

THE MILE SQUARE CATHEDRAL:  
THE CHURCH AS COMMUNITY HEALER

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## ABSTRACT

### THE MILE SQUARE CATHEDRAL: THE CHURCH AS COMMUNITY HEALER

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Since its beginning, the Church has marked the joys and sorrows of life through ritual observance. Coming together in times of individual and community trauma can help create a path to wholeness. As people in the United States continue to disaffiliate from organized religion, they lose more than an affinity group; they lose the restorative benefits of being rooted in a faith community. However, even if people are not coming into our buildings under such circumstances, the Church is uniquely situated to provide space for healing wherever it might be needed.

Between 1978 and 1982, the Mile Square City of Hoboken, New Jersey, experienced a wave of residential building fires, many of them suspected to have been intentionally set. More than fifty people died, most of them children. Amongst the Hoboken residents who lived through that era, there is an unshakeable belief that the majority of the fires were arson, intended to drive out low-income and indigent residents so that developers could create expensive apartments, condominiums, and brownstones. It was popularly known as “gentrification arson.”<sup>1</sup>

This project seeks to remedy the lack of attention or public acknowledgment of these tragedies for those who still bear the emotional and physical scars through a series of events designed for storytelling, remembering, and memorializing. The Church knows how to create

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<sup>1</sup> Dylan Gottlieb, “Hoboken Is Burning: Yuppies, Arson, and Displacement in the Postindustrial City,” *Journal of American History*, 106, Issue 2 (September 2019): 390-416, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jahist/jaz346>.

space for ritual, mourning, and remembrance that lead to healing. Preparing a liturgical framework set in the streets of this compact city is also a way of making God known. Some anthropological studies have led researchers to believe that early faith grew out of memorializing the dead: “The ceremonies our early ancestors enacted reflexively in the face of death, they speculate, were the soil in which a sense of the holy grew.”<sup>2</sup> This project will have succeeded beyond imagining if those who participate in its three parts experience something holy in the process.

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<sup>2</sup> Thomas G. Long, *Accompany Them with Singing: The Christian Funeral* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009).

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And always, always remembering Seth.

Elaine Ellis Thomas

Hoboken, New Jersey

## INTRODUCTION

There is a balm in Gilead, to make the wounded whole,  
There is a balm in Gilead, to heal the sin-sick soul.<sup>3</sup>

Church membership has been declining for decades. In the latest Gallup poll, membership fell below fifty percent in the U.S. for the first time<sup>4</sup> The non-affiliated are finding community elsewhere. If they report any faith practice, it is not dependent on formal membership in an organized body. The Church, which once touched almost every aspect of social life, is no longer relevant to many, at least not as an institution. However, what is lost in the disaffiliation is more than community and faith formation. The need for a place for people to gather in celebration and in mourning has not gone away, and it is this that the Church does best. Through ritual and liturgy, going where the pain is, helping people move through grief to healing is part of the Church's mission. If people are not affiliating with the Church, then perhaps the Church must go into the community to create space for healing.

The deaths of fifty-six people, primarily children, in a span of four years should rock a small city to its core. In Hoboken, a wave of residential building fires between 1978 and 1982 and suspected, to this day, of having been intentionally set resulted in no criminal convictions and no public acknowledgements or memorials. Hoboken residents

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<sup>3</sup> "There is a Balm in Gilead." *The Hymnal 1982* (New York: The Church Hymnal Corp., 1985) 676.

<sup>4</sup> Jeffrey M. Jones, "U.S. Church Membership Falls Below Majority for First Time," news.gallup.com, March 29, 2021. [https://news.gallup.com/poll/341963/church-membership-falls-below-majority-first-time.aspx?utm\\_source=newsletter&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=newsletter\\_axiosam&stream=top](https://news.gallup.com/poll/341963/church-membership-falls-below-majority-first-time.aspx?utm_source=newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=newsletter_axiosam&stream=top)

who lived through that era and experienced Hoboken's gentrification firsthand firmly believe that the majority of the fires were arson, intended to drive out low-income and indigent residents to build more expensive and profitable housing.

Jill Singleton is the Head of School at All Saints Episcopal Day School, founded in 1985 by All Saints Episcopal Parish in Hoboken. Ms. Singleton arrived in Hoboken at age seven and is considered what the locals call a "B&R"— someone born and raised in Hoboken. B&Rs have a fierce sense of pride in this city, remembering the days when it was a gritty industrial town and more than a little resentful of all the newcomers who arrived after gentrification when development along the waterfront created a community attractive to urban professionals commuting into New York City. B&Rs bemoan the loss of local ethnic flavor: the Italian grandmothers sitting on their stoops chatting in their housedresses, the multiplicity of languages one would hear walking down the street, and the specialty markets, delis, and shops that helped immigrants from Germany, Italy, Ireland, and Puerto Rico gain a foothold in this country. Most of all, the B&Rs deplore the skyrocketing cost of real estate that has driven out all but the most well-off.

Ms. Singleton remembers well the arson era in Hoboken. As a schoolgirl, it was her responsibility to make sure that the smoke detector was plugged in every night. This was back in the day before these devices were battery-operated or hard-wired into new construction. In her case, the electrical outlet for the smoke detector was right next to her bed. To hear her tell it, she would have difficulty settling down to sleep, worried that she had forgotten to plug the detector in or that it had jostled loose as she moved her hand away. The hallway smoke detector with its red light became her beacon. She would check it every time she went up or down the stairs or into the hallway in the middle of the night.



When she grew up and had children of her own, Ms. Singleton would not allow her children to have their bedrooms on the third floor of the house, insisting that they sleep on the more easily accessible second floor. Remembering that most of the people who perished in the Hoboken fires were children under eighteen, Ms. Singleton carried within her fear for her own children even years afterward. To this day, the sound of a fire truck passing by can cause her anxiety to increase.

Ms. Singleton is not alone in carrying the trauma of those years into the present. These are the stories people tell. Crusty old, retired firefighters break into tears at the memory of the screams, their helplessness to do anything, and the parade of small body bags carried out of buildings. Leaders of the faith community recount their battles with city officials to provide greater protections for the poor.

In listening to these stories, it is clear that the pain, sorrow, and trauma reside just beneath the surface. Anger has simmered for forty years about the loss of life and the lack of accountability. Housing issues for the poor continue to cause political fights as developers buy up empty space to make a profit, and the city aids and abets them in search of higher property tax revenues. A ten-percent set-aside for affordable housing units is a perpetual political football.

Where does the Church fit into all of this? We know that, left unaddressed, trauma perpetuates itself. Unacknowledged grief will continue to surface in often unhealthy ways. At its best, the Church goes where the suffering is, proclaiming God's love to those on the margins, the grieving, the sick, and the impoverished. The Church challenges the powers and principalities that put wealth over people and ignore the plight of those harmed by others' greed. Perhaps most importantly, through liturgy and ritual, the

Church makes the wounded whole, providing balm for crushed spirits, allowing the unspeakable to be spoken, and holding space for remembrance and grief.

Even after forty years, the Church can be a healer for an entire community.

## CHAPTER ONE

### WHO AM I?

In August of 2017, I was an organizer in the clergy response to the Unite the Right Rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, home to what Thomas Jefferson called his Academical Village, better known as the University of Virginia. Nearby is Jefferson's stately plantation, Monticello. Charlottesville is a town whose formidable southern roots run as deep as its self-image as a cosmopolitan university town runs wide.

Seven months after the turmoil and violence of August 12 of that year, I found myself organizing once again, this time 350 miles to the north in Hoboken, New Jersey, in the March for Our Lives opposing gun violence in the wake of the Valentine's Day shootings at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida. The journey from a place that wears a mask of gentility and where housing developments are built upon plantations of the Old South to a densely packed, covered-over marsh that gazes across the Hudson River at New York City is a dramatic contextual shift. Yet, what of my role as a clergy person? Is there an equally dynamic shift in my identity as priest and pastor?

In the introduction to *Changing Signs of the Times: A Christian Introduction to the Semiotics of Communication*, Crystal L. Downing explores the similarities and differences between a road map and a bible, neither of which has the capacity to reflect fluid events and changes, requiring the navigator to adjust to the circumstances. As a result, she writes, "without giving up on the final destination or the guidance of the original map, Christians must venture out on new routes as the signs of culture change,

sometimes altering their own signs to aid those who have never studied the map.”<sup>5</sup> The shift from Charlottesville to Hoboken has undoubtedly required me to learn how to read the signs of a completely new environment, adjusting and translating my own signs into new ones that my new community can understand.

In many ways, I am grateful that I did not come to this work as a young woman. While I continue to learn and grow and explore during this season of my life, I am not simultaneously trying to figure out who I am and what my place is in the world. Early marriage and motherhood, divorce, remarriage, plenty of therapy, and years of spiritual direction are all part of the mix of who I am today. My life is lived in the before and after of the death of my son, Seth, in 2009. The suicide of a beloved child is as cataclysmic an event as one might endure, and I often find myself looking back at the road signs of the years without Seth. At my core, I am the same woman I was for the forty-eight years leading up to that moment. I have also undergone a profound shift in my ability to focus on what is essential and to ignore the insignificant, to remain steady when storms swirl, and not lose sight of the goal and the vision of God’s claim on my life. When one has buried one’s child, what else is there to fear?

Because I married just out of high school, my college career took three stages. In the intervening years, I raised my children, worked numerous jobs, fell into church music, served as a church musician over many years in both full- and part-time positions, and finally landed at a faith-based non-profit agency in Philadelphia. Here, I had the opportunity to hone my professional skills in organizational management, leadership development, and strategy implementation and to develop a keen understanding of how

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<sup>5</sup> Crystal L. Downing, *Changing Signs of the Times: A Christian Introduction to the Semiotics of Communication* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2012), 21.

poverty and injustice can be perpetuated through the same systems we develop to address them. It was over this span of ten years, beginning in 2000, that cries for justice for all God's people sharpened my vocation to be a pursuer of justice.

The first rumblings of God's call came to me on the organ bench in the early 1990s, but it took years of exploration, avoidance, and the ongoing living of the days before I responded in full. Through the incessant practicing of music, training choirs of all ages, and planning of liturgies, there were moments of divine beauty and absolute certainty that those engaged in worship were experiencing something transcendent and holy. This certainty led to another pursuit: to seek God in the gathering together of God's people to hear the Word proclaimed and to celebrate the sacraments.

All those years of deepening faith, of listening for the movement of the Spirit, of an increased yearning to serve in the Church only strengthened my ability to carry on under the weight of immense grief. Walking alongside Seth through five years of deepening depression helped crack me open to those whose struggles may not be easily detected, who appear to function well in the world but bear the burdens of mental illness, fighting a never-ending war with voices inside their heads lying to them about their worth and abilities and isolating them from loved ones. Thus, the third strand finally fell into place: the gift to be a companion to the least and the lost so that they know they are not alone and are beloved of God.

Pursue justice. Seek God in worship. Befriend the lost.

In my jubilee year eighteen months after Seth died, I left my career, my home, and my husband (at least during the week) and relocated from the Philadelphia suburbs to New Haven, Connecticut, to study for a Master of Divinity at Yale Divinity School and a

Diploma in Anglican Studies at Berkeley Divinity School at Yale. It was a period of continuing to try to make sense of a world without my son in it, of new learning and experiences and the building of community, of new friendships, and a broadening of my world in unexpected ways. In my first semester, I met someone who was to change the trajectory of my studies when he came to speak at a Wednesday Eucharist at Berkeley. David Porter is currently the Chief of Staff and Strategy for the Most Reverend Justin Welby, Archbishop of Canterbury. When I met Porter, he was the Canon for Reconciliation at Coventry Cathedral. Prior to that, he participated in his native Northern Ireland's peacemaking process, working on the negotiations for the 1998 Good Friday Agreement. Listening to him speak during his Yale visit about the global reconciliation ministry of the Community of the Cross of Nails, I knew I needed to know more, and so I volunteered my skills in strategic planning and organization for two weeks in exchange for access to files and historical documents in Coventry.<sup>6</sup> Canon Porter shared with Archbishop Welby the framework I produced over that summer of 2011. It is still used as a foundational document in guiding the direction Coventry's Reconciliation Ministry has taken since then.

Having studied a global ministry of reconciliation born out of World War II's upheaval, I sought opportunities to delve more deeply on a regional level to learn how reconciliation might look in local communities. The next summer, in 2012, I became part of the first international group of trainees in the methodology of the Institute for Healing of Memories (IHOM) in Cape Town, South Africa. Founded by Father Michael Lapsley,

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<sup>6</sup> "The Community of the Cross of Nails: Growing Together in Hope," accessed November 10, 2018, <http://www.coventrycathedral.org.uk/ccn/>.

SSM, IHOM grew out of his work as chaplain of the Trauma Centre for Victims of Violence and Torture, which worked alongside the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Father Michael, himself the victim of a letter bomb that took his hands and the sight in one eye, developed a storytelling methodology to help victims and perpetrators heal from the deep traumas of the apartheid era even when they did not know the identity of the one who harmed them or whom they had harmed. Facilitating the telling of stories, “vomiting something toxic,” as Father Michael puts it, is the beginning of healing.<sup>7</sup>

In addition to these two international training and study experiences, my summer of Clinical Pastoral Education found me back in Central Pennsylvania, serving as a hospice chaplain. I drove hundreds of miles each week, sometimes down dirt roads to secluded cabins and sometimes to nursing homes or other facilities to sit with the dying (and their families, if they had families) during this final journey. With my son’s death only a couple of years behind me, I thought it would be smart to avoid the trauma of working in an emergency room and the possibility of having to attend to a suicide victim. Yet, in working with hospice, I was confronted with death every single day. Over the course of ten weeks, I sat with twenty-seven people who died. For some, I was the only one there to witness their death. For others, I was the one who tried (and sometimes failed) to help them say goodbye or help their families come to terms with their impending death. It was, up to that point, the holiest work I had ever done.

All of these experiences broadened and enriched my experience of divinity school, and I felt well-prepared to launch into parish work upon graduation in 2013. My

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<sup>7</sup> Michael Lapsley, *Redeeming the Past: My Journey from Freedom Fighter to Healer* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2012), 162.

initial ministry as an ordained person was in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, at a church that had been planted on the north side of the city by a determined group of people who were tired of driving into town to go to church. It was a small but healthy congregation, led for years by a vicar from Hull, England, who saw his role as one who shows his people the love of Christ every day. He was a sound theologian with great wit, and I learned a lot from him about being patient with people and the congregations of which they are a part as they do the faithful work they believe they have been called to do.

Shifting from Pennsylvania to Charlottesville, Virginia, near the end of 2014 was, in some respects, a homecoming for me. I grew up in North Carolina and had an understanding of southern culture that was foreign to my Midwesterner husband. I arrived on Grounds (the campus at the University of Virginia) as the Chaplain for Episcopal Student Ministry. My primary duties were as associate rector of St. Paul's Memorial Church, just across the street from Jefferson's rotunda, the iconic center of the university.

When my work in Charlottesville began, a young undergrad had just been found dead following a weeks-long search after her abduction. Soon, Rolling Stone Magazine published an exposé (later debunked) about rape culture at UVA. I spent the first several months as associate rector supporting the young women, building relationships with key members of the administration and the Women's Center, and building a program aimed at protecting young women going through the grueling process of sorority rush, a much more serious and intense activity than I might ever have anticipated.

After nine months, the rector who hired me left for California, and for the next two-and-a-half years, I was, in effect, the rector of the congregation but without the title



or the authority. Supervision of staff, managing conflict between the musicians, planning liturgies, meeting with students, and pastoral care for a large number of older adults consumed my days. Following the white supremacist killings at Mother Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina, on June 17, 2015, a local African American pastor, the Rev. Dr. Alvin Edwards, called together the clergy of Charlottesville to try to develop relationships so that we could all be of mutual support if such a tragedy should strike Charlottesville. The Charlottesville Clergy Collective was born out of these first meetings. By the time the Ku Klux Klan applied for a rally permit in Charlottesville two years later, I was a co-convener of the group.

That summer of 2017 was a period of intense work as I helped prepare the community to confront the hate that was to descend on our town, first with the Ku Klux Klan in July, followed by the so-called Alt-Right in August. My church provided the space for a mass prayer meeting on August 11—the night before the rally—during which several hundred torch-bearing white supremacists and neo-Nazis paraded on the Grounds of the University of Virginia, attacking a small cadre of students and staff who had gathered around a statue of Thomas Jefferson. From my Church, St. Paul’s Memorial, we could see the light of the torches and hear the escalating turmoil. Unable to permit the hundreds in attendance at the prayer meeting to leave for fear of a violent mob, we sang freedom songs and led prayers until late in the evening, when we slowly began to let people out a side door to make their way home.

The next morning, a group of leaders and other faithful participants gathered before dawn to pray and prepare for the day ahead. I led a procession of clergy and community members to the First Methodist Church, which overlooked Emancipation

Park on its north side, dominated by the statue of Robert E. Lee. Another group proceeded directly to the south side of the park to try to block access. Armed militias, Neo-Nazis, and white supremacists were on the ground as police snipers occupied rooftops, others blocked off streets in armored vehicles, and the beat of the propellers of a state police helicopter provided an insistent soundtrack. In the violence and chaos of that day, a young woman was killed by a driver using his vehicle as a weapon when he plowed into a crowd of peaceful protestors. Two state troopers also died when the helicopter that had flown over Charlottesville all day crashed nearby.

Throughout that summer, given that all my experience so far had prepared me to serve as priest and pastor of my own congregation, I had been seeking a position as a rector. After an extensive search, I was called to be the rector of All Saints Episcopal Parish in Hoboken, New Jersey. I had been interviewing with three churches in the Northeast, trying to find a position where I could be rector and where my husband would not need to travel several days out of each week to run his business. One of the churches was in a small university town, one a stable suburban parish. The third was All Saints in Hoboken, which had endured five years of upheaval, conflict, and decline following the departure of a rector who had been there for 33 years.

When I was undecided about whether or not I wanted to accept the call to this parish with all of its unresolved conflict and disarray, I sent my husband for a visit on one of his business trips from Charlottesville to northern New Jersey, arranging for him to meet with the chair of the search committee, get a tour of the Church and the rectory, and ask any questions he might have. My only instruction was to call me when his meetings were over to tell me that I was out of my mind to consider going to such a place. Tim did

as I asked, except that when he called, he told me that while he understood my reservations, there was something very compelling about All Saints, and he thought God might actually be calling me here. While he failed miserably in the one job I gave him, he confirmed for me what I had been wrestling with for months. If I believe that God is good and God is faithful, if I believe that God leads and I follow, even as a “first follower,” as Leonard Sweet puts it, then I must respond to that call.<sup>8</sup>

As I prayed over the choices before me, I realized that while the small college town would have been the right place at a different point in my life, it was not at that particular moment. The stable suburban Church looked good on paper and its people warm and welcoming, but it did not seem a good fit for someone whose ministry is focused outward. All Saints, for all of its challenges, would allow me to take what I had learned about reconciliation, conflict management, and a collaborative public ministry and put these experiences to use in a parish that needed all of that. So, it was a call I enthusiastically accepted, although leaving Charlottesville and the community of faith leaders and activists with friendships forged in a violent and tumultuous summer was even more challenging than anticipated. The work continues there, and as the anniversaries come, I often find myself revisiting the traumas, made more difficult by my separation from those who lived it with me.

To serve as rector of an urban church in a highly gentrified, trendy city is to face the challenges of privilege, secular culture, and a multitude of interests that draw people anywhere but to church. Nevertheless, I am here because I believe that it is possible to

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<sup>8</sup> Leonard Sweet, *I Am a Follower: The Way, Truth, and Life of Following Jesus* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2012).

develop and lead a faithful, scripture-informed, prayerful people in and into this community. My friend Sara Shisler Goff writes, “In order to lead radical, world-changing, life-transforming churches, we need to know the communities we desire to create are possible because we have experienced them.”<sup>9</sup> Perhaps those experiences have not always been in the Church. Perhaps they were found in praying and singing and walking with people to challenge injustice or gathering in a small group to study and pray. How is it that we have so detached “church” from the reality of lived experience that everyone feels the need to leave their brokenness at the door rather than to place it on God’s holy table? It is the experience of the transcendent *in the fullness of who we are* that will transfigure our Church and our world as we seek justice, worship God, and befriend the lost.

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<sup>9</sup> Sara Shisler Goff, *The Art of Feminine Spiritual Leadership: Be a Badass Priest and Create a Ministry You Love* (Alexandria, VA: Difference Press, 2018), Kindle Edition, Loc 1731 of 1837.

## CHAPTER TWO

### WHAT IS THE CONTEXT OF MY MINISTRY?

Since its founding, Hoboken has been a playground for New Yorkers escaping the crowded city. Incorporated in 1855, the same year the cornerstone of the present All Saints Episcopal Parish was laid, Hoboken prides itself as the birthplace of organized baseball and Frank Sinatra, the principal embarkation port for soldiers during World War I and the setting for the 1954 Elia Kazan classic, *On the Waterfront*. The city saw its heyday early in the twentieth century, with its 1910 population of 70,234 swelling over the next decade with the influx of military transport ships during the Great War.<sup>10</sup> Following the Armistice, the city filled with immigrants from Europe, later followed by Latinos and South Asians. However, over time the decline of shipping led to the closure of industry, deterioration of the waterfront, and westward movement of the White families who could afford to relocate.

Today, Hoboken has a population of just over 54,000 with a median income of \$127,523, about \$51,000 higher than the rest of New Jersey. The median age is 31.8; the median property value \$652,200. The city is young, urban, professional, and 70.6% White.<sup>11</sup> Given its history as an immigrant, working-class city, its renaissance as a prime location for the young and wealthy who work in New York in finance, banking,

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<sup>10</sup> “The Mile Square City: A Brief History,” Hoboken Historical Museum, accessed April 24, 2019, [https://www.hobokenmuseum.org/unused\\_content/hoboken-new-jersey-the-mile-square-city-a-brief-history/](https://www.hobokenmuseum.org/unused_content/hoboken-new-jersey-the-mile-square-city-a-brief-history/).

<sup>11</sup> “Data USA: Hoboken, NJ,” accessed April 25, 2019, <https://datausa.io/profile/geo/hoboken-nj/>.

insurance, and law, while making it a beautiful and lively place to be, has proved devastating to those who are being priced out of their homes and neighborhoods.

My relocation in 2018 from Charlottesville to Hoboken meant shifting from a bucolic university town to a bustling bedroom community outside New York City. Charlottesville had just over 4,200 residents per square mile in the last census, with a median income, in 2016, of roughly \$51,000.<sup>12</sup> In contrast, Hoboken, known as the “Mile Square City,” boasted more than 39,000 residents per square mile and a median income more than twice that of Charlottesville. Our new home is whiter, wealthier, better educated, and (anecdotally, at least) much less inclined to affiliate with religious institutions. Charlottesville is very much part of the Bible Belt, with Liberty University in Lynchburg a little more than an hour’s drive away. The University of Virginia has more than twenty faith groups working on Grounds with students. The former president of the university invited Charlottesville clergy to tea at the beginning of each school term to update them on activities and initiatives impacting students, and a representative from the Office of the Dean of Students serves as a liaison to religious organizations. Faith is big in Charlottesville.

On the other hand, Hoboken may be home to more than a dozen congregations, but the majority are Roman Catholic (5). There is one Episcopal Church (All Saints), one Evangelical Lutheran, one Missouri Synod Lutheran church plant, one Presbyterian (affiliated with the Presbyterian Church in America), one Southern Baptist, two synagogues, and an assortment of non-denominational, evangelical, and Pentecostal

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<sup>12</sup> The United States Census Bureau, Quick Facts: Charlottesville City, Virginia, accessed November 9, 2018, <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/charlottesvillecityvirginiacounty>.

churches. If I had to guess, I would place the majority of the residents of Hoboken squarely in the category of the “nones,” having no religious affiliation.

My parish, All Saints, was founded in 1983 by combining the three existing Episcopal churches in Hoboken into one. The oldest of those congregations was founded in 1832, and its building was ultimately sold to a developer and converted to condominiums. Trinity Church—the current site of All Saints—was founded in 1853 and is “the oldest continuous congregation in Hoboken.”<sup>13</sup> Lastly, the Church of the Holy Innocents was founded in 1872, built by the Stevens family—also founders of the Stevens Institute of Technology—in memory of a deceased daughter. That building has lain vacant since its closure in the 1980s, with occasional use for rummage sales, Christmas tree sales, and miscellaneous storage. The separation of the north gable on the building during Hurricane Sandy was temporarily repaired in order to stabilize the wall and has only been recently fully restored. Following that restoration, serious financial decisions must now be made concerning upgrades to the electrical and fire detection systems. Until that happens, the building is not usable. The matter of investing in a crumbling building, rather than pouring funds into the life and ministry of All Saints, is an ongoing conversation.

On January 1, 1980, the Rev. Geoffrey B. Curtiss was sent to Hoboken as missionary by the bishop of the Diocese of Newark, the Rt. Rev. John Shelby Spong, to consolidate the three Episcopal churches, all of them in severe decline. From 1980 to 2013, Curtiss helped All Saints grow in numbers and influence in the community. Geoff

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<sup>13</sup> “All Saints Hoboken: History,” accessed November 9, 2018, <http://allsaintshoboken.com/history/>.

Curtiss was a dynamic leader, a force for liberal social justice causes. Within three years of his arrival, Curtiss had accomplished the consolidation of the congregations but, even before that, he became deeply involved in justice issues in the community.<sup>14</sup>

When Curtiss arrived in Hoboken, the city was in the midst of an arson wave that killed more than fifty people, mostly children, and what those who lived through it still call gentrification by arson. As New York City rebounded from the brink of bankruptcy and residential real estate became unaffordable, young professionals began to seek housing in the Williamsburg neighborhood of Brooklyn and in Hoboken.<sup>15</sup> Developers were happy to accommodate them, some by buying up single resident occupancy buildings (SROs) and others emptied, it has been long-rumored, by arson, although no one was ever charged in the fires that ravaged the city.<sup>16</sup> Recognizing the need for a coordinated response to those being burned out and priced out, Curtiss and faith leaders in Hoboken came together to form the Hoboken Clergy Coalition.

Two vital ministries were a direct result of the fires and subsequent displacement of poor and working-class families, and the Coalition was responsible for both. The first was a local food bank, In Jesus' Name Charities. Established in 1981, it continues to provide food and household resources to families in emergency situations. The other is the Hoboken Shelter, officially known as Communities of Faith for Housing, Inc.,

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<sup>14</sup> Geoffrey B. Curtiss, telephone interview, April 11, 2019.

<sup>15</sup> Anne-Marie Caruso, "Hoboken: Arson, gentrification, and Maxwell's," northjersey.com, August 26, 2018, <https://www.northjersey.com/videos/news/hudson/2018/08/26/hoboken-arson-gentrification-and-maxwells/1101202002/>.

<sup>16</sup> "March Against Arson-for-Profit," Citizens United for New Action, et al (Handbill, Hoboken Historical Museum, November 14, 1981).



established in 1982. These efforts provided relief and assistance to members of the Hoboken community when gentrification and displacement from homes and jobs caused significant stress amongst the long-time residents of the city as industries shuttered their facilities. These included a bread factory that had been in business since the turn of the twentieth century and the Maxwell House Coffee plant that closed in 1992, its iconic giant coffee cup and the illuminated “Good to the last drop” sign no longer towering over the north side of town.<sup>17</sup> These and similar closures exacerbated the dwindling availability of living-wage jobs. The food bank and the shelter became the safety net between the dearth of jobs and hunger and life on the streets for many of Hoboken’s most vulnerable citizens.

As development along the waterfront pushed lower-income residents further to the west end of town, the need for supportive services for those living in Hoboken Housing Authority (HHA) buildings became acute. The All Saints Community Service and Development Corporation (ASCSDC) was founded in 1996 to provide after-school programming in an HHA building basement. In 2003, the Jubilee Center, a new 9,000 square foot building, was opened under the auspices of the ASCSDC to house the after-school program, summer camp, and community space.

In addition to mission development in Hoboken, the congregation founded an Episcopal School in 1985 for kindergarten through grade six. Now providing schooling for children from nursery through grade eight, the school operates independently of the

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<sup>17</sup> Philip A. Hayden and Glenn R. Modica, *Field to Factory: The Story of the Maxwell House Coffee Plant*, Hoboken Historical Museum Online Collections Database (Cranbury, NJ: Richard Grubb & Associates, Inc., Cultural Resource Consultants, 2005), 34.  
<https://hoboken.pastperfectonline.com/archive/33252E63-0414-4B4F-BD9C-038679460283>.

parish, although still using church-owned property to provide classes and extracurricular activities for its 240 students.

On September 11, 2001, Hoboken lost more people per capita in the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center in Lower Manhattan than did any other New Jersey city or town. Fifty-six Hoboken residents—one out of every 710—died that day.<sup>18</sup> The All Saints community immediately opened the doors of the church, providing a gathering space for those awaiting word on whether or not their loved ones would come home. This hospitality turned into a years-long support group for families of survivors. A steeple bell given in gratitude by this group of families sounds every Sunday morning before our services.<sup>19</sup>

The four ministries—In Jesus’ Name, the Hoboken Shelter, the Jubilee Center, and the Day School—in addition to a very public ministry following 9/11, have provided the primary identity of All Saints in its 37-year history. Engagement of the congregation in these efforts has varied through the years and is currently somewhat limited. The fluidity of the population of Hoboken has led to a frequent turnover in membership at All Saints. The majority who now attend regularly have been in Hoboken for fewer than ten years. Demographically, we reflect the White, wealthy, young professional population that defines Hoboken. As a young congregation lacking in depth and breadth of historical

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<sup>18</sup> Andy Newman, “Zones of Devastation From 9/11: Mapping the Victims by Zip Code,” *The New York Times* (New York, NY), August 21, 2002. At the time of this newspaper article, only 39 people from Hoboken were thought to have died. Calculating the population by number included here, “one out of 750 residents” for 53 dead, the number for 56 dead is one out of 710.

<sup>19</sup> Barbara Davey, “Bell at All Saints, Hoboken, Rings in Remembrance of those Lost on 9/11,” The Episcopal Diocese of Newark, September 1, 2011, <https://dioceseofnewark.org/content/bell-all-saints'-hoboken-rings-remembrance-those-lost-911>.

memory, the storied past of All Saints in Hoboken is unfamiliar to our members. Given that we have an abundance of parents with children, discretionary time to participate in worship and ministry is limited.

The fluidity of the congregation is but one factor limiting its engagement in our historical outreach ministries. There has not been a tradition at All Saints of helping people connect what we do on Sunday, who and what we are in our lives of faith, and the good works we do in and with our city. Rev. Curtiss was a visionary, persuasive at bringing big ideas to fruition. The ministries developed in Hoboken during his tenure were seen as part of All Saints, but All Saints' image was primarily Geoff Curtiss.

As a parish, All Saints was a thriving community by the end of Rev. Curtiss's tenure in 2013, with 550 baptized members giving close to \$300,000 in pledge and cash contributions and an average Sunday attendance approaching 150.<sup>20</sup> Unfortunately, after thirty-three years as rector, Rev. Curtiss, preparing for retirement, faced charges under the Episcopal Church's ecclesiastical discipline canons. Allowed to retire, he was nonetheless inhibited from engaging in priestly ministry for a significant period of time following his retirement. These events launched five years of transition, conflict, and decline.

Because Rev. Curtiss had announced his retirement the year before his departure, a search committee had already been formed to find a new rector and was in the process of final interviews. Rather than insisting that the parish hire an interim rector to help sort through the trauma and loss brought on by the abrupt end of a long and vibrant

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<sup>20</sup> The Domestic and Foreign Mission Society, "Studying Your Congregation," Participation and Giving Trends, accessed November 9, 2018, [https://pr.dfms.org/studyyourcongregation/exports/4937-0117\\_20181109\\_10125245.pdf](https://pr.dfms.org/studyyourcongregation/exports/4937-0117_20181109_10125245.pdf).

rectorship, the bishop of the diocese gave his blessing to the calling of a new rector that same year. The Rev. Daniel Lennox was a young priest with a young family and no experience addressing conflict or change in a congregational setting. He was much loved by the congregation for his pastoral demeanor, a contrast from his predecessor, whose focus had primarily been on the community beyond the walls of the church.

At the time Rev. Lennox became rector, the school was planning an ambitious expansion. The new rector called a halt to that project, as it would have required taking on several millions of dollars of debt and could have disrupted his home life as the expansion was to wrap around the back of the rectory where he and his family lived. His resistance to the expansion ignited a storm of conflict between the Head of School and the school trustees, on the one hand, and the rector and vestry of the parish, on the other. Intervention by the diocese seems only to have fueled the conflict, and within eighteen months of his arrival, Rev. Lennox left All Saints, plunging the congregation, once again, into turmoil.

For several months, the parish had a series of supply priests to conduct services on Sunday mornings. However, there were occasions when a priest could not be found to celebrate the Eucharist, so a member of the congregation would lead Morning Prayer with no one in attendance on some Sundays. The school and the parish had long shared members, with school families attending the church and supporting it financially. Within two years of Rev. Curtiss's departure, only a few school families remained at the parish. The parish budget suffered. Morale in the congregation was at a low ebb, and battle lines had been drawn, with each side casting blame for the conflict fully on the other side.

The Rev. Greg Morgan was hired as an interim priest in November 2015 and would remain at All Saints until I arrived on February 1, 2018. A retired Episcopal school administrator who had only recently been ordained, he split his time between Hoboken and his home on the Upper West Side of New York, worked part-time, and did not wade deeply into the conflicts between the parish and the school. At some point after Rev. Lennox left, the school decided to seek its independence from the parish, feeling uncertain about the reliability of promises made by the parish when a transition could disrupt their plans, as had occurred with the expansion that had been paused when Lennox arrived. The school was then thirty years old, and it is not unusual for church-affiliated schools to become independent. However, the conflict that drove the separation meant that negotiations over building leases and revision of by-laws for incorporation as an independent school were clouded by division, rancor, and fault-assigning.

Through all of this, the Jubilee Center continued to provide after-school programming and summer camp to underserved children in Hoboken. The All Saints Community Service and Development Corporation, LLC., is a separate 501(c)(3). By tradition and by-laws, however, the rector of All Saints is the ex officio chair of the board, and the second vice president is a member of All Saints vestry. The president of the board has customarily been a member of the parish. During the five years of transition and conflict with the school, Jubilee Center by-laws were revised to separate the parish from the organization more clearly.

The board of trustee's relatively hands-off approach led to some mismanagement—fiduciary and otherwise—by consecutive executive directors. As enrollment fell and grant funding declined, an interim executive director was hired to

right the ship. A new executive director was also hired six months after I arrived, but she has since departed. The Jubilee Center continued to hemorrhage money under her leadership, and the building is currently for sale. Any proceeds remaining from the sale will be used to reassess Jubilee as a non-profit entity rather than simply a location and attempt to address the community's needs that are not otherwise being addressed.

Since I arrived in Hoboken three years ago, we have made significant progress in settling some old business and laying the groundwork for growth. Most importantly, perhaps, I have developed a collaborative working relationship with the All Saints Episcopal Day School leadership. Within seven months of my arrival, we had come to terms on building leases, a license for the use of the church facilities, and a \$2.1 million refinance of a loan on each of the two school buildings. The school is responsible for the repayment of these loans, although should the school default, those loans become our responsibility. This fact, coupled with the debt of the Jubilee Center, can keep me awake at night. The revision of the leases and the school's independence allow the parish to treat the school as a tenant rather than a ministry, with an attendant increase in the rent amount the school pays to the parish. That increases steadily over the lease's twenty-year term and should keep the church in reasonably good financial condition during that period.

Beyond settling the business side of the situation with the school, I have worked hard to repair relationships and deal with the school with transparency and an abundance of communication. Much of the conflict seemingly arose because no one was talking to anyone else, and I have, perhaps, erred in the other direction. This strategy has already borne fruit. In the spring of 2019, we launched a liturgy before school on Thursdays called "Joyful Noise: Interactive Morning Prayer for Children and Families" for students,

parents, teachers, and members of the parish as a way of demonstrating our common heritage as followers of Jesus in the Episcopal tradition. While qualifying as an Episcopal school under the guidelines of the National Association of Episcopal Schools, All Saints Episcopal Day School does not engage in Episcopal worship, and the leadership of the parish insisted that the school have some kind of statement of Episcopal identity before it would agree to independence for the school. This was yet another source of conflict. One way to ensure that there is some liturgical connection between the two entities is to plan a joint worship service, and this is what we have done. While it may not be straight from the Book of Common Prayer each week, the joint worship service contains sufficient elements familiar to our tradition to strengthen the school's connection with the Episcopal Church.

As previously mentioned, the Church of the Holy Innocents underwent a long-awaited repair that began in my first year here. Because it is a stunning space with deep sentimental value to many Hoboken residents, some would like to have us raise money to make necessary repairs to meet building codes so that we can use it for events to raise even more money for a full restoration. My concern is that this beautiful stone structure is actually a millstone around our necks, draining funds and energy from our ministries. In 2018, the Diocese of Newark elected and consecrated a new bishop, the Rt. Rev. Carlye J. Hughes. In her first sermon as bishop when she was seated at the cathedral, Bishop Hughes commented that we need to seriously reconsider how we hold on to failing buildings until our dying breath, a misuse of the legacies entrusted to us. I am encouraged to know that my bishop might support my dream of turning Holy Innocents into low-income housing, something desperately needed in Hoboken. This would likely not be a

popular move for many in my congregation or in Hoboken, but the millions it would cost to restore Holy Innocents could surely be put to use for some good purpose other than to restore a church that is not needed here.

The sale of the Jubilee Center would help settle the third principle external challenge facing All Saints. Once the sale is complete, the parish will either be wholly divested of any connection to, or responsibility for, the Jubilee Center, or we could, once again, lead the way in partnering with the community to develop programming that our neighbors most need. The Board of Trustees is currently engaging in conversations with the community and those we have served over the years about how a revitalized, property-less organization might partner with the residents and their families. As it turns out, we hardly know our neighbors in the Hoboken Housing Authority buildings anymore. What began as a need that surfaced through conversations and partnerships with those residents evolved into programming that was either redundant in being already offered by the school district or other organizations or was easily ignored because the neighbors no longer really knew who we were. There was a serious and disappointing failure to invite the community to work with us as we became the purveyors of services that we believed they needed. It is no surprise that this effort has failed.

However, the community conversations have been energizing and provide a spark of hope that the Jubilee Center still has a purpose for the people of Hoboken. We are just now trying to uncover the gaps in services where there is a significant need, and perhaps that will be where we begin our work anew.

Within the parish, my greatest challenge has little to do with money or buildings or budgets and much more to do with the condition of my congregation. Geoff Curtiss



was a quintessential product of the late-sixties to mid-seventies: a social justice-oriented priest, great at reaching out into the community and making things happen, but the connection back to the congregation is difficult to trace. There is little cultural or historic understanding within All Saints about the importance of knowing who we are through the lens of scripture and the church tradition. My congregational demographic skews young, with families with young children comprising the majority. There are very few older adults, and I engage in almost no pastoral care. No one seems to know that caring for people when they are sick or incapacitated is part of my role!

In the past, there was a robust Sunday School program for children, including a paid, part-time Coordinator for Christian Education. However, the youth have suffered mightily as there has not been any consistent effort to keep them involved in the life of the congregation. Most of the adults have been away from church for a significant part of their lives and return with their children, not quite sure what it is they are seeking but knowing that, for their children at least, church is what they want. Yet they are, for the most part, successful in their careers and busy with many activities in their lives, including second homes that take them away from Hoboken many weekends. It seems that coming one out of three Sundays is considered to be “regular” attendance among many in the congregation.

Out of these younger families, to those who grew up in the church (not the majority) and attended as children or teens, went away, and have now returned, taking on adult roles, responsibilities, and practices was something their parents did. Pledging of time, talent, and treasure was their parents’ job and is not perceived as theirs. Shifting their understanding of their position as now the grown-ups in the church is a challenge,

even more so given that they are often stretched to their limits with work and family commitments.

We do have a core of dedicated parents who have cobbled together a Sunday School for the past several years. There was only one class for students ranging from age two to eleven or twelve, an absolutely unworkable age range. Following my arrival, we invested in an established curriculum and divided the program into three age groupings. It is still small, and we need to increase the number of children and parent volunteers, but we have made a start. A significant number of our children do not stay for Sunday School following a rather raucous family-friendly service tailored to include children. Some have suggested that we follow the model of sending the children out during the service, only to return before the Eucharist. However, I am committed to the idea that children learn how to pray and worship by watching their parents pray and worship, and I am resistant to the idea of separating them, particularly since this service is so welcoming to families.

We have two other worship services on Sunday. One is a quiet, early morning Eucharist, and the other, a traditional Anglican choral Eucharist with choir and organ. As with most churches of which I have been a part, the early service is small but faithful, with a consistency in attendance that permits for familiarity and intimacy lacking at services that are better attended. The late-morning service is the kind of quintessential liturgy of the Episcopal Church that most people would expect to find, with standard hymns, sung and chanted canticles, and the familiar words of the Book of Common Prayer.

Because of my work as the chaplain for Episcopal Student Ministries at the University of Virginia, my vestry hired me intending to launch a similar ministry here,

but that effort was not successful. We partnered with the local Lutheran parish that had funding for a part-time campus minister, but without significant support in time and energy by either congregation, it was impossible to build any sustainable momentum. The Stevens Institute of Technology is a vastly different place from the University of Virginia. Under pressure to bring some kind of campus ministry, I neglected to do the homework and organizing that I should have done to succeed in this endeavor.

Adult formation at All Saints was virtually nonexistent when I arrived. I have made several efforts at launching bible and book studies, spiritual formation groups, a women's group, an introductory Episcopal 101 course, and an anti-racism series. Except for this last, these efforts have, for the most part, been met with little enthusiasm and low participation. Consequently, most adult teaching happens in the context of the liturgy and the spoken, preached word.

The Episcopal Church is not known for biblical literacy among its members, but I would venture to estimate that those who attend any given Sunday service hear more from the bible than in almost any other denomination. We routinely have four readings: Hebrew scripture, psalm, epistle, and the gospel. Moreover, "approximately 70% of the Book of Common Prayer is biblical quotation."<sup>21</sup> Yet, hearing and reading on Sunday is far different from time spent daily in study, meditation, and conversation over God's word. I spend far more time telling stories and connecting what we have read and heard during the service with what is going on in the lives of my congregation, so much so that

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<sup>21</sup> Scott Gunn and Melody Wilson Schobe, *Walk in Love: Episcopal Beliefs and Practices* (Cincinnati: Forward Movement, 2018), 187.

what they know is, generally, what I teach them. It is not a particularly healthy, nor desirable, state of affairs.

There seems to be no custom of prayer, either, for ourselves or even for each other as a community. How, then, are we to be community? As Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, “A Christian fellowship lives and exists by the intercession of its members for one another, or it collapses. I can no longer condemn or hate a brother for whom I pray, no matter how much trouble he causes me.”<sup>22</sup> Thus, I use every opportunity to speak, teach, and write about prayer and, above all, to pray with my people whenever we are together.

Notwithstanding these challenges—many of them inherent in rebuilding a congregation—our attendance is increasing, as are our pledges and contributions. More people are more involved in various ways: assisting with Sunday School, volunteering with outreach ministries, coordinating hospitality events. I have baptized more than fifty children since my arrival. This church has a custom of baptizing anyone who seeks baptism, but I have required more of a commitment from families to become involved, to let us get to know them and to encourage them to permit us the privilege of keeping our promises to support their children in the life of faith. The majority have continued to attend, if only with once-every-third-Sunday regularity.

I must also acknowledge the overarching context in which I do ministry. Like many mainline denominations, the Episcopal Church is in a long period of decline. In the ten years between 2007 and 2017, the number of active members went down by 19%.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together: A Classic Exploration of Christian Community* (New York: Harper Collins, 1954), 86.

<sup>23</sup> “Episcopal Domestic Fast Facts: 2017,” accessed November 9, 2018. <https://extranet.generalconvention.org/staff/files/download/22938>

Average Sunday attendance (ASA) in that same period declined by 24%.<sup>24</sup> 72% of our parishes have an ASA of fewer than 100.<sup>25</sup> There has been much hand-wringing over these figures, just as there was in the years before 2017. Even though our pledge income has increased overall, dollars do not equal lives touched, so there is genuine concern about the future of the Episcopal Church as it is currently constituted. However, there is also a great deal of excitement about the message of our presiding bishop, the Most Rev. Michael B. Curry, who seems less concerned with increasing the number of Episcopalians than he is about increasing the number of “crazy Christians”:

What we need are some crazy Christians – Christians who are crazy enough to catch a glimpse of the crazy, transforming, transfiguring, life-changing vision of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Christians who are crazy enough to follow him into the work of helping God to realize God’s dream for all people and for all creation.<sup>26</sup>

His call to Episcopalians to engage in evangelism, to share the love of Jesus, and to commit to a life of prayer, study, and ministry in the world seems to be a return to fundamentals rather than another gimmick to try to fill our pews.

Gimmicks do not work. Inauthenticity does not work. The millennial generation, in particular, is adept at picking up on contrived efforts to get them into a church. “Much (most) pastoral work takes place when we don’t know we are being pastors.”<sup>27</sup> My greatest “success,” if it can be called thus, has been the relationships I have built simply

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<sup>24</sup> “Episcopal Domestic Fast Facts.”

<sup>25</sup> “Episcopal Domestic Fast Facts.”

<sup>26</sup> Michael B. Curry, *Crazy Christians: A Call to Follow Jesus* (New York: Morehouse Publishing, 2013).

<sup>27</sup> Eugene H. Peterson, *The Pastor: A Memoir* (New York: HarperOne, 2011), 286.

by being out in the community, whether having coffee in the dining hall at the University of Virginia or leading a march against neo-Nazis or gun violence. There is always an uptick in people coming through the doors, even if only temporarily, or others who want to meet with me, have coffee, and join in the activity. The increase in the so-called “nones” is not the tragedy it might appear to be, but merely a transformation of belief. “Belief itself is being enfolded into a new spiritual awareness as belief questions morph from *what* to *how*, from seeking information *about* God to nurturing experience *of* the divine.”<sup>28</sup>

We have been committed to a 1950’s model of being a church that simply does not work anymore. Gone are the days when new people would move to town and look in the yellow pages for the denomination of their choice. The institutional church has failed to carry out its mission: to share the love of Jesus with the world and to invite the world to come along as a follower, a disciple. “A disciple is...simply a learner; and this, ultimately, is what the disciple learns: how to be a place in the world where the act of God can come alive.”<sup>29</sup> I believe that most churches have been more interested in self-preservation than in serving as midwives of a living God.

If we are resurrection people, why are we so afraid of a church that is in decline? Do we not truly believe that “unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit?”<sup>30</sup> These are exciting times

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<sup>28</sup> Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity after Religion: The End of Church and the Birth of a New Spiritual Awakening* (New York: HarperOne, 2012), 114.

<sup>29</sup> Rowan Williams, *Being Disciples: Essentials of the Christian Life* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2016), 18.

<sup>30</sup> John 12:24. This and all other bible quotes are from the New Revised Standard Version.

for the Church and exciting times for All Saints Episcopal Parish in Hoboken. In many ways, my ministry here is like planting a new church. The roots are not yet very deep. They have not yet been nurtured and tended to sustain people when the wind blows hard, as it has with some consistency over the past several years. Yes, there is a core of people who refused to give up, determined that All Saints would not die, that its work and witness are needed in this community. This faithful remnant forms a strong foundation for what lies ahead.

Lastly, it is important to keep in mind the understanding of the parish model in the Church. Before 1981, there were three Episcopal churches within twelve blocks of each other. When these three were combined, they became a parish, meaning that, as the only Episcopal congregation in Hoboken, its geographical boundaries became the square mile that delineates this city. This became a crucial distinction as the framework for this doctoral project came into focus.

## CHAPTER THREE

### WHAT IS THE CONTEXT OF MY MINISTRY IN A PANDEMIC?

In many ways, the coronavirus pandemic has completely altered how I carry out my ministry here in Hoboken. For the first two Sundays in March 2020, the bishop advised us to refrain from shaking hands at the Peace and intinction of the bread in the chalice during communion. On Friday, March 13, we were notified that all public worship would be suspended for three weeks. That directive would soon become a suspension for an indefinite period of time.

The immediate task was to find a way to continue to gather as a worshipping community. Rather than attempting to continue to hold three services on that Sunday morning, two days after this announcement, we elected to hold one service, livestreamed on Facebook Live and with only the organist, two readers, and a technical assistant to monitor the live stream. Within a couple of weeks, it became clear that we would not be returning by the end of March, or by Palm Sunday, or by Easter, so we began streaming from Zoom to Facebook Live, returning to Zoom for virtual coffee hour following the services. Shortly after Easter, the bishop issued further instructions that no more than 3-4 people could be present during the livestream, so I began to ask for pre-recorded videos of all music and readings, and my technical assistant and I were the only ones in the church. Fortunately, that technical assistant is my husband, so our exposure to others was limited only to those we might meet on the street while going to and from the church.

As weeks turned into months, it was clear that we needed to find new ways to be together virtually. While gaining some participants who normally would not be able to attend because of distance or some other incapacity, our Sunday attendance still fell.



Since there was no plate collection, giving declined. Children, now confined to home and schooled through virtual means, were less than willing to also sit in front of a computer screen on Sunday morning. Parents were scrambling to get work done while being in the house with their children full-time.

Admittedly, the adrenaline of those early weeks was intoxicating. Working online meant that work could be accomplished at almost any hour, day or night. Plans to mail to our families their Sunday School materials or deliver Lent-in-a-Bag and Easter-in-a-Bag filled with various arts and crafts items related to the season drew on my creativity. Putting the conclusion of a seven-week spiritual formation program online went so well that we launched “Acts in Easter,” a virtual study of the book of Acts from the First Sunday of Easter through Pentecost.

Not to ignore the need for fellowship, I organized two online trivia events. One covered music from the 1960s through the 1990s and became, in some households, a dance party. The second trivia night was more general and included movies, music, and New Jersey-specific questions. Both events were enthusiastically received, though attendance was a fraction of what it might have been.

Until the end of May, I spent most of my time out of the public eye, attending every meeting of boards and committees online, having groceries delivered when available, and spending an enormous amount of time working, writing, planning, and making phone calls to my congregation. However, the local protests following the killing of George Floyd on May 25, 2020, nudged me out of the safety of my home and into the

streets.<sup>31</sup> This event led to the planning and launch of two additional online programs. But first, I needed a vacation.

A common theme among my colleagues has been the exponential increase in the hours spent working since the COVID-19 pandemic began. For those of us who are solo clergy, the demands have been unrelenting. Recognizing my own exhaustion and the effect it was having on my mental health, and having had to cancel a long-planned trip to Alaska, we used the money saved from that to go to the beach for a couple of weeks, distancing ourselves from other beachgoers who seemed oblivious to the pandemic, and getting much-needed rest.

Towards the end of the vacation, I did engage in one piece of work that was an outgrowth of the growing outcry over the killings of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, and Breonna Taylor. A young mother of three in my congregation brought two of her children, ages six and four, to the Hoboken protests. The image of them handing out water in front of our church sparked the idea that many parents would probably like to know how to go about having conversations on race and racial injustice with their children. So, I asked this mother plus two others, one from Charlottesville and one from Dallas, and we held a YouTube discussion entitled “Raising Anti-Racist Children.” Rather than presenting themselves as experts, which they are not, they talked about the

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<sup>31</sup> Jessie Gomez, “Hoboken protest draws more than 1,000 demonstrators from across the city,” *NorthJersey.com*, June 5, 2020, accessed September 14, 2020, <https://www.northjersey.com/story/news/hudson/2020/06/05/george-floyd-protests-nj-hoboken-nj-over-1000-protesters-march/3158208001/>.

things they do and the conversations they have, including the mistakes they have made. It was a time of incredible vulnerability and sharing of stories.<sup>32</sup>

The second event began the Sunday after we returned. For the past two summers, I have launched an All Saints Summer Read, trying to encourage my congregation to join together in some kind of consistent formational conversations. This year, I selected “How to Be an Antiracist” by Ibram X. Kendi. Because this was to be an online discussion and announced widely across church and personal social media accounts and e-newsletters, we had people from as far away as Denver participating over four Sundays by Zoom. It was a powerful series of conversations, which have continued with follow-up emails and one Zoom discussion this far.

In early June, a diocesan team working on protocols that would allow for the resumption of in-person worship released its recommendations. At All Saints, we had conducted an online survey to assess our congregation’s willingness to return and decided to wait until the beginning of August, meeting outdoors on the lawn at Holy Innocents—the only large outdoor space available to us. Since then, we have held simple liturgies of Morning Prayer, Holy Eucharist, and we baptized three babies. We remained outside until the weather began to grow cold and the annual sale of Christmas trees occupied the lawn, and then we returned to livestreamed indoor services. This period of time witnessed an increase in the number of COVID cases in this area and nationwide, so we did not consider trying to include members of the congregation inside the building. Instead, the musician and a cantor are present along with two readers, someone attending the

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<sup>32</sup> “Raising Antiracist Kids: A Conversation,” July 2, 2020, <https://youtu.be/lm7HaRN0ay4>.

technical equipment, and me. We pre-recorded Evensong for Advent and the annual Christmas pageant and other Christmas liturgies. At the time of this writing, we are planning on recording several liturgies for Holy Week and Easter for a second year.

COVID has presented challenges and opportunities, blessings and losses. Our people are overwhelmed. None of them wants to risk engaging in any of our outreach efforts at the shelter or otherwise. Endless meetings on Zoom discourage participation in fellowship or formation events. While our pledge giving has been up and an extra contribution appeal for upgraded sound and video equipment was successful, my primary concern is that an already fairly disengaged congregation will lose whatever tenuous connection it already has to the Church.

When the pandemic began, many experts predicted that it would come in waves and could take a year or probably more to control through protocols to inhibit the spread of infection and the development and widespread use of a vaccine. Thus far, these expectations have come to pass as the approach of winter has seen a significant upswing in the number of cases locally and nationally. Given this, our planning at All Saints is to continue online worship for the foreseeable future, certainly well into 2021.

Even with the revised expectations that we will not gather for worship in our building any time soon, the reality is that this may be the future even when the pandemic is sufficiently at bay. People will attend when it feels safe, perhaps availing themselves of online services, perhaps not. The ongoing formation of disciples through teaching, prayer, and acts of service will require creativity, a willingness to break free of old methods, and the courage to model a new way of being Church in the world.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### A THEOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

On June 6, 2015, in Göreme, a city in the Cappadocian region of Turkey, a group of travelers gathered in a fourth-century cave church to hold a brief remembrance service for the two-year-old grandson of two of our companions who had died the year before in a tragic accident. A hillside of caves that had served as the churches and dwelling places for a community of anchorites from the time of Basil of Caesarea provided a breathtaking setting, with tenth-century frescoes preserved on the walls and ceilings, hidden from view for centuries following the fall of Constantinople.

Our short liturgy was held in a plain cave, away from the tourists who had come to see the celebrated Dark Church. A bench carved from the stone of the cave ran along each wall, as was the custom in the early church. In this quiet space, we gathered to remember, read scripture, and pray together. Each year around that date, I still hear from the grandparents, with gratitude for that simple gathering in an ancient church so far from home.

The desire to mark death, to remember the ones we have loved but see no more, is a human need. Thomas G. Long opens his book *Accompany Them with Singing: The Christian Funeral* by describing the discovery in the 1960s of the oldest burial-site known at that time, a 50,000-year-old Neanderthal site in northern Iraq and a 30,000-year-old Cro-Magnon site near Moscow. Evidence uncovered at the latter included decorative jewelry and objects buried with what appeared to be a family. Long writes,

Human death has never been simply a fact; it has always been a mysterious ocean summoning those left standing on the shore to stammer

out convictions about life and to wonder what lies over the horizon. From the beginning, humans have adorned burial places and the bodies of the dead with tokens of beauty and love, symbols that push back the brute facts and display the hunger for meaning in the shadow of death.<sup>33</sup>

What happens to that “hunger for meaning” when an entire community is affected by death?

Certain kinds of death lead to communal mourning that affects everyone more or less equally. John F. Kennedy may not have been universally admired, but the shock of his assassination and the drama that unfolded in the following days provided a vessel for an outpouring of grief on a national and international scale. The dramatic staging of three days of mourning with those indelible images of his young widow and children, diplomats and leaders from around the world following the caisson as it made its way to St. Matthew’s Cathedral, and weeping soldiers all provided an opportunity, as well as permission, for the nation to mourn.

Similarly, the 2012 murder of twenty young school children and six teachers, including the school principal, at Sandy Hook Elementary School induced an outpouring of grief and sorrow that went far beyond the Newtown, Connecticut region. Perhaps no foreign dignitaries came to the funerals, but the President of the United States did, in a way representing all Americans in paying our respects.<sup>34</sup> Regardless of the conspiracy theories and denials that came later, the United States was collectively in mourning following this horrific event.

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<sup>33</sup> Long, 3-4.

<sup>34</sup> “Vigil for Sandy Hook Shooting Victims,” *Barack Obama Presidential Library*. December 16, 2012, accessed October 23, 2020, <https://www.obamalibrary.gov/timeline/item/vigil-sandy-hook-shooting-victims>.

In Hoboken, there is perhaps no delineation more profound than the one dividing the time before September 11, 2001, from the time after. Fifty-six mothers, fathers, children, aunts, uncles, friends, and neighbors left for work on a crystal-blue September morning and did not return. Retired emergency personnel are still brought to tears remembering those who did, stunned and injured, terrified and confused as the city of Hoboken began to realize just how many residents it had lost.<sup>35</sup> It took several years to arrive at an exact count, and it has been established that the fifty-six Hoboken residents who died represented the largest loss of life in any New Jersey zip code. Most of them were young professionals commuting to the World Trade Center. The average age was just 32.<sup>36</sup>

Every year on the anniversary of the attacks, civic officials and local clergy gather to remember at Pier A, a park built on an old shipping pier jutting out into the Hudson River. It was from this location that many citizens of Hoboken gathered to watch in horror as the second plane hit the South Tower of the World Trade Center, and both towers crumbled to the ground that morning. Not until 2017 was a permanent memorial placed in this park: towers of glass etched with the names of the dead, set in a grove of ginkgo trees.<sup>37</sup> Patriotic hymns and speeches by senators and congressional

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<sup>35</sup> Jennifer Tripucka. "A First-Responder's Story of Hoboken on September 11," *Hoboken Girl*, September 10, 2020, accessed October 23, 2020, <https://www.hobokengirl.com/first-responders-story-hoboken-on-september-11th/>.

<sup>36</sup> Dan Mihalopoulos, "They were just starting their lives," *The Chicago Tribune*, September 11, 2002, accessed October 23, 2020, <https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-xpm-2002-09-11-0209110343-story.html>.

<sup>37</sup> Elif Merve Unsal, "16 Years Later, The City Unveiled a new Memorial for 9/11," *World Architecture Community*, October 20, 2017, accessed October 23, 2020, [https://worldarchitecture.org/articles/cvvef/16\\_years\\_later\\_the\\_city\\_unveiled\\_a\\_new\\_memorial\\_for\\_9\\_11.html](https://worldarchitecture.org/articles/cvvef/16_years_later_the_city_unveiled_a_new_memorial_for_9_11.html).

representatives are framed by readings from scripture, the blowing of the shofar, a prayer litany, and the reading of the names of those who died. It is a familiar and comforting ritual that, accompanied by anecdotal conversations with participants and attendees, provides solace to those who remember that day and its aftermath.

The Kennedy assassination, Sandy Hook, and September 11 were all very different events, and yet they brought communities, and even nations, together in a common act of mourning and remembrance. In contrast, while the fires that plagued Hoboken were a much more localized news story, to be sure, yet even in this relatively small Mile Square City, the grief was not universal. The outpourings of sorrow were fairly limited, given the scope of the loss and the number of years the fires continued.

There are, of course, those who choose to forget or sweep it under the rug. Talk with anyone who lived through those days, and it will not take long to hear that there are developers in town even today who benefited from the fires. There are accusations that law enforcement and firefighters had vested interest in the new development. Suspicions arise even after forty years: if no one was ever charged, no one was held accountable, surely there must have been a cover-up. So this line of thinking goes.

Very early in planning this project, I made it clear to city officials and everyone else with whom I spoke that my purpose was *not* to assign blame or open some kind of investigation. My sole purpose was to offer a framework for remembrance and healing, two deeply pastoral acts that are essential in the process of reconciliation, even if such reconciliation is between past and present.

The models on which my understanding of this process is based were touched upon briefly in Chapter One and merit further exploration here. The first is a global



ministry of reconciliation forged out of the destruction of World War II. The second grew out of the trauma of the apartheid era in South Africa. The time spent in Charlottesville, Virginia, leading up to and during the summer of 2017 and the white supremacist demonstrations were formative in my experience of the development of a community of faith organized explicitly to stand up for justice and for continuing a pastoral and prophetic presence for the community grief and upheaval that followed. Next, an experience of storytelling using ancient theater to provide the prompt for dealing with present grief is part of my experience with Bryan Doerries' *Theater of War*. Finally, situating all of this within a theological framework of liturgical space provides the setting for the enactment of a series of events designed for remembrance and healing.

### **Coventry Cathedral**

On the night of November 14, 1940, the German Luftwaffe, determined to strike fear in the heart of Great Britain, engaged in an overnight bombing campaign in the Midlands of England, the geographical center of the country. Coventry was the target, and the medieval Cathedral Church of St. Michael was at the center. The cathedral, like much of the city, burned that night. The next morning, two charred timbers from the roof, which had fallen in the shape of a cross, were placed in the cathedral's ruined chancel. One of the cathedral priests began gathering up the medieval nails and fashioned three of them into the cross of nails that later became the symbol of Coventry's reconciliation ministry. The cathedral provost, the Very Reverend Richard Howard, vowed in his Christmas Day address that year to use the destruction as a symbol:

What we want to tell the world is this: that with Christ born again in our hearts today, we are trying, hard as it may be, to banish all thoughts of revenge; we are bracing ourselves to finish the tremendous job of saving the world from tyranny

and cruelty; we are going to try to make a kinder, simpler – a more Christ-Child-like sort of world in the days beyond this strife.<sup>38</sup>

Understandably, these words were not greeted with a universal welcome by those still suffering through the blitz. In 1948, as plans for building a new cathedral were underway, Provost Howard had the words “Father, forgive” inscribed on the wall of the chancel of the ruined cathedral. Echoing the words of Christ from the cross (Luke 23:34), there was a significant difference. Howard did not include an object of that forgiveness because he recognized that we all are complicit in the world’s pain and suffering. The words “Father, forgive” form the response to the petitions of the Litany of Reconciliation that is prayed every weekday at noon from the “new” 1962 cathedral and in the ruins of the old cathedral on Fridays:

All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.

The hatred which divides nation from nation, race from race, class from class,  
Father, forgive.

The covetous desires of people and nations to possess what is not their own,  
Father, forgive.

The greed which exploits the work of human hands and lays waste the earth,  
Father, forgive.

Our envy of the welfare and happiness of others,  
Father, forgive.

Our indifference to the plight of the imprisoned, the homeless, the refugee,  
Father, forgive.

The lust which dishonours the bodies of men, women and children,  
Father, forgive.

The pride which leads us to trust in ourselves and not in God,  
Father, forgive.

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<sup>38</sup> Howard is quoted in a draft of the English translation of Oliver Schuegraf, *The Cross of Nails: Joining in God’s Mission of Reconciliation* (London: Canterbury Press, 2012). The draft was in the files to which I was granted access at Coventry.

Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.<sup>39</sup>

Shortly after the war ended, Howard began to lay the groundwork for what would become an international center for reconciliation in Coventry, presenting the first cross of nails, formed from those medieval nails recovered from the ruins, to St. Nikolai Church in the city of Kiel, Germany in 1947.<sup>40</sup> The Community of the Cross of Nails (CCN) was not formally created until 1973, with the International Centre for Reconciliation coming the following year.<sup>41</sup> The CCN currently has a membership of more than 235 churches and other organizations spread across 45 countries, proclaiming a message of reconciliation and hope.<sup>42</sup> Some question the need for remembering wounds that occurred so long ago. One has only to recall the conflict over Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, visiting Dresden in 2004 and declining to offer an apology for the destruction of the city at the end of the war, to be reminded that healing and reconciliation are not static, nor are they easily accomplished.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> “Litany of Reconciliation,” Coventry Cathedral, accessed October 7, 2020, <https://www.coventrycathedral.org.uk/wpsite/litany-of-reconciliation/>.

<sup>40</sup> Schuegraf.

<sup>41</sup> Richard Farnell, “The City and the Cathedral” in *Reconciling People: Coventry Cathedral’s Story* ed. Christopher A. Lamb (Canterbury Press: London, 2011) 141.

<sup>42</sup> “About Us,” The Community of the Cross of Nails, accessed October 28, 2020, <http://www.coventrycathedral.org.uk/ccn/about-us-2/>.

<sup>43</sup> Luke Harding, “Queen: both sides suffered in the war,” *The Guardian*, November 3, 2004, accessed October 27, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2004/nov/03/secondworldwar.germany>.

At the time of my work at Coventry in 2011, the reconciliation ministry team was looking for a way forward with renewed focus. I drafted a strategic framework with observations and recommendations that would support three mission areas:

1. Healing the wounds of history.
2. Learning to live with difference and celebrate diversity.
3. Building a culture of peace.

The canon for reconciliation at that time, David Porter, was determined to create a culture of learning for the reconciliation ministry, moving beyond the symbolic global relationships and encouraging the hard work of peacemaking and reconciliation in its partners' contexts. Provost Howard, reflecting in 1962 at the dedication of the rebuilt cathedral, recalled:

As I went with this thought in my mind into the ruined Cathedral on the morning after the destruction, there flashed into my mind the deep certainty that as the Cathedral had been crucified with Christ, so it would rise again with Him. How or when, we could not tell; nor did it matter. The Cathedral would rise again.<sup>44</sup>

One wonders if he could have imagined the global reach of this resurrection.

### **The Institute for Healing of Memories**

In the fall of my second year of divinity school studies, I shared my reflections on my time at Coventry with the rector of my home parish. The Rev. David W. Peck had been the Secretary of International Development for Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams before returning to the United States to assume his position at St. James Episcopal Church in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. In the course of my conversation, Peck mentioned Fr. Michael Lapsley, whom he had encountered in his work at Lambeth

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<sup>44</sup> Schuegraf.

Palace, the headquarters of the Anglican Communion, and wondered if I had done any work around a more localized sort of reconciliation.

Beginning some research on Father Lapsley, I learned that he would be inviting the first international group of people to Cape Town the following summer for training in the Institute for Healing of Memories' methodology. I requested an interview and found myself on a Skype call just after Christmas, sitting in the lobby of the El Tovar Hotel on the south rim of the Grand Canyon, speaking with a hero of the apartheid era in South Africa. After that call, my next phase of exploration of healing and reconciliation ministry began.

Michael Lapsley was born in New Zealand, became a priest in Australia, and was sent to South Africa in 1973 by his religious order, the Anglican Society of the Sacred Mission. He served as a university chaplain in Durban in the eastern province of KwaZulu-Natal, where anti-apartheid fervor was rising. Following the Soweto Uprising of 1976 and as a consequence of his affiliation with the African National Congress (ANC), Lapsley was exiled to Lesotho, the mountain kingdom surrounded on all sides by South Africa. Additional threats of violence directed at him and his community in Lesotho led to exile in Zimbabwe, where he continued to serve as chaplain to the ANC. While living in Zimbabwe, he opened a letter bomb disguised as an envelope of religious magazines. The explosion took both of his hands, the sight in one eye, damaged his hearing, and left him near death. It was just three months after Nelson Mandela was released from prison, as the apartheid regime continued to target its opponents.

When he was sufficiently recovered from his injuries in 1993 and now living in Cape Town, Lapsley began work as the chaplain of the Trauma Centre for the Victims of

Violence and Torture, later changed to *Survivors* of Violence and Torture. When the Truth and Reconciliation hearings began in 1996, the hearings were only available to those who had suffered “gross human rights violations” such as murder, torture, rape, and kidnapping.<sup>45</sup> The Trauma Centre became the place for everyone else to receive care, and it was while working there that the idea for the Institute for Healing of Memories was born.

Thousands of South Africans were victims of apartheid. Lapsley believed that victims and perpetrators were both in need of healing. The Institute for Healing of Memories that grew out of his work at the Trauma Centre was a way of including anyone with a story to tell because, as the Institute tagline suggests, “every story needs a listener.”<sup>46</sup> The methodology is deceptively simple: spread over three days, asking the hard and painful questions of one’s past, sharing them in small groups, and engaging the senses with art and music before ritualizing the “letting go” of the guilt, shame, or trauma that inhibits our ability to flourish.

In July 2012, I arrived in Cape Town along with eleven others for an intensive training program entitled “Healing of Individual and Collective Wounds.” We came from India, Rwanda, England, the United States, South Africa, Zambia, and Zimbabwe. Our first three days together were spent on Robben Island, home to the infamous prison where Nelson Mandela had been held for the first eighteen years of his twenty-seven-year imprisonment. We were housed in converted cells that had once held minor criminals. Given that it was the middle of winter, it was frigid in these unheated rooms. Father

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<sup>45</sup> Lapsley, 119.

<sup>46</sup> Institute for Healing of Memories North America, accessed October 28, 2020, <https://healingmemoriesna.org>.

Lapsley's intention was clear: have this group of trainees bond over three days of isolation while going through the methodology of a Healing of Memories workshop.

Over the next three weeks, we met daily for training exercises, spent time with people who had suffered under the apartheid regime, visited Black townships, toured farms where we learned about the continuation of majority-White land ownership, and developed skills of listening and creating space for people to share their often-horrific stories. The importance of ritual and liturgy in bringing the stories together and in looking toward the future are critical elements of the Healing of Memories workshops. As someone who was, at the time, studying for ordination and had spent years as a musician engaged in the crafting of music and worship to bring participants into an experience of the divine, this closing workshop ritual made perfect sense. Lapsley wrote:

We can think of the entire Healing of Memories workshop as an extended liturgy. Religious liturgies have a transcendent quality that opens our hearts to relationships – with those with whom we share a common faith and with God. In a Healing of Memories workshop those relationships may include others on the workshop journey and significant persons living or dead who are not physically present. The safe and sacred space we create not only allows participants to feel connected with one another but also to be in touch with whatever each person understands as the ultimate ground of being, whether or not that is personalized a God.<sup>47</sup>

These three weeks in South Africa provided another piece, another tool for my toolkit, as I continued exploring healing and reconciliation. Whereas Coventry is a global connection of organizations, churches, and ministries, the Institute for Healing of Memories is an intense, intimate, and very personal way of addressing pain, loss, and trauma.

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<sup>47</sup> Lapsley, 167.

## Charlottesville

In my final year of divinity school, I intentionally focused on theologies of reconciliation and understanding the pastoral work of addressing individual and collective wounds and trauma. At graduation, the dean of Berkeley Divinity School confessed that there was no award in place for the work in which I had been engaged, so he and the trustees had created one for me in recognition of my “ministry of reconciliation.” Following graduation and ordination to the transitional diaconate—a canonical requirement in the Episcopal Church—I returned to Cape Town for three more weeks to do additional research in that country’s ongoing healing. Here, I served on Sundays as the deacon at St. George’s Cathedral and alongside Archbishop Desmond Tutu at the Friday morning Eucharist that he customarily celebrated when he was not traveling.

Returning to the United States, I still did not have a parish placement and began to serve informally at a local parish, principally providing pastoral care and preaching until my bishop placed me at St. Edward’s Church in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. As soon as I was ordained, the rector of that congregation left for a long-delayed sabbatical, leaving this newly minted priest in charge of his congregation. Not long after his return, I was called to serve as the associate rector of St. Paul’s Memorial Church in Charlottesville, Virginia, and moved there in November 2014.

As described in some detail in Chapter One, my arrival in Charlottesville coincided with grief and anguish over the rape and murder of a young student and an exposé about a culture of sexual assault and misogyny at the University of Virginia. While many of the details of that Rolling Stone essay were later proven false, the story it



told was believable enough that factual truth was less important than that the experience of women on Grounds was finally being brought into the open. Yet, it was the racist history of this southern town, its university, and the university's founder that was to create an overarching theme of my time in Charlottesville.

From the day the Rev. Dr. Alvin Edwards sent out a call to clergy in the area to come together for conversation following the June 2015 murder of nine Black people at Mother Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina, dialogue on race and white supremacy was never far from the center of my work. Even before that, when I had been in Charlottesville for barely one month, one of the long-time members of my congregation walked out in the middle of a sermon during which I noted the failure of the grand jury to bring charges in the killing of Michael Brown by a police officer in Ferguson, Missouri that summer. When I was being recruited to accept a position in Charlottesville and being shown all the beautiful, White-dominated places, I asked my guide where the Black folks lived. He literally drove me across the railroad tracks that divide the town to show me where the concentration of people of color resides in Charlottesville.

By the time of the 2016 election, Rev. Edwards and I had developed a trusting partnership in co-convening the Charlottesville Clergy Collective (CCC). There were struggles in that first year of the group when some of the women felt that their voices were being minimized, and some of the Black clergy wanted little to do with the Whites who had for so long opposed them or ignored them. In the post-Brown vs. the Board of Education period of massive resistance that saw Whites-only schools in Charlottesville closed by the governor of Virginia rather than integrate, White churches—including one

of the Episcopal churches in town—began offering classes for White students only.<sup>48</sup> From the beginning of the CCC, the painful history of white supremacy— including lynching, the erection of monuments, and the resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century—led to difficult conversations amongst the handful of clergy who refused to back away from the table. Those of us who are Christians tried to embody the words of Paul’s letter to the Galatians: “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28). Additionally, the rabbis spoke of *tikkun olam*—repair the world—based on the Deuteronomic imperative, “Justice, justice you shall pursue” (Deuteronomy 16:20).

When the torch-lit rally shocked Charlottesville on Mother’s Day weekend in 2017, with marchers chanting Nazi slogans and white supremacist ideologies, the CCC had been working through these challenges and building relationships for almost two years.<sup>49</sup> As the unofficial communications person for the group, I wrote a strongly-worded denunciation that the CCC presented to the press even as we learned the permits had been granted for the Ku Klux Klan to hold a rally in July, followed quickly by the news that a so-called Unite the Right rally had also received a permit for August.

These events galvanized the CCC. Whereas fewer than a dozen clergy typically attended our monthly breakfast meetings, we regularly saw three times that number at the

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<sup>48</sup> David Paulsen, “Charlottesville congregations once divided by segregation now chart a healing path together,” *The Episcopal Church*, September 11, 2017, accessed October 31, 2020, <https://episcopalchurch.org/library/article/charlottesville-congregations-once-divided-segregation-now-chart-healing-path>.

<sup>49</sup> Timothy J. Heaphy, “Independent Review of the 2017 Protest Events in Charlottesville, Virginia” (*The Heaphy Report*), November 24, 2017, accessed October 31, 2020, <https://www.huntonak.com/images/content/3/4/v2/34613/final-report-ada-compliant-ready.pdf>.

now-weekly meetings being held as we prepared to respond. Some of the younger clergy, frustrated at the conflict-averse nature of the CCC's planned counterprotests, started a new group, Congregate C'ville, of which I was also a founding member. As a connector between these two groups, I viewed my support as instrumental in encouraging a multi-faceted approach to confronting what was looming that summer. Much as there was dissension during the Civil Rights Movement about tactics and non-violence, a similar dynamic played out in Charlottesville.

News media and others have endlessly covered the events themselves. The consensus among the clergy and other local activist organizations was that the KKK demonstration on July 8, which ended in tear gas being used against counter-protesters, was a prelude to something much more volatile and dangerous the following month. Various diversionary events were planned by some congregations and by the University of Virginia to attract locals to attend those rather than showing up at Emancipation Park (formerly "Lee Park") to confront the Unite the Right rally. After the events of August 11, with the torch-lit parade at the University of Virginia and violence against students and others gathered around the statue of Thomas Jefferson in front of the rotunda, all events for August 12 were canceled, and people were urged to stay home.

In the Episcopal Church's baptismal covenant, we promise to "persevere in resisting evil" and "strive for justice and peace among all people."<sup>50</sup> Staying home was simply not an option for many of my colleagues or for me. I made it clear to Rev. Edwards that I did not expect any of the Black clergy to march or show up or

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<sup>50</sup> *The Book of Common Prayer* (New York: Church Publishing Inc.) 304-305.

demonstrate against the white supremacists who were expected to arrive heavily armed. Many of them, following the guidance of their own faith and faith traditions, showed up anyway. Sadly, in the end, it was a young White woman who was the victim of a vehicle attack.

The events of August 11-12, 2017, are seared into my memory. Understanding on an intellectual level that racism exists is one thing. However, to actually witness that armed militias have more firepower than local and state law enforcement and that hatred and evil are given permits to walk around in broad daylight was life-altering. Of the many lessons learned, however, is that groups of people can disagree over what approach to take in protest or counterprotest, but, at a fundamental level, it takes all of us doing our part to stand in solidarity with the targets of the hate to try to end it. For some people, their goodness was in providing bottled water on that hot August day. For others, it was spending the day in prayer and meditation. For another group, it was walking in the midst of a hate-filled mob to proclaim that love will always win in the end.

### **Theater of War**

My field placement internship during my divinity school studies was at Trinity Church Wall Street in lower Manhattan. Given that I spent weekends during the school year reconnecting with my husband either at our home in Pennsylvania or at my New Haven, Connecticut, apartment, serving in a parish over the course of the academic term was not feasible. So, I was fortunate to be part of a ten-week intensive internship at one of the wealthiest churches in the Episcopal Church. It was not so much the wealth that attracted me (quite the opposite) but that, even in the summer when most congregations

are quiet or on something of a hiatus, worship and ministry continued apace at this historic congregation in New York City.

I was placed in the Faith in Action department. In addition to planning and coordinating the first gathering of international ministry partners at Trinity in the fall of 2012, I was assigned the task of identifying potential recipients of a \$25,000 grant directed to an organization working with the homeless and otherwise vulnerable military veteran population in Lower Manhattan. One of the applicants was Bryan Doerries, who founded Theater of War in 2009. Theater of War presents classic Greek plays to designated audiences to provide a framework to address whatever trauma they may have endured. The first play presented was Sophocles' *Philoctetes* because, as Doerries explains, our medical capabilities can save the lives of soldiers with injuries that could have been fatal, but

by saving so many lives, we had also refined our ability to prolong the agony and isolation of wounded soldiers, like Philoctetes, stranded on islands of chronic illness. We were creating a vast subclass of profoundly injured veterans who would be dependent on the care of others for decades to come.<sup>51</sup>

In presenting this play to soldiers, Doerries was trying to open a pathway to understanding the universality of human experience, finding means of expression that only artistic endeavors can provide.

Theater of War did not receive the Trinity grant that year, but I would later encounter Doerries and Theater of War in Charlottesville when he was invited to present the Sophocles play *Ajax* as part of a mental health project on the subject of suicide. The

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<sup>51</sup> Bryan Doerries, *The Theater of War: What Ancient Greek Tragedies Can Teach Us Today* (New York: Vintage Books, 2015) 64-65.

way Doerries designed Theater of War is that a small group of actors would read a portion of a play, and then a select panel of people who had experienced the trauma (in this case, losing loved ones to suicide) would reflect on their experience of watching the play. The discussion then opened to the audience for questions and feedback.

Having lost my son to suicide, the local organizer invited me to be part of this panel. Well-known television and theater actors came to speak the roles in the play, which centers on the warrior Ajax, tormented by the death of his friend Achilles during the Trojan War. Suffering from what we would today call post-traumatic stress disorder, he attempts to kill the commanding officers but, failing that, turns the violence on himself. This play is wrenching to watch. The anguish of Ajax and the frantic worry of his wife Tecmessa produced a visceral response in me. It was a powerful experience to tap into that feeling of what it is like to watch a loved one who is beyond your reach as it played out on stage.

Doerries has offered Theater of War productions in all manner of conflict situations, including *Antigone* in Ferguson and portions of four Sophocles tragedies for frontline responders during the COVID-19 epidemic. About the latter, the Theater of War website says

By presenting ancient plays to doctors, nurses, EMTs, respiratory therapists, and other healthcare providers about emotionally-charged, ethically complex situations, Theater of War Frontline aims to create a brave space for open, candid dialogue and reflection, fostering compassion, a renewed sense of community, and positive action.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> “Our projects,” *Theater of War Productions*, accessed November 10, 2020, <https://theaterofwar.com/projects>.

My experience of Theater of War shaped a portion of this project. Understanding the power of dramatized tragedy followed by reflection on the play as a means of processing present reality was a potent reminder that sharing stories in an embodied way can be therapeutic in addressing psychic and emotional wounds.

### **A Theology of Space**

In the spring of 2013, I went on a Yale Divinity School class trip to northern England to explore the history, lives, and liturgical traditions of Cuthbert of Lindisfarne and the Venerable Bede. Our travels began in Durham, followed by Lindisfarne and Whitby, before ending in York, where the massive York Minster dominates the city skyline. The history of the early English church is a story of the struggle between Northumbria and Canterbury, where two very different strands of Christianity developed, particularly in liturgical practice and the dating of Easter. Following the Synod of Whitby in 664 CE, the seat of the church in the north moved from the Holy Island of Lindisfarne to York as the Northumbrian church reluctantly agreed to follow the traditions of Rome. As two of the most influential figures in the early Northumbrian church, Bede's and Cuthbert's presence is imprinted throughout the region. It was their footsteps that our class attempted to follow.

In each cathedral city, we met with cathedral deans and historians, theologians, and canon precentors. All of the cathedrals have the customary array of daily and Sunday liturgies from Matins to Holy Eucharist to Evensong. However, at the time of our visit, only York Minster had begun an experimental worship called "Ancient Modern

Worship.” Now known as “Threshold,”<sup>53</sup> the Sunday evening service weaves traditional eucharistic liturgy with a sensory and experiential pilgrimage through the cathedral. The movement through the cavernous space of this medieval cathedral brings to mind the invitation to commune with God and invokes all of the faithful who have done the same throughout the centuries and those for whom the cathedral was a gathering space for all kinds of daily, mundane activities. The enormous nave could serve as a marketplace and meeting space, interrupted from time to time by the ringing of Sanctus bells from the other side of the rood screen to remind folks that something holy was happening at the high altar.

The Threshold service represents something of a pilgrimage, hearkening back to a time when those with little means could experience pilgrimage only by walking a labyrinth or engaging in Stations of the Cross. The fourteen stations of Christ’s passion, still a popular devotional practice for Christians around the world, allow the pilgrim to pray and reflect on the last hours of the life of Christ. An annual Holy Week event in Jersey City visits fourteen locations of violence as a representation of the way Jesus continues to be crucified in our city streets by our apathy and inaction on guns and poverty.<sup>54</sup> Whether making a pilgrimage inside an enormous medieval cathedral or on the streets of a modern-day city in America, a tradition of prayer and faith expression through bodily movement is a meaningful devotional practice.

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<sup>53</sup> “Threshold,” York Minster, accessed March 27, 2019, <https://yorkminster.org/whats-on/event/threshold/>.

<sup>54</sup> Aya Elamroussi, “Stations of the Cross ceremony stops at 14 scenes of Jersey City violence,” updated April 22, 2019, <https://www.nj.com/hudson/2019/04/stations-of-the-cross-ceremony-stops-at-14-scenes-of-jersey-city-violence.html>.



Because All Saints as a parish comprises all of Hoboken, the concept of a Mile Square Cathedral, sacred space that has been hallowed by the life and death of all who have called this place home, became a compelling driver in the development of this project. Beginning with the Lenni-Lenape who first claimed it to its current residents, Hoboken has been shaped by the experiences of all who have worked, raised families, struggled, and found success here. It is fitting that we have a geographically manageable space in which to carry out liturgical, spiritual, and memorial action beyond the walls of any single building, embracing this entire community. It is with this background in mind that the logistical plan for this project began to materialize.

### **Summary**

These various studies, hands-on training, peacemaking experiences, reconciliation, healing, and relationship-building all coalesced in the Hoboken fire memorial project. In Hoboken, the rage and sorrow have been mostly forgotten. Or, more likely, people living here now are oblivious to them. Yet, the memories of the arson years have had a profound impact on the people who experienced them and on the continuing battles over housing and equity in this city. Empty buildings continue to be bought and converted into high-priced condominiums and apartments. In September 2020, a Hoboken Clergy Coalition representative read a statement at a City Council meeting decrying rumored plans to suspend a ten-percent affordable housing unit set-aside on any new development.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> John Heinis, “Appellate Court: Hoboken developers shouldn’t have been able to bypass 10% affordable housing,” *Hudson County View*, September 30, 2020, accessed October 31, 2020, <https://hudsoncountyview.com/appellate-court-hoboken-developers-shouldnt-have-been-able-to-bypass-10-affordable-housing/>.

COVID-19 has heightened the disparities between those who can afford to work from home and those considered essential who cannot work remotely. Families with sufficient internet bandwidth and equipment for their children to attend school virtually have a significant advantage over those who do not and over those who attend public school rather than the private or charter schools that are better equipped to deliver quality online learning. All of this is a continuation of the gentrification battles of the late 1970s and early 1980s. The more desirable Hoboken becomes as a place for the well-off to live, the more evident the gap becomes in housing, jobs, and education between the rich and the poor of this city.

When a priest is ordained in the Episcopal Church, we are taken through a series of commitments. One is a promise “to love and serve the people among whom you work, caring alike for young and old, strong and weak, rich and poor.”<sup>56</sup> Another is a prayer to “let the whole world see and know that things which were being cast down are being raised up, and things which had grown old are being made new.”<sup>57</sup> The people among whom I work and whom I serve are not limited to those who are members of All Saints, any more than my ministry in Charlottesville was just for the people of St. Paul’s Memorial Episcopal Church. My office may entail serving a particular congregation as rector or associate rector, but my vocation as a priest is for all people I encounter. In the

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<sup>56</sup> Book of Common Prayer, 531.

<sup>57</sup> Book of Common Prayer, 528.

words of Archbishop of Canterbury William Temple, “The Church exists primarily for the sake of those who are still outside it.”<sup>58</sup>

In describing the founding and purpose of Yale’s Center for Faith and Culture, theologian Miroslav Volf wrote:

That’s what we at the Center are all about – promoting the practice of Christian faith in all spheres of life so that what is broken in our individual lives and cultures can be mended, and we all can flourish as God’s creatures, finite, fragile, flawed, and in all this glorious. More important, that’s also what the Christian faith as a prophetic religion is all about.<sup>59</sup>

When I was searching for a rectorship, and before I accepted the call to Hoboken, my husband was included in an interview at a church outside of Philadelphia. When the committee asked him what they needed to know about me from his perspective, his response was, “I hope you are ready for a rector whose ministry is in the public square, because if you are not, Elaine is not the right person for you.” They were hard-pressed to respond enthusiastically to that. Even though they offered me the position, it was clear that it was not the right place for someone with a view of public ministry such as mine.

Jesus did not stay in the synagogue or the temple. He was out among the people, teaching and healing, laughing and breaking bread. I am not an itinerant preacher, but being out and about among the people is how I follow Jesus. It is how I fulfill my baptismal promises, and it is how I keep my ordination vows. Working with the people of Hoboken whose stories have been largely forgotten has been the next part of that very public ministry.

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<sup>58</sup> “William Temple 1881-1944, English Theologian and Archbishop,” *Oxford Reference*, Accessed November 30, 2020, <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780191826719.001.0001/q-oro-ed4-00010671>.

<sup>59</sup> Miroslav Volf, *A Public Faith: How Followers of Christ Should Serve the Common Good* (Grand Rapids, MI: BrazosPress, 2013) 4.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### THE PROJECT

The genesis of this project is the research conducted into the context of my ministry at All Saints. The Rev. Geoff Curtiss arrived in Hoboken in 1980, and by 1983 had managed to combine three failing congregations—Trinity, St. Paul’s, and Holy Innocents—into one parish. In those years, Curtiss was also instrumental in forming the Hoboken Clergy Coalition, In Jesus’ Name Charities, and the Hoboken Shelter. All of this was in direct response to the fires that swept through Hoboken, most especially in the years between 1978 and 1983, killing 56 people, most of them children.

Hours spent scanning through the Hoboken Historical Museum’s digital records revealed a shocking number of fatal fires, many of them with evidence of accelerants, indicating arson. Numerous other non-fatal fires displaced hundreds of the poorer residents of the city. Most remarkably, no citywide public memorial was held other than the ones organized by local clergy. There has never been an acknowledgment by the City of Hoboken of these lost lives.

The museum published a series of chapbooks as part of an oral history project called “Vanishing Hoboken.”<sup>60</sup> I stumbled across one of them containing the recollections of a retired nurse, Rose Orozco. This chapbook, *The Basic Goodness of People: Recollections of Rose Orozco*, included a section on her memories of the fires, including traumatic images of small, child-sized body bags coming to the emergency room of St. Mary Hospital where she worked. She tells of going to the sites of some of

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<sup>60</sup> “Oral History Project,” Hoboken Historical Museum, accessed October 2, 2020, <https://www.hobokenmuseum.org/explore-hoboken/oral-history-project/>

the fires, including one in October 1981 in which eleven people died. She saw a child banging on an upper floor window, screaming for help as horrified classmates watched from the street below. Orozco said:

I've been doing research on the fires for a while, because I wanted to start sort of a blog, to give a voice to the voiceless, and those who are literally scarred, and figuratively scarred by the things that happened. Because there was never any justice for those folks. There really wasn't. I think a lot of things have never been said or done or should have been done, and nobody really took responsibility. There was a lot of suspicion here and there. [But I think there should be some report of] what was there. That, to me, is important. As I get older (as I am, getting older), it's almost like I feel that I'm running out of time, and this is something that I really want to do.<sup>61</sup>

These words prompted me to reach out to Orozco to discuss my research and the interest it generated in this era of All Saints and Hoboken's history. I learned that she was putting together a group to plan a physical memorial to the fire victims, and she graciously included me in that. The connections I made through the Hoboken Fire Memorial Project added significantly to the development of my own work.

It was clear from conversations with Orozco, the memorial project team, and other community members, including retired firefighters, that there was a great deal of unfinished business from Hoboken's fire era. From my understanding of reconciliation, liturgics, and public theology as outlined in the previous chapter, this project began to take shape as a series of three events centered around storytelling, physical memorializing, and liturgical remembrance.

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<sup>61</sup> Holly Metz, editor, *The Basic Goodness of People: Recollections of Rose Orozco* (Hoboken: Hoboken Historical Museum. 2019) 19.

## The Setting

In Chapter 4, I explored the idea of pilgrimage within sacred space, moving from place to place as a way to honor, remember, or otherwise mark a liturgical event. Most contemporary churches do not have the space for such interior pilgrimages, including my own parish of All Saints in Hoboken, New Jersey. Yet, what if we expanded the idea of public meeting and worship space beyond the walls of our church and took it into the streets of this one-mile-square city? The “fresh expressions” movement, popular in England and growing in the United States, has as its hallmark worship and gathering in non-traditional locations, from parks to bars to coffee shops.<sup>62</sup> In Hoboken, the mayor and city council have been intentional in the past several years about preserving open space and creating public parks and gathering spaces. A protected Hudson River waterfront offers breathtaking views of the Manhattan skyline with a walking and running trail running the entire length of Hoboken that includes piers, dog parks, and plenty of benches and grassy areas. Whole city blocks are set aside for parks and playgrounds in every part of the city. Hoboken is urban and increasingly gentrified, so the coffee, pub, and arts scenes are vibrant.

Imagine creating a cathedral here without walls, with several select venues for worship, small group conversations, art, and music all emanating from All Saints Episcopal Parish. Even further, imagine if this all started with the ritualized remembering

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<sup>62</sup> Michael Adam Beck, *Deep Roots, Wild Branches: Revitalizing the Church in the Blended Ecology* (Franklin, TN: Seedbed, 2019), Kindle.

of forty-year-old events, creating space for story, liturgy, and song. This, then, is the Mile Square Cathedral.

### **Part One: Community Conversations and Storytelling**

There are so many people in Hoboken with vivid memories of the fires that selecting a few representative voices to recount their memories in a public setting was the first challenge. The second was to provide the background and context for those who were not aware of this part of Hoboken's history but to do it in such a way that it was not a dry history lecture. The third and final challenge was to format all of this into a two-hour Saturday morning event.

I settled fairly quickly on the idea that the storytellers should include someone who had fought the fires, someone whose life was impacted due to the fires, and, if possible, a victim or family member. Recognizing that to single out an individual firefighter living in Hoboken might prove pastorally tricky as the fire department chaplain, by happy coincidence, I recalled meeting a retired firefighter, Capt. Mike Lisa, at the convention of the Episcopal Diocese of Newark early in 2019. I acquired his phone number and contacted him for a conversation. In disbelief, I listened as he recounted his experience of the same fire mentioned in Orozco's chapbook, the one that occurred on October 25, 1981, killing eleven people from two families.<sup>63</sup> Lisa lived around the corner from that fire location at the time and was awake in the night with his toddler-aged

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<sup>63</sup> "Eleven Die in a Hoboken Fire Believed Set by Arsonist," *The New York Times*, October 25, 1981, accessed October 2, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/1981/10/25/nyregion/11-die-in-a-hoboken-fire-believed-set-by-arsonist.html>.

daughter when he heard shouts of “fuego, fuego!” coming from nearby.<sup>64</sup> As one accustomed to responding to calls to report fires, Lisa found himself in the position of calling this one in. Capt. Lisa agreed to tell this story.

In identifying someone whose life was directly impacted by the fires as the second speaker, I selected April Harris, a Catholic layperson. She had founded In Jesus’ Name Charities and continues to serve as its director almost forty years later. Harris recounts how hundreds of people were displaced by the fires and had nowhere to go. Most were placed in temporary shelter at hotels, with only the clothes they were wearing when they escaped the flames. With the support of Geoff Curtiss and All Saints, Harris organized the collection of clothes, food, household supplies, and money for these displaced residents. She named the organization In Jesus’ Name Charities because it was in response to God’s call that she undertook this work.<sup>65</sup> She continues to provide emergency supplies to those in need in Hoboken. April was my second storyteller.

The final person was a more delicate matter. Most of the people whose homes burned no longer live in Hoboken. Families of those who died have also moved away, and approaching them to ask them to speak publicly could mean opening wounds and renewing sorrow and anger. I wanted to be particularly careful not to exploit their loss or appear to do so in any way, and I also did not know how to contact them. Fortunately, a solution came about unexpectedly when a woman commented on the Hoboken Fire

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<sup>64</sup> Mike Lisa, telephone interview, November 19, 2019.

<sup>65</sup> April Harris interview, February 12, 2020.



Memorial Project Facebook page saying that she would like to be part of the memorial Rose Orozco's group was planning.

Marisol Zenon now lives in Florida, but at this time was in Union City, NJ, just next to Hoboken, to care for her sick mother. When I contacted her, Ms. Zenon was in the hospital and said she would welcome a visit. During that conversation, she told me that she was eleven years old when a fire broke out in the Pinter Hotel, a tenement apartment building on Hoboken's north end. Zenon's family lived in Union City at the time and was contacted by police about the fire. They were to learn that seven of her family members had died, including her mother's sister, who had jumped from the building; two cousins; and their four young children, the youngest of whom was one month old. Ms. Zenon vividly remembers the smell of the smoke, the haze that hung over Hoboken as the police escorted her family down the hill that leads from Union City, and the seven caskets arrayed in the small funeral home before being transported to Puerto Rico for burial. She also was candid about the lingering trauma those memories induced, including an inability to stay indoors any time she smelled smoke or heard a smoke detector.<sup>66</sup> Marisol agreed to be my third storyteller.

The final piece of this community conversation was to set the stage to help people understand what was happening in Hoboken between the years 1978 and 1983. I had hoped to have historian Dylan Gottlieb, who had studied and written about the fires (see Abstract). He was not available, so I contacted a local playwright, Joseph Gallo, whom I had already interviewed about a play he was writing, the first act of which is set in the

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<sup>66</sup>Marisol Zenon interview, February 23, 2020.

arson era. Gallo agreed to present a reading of that first act to open the morning event. While the other seven participants were professional actors, I was recruited to read the part of Sister Norberta Hunnewinkel, a teacher and activist who was a leader in the tenants' rights movement and a founder of the Hoboken Shelter. The play is based on a 1987 book, *Yuppies Invade My House at Dinnertime: A Tale of Brunch, Bombs, and Gentrification in an American City* (Big River Publishing), a collection of letters to the editor of the local newspaper, *The Hoboken Reporter*, which provides a snapshot of the conflicts between the B&Rs and the newly arrived. To set the play's backdrop, Gallo dramatized the events surrounding a fire on October 12, 1981, that killed two young boys. Reflecting on my experiences with Bryan Doerries' Theater of War, I was convinced that introducing the morning's conversations with a reading of this play would be much more effective than a twenty-minute lecture on the history of gentrification and arson in this city.

On a cold Saturday morning on the last day of February, 38 people gathered around tables at All Saints for an event advertised as "Community Conversations and Storytelling." We provided coffee, tea, bagels, and fruit for people to enjoy as they arrived and as the morning progressed. I made some brief introductory remarks before the play reading, after which those seated at tables were instructed to refer to cards on their tables to guide their discussions (Appendix 1, p. 106):

Say your name and a little bit about how long you've lived in Hoboken.

Questions:

Do you remember the fires?

Did you know about the fires?

Do you have a personal connection with anyone who died, was injured or burned out?

After fifteen minutes, I facilitated a short report out of those table discussions, during which I invited people to share their responses with the whole group.

Next, I introduced the three storytellers, beginning with Capt. Lisa, formerly of the Hoboken Fire Department, followed by the founder of In Jesus' Name Charities, April Harris, and finally Marisol Zenon, who had lost seven family members in a hotel fire in 1982. After each person spoke, attendees were invited to ask questions before resuming the conversation at their tables. For the next thirty minutes, those at each table considered the following:

At your table, share your thoughts about what you've seen and heard so far this morning.

What is your story?

What questions do you have?

An additional time of conversation among the whole group followed, with people sharing their stories, memories, and reflections.

The responses to the play, the storytellers, and the table discussions varied depending on whether or not someone had a personal recollection of the events. Even then, those who lived through the arson years differed in their reactions. Some responded mostly with sorrow for the loss of life, especially the children. Others voiced anger that they have carried for years because no one was ever arrested or charged for those fires, even though many were determined to be arson based on evidence of accelerants. Those who moved to Hoboken in more recent years were shocked to discover this part of Hoboken's history.

Perhaps the most moving part of the morning was to have in attendance Marisol Zenon's mother, whose sister, Anna Hilda Perez, died in the April 30, 1982, Pinter Hotel fire after jumping from the burning building. Marisol's mother has carried her sorrow for

38 years, knowing that no one was held accountable for the loss of thirteen lives in that fire, including that of her sister, two nieces, and four grandnieces and grandnephews, the youngest of whom was a newborn.

If it is true that “every story needs a listener,” as the tagline of the Institute for the Healing of Memories says (footnote 44), plenty of people had stories to tell on this morning. As I wandered from table to table listening to the conversations, I was struck at how intently those who were not in Hoboken in those years listened and asked thoughtful questions of the ones who were here then. Several of those with memories to share expressed their gratitude for the opportunity to talk about something they had carried inside for decades. One expressed some surprise at how deep the emotion was that welled up inside of her as she recalled the fires and the palpable fear that permeated Hoboken like a fog in those days.

Perhaps most telling was the surprise and disbelief expressed by those who mostly listened. How is it that fifty-six people could die in a city in such a horrific way, and most of the residents are oblivious to it? The overall consensus seemed to be less that someone should have been held accountable and more that collective amnesia had permitted a perpetuation of the very same conditions that led to the fires in the first place. Rapid redevelopment of buildings for sale as condominiums or high-priced rentals and displacement of low- and even medium-income residents continues to this day. In October 2020, the average monthly rent in Hoboken was \$3,480,<sup>67</sup> while the median

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<sup>67</sup> “Rent trend data in Hoboken, NJ,” *Rent Jungle*, accessed November 10, 2020, <https://www.rentjungle.com/average-rent-in-hoboken-nj-rent-trends/>.

listing price for sale was \$789,000.<sup>68</sup> The poor and low-income people who once lived in the center of town could not dream of living at those now-desirable, pricey addresses. Even the west side of Hoboken, the site of most of the Hoboken Housing Authority public housing units, is becoming overdeveloped with high-priced apartments and condos. Those in conversation at this community event were able to trace a through-line from the fires to Hoboken's current housing situation.

### **Part Two: A Prayer Walk**

The conception of this embodied ritual walk was the one most fraught with potential conflict. In conversation with some community members, I was told that we simply could not gather in front of buildings where people live now who have no idea that there once stood a different structure in that location where as many as twenty-one people had died in a fire. Such a gathering would only make those residents feel guilty, perhaps anger them, and turn them against any potential memorial project. Conversely, it was suggested that we make a dramatic and visible sign of what took place at these Hoboken addresses between 1978 and 1983, much like the chalk project in Manhattan. Every year on March 25, volunteers spread out across the city of New York to write in chalk the names of the 146 people, mostly young women, who died in the 1911 Triangle Shirtwaist Fire. This chalking takes place on the sidewalk in front of the home addresses

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<sup>68</sup> "Home values in Hoboken, NJ," *Realtor.com*, accessed November 10, 2020. [https://www.realtor.com/realestateandhomes-search/Hoboken\\_NJ/overview](https://www.realtor.com/realestateandhomes-search/Hoboken_NJ/overview).

of those who died.<sup>69</sup> Could we not also write the names of the dead in front of the buildings?

After several such conversations and considering some very public types of enactments of Stations of the Cross of which I have been a part, I was determined that walking from place to place was non-negotiable. The question at hand, then, was what to do when we arrived. Praying together was a given, as was a reading of the names of those who died. Rather than using chalk or some other mark, I decided that we would leave irises on the step or sidewalk in front of the building. The iris was the image adopted for this project in consultation with my contextual advisory team. In Greek mythology, Iris is the goddess of the rainbow. In our faith tradition, the rainbow signifies God's promise to protect humankind from destruction, so this flower seemed a fitting symbol.

On Saturday morning, one week following the community conversations, a group of fifteen people braved the cold to gather at 67 Park Avenue in Hoboken, the site of an October 12, 1981 fire that killed two brothers, ages seven and two. The apartment building that currently stands at the site is numbered "77," as if to erase the horror of the arson fire that took place at "67."

This was the starting point of a walk through the city to several fire locations (Appendix 1, p. 108). We recited a short litany at each stop, said the names of the dead, and placed an iris for each of them on the step or next to the building. All the victims' names had been pre-written on small cards so that everyone would have an opportunity to say a few of them as we made our way through the morning.

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<sup>69</sup> "Chalk," Ruth Sergel Street Pictures, accessed November 13, 2020, [www.streetpictures.org/chalk](http://www.streetpictures.org/chalk).

From 67 Park Avenue, we walked to 311 First Street. An October 1979 fire killed two people in an apartment above a popular fish market, Joseph Apicella & Sons. The market reopened and thrived until closing in 2005, but the lives of a one-year-old and his mother were lost, leaving three other children to find shelter and a home with relatives.

At 131 Clinton Street, the emotions of the walk participants were very much on the surface. On a January night in 1979, twenty-one people died, including every member of three different families. Two of the families were immigrants from British Guyana, and one was from Puerto Rico. Almost anyone who lived in Hoboken at the time would recognize the iconic photos of the Hoboken Fire Department fighting the fire and of the next morning as icicles hung from power lines in front of the burned-out building (Appendix 1, p. 118). On our stop there, intoning twenty-one names and placing an iris for each of them impressed upon us the enormity of what had been lost.

Our next destination was not a fire location but the Hoboken Shelter, officially known as Communities of Faith for Housing, Inc. The Shelter was established in 1982 by the Hoboken Clergy Coalition to directly respond to Hoboken residents' economic displacement.<sup>70</sup> The city codes that drove arson-for-profit also shut down single resident occupancy buildings that could be sold for upscale apartments and condominiums. Low-income and poor residents began to flood the streets, going from church to church for assistance. The clergy came together to open a winter shelter in the basement of St. John's Lutheran Church, and that is where it remains today, although the congregation is no longer active.

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<sup>70</sup> Alan Skontra. "The History of the Homeless Shelter Is the History of Hoboken," *Hoboken Patch*, May 3, 2012, accessed October 13, 2020, <https://patch.com/new-jersey/hoboken/the-history-of-the-homeless-shelter-is-the-story-of-hoboken>.

At the shelter, we told some of this story, giving thanks for those who had responded to the need with compassion, contending with city officials over the legality of overnight shelter, and taking the case all the way to the New Jersey Superior Court, where the ruling in favor of religious use set a nationwide precedent.

This stop was followed by two more that were not fire locations. The advice of the contextual advisory team for this project was that the fire locations' unrelenting sadness would best be balanced by some of the hope that arose from the fires. Given that this was to be a two-hour event, there was no way we could get to every fire location anyway, so the path was mapped out in such a way as to permit us to honor some of those who worked to make things better.

Our next stop, then, was a building behind Our Lady of Grace Roman Catholic Church where In Jesus' Name Charities is housed. Its founder, April Harris, had spoken as one of the storytellers the previous week, telling the assembly how she witnessed the significant needs of those who were being burned out and displaced by developers and had been moved to act. She had first acquired storage space from All Saints before being granted permission to use a large basement area at Our Lady of Grace. Ms. Harris was with us on the walk and described how she continues to provide for emergency needs to this day.

The walk to the next fire location was twelve blocks, and on the way, we passed what is essentially the geographic center of Hoboken, the location of Rescue 1 Firehouse. We stopped to speak to the firefighters on duty accompanied by the fire chief, who was part of the prayer walk. In an era before mandatory smoke detectors in multifamily buildings and before there was even an arson investigation unit in Hoboken, firefighters



bore the brunt of the fire epidemic and shouldered the burden of carrying children's bodies from the shells of buildings.

Firefighting in Hoboken seems to run in families. Some of today's firefighters had fathers and grandfathers who also served right here in the Mile Square City. During the arson years, those who came before claim never to have had so many fire alarms over such an extended time. We talked with the firefighters of Rescue 1 Firehouse about what that must have been like and how different firefighting is today, with professional investigation units and stricter construction and building codes. Our stop to talk with the firefighters was mostly about thanking them and, in doing so, thanking by proxy the firefighters from forty years ago.

The final two fire locations lay ahead of us, and after the twenty-one killed at 131 Clinton Street, these were the deadliest.

The hotel at the corner of Twelfth and Washington Streets was the location of the fire called in by Capt. Mike Lisa, recounted at the community conversations gathering. The Mercado family, seven people, ranging in age from nine to seventy-six, immigrants from Puerto Rico, all died in that fire. Another Cuban family lost four members. Newspaper accounts tell of a building owner who had threatened arson when a rent increase was deemed illegal under rent stabilization regulations in Hoboken.<sup>71</sup> The four Mercado children attended the same public school in Hoboken, and their classmates still remember the empty desks when they returned to school on Monday morning.

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<sup>71</sup> Roy Kahn, "Hoboken fire: tenants say owner threatened arson," Hudson Dispatch, October 29, 1981, accessed October 13, 2020, <http://www.digifind-it.com/njhistoricalportal/data/hoboken/books//Fires%20&%20Fire%20Department.pdf>.

The final fire location on the prayer walk was near the northern boundary of the city. This is the fire in which Marisol Zenon lost seven of her relatives when she was just eleven years old.

Witnesses watched as desperate mothers dropped their infants from windows to passersby before jumping out themselves. Thirteen residents, all Puerto Rican, perished. A subsequent investigation found that the building had been fined a week earlier for lacking any working smoke detectors. By that time, the cleared lot had been sold for redevelopment. Arson yet again proved the most effective—if deadly—way to clear out tenants to make way for luxury apartments.<sup>72</sup>

The tragedy of the fire at the Pinter Hotel was that eight children under the age of eighteen died, the youngest just one month old. The recitation of names and ages and the placing of irises outside what is now a trendy coffee shop proved a somber moment in this prayer walk.

Our group had one final stop to make. In June 2019, Hoboken City Council voted to rename the local American Legion Park in honor of a tenants' rights activist Teofilo "Tom" Olivieri, who had worked tirelessly during the arson wave on behalf of those being displaced.<sup>73</sup> Having arrived in Hoboken from Puerto Rico as a ten-year-old, his activism on behalf of the Puerto Rican community is legendary.

The prayer walk concluded, then, at the renamed park, where we said the names of the remaining victims from locations we had not visited and laid the remaining irises there, as well. Eventually, the Hoboken Fire Memorial Project will place a plaque in the

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<sup>72</sup> Gottlieb, 410.

<sup>73</sup> Corey W. McDonald, "Hoboken honors longtime tenants' rights activist with park renaming," *The Jersey Journal*, June 6, 2019, accessed October 13, 2020, <https://www.nj.com/hudson/2019/06/hoboken-honors-longtime-tenants-rights-activist-with-park-renaming.html>.

park, the only such public memorial to the victims of the fires. As we parted from each other, there was a somber mood in the air. Yet, each of us was able to express some satisfaction that we had accomplished what no one else had been able to in forty years or so: to say the names of each person who died in those years, names long forgotten except by any remaining family and by God, who said, “See, I have inscribed you on the palm of my hands” (Isaiah 49:16).

### **Part Three: A Service of Remembrance for the Victims of the Fires, 1978-1983**

We come from far and wide;  
 We have our own stories to tell who we are  
 Stories of places and people and experiences  
 Tales of discovery and disappointment.

Somewhere between there and here,  
 God has become part of our adventure;  
 Part of our walking and speaking and breathing,  
 In us and through us and before us.<sup>74</sup>

Somewhere between the events of 1978-1983 and the spring of 2020, people’s stories of what they had experienced, what they continued to wrestle with, was due for a liturgy that permitted the expression of loss and grief and trauma. In the Christian tradition, any service of remembrance or funeral liturgy is also a service of worship, and we are reminded that “worship that is grounded in God acknowledges that God initiates worship. God invites us to worship. *Worship is an invitation, not an invention*” (emphasis

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<sup>74</sup> Mike Riddell, Welcoming Liturgy, “It’s worship Jim, but not as we know it”: an Emerging Worship Course, quoted in Mark Pierson, *The Art of Curating Worship: Reshaping the Role of Worship Leader* (Minneapolis: Sparkhouse Press, 2010) 54.

mine).<sup>75</sup> The culmination of this fire memorial project in a service of worship would be a God-initiated invitation to be together as a community, engaging in public remembrance of people long since dead and mostly forgotten. Forgotten except for those who simply could not forget, and for them, the service was intended as an invitation to healing.

On Friday, March 13, 2020, the Right Reverend Carlye J. Hughes, bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Newark, held an online meeting with diocesan clergy, instructing us that we were to suspend public worship, effective immediately. The increase in positive cases of coronavirus raised alarms throughout the state of New Jersey. Restrictions on public gatherings were starting to be imposed at local and state government levels, and the bishop and her staff determined that waiting to be told to shut down was not a plan that best demonstrated the love of neighbor. On Sunday, March 15, every congregation in the diocese worshipped online, in their homes, or not at all.

The final event in the three-part series that comprises this project was set to be held on the afternoon of March 15, 2020. The liturgy was prepared. The participants were looking forward to taking part in this historic remembrance service, and I was hoping to receive immediate, tangible, and visible responses to the liturgy. When we postponed the service, we thought that we might be able to reschedule it later in the spring. Weeks turned into months until finally, it seemed best to create a virtual remembrance service.

The original program was to include clergy and choirs from congregations representing the original Hoboken Clergy Coalition, founded in 1981, in response to the needs in the community following the fires. Also, Hoboken residents who were here during those years and clergy who served as part of the Coalition then were invited to

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<sup>75</sup> Constance M. Cherry, *The Worship Architect: A Blueprint for Designing Culturally Relevant and Biblically Faithful Services* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010) 4.

light the fifty-six candles that represented the dead. The middle school choir from the Mustard Seed School, a local faith-based school for children in preschool through eighth grade, was scheduled to sing “Kumbaya,” which children from that same school had sung at the memorials the Coalition had held at the fire locations. Along with the traditional Isaac Watts hymn “O God, our help in ages past,” “Kumbaya,” sung in English as well as Spanish, provided the soundtrack for these outdoor gatherings. Mark Miller had also been invited to conduct the combined choirs in singing his anthem, “I Believe,” based on an anonymous Jewish poem:

I believe in the sun even when it’s not shining.  
I believe in love even when I don’t feel it.  
I believe in God even when God is silent.<sup>76</sup>

Recognizing that a virtual service would need the story to be told as concisely as possible while including the elements of worship as initially planned and would also need to be visually appealing to the viewer, I hoped to contract with a local filmmaker who produces short films for the City of Hoboken. When I described what I hoped to do, I was told that it would take a considerable amount of time and cost in the thousands of dollars. Given that I have been editing our weekly liturgy for YouTube for those who choose not to attend outdoor, in-person worship on Sundays, I decided to attempt this myself, hoping that I might preview it for someone a bit more professional than me. With that in mind, I began to plan how this service might unfold.

Two elements that I considered essential were the lighting of candles and the voices of children singing. Joseph Gallo, the playwright who shared a reading of the first

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<sup>76</sup> Mark Miller, *I Believe* (Dallas: Choristers Guild, 2012).

act of his play for the storytelling event, had recorded the Mustard Seed School Middle School Chorus in the parking lot of the school late in the fall of 2019. They sang both “O God, our help in ages past” and “Kumbaya.” He intended to use the singing as a backdrop for a portion of his play. Gallo agreed to permit use of only the audio of the children singing because any video would require permission from the school and every parent whose child appeared. Lacking video, I needed to develop an idea for what viewers would see while the children sang.

The next challenge was to find ways for the choirs to sing. The original plan was to have two movements from the *Requiem* of Gabriel Fauré, but in the interest of time and the amount of effort required of my music director, I decided on just the “Pie Jesu” in audio with “I Believe” serving as the sole video production of a piece of music for our choir. The choir from the United Synagogue of Hoboken offered a Hebrew setting of the verses from Exodus 15:2 and Psalm 118:4, “Ozi v’Zimrat Yah” (God is my strength and my song and my salvation).<sup>77</sup> The choir is directed by Rabbi Robert Scheinberg, who had originally been scheduled to read from the Torah. Rabbi Scheinberg provided the full video of the choir to insert into the service.

Two other participants were needed to provide prayer and a reading from scripture. Pastor Gary LeCroy serves at St. Matthew Trinity Lutheran Church, one block away from All Saints. One of his predecessors was an original member of the Hoboken Clergy Coalition. His parish council also has oversight of the former Lutheran Church

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<sup>77</sup> Shefa Gold, *The Magic of Hebrew Chant: Healing the Spirit, Transforming the Mind, Deepening Love* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2013) 245.

that has housed the Hoboken Shelter since 1982. He is a gifted liturgist and preacher and agreed to compose an opening prayer. The Rev. Deacon Marjorie Boyden-Edmonds is a vocational deacon in the Episcopal Church, serving as a chaplain at Hoboken University Medical Center. This hospital was known as St. Mary Hospital at the time of the fires, and all of the bodies and most of the injured were brought there. She read a passage from Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians. I filmed the prayer at St. Matthew Trinity and the readings in the hospital chapel.

The final piece of this liturgical puzzle was to decide how best to read the names of those who died. Those who were invited to light candles back in March would also have taken turns going through the fifty-six names, but with so much audio music planned, I knew that some visual representation would be necessary. Using twenty-one title cards with black backgrounds, I put the names and ages of the victims, starting with the first death on March 10, 1978, and ending with the last on May 6, 1982. Accompanying this necrology was a member of the All Saints choir singing the "Pie Jesu."

The service opened silently with a series of title cards describing the purpose of the remembrance:

- Card one: Between 1978 and 1983, a series of fires left 56 Hoboken residents dead, most of them children.
- Card two: Many of the fires were deemed "suspicious." Evidence of accelerants was found in the aftermath of several of them.
- Card three: No one was ever held accountable.
- Card four: There has never been a public acknowledgment by the City of Hoboken, nor is there any kind of permanent memorial to the victims.

- Card five: This Service of Remembrance is offered for all who died and for those who continue to bear the emotional and physical scars of those years.
- Card six: Just as they did 40 years ago, children from the Mustard Seed School sing “Kumbaya” and “O God, our help in ages past” for this service, recorded outside just as it was sung then. (This explanatory comment was necessary because the audio quality on their singing is rough and has a lot of background noise.)
- Card seven: We pray that this remembrance will help provide healing and hope to the people of the Mile Square City.

As the screen fades to black, the guitar accompaniment to “O God, our help in ages past” begins as a video of the lighting of fifty-six candles unfolds on-screen with the children singing two stanzas of the hymn. This is followed by Pastor LeCroy’s opening prayer, the chant by the United Synagogue choir, and Deacon Boyden-Edmonds reading. Mark Miller’s “I Believe” is situated between the scripture and my eight-minute reflection on the fires, filmed in my church. The children singing “Kumbaya” overlays a scrolling series of photos of old newspaper clippings, loaned to me by a fire inspector from the Hoboken Fire Department who was a young firefighter at the time of these fires. He told me that he didn’t know why he kept them all, moving them from locker to locker as he changed firehouses over the course of his career. For almost three minutes, images of the fires, onlookers, victims in body bags, and alarming headlines laid bare the pain and trauma of the unrelenting incidence of deadly fires in Hoboken over a period of years. Next come the names of the fifty-six victims, ranging in age from seventy-six to one month, accompanied by Fauré’s “Pie Jesu.” The service concludes with a dozen acknowledgment title cards as the Mustard Seed children hum “Kumbaya.”

The editing of this filmed remembrance brought tears more than once. It was impossible not to be moved by the images, the impact of entire families perishing in fires,



and the music perfectly suited to this kind of liturgical observance. It became a labor of love as I recalled all of the people who had told me their stories, who held out hope that someday a memorial would be put in place, and who have continued to carry the burden of traumatic memories for forty years.

While my video editing skills have improved, and I have gotten much faster at putting together All Saints' Sunday services, the process of putting together each piece of this filmed remembrance was painstaking. Adjusting audio quality, calibrating the timing of each slide or image, creating smooth transitions, and trying to evoke a time long past all went into the creation of the finished product. If we could not be in the same worship space to bear witness to the losses of a time long past, it was vital that I be able to curate a liturgy that could feel communal, even if someone watched it alone at home. Setting the service to premier on YouTube at a particular time on a Sunday afternoon lent a feeling of deliberation and intention, to tune in and to be ready for the service, just as if we had arrived at church on time.

Of course, the challenge to a virtual service is not knowing for sure who the congregation is. What is their connection, if any, with All Saints? What compelled them to join this particular service? I considered posing a question and requesting feedback in the service description on YouTube or in the service bulletin but felt that it detracted from creating the kind of reverence I intended. I am grateful to those who chose to reach out with their impressions.

One clear advantage of a pre-recorded service is that it is a permanent memorial for anyone who wishes to see it. Before the pandemic, All Saints did not record or livestream its services, so an in-person remembrance would have been a one-time event,

lingering only in the memories of those who were there. This way, the liturgy is preserved as part of the history of the fire era, even though it came at a remove of forty years.

## CHAPTER SIX

### EVALUATION AND CONCLUSIONS

My most vivid (memory) is the 102 12<sup>th</sup> Street (fire). Tom Olivieri called me early that morning saying, “You’d better get down here, there’s a fire and it’s bad!” I took my bike and pedaled to Washington Street. There we watched as firemen set about putting out the fire that had consumed most of the building and many of its inhabitants. Among the people were Ana Mercado and her family. She and I had been working, as part of Por la Gente, we were trying to organize the different buildings, demanding that the owners pay their renters a just compensation to move so the building could be “Delivered Vacant.” As I watched one body bag after another skid along the fire ladder I was so sad and enraged that our Hoboken had sunk so low as to destroy life for a monetary gain! I looked at Mayor Cappiello walking back and forth in the street and wanted to scream at him for allowing this; whether he had control over the situation by this time or not! What a sad day that was!<sup>78</sup>

Sister Norberta Hunnewinkel, a member of the Sisters of St. Francis of the Neumann Communities, was a central figure in the push for tenants’ rights in Hoboken. She arrived in Hoboken in the late 1960s and taught in one of the local parochial schools before being sent to South America for a few years. When she returned to Hoboken, she “realized that Hoboken had changed, not so much in its decrepit housing but in the feverish struggle to buy up and rehab the tenements.” She began working with the Spanish-speaking community’s organization Por la Gente (For the People) to advocate for tenants’ rights, including improvements in building safety and preventing evictions.

At that time, the fires were at their height, and Sister Norberta joined with the Hoboken Clergy Coalition to hold prayer services in front of burned-out buildings where people had died. When the Hoboken Shelter opened in 1982, she was its first Executive

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<sup>78</sup> Sister Norbert Hunnewinkel provided a written set of answers to questions posed to her by playwright Joseph Gallo. She provided this document to me in preparation for a phone interview on September 25, 2019. All quotes are from this document.

Director and battled city leaders and neighbors who objected to its presence in the heart of Hoboken. She also served on the Rent Lowering and Stabilization Board, engaging in advocacy in an official capacity while continuing her efforts with the Puerto Rican community and Por la Gente.

Although Sister Norberta left Hoboken in 2009, her reputation continues to loom large. I heard stories of her standing up to politicians and holding sit-down protests to prevent bulldozers from destroying historic property. My interview with her was an important part of my research, and I kept her apprised of the events and the pandemic-caused delays.

When the virtual Service of Remembrance was broadcast on YouTube on the afternoon of October 11, 2020, Sister Norberta wrote these words in an email to me:

Hi Pastor,

I just finished praying with all of you; remembering the time, the people and the tragedy of the Hoboken fires. Thank you for doing this. It is true that by remembering there is healing. The Hoboken of today is built on the shoulders of many who came before.

The service was well done, and I thank you for inviting me to it. May your ministry continue to flourish.

Sister Norberta<sup>79</sup>

Her use of the word “healing” is significant for this project since the healing of communities is a central premise of this work.

Jill Singleton, the Episcopal deacon and head of All Saints Episcopal Day School whose story provides the introduction to this paper, was similarly moved to write:

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<sup>79</sup> Norberta Hunnewinkel e-mail dated October 11, 2020, 5:20 p.m.

Dear Elaine -

Thank you so much for organizing a moving and meaningful memorial service for our community.

Throughout the service I felt that my pain was honored, seen and held. When you spoke of sleepless nights, I was back in my childhood bed, obsessing about whether the smoke alarm was all the way plugged in and my family was safe. Only this time, I wasn't alone. Not only did I envision God with me, I saw you, too, on the edge of my bed, holding my hand and providing the comfort I needed but never received. I can't tell you how grateful I am for your commitment to "go where the pain is and to sit with people in times of trouble." Although you couldn't have sat with me all those years ago, by holding this service, you found a way to travel through time and do just that.

I thank you also for creating a space for tears. Our Bishop recently mused, "If we don't cry the tears, where do they go?"

The tears I cried in the service were for all of those who perished, for their loved ones, and for the child within me for the trauma she suffered as a result of these fires.

But the tears were also for the fears of today.

In your sermon you spoke of the "years of terror" created by the fires. That terror was real and present and, as real as the aroma of the coffee brewing in the Maxwell Coffee House factory, permeated the very air we breathed in Hoboken. Today we breathe this same terror-filled air as a result of the frightening intersection of a global pandemic, systemic racism, climate change, economic collapse, and unprecedented political divisiveness.

Your service reminded me of the important role the church can play in bringing us together not only to heal our pain, but to strengthen our faith and resolve so that we can continue to work toward a world in which we all have the opportunity to flourish into the person God created us to be,

May God continue to bless you in abundance,  
Jill<sup>80</sup>

Ms. Singleton, too, mentions healing and the church's role in that healing. Her evocative use of memory brought on by certain smells was a theme I repeatedly heard from those who continue to experience anxiety at the smell of smoke.

April Harris, the founder of In Jesus' Name Charities and one of the storytellers at the Community Conversations and Storytelling in February, wrote simply, "That was

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<sup>80</sup> Jill Singleton e-mail dated October 12, 2020, 9:00 a.m.

utterly beautiful Elaine.”<sup>81</sup> In subsequent conversations, Ms. Harris has emphasized the importance the service had for her, reminding her that her ministry’s history with Hoboken’s poor was born in these years of tragedy. Throughout the summer of 2020, Hoboken’s housing issues became a subject of public debate once again as developers tried to bypass requirements to set aside affordable housing units in any new construction. Ms. Harris believes that the struggle for housing for the poor and low-income residents of Hoboken has been energized by the series of events in this project, recalling the lengths to which people would go, including arson, to force people out of their homes so that they could be redeveloped or converted to high-priced apartments or condominiums.

A member of my congregation who is a relative newcomer to Hoboken and who has two elementary school-aged daughters wrote

What a beautiful, moving service and tribute. I had no idea how many children died in the fires, it is heartbreaking.

Yours is very important work. Thank you very much.<sup>82</sup>

This particular response, and others like it, is not about healing, but it is an integral part of the conversation because the wounds are *not* solely carried by those who lived through the fires. The latent trauma permeates almost every aspect of life in Hoboken, from the housing policy mentioned above to the kinds of schools children attend. Creating authentic community requires an understanding of who our neighbors are and what their experiences have been. Even though the events remembered in this project occurred forty years ago, they remain relevant, as this email attests. Thirty-seven children under the age

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<sup>81</sup> April Harris, e-mail dated October 11, 2020, 4:32 p.m.

<sup>82</sup> Alice Kocis, email dated October 11, 2020, 4:39 p.m.

of eighteen died in the fires included in the years under study. That they have been all but forgotten is a testament not just to the population fluidity of Hoboken but of the gulf between the born-and-raised and the newly-arrived. That gulf must also be acknowledged and bridged.

The Mustard Seed School is a Christian elementary school started in 1979 with sixteen students and three staff members. The first Head of School, Larry Litman, was recruited from California and moved across the country with his wife, Joan, and two children. Joan Litman taught music in the Kodály tradition, launching Mustard Seed's award-winning music program.<sup>83</sup> Six days after an arson fire that killed two young brothers on October 12, 1981, the Mustard Seed School Chorus gathered with local clergy for a vigil in front of the destroyed building, singing "O God, our help in ages past."<sup>84</sup>

Responding to the remembrance service, Larry Litman, viewing the video from Italy, wrote

Thank you for leading us in remembering and in prayer for those whose lives were lost during that time in Hoboken's history. It is a time we will never forget. And with God's help may we continue to "strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being." (Baptismal Covenant BCP)<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> "Our Story: Inspiring minds, captivating hearts, removing barriers," The Mustard Seed School, accessed November 10, 2020, <https://mustardseedschool.org/about/our-story/>.

<sup>84</sup> Bill Alpert, "Fire deaths unite religious leaders in prayer," *The Hudson Dispatch*, October 17, 1981, accessed November 10, 2020, <http://www.digifind-it.com/njhistoricalportal/data/hoboken/books/Fires%20&%20Fire%20Department.pdf>.

<sup>85</sup> Larry Litman, comment on the All Saints Hoboken YouTube Service of Remembrance video, October 11, 2020. <https://youtu.be/FGIxOvfv5zU>

Joan Litman, whom I interviewed in December 2019 for this project, was effusive in her comments

Extraordinary. Thank you for giving us a place to go with our memories, our sadness, and our resolve to stand and fight to “fearlessly contend against evil and to make no peace with oppression.” (BCP)<sup>86</sup>

The prayer that she quotes is a collect for social justice and reads in full

Almighty God, who created us in your image: Grant us grace fearlessly to contend against evil and to make no peace with oppression; and, that we may reverently use our freedom, help us to employ it in the maintenance of justice in our communities and among the nations, to the glory of your holy Name; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.<sup>87</sup>

Joan Litman, Sister Norberta, April Harris, and all the rest believed that what was happening in Hoboken during these years was a manifestation of evil. Their determination and efforts to stand up to that left lasting memories as well as permanent scars. In a message sent separately to me, Ms. Litman told me that her now-former husband had watched from Italy, and when I told her he had left a message on the YouTube video, she replied, “Good. Closure was so important with this dangling nightmare...”<sup>88</sup>

Another original member of the Hoboken Clergy Coalition, the Rev. Barbara Cathey, formerly of the First Presbyterian Church, was similarly moved

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<sup>86</sup> Joan Litman, comment on the All Saints Hoboken YouTube Service of Remembrance video, October 11, 2020. <https://youtu.be/FGIxOvfv5zU>

<sup>87</sup> *The Book of Common Prayer*, 260.

<sup>88</sup> Joan Litman, Facebook message, October 12, 2020.



This was a beautiful and poignant remembrance. Those of us who lived through these times and gathered in witness after each fire will never forget. Grace and peace to all who suffered loss in these fires.<sup>89</sup>

Rose Orozco, the retired nurse who has been a driving force behind the creation of a physical memorial to the victims of the fires, has been in failing health for the past year. She spent several weeks in a rehabilitation center over the summer recovering from a fall, and the pandemic has further isolated her from the community. I had hoped to go to her home and view the remembrance service with her on the day it launched, but she was not feeling well. Later in the week, we made arrangements for me to come to her apartment with my laptop, keeping a safe distance from each other and a balcony door open for ventilation so that she could view the video.

I sat at an angle to her so that I could watch her expression. This is a woman, an emergency room nurse, who could not bring herself to accompany a physician whose job it was to open the body bags in the back of an ambulance to pronounce the victims dead. “No, I don’t need to see this. I do not,” she wrote.<sup>90</sup> She spent days walking up and down Washington Street, the main thoroughfare through Hoboken, informing residents of their rights. “You get a smoke detector, then you take that out of your rent. You’re entitled to a smoke detector.”<sup>91</sup> Orozco is also the one who is determined to make sure that the dead are not forgotten, especially the children.

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<sup>89</sup> Barbara Cathey, comment on the All Saints Hoboken YouTube Service of Remembrance video, October 11, 2020. <https://youtu.be/FGIxOvfv5zU>

<sup>90</sup> Metz, 19.

<sup>91</sup> Metz, 18.

As I watched her viewing the video of the service, she fought back tears, took deep breaths, and shook her head as the images of the fires and names and ages of the victims scrolled past to the accompaniment of Gabriel Fauré’s “Pie Jesu.” When it was over, she took a moment before speaking and rather sheepishly said that the tears would not come but that they surely were there and would likely burst forth at an unexpected moment. Before the day was out, Rose Orozco had called and left half a dozen messages on my phone—messages of gratitude, of remembering, of sorrow. Of all the people I desired to receive some solace and healing, she is the one I most hoped to provide that. Once the permanent memorial marker is in place, I believe that she will feel like her work is done.

## **Conclusions**

Earlier in this document, I mentioned the criticisms heard in some quarters about dragging up old news so long after it occurred. Rumors made their way to my ears that I was trying to stir up trouble, open a criminal investigation, and bring people to justice, whatever that means. I have made it clear that commemorating the lives of the dead and providing healing for those bearing the fires' physical and emotional scars has been my motivation.

My local Lutheran colleague and member of my contextual advisory team for this project, the Rev. Dr. Gary LeCroy, recounted to me the theme of a sermon that he preached on the prophet Ezekiel, especially the first two verses of chapter eighteen:

The word of the Lord came to me: What do you mean by repeating this proverb concerning the land of Israel, ‘The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge’?<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> Ezekiel 18:1-2, New Revised Standard Version.

He wrote to me of the application of that message to this project:

Ezekiel soothes the nation of Israel, telling them that they are not punished for the sins of their parents while simultaneously warning them that leaving the sins of the ancestors unaddressed and unattended is the sin of the present. Even if it was a wrong done by ancestors, this generation must address it. We are not to be punished by God for the sins of slavery, the genocide of the indigenous population, or in this instance the tragedy that was caused by gentrification, but we are responsible for the fallout from these sins. At the very least, public liturgy is the genesis of responsibility. Grief unattended is grief unresolved.<sup>93</sup>

In the homily I gave for the remembrance service, I quoted William Faulkner's famous words from *Requiem for a Nun*, "the past is never dead; it's not even past."<sup>94</sup> Not remembering is not an option, and the avoidance of remembering—as anyone who has ever engaged in any kind of psychotherapy can tell you—leads to all manner of emotional and psychological difficulties. Humans are wired to remember, and our need to acknowledge, to hold onto the memory of people we loved but no longer see, is a crucial part of what it means to be human.

I would venture to say that this kind of remembering is also central to what it means to be Christian. While our theological understandings of the Holy Eucharist or the Lord's Supper or Holy Communion may differ among various denominations, it is clear that this shared meal in the community began as a way of recalling when Jesus was at the table with the disciples. The recounting of the words of institution at the Last Supper are about anamnesis, a transformation of the present by invoking the past.

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<sup>93</sup> Gary LeCroy, e-mail dated November 11, 2020, 12:53 p.m.

<sup>94</sup> James B. Carothers and Stephen Railton, "Faulkner's Requiem for a Nun," *The Digital Yoknapatawpha Project*, added to the project: 2019, Digital Yoknapatawpha, University of Virginia, accessed November 13, 2020, <http://faulkner.iath.virginia.edu>.

For not as common bread and common drink do we receive these; but in like manner as Jesus Christ our Saviour, having been made flesh by the Word of God, had both flesh and blood for our salvation, so likewise have we been taught that the food which is blessed by the prayer of His word, and from which our blood and flesh by transmutation are nourished, is the flesh and blood of that Jesus who was made flesh. For the apostles, in the memoirs composed by them, which are called Gospels, have thus delivered unto us what was enjoined upon them.<sup>95</sup>

Remembering is not to wallow in grief and misery, or even anger or a need for vengeance. It is a way to re-member, to put things together in a new and life-giving way.

When families and friends gather following a funeral for a loved one, the stories inevitably begin to be told, recounting memories of past events—funny, poignant, inspiring—because this *is* how we make sense of death and keep those we love somehow with us. We do it as a community, just as the followers of Jesus did. Telling these stories is not only entertaining; it is cathartic and healing. It is also a way of discerning the hand of the divine in times of joy as well as sorrow. Frederick Buechner put it this way

It is absolutely crucial, therefore, to keep in constant touch with what is going on in your own life's story and to pay close attention to what is going on in the stories of others' lives. If God is present anywhere, it is in those stories that God is present. If God is not present in those stories, then they are scarcely worth telling.<sup>96</sup>

For people of faith, relying on the presence of God in the warp and woof of our lives as individuals and as communities is the bond of love that unites us into one holy fellowship. Remembrance of who and whose we are, as well as who we are yet to be in

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<sup>95</sup> Justin Martyr, "The First Apology," translated by Marcus Dods and George Reith, from *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 1., edited by Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe. (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1885.). Revised and edited for New Advent by Kevin Knight. Accessed November 13, 2020, <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0126.htm>.

<sup>96</sup> Frederick Buechner, *Whistling in the Dark: A Doubter's Dictionary* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988) 103.

the communion of all the saints, is how those who have suffered profound loss keep moving through life with conviction, love, and even great joy.

Theologian Miroslav Volf explored the theme of memory through a personal and a theological lens in his 2006 book *The End of Memory: Remembering Rightly in a Violent World*. To heal from traumas of the past, it is necessary to remember them rightly in ways that allow them to be redeemed.

Learning to remember well is one key to redeeming the past; and the redemption of the past is itself nestled in the broader story of God's restoration of our broken world to wholeness — a restoration that includes the past, present, and future. So what is the relationship between remembering well and redeeming the past?<sup>97</sup>

He goes on to outline a theological framework, situating memory and redemption within the story of God's action in the person of Jesus

...humanity has not been left by itself to deal with the divisive results of our deadly failures to love God and neighbor — a fissure of antagonism and suffering that taints all human history and scars individual lives; in Christ, God entered human history and through his death on the cross unalterably reconciled human beings to God and one another.<sup>98</sup>

*The End of Memory* shatters some cherished assumptions about remembrance, none more so than that remembering must last forever, or we somehow dishonor those who were victims.

Both ways in which this book disturbs conventional opinion are rooted in a single conviction: the proper *goal* of the memory of wrongs suffered — its appropriate *end* — is the formation of the communion of love between all people, including victims and perpetrators...Put simply, love is the “end” of memory in the twofold sense of that term.<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> Miroslav Volf, *The End of Memory: Remembering Rightly in a Violent World* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2006) 42.

<sup>98</sup> Volf, *Memory*, 44.

<sup>99</sup> Volf, *Memory*, 232.

Much as the Institute for Healing of Memories works with both victims and perpetrators, Volf contends that the redemption of the past cannot be achieved unless all parties are brought to a right remembering of events. Only then can the need to remember be swallowed up in love.

Reflecting on the experiences and training that led to the project at hand, the attainment of that state of love has been elusive. Undoubtedly, the work of Coventry's Community of the Cross of Nails has been global in its reach to draw people together, to embody the litany of reconciliation in their local contexts, and to seek an end to exploitation and violence. Yet, the criticism of the queen mentioned above and whether or not she would issue a formal apology to the people of Dresden would indicate that reconciliation among all people of nations formerly at war might never be possible.

Post-apartheid South Africa's difficulties are also instructive in the likelihood of forgiveness and restoration of relationship ever being possible. Many contend that the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was too easy on perpetrators, granting amnesty with no requirement for restitution or reparations. The economic and social devastation of almost fifty years of apartheid and another two centuries of marginalization and discrimination against the indigenous people of South Africa has yet to be fully rectified. Even Michael Lapsley, who is as reconciled a human as I have ever met, is forthright in saying that he cannot forgive a perpetrator he cannot identify. He fully believes that the responsibility for his bombing lies at the feet of former president F.W. DeKlerk, but it is not something he can prove. DeKlerk has certainly not taken responsibility or admitted any kind of complicity in ordering that act of violence. That does not embitter Lapsley. He has created a healing ministry for the world that has also served to facilitate his own

healing. Again, for individuals and groups, reconciliation and healing are more achievable than on the national or international stage.

What of Charlottesville? It is too early to tell. The new president of the United States has said that it was the events of Charlottesville and the “fine people on both sides” narrative that spurred him to seek the presidency.<sup>100</sup> Yet even now, many activists and victims of the violence on August 11-12, 2017, resent that their trauma is a political talking point. They complain that Joe Biden has never visited, even as they have asked him to stay away. The need to tell their story, to have some influence in the narrative of white supremacist violence and the rise of Nazism that were on display, is important to those who survived.

Shortly after the events of that August, I was contacted by StoryCorps, a non-profit organization that records interviews and conversations between two people talking about a singular event, and then archives those recordings at the Library of Congress. It is a way to have a living history of life in America. I organized ten dyads for the conversations, some of whom were friends and others who did not even know one another. I have not been able to listen to the session I recorded with a local Black female clergy colleague and friend. It was recorded six months after the events when the memory was very raw, and even now, I am not prepared to revisit that. In the context of this current project, I cannot help wondering how much time needs to pass before the pain can be brought to a place where remembering is not retraumatizing.

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<sup>100</sup> Brielle Entzminger, “Campaign pain: Joe Biden talks about Charlottesville a lot. Charlottesville isn’t sure he’s listening,” *C’ville*, October 28, 2020, accessed November 10, 2020, <https://www.c-ville.com/campaign-pain-joe-biden-talks-about-charlottesville-a-lot-charlottesville-isnt-sure-hes-listening/>.

In none of the areas I have studied, nor in the current project, have all parties come to health and wholeness. Many people have, it is true. Indeed, in the Community of the Cross of Nails and South Africa, thousands, if not millions of people have been reconciled, relationships have been strengthened, and healing has occurred. In Hoboken, individuals have experienced healing, for sure, as their testimonies have affirmed. For that reason alone, this project has been immeasurably valuable.

In considering future possibilities for this project model, there are any number of uses for a process of storytelling and listening, embodied reenactment or movement, and liturgical remembrance. In some ways, traditions around death and dying in this country incorporate all of these, from families gathering to tell stories to religious services to burial or distribution of ashes. I have even participated in the filling of a grave, shovel by shovel, when a family of farmers refused to allow the graveyard bulldozer to do its work. Ritual movement, whether shoveling dirt or going on a prayer walk, aids with grieving and remembering.

The idea of Hoboken as a Mile Square Cathedral—a manageable geographic area with a multitude of possibilities for public gathering—lends itself to liturgies and religious observances that might not be possible otherwise. During the pandemic, the local synagogue started the new year after the High Holy Days by launching a “Torah Tour,” posting a QR Code link to a Torah portion reading along with a work of art reflective of that reading. There are fifty-four Torah portion readings over the course of one year, and this project will continue to be developed around this city as the year ahead



unfolds.<sup>101</sup> Our Jewish neighbors may not call it a cathedral, but they have claimed this as their space where worship and liturgy intersect.

When the pandemic has run its course, some months out or, perhaps, years in the distance, the Mile Square Cathedral might become a place for remembrance and mourning as well as celebration and thanksgiving. The grief surrounding all that we have lost will need a place to be held and expressed, and stories have to be told and honored. Our city has lost many people to COVID-19. Many more have been sickened. Local businesses have struggled, and many have closed. School children have had to learn new ways of learning, and families balance work and home life in all new ways. The financial picture for so many Hobokenites has been dramatically altered, and it will take years for individuals, families, and indeed, this city and nation, to recover.

It is easy to imagine the enactment of a project similar to this one after the pandemic is under control. We need not wait forty years to remember. The whole community could be involved in the planning, including those who have been sick or lost loved ones, those whose family celebrations had to be postponed or performed under vastly different circumstances, and city officials and business owners who have been forced to work nonstop to manage the effects of the virus. Of course, our local hospital and health care teams—especially those who coordinated testing for any resident who asked for it—will all be part of the planning and execution of this project on a larger scale. Conversation, movement, and liturgy all provide a framework for community remembrance and healing.

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<sup>101</sup> United Synagogue of Hoboken Facebook Page, October 23, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/HobokenSynagogue>.

In a conversation early in this project's planning, playwright Joseph Gallo asked me if I believe that cities have a soul. My response to him was that the lives and experiences of the people who live in a city create that soul or spirit. It follows that no town can truly flourish until and unless its residents are also able to flourish. Recognizing that underlying pain, sorrow, and trauma inhibit such flourishing is a first step to addressing the ills that continue to plague Hoboken and other cities like it.

Perhaps the effect on the city of Hoboken of the project at hand has not been universally restorative. Nevertheless, I am not, standing on this side of it, at all sure that this is an unsatisfactory outcome, *per se*. Reconciliation is the ministry we have been given, according to St. Paul (2 Corinthians 5:18), but the end result is not ours to achieve. Only in God and in God's time can that final restoration of humankind take place. Those of us serving in ministry, proclaiming in a prophetic voice the reign of God, and drawing people into the work of God's vineyard can only accomplish faithfully the work that is before us. The outcome, as well as the glory for it, belongs to God alone.

APPENDIX I:  
PUBLICITY, STORYTELLING, AND PRAYER WALK MATERIALS

**Publicity Flyer** posted on bulletin boards at various locations in Hoboken and used to create a Facebook event. The image was also used in other social media listings and local online news source event listings.



**All Saints Episcopal Parish, Hoboken**

presents

**The Mile Square Cathedral**

**Remembering the victims of the fires, 1978-1983**

**Saturday February 29** - 10:00 a.m. - noon, 701 Washington St.:  
Community Conversations and Stories

**Saturday March 7** - 10:00 a.m. - noon: Beginning at 67 Park Ave.:  
Prayer Walk to some of the fire locations  
and those places of hope and renewal that  
grew out of these tragedies.

**Sunday, March 15** - 4:00 p.m., 701 Washington Street:  
Interfaith Service of Remembrance

Press release sent to local news organizations and diocesan and national Episcopal Church communications officers.



*All Saints Episcopal Parish*

*The Rev. Elaine Ellis Thomas, Rector*

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### **PRESS RELEASE**

All Saints Episcopal Parish in Hoboken will offer a series of events to commemorate the 55 people, many of them children, who died in the fires that terrorized this city between 1978 and 1983. Called "The Mile Square Cathedral: Remembering the Fires 1978-1983," the three-part series begins with a morning of community conversation and storytelling at the church, 701 Washington Street, from 10:00 a.m. to noon on Saturday, February 29. Representatives from Mile Square Theater will open this event, presenting background on the fire era through a dramatic reading of a portion of an upcoming play by Joe Gallo.

On Saturday, March 7, the series continues with a Prayer Walk, beginning at 10:00 a.m. at 67 Park Avenue, the location of an October 1981 fire that killed two children. The Prayer Walk will continue past several fire locations as well as the Hoboken Shelter and In Jesus's Name Charities, both of which were founded as a direct result of the fires. The Prayer Walk will conclude at Tom Olivieri Park, 13<sup>th</sup> and Willow, the proposed site of a memorial to the victims of the fires. Hoboken City Council approved the renaming of the park in June 2019 in recognition of his long years of service as an advocate for affordable housing and the Puerto Rican community.

The final event will be on Sunday, March 15, at 4:00 p.m. at the church. An Interfaith Service of Remembrance will remember and honor the dead and provide comfort to those who still bear the emotional wounds from those devastating fires. Multiple choirs and members of the Hoboken Clergy Coalition will participate.

The public is invited to participate and attend all of these events. More information is available from the rector of All Saints, The Rev. Elaine Ellis Thomas, at [ethomas@allsaintshoboken.com](mailto:ethomas@allsaintshoboken.com).

*In the heart of Hoboken.*

*All Saints Episcopal Parish, 701 Washington Street ■ Hoboken, NJ 07030*

*Phone (201) 792-3563 ■ Cell (201) 792-1802 ■ Website: [www.allsaintshoboken.com](http://www.allsaintshoboken.com)*

New Jersey News 12 aired a report about the memorial project on February 26, 2020. The original online version may be found here: <https://newjersey.news12.com/a-dark-time-in-hobokens-history-remembering-the-arson-victims-of-the-70s-80s-41822565>

## **A dark time in Hoboken's history: Remembering the arson victims of the '70s, '80s**

**News 12 Staff**

Feb 26, 2020, 9:06pm EST

Updated on: Oct 04, 2020, 12:31am EDT

<https://newjersey.news12.com/a-dark-time-in-hobokens-history-remembering-the-arson-victims-of-the-70s-80s-41822565>

A community effort is underway in Hoboken to finally tell the story about a wave of fires that killed dozens of people and displaced hundreds 40 years ago.

Over the years, Hoboken has evolved from a gritty, working-class enclave to a town with the highest rents in the state of New Jersey. Hoboken's Hispanic population has dropped by 50% during that time.

The gentrification of Hoboken wasn't just the result of market forces and economics. It was fueled by evictions, intimidation, violence, arson and murder.

As many as 55 people died in a series of fires in Hoboken between 1978 and 1983 – many of them children and the impoverished. Hundreds more were displaced by fires that were intentionally set.

Newspaper headlines of the era described an epidemic of arson. On Jan. 21, 1979, 21 people were killed and 21 more injured in a fire at 131 Clinton St. On Oct. 25, 1981, 11 were killed, including a 9-year-old child, in an unsolved arson at the El Dorado apartment complex on Washington Street. On April 30, 1982, 13 were killed, including three babies, at the site of a former hotel. It remains another unsolved arson. And the list goes on.

The allegations - never proven but widely believed – is that fires were being set by property owners to clear tenements and hotels of poor tenants for conversion into higher rent condos for the new waves of Wall Street yuppies who were flocking to Hoboken.

Many of today's newer Hoboken residents do not know about the history of the fires in the city. But for those who lived in what is called "Old Hoboken," the images of mothers dropping babies from windows and other horrors still haunt them.

Hoboken resident Rose Orozco worked as a nurse at St. Mary's Hospital amid the fires. Orozco is spearheading the Hoboken Fire Victims Memorial Project. She plans to build a memorial to the 55 victims in Thomas Olivieri Park.

"I just felt it was part of our history and that it should be remembered and these folks should be remembered," Orozco says.

There are other efforts underway to remember those victims and tell their stories. All Saints Episcopal Church is running a three-part series beginning with a day of conversation and storytelling on Saturday.

"Just giving people permission to talk about something that was a really painful era in Hoboken's history," says the Rev. Elaine Ellis Thomas.

A prayer walk to the fire locations will be held in March and a service of remembrance is planned. Anyone affected by the fires - including victims, first responders and community members - is invited.

**Community Conversation and Storytelling table cards:** These were formatted to print as tent-folded cards but have been reformatted here for ease of viewing.

## Table Conversations

### Part 1: Introductions

Say your name and a little bit about how long you've lived in Hoboken.

Questions:

Do you remember the fires?

Did you know about the fires?

Do you have a personal connection with anyone who died, was injured, or burned out?



### Part 2: Reflections

At your table, share your thoughts about what you've seen and heard so far this morning.

What is your story?

What questions do you have?

#### *Rules of Engagement*

- 1. Be a generous listener. Give your full attention to the storyteller.*
- 2. Be lean of speech. Everyone has something to say and a story that needs to be heard.*
- 3. Everyone's story is their own to tell. Do not share someone else's story that you hear this morning without that person's permission.*
- 4. Be kind. These are difficult and painful memories for many people. Treat them with care.*



**Prayer Walk brochure:** These were formatted to print as tent-folded cards but have been reformatted here for ease of viewing. The insert included a litany said at each stop and during which the names were read. The reverse side of the folded card included the prayer of commendation from the burial office in the Book of Common Prayer and the Jewish mourner's kaddish, recited daily for eleven months following a death.

*Into your hands, O merciful God, we commend your servants.  
Acknowledge, we humbly beseech you, sheep of  
your own fold, lambs of your own flock, sinners of your  
own redeeming. Receive them into the arms of your mercy,  
into the blessed rest of everlasting peace, and into the  
glorious company of the saints in light. Amen.*

*Magnified and sanctified be the great name of God throughout the  
world which He hath created according to His will. May He  
establish His kingdom during the days of your life and during the  
life of all people, speedily, yea, soon; and say ye, Amen.*



The Mile Square Cathedral

## **Remembering the Fire Victims 1978-1983**

A Prayer Walk

March 7, 2020

10:00 a.m.

### Inside view of the brochure:



These are locations of some of the fires at which there were multiple fatalities, as well as locations that grew out of those losses through the work of the faith communities of Hoboken. One firehouse is included in recognition of the heroic efforts of Hoboken's firefighters.

1. 67 Park Avenue, 10/13/1981, 2 dead, 13 injured
2. 311 1<sup>st</sup> Street, 10/26/1979, 2 dead, 1 injured
3. 131 Clinton Street, 1/21/1979, 21 dead, 21 injured
4. 300 Bloomfield Street - The Hoboken Shelter
5. 411 Clinton Street - In Jesus's Name Charities
6. 8<sup>th</sup> & Clinton - Rescue 1 Firehouse
7. 12<sup>th</sup> & Washington, 10/25/1981, 11 dead, 4 injured
8. 151 14<sup>th</sup> Street, 4/30/1982, 13 dead, 3 injured

END: 13<sup>th</sup> & Willow, Tom Olivieri Park, site of the proposed fire memorial plaque.

Brochure insert:

## **Prayer Walk**

*At each location where there were fatalities, we pause in silence and then say together:*

**We remember those who died, those who were displaced, and those who continue to bear the physical and emotional scars of this tragedy.**

**We say their names:**

*The names are read by designated people and a flower is placed on the sidewalk.*

**We remember those who died, those who were displaced, and those who continue to bear the physical and emotional scars of this tragedy.**

*The leader concludes:*

We pray for God's continual mercy to those who died, those who mourn, and those who bear the wounds of this tragedy.



**The names of the dead:**

<b>Remembering the Fire Victims</b>						
<b>Address</b>	<b>Date</b>		<b>Deceased</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Injured</b>	<b>Cause</b>
560 Marshall Drive	3/10/78	1 dead	Alberto Langini	unknown		Unknown
70 Washington Street	5/6/78	2 dead	Julia Rodriguez	unknown		Unknown
			Jesus Rodriguez	11		
131 Clinton Street	1/20/79	21 dead	Gayatri Rampersad	35	20	Unknown
			Sandra Rampersad	12		
			Indravati Rampersad	11		
			Bholaram Rampersad	10		
			Inder Rampersad	8		
			Fatbay Rampersad	7		
			Sharmun Rampersad	4		
			Neelavati Rampersad	2		
			Jacob Drepaul	43		
			Gangapati Drepaul	39		
			Roxanne Drepaul	17		
			Adrian Drepaul	15		
			Mukesh Drepaul	13		
			Veronica Drepaul	11		
			Raymond Drepaul	9		
			Premnath Drepaul	6		
			Pradeep Drepaul	5		
			Nicholas Torres	24		
			Maria Teresa Torres	17		
			Margarita Torres	16		
			Marilyn Torres	14		
311 1st Street	10/25/79	2 dead	Edna Gadea	39	1	Unknown
Above Apicellas Fish Store			Tawary Colon	1		
224 Jefferson Street	9/20/80	2 dead	Louis Sanchez	8		
			Victor Sanchez	2		
67 Park Avenue	10/12/81	2 dead	Javier Galicia	2	13	Unknown
			Modesto Cordero, Jr.	7		

Remembering the Fire Victims						
Address	Date		Deceased	Age	Injured	Cause
12th & Washington	10/25/81	11 dead	Goduvin Mercado	39	4	Arson
(102 12th Street)			Ana Mercado	35		
			Ruth Mercado	13		
			Denmise Mercado	12		
			Walter Mercado	10		
			Kenneth Mercado	9		
			Manuel Vega	76		
			Reineira Rios	43		
			Frank Rios	20		
			Marybell Rios	18		
			Jesus Rios	13		
80 River Street	11/21/81	2 dead	Walter Mitchell	51	6	Unknown
American Hotel			Howard Warshaver	52		
Pinter Hotel	4/30/82	13 dead	Anna Hilda Perez	45	3	Arson
151 14th Street			Francisca Vasquez	41		
			Juan Serrano	38		
			Olga Garcia	22		
			Luz Delia Garcia	17		
			Ismael Vasquez	15		
			Angel Luis Perez	8		
			Luis Xavier Colon	4		
			Charles Serrano	3		
			Jorge Negron	18 months		
			Catherine Torres	6 months		
			Erica Negron	1 month		
			Maria Colon	20	<i>died May 5</i>	

Publicity flyer for the March 15, 2020 Service of Remembrance:

Sunday, March 15 at 4:00 p.m.  
**An Interfaith**  
**Service of Remembrance**  
for the Victims of the Fires  
1978-1983

Music of Gabriel Fauré,  
Salamone Rossi, Mark Miller,  
and more, sung by the  
All Saints Choir and guests from  
United Synagogue of Hoboken,  
St. Matthew Trinity Lutheran Church,  
Community Church of Hoboken, and  
The Mustard Seed School.

Join us for a time of prayer,  
remembrance, and song.

The community is invited.



All Saints Episcopal Parish  
701 Washington Street  
Hoboken, NJ 07030  
201-792-3563

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 201-792-3563

**This column appeared in the Jersey Journal** the day of the postponed Service of Remembrance. The original online version may be found here:

<https://www.nj.com/opinion/2020/03/still-room-for-healing-40-years-after-devastating-hoboken-fires-faith-matters.html>

## Still room for healing, 40 years after devastating Hoboken fires | Faith Matters

Updated Mar 15, 2020; Posted Mar 15, 2020

By [Rev. Alexander Santora](#)/For the Jersey Journal

Last year, the Rev. Elaine Ellis Thomas enrolled in a doctoral program with an unusual name at Drew Theological School of Drew University in Madison: “Prophetic Fire and Pastoral Identity in a Fluid Culture.”

In her words, the program delves into “priestly ministry in a challenging world.”

Little did she know that the fire part would prove prophetic. Researching the history of All Saints Episcopal Parish in Hoboken, where she has been the rector for almost two years, she heard about a wave of fires that devastated the Mile Square City in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Scores of people died, including many children.

“I started talking with people here, including firefighters who were on the job at the time,” she said. “Many fought back tears.”

She soon realized that all these years later, there was still “room for some kind of healing.”

The fires came at a time when landlords sought to convert tenements and other buildings into market-rent apartments and condos, beginning the gentrification of a now prosperous Hoboken.

“This transformation of the community,” Ellis Thomas said, “was never addressed.”

There was never a public acknowledgment by the city or any city agency, she said, adding: “It’s like a dirty little secret in this town.”



Ellis Thomas had spent time working at the Institute for Healing and Memory in Cape Town, South Africa, where she discovered that the perpetrators and victims of apartheid did not know each other.

And that observation held for the Hoboken fires.

A group of Hoboken residents want to recognize fire victims from the 1970s and '80s. They have created the Hoboken Fire Victims Memorial Project.

All these insights led her to choose this subject of community healing and remembrance as the topic of her doctoral dissertation.

Now in her second year of study, she is doing preparatory research before she begins writing. As part of her research, she scheduled three community events, the last of which is an interfaith service of remembrance that was originally set for this 4 afternoon at her church, 701 Washington St., but will be rescheduled due to area closures in light of the coronavirus.

On Feb. 29, she organized a storytelling gathering at All Saints Church with the first reading of a new play by Joe Gallo in part addressing the Oct. 12, 1981, fire at 67 Park Ave., where two people died. It included voices of the police dispatchers along with some key figures from back then.

Ellis Thomas played the role of Franciscan Sister Norberta Hunnewinkel, who was a tenant activist at the time and eventually became the founding director of the Hoboken Shelter, which arose in response to the many fires.

Another character is Thomas Molta who was an EMT back then. He since retired as a Hoboken fire captain and now heads the Hoboken Ambulance Corps.

Some 35 people attended and participated in a discussion afterward, Ellis Thomas said.

One of the participants was Marisol Zenon of Union City, who was 11 years old at the time of the April 30, 1982, fire at 14th and Bloomfield streets. She lost seven family members. Her aunt jumped out of the building and died.

The attendees found the experience of storytelling and remembering “very meaningful,” Ellis Thomas said.

Long-time residents have told Ellis Thomas they are grateful that someone is remembering, but some have questioned why Ellis Thomas is doing this since some people believed to have been behind some of the fires are still living in town and have never been brought to justice.

Ellis Thomas’ research thesis is “the church’s role in community healing” and how to help people to relive the memories so they are not forgotten.

This process is occurring, she said.

On the day known for LepreCon in Hoboken -- last Saturday, March 7 -- Ellis Thomas scheduled a pilgrimage to several of the fire sites, a firehouse and In Jesus’ Name Charities, which April Harris, a Jersey Journal Everyday Hero, founded in 1981 to respond to the needs of the displaced fire victims.

“None of us had any idea what was about to be unleashed,” Harris recalled. “There was a law in place that made it profitable to empty apartments. It was called vacancy decontrol. It meant a vacant apartment could rent at whatever the new tenant was willing to pay. This was arson for profit.”

Ellis Thomas’ accent hints that she hails from the South, and she does: North Carolina and Tennessee. After raising her family, she entered Yale Divinity School at age 50 and has been a priest for six years. She served first in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, and then Charlottesville, Virginia, during the deadly Aug. 12, 2017, alt-right protest.

Her passion for the fire project has “the potential to elevate the poor and displaced who are not entirely known or seen,” she said.

In other words, their memory “has a place here.”

The Rev. Alexander Santora is the pastor of Our Lady of Grace and St. Joseph, 400 Willow Ave., Hoboken, NJ 07030. Email: [padrealex@yahoo.com](mailto:padrealex@yahoo.com); Twitter: @padrehoboken.

### Pilgrimage sites

These sites were visited March 7:

67 Park Ave., where two died and 13 were injured in a fire on Oct. 12, 1981;

311 First St., where two died and one was injured on Oct. 26, 1979;

131 Clinton St., where 21 died and four more were injured on Jan. 21, 1979;

300 Bloomfield St., The Hoboken Shelter;

411 Clinton St., In Jesus' Name Charities;

Eighth and Clinton streets, Rescue 1 Firehouse 7;

12th and Washington streets, where 11 died and four were injured in a fire on Oct. 25, 1981;

151 14th St., where 13 died and three were injured on April 30, 1982;

13th Street and Willow Avenue, Tom Olivieri Park, site of a proposed memorial plaque.



During a March 7, 2020, pilgrimage to sites of the fires, Joel Horwitz places flowers outside of 131 Clinton St., where 21 people died in a fire on Jan. 21, 1979.



Photos of Hoboken firefighters battling deadly blazes in the late 1970s and early 1980s.



At 12th and Washington streets, the Rev. Elaine Ellis Thomas, center, and members of All Saints Episcopal Church read the names of the 11 people who died there in a fire on Oct. 25, 1981.



The Rev. Elaine Ellis Thomas, left, is seen with April Harris outside of In Jesus' Name, a nonprofit Harris set up in response to the fires. The agency was a stop on the March 7, 2020, pilgrimage Thomas led to remember the Hoboken fires of the late 1970s and early 1980s.



The Rev. Elaine Ellis Thomas speaks outside of the firehouse at Eighth and Clinton streets in Hoboken during the pilgrimage on Saturday, March 7, 2020.

Flyer for the rescheduled online Service of Remembrance:

Sunday, October 11, 2020 at 4:00 p.m.  
**A Service of Remembrance**  
for the Victims of the Fires  
1978-1983

Music of Gabriel Fauré,  
Mark Miller, and more, sung by  
The All Saints Parish Choir,  
the choir of United Synagogue of  
Hoboken, and students from the  
Mustard Seed School.

Join us for a time of prayer,  
remembrance, and song on  
All Saints YouTube channel.



All Saints Episcopal Parish  
701 Washington Street  
Hoboken, NJ 07030  
201-792-3563

**This column appeared in the Jersey Journal** the week before the rescheduled online Service of Remembrance. The original online version may be found here: <https://www.nj.com/hudson/2020/10/churchs-fire-memorial-has-final-piece-ready-blood-drive-planned-hccc-to-host-kim-hass-event-upcoming.html>

## Church's fire memorial has final piece ready; Blood drive planned; HCCC to host Kim Hass event; Jump for Jerry | Upcoming

Updated Oct 08, 2020; Posted Oct 08, 2020



A virtual service for the final piece of All Saints Episcopal Parish fire memorial project will launch on YouTube on Sunday, Oct. 11, at 4pm. Pictured: The Rev. Elaine Ellis Thomas speaks outside of the firehouse at Eighth and Clinton streets in Hoboken during the pilgrimage that took place on Saturday, March 7, 2020.

By [David Mosca | The Jersey Journal](#)

### Fire memorial project to conclude on YouTube

This past March, Hoboken's All Saints Episcopal Parish began a three-part series of events to remember those who died in the devastating fires between 1978 and 1983 in the city. A virtual service for the final piece of this fire memorial project will launch on YouTube on Sunday, Oct. 11, at 4 p.m. The series is led by the Rev. Elaine Thomas.

The first part of the project was a community conversation where the public listened to stories of those who lived through the events and also featured a dramatic recounting of one of the fires in a new play by local playwright Joseph Gallo. The following week, a prayer walk was held to several fire locations, offering prayers, reading names, and placing irises as a memorial.

The third part of the series was to have been a Sunday afternoon Interfaith Service of Remembrance, with music and candle-lighting, readings, and reflection. The event was cancelled as in-person worship services were suspended due to the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, the final offering of the series will be held in a virtual service.

The participants in this service will mirror those who gathered at fire locations to hold informal memorials in the days following the fires, including the Hoboken Clergy Coalition and children from the Mustard Seed School.

The link for the virtual service on YouTube can be found at <https://youtu.be/FGlxOvfv5zU>.



APPENDIX 2: SERVICE OF REMEMBRANCE AND HOMILY

The service leaflet for the Service of Remembrance, October 11, 2020. You may view this Service of Remembrance on YouTube: <https://youtu.be/FGIxOvfv5zU>

## *A Service of Remembrance*

*for the Victims of the Fires 1978-1983*



Sunday, October 11, 2020

4:00 p.m.

Welcome to All Saints Episcopal Parish in the heart of Hoboken. We are glad you have joined us for this special Service of Remembrance.

Last spring, a three-part series of events was planned to remember those who died in the devastating fires between 1978 and 1983. The first part was a community conversation where we listened to stories of those who lived through those horrifying days and heard a dramatic recounting of one of the fires in a new play by local playwright Joseph Gallo. The following week, we held a prayer walk to several fire locations, offering prayers, reading names, and placing irises as a memorial.

The third part of the series was to have been a Sunday afternoon Interfaith Service of Remembrance, with music and candle-lighting, readings and reflection. That was the first Sunday that in-person worship was suspended due to the pandemic. We had hoped to offer this service within a month or two of that, but it has not yet been possible for us to gather indoors at All Saints. This virtual service is our final offering in the series.

The participants in this service attempt to mirror those who gathered at fire locations to hold informal memorials in the days following the fires, including the Hoboken Clergy Coalition and children from the Mustard Seed School.

The iris on the cover, and the ones left on the doorsteps of several fire locations during the prayer walk last spring, represent hope. The Greek word for rainbow is *iris*. In our faith tradition, the rainbow represents God's covenant to save us from destruction, a symbol of God's abiding love, and it has come to represent this fire memorial project. I offer my deepest thanks to my sister, Gail Diane Ellis, for her rendering of the iris for this series.



The Rev. Elaine Ellis Thomas, Rector

All Saints Episcopal Parish  
701 Washington Street, Hoboken, NJ 07030  
201.792.3563  
[www.allsaintshoboken.com](http://www.allsaintshoboken.com)

## A Service of Remembrance

<b>Lighting of Candles</b>	“O God, our help in ages past”	<i>The Mustard Seed School Middle School Chorus</i>
<b>Prayer</b>		The Rev. Dr. Gary LeCroy <i>St. Matthew Trinity Lutheran Church</i>
<b>Selection from the Hebrew Scriptures</b>	Ozi ve-Zimrat yah God is my strength and my song	Exodus 15:2 Music by Shefa Gold <i>United Synagogue of Hoboken Choir</i>
<b>Reading from the Christian Scriptures</b>		2 Corinthians 4:16 – 5:9 The Rev. Deacon Marjorie Boyden-Edmonds <i>Hoboken University Medical Center</i>
<b>Musical Selection</b>	“I Believe” <i>All Saints Choir with students from the Mustard Seed School</i>	Mark Miller
<b>Reflection</b>		The Rev. Elaine Ellis Thomas <i>All Saints Episcopal Parish</i>
<b>Images</b>	“Kumbaya”	<i>The Mustard Seed School Middle School Chorus</i>
<b>Remembering the Names</b>	“Pié Jesu” from <i>Requiem</i> <i>Alice Heatherington Kocis, soprano Josh Mauldin, organ</i>	Gabriel Fauré
<b>Acknowledgements</b>	“Kumbaya”	<i>The Mustard Seed School Middle School Chorus</i>

## Those who died

### 560 Marshall Drive

March 10, 1978

Alberto Langini

### 70 Washington Street

May 6, 1978

Julia Rodriguez

Jesus Rodriguez

### 131 Clinton Street

January 20, 1979

Gayatri Rampersad

Sandra Rampersad

Indravati Rampersad

Bholaram Rampersad

Inder Rampersad

Fatbay Rampersad

Sharmun Rampersad

Neelavati Rampersad

Jacob Drepaul

Gangapati Drepaul

Roxanne Drepaul

Adrian Drepaul

Mukesh Drepaul

Veronica Drepaul

Raynond Drepaul

Premnath Drepaul

Pradeep Drepaul

Nicholas Torres

Maria Teresa Torres

Margarita Torres

Marilyn Torres

### 11 1st Street

October 25, 1979

Edna Gadea

Tawary Colon

### 224 Jefferson Street

September 20, 1980

Louis Sanchez

Victor Sanchez

### 67 Park Avenue

October 12, 1981

Javier Galicia

Modesto Cordero, Jr.

### 102 12th Street

12<sup>th</sup> & Washington

October 25, 1981

Goduvin Mercado

Ana Mercado

Ruth Mercado

Dennise Mercado

Walter Mercado

Kenneth Mercado

Manuel Vega

Reineira Rios

Frank Rios

Marybell Rios

Jesus Rios

### 80 River Street

American Hotel

November 21, 1981

Walter Mitchell

Howard Warshaver

### 151 14<sup>th</sup> Street

Pinter Hotel

April 30, 1982

Anna Hilda Perez

Francisca Vasquez

Juan Serrano

Olga Garcia

Luz Delia Garcia

Ismael Vasquez

Angel Luis Perez

Luis Xavier Colon

Charles Serrano

Jorge Negron

Catherine Torres

Erica Negron

Maria Colon

**Participants in this service**

*in order of appearance*

The Mustard Seed School Middle School Chorus,  
Dr. Jessica L. Smith, director

The Rev. Dr. Gary LeCroy, Pastor  
St. Matthew Trinity Lutheran Church, Hoboken

United Synagogue of Hoboken Choir  
Rabbi Robert Scheinberg, Director

The Rev. Deacon Marjorie Boyden-Edmonds  
Hoboken University Medical Center

All Saints Episcopal Parish Choir  
with students from the Mustard Seed School  
Josh Mauldin, Director of Music  
Alice Heatherington Kocis, Soprano

The Rev. Elaine Ellis Thomas  
All Saints Episcopal Parish

**Music permissions**

“O God, our help in ages past” – Public Domain

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Mark A. Miller, “I Believe” Copyright ©2017 Choristers Guild. Used by permission.

“Kumbaya” – Traditional African American Spiritual – Public Domain

Gabriel Fauré, “Pie Jesu” from *Requiem, opus 48* (1890) – Public Domain

### Additional thanks

Joseph Gallo, playwright, Mile Square Theater, Hoboken who provided the recordings of the Mustard Seed students, intended for use in his play that opens with an account of the fire at 67 Park Street, October 12, 1981.

John O'Brien, Fire Inspector, Hoboken Fire Department whose saved newspaper clippings from the fire years are used in this remembrance service.

Rose Orozco, retired nurse, St. Mary Hospital, Hoboken whose tireless efforts to collect the names of those who died and to have a permanent memorial created helped inspire this remembrance.

And all who shared their stories and memories of those years.

A permanent marker remembering all who died and all who still bear the emotional and physical scars is planned for completion later this year.

If you would like to contribute to the cost, make checks payable to All Saints with "fire memorial" in the subject line, or donate by PayPal (*allsaintshoboken*) indicating the same.

**Homily for the Service of Remembrance, October 11, 2020:**

Erica Negron and Catherine Torres would be my daughter's age now.

Howard Warshaver was my mother's age.

Modesto Cordero should have grown up looking out for his little brother Javier instead of being found with him in the wreckage of the bathroom of their apartment two days after a "suspicious" fire tore through the building.

I may not have lived in Hoboken for very long, but it has been long enough to know that the memories of five terrifying years lie not very far below the surface.

September 11, 2001 was a cataclysmic tragedy here in Hoboken. We lost more people per capita than any other city in New Jersey. And we remember it every year with solemn ceremonies, as we should.

Yet 56 people also died in the fires during those five years two decades earlier. No, they didn't die all at once, but in a reign of terror that changed this city forever. All the fires in those years may not have been arson, but enough were to create a climate of fear that led to sleepless nights and civilian fire watches, as a rebuilding city priced out the immigrants and poor people whose homes had burned.

Rampersad. Rodriguez. Drepaul. Torres. Sanchez. Mercado. Rios. Perez. Vasquez.

People who came here to make a better life. Came to Hoboken because this was the place of German and Italian and Irish immigrants. A place that welcomed the stranger.

Until it didn't.

Many have asked why bring this up now after so many years.



William Faulkner famously wrote that “the past is never dead; it’s not even past.”<sup>102</sup>

If the memories of a shockingly painful time are so stark, so chilling that they move those who experienced them to tears even now, there is deep trauma there. Unresolved grief. Unvented anger. These don’t happen in isolation; they affect communities. They affect how we interact with one another. Not remembering rightly leads to an inability to see ourselves rightly, to understand who we are. The beauty of Hoboken, the desirability of this Mile Square City as a place to live and raise a family came at a price. A very steep price.

And so, we remember. We *need* to remember. We *must* remember in order to heal.

As a Church, as a priest, part of my vocation is to go where the pain is. To sit with people in times of trouble, to pray over the dying, to walk with the grieving. This is true of most faith traditions, and it is one of the most sacred responsibilities we have.

Fifty-six of our neighbors, ranging in age from 1 month to 76 years old, died in fires between 1978 and 1983. Local clergy and housing and immigrants’ rights activists and a couple of schools participated in memorials and tried to make the horror end. But there has been no citywide public acknowledgement of these lives lost.

And so we remember. Mukesh and Edna, Ana and Manuel, Jorge and Luz and the 50 others. We name them before God who created them out of the dust and in whose loving presence they dwell even now, for God said, “See, I have inscribed you on the palm of my hands” (Isaiah 49:16).

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<sup>102</sup> “Requiem for a Nun”

Poet and artist Morgan Harper Nichols wrote:

*Let me hold the door for you.  
I may never have walked in your shoes,  
but I can see the soles are worn,  
your strength is torn under the weight of a story I have never lived before.  
Let me hold the door for you.  
After all you've walked through, it's the least I can do.*<sup>103</sup>

Let's hold the door for those who remember. Let's hold the door for those who still bear the physical and emotional scars of those days. Let's remember the story even if we did not live it. And let's commit ourselves anew to creating a community where all can find a home, no one is hungry, and parents raise their families in safety. In the end, no one truly flourishes unless we all flourish.

*Life is short and we do not have much time  
to gladden the hearts of those  
who make this earthly pilgrimage with us.  
So, be swift to love,  
make haste to do kindness,  
shower abundant hospitality on friend and stranger,  
walk in justice that you may follow the path of mercy and love.  
And the blessing of God who comes to us unbidden,  
who for our lives was broken,  
and in whose Spirit we are guided into wholeness and holiness of life,  
be upon you and those who you love and pray for this day, and forevermore.  
Amen.*

*(Adapted from Henri Frédéric Amiel)*

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<sup>103</sup> "Empathy" <https://morganharpernichols.com/blog/a-few-notes>

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