I didn't even have a friend—she showed up like...she'd been there a thousand times, like grief was familiar, like loss was not a stranger to her. And she was not afraid of walking... It's one thing to go give a speech in a community where there has been loss. It's another thing to walk into the house of a mother whose child has been killed, and she walked in."⁵⁴ What a powerful word and teaching for us as child advocates, as mothers, as clergy, as faith-based leaders. When gun violence kills a child or teen roughly every two and a half hours in our nation, it is a tragically urgent text for us to know. It speaks to the rare, needed, and holy call to accompaniment, to the "ministry of presence," to sitting with another in their grief.

The sacred text Marquez-Greene offers provides a fresh glimpse of the spirit moving in and through us, as she says, "there's just something beautiful about [Marian's] spirit that just kind of emanated through. That energy and that force just kind of emanated through all the women [at the retreat]. And there was, it just, it just seemed very cocoon-like and respectful, respectful."⁵⁵

In her book *In My Grandmother's House: Black Women, Faith, and the Stories We Inherit*, Pierce writes, "Learning the difference between the ghostly silences into which we must speak truth to power and the holy silences from which we can draw strength and comfort may take a lifetime."⁵⁶ Pierce further describes those holy silences:

⁵⁴Marquez-Greene, interview.

⁵⁵Ibid.

⁵⁶Pierce, *In My Grandmother's House*, 70.

“There is a silence that is holy. There is a silence that is saving. There is a silence that is healing. There is a silence that allows others to be heard. There is a silence that is the presence of the precious Holy Ghost.”⁵⁷

SACRED STORIES OF SUPPORTIVE SISTERHOOD: “NEW SPACE IN OUR HEARTS”

In Chapter One we explore the scriptural text of Mary and Elizabeth as one that speaks to the power of sisterhood in support across difference and to the depth of their shared theologizing. Women from CDF’s women’s retreat offer their own sacred texts as they experienced sisterhood. Like Mary and Elizabeth, in each instance the sacred text involves women who embody both differences and profound connections. Listen for the word of God speaking to you in these words of Gina Jacobs-Strain, Donna Lawrence, Nelba Marquez-Greene, Naomi Post, and Mary Nell McPherson. Jacobs-Strain describes an experience of sisterhood:

The storytelling of the mom and her daughter, and what brought them together, and the experience that [the daughter] had had as being in India and what that felt like, and then being here and what that felt like, and just, you know, the affirmation that—maybe affirmation is not the right word—but you know, the notion that people from so vastly different beginnings—and somehow God connected them and what a difference in both of their lives that meant... and sharing that story with us. ... It made new space in our heart for different things.⁵⁸

Lawrence is a white woman who adopted two children with her then-wife. She is Jewish and a long-time leader in nonprofit work. Asked about a moment that exemplified sisterhood to her, she describes this moment with Theresa Thames, associate dean of the

⁵⁷Pierce, *In My Grandmother’s House*, 73.

⁵⁸Jacobs-Strain, interview.

Princeton University Chapel. After Thames' sister died, her nephew came to live with her. Lawrence shares,

There are probably so many. I'm terrible with names. So the woman who I think was from Princeton, an African American woman... had taken in her sister's son and was raising him... [A]nd I just remember being so moved by her story, and also sharing with her my story of my kids. And again, it was like this remarkable, like, we come from such different experiences, in such different lives. And even the way our kids came into our lives was so different. But there was such a connection about what that experience has [inaudible] been through system or who lost their parents. And... we did connect for a while after that; we stayed in touch. And it was very powerful. You know, it was very eye opening.⁵⁹

Marquez-Greene shares a story of sisterhood, describing a connection with

Edelman:

This one's pretty personal but I will share it with you. I will say that as a family who has experienced loss in the U.S... around the circumstances of gun violence and a mass shooting, like we have, that primarily happens in a white suburban community, where we already don't fit in, and straddling this other world of my husband is black, and I'm Puerto Rican. It's very lonely, like it's really lonely. It feels like you don't really fit in in either camp. You know? People who, you know, look like you who maybe have had children lost in other circumstances, there is a very strong feeling of "you are not like us." But we also don't fit into the mass shooting narrative, which is mostly strikes in a suburb, you know, white children.

And so it's been a very delicate thing. I have found safe spaces in that difficulty, but they've been very rare. And we constantly strive to reach out to others, no matter how they've lost their children. We constantly strive to, but it takes a lot of work. It takes a lot of trust building. It takes a lot, you know.

When I was there [at the Women's Retreat]—and I probably shared this with you before—one of the things that struck me was the rocking chairs, the green rocking chairs on the wraparound porch, and they were very big ones [with name plaques in memory of movement leaders]. And then there were four little ones... the girls were killed in the bombing. And I had I saw those. And I mean, it was a visceral reaction, like I just had a really hard time with the chairs, these little girls that look like Ana, right, and then [Ana Grace] would have done the same thing, she would have tied a bow on her friends. And I read those stories like I, I was just obsessed with these stories and learning about these little girls who didn't get a chance.

⁵⁹Lawrence, interview.

And I said to myself, “I wish I had a chair.” You know, I wish I had a chair here, you know, and then recognizing –well, all these different worlds we live in, right? Why would anybody feel like [Ana Grace] would, you know . . .

Anyway, long story short, it was the day before the last day of the retreat, and I’m out there with Marian. And she looks at me and she goes, “Ana should have a chair here.” And that was really powerful because it was something I had selfishly prayed for as a mom, right that she could be with the other little girls. . . . And [Marian] really did make it happen. [Ana’s] got a chair there now. And that was really beautiful.⁶⁰

The experience of connection across difference—when the absence of that is all too common—is an element of and not barrier and not incidental to an experience of the sacred and holy when women child advocates come together in a sisterhood of support. Post speaks to that experience, when asked what was most meaningful to her in the women’s retreat:

You know, I don’t want to sound like I’m not at all profound. But really, you know, for me, it was the companionship, it was the support, it was the renewed sense that you can express your faith and feel and see God in everyday acts. And to be around people you sense believe that. It was spiritually renewing. I mean, whenever I, when I left, the two times I went, I felt so much stronger, so much more centered, than I felt going into it. And I liked that. There were people who were really, really different. I mean, it was intergenerational. It was racially diverse. People came from different faiths, so it wasn’t a one size fits all. So you could just see how people who had different lifestyles and different ways of worshipping could come together and support one another in a really meaningful, powerful kind of way.⁶¹

Each of these sacred texts was offered in response to the question of an experience that embodied or exemplified sisterhood to them. Nonetheless, as a white woman I do not use the word “sisterhood” without reflection on and caution about appropriating a term that in modern usage primarily emerges from and speaks to the

⁶⁰ Marquez-Greene, interview.

⁶¹ Post, interview.

connection among Black women. Is it cultural appropriation to claim this term to describe these relationships between and among women of different racial and ethnic identities? Further, asks Wolf, do progressive child advocates want to claim any kind of “-hood” lest it perpetuate Empire’s inside/outside membership structure?

Are there other terms that better convey the relationship? Company, in “the company of women,” or “companions” nod through their Latin roots to those with whom we break bread. This could acknowledge both the physical and spiritual food that is part of the women’s retreats. We are accompanying one another on a journey of faith and life. But without the specific modifier “of women” it misses that element that “sisterhood” has. And it does not have an explicit spiritual connotation. Too, it ignores that women child advocacy leaders do not hunger for the company of just any women, but women who share their commitments to justice for children, who embody welcome, who recognize the many forms of injustice we work against—even within ourselves.

Koinonia is the Greek word that brings meanings, notes John Koenig, of “partnership,” “an atmosphere of shared worship,” and common material possessions.⁶²

Koenig continues,

In the great majority of passages where the koinonia words appear, the meaning has to do with human participation in a blessing of task or higher reality that is directed by God... [T]he New Testament writers conceive of partnership chiefly as cooperation in a divine project; there is a “given” from God or Christ or Spirit into which one enters, of which one partakes, with and for which one labors.⁶³

McPherson gives expression to this sense of koinonia experienced in the women’s retreat when she says, “I definitely come away with a sense of community—not just my

⁶² John Koenig, *New Testament Hospitality*, 9.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

local, geographic local community; I come away with a sense of community that is grounded in something larger than ourselves, both the God of all creation and the effort to serve children and work for a more just world. And both of those things are a gift.”⁶⁴

Russell also affirms *koinonia* as “community in partnership” “cooperat[ing] around a divine project” and sees it as “nurtured through continuing commitment and common struggle in a wider community context.”⁶⁵

However, *koinonia*, in addition to lacking the women-specific meaning of sisterhood, risks sounding pretentious and does not generate the easy, unselfconscious reflection and identification that “sisterhood” does.

Returning, then, to the use of sisterhood to describe these relationships of support across difference, Russell offers a way to consider sisterhood for this context. Writes Copeland in “Journeying to the Household of God,”

Russell conceived of sisterhood as a dynamic process that women achieved by learning to affirm themselves and their sister(s) in their aspirations, “whatever the divergence of race, language, geography, ideology, and tactics.” For Russell, sisterhood contested the enforced subordination of women; as a process it was a task toward mutually supportive community that gave women new identity and hope.⁶⁶

Copeland further notes that “For marginalized persons, this self-liberation entails proper self-love and self-acceptance of one’s own body and embodiedness, race, sexual orientation, class, and cultural background... For those who control society or benefit from that control, women and men at the center, self-liberation involves unlearning

⁶⁴McPherson, interview.

⁶⁵Russell, *Just Hospitality*, 84.

⁶⁶Copeland, “Journeying to the Household of God,” 33.

sexism, racism, homophobia, heterosexism, economic and cultural elitism.” Together, then, they may collaborate in “the task of recreating society.”⁶⁷

For the women child advocates interviewed, who were white, Black, and Latinx, examples of sisterhood all included connection with another woman or women across racial and ethnic differences as well as, for some, generation, faith tradition, and sexual orientation.

In this context then, not casually or carelessly but with intention, and mindfulness of the active and attentive commitment that it entails, the “sisterhood of child advocates” best captures the experience of the gathered community.

SACRED STORY OF SISTERHOOD IN WORSHIP: “WE FELT THAT IN OUR VERY BEING” –GINA JACOBS-STRAIN

Listen for the word of God speaking to you in these words from Jacobs-Strain:

One day... we were writing something and you played the song “Ella’s Song.”
“We who believe in freedom...”

Music is definitely my love language. And so you know, I just thought that was such a... it just moved us in such a special way.

And, you know, first people were just kind of tapping their feet and kind of humming. And then people who knew it just started singing it a little bit louder. And it was such a, such an organic, natural sort of moment, because I think we felt those lyrics, right? We felt that in our very being and it was a great way to experience it. We would have never been able to put it into words like that. But that song did it. And I think that was a really special kind of unifying moment. I get teary even thinking about it.

And I came home realizing that my family probably didn’t know that song. And so I played it for them. And it’s a song that I’ve played hundreds of times. We have a tradition in our family every morning at 7 a.m. Alexa... plays gospel music; that’s the way we wake up. Now it is not always welcomed by my son who’s trying to sleep late! But it is the way we wake up.

So I came back home and I just thought about that song. And, you know, I sent it to a bunch of friends and said, “You know, I don’t know if you’ve heard this, but I think it’s gonna make you feel good.”

⁶⁷Ibid., 34.

But it also encourages you; like it's also a, it's a call to action, right? And so I just felt like that was just such a great song. And in fact, when we were doing some things for our beloved community work, we played that song so that people could hear it and some people had never heard it and they didn't really know. So I think that was a moment.⁶⁸

Throughout her recounting of this moment, Jacobs-Strain wipes away tears—tears which speak to the deep well of emotion the experience taps. What she describes is a holy experience that might have gone unnoticed, unremarked, unexamined. But with attention, quiet, and curiosity—“What was a moment that exemplified sisterhood for you?”—this sacred story emerges. What does it have to teach us of God working in, through, and among us?

We make space for the holy to emerge when we stop speaking and listen to ourselves and to others—as we were during the retreat reflection time she described.

We find the holy in untraditional places—song that is not “religious” per se but speaks deeply to our most profound spiritual convictions and understanding of the sacrality of children of color and all children. The call to work for freedom without stopping is a sacred and holy calling. “Ella’s Song,” written by Bernice Johnson Reagon and performed by Sweet Honey in the Rock, is based on the words of Ella Baker who helped found the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and mentored countless young people in their leadership during the civil rights movement. “Ella’s Song” begins,

We who believe in freedom cannot rest,
 We who believe in freedom cannot rest until it comes
 Until the killing of black men, black mothers’ sons
 Is as important as the killing of white men, white mothers’ sons.

That which touches me most is that I had a chance to work with people
 Passing on to others that which was passed on to me
 To me young people come first, they have the courage where we fail

⁶⁸Jacobs-Strain, interview.

And if I can but shed some light as they carry us through the gale...

Struggling myself don't mean a whole lot, I've come to realize
That teaching others to stand up and fight is the only way my struggle survives
I'm a woman who speaks in a voice and I must be heard
At times I can be quite difficult, I'll bow to no man's word⁶⁹

Jacobs-Strain's sacred story reminds that we experience the holy in a community of kindred spirits who share our commitment to justice for children. We experience the spirit coming unbidden and unexpected, through the organic movement of our bodies, hearts, minds.

Spiritual moments move us to share them—in the immediate context of the circle of women, broadening out to our families and children, and to those who share our passion for justice.

Time away from the work does not make us distant from it, necessarily, but perhaps even more attuned to its persistent hold on our hearts.

The sacred text of Jacobs-Strain's experience speaks to sisterhood in worship although the moment was not one of formal worship. Pierce writes of the myriad places and ways that theology emerges in community:

When we are fully present in mind and soul and body, we embrace worship as a time of praise and thanksgiving as well as a time of lament and mourning. When we are fully present in worship, we participate in a creative theological process daring to both raise and answer questions about the nature and reality of God. Theological work cannot simply take place in academic spaces; it is not a dry set of questions to be posed by those who are 'qualified' those who have a set of particular educational credentials. You do theology in community, and the best theology reflects the cares and concerns of that community. This theology often shows up in sermons, songs, and praises.⁷⁰

⁶⁹Sweet Honey in the Rock, "Ella's Song," lyrics and music by Bernice Johnson Reagon. Recorded 1988 on the album *Breaths*. Based on the words of Ella Baker, civil rights leader and pivotal force in the founding of, and mentor to, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee.

⁷⁰Pierce, *In My Grandmother's House*, 83.

Jan Richardson writes, *In the Sanctuary of Women: A Companion for Reflection and Prayer*,

Across the centuries women have carried prayers in our bones and in our blood. We have passed down the sacred stories from body to body. We have struggled to know our lives as sacred texts, to perceive the ways that God has written God's own story within us, to understand how the Word still seeks to take flesh in and through us. And we have hungered for places of safety and of community in which to do this, to gather in the company of others whose stories and prayers both echo and challenge our own.⁷¹

Retreat invites women child advocates to embrace and honor the wisdom of their incarnated, embodied selves—to feed, rest, walk, dance, move, and love themselves. To see, hug, touch others when welcomed. To feel the feelings—to cry, laugh, sing, breathe, rage, question, wonder. We embody our shared wisdom when we sit in a circle—no pulpit, podium, head seat, or pew.

In our hearts pondering, in our feet tapping, in our ears listening, in our voices singing, in our tears falling, we as women child advocates experience the holy.

⁷¹ Jan Richardson, *In the Sanctuary of Women: A Companion for Reflection & Prayer* (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 2010), 14.

CHAPTER FIVE: SUSTAINING SISTERHOOD IN THE CHILDREN'S MOVEMENT

Edelman often says “children don’t come in pieces,” meaning our advocacy for children has to encompass all of their needs for well-being, from health to family income to safety to education and more, as well as recognizing their family and community context and needs. Women leaders in the child advocacy movement, too, need a place where they can be whole, that recognizes all of the pieces of their lives, that allows them to integrate their faith, vocation, heart, head, body, hunger for community and need for time alone.

Like Shiprah and Puah, we need sisterhood to support and sustain each other in effective resistance to oppression and injustice. Like the weeping women, we need sisterhood to sit with each other as we grieve the hurt and harm done to our children, to marginalized families, to ourselves. Like Mary and Elizabeth, we need sisterhood in support and as we theologize together, upending the theology of empire and giving voice to a new theology born of our own experiences. Like Lydia and the women who gathered, we need sisterhood in worship in which every voice, every body, and every woman counts and is encouraged.

FATIGUE DUTY: RETREATS TO STEP OUT OF...

Retreat is not running away, but intentionally stepping out of the daily context that makes it so difficult to sustain one’s strength. Women leaders in child advocacy work in a context of multiple pressures, including white privilege and systemic racism, sexism, heterosexism, elitism, institutional struggles, and the emotional weight of serving

and seeking justice for children and families on the margins. Retreat is not an indulgence, a temporary abandonment of work, but is in fact an essential aspect of effective work.

In the military, “Fatigue Duty” is work which does not involve weapons. It includes “work on fortifications, in surveys, in cutting roads, and other constant labor, of not less than ten days...”¹ In the Civil War, “fatigue duty” was predominantly assigned to Black soldiers while the violent and bloody presumed “glories” of the battlefield were mostly reserved for whites.² Women child advocates are engaged, one might say, in “Fatigue Duty.” The on-going struggle using nonviolent organizing strategies, direct service, and advocacy to fortify our children, building structures and systems that will protect them, analyzing data that documents the crises, looking to create new, better pathways to adulthood that don’t push children of color into the cradle to prison pipeline, and the myriad other labors of this work... it is fatiguing. It is often accompanied by racist and sexist assumptions about what work matters and who is worthy of doing it. The air in which we work is toxic with white supremacy, sexism, elitism, heterosexism, and more. While we were not drafted into this work but called, nonetheless women child advocates need to hear the equivalent of the military’s “Retreat Call”—a bugle tune which originally called troops to retreat and now at the end of the day summons them to rest.

There are factors which make it difficult and even risky for women child advocates to hear and heed the summons to retreat. First and foremost, there are very few opportunities designed just for this purpose. While retreats abound, they encompass a

¹ Edward Samuel Farrow, Farrow’s Military Encyclopedia, 628, <https://books.google.com/books?id=x-ofAQAAMAAJ&pg=PA623#v=onepage&q&f=false>, accessed 4/7/2021.

² “Fatigue Duty” https://www.nps.gov/parkhistory/online_books/civil_war_series/2/sec15.htm, accessed 3/24/2021.

wide range of emphases and different populations. There is a need for more retreats specifically for the purpose of supporting and sustaining women child advocates. Second, women who are engaged in this work may find it difficult to respond to the invitation. Child advocacy work tends to be highly demanding and low-paid. Women often bear disproportionate responsibilities at home, caring for children and/or aging family members. It is boldly counter-cultural professionally and personally to step out of those responsibilities to prioritize retreat time for oneself. Finally, some women may be reluctant to respond to an invitation for retreat when they have had negative prior experiences of such gatherings as a result of racism, elitism, heterosexism, or oppressive theologies; responding to that invitation is not without risk and the decision to accept is brave.

To make it easier for women child advocacy leaders to hear and heed the call to retreat, we need greater investment in organizations that offer them—not only making more retreats available but also ensuring they are financially feasible. We need to push back against cultural and organizational norms that diminish the value of women's retreats, maintain unrealistically high and disproportionate demands on women, and underpay women, all of which make it hard to get away. We need to not only recognize, name, and work to eliminate the toxicities that make it difficult for women to do their work in the world, but also to commit to ensuring that the retreat spaces into which we call them are indeed safe spaces that will not further harm them. That requires expanding and diversifying the leadership of retreats, engaging leaders who are committed to doing the internal work on their own complicity with white supremacy or perpetuation of any of

the -isms, and determining ways to invite and set expectations, ethos, and boundaries for participants that ensures all are safely welcomed.

CATHEDRAL: RETREATS TO MOVE INTO...

Retreat is moving into what is needed to renew and strengthen oneself. Women child advocacy leaders are looking for a place that feels safe—safe for them as women, as people of color, as leaders, as boundary-crossers who don't fit neatly in one category, safe to be known as an individual first, and safe from theological harm. Women child advocates seek the trustworthy support of other women in safe space to do theology in community that honors the sacred in their stories and the stories of children they serve to find renewed strength and sustenance for their work.

These retreats offer wholeness in a fractured world—a world the splinters work from spirituality, spirit from body, sacred from experience. Together, we breathe in silence, exhale ruach/spirit, and express and explore stories that speak to the holy. Together, we wipe away tears of lament and tears of laughter. We sit with each other's grief and struggle, honoring it with our witness, silence, and support that does not attempt to deny or fix. Together, we recognize differences and are moved by connection. Together, we challenge and discard theology of Empire and develop prophetic possibility that is understood from and expressed faithfully in action. Music moves us. Meals feed our bodies as the conversation feeds our connection. Flickering candles honor our stories of those who came before us on this journey toward justice.

At one women's retreat, we looked together at a replica of Rodin's sculpture of two hands, cast in black metal, touching. Most of Rodin's sculptures have obvious titles: a young girl with flowers in her hair is *Young Girl with Flowers in Her Hair*, a man with a broken nose is *Man with the Broken Nose*, a foot is *Right Foot*. This sculpture,

however, is not titled the obvious “Hands.” Instead, it is titled *The Cathedral*.³ Two hands touching—cathedral. A closer look reveals they are not, as might next be supposed, two hands of a person clasped in prayer; they are two right hands, so the touch is between two people—cathedral. The fingertips touch, but the palms are cupped, preserving space and light between them—cathedral. *The Cathedral* gave rise to conversation about the experience of sacred space and holy connection in coming together as women child advocates. Retreats for women child advocates create a sacred, holy “cathedral” out of our embodied togetherness, touching and holding space for silence, for light, for listening.

Rodin’s *The Cathedral* spurred me to look at cathedral buildings with their flying buttresses—that construction innovation which provides support from the outside to maintain the interior space and preserve the structural strength while allowing for thinner walls and more windows that provide natural illumination from the outside shining in. Those flying buttresses seem an apt metaphor for retreat facilitation. Rather than retreat facilitators filling the space with their own preaching and teaching, at best retreat facilitators support or hold the space, keeping the walls thin and windows plentiful so that the space within is illumined by the wisdom and experience brought in by the women who gather.

Planning retreats well takes time, thought, attention to detail, imagination, study, and creativity. But what has become clear in the interviews is that when done well the programmatic “content” –the particular readings, documentaries, scripture, and framing—fades into the background of memory and what comes to the foreground is the

³Auguste Rodin, *The Cathedral*, 1908, bronze, The Rodin Museum, Philadelphia.

experience of sharing and connection that the “program” invites and for which it holds space. A good question centers typically marginalized voices, but it is those voices that matter most. Well-planned participatory Bible study methods engage participants in new ways with old texts, but it is the emerging insights of those women which disrupt oppressive theologies. A well-chosen metaphor or rich and resonant ritual invites deep reflection, but it is the vulnerability, honesty, and sharing of the women gathered which provides inspiration, renewal, and sustenance for child advocacy work. When the holy space of retreat that women child advocacy leaders move into is held well and safely, generating strength and renewal, then comes the movement back out at its conclusion, in order to continue moving forward in the children’s movement.

SISTERING: RETREATS TO MOVE FORWARD...

Retreats for women child advocates are a means of advancing the children’s movement by forging supportive, authentic, and trustworthy sisterhood across difference, affirming a collective vision for the work they do, and sustaining and strengthening its leaders after they depart the retreat to persist in that calling.

Women child advocates yearn for even more connection through the year to deepen and sustain the support as they return from retreats to contexts of intersecting racism, sexism, classism, institutional struggle, and the emotional weight of serving and seeking justice for children and families on the margins. How might women child advocates be better sustained in their work through more supported sisterhood throughout the year? The women child advocacy leaders themselves offered a variety of possibilities in addition to the existing annual January women’s retreat: women could commit to reaching out to a few others to check-in informally every month or so; annual cohorts so

that the group which met in January would meet monthly or bimonthly with a shared mission focus; a mid-year mini-retreat in addition to connecting bi-monthly; connecting a few times a year perhaps for worship, a book group, or structured or informal conversation; connecting more intentionally with the strategic initiatives and programs of child advocacy organizations, or even returning home to start local cohorts for a women's retreat so that those who had not participated in the national retreat could nonetheless find other child advocates and forge a similar supportive sisterhood on a local level.

Recently, West's use of "sistering" as a verb brought to mind the use in building or construction of "sistering." In construction work, "sistering" means bringing additional beams alongside an existing beam so that they may provide greater strength by being joined together. The original beam no longer bears the burden alone. But it is not removed and replaced, placing all the burden on a new single beam. Instead, through sistering, new beams are placed alongside the original beam and together they are better able to bear the weight of what is being built.

Coming alongside each other to share and better bear the weight of this child advocacy work is sistering. Sistering does not only happen in retreat, but back in our congregations and organizations, communities and contexts. We are sistering in resistance when we do not expect one woman, one organization, one denomination, one generation to hold up this justice work. We are sistering in resistance when we connect with each other of different generations, race and ethnicities, and experiences, becoming stronger as we unite.

We are sistering in lament as we act so that no woman is abandoned to her grief alone but we stand beside each other—knowing when sitting in silence speaks most

loudly, when presence is balm. We are sistering in lament when we know we cannot remove the burden of grief from another, but neither will we add to it by placing our own political agendas or destructive theologies on her.

We are sistering in support as we deny the myth that any one of us can do this work alone, that we are “tireless,” that we are perfect, instead acknowledging that we feel shaky under the weight when we bear it alone.

We are sistering as we do theology together, refusing to uphold oppressive theologies and honoring the sacred in our own stories and the liberating word too often obscured in scripture. We are sistering in worship as we recognize that one voice cannot speak for all any more than one beam can hold up the sanctuary walls. Sistering in worship we bring many voices alongside each other, resisting and supporting, lamenting and celebrating, theologizing, inspiring, and renewing.

RETREATS: MICRO-SCALE; MACRO-DIFFERENCE

If we are to work effectively for macro change to achieve systemic justice and transform our nation, we as women need to experience, on the micro-scale, welcome in a safe space to find supportive sisters, hear and share our sacred stories, and do theology in community that renews our hope and strength for the work we do. The intimacy of the small number of women who gather at any one retreat, and the relatively brief amount of time spent together, belies its great sustenance and impact on the women and on the bigger movement we seek to build. Its transformative impact is captured by these wise and profound words from adrienne maree brown—an influential organizing leader advancing understanding of fractal change—in her blog post “Making Tomorrow:”

the small place

between yesterday and tomorrow
where people who can see futures
whisper to each other
the words to the songs they must sing
to lead the way...

the only way forward is at the pace
of our collective heartbeat
altogether, imperfect, together...⁴

⁴Adrienne Maree Brown, "Making Tomorrow" adrienne maree brown (blog). April 26, 2017.
<http://adriennemareebrown.net/2017/04/26/making-tomorrow/>

APPENDIX: LIST OF INTERVIEWEES

Gina Jacobs-Strain is the executive director for American Baptist Women's Ministries and is a member of the National Executive Council for American Baptist Churches, USA. Previously she served several New Jersey congregations and as Associate Regional Pastor for Women in Ministry for American Baptist Churches of New Jersey. She is an Associate Minister of Christian Education at St. Paul Baptist Church in Montclair. Jacobs-Strain holds an M.Div. from Drew University Theological School and a D.Min. from Duke University.

Donna Lawrence has served as the president and CEO of the I Have a Dream Foundation since 2014. Prior to that she was vice-president of the JPB Foundation, a programme director at Atlantic Philanthropies, and executive director of the Children's Defense Fund—New York.

Nelba Marquez-Greene is the founder and executive director of the Ana Grace Project. Previously, she served as the Coordinator for Klingberg Family Therapy Center's outpatient child and adolescent psychiatric clinic and as adjunct faculty at Central Connecticut State University. She is a clinical fellow of the American Association of Marriage and Family Therapy and has worked in a variety of settings in the U.S. and Canada.

Mary Nell McPherson served as the founding executive director of Freedom School Partners in Charlotte, North Carolina, from January 2000 until December 2019. Her additional nonprofit leadership included serving as director of operations for Habitat for Humanity in Charlotte and support specialist for Crisis Assistance Ministry.

Naomi Post served as executive director of the Children’s Defense Fund—New York from 2016 until her retirement in 2020. Prior to that she was a Senior Fellow at the United Way of New York City, head of Community Based Programs at Atlantic Philanthropies, led a public/private child and youth advocacy effort, and co-founded Philadelphia Youth Violence Reduction Partnership. With a Juris Doctorate from Cornell Law School, Post spent a decade on juvenile justice system reform with the Philadelphia Family Court.

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VITA

Full name: Shannon Patricia Daley-Harris

Place and date of birth: San Rafael, California, March 12, 1965

Parents' Names: Eliot Alexander Daley and Patricia Litzenberg Daley

Educational Institutions:

School	Place	Degree	Date
<hr/>			
Secondary:			
Princeton High School	Princeton, NJ		1983
Collegiate:			
Brown University Providence RI B.A. 1987	Providence, RI	BA, <i>magna cum laude</i>	1987