

INCORPORATING DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS IN WORSHIP

A dissertation submitted to the  
Theological School  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree  
Doctor of Ministry

Advisor: Dr. Kate Ott

Rev. Amanda Hemenetz

Drew University

Madison, New Jersey

May 2022



## ABSTRACT

### INCORPORATING DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS IN WORSHIP

Rev. Amanda Hemenetz

The United Methodist Church of New City, New City, NY

Should difficult topics, such as those that are political and/or potentially divisive, be incorporated into the worship service? How might one endeavor to incorporate such material in a positive, non-threatening way that furthers the Kingdom of God here on earth? These are the questions that are explored in this project through scholarly research of texts, interviews, the creation and implementation of a workshop in reference to the topic, and personal experience of the author.

Such difficult conversations are needed in worship in order for worship services to be relevant, Kingdom-oriented, and scripturally driven. Churchgoers require challenging material in worship that equips them to serve in the world and encourages them toward becoming comprehensive Christians, who practice their faith in all aspects of their lives, including politics. Addressing the difficult issues congregants face on a daily basis in the secular world also assists in the mediation of theological dissonance. This project explores the theology behind having difficult conversations in worship, and offers concrete strategies for the planning, execution, and follow-up related to such undertakings.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements.....	v
Chapter One: Introduction .....	1
Chapter Two: A Theology of Difficult Conversations .....	3
Chapter Three: Researching for Implementation.....	30
Chapter Four: Elements of Worship: A Praxis of Difficult Conversations .....	35
Chapter Five: Congregational Culture: Preparation for Difficult Conversations .....	56
Chapter Six: Conclusion .....	86
Bibliography .....	88
Appendix 1 .....	91
Appendix 2.....	92

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First, I thank God for pushing me toward the Doctoral program, though if I knew I'd be undertaking this in a COVID world, I would have waited until after the pandemic. I lift a prayer that the pandemic will end.

My sincerest and humblest thanks to Dr. Kate Ott, the best mentor possible. She was a God-send to me in this project. Similarly, my thanks to Dr. Elizabeth Siegelman, who led our writing cohorts. These two women helped to “make a way out of no way.”

Thank you to my interviewees, including my professional advisor and founder of Shalom IDEA, Rev. Dr. Grace Pak; associate dean of Drew Theological School, Rev. Dr. Tanya Linn Bennett; and the brave women pastors who joined me for my workshop—You are forever in my prayers.

To my Doctoral cohort with whom I journeyed—You are an AWESOME group of people. What a gift to have gotten to know you. And to my clergy colleagues and friends with whom I vented along the way—Thank you for listening.

Thank you, also, to the church I pastor, The United Methodist Church of New City, for being who you are and letting me say the things that need to be said.

Finally, I offer thanks for my family, who supported me on this journey. To my husband, George; my son, Gregory, and my parents, Mindy and Bruce—You are loved, you are loved, you are loved.

## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

In preparation for countless Sundays over the past six years or so of my ministry, amidst a turbulent national scene, I have found myself pondering the following question: Is it acceptable to “rock the boat” in worship with potentially divisive, oftentimes political material? The answer I receive from the Holy Spirit is always “yes,” which leads to another, more difficult question: If it is acceptable to include, and even focus on, controversial subjects in worship in which all congregants may not agree, how does one do so with the intention of forming disciples into agents of social change in the name of Jesus Christ, toward God’s will being done on earth as it is in heaven?

I was taught to preach with a Bible in one hand and a newspaper in the other. It is my belief that current events most talked about in secular life, especially the difficult ones, should not be overlooked on Sunday morning in favor of simplistic, feel-good Christianity. Jesus calls us beyond that. Jesus calls us to further the Kingdom of God on earth, loving each other as God loves us. In this world where so many are abused, isolated, neglected, and robbed of basic resources, it is not possible to further the Kingdom of God without having difficult conversations. And there is no better place for difficult conversations that further the Kingdom of God than in worship.

My personal experience with this question in United Methodist congregations is what sparked my interest. I had the unfortunate experience of changing appointments during the COVID-19 pandemic, but amidst the stress of doing so my eyes were opened to greater possibilities in worship. The leadership of my previous church, well-meaning

though they were, cautioned me against speaking on political matters, to the point that I often felt hypocritical standing in the pulpit. I knew what I was *meant* to preach, but caved to the surrounding insistence that “faith and politics don’t mix.” My new church, on the other hand, would be offended if I did *not* preach about what was happening in current events, political and otherwise. In my current appointment, I am free to structure worship at the guidance of the Holy Spirit, with divisive topics welcomed. My desire is for all United Methodist pastors to be able to do the same.

The first chapter of this doctoral project will focus on my initial research question, exploring the reasoning behind my claim that in worship no subject should be out-of-bounds, including those deemed political in nature. Chapter Two will introduce the reader to my research process. Chapter Three presents various worship elements in which difficult subject matter can be incorporated. Finally, Chapter Four explores how pastors and worship leaders may undertake the challenge of incorporating difficult material into worship without scaring away half the membership. As I am United Methodist clergy, the following analysis and suggestions for implementation are aimed toward United Methodist Churches, pastors, and worship leaders.

## CHAPTER TWO

### A THEOLOGY OF DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS

It is my belief that a person's Christianity should be all-encompassing, affecting how one considers and reacts to all happenings in life, including politics. This chapter will attempt to support that claim, leading the reader toward an understanding that *all* topics are acceptable in worship, with an emphasis on areas of needed improvement in the socio-political realm. First, I will provide a brief overview of worship in terms of scriptural prescriptions and traditional practice, followed by an exploration of Methodist-specific involvement in socio-political concerns. In the section entitled *Faith vs. Politics*, I offer a definition of "politics" and an unpacking of why political discussion is frequently frowned upon in church. Next, I invite the reader to consider political words and actions of Christ, leading into a discussion of what I call "comprehensive Christianity," in which worshippers are encouraged to meet and follow Jesus in all aspects of life, including politics. In the section entitled *Our Calling in Worship*, I return to scripture, focusing on Micah 6:6-8, as a foundation for suggesting a new definition of "worship" for today. That definition then carries the reader into the final two sections, *Worship as Spiritual Formation* and *Risky Worship*, where the values of difficult conversations in worship elements are explored.

#### *Worship in Scripture and Tradition*

Scripturally, worship is most often performed as an act of praise, as in the words of Isaiah when he cried out, "Oh Lord, you are my God; I will exalt you, I will praise your name . . ." (25:1). Similar verses can be found throughout scripture, most notably in



the Psalms (see Ps 9:1; Ps 34:1; Ps 105:1; Ps 108:3; Ps 145:1; Ps 150:1). Biblical accounts of characters engaged in worship most often take this form of praise, but Biblical worship also includes intercessory prayer (see Ps 40; Ps 69) and ritual, such as the building of altars (see Gen 12:7; 26:25; Ex 17:15) and the burning of incense (see Ex 30:7-8; 2 Chr 13:11). From these Biblical accounts of scripture, among others, our contemporary worship services have emerged, based primarily in praise, prayer, and ritual.

However, praise, prayer, and ritual are not the only aspects of a worship service, nor, in my opinion, should they be. Teaching is a vital part of the worship experience, though I would not call teaching “worship” in and of itself. Congregants come to the worship service not only to *worship* (praise, prayer, and ritual), but also to be *taught*. In the present time, when busy schedules often preclude believers from attending Bible studies and other church-sponsored learning opportunities outside of the worship service, it is integral that congregants do more than worship in worship. The aim of the worship service is not only to lift our prayers and praises to God, but also to form disciples who can face the world with faith. To accomplish this, teaching is necessary through the sermon, the words of liturgy and music, and through action.

Should controversial topics be included in this teaching experience within the worship service? According to the New Testament Epistles, conflict in worship is to be avoided (see 1 Cor 1:10; Gal 5:7-10). As Methodist Christian ethicist Ellen Ott Marshall reminds us, disagreements are cited as “not only a characteristic of the setting for the writing (of the Epistles) but also a behavior that is explicitly discouraged.”<sup>1</sup> The writer of

---

<sup>1</sup> Marshall, *Christian Ethics*, 70.

2 Timothy penned, “Have nothing to do with stupid and senseless controversies; you know that they breed quarrels” (2:23). I agree with this assertion if the controversies in question are truly “stupid” and “senseless;” but there are many topics unaddressed in worship, to the detriment of the church, its worshippers, and society, that are neither stupid nor senseless but *important*, even though they bring with them the possibility of conflict. When Mary the mother of Christ sang her song of praise (Lk 1:46-55), she gave thanks to God for “scattering the proud,” “bringing down the powerful,” “lifting up the lowly,” “filling the hungry,” and “sending the rich away empty.” Incorporating those topics in worship in a deep and meaningful way would certainly bring the possibility of conflict and controversy, but such topics are hardly stupid nor senseless. They are, on the other hand, what Christ longs to accomplish (see Lk 4:18-19).

Traditionally, worship is viewed as a safe space, where individual piety is restored and celebrated. This purpose has led religious leaders to create categories for topics and label some to be “outside of faith,” and/or with the potential to unsettle faith. Church tradition has, for the most part, held to the positions addressed above from 1 Corinthians and Galatians, clinging to the understanding that controversial subjects are to be avoided in worship due to their infringement on unity. In my opinion, this has led to a Church that is out-of-touch with reality in its refusal to attend to the spiritual aspects of surrounding current events. Furthermore, ignoring the “secular” problems around us means the Church continues to ignore many in need; it is common for churches to search for “churchy” mission projects while avoiding potentially political situations in our communities where the church’s assistance could be vital. For example, promoting a passing vote for the school budget is *mission*, just as much, or perhaps more so, than

sending shoeboxes of trinkets to children through *Samaritan's Purse*. But pushing for a vote is political in the traditional sense, and therefore not often mentioned in worship due to the possibility of its being a divisive topic. If, however, supporting our children serves as an example of “lifting up the lowly” (Lk 1:52), as I believe it does, then this is a topic worth exploring, despite possible disagreement. Marshall states, “When cohesion is the goal (of the Church), one puts away conflict as an act of obedience and faithful submission. When the Kingdom of God is the goal, one enters into the inevitable forms of social and spiritual conflict in a way that opens space for the Kingdom to emerge.”<sup>2</sup> The Church needs a new tradition—one that is Kingdom-centered and unafraid of potentially divisive issues; a tradition that tackles the tough questions through teaching in worship, in favor of spreading the love of Christ through human action in meaningful ways that affect our communities and bring them closer to the Kingdom of God.

#### *Methodist Socio-Political Engagement*

Specific to United Methodism, our church has a rich history of entering the political field, affecting and even changing governmental policies, and speaking about such in worship. While it is true that John Wesley was against governmental political participation, (he preferred monarchy to any form of democracy<sup>3</sup>), he was overwhelmingly in favor of social programs that cared for the poor and the sick. Considering the care of the poor and sick is politicized in the present, I believe Wesley would agree with political involvement today. During his Class Meetings, which were not “worship,” so to speak (praise, prayer, and ritual), but taught the values of

---

<sup>2</sup> Marshall, *Christian Ethics*, 75.

<sup>3</sup> Weber, “Political Order.”

Methodism (which are relevant to worship services today), John Wesley spoke of and encouraged social justice, drawing heavily upon Isaiah 1:16-17 – “cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow” – in establishing his general rules for the Methodist Societies to do good, do no harm, and attend upon all the ordinances of God.<sup>4</sup> As Methodism spread overseas to the colonies, and Class Meetings evolved into full worship services and then a new denomination (much to Wesley’s disapproval), the emphasis on social justice continued.

In the first half of the nineteenth century, Methodism and politics were so entwined that Methodist practices, language, and characteristics of the Methodist Camp Meeting were adopted by political campaigns. According to Richard Cardwine, professor emeritus at Oxford University, Methodist pastors “helped set a moral purpose in public affairs” through their preaching.<sup>5</sup> Methodist gatherings talked politics, and political campaigns used Methodist jargon, calling their activists “missionaries,” “local preachers,” “presiding elders,” and “bishops.”<sup>6</sup> In the years leading up to the American Civil War, Methodists were commonly involved in political campaigns and rhetoric, including in worship, where ministers frequently preached on the nation’s current events.<sup>7</sup> By the second half of the nineteenth century, Methodists saw the nation as “a moral being and believ(ed) that Christians as active citizens had to take responsibility for

---

<sup>4</sup> Marshall, *Christian Ethics*, 37.

<sup>5</sup> Cardwine, “Methodists, Politics,” 586.

<sup>6</sup> Cardwine, “Methodists, Politics,” 587.

<sup>7</sup> Cardwine, “Methodists, Politics,” 584.

ensuring that the highest standards of virtue flourished in civic life.”<sup>8</sup> In 1868, soon-to-be President Ulysses S. Grant spoke of “three great parties in the United States: the Republican, the Democratic, and the Methodist Church.”<sup>9</sup>

In the era of Walter Rauschenbusch and the immediate years after the release of his writing, *Christianity and the Social Crisis*,<sup>10</sup> numerous churches in the United States, Methodist and otherwise, emphasized the social gospel and “powered many of the reform movements that swept the nation over the next century, including the fight for child labor laws, a manageable workweek with a minimum wage, FDR’s New Deal, the Great Society, and the civil rights movement. . . . As pastor to the nation, Rauschenbusch preached both personal and societal repentance.”<sup>11</sup> Many pastors, including those of the Wesleyan tradition, followed suit.

In reference to the merger of the Evangelical United Brethren Church and the Methodist Church in 1968, according to the United Methodist Book of Discipline, “The thrust of the Wesleyan movement and of the United Brethren and Evangelical Association was to *reform the nation*, particularly the Church, and to spread scriptural holiness over the land” (emphasis added).<sup>12</sup> It continues, “Scriptural holiness entails more than personal piety; love of God is always linked with love of neighbor, a passion

---

<sup>8</sup> Cardwine, “Methodists, Politics,” 582.

<sup>9</sup> Cardwine, “Methodists, Politics,” 578

<sup>10</sup> Rauschenbusch, *Christianity and the Social Crisis*.

<sup>11</sup> Rauschenbusch, Foreword to *Christianity and the Social Crisis*, xii.

<sup>12</sup> *The Book of Discipline*, ¶102.

for justice and renewal in the life of the world.”<sup>13</sup> This tradition may be the reason United Methodists have a wealth of justice resources as worship material.

The United Methodist Hymnal claims, in reference to faith, “Next to the Bible, our hymnals have been our most formative resource.”<sup>14</sup> While this may be true, it begs the question as to why so many United Methodist worship services are silent on difficult life matters and social justice concerns, as the Hymnal is peppered with material encouraging worshippers to do all they can to improve society. Additionally, our basic prayer of confession states, “We have not loved our neighbors, and we have not heard the cry of the needy,” before asking God to “free us for joyful obedience.”<sup>15</sup> With a tradition this rich, wouldn’t offering concrete examples in worship of *how to* love our neighbors and hear the cry of the needy, including dismantling the systems that create the problem, help in our yearning to be joyfully obedient, and assist in Christian formation in positive ways?

The 1988 version of the United Methodist Hymnal even removed obsolete hymns in favor of those encouraging “peace, justice, the care of the planet Earth, hunger, and the reconciling ministry of Christ’s church to the world.”<sup>16</sup> With hymn topic headings such as “Social Holiness” (Hymns 425-450) and “Called to God’s Mission” (Hymns 568-593), the Hymnal provides vast amounts of social justice oriented material that is both

---

<sup>13</sup> *The Book of Discipline*, ¶102.

<sup>14</sup> *The United Methodist Hymnal*, Preface V.

<sup>15</sup> *The United Methodist Hymnal*, 8, 12.

<sup>16</sup> *The United Methodist Hymnal*, Preface VI.

controversial and kingdom-building, as well as prayers and affirmations geared toward social justice.

Likewise, the United Methodist Book of Worship contains a vast amount of material regarding social justice causes through liturgy, prayers, Special Sundays of the Church, and specific worship experiences. A prayer suggested for the Lenten season reads, “Help us so to keep the fast that you have chosen, that we may loose the bonds of wickedness, undo the heavy burdens, and let the oppressed go free . . .”<sup>17</sup> Certainly this sentiment would carry further if expounded upon in worship, even if the ensuing discussion ruffled some feathers. From the opening pages of the Book of Worship, “When the people of God gather, the Spirit is free to move them to worship in diverse ways, according to their needs.”<sup>18</sup> What *we need* in worship is what *God asks for* in worship—justice (Is 1:17). To get there, the church must enter the political realm in its mission, including through its worship.

#### *Faith versus Politics*

Before moving forward, allow me to offer a definition of the word “politics.” Typically, politics refers to the explicit actions of governments and political parties, but there is another definition of politics that would better serve the church. When referencing the Oxford English Dictionary, we find the following definition listed fifth, after any mention of “government”: Politics refers to “The principles relating to or inherent in a sphere or activity, especially when concerned with power and status.”<sup>19</sup>

---

<sup>17</sup> *The United Methodist Book of Worship*, 337.

<sup>18</sup> *The United Methodist Book of Worship*, 13.

<sup>19</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “politics,” accessed April 29, 2021. [lexico.com/definition/Politics](http://lexico.com/definition/Politics)

And from Merriam-Webster, again in the fifth position, politics is cited as “The total complex of relations between people living in society.”<sup>20</sup> Combining these two definitions, for the purposes of this study, I suggest the following as a working definition: *Politics refers to any and all systems of principles, thought, and/or action developed for the mediation of relationships among people.* As such, our governments, social services agencies, and jails are political; so are our schools, our community centers, and our churches, in that they impact the lives of individuals and the community. Any system, organization, or relationship operating on rules or norms that affect relationships is political, whether those rules are codified or not. For example, my local grocery store is political as it decides which goods it will carry and which aisles I can walk “up” or “down” in a COVID world, not to mention how it treats its employees; and the DMV is political as it attempts to mitigate relationships on the road.

Even if we keep “government” *in* our definition of politics, the definition is not reduced; governments touch all aspects of life, as their primary task is the mediation of relationships. As political scientist and theologian Kaitlyn Schiess points out in her book *The Liturgy of Politics*, “Our common life together will always involve government in some way.”<sup>21</sup> From where we live, to what we own, to the occupations we pursue, to where we buy our morning coffee—all can be traced back to influential governmental decisions. We are Americans because the government (either of this country or another) allowed us to enter this land, chose to look the other way when we did, or, for Native

---

<sup>20</sup> Merriam-Webster Dictionary, s.v. “politics,” accessed April 29, 2021. merriam-webster.com/dictionary/politics

<sup>21</sup> Schiess, *The Liturgy of Politics*, 15.



Americans, failed (thankfully) at their attempts of genocide. One can choose to be a United Methodist partly because our government allows freedom of religion. Many of our stresses and our joys come from governmental involvement—a newly engaged young woman marvels at the diamond ring whose worth is regulated by the government, while another young woman mourns the passing of her fiancé to whom the government denied healthcare. All of life (and death) is political.

How, then, can it be claimed that “faith and politics don’t mix?” It is common for United Methodist pastors to hear from their parishioners, “The church (specifically worship) is not a place for politics.” Congregants usually have in mind the narrowed definition of politics as conflicting ideologies behind governmental decisions; but based on our working definition of politics as concerning relationships among people, excluding politics from the church is impossible. All churches are themselves inherently political. In the words of Walter Rauschenbusch, “the Church . . . has a stake in the social movement. The Church owns property, needs income, employs men [sic], works on human material, and banks on its moral prestige.”<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, from which pews congregants sit in to what the pastor is *allowed* to preach on, from who is able to be baptized and receive Communion to how much the janitor is paid (and if congregants know his or her name)—all routine aspects of church life are political, because *all aspects of our common life together can be traced back to politics*.

Our tendency to separate faith and politics arises, of course, from the American separation of church and state, which prohibits government from infringing on religion and vice versa. This does not, however, preclude politics, in our working definition, from

---

<sup>22</sup> Rauschenbusch, Introduction to *Christianity and the Social Crisis*, xxi.

being both a part of church life and an area of ministry beyond church doors. The church itself is naturally political, and all of life with it. Negating this is a political act, as it regulates what type of conversations can and cannot take place within church walls. But I believe the primary reason churches cling so desperately to a perceived antithesis between faith and politics is the fear that allowing such conversations to take place will undermine the church. Again, to quote Kaitlyn Schiess, “*Political* is practically a dirty word. It’s constantly pitted against the gospel.”<sup>23</sup> And so, we are encouraged to “Keep our faith out of our politics, and our politics out of our faith.”<sup>24</sup> Faith makes us feel protected, hopeful, inspired. Politics, on the other hand, tends to make us argue. Many believe the church should not be a place of argument, but of sanctuary.

Or should it? Jesus provided sanctuary to the people, yes, but he also argued. He argued in word and in action throughout the gospel narratives and continues to do so today. Jesus oftentimes brought people to a place of sanctuary *through political argumentation*. If we, as the church, are avoiding political arguments for the sake of cohesion, then we are avoiding a ministry modeled on Jesus’ example. In the words of Lenny Duncan in his book *Dear Church*,

*I am often asked how the church can avoid the gravity well that is the political divide in this country. I think the real question is, Do we even have to? The church is political. Feeding the homeless is radical. Marriage is radical when it’s offered to everyone and blessed by clergy. God’s justice is radical. Centering the oppressed is radical. Our task is not so much to reject politicism as it is to reject evil. The message of Jesus is radical and political.*<sup>25</sup>

---

<sup>23</sup> Schiess, *The Liturgy of Politics*, 8.

<sup>24</sup> Johnson-DeBaufre, “A Citizen’s Agenda.”

<sup>25</sup> Duncan, *Dear Church*, 9.

*Jesus Was Political*

So let us consider how Jesus was political. According to our working definition of “politics,” *any and all systems of principles, thought, and/or action developed for the mediation of relationships among people*, Jesus was incredibly political, in that his ministry centered on the people around him, on relationships. Jesus made it clear in his ministry that we are first to love God; but the “second greatest commandment” is the love of neighbor (Mt 22:39; Mk 12:31). Politics is where we meet our neighbors. As such, politics not only falls within the realm of Christianity, but is at the crux of it, if we are to love our neighbors as we do ourselves (Lk 10:27).

With love of neighbor as his impetus, Jesus lived and died in disruption of political systems. Speaking alone with women (Jn 4:7-27), having and telling of interactions with Samaritans (Jn 4:7-27, Lk 10:33-35), inviting tax collectors into ministry and dining with sinners (Mt 9:11; Mk 2:14-16), raising the importance of widows and children (Mt 18:1-7; Lk 18:15-17; Lk 21:1-4), healing on the Sabbath (Mk 3:1-6; Lk 13:10-17; Lk 14:1-6; Jn 5:1-18; Jn 9:1-17)—these are all examples of Jesus involved in political teaching and action that contradicted laws, mores, and norms of the time. Jesus was a political rebel. He often argued over the Torah with religious leadership. In a sermon concerning Mark 2:23-3:6, biblical scholar and dean of Drew Theological School Melanie Johnson-DeBaufre states, “To debate Torah is to debate the way the community organized its life, legally, with practices, with policies.”<sup>26</sup> In doing so, Jesus was encouraging positive change in society by not kowtowing to the status quo. Such conversations are divisive by nature, but necessary for societal improvement.

---

<sup>26</sup> Johnson-DeBaufre, “A Citizen’s Agenda.”

Citing Luke 12:51, Ellen Ott Marshall calls Christians “followers of one who came to bring division.”<sup>27</sup> As Christians, *that is who we are*—followers of a rebel who refused to stay silent and chose to work toward justice, no matter the cost. It is a difficult calling to continue such ministry. In the words of Lenny Duncan, “Jesus Christ, by his very existence, asks of his followers to be seditious.”<sup>28</sup>

Jesus made plain the heart of his ministry in Lk 4:16-21, when he stated he had come “to bring good news to the poor . . . proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind . . . to let the oppressed go free.” “He might as well have said,” writes Marshall, “‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me to do disruptive, contentious, and quarrelsome things!’” Jesus stood with, and stands with, those on the margins—the ostracized, the misunderstood, the scapegoats, the lonely, the oppressed. For us, as his followers, to do the same is a political action. To learn about those on the margins in worship, see them as precious children of God and celebrate them as such through litany and prayer involves political words. Using political and potentially divisive language in worship is more than acceptable; it is encouraged by the very example of Christ. Again, from Lenny Duncan—

*We don't often fully grasp how counterintuitive and often enraging Jesus' message was . . . 'Blessed are the poor' would have been perceived as a direct attack against the first-century Jewish understanding of God's relationship to the world. We can be sure that Jesus' Sermon on the Mount—and its pushback against all the ways his audience thought about power and godliness—would have been painful for some and enraging for others.*<sup>29</sup>

---

<sup>27</sup> Marshall, *Christian Ethics*, 76.

<sup>28</sup> Duncan, *Dear Church*, 108.

<sup>29</sup> Duncan, *Dear Church*, 144.

Pastors and worship leaders may be nervous about using disruptive language in worship, but if they are reading the Gospels out loud in the service, they already are! Should we be careful while doing so? Yes. Should we avoid it? Absolutely not.

Jesus' ministry "calls us to be involved in the complexity, brokenness and incompleteness of human society in order to bring about transformation."<sup>30</sup> In other words, Jesus' ministry calls us to be political for the greater good. "Instead of a society resting on coercion, exploitation, and inequality," wrote Walter Rauschenbusch, "Jesus desired to found a society resting on love, service, and equality."<sup>31</sup> Engaging in politics is how we get there.

### *Comprehensive Christianity*

I believe in what I call a "comprehensive Christianity," one in which the teachings of Jesus resonate in all aspects of life, from Sunday morning worship, to how one treats other drivers on the road, to how believers engage in conversation and what they vote for and why. As Christians, we are called to live out the vows of our baptism at all times, in everyday encounters as well as church-sponsored ministry. This section will explore this concept, and end with theological dissonance, the possible psychological consequence of leaning toward a less-than-comprehensive view of faith.

When pastors and church leaders consistently leave the "hard stuff" out of worship in favor of safer spirituality, there is not only an injustice done to Jesus and his message; there are also consequences for the Christians in the pews. How is one supposed to engage Christ in all aspects of their lives if the more difficult questions they

---

<sup>30</sup> Field, "The Unrealized Ethical Potential."

<sup>31</sup> Rauschenbusch, Forward to *Christianity and the Social Crisis*, xi.

face in society are not addressed in worship? In the words of Kaitlyn Schiess, “Our faith is not a private expression of belief that we leave behind when we enter the public square. We need to unlearn our bent toward a private religion and a public politics—and see our participation in political life as a reflection of our very public faith . . . no part of our life (should be) separated into spiritual and nonspiritual.”<sup>32</sup>

Similarly, Jim Wallis, founder of Sojourners magazine and political activist writes, “The people I meet across the country are yearning for what I call a ‘moral center’ to our public life and political discourse, with a fundamental emphasis on the common good.”<sup>33</sup> People long to belong, to locate their principles within a larger system in which they can claim membership. For Christians, Christianity should be the paramount location of belonging; Christianity should be where Christians find their “moral center” in reference to all aspects of life. Our faith should guide our thoughts, words, and actions regarding *every* subject, but how can it if many difficult subjects are not addressed in worship? People oftentimes operate with parameters in their thought structures, formed by the groups they belong to and the teachings they have learned. If teachings pertaining to some of the more difficult issues we encounter only come from *outside* the church, then faith will not have the influence it should in considering such issues, leading congregants to find their source of meaning elsewhere, sometimes to the detriment of society (ex: QAnon). Our Christianity should come first—allegiance to political parties and other groups should be subordinate to and informed by our desire to follow Jesus. To

---

<sup>32</sup> Schiess, *The Liturgy of Politics*, 25.

<sup>33</sup> Wallis, Introduction to *Seeing Gray*, ix.

quote Kaitlyn Schiess, “loyalties are only rightly placed when they find their context and meaning in light of the ultimate loyalty we have to the body of Christ.”<sup>34</sup>

In United Methodism, our Baptismal vows are taken not only in reference to the Church, but also to the world. The first question asked in our Baptismal Covenant (“Do you renounce the spiritual forces of wickedness, reject the evil powers of this world, and repent of your sin?”) could be taken as applying to internal faith only; but the second question specifically concerns our relationship with the outside world—“Do you accept the freedom and power God gives you to resist evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves?”<sup>35</sup> The Christian is expected, by virtue of their Baptism, to not only engage in difficult societal situations and conversations but to act against those that are evil. This is an incredibly tall order. I believe it stands to reason that offering training and support in this area through worship elements such as prayer, litany, song, and sermon would be appropriate.

Similarly, the United Methodist Book of Worship states “All who take on the name of Christ are called into ministries of love and service by the example of Christ.”<sup>36</sup> All Christians are called to step out in love and service. In a society that is complicated by politics and inequality, we need worship elements that speak to real problems and possibilities for love and service geared toward making a difference. John Wesley himself “envisaged the kingdom of grace growing and transforming all aspects of human

---

<sup>34</sup> Schiess, *The Liturgy of Politics*, 30.

<sup>35</sup> *The United Methodist Hymnal*, 34, 40, 50.

<sup>36</sup> *The United Methodist Book of Worship*, 592.

society.”<sup>37</sup> What happens in worship should serve as a catalyst for positive individual and societal change. The mission statement of The United Methodist Church speaks to this: “The mission of the United Methodist Church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ *for the transformation of the world*” (emphasis added). Worship would do well to serve the entire statement, instead of ending at “disciples of Jesus Christ.” Quoting Gary Dorrien, Reinhold Niebuhr Professor of Social Ethics at Union Theological Seminary, Marshall puts it this way: “The reason why we pay attention to the interaction between faith and history, tradition and lived experience, conviction and circumstance, church and world is because ‘Christianity has a social-ethical mission to transform the structures of society in the direction of social justice.’”<sup>38</sup>

All Christians are called to *live* their faith. We are called to a comprehensive Christianity, one in which we are defined, first and foremost, in all situations, as followers of Jesus. A “safe” worship service could involve elements of love and service throughout, but to quote Sharon Ketcham, professor of theology at Gordon College and author of *Reciprocal Church*, “values only have meaning as people adopt them and creatively give them shape.”<sup>39</sup> To do this, real-life, contextual, contemporary examples must be given, and that gets messy. But the alternative is a faith that is dead six days out of the week; one that makes sense only on Sunday morning and is the rest of the time irrelevant.

---

<sup>37</sup> Field, “The Unrealized Ethical Potential.”

<sup>38</sup> Marshall, *Christian Ethics*, 26.

<sup>39</sup> Ketcham, *Reciprocal Church*, 8.



Such disconnects in faith result in what president of New Brunswick Seminary, Micah L. McCreary, calls “theological dissonance:” when what we are taught about God and faith on Sunday does not match up with what we see in the world the rest of week, we experience theological dissonance, an uncomfortable awareness of opposing beliefs clashing together.<sup>40</sup> Theological dissonance occurs when our expectations of Christians and their actions are not in congruence. I felt this type of theological dissonance this past fall when Donald Trump was nearly re-elected. Theological dissonance also occurs when *we are the ones* claiming to be followers of Jesus, but then choose to act in ways opposed to our own values. For example, Christians believe in lifting up the lowly, but homelessness is a major problem in our country. White Christians are loving people who accept all; and yet, many (if not most) are racist. United Methodists believe above all else in God’s grace, and yet we are a homophobic church. Another way in which we experience theological dissonance occurs when our beliefs do not ring true in experience—How could a God that loves us and desires us to be healthy leave us to the mercy of COVID-19? Issues that cause theological dissonance are difficult ones; people of faith face them daily.

Theological dissonance, if not worked with and remedied, leads to a forfeit of one of the opposing values.<sup>41</sup> Christians may refrain from involvement in social needs (and even thinking or talking about such things) in favor of protecting their faith, or they may pursue social justice with a passion while laying their faith aside. Neither option is conducive to the health of the Christian or to the Church. The alternative is to tackle

---

<sup>40</sup> McCreary, “Theological Dissonance.”

<sup>41</sup> McCreary, “Theological Dissonance.”

theological dissonance head-on, in all aspects of church life, including worship, with the objective of creating comprehensive Christians who turn to their faith for guidance, and turn to the world in assistance in bringing it closer to the kingdom of God. I agree with Ellen Ott Marshall, who asserts, “If we claim to receive the grace of God, we should live that way. We must respond to the grace of God by working on ourselves, working in our communities, and working for the world.”<sup>42</sup> Not only *can* worship assist the Christian in learning how; it should be an obligation of the worship service to do so.

### *Our Calling in Worship*

I have previously offered an overview of what worship entails according to United Methodist resources and traditions. I will now turn to what we, as Christians, are *called to* focus on in the worship service. From my analysis, the Old Testament of the Bible speaks more often of the foremost characteristics of worship than New Testament scriptures. The prophet Micah, after proclaiming judgment on Israel and the coming of a Messiah, offers a vision of worship pleasing in the eyes of God. From Micah 6:6-8:

*“With what shall I come before the LORD and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?” He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?*

This is not the only scripture from the prophets that speaks of acts of justice serving as worship. A longer exhortation with the same emphasis can be found in Isaiah 1:10-17. In both scriptures, the writer first details what is *not* needed in worship, (the Isaiah passage goes so far as to call common practices ‘detestable’), and then gives the

---

<sup>42</sup> Marshall, *Christian Ethics*, 37.

reader an understanding of God’s desire for worship; in the case of the above passage from Micah, “to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.”

United Methodist worship oftentimes leads congregants to “love kindness” and “to walk humbly” with God, but it too often falls short on guiding toward justice. Micah lists justice as the *first* requirement of worship (6:8). *Doing justice* is an act of worship. To *do* justice, we must *learn* justice, *talk* justice, *sing* justice, *pray for* justice. Why, then, are many United Methodist churches opposed to political topics being discussed from the pulpit and included in other worship elements? Lenny Duncan writes, “The church should be all about bringing people further and further along the arc toward justice. . . The Gospel is always a call for liberation. . . When did we become so damn afraid of it? Dear Church, we are cowards.”<sup>43</sup> His language is strong, but true. Are we here just to love God, or to change the world? Jesus came for both. In the words of Walter Rauschenbusch, written in 1907 but just as relevant today, “the essential purpose of Christianity was to transform human society into the kingdom of God by regenerating all human relations and reconstituting them in accordance with the will of God. . . the Christian church has never undertaken to carry out this fundamental purpose of its existence.”<sup>44</sup>

In the Micah scripture, and in the one from Isaiah, God “makes it abundantly clear that the way we treat other people is a big part of how he views our worship.”<sup>45</sup> In their book *The Big Idea*, Dave Ferguson et al. encourages worship leaders to consider what

---

<sup>43</sup> Duncan, *Dear Church*, 5.

<sup>44</sup> Rauschenbusch, Introduction to *Christianity and the Social Crisis*, xxi.

<sup>45</sup> Schiess, *The Liturgy of Politics*, 16.

they want their congregants to take away from each service, emphasizing a call to mission and justice over the “increase (of) people’s personal Christian database.”<sup>46</sup>

Pastors can talk about Christian concepts all they want, but the real question is how those concepts are applied in the real world, and to what ends. Ferguson pleads with pastors to “never again teach a message that (is) not going to be lived out to accomplish the mission of Jesus,” stating that, if we heeded such advice, “church would not be a place of information but a place of transformation.”<sup>47</sup> According to Micah 6:6-8, *transformation* is what God desires in worship, in the form of justice.

### *Worship as Spiritual Formation*

Worship serves other functions in addition to pleasing God; it also affects the lives of the worshippers. One of the ways this is accomplished is through spiritual formation. In the worship setting, congregants learn about their relationship to God and who they are meant to be. Spiritual formation is moral formation, and how we live into our relationship with God as justice-seeking people. As the word “Christian” means “little Christ,” Christians are called to be as Christ-like as possible. Our journey toward that end, and all that affects it, is spiritual formation.<sup>48</sup> Worship provides us with specific practices that add to and guide our spiritual formation (prayers, liturgies, scripture, teaching through sermons, hymn lyrics, etc.). Our spiritual formation then affects all we do in life; life, in turn, affects our spiritual formation. The question we must keep in

---

<sup>46</sup> Ferguson, Ferguson, and Bramlett, *The Big Idea*, 51.

<sup>47</sup> Ferguson, Ferguson, and Bramlett, *The Big Idea*, 51.

<sup>48</sup> Schiess, *The Liturgy of Politics*, 15.

mind is “What am I being formed to love?”<sup>49</sup> Or, in the case of worship, “What is the church forming its people to love?”

I agree with David Field, founding pastor of Emmanuel Evangelical Church in London, England, who claims United Methodist worship should be forming its people to love Wesleyan values, specifically those of justice, mercy, and truth/integrity, with the objective of “resisting and overcoming evil, healing the wounded and empowering the disempowered.”<sup>50</sup> Though John Wesley may not have used the term “spiritual formation,” he was certainly concerned with the Church and its adherents becoming more Christ-like through involvement with social concerns. In a discussion around deontology, Ellen Ott Marshall states, “our capacity to adhere to a principle rather than give in to personal biases is perceived as a mark of moral maturity.”<sup>51</sup> One’s spiritual formation could be measured by their capacity to adhere to the calling to follow Christ, both in the sacred and secular world. A huge problem lies in the way: “The world seems to be actively working against the gospel message of standing in solidarity with the poor, the immigrant, and the marginalized.”<sup>52</sup> Society, in many ways, is pulling away from Christ. “When faith is suppressed, it can rise to the challenge, or as in the case of Peter on the night of betrayal, it can melt like ice cubes on a sidewalk in summer.”<sup>53</sup> Worship

---

<sup>49</sup> Schiess, *The Liturgy of Politics*, 20.

<sup>50</sup> Field, “The Unrealized Ethical Potential.” cf. Walter Rauschenbusch, *Christianity and the Social Process: The Classic that Woke Up the Church*. New York: Harper One, 2007, 292. “(Churches) should teach plainly on the moral causes and remedies of social misery.”

<sup>51</sup> Marshall, *Cristian Ethics*, 44.

<sup>52</sup> Duncan, *Dear Church*, 146.

<sup>53</sup> Duncan, *Dear Church*, 106.

should give believers the tools they need to strengthen their spiritual formation and stand up to injustice amidst seemingly insurmountable odds, so that, when faced with them, they don't melt.

Worship elements can be geared toward spiritual formation, in the direction of becoming more Christ-like. Belief is part of that, as are the Christian concepts of forgiveness, grace, and hope, among others; but Jesus didn't just *believe*, he *acted*; he *lived his faith*. As such, all worship elements should be crafted and performed with the following question in mind—"How does this practice form me (and my congregants) in ways that have consequences for how I treat my neighbor, sometimes through my political participation?"<sup>54</sup> We must be aware of both "the ways we are spiritually formed by the political forces around us, and the ways our intentional spiritual formation practices form us in political ways."<sup>55</sup>

### *Risky Worship*

When one thinks of worship, "conflict" is not a word that comes to mind, and yet, without conflict, nothing changes. Worship should lead to change, to transformation, both of the individual worshippers and of society. Am I suggesting worship should include some aspect of conflict? *Yes*. No, not a boxing match, but real information that causes the listeners to experience enough internal conflict to long for change. The phrase "comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable" is relevant here. The comfortable need to feel enough conflict to rethink, reimagine, and be reborn in the Spirit in the direction of

---

<sup>54</sup> Schiess, *The Liturgy of Politics*, 21.

<sup>55</sup> Schiess, *The Liturgy of Politics*, 13.

justice. Worship leaders need to “challenge (their) people with the truth of God’s word and insist it be lived out missionally.”<sup>56</sup>

Real-life problems, political issues, the many “isms” (racism, sexism, classism, etc.)—these are challenging subjects that are based in conflict, and oftentimes bring about conflict when discussed. But if not discussed *in* worship, conflict arises around these subjects anyway *outside of* worship. What better place to have difficult conversations than in the house of God, where such undertakings are bathed in prayer and praise? No, not everyone in the sanctuary will agree around any hot-button topic, but everyone will be forced to *think*, and hopefully, in United Methodist Churches, that thinking will be supported by drawing on scripture, tradition, reason, and experience. By introducing potentially divisive topics in worship, we allow the Holy Spirit to enter those spaces, inspire the hearts of the listeners, and lead toward real change.

In the words of Ellen Ott Marshall, “one cannot pursue the kingdom of God without entering into conflict.”<sup>57</sup> The world around us does not align with God’s will. To work toward the will of God for justice (Mic 6:8), and to prepare Christians for such work, involves conflict in a myriad of ways—conflict with society, conflict with government, conflict with each other, internal conflict, etc. To proclaim such and expand upon it in worship is risky business, but without it our worship services do not address what God desires. To work toward justice, believers must be prepared for the challenge.

---

<sup>56</sup> Ferguson, Ferguson, and Bramlett, *The Big Idea*, 22.

<sup>57</sup> Marshall, *Christian Ethics*, 75.

O Wesley Allen, Jr., Louis Craddock Perkins Professor of Homiletics at Perkins School of Theology, encourages pastors, “don’t ignore the elephant in the sanctuary.”<sup>58</sup> When congregants are thinking of mass shootings, immigrant children being dumped over the border, Asian Americans being viciously attacked, Black Lives Matter rallies, climate change, or morgues running out of space due to COVID-19, ignoring these difficult issues may augment a “safe” worship experience, but doing so fails to help worshippers connect faith with the world, and bypasses the expressed will of God to work toward justice. To quote Episcopal bishop Steven Charleston, “the Christian faith is lived out by real people in the real world.”<sup>59</sup> For faith to be real and relevant, worship leaders must meet the people *where they are*, even if where they are is messy and downright frightening. In the words of Gregory Ellison II, founder of Fearless Dialogues, “For meaningful connections to be forged, individuals and communities must face fear head on.”<sup>60</sup>

Many congregants, and those who have not yet become members of churches, yearn for such experiences, especially younger faith-seekers. According to Kaitlyn Schiess, “many are looking for political engagement that wrestles with the difficulty of applying theological convictions to public life and an approach to culture that does more than condemn.”<sup>61</sup> They want real conversation around relevant issues from a faith perspective, and real people in the pews who do more than play with niceties. Ketcham

---

<sup>58</sup> Allen, Jr., *Preaching in the Era of Trump*, 24.

<sup>59</sup> Charleston, *Good News*, 3.

<sup>60</sup> Ellison, II, *Fearless Dialogues*, 7.

<sup>61</sup> Schiess, *The Liturgy of Politics*, 8.



adds, “If (young people) encounter a church filled with people who sit beside each other chattering about unity without actually prioritizing reconciliation, young people see a lose credibility when what we claim about Christ’s redemption does not influence our relationships with another.”<sup>62</sup> Youth and young adults, whom United Methodist Churches are craving to attract and retain, want honest, un-whitewashed worship.

“Right now, (church) members are at their most divided in modern political history.”<sup>63</sup> This, of course, is what makes difficult conversations so risky. But we cannot allow fear to dissuade us from following God’s will and the example of Christ. Conflict is part of the Christian experience. To quote Schiess, “If we’re truly concerned about our neighbors, then we’ll inevitably come in contact with even more political questions.”<sup>64</sup> We either trust in Christ, put our fears aside, and delve into the hard stuff, or we refuse, and neglect the Gospel. As Marshall says, “living a good life in contexts of conflict requires that we respond to need rather than react to fear.”<sup>65</sup> We may fear rocking the boat, but people on the margins *need* us to put our fears aside in favor of social justice.

From the *Higher Ground Moral Declaration*, crafted by William Barber II and Repairers of the Breach, “poverty, inequality, and systemic racism are rampant, voting rights and democracy are being trampled, millions of people lack the health care, living wage jobs, and quality education they need, and racism, hatred, and bigotry are disintegrating the possibility for life, liberty, and a pursuit of happiness for everyone in

---

<sup>62</sup> Ketcham, *Reciprocal Church*, 61.

<sup>63</sup> Duncan, *Dear Church*, 4.

<sup>64</sup> Schiess, *The Liturgy of Politics*, 16.

<sup>65</sup> Marshall, *Christian Ethics*, 19.

these United States.”<sup>66</sup> These are problems to be explored and mitigated not just by our nation, but by the Church, as Jesus came that everyone might have life, and have it abundantly (Jn 10:10).

No, not everyone will agree on what should be said or done regarding each issue. Some will argue the issues should not be raised in worship at all. But if politics, at its core, involves the mediation of relations among people, then politics is the work of Christ; as such, it is the work of the Church, and of Christians. If a core concept of Christianity is to recognize and work toward God’s will being done, as is stated in the Lord’s Prayer, and God’s will involves the marginalized being recognized and uplifted as portrayed in the ministry of Jesus Christ, then to do so is our calling. If politics and/or potentially divisive conversation is involved, so be it. United Methodist churches can do this through missions, classes, outreach, and perhaps most importantly, through worship. Again, from Duncan, “Dear Church, we can be divisive. If we are dividing what is life giving from what is empire, if we are dividing what is of God from what isn’t, if we are dividing what is love from what is hate, then we are walking the path of our savior.”<sup>67</sup>

---

<sup>66</sup> Repairers of the Breach, “Higher Ground.”

<sup>67</sup> Duncan, *Dear Church*, 138.

## CHAPTER THREE

### RESEARCHING FOR IMPLEMENTATION

#### *Introduction*

Now that I have presented the theology behind having difficult conversations in worship, how might one endeavor to introduce such material, including that which is political and/or potentially divisive, in such a way as to inform and encourage disciples toward wholistic Christianity, thereby promoting involvement in discipleship thought and actions that move the world closer to the Kingdom of God? I used a variety of resources to research this question, including multiple writings, professional interviews, the creation and implementation of a workshop, and personal experience. This chapter details my research process through each of these methods.

#### *Writings*

The writings I chose to explore revolve around Christian ethics, conflict management, worship design, and social justice through the lens of faith. Most are contemporary resources with the exception of Rauschenbusch's *Christianity and the Social Crisis*, which was first published in 1907 but continues to speak truth to the church today.<sup>1</sup> From the category of Christian ethics, I found Ellen Ott Marshall's *Introduction to Christian Ethics* extremely helpful, especially as it is written from a United Methodist

---

<sup>1</sup> Rauschenbusch, Walter. *Christianity and the Social Crisis: The Classic That Woke Up the Church*. New York: Harper One, 2007.

standpoint and speaks of how to engage conflict well.<sup>2</sup> Adam Grant's *Think Again*<sup>3</sup> served to spark new ideas and understanding regarding conflict management, while writings by Bishop Steven Charleston<sup>4</sup> and the Justpeace Center for Mediation and Conflict Transformation<sup>5</sup> provided basic understandings of what works versus what doesn't. Khalia Williams and Gerald Liu's *A Worship Workbook* supplied excellent analysis and suggestions regarding worship design.<sup>6</sup> From the category of faith and social justice, I found O. Wesley Allen's *Preaching in the Era of Trump*<sup>7</sup> and Claudio Carvalhaes' *What's Worship Got to Do with It?* to be thoughtful and creative resources. Overall, though, the written resource that assisted me in my research the most was Kaitlyn Scheiss' *The Liturgy of Politics*, which emphasized the inseparable character of faith and all things political.<sup>8</sup> Through my research I learned that I read slower than I would like, and that there are few resources available connecting faith and politics. I hope this is a topic that will be explored by more theologians in the future.

### *Interviews*

---

<sup>2</sup> Marshall, Ellen Ott. *Introduction to Christian Ethics: Conflict, Faith, and Human Life*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2018.

<sup>3</sup> Grant, Adam. *Think Again: The Power of Knowing What You Don't Know*. New York: Viking, 2021.

<sup>4</sup> Charleston, Steven. *Good News: A Congregational Resource for Reconciliation*. Cambridge: Episcopal Divinity School, 2003.

<sup>5</sup> Justpeace Center for Mediation and Conflict Transformation. *Engage Conflict Well: A Guide to Prepare Yourself and Engage Others in Conflict Transformation*. Washington, DC: Justpeace Center for Mediation and Conflict Transformation, 2011.

<sup>6</sup> Liu, Gerald C. and Williams, Kalia J. *A Worship Workbook: A Practical Guide for Extraordinary Liturgy*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2021.

<sup>7</sup> Allen, Jr., O. Wesley. *Preaching in the Era of Trump*. Saint Louis: Challis Press, 2017.

<sup>8</sup> Scheiss, Kaitlyn. *The Liturgy of Politics: Spiritual Formation for the Sake of Our Neighbor*. Downer's Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2020.

I conducted two professional interviews for this project. The first interview was with Rev. Dr. Grace Pak,<sup>9</sup> founder of *Shalom IDEA*, whose mission is to “enable the Church to embody the Shalom of God by practicing IDEA (Inclusion, Diversity, Equity, and Anti-racism) so that God’s kingdom is experienced and expanded on earth.”<sup>10</sup> This philosophy fit well with my project. I enjoyed getting to know Pak, who is a clergy colleague of mine in the Greater New Jersey Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church. Her work is inspiring, and the advice she imparted was thoughtful and encouraging.

The second interview was with Rev. Dr. Tanya Linn Bennett.<sup>11</sup> Bennett serves at Drew Theological School as the Associate Dean for Vocation and Formation, Associate Professor in the Practice of Public Theology and Vocation, and the University Chaplain. Bennett is also a colleague of mine in the Greater New Jersey Conference of the United Methodist Church. The stories she shared with me of her own attempts at bringing difficult conversations to the worship space were integral to forming my current beliefs on the topic, and the liturgies she writes inspire me to write my own.

### *Workshop*

From the beginning of this project, the plan was to create a workshop for fellow clergy on both why we should be having difficult conversations in worship and how to do it well. I enjoyed researching with this goal in mind. The intention was to hold the workshop with the blessing of the Greater New Jersey Annual Conference of the UMC. I

---

<sup>9</sup> See Appendix 1.

<sup>10</sup> “Shalom IDEA,” accessed March 23, 2022, <http://www.shalomidea.com/about-shalom-idea>

<sup>11</sup> See Appendix 1.

anticipated their cooperation and excitement in this partnership. It wasn't meant to be. Though I did all they asked of me (contacted them early, explained the project, provided an outline), and received a date from them for the workshop, I was informed two weeks prior to the given date there was not enough room on the Conference calendar. I took this as an example of resistance toward the incorporation of difficult conversations in worship.

I decided to do the workshop on my own, posting an invitation on Facebook's United Methodist Clergy group page. I was content with the 13 individuals who registered, and excited that they were from eight different Conferences of the UMC including two from outside the United States. I was looking forward to interesting conversation from varied contexts and experiences, especially after viewing their pre-workshop surveys.<sup>12</sup> Unfortunately, only three of the 13 attended the workshop.

To say I was disappointed would be an understatement. However, the four of us had wonderful conversation. The participants appreciated the workshop. I learned from them that many in the UMC are not at liberty to present difficult conversations in worship, which led me to emphasize the importance of starting small in the "Best Practices" section of the proceeding chapter. It also made me realize how much my project has been affected by my geographical location—I have been able to broach such difficult subjects as a United Methodist in the New York and New Jersey churches I have pastored, and I am thankful for that. All in all, the workshop process was a lesson in humility.

### *Personal Experience*

---

<sup>12</sup> See Appendix 2.

Over the course of my research, I have implemented various findings in my ministry at The United Methodist Church of New City in New City, New York. This is a unique congregation in that it was home to the Rev. George Houser, whose work on civil rights and other social justice causes spilled over into the rest of congregational life. This church *wants and expects* difficult conversations to be happening, and the congregants have been overwhelmingly supportive of my project—so much so that I was recently asked by our Church and Society Committee to preach on abortion for Women’s History Month. I used my research and writings to craft my sermon, and used the experience of giving the sermon and its feedback to hone the “Best Practices” section of this project. I cannot thank my church community enough for being who they are and courageously venturing with me into difficult conversations of all kinds.

My research journey has been an interesting process, with ups and downs, positives and negatives. Above all, I have come to believe this work is needed, even more so than I believed at the start. Pastors must engage their church communities in difficult conversations, even potentially divisive and/or political ones. The next chapter will focus on how.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### ELEMENTS OF WORSHIP: A PRAXIS OF DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS

Chapter 1 of this project attempted to inform as to why political and/or divisive subjects should be talked about in worship. This chapter will offer suggestions for incorporating such topics in the worship service. I begin with an analysis of the role of teaching in worship, especially in reference to its ability to lessen the problem of theological dissonance. Then I move into specific worship elements in which teaching through the incorporation of difficult issues can be applied.

#### *Incorporating Faith Formation (Teaching) in Worship*

In Part 1 of this project, I stated the problem of theological dissonance—when what one believes, or claims to believe during Sunday morning worship, is not reflected in their thoughts and/or actions in the world around them, or in their perceived actions of God and community.<sup>1</sup> In the words of Micah L. McCreary, President of New Brunswick Theological Seminary, “When there is an inconsistency between our conclusions about God, the nature and existence of evil, and the human-environmental-applied condition, we have dissonance. When we have this ‘theological’ dissonance something must change! Only through change will we eliminate the dissonance.”<sup>2</sup> The worship environment can lead to theological dissonance when what it claims is not reflected in the worshipper’s everyday world, and when events of the everyday are not addressed from a

---

<sup>1</sup> McCreary, “Theological Dissonance.”

<sup>2</sup> McCreary, “Theological Dissonance.”



faith perspective in worship. A change that must be made in worship to minimize theological dissonance is the exploration of difficult subject matter worshippers encounter in the secular world through the lens of faith; subject matter which affects congregants on a daily basis, including that which is political and/or potentially divisive. Pastor and author Adam Hamilton writes the job of the church “is to equip [congregants] with the basic tools and resources so that they can spend the rest of their lives daily pursuing their relationship with Christ and faithfully serving him in the world.”<sup>3</sup> Attempting to serve Christ by bringing love and justice to a world that is ripe with injustice and far from Jesus’ descriptions of the Kingdom of God causes theological dissonance—Society is far removed from God’s ideal. In order to minimize theological dissonance, or at least equip worshippers to recognize it and provide them with tools for assistance, congregants must be taught how to approach life events, especially the hard ones, through faith.

Worship is an ideal time for teaching in such a direction. Some may say, “No, worship is for prayer, praise, and ritual. Bible study and other church-sponsored classes are for teaching.” Not so. Faith formation through teaching occurs in all aspects of the Church; and Christian education is needed, in all its forms—Sunday School, Youth Classes, Confirmation, Adult Study Classes, AND during worship. Furthermore, many churchgoers do not attend Bible study and other Christian education opportunities. If pastors and worship leaders reserve their teaching on difficult subjects for classes only, their lessons miss the majority church population.

---

<sup>3</sup> Hamilton, *Seeing Gray*, 140.

It is through teaching that faith formation increases; and it is through a depth of faith formation bridging the gap between church and congregants' everyday lives that theological dissonance can be alleviated and, to an extent, prevented. I say *to an extent* because until this world adequately reflects the Kingdom of God, Christians will always experience a measure of theological dissonance. What we believe is right and good in Christ is often not what happens in the world. Teaching faith formation leading toward less theological dissonance can and should happen in all aspects of worship. To quote Christian ethicist Traci West, "The rituals of Sunday worship [should] enable Christians to publicly rehearse what it means to uphold the moral values they are supposed to bring to every aspect of their lives."<sup>4</sup> In worship, "we learn what to love and how to love it."<sup>5</sup> To follow the call from Jesus to truly love our neighbors, difficult aspects of life, including political and potentially divisive subjects, must be faced head-on in the worship experience.

#### *Teaching through Specific Worship Elements*

Claudio Carvalhaes, theologian, author, and professor at Union Theological Seminary, says, "The liturgical theologian, more than building tradition, interprets reality through rituals with the people. . . Worship is a privileged place to learn, live, and rehearse love. Inside of the worship space, the whole world is challenged and reordered—or should be. . . The worship space is where we fix, re-orient, re-learn, and find better ways to love."<sup>6</sup> This can be done through the exploration of difficult topics in

---

<sup>4</sup> West, *Disruptive Christian Ethics*, 112.

<sup>5</sup> Shiess, *The Theology of Politics*, 100.

<sup>6</sup> Carvalhaes, *What's Worship*, 8, 22.

the elements of worship. This includes teaching through the sermon and chosen scriptures; but divisive subjects can also be addressed in the prayers, hymns, and other music selections, through the sacraments, and in additional liturgy incorporated in the service. Using a variety of worship elements to convey difficult subject matter amounts to reaching different types of people, as worshippers respond to various worship elements in different ways. A brief description of how teaching can play a part in each of these worship elements follows.

### Sermon and Scripture

For many pastors, the most important worship elements, and the ones that lend themselves most readily to the incorporation of difficult material, are the sermon and scriptures. Together, these two elements present the story of faith to the congregation. This story, and the teachings conveyed through it, need not avoid challenging subjects, particularly the potentially divisive and/or political. Conversely, embracing such subjects through the scriptures and sermon allow for a time of teaching which can minimize theological dissonance and bridge the gap between faith and the secular world.

The sermon is the most obvious section of worship for teaching difficult subject matter as it is the time set apart for exposition. Many pastors (including me) have been taught not to shy away from difficult conversations from the pulpit, as we were encouraged, in the words of journalist Finley Peter Dunne, to “comfort the afflicted, and afflict the comfortable.” We were also taught, however, not to scare away our congregation with words they do not want to hear. That teaching is reinforced in church settings by SPRC Committees (Staff-Parish Relations), Church Councils, and others concerned about membership numbers, including Conference leadership. I think the best

practice in crafting a sermon is somewhere between these two extremes. An emphasis on *teaching* rather than *afflicting* is a much more pastoral way of addressing difficult subjects; and choosing to teach rather than kowtow to the fears of church leadership (and our own anxieties) is a much better response to being called to preach the Gospel.

I was taught to preach with a Bible in one hand and a newspaper in the other. If sermons are not linked with the lives parishioners are leading, how is faith to be translated beyond the sanctuary? The Bible is called the “Living Word of God” because it speaks to us in the present; it carries meaning for our lives today. To speak of Jesus preaching the Beatitudes (Mt 5:1-12) to the people of his day is one thing; to adapt them to congregants’ present realities is another. As Traci West points out, “Community members such as poor single mothers who have achieved amazing feats of struggle and survival on public assistance will most likely not be among those celebrated for accomplishments or for gifts of courage and tenacity.”<sup>7</sup> But we can change that—Regarding the Beatitudes, how would congregants be affected if we added to our scriptural interpretation in our sermon, “Blessed are our single mothers, for they shall be given strength; Blessed are those on welfare, for their resourcefulness will be rewarded?” Not only would the struggling feel seen and encouraged; the privileged would also be invited to look at the marginalized in a Jesus-centered way. According to the United Methodist Book of Discipline, “Of crucial importance are concerns generated by great human struggles for dignity, liberation, and fulfillment.”<sup>8</sup> These are topics worthy of addressing during the sermon time in such a manner that congregants are taught about

---

<sup>7</sup> West, *Disruptive Christian Ethics*, 129.

<sup>8</sup> *The Book of Discipline*, ¶105.

these struggles and find hope in how they, individually and as a church, can work toward the alleviation of such difficulties.

Many pastors are fearful of preaching on difficult subject material, especially that which is political and/or potentially divisive. We have been told *not* to preach on such topics so many times that we believe to do so is wrong, but is it? Jesus spoke of difficult subjects often; if it was acceptable for Jesus to do, it is acceptable for us. There are cautions to be taken which will be explored later in this project, but opening our minds to the *possibility* of preaching on difficult subjects is the first step. To quote Grace Pak, founder of Shalom IDEA, “The biggest problem is that we’re not talking.”<sup>9</sup> Walter Rauschenbusch wrote, back in 1907, “It is true that social preaching has often been badly done. It has often been ignorant, bitter, partisan, and nonreligious. But if it has been done badly by the few who stood alone in attempting it, that is all the more reason why all should develop greater wisdom by common experience.”<sup>10</sup> Unfortunately, it seems we have not come very far since Rauschenbusch’s day. It is still only “the few” who courageously venture into the realm of preaching on difficult subjects. To avoid such subjects is to condone the continuance of the problems associated with them, consciously or not, and to add to the challenge of theological dissonance. It is past time to embrace the importance of teaching through “social preaching,” and to do it well.

Which scriptures we highlight in our preaching, or overlook, greatly affect the theological concepts that are/are not taught in worship. In the Gospels, Jesus spends the majority of his time teaching. He does so through his words and actions, which are

---

<sup>9</sup> Pak, Grace. Interview by author. Personal interview. Zoom, January 19, 2022.

<sup>10</sup> Rauschenbusch, *Christianity and the Social Crisis*, 292.

recorded in scripture. It stands to reason, then, that scripture can and should be used to teach. If following the lectionary, pastors and worship leaders should not shy away from choosing difficult passages to highlight in the worship service when they can be related to events in congregants' lives. The story of Jesus and the Canaanite/Syrophenician woman comes to mind (Mt 15:21-28; Mk 7:24-30). While it is disturbing to hear Jesus speak so harshly to someone seemingly based solely on her heritage, pastors can connect this to the experience that most (if not all) Christians engage in some form of prejudice and discrimination. This passage can be an interesting, albeit difficult, introduction to a conversation regarding racial and ethnic relationships.

Difficult conversations can be fostered by finding ourselves in scripture in different ways than are customary. For example, when one reads "Woe to the scribes and Pharisees," which Jesus says multiple times in Matthew Chapter 23, parishioners (and pastors) have a tendency to see *others besides themselves* as those being accused of hypocrisy, but what if we owned up to the fact we are oftentimes the scribes and pharisees in how we look down on others and fail to follow through on our beliefs, especially if "we" are the white church? In the words of Adam Hamilton, "We are all recovering Pharisees. . . It is only in recognizing our tendency to be Pharisees that we have any hope of remaining in recovery."<sup>11</sup> Seeing ourselves in scripture, but not always as the heroes and heroines, can greatly affect how we perceive difficult situations around us.

---

<sup>11</sup> Hamilton, *When Christians*, 17.

Our scriptures are “a sacred memory of how real people struggled to hear what [God] said and put it into practice.”<sup>12</sup> Today’s people of faith are attempting to do the same in reference to the happenings around and within them. Congregants can learn how to do this by seeing themselves in the stories of God, such as in relationship to the apostles. The apostles argued amongst themselves about difficult topics of their day and were not known as people who usually got things “right;”<sup>13</sup> yet they persevered in faith and action, thereby changing the world for the better while attending to the contexts they found themselves in ministry. Steven Charleston, Episcopal bishop and former dean of Episcopal Theological School, wrote that Jesus himself,

*actively crossed all boundaries of religious conviction between ‘conservatives’ and ‘liberals’ and openly welcomed them equally into his company. . . He even warned them not to play the dangerous game of theological correctness or pietistic arrogance. . . He frustrated their attempts to say that some amongst them were superior in knowing God’s will or closer to him personally than any others. He told them not to forbid others to share their opinions if the goal was to teach and understand the gospel.*<sup>14</sup>

Such scriptures and sacred stories can be used to assist in teaching pastors, worship leaders, and congregants alike how to approach difficult subject matter in regard to faith.

Problems in and with scriptural interpretation should also be pointed out to the congregation. Scripture is rife with sexism, classism, ageism, etc. At the same time, scriptural culture can provide solutions to problems—Pointing out connections in scripture between Judaism and Islam, for example, can be beneficial regarding

---

<sup>12</sup> Charleston, *Good News*, 9.

<sup>13</sup> Charleston, *Good News*, 10.

<sup>14</sup> Charleston, *Good News*, 18.

interreligious conflict and misunderstanding.<sup>15</sup> Conversations regarding race relations may take on a different hue when the white church is reminded that none of the main characters in scripture were white.<sup>16</sup> To quote writer and speaker Kaitlyn Schiess, “One of the most political acts we can do is to push back against the homogeneity of privileged perspectives and seek to learn from the kind of voices the Bible is full of—the marginalized, vulnerable, or oppressed.”<sup>17</sup> A vast array of hermeneutical approaches should be employed in uncovering the hidden gifts and vices scriptures lend to important (and difficult) conversations today. Again, from Schiess, “Reading Scripture with the recognition of our own biases, humble engagement with the global and historic church, and special attention to marginalized voices will transform us and our churches.”<sup>18</sup>

When tragedy strikes or important news stories are being highlighted, preaching on and choosing scriptures for worship that consider the times and speak to the heart of the congregation can be an incredibly important teaching tool: Our faith *can* and *should* interplay with the world around us. Scriptures chosen for worship and preaching can influence how congregants interpret current events and guide them in their responses.

### Prayer

Prayers are an integral part of worship. To pray is to talk with God; and while this can be done anywhere, worship would hardly seem to be worship without prayer. Wording in prayers matters. The unison prayer(s) of a service can be a moment in which

---

<sup>15</sup> Allen, Jr., *Preaching*, 110.

<sup>16</sup> Schiess, *The Liturgy of Politics*, 88.

<sup>17</sup> Schiess, *The Liturgy of Politics*, 91.

<sup>18</sup> Schiess, *The Liturgy of Politics*, 92.



the difficult conversations of life are brought to the attention of both God and church members. Written prayers are one of the easier ways of incorporating political/potentially divisive subject matter without expanding upon it. Including a plea for an end to racism, homelessness, sexism, or gun violence in a written prayer pays homage to the fact these problems exist. It is important to name what matters to our congregants in the prayers pastors and other worship leaders ask them to pray.

Honest prayers are always best. In regard to divisive topics, saying in prayer prior to a sermon, “We don’t know what’s right,” or, “We don’t claim to understand,” can go a long way in bringing down defenses and setting the stage for listening with humility.<sup>19</sup> Ending a sermon on a difficult topic with a prayer thanking God for God’s presence in the conversation, and thanking God for the diversity of understandings and experiences within the worship space, can calm nerves that may have been rattled during the presentation.<sup>20</sup>

What is included/not included in written prayers is a political statement itself. Only calling God “Father” in written prayer limits God’s personhood and how congregants are expected to interact with the divine. Constantly thanking God for our “blessings” can be problematic when not everyone is “blessed” in equal measure; it can serve to highlight the difference between privileged and the poor, and not in a good way.<sup>21</sup> Not mentioning difficult subjects in unison prayers suggests God is not interested in (or not capable of assisting in) the problems congregants face in their daily lives. A

---

<sup>19</sup> Charleston, *Good News*, 9.

<sup>20</sup> Charleston, *Good News*, 15.

<sup>21</sup> West, *Disruptive Christian Ethics*, 120.

prayer that mentions domestic violence, incarceration rates, homophobia, or political discord may not be as *pretty* as one that speaks only of hope and salvation, but it is much more real to experiential life.

Extemporaneous prayers, especially ones offered for or after the prayers of the people, can also be utilized in the naming of difficult subject matter. If there is a time of prayer sharing preceding a pastoral prayer in which especially difficult issues are raised, naming these issues again in the prayer that follows highlights their importance, both to God and to the gathered assembly. Even when difficult issues are *not* raised during a time of prayer sharing, they can be incorporated into a pastoral prayer when appropriate. This is an easy way of incorporating otherwise divisive material, as the prayer moment comes and goes, usually without talkback. For example, I have raised the problem of anti-Asian violence in my pastoral prayers, even when it was not raised by the congregation in their prayer requests. By including violence against Asian persons in my prayer, it became part of the worship experience. If current events on people's minds are not raised in worship, especially in prayer, a connection between faith and life can fail to be established, again leading to theological dissonance. When a pressing political, difficult, and/or potentially polarizing issue is in the forefront of the minds of worshippers in attendance, it should be addressed *at the least* through prayer. Not to name what is on the heart of worshippers is to fail to reach them in worship from a pastoral care standpoint.

Considering the exploration of difficult conversations in worship, perhaps no prayer is as important as the Prayer of Confession. I tend to shy away from such prayers in worship but am reconsidering based on my research. After all, our societal ills (the

crux of many of our difficult conversations) have come from “what we have done, and what we have left undone.”<sup>22</sup> Prayers of confession invite us to claim responsibility and enter into conversation on difficult topics. Psalms and scriptures that convey lament can also be used as prayers; they adequately represent communal feelings associated with difficult subjects, often from the perspective of the oppressed.

Offering different ways to pray, creatively and from various cultures, may be helpful in setting the stage for talk involving difficult subjects, as doing so can open parishioners to the fact they (and their ideas) are not the only Christian representations. Participating in the Korean prayer custom of praying aloud together (Tongsung kido) can serve to teach congregants that all voices matter and are valuable to God. Offering prayer stations with visuals around the topic in question may also be beneficial. Communal prayers that use “We” instead of “I” should be utilized, as they highlight connectedness over individuality, thereby fostering and upholding relationship.<sup>23</sup> To quote Kaitlyn Schiess, “The first hurdle to faithful political participation is our focus on personal piety and individual transformation. . . We do not approach God with merely individual concerns and praises, but with the heart and voice of a community.”<sup>24</sup>

### Hymns and Other Music Selections

---

<sup>22</sup> *The United Methodist Hymnal*, 890. The basic form of the United Methodist Prayer of Confession.

<sup>23</sup> Pak, Grace. Interview with author. Personal interview. Zoom, January 19, 2022. Using “We” instead of “I” in prayer is customary in many cultures outside the United States.

<sup>24</sup> Schiess, *The Liturgy of Politics*, 58, 140.

In most Methodist churches, music accounts for at least one-third of the service.<sup>25</sup> Choosing music deliberately is also a way of addressing difficult issues. Singing the Black National Anthem, *Lift Every Voice and Sing*, especially including a brief introduction on its history, could mark an attempt to notice and dismantle racism. Incorporating music from other languages and teaching those in attendance how to sing such songs, such as singing Latinx *coritos*, can keep a non-Latinx congregation mindful that God's family is much broader than those whom they see on Sunday morning.<sup>26</sup> Incorporating different music from genres not usually heard in church, or from other cultures and in foreign languages can be tricky, as what one person considers "music," another may hear as just "noise."<sup>27</sup> This creates a wonderful opportunity to practice the challenge of loving and appreciating *all* our neighbors in their varied ways of worshipping and experiencing God.

As mentioned in Chapter 1 of this project, The United Methodist Hymnal contains an entire section of hymns under the headings "Social Holiness" and "Called to God's Mission," which speak of stepping out in faith and bringing an end to injustice.<sup>28</sup> Many of these songs emphasize reaching out to others and furthering the kingdom of God here on earth through thought, word, and action leading to better human relations, thus promoting a political agenda. Methodism itself "formed its theology from hymnody."<sup>29</sup>

---

<sup>25</sup> Liu and Williams, *A Worship Workbook*, 107.

<sup>26</sup> Liu and Williams, *A Worship Workbook*, 91.

<sup>27</sup> Liu and Williams, *A Worship Workbook*, 143.

<sup>28</sup> *The United Methodist Hymnal*, 425-450, 568-593.

<sup>29</sup> Liu and Williams, *A Worship Workbook*, 139.

As such, there are vast expressions in its sacred music of Methodism's political involvement and willingness to encounter difficult subject matter.

Music is also a way to lament the current conditions of our societies, as in African American Spirituals written during slavery that continue to be sung today. When chosen well, and linked with appropriate sermons, prayers, or introductions, music can serve to express (and assist in processing) emotions brought up by difficult issues raised in worship and/or being faced in the world. I have found it especially meaningful to incorporate popular secular music which speaks to the subject matter of the worship service. Doing so assists in building the bridge between everyday life and faith. By bringing the music of the car radio into worship, perhaps congregants will consider the song's spiritual ramifications the next time they hear it. One of the most powerful worship services I have led ended with the congregation singing Bill Withers's "Lean on Me;" it summed up the message and connected the congregation in a way "sacred" music could not have.

### The Sacraments

The United Methodist sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion can be viewed as political actions in and of themselves. While the primary purpose of coming to the water in Baptism and accepting the "body" and "blood" of Jesus Christ in Communion is the receiving of grace, much more can be gleaned from these ancient but ever-revealing practices. When one considers the stories behind the sacraments and the physical elements involved, and relates these to present circumstances, powerful connections can be made which lead to difficult but necessary conversations.

Baptism creates the boundaries of the Christian church. As such, it organizes people, thereby making the sacrament political. Furthermore, baptism in the UMC requires that the one being baptized, or their sponsors on the candidate's behalf, pledge to "resist evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves."<sup>30</sup> To do so requires political action. Highlighting these aspects of baptism while performing the sacrament, or teaching about them during the worship service, can call to mind that United Methodists are political by virtue of their faith.

"Baptism creates a community of equality in a world of injustice,"<sup>31</sup> and reminds us that, as Christians, "we have a citizenship beyond our passport."<sup>32</sup> Through baptism we are reminded of our forgiveness, worthiness, and worldwide connection as family. All Christians are our brothers and sisters, and "If one suffers, we all suffer" (1 Cor 12:26). To remedy suffering in the world requires conversations that are difficult and lead toward political action. In the words of Emmanuel Lartey, author and seminary professor at Candler School of Theology, "The dismantling of unjust and socially oppressive structures must thus be the focus of any persons who seek individual well-being" of others.<sup>33</sup> Baptism can serve as a reminder of this calling.

The water itself in a baptismal service can be highlighted as political, in that clean water is scarce in many parts of the world. If we are baptized into one in Christ Jesus, and are all equal (1 Cor 12:13), all should have access to needed resources. Claudio

---

<sup>30</sup> *The United Methodist Hymnal*, 34, 40, 50.

<sup>31</sup> Schiess, *The Liturgy of Politics*, 104.

<sup>32</sup> Carvalhaes, *What's Worship*, 51.

<sup>33</sup> Pui-Lan and Burns, *The Practice of*, 27.

Carvalhaes, theologian and seminary professor at Union Theological Seminary, states all Christians should feel perpetually “wet” from their baptism—not just as a reminder of their blessedness and belonging, but as a driving force toward working for justice for all: “Individually and communally, we must look at the world from this wet perspective and work to transform every aspect of life that is not living the potential of its fulness.”<sup>34</sup>

Our second sacrament, Holy Communion, also brings Christians together as one family, the Body of Christ. When the Communion elements are in the worship space during a difficult conversation, it can be helpful for the worship leader to point them out in reference to the topic in question—No matter our opinions regarding the subject matter, we are all one body in Christ, and all welcome each other to the same table.<sup>35</sup> As the disciples sat with Jesus at the Last Supper, Judas included, the church community welcomes all in attendance to participate in Communion and be recipients of God’s grace, regardless of disagreements or different points of view.

Like the baptismal waters, communion bread can serve as a reminder of needed resources not available to all. We speak of the “heavenly banquet” but only receive a small piece of bread here on earth. What if we could work toward all humanity experiencing abundant life in the here and now? From the Justpeace Center for Mediation and Conflict Transformation, “If we work together to heal relationships and create right relations in all creation, we can truly experience Holy Communion and be a model to the wider society” (capitalization added).<sup>36</sup>

---

<sup>34</sup> Carvalhaes, *What’s Worship*, 61.

<sup>35</sup> Allen Jr., *Preaching*, 35.

<sup>36</sup> Justpeace Center, *Engaging Conflict*, 12.

The fact that we proclaim a *broken body* can also be addressed during a Communion service. Do we lift up the broken body of Christ only in celebration of Jesus' sacrifice, or do we also proclaim in doing so that we will do all in our power to stop the sacrifice of others? These are difficult questions; but we are in difficult times, and such questions are appropriate. Do we see in the broken body of Christ only Jesus, or do we also see addicts, those with depression, the unemployed and underemployed, the abused and their abusers, those in need of healing, though, like Jesus, their scars will remain? After the next school shooting, what would it mean to our congregations if, during Holy Communion, we lifted up the names of those lost, offering their broken bodies to Christ while promising to do all in our power to change our world for the better? To quote Tanya Bennet, Associate Dean for Vocation and Formation at Drew Theological School, "We have the opportunity to think differently about every Communion service."<sup>37</sup>

Traci West cites the problematic emphasis on the glory of suffering in Communion with the question, "What does it mean for whites to repeatedly rehearse this ritual of giving thanks for the fact that Jesus suffered, sacrificed, and died to take away their sins?"<sup>38</sup> Does it add to the exploitation of, degradation of, and even murder of people of color (since Jesus was not white) as long as atrocities benefit white privilege? In failing to confront the wording of our Communion liturgies, we perpetuate a system

---

<sup>37</sup> Bennet, Tanya Linn. Interview by author. Personal interview. Zoom, January 24, 2022.

<sup>38</sup> West, *Disruptive Christian Ethics*, 124.



that not only values suffering at the expense of the marginalized, but calls it “holy.” Atonement theology definitely “creates difficulties.”<sup>39</sup>

Some of the wording of the United Methodist Communion liturgy is not problematic but helpful to us in our quest to incorporate difficult subject matter in worship. Paraphrasing Luke 4:18-19, the text of “A Service of Word and Table I” reads, “Holy are you, and blessed is your Son Jesus Christ. Your Spirit anointed him to preach good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, and to announce that the time had come when you would save your people.”<sup>40</sup> The liturgy suggests that we, as followers of Christ, should be interested in the same. Our United Methodist tradition is rich with worship resources that can assist us in highlighting difficult, though necessary, topics. For example, the “Bread and Justice Prayer,” proffered in the “Eucharist” section of the Hymnal, offers helpful words for a Communion service: “May these sacramental gifts make us remember those who do not receive them: who have their lives cut every day, in the bread absent from the table; in the door of the hospital, the prison, the welfare home that does not open; in sad children, feet without shoes, eyes without hope; in war hymns that glorify death; in deserts where once there was life.”<sup>41</sup> Highlighting “the bread absent from the table” and “feet without shoes” in Communion, and reminding congregants through Baptism of the gift of water and its scarcity for many, transforms the sacraments

---

<sup>39</sup> Pui-Lan and Burns, *The Practice of*, 83.

<sup>40</sup> *The United Methodist Hymnal*, 9.

<sup>41</sup> *The United Methodist Hymnal*, 639.

into not only acts of grace, but callings to action, which cannot be accomplished without challenging conversations.

### Other Liturgy and Worship Elements

In addition to the basic parts of the worship service discussed above, other liturgies and worship elements can be used to incorporate difficult subject matter, such as responsive readings, affirmations of faith, and innovative services written around a theme. Creating a responsive litany to be read after a sermon on a political or potential divisive topic is a way of encouraging participation and unifying the congregation. Responsive readings which include heavy issues can be very powerful, such as ones that acknowledge absent fathers on Father's Day or call attention to the plight of refugees at Christmastime. Affirmations of faith are also useful in lifting up political situations and can be written by creative individuals to match the subject in question. To quote Liu and Williams, authors of *A Worship Workbook*, "Fusing the needs of our current era, the flashes of revelation given to us by God in the world, and what we read in scripture helps us generate empowering acts of worship custom made for the people we serve."<sup>42</sup>

A number of creative liturgies that lend themselves to difficult conversations are offered in the United Methodist Book of Worship, such as the *Service of Las Posadas*, in which the Christmas story is acted out in reference to the Holy Family not being able to find shelter. In the liturgy, the question is asked of the congregation, "Will the child be born tonight out on a street corner? Can't you find a place for him? Do you have no pity?"<sup>43</sup> The liturgy not only introduces the congregation to a Mexican account of

---

<sup>42</sup> Liu and Williams, *A Worship Workbook*, 28.

<sup>43</sup> *The United Methodist Book of Worship*, 266-268, 2281-284.

Christmas; it also evokes questions regarding immigration, asylum seekers, compassion, and poverty.

Another example of liturgy geared toward difficult but needed conversation comes from Claudio Carvalhaes, who tells of a Good Friday liturgy in an urban area of the United States where parishioners walked the neighborhood sharing Passion scriptures at locations where violence had occurred over the previous year. As congregants reflected on Jesus' betrayal and death, they also remembered those in their own community who were betrayed, beaten, put on trial, and lost their lives. At each stop, after telling both Jesus' story and the story of present-day victims, believers sang, "Were you there when they crucified my Lord?"<sup>44</sup>

Such creativity in liturgy is a blessing and a gift from God. Using creativity in worship can greatly enhance the effectiveness of teaching. Incorporating poetry, short stories, song lyrics, and/or quotes from famous people in the worship service are also useful tools. Mark Batterson, pastor of National Community Church in Washington, DC, states in an interview for the book *The Big Idea*, "The most important truths ought to be communicated in the most unforgettable ways."<sup>45</sup>

Even seemingly innocuous worship elements such as the announcements and passing of the peace can be instrumental in dealing with difficult subject material. The act of announcing community events incorporating social justice, from rallies and peace walks to informational affairs, says to the congregation that church is a place for such issues to be raised. Placing the passing of the peace *following* a sermon or presentation

---

<sup>44</sup> Carvalhaes, *What's Worship*, 39.

<sup>45</sup> Ferguson, Ferguson, and Bramlett, *The Big Idea*, 84.

incorporating difficult issues can encourage congregants to leave worship seeing each other primarily as the family of Christ, not as those on different sides of an issue.<sup>46</sup> In short, all elements of the worship service can be used to foster difficult conversations and present challenging material. The possibilities of such are endless.

---

<sup>46</sup> Charleston, *Good News*, 8.

CHAPTER FIVE  
CONGREGATIONAL CULTURE: PREPARATION  
FOR DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS

Both the culture of the congregation and the readiness of worship leadership must be taken into account when considering the introduction of difficult subject matter in worship. This chapter offers best methods for implementation, beginning with insight into preparation for such conversations. The section entitled *Approaches* introduces the reader to a number of best practices regarding this challenge, ending with a discussion on when to implement divisive topics. Then I move into *Checks and Balances*, including what to do with resistance and the problem of interruptions, and finally end with an emphasis on the importance of prayer in the journey.

*Preparation for Difficult Conversations*

All churches are different. In preparation for difficult conversations, it must be acknowledged that what works in one church many not be possible in another. Conversely, just because a pastor could not broach certain subjects in one appointment does not mean they will be met with the same resistance in the next. It is my belief that all churches and pastors can successfully incorporate difficult conversations in worship, though the preparation for each and scope of such subject material will be different depending on church culture. Preparing for the inclusion of potentially divisive and/or political subject matter in worship is a process that includes the following: keeping one's context in mind (and often starting small), the creation of a covenant between the speaker

and the congregation, self-understanding on the part of the pastor or worship leader, and an adequate awareness of the backgrounds and needs of the people in the pews. This section of my project will look at each of these elements in turn.

Some churches are hungry for political and potentially divisive subject matter in worship. These congregations are ready to make a difference in their communities and are comfortable with, or at least courageous enough to attempt, being challenged on deep levels. In these types of churches, offering difficult conversations in worship may happen nearly every Sunday and in many aspects of the worship service. Other churches may be completely new to the idea of political and/or potentially divisive worship material being desirable, or even acceptable. Some may be against such subject matter entirely. During a workshop I held on the topic of difficult conversations in worship, it was brought to my attention that, depending on where one is located, introducing such material can be dangerous. One workshop participant (from Missouri) stated, “I’ve done it, and I’ve been punished.”<sup>1</sup> Another workshop participant (from North Carolina) told her story of church members telling her they’d make her life “a living hell” if she broached a political topic, and then coming to her home and threatening her with her young children present.<sup>2</sup> Whatever the pastor’s and/or worship leader’s context, it is imperative that this context be kept in mind in planning worship. A song here or a prayer there that points to difficult conversations may be all a congregation can handle *at first*; but as subject matter gradually changes, so do hearts. It is not wise to overwhelm. Begin with one paragraph of the sermon speaking of societal ills, not the entire manuscript; or

---

<sup>1</sup> Workshop participant comment. Zoom, February 11, 2022. See Appendix 2.

<sup>2</sup> Workshop participant comment. Zoom, February 11, 2022. See Appendix 2.

preach once per quarter on a particularly difficult issue, not every Sunday. *Do not* neglect the Holy Spirit's calling in what is meant to be preached, but also remember the audience. How much are *they meant* to be exposed to? How deep does God want them to go *today*? Incremental increases toward tough conversations are more effective in changing church culture than a sudden disruption of the "usual" way of doing things.<sup>3</sup> Having said that, if a church is ready for difficult conversations to become more of the norm, go for it! The more "real life" comes into the worship service, the more worship reflects, and is able to transform, reality.

A strategy toward effective (and safe) confrontation of difficult subject matter in worship is to establish an understanding of how such topics will be handled. Therefore, the creating and sharing of a covenant is appropriate. Such a covenant could be developed by the pastor in conjunction with the Worship Team and then shared with the congregation, both formally in an announcement and through the newsletter, but also before each sermon exploring political and/or potential divisive material. Included in the covenant should be what the presenter will/will not do (ex: will respect different opinions while keeping true to the spirit of the Gospel; will not insist their opinion is the only Christian understanding), and how the congregants are to behave (ex: practice active listening with open hearts and minds; see each other first as brothers and sisters in Christ). Such a "relational covenant" serves as "a set of shared promises to each other and to the community as a whole."<sup>4</sup> The covenant should reflect who the congregation is called to be in Christ—one that is humble, one whose members are on equal footing, one

---

<sup>3</sup> Bennet, Tanya Linn. Interview with author. Personal interview. Zoom, January 24, 2022.

<sup>4</sup> Justpeace Center, *Engaging Conflict*, 8.

where change is seen as natural and desired, one that remains together through disagreements, one that is attuned to the movement of the Holy Spirit, and one that goes out into the world as reconcilers and healers.<sup>5</sup> A reminder of the covenant by reading it aloud, especially immediately prior to the sermon or presentation of a difficult topic, sets the mood first and foremost as one of Christian love.

It is of vital importance in bringing difficult subject matter to the congregation that pastors and/or worship leaders understand themselves regarding the issue. Where do the opinions of the presenter stand? Is the presenter open to considering positive attributes of the ideas of the opposing side? Is the presenter capable of speaking to those who disagree on the issue in question with respect and love? There are some issues concerning which a pastor or worship leader may have such strong opinions that it would be wise *not* to approach the subject in worship. In the words of Adam Grant, “We won’t have much luck changing other people’s minds if we refuse to change ours.”<sup>6</sup> When a pastor or worship leader either cannot be impartial, at least to an extent, or would have trouble representing the “other side,” a guest presenter would be more appropriate.<sup>7</sup> For example, I would have trouble adequately presenting the issue of gun control to my congregation as I firmly believe no one outside law enforcement or military should be allowed to own a gun. My views are so staunch on this topic that I have trouble speaking about it with those who disagree. As such, I would be very cautious in taking on such a topic from the pulpit, unless it was directly communicated beforehand that I would only

---

<sup>5</sup> Charleston, *Good News*, 24.

<sup>6</sup> Grant, *Think Again*, 107.

<sup>7</sup> Justpeace Center, *Engaging Conflict*, 5.



be promoting one opinion, as in a debate-style presentation. During such a sermon, I would have difficulty being pastor to *all*, so it is a sermon I would not undertake in a traditional worship service. A guest preacher could also be invited to tackle subjects the regular worship leader does not feel comfortable discussing.

Knowing your people is also important in preparing to present difficult subject matter in worship. What issues do the congregants already face? Are there people in the pews suffering from exploitation? On the flip side, are there those in worship who, knowingly or not, exploit others? It is most effective, and a good place to start in presenting difficult issues, to bring to the attention of the congregation things they are already experiencing, either personally or in community. Claudio Carvalhaes points out the word “liturgy” means “work of the people.” He says, “It is the life of the people that [should] give shape to the liturgy.”<sup>8</sup> Worship leaders should be asking, *Who are my people? What are their needs? What are the causes of their pain?* Worship created around answers to these questions may be difficult but is relevant to parishioners’ lives. Liu and Williams suggest “see[ing] the image of God in others, look[ing] to them and their experience and knowledge as living iconography from which illuminated preparation for preaching can happen.”<sup>9</sup> Another question to keep in mind in preparation is “Who are we missing?” What types of people are *not* a part of the church and why? Expanding the worldview of those in attendance by addressing issues common to those absent from their midst is an admirable goal in bringing political and/or potentially divisive subject matter to their attention.

---

<sup>8</sup> Carvalhaes, *What’s Worship*, 6.

<sup>9</sup> Liu and Williams, *A Worship Workbook*, 46.

Above all, one must remember that the job of the pastor or worship leader is opening congregants' hearts and minds to relationship and the movement of the Spirit of God in reference to the subject in question, not "solving" the problem. From the Justpeace Center for Mediation and Conflict Transformation, "We cannot bring out healing or restoration. We can only create the environment in which it can occur or the context for the Spirit to work."<sup>10</sup> Knowing your context, creating a covenant, having adequate self-knowledge, and understanding your people help to establish a space within worship where difficult conversations can be undertaken with grace.

### *Approaches*

In bringing political and/or potentially divisive topics to the worship service, there are several best practices that should be kept in mind. This section will endeavor to provide the pastor/worship leader with tips geared toward following the Holy Spirit's leading in discussing difficult topics while keeping pastoral care of the congregation in the forefront. No pastor or worship leader wants the congregation to walk out during a sermon, withhold their offerings, or vow to never return because of subject matter in worship. These best practices are offered with that in mind.

### Use of Language

No one wants to feel like dirt. I believe in telling the truth, but with love. All attendees at a worship service should feel loved—those the pastor or worship leader agrees with, and those with whom they do not. There are positive ways of speaking of differing opinions that include a genuine respect for the "other." In the words of O. Wesley Allen Jr., author of *Preaching in the Era of Trump*,

---

<sup>10</sup> Justpeace Center, *Engaging Conflict*, 5.

*It is not the preacher's job simply to preach the gospel; it the preacher's job to get the gospel heard, then believed, and then lived. This not only takes time and repetition. It takes approaching difficult subjects in a hospitable manner—inviting hearers into the sermons as honored guests to converse about the topic instead of using the topic as a weapon against them.<sup>11</sup>*

If the pastor/worship leader is not capable of speaking in such a way, they should not lead difficult conversations in worship.

Using inclusive and positive talk can be incredibly difficult in political and potentially divisive conversations, as we “embrace the political ramifications of the gospel message and embrace our people at the same time.”<sup>12</sup> Emotions run high. It is imperative that the pastor/worship leader remembers that his or her first job is to *love*, as God does. God loves even the most bigoted person in the pew, and so must we. Does that mean one cannot hold them accountable and offer teaching in a better direction? By no means! But *how* it is done is important. Simply saying, “Now, you know I love you all, and as we get into some tough stuff here, I want you to remember that,” can go a long way. We need to speak from the heart, share our own experiences, and admit our feelings.<sup>13</sup> At the same time, we need to acknowledge, with respect, that not everyone thinks as we do.

All issues that need talking about have multiple sides. It is helpful for the presenter to recognize those various sides, even the ones they do not agree with. Pointing out helpful aspects of respective sides can make those who are of the opposing position feel heard. From Adam Hamilton, “Any issue about which thinking Christians disagree

---

<sup>11</sup> Allen Jr., *Preaching*, 20.

<sup>12</sup> Duncan, *Dear Church*, 123.

<sup>13</sup> Pak, Grace. Interview with author. Personal interview. Zoom, January 19, 2022.

likely has important truth on each side of the debate. The key is to listen to both sides and look for ways to integrate the legitimate concerns of each side, often forging a new way forward, or at least plowing forward while taking seriously the views of the other.”<sup>14</sup> I do not mean opinions that are truly nonsensical and anti-Christian should be lifted up and lauded as potentially appropriate. Not all perspectives on issues are valid.<sup>15</sup> For example, when discussing racism, two sides that may be worth shedding light on are those who think racism should be talked about more and those who think it should be talked about less, as long as the aim of both groups is the same—an end to racism. There should be no positive talk given regarding the opinion of those who believe some races are inferior to others, or that racism no longer exists.

Thus we need to abandon dichotomies, as in presenting one view that is pro-racism and one that is anti-racism. Instead, we focus on Christian values that condemn racism and have conversation about the finer details. There are many gray areas between right and wrong, win or lose, democrat and republican, liberal or conservative—and those gray areas should be acknowledged.<sup>16</sup> “We’re all more liberal than someone, and more conservative than someone else,” so relying on our typical labels is not helpful.<sup>17</sup> From Emmanuel Lartey, “Pastoral leadership that wishes to adopt a postcolonial ethos must pay attention to multiple positions and divergent perspectives,

---

<sup>14</sup> Hamilton, *Seeing Gray*, xvi.

<sup>15</sup> Grant, *Think Again*, 189.

<sup>16</sup> Charleston, *Good News*, 4.

<sup>17</sup> Hamilton, *Seeing Gray*, 7.

resisting any hegemonic impulses, whether doctrinal or pastoral.”<sup>18</sup> Values and views are what matter, and oftentimes perspectives across the board are reasonable in their own right, but when expanding an issue and recognizing multiple points of view, that does not mean all views must be presented as equal. Rauschenbusch’s words from the early 1900s still ring true today: “The minister of Jesus Christ must voice the mind of Jesus Christ. His strength will lie in the high impartiality of oral insight and love to all. But if he really follows the mind of Christ, he will be likely to take the side of the poor in most issues.”<sup>19</sup> Though we love all, in the end, the church and its pastors are called to stand where Jesus did—with the marginalized.

Overall, I like the analogy from the Justpeace Center for Mediation and Conflict Transformation, a United Methodist initiative, which suggests “building a well, not a wall” in reference to engaging difficult topics.<sup>20</sup> A wall divides and is impenetrable; a well contains room: room for knowledge to increase, stories to be shared, and relationships to be cultivated. A well allows space for participants to “see good and truth in those who hold very different opinions from their own.”<sup>21</sup> A wall allows nothing from the “other side” to penetrate.

As pastors, admitting our own faults is helpful, too. When talking of racism, for example, admitting that I, as a privileged white woman, have learned to be racist can open the possibility of deep listening for other privileged whites in the room much more

---

<sup>18</sup> Pui-Lan and Burns, *The Practice of*, 24.

<sup>19</sup> Rauschenbusch, *Christianity and the Social Gospel*, 294.

<sup>20</sup> Justpeace Center, *Engaging Conflict*, 1.

<sup>21</sup> Hamilton, *Seeing Gray*, 31.

effectively than speaking of racists only in the third person.<sup>22</sup> Fears associated with the topic in question should be named. Speaking fears aloud can quiet their influence.<sup>23</sup>

### Rethinking through Questions

In his book *Think Again*, Adam Grant suggests the best way to approach political and/or potentially divisive subjects is to encourage participants to think like scientists, “doubt[ing] what you know, be[ing] curious about what you don’t know, and update[ing] views based on new data.”<sup>24</sup> He calls this process “rethinking,” which involves “being *actively* open-minded. It requires searching for reasons why we might be wrong—not for reasons why we must be right—and revising our views based on what we learn.”<sup>25</sup> Leadership expert Margaret Wheatly suggests a similar approach to leading difficult conversations when she encourages leaders to cultivate in their audiences a “willingness to be disturbed.”<sup>26</sup> This does not mean the pastor or worship leader asks congregants to abandon their own theories entirely. Instead, congregants should be taught to pursue a “confident humility,” which supports faith in personal understandings but leaves room for enough doubt to allow a change in one’s mind, should the information presented warrant it.<sup>27</sup> Of course, it is the privileged that need to do the greater amount of rethinking.<sup>28</sup>

---

<sup>22</sup> Allen, Jr., *Preaching*, 67.

<sup>23</sup> Ellison, II, *Fearless Dialogues*, 8.

<sup>24</sup> Grant, *Think Again*, 19-20.

<sup>25</sup> Grant, *Think Again*, 25.

<sup>26</sup> Wheatley, *Turning to One Another*, 38.

<sup>27</sup> Grant, *Think Again*, 47.

<sup>28</sup> Grant, *Think Again*, 140.

Asking them to approach this process like a scientist appeals to their already privileged nature, and so may be effective.

A fruitful tool in presenting difficult subject material in worship is the use of questions. It is not the pastor's job in such instances to offer the right answer, but to open the minds of the listeners to possibility. In the words of Adam Hamilton, "When it comes to controversial moral issues I have never tried to dictate what our congregation members should believe. But I have regularly raised questions and invited our members to reflect upon the relationship between the gospel and the issues of our time."<sup>29</sup> Asking open-ended questions and allowing congregants' imaginations to consider possible answers in reference to faith is effective in faith formation.

Ellen Ott Marshall, Christian ethicist, suggests forming questions that speak to "moral reflection on meaning, responsibilities and implications" regarding the subject being explored that allow congregants to spend time in "the gray space" in order not to "rush from description to prescription."<sup>30</sup> The initial goal of conversation is not to solve the problem, but to acknowledge it, understand it, and seek deeper relationships with each other that may lead to overcoming it. Pastors and worship leaders should not be afraid to ask questions they do not know the answer to.<sup>31</sup>

Offering open-ended questions for consideration is more effective when periods of silence following the questions are incorporated. Silence allows listeners to consider the questions presented on their own. Silence provides processing space, not to mention

---

<sup>29</sup> Hamilton, *Seeing Gray*, 193.

<sup>30</sup> Marshall, *Introduction to Christian Ethics*, 22.

<sup>31</sup> Ellison, II, *Fearless Dialogues*, 107.

a chance for God to speak amid the conversation. When a question is presented, allow a moment of silence for the question to resonate. A silent space should also be provided for contemplation at the end of the sermon or presentation. Such time allows congregants to “be attentive to the action of the Holy Spirit in guiding [them] to deeper understanding.”<sup>32</sup> It also allows them the autonomy to make their own decisions. Again, to quote Adam Grant, “Psychologists have long found that the person most likely to persuade you to change your mind is *you*.”<sup>33</sup>

One may ask the question, “What is better: a time of person-to-person discussion during the worship service or a sermon with no interaction?” Person-to-person discussions, particularly small group ones, are ideal, but not conducive to every worship setting. When dealing with political and/or potentially divisive material, caution should be exercised in attempting conversation between parishioners in the absence of a trained mediator. The last thing a pastor or worship leader wants is for the sermon time to become a war among congregants, or between congregants and the presenter. If conversation is desired, keeping conversation questions geared toward personal experience may be helpful. For example, if discussing racism, asking congregants either in pairs or small groups to answer the question, “Where have you witnessed racism?” may be more productive considering time restraints and a lack of mediation than “Should Critical Race Theory be taught in our schools?” The latter question would be better offered toward the end of a sermon/presentation on racism as a question for parishioners

---

<sup>32</sup> Charleston, *Good News*, 15.

<sup>33</sup> Grant, *Think Again*, 112.



to consider on their own in relation to the information presented, or during a follow-up small group discussion.

### One Consistent Message with Real Information

For those ready to attempt a sermon on a difficult topic, it is helpful for the entire worship service to revolve around the main idea being presented. This is best in all worship services, not just for those with political or potentially divisive subject material. Worshippers learn best when all aspects of the service fit together. The scriptures, music, prayers, and other liturgy should all revolve around the same topic as the sermon. In such services, the lesson is repeated in different genres, therefore making it easier to process and retain.<sup>34</sup>

An entire service based on a difficult topic can be very powerful. Consider a service regarding human sexuality and the rights of LGBTQ+ individuals in the church. If only the sermon speaks of the topic it serves as a good time for learning, but the topic in question can be soon forgotten amidst the prayers and songs of the rest of the service. If, however, the Call to Worship speaks of welcoming those who are gay, straight, bi, transgender, and asexual; the Unison Prayer speaks of calling no one “incompatible with Christian teaching;” the scripture calls for reconciliation of all God’s people; the hymns are ones written by gay composers (with introductions that reference this); Communion is served by those who are “out” on the LGBTQ+ spectrum; *and* the sermon encourages love for and among all God’s children, the message is reinforced throughout the entire service, therefore creating many opportunities for learning and re-learning the same concepts.

---

<sup>34</sup> Ferguson, Ferguson, and Bramlett, *The Big Idea*, 20.

A vitally important tip to keep in mind is to offer verified information on the topic in question. In the era of “fake news,” factual information can be hard to come by. Congregants may come to worship with assumptions on the topic that are false. Correcting these views in a respectful manner provides important teaching. Backing up points with statistics and references is important, though in this era of information overload, less is often more.<sup>35</sup> Verifying information before it is presented is crucial—no pastor or worship leader wants to add to the problem of inaccurate information.

To quote Walter Rauschenbusch, “It is safe to advise a man (sic) who feels ‘the burden of the Lord’ on social wrongs to go slowly and get adequate information, especially in political economy and the history of social institutions.”<sup>36</sup> Political institutions are even more complex now than they were in Rauschenbusch’s time. There are many factors that go into each political and/or potentially divisive subject. For example, politics and economics are expressly linked, so a conversation about something political should touch on economics, also.<sup>37</sup> To lead toward change, one must work on his or her skills in teaching, helping, listening, learning, and building relationships.<sup>38</sup> Turning to experts for information, but also to those living the conditions in question, is most helpful. It is quite commonplace to be prepared with inaccurate or irrelevant information if the presenter does not immerse him or herself in the cultural context from which the subject in question emerges. Lartey calls this “communiopathy,” which

---

<sup>35</sup> Ferguson, Ferguson, and Bramlett, *The Big Idea*, 10-11.

<sup>36</sup> Rauschenbusch, *Christianity and the Social Crisis*, 192.

<sup>37</sup> Carvalhaes, *What’s Worship*, 22.

<sup>38</sup> The Arbing Institute, *The Anatomy of Peace*, 22.

involves “entry into the *pathos* (passion, pain, and deep feeling) of an entire community.”<sup>39</sup> We can and should learn both from statistics and the lived lives of the marginalized. After all, “if we are poor learners, our teaching will be ineffective.”<sup>40</sup>

### Use of Stories

O. Wesley Allen Jr. notes a difference between modernists and postmodernists, both of which are found in our churches. Modernists rely on information; postmodernists want experiences.<sup>41</sup> While the modernists’ need for factual information is covered by the section above, experiences for our postmodernists can be provided through stories. Nothing speaks louder than first-person narrative accounts tied to the issue in question. The sharing of true stories around the topic makes the topic real. To quote Margaret Wheatley, “As we share our different human experiences, we rediscover a sense of unity . . . We also discover our collective wisdom. We suddenly see how wise we can be together.”<sup>42</sup>

Having a guest speaker tell his or her personal story gives a face to the issue being presented. If this is not possible, reading a first-hand account can be nearly as effective. When doing so, it is important to remember that in the American church, whites are considered the “norm.” In other words, congregants will assume the characters in a story are white (and male) unless they are told otherwise, as white has traditionally been the

---

<sup>39</sup> Pui-Lan and Burns, *The Practice of*, 26.

<sup>40</sup> The Arbinger Institute, *The Anatomy of Peace*, 266.

<sup>41</sup> Allen Jr., *Preaching*, 19.

<sup>42</sup> Wheatley, *Turning to One Another*, 32.

“default” race in this country.<sup>43</sup> It can be helpful in presenting stories to switch up the expectations—offer a story with a female doctor, or a male nurse; use stories from different cultures often, not just as a token example.<sup>44</sup>

It is imperative to keep in mind who the congregation is. If a subject to be discussed is familiar to a churchgoer, he or she could be asked to tell a personal story or give other input to the service. This is the concept of “epistemological privilege,” where those with first-hand knowledge of a subject are given jurisdiction.<sup>45</sup> The face of Jesus shines back at the pastor/worship leader from every person in the pews; the congregation itself is a resource that cannot be overlooked.

#### Highlight Commonalities

While lifting up the differences between opposing views is educational, calling attention to the similarities has the effect of promoting Christian unity within the congregation when various opinions are present in the worship space. Most, if not all, societal ills would be remedied if we truly saw each other as neighbors worthy of respect and love. Citing commonalities over differences can assist in moving the church in such a direction. In the words of Margaret Wheatley, “When a community of people discovers that they share a concern, change begins. There is no power equal to a community discovering what it cares about.”<sup>46</sup>

---

<sup>43</sup> West, *Disruptive Christian Ethics*, 118.

<sup>44</sup> Allen, Jr., *Preaching*, 78, 82.

<sup>45</sup> Marshall, *Introduction to Christian Ethics*, 16.

<sup>46</sup> Wheatley, *Turning to One Another*, 26.

In the Biblical history of the formation of Christian community, Paul led with such an approach. In Acts 17, Paul holds a conversation in Athens with a group of Greeks. “He doesn’t insult them. He looks for common ground with them. He quotes their poets. He even identifies one of the unknown gods they worship with the God of the Bible.”<sup>47</sup> Effective leaders “call people to think about common values instead of partisan divisions.”<sup>48</sup> Pastor, author, and seminary professor Mark Felmeir suggests discovering an axiom (or more than one) that equally applies to various opinions for each divisive subject talked about.<sup>49</sup> An axiom is a statement of truth, such as “The earth is round.” Common statements of truth (ex: God loves all; God’s creation is good; Jesus saves) held by all parties in a debate should be recognized and offered as reminders of shared values; and that we, “as people of faith . . . can reorder our everyday conversations and renew our commitment to practicing a politics of compassion.”<sup>50</sup> Similarly, Ellen Ott Marshall emphasizes shared norms: “the principles, goals, virtues, and values that give shape and texture to the moral life: Love God and neighbor. Be a good steward of creation. Do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God. Care for the least of these.”<sup>51</sup> When common axioms and norms are lifted up, groups have a starting place from which to engage in real conversation that unites instead of excludes.

---

<sup>47</sup> Hamilton, *When Christians*, 44.

<sup>48</sup> Feldmeir, *A House Divided*, 2.

<sup>49</sup> Feldmeir, *A House Divided*, 4.

<sup>50</sup> Feldmeir, *A House Divided*, 4.

<sup>51</sup> Marshall, *Introduction to Christian Ethics*, 21.

A study by The Arbinger Institute, whose focus is turning people toward an outward mindset that embraces accountability, describes a story of an Arab and a Jew finding common ground over their love of the land. When they realize how much they both love the land they call home, they are able to speak with each other and cultivate friendship, when at first they had been enemies.<sup>52</sup> When commonalities among groups are emphasized, those groups move closer toward seeing the “other” as a person instead of an object. The Arbinger Institute calls this transition moving from having a “heart at war” to a “heart at peace” toward others; positive change is not possible without it.<sup>53</sup>

### Ending Well

All worship services should end with hope, as should all sermons within them. The job of the pastor/worship leader is to share the “Good News” with the congregation. Therefore, what we leave them with must be “good.” Sending congregants into the world in despair after a diatribe regarding a difficult subject hardly lends itself to furthering the kingdom of God. In the words of Tanya Bennett, “We are not allowed ‘drive-bys,’ where we splat it and move on.”<sup>54</sup> Ending a sermon with a story that shares hope regarding the issue in question does far more good in inspiring hearts toward change than finishing a presentation with lament.<sup>55</sup> Sermon and worship endings should remind congregants of who we are as a church. Using the wording “who we are” instead of “who we should be”

---

<sup>52</sup> The Arbinger Institute, *The Anatomy of Peace*, 5.

<sup>53</sup> The Arbinger Institute, *The Anatomy of Peace*, 40, 137.

<sup>54</sup> Bennet, Tanya Linn. Interview with author. Personal interview. Zoom, January 24, 2022.

<sup>55</sup> Justpeace, *Engaging Conflict*, 10.

offers a more positive and hopeful outlook.<sup>56</sup> We *are* people of love who follow Christ and yearn to move this world a little closer to the Kingdom of Heaven.

It is important to close a sermon on a difficult subject with possible action items congregants can take. These actions can be big or small; doing *something* is better than doing nothing. Gregory Ellison, II, founder of Fearless Dialogues, suggests asking a question such as, “How does your work in the hospital, the church, the large corporation, the fast-food chain, or within your family afford you opportunities to share knowledge, engage spirit, and advocate for others?”<sup>57</sup> It can be depressing and frustrating to hear of societal ills and not be given any resources toward change. I personally made this mistake as a guest preacher at my husband’s church when I was in seminary. During a seminary excursion to the Kentucky and West Virginia areas of Appalachia, I had been touched by the plight of the people and the environment due to mountaintop removal. When asked to fill in for my husband’s pastor during their dinner church, I chose to present my findings, complete with newspaper articles and a picture slideshow. I convinced many of the parishioners mountaintop removal was a huge problem. What I didn’t do is give those in attendance any means by which to do something about it, which resulted in a congregant screaming, “Why would you dump this on us and then leave us hanging?” Why, indeed? If I had distributed the names and addresses of congressional representatives so those who wished could write letters or had led small group discussions around what could be done to help, the service probably would have ended well. Instead, I was lambasted and fled the room crying. It is not fair to worshippers to

---

<sup>56</sup> Allen Jr., 54.

<sup>57</sup> Ellison, II, *Fearless Dialogues*, 131.

leave them without hope, and a worship service is not complete without a call to action. Therefore, one should research what can be done to alleviate the problem being discussed, and then present that information and/or organize a future event around it.

It is imperative, however, not to resort to charity alone. As Christians, we should be fostering *relationships* with those in need, as Jesus did, instead of perpetuating a hierarchy where the privileged offer help to those “below” them.<sup>58</sup> Adam Hamilton suggests two questions that could be asked of congregations (and ourselves) at the close of a teaching presentation—“What course of action could I take that would express my love for God? And second, what is the most loving thing to do toward my neighbor?”<sup>59</sup> Ending well necessitates that both the sermon and worship service conclude with hope and a calling to further the Kingdom of God in reference to the difficult subject in question.

#### When to Implement

When should difficult conversations be held in worship? Every Sunday? As often as possible? My suggestion is *as often as necessary*. Definitions of “necessary” will vary, however. If top news concerns a political and/or potentially divisive topic that is on the hearts of most congregants, it is time to talk about that subject in worship. If the community around a church is facing difficulty, or the culture of the church itself is in flux, worship services that address communal issues are relevant and should be attempted. If the church, and/or the pastor, cares about bringing this world and its inhabitants closer to the will of God for creation, then it is a good time for a difficult

---

<sup>58</sup> West, *Disruptive Christian Ethics*, 126.

<sup>59</sup> Hamilton, *Seeing Gray*, 151.



conversation. If a church needs to learn *how* to talk about difficult subjects, or a pastor has never attempted social justice sermons before, leaning on a sermon series by Adam Hamilton such as *Confronting the Controversies* (2005),<sup>60</sup> *Seeing Gray in a World of Black and White* (2008),<sup>61</sup> or *When Christians Get It Wrong* (2013)<sup>62</sup> may be appropriate. Preaching through the Social Principles listed in the United Methodist Book of Discipline is another option.<sup>63</sup> In churches that are new to this subject matter, spreading out such topics to once per month may be more palatable to the congregation and its leadership than tackling an entire sermon series on social justice multiple Sundays in a row. One way of doing this is to emphasize the Special Sundays of the UMC which are spread out over the course of the year and include Human Relations Day (human rights), One Great Hour of Sharing (helping those who hurt), Native American Awareness Sunday, Golden Cross Sunday (healthcare), Peace with Justice Sunday, Christian Education Sunday, Rural Life Sunday, World Communion, and United Methodist Student Day.<sup>64</sup> All of these topics bring up difficult conversations that concern needed changes in society and offer the congregation ways of responding by contributing financially to social causes.

When current events take a turn that attract the attention of all congregants, such as the insurrection at the Capitol on Epiphany of 2021, or the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks, or a school shooting in your own neighborhood, *do not ignore them in worship*. Though such

---

<sup>60</sup> Hamilton, Adam. *Confronting the Controversies*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005.

<sup>61</sup> Hamilton, *Seeing Gray*.

<sup>62</sup> Hamilton, *When Christians*.

<sup>63</sup> *The Book of Discipline*, ¶160-165.

<sup>64</sup> *The United Methodist Book of Worship*, 423-433.

tragedies bring up the hardest of conversations, to ignore them in worship is to *cause* theological dissonance on top of already felt confusion, anger, and fear. It is preferable to discard a planned worship service at the last minute in favor of a service (even a mediocre one) that addresses the present issue on parishioners' minds. In the words of Dave Ferguson et al., authors of *The Big Idea*, "When you're sure that God is taking you in a different direction than you planned several weeks ago, *do what God tells you to do*" (emphasis added).<sup>65</sup> Or, to quote Claudio Carvalhaes, "Life comes first and traditions come after."<sup>66</sup>

### *Checks and Balances*

There are a number of checks and balances that can be incorporated to attempt to ensure a worship service of any kind, but especially one with a political or potentially divisive topic as the crux of its subject matter, is effective in its delivery and purpose. My hope is that the following suggestions involving feedback, forewarnings, follow-up, what to do with resistance, the possibility of interruptions, and the importance of prayer will be helpful in remedying, if not preventing, common issues in implementation.

### Importance of Feedback

Following a service I have led on a topic that is political and/or potentially divisive, I have found it especially helpful to conference with people from various sides of the issue being presented. Feedback is essential for the pastor/worship leader in that we cannot know what worked and what didn't if no one tells us. There are many options for receiving feedback, from asking for such through email to incorporating a

---

<sup>65</sup> Ferguson, Ferguson, and Bramlett, *The Big Idea*, 78.

<sup>66</sup> Carvalhaes, *Whats Worship*, 7.

“suggestions” box in the worship space. It should be emphasized that both positive and negative feedback is encouraged, as both offer learning experiences for worship leadership and a chance for those in the pews to have their voices heard.

While positive feedback from like-minded individuals is encouraging to hear, I have found it most helpful to seek out feedback from those whose opinions differ from my own. In my previous appointment, whenever I planned to preach on a topic that could be seen as political in nature, I would encourage my SPRC (Staff-Parish Relations Committee) Chairperson to be present. She and I saw eye-to-eye on very little politically, but both believed very strongly that all were worthy of love and acceptance. She was up for the challenge in critiquing me. Adam Grant calls such people “thoughtful critics.” There were many times I said things in worship that my “thoughtful critic” did not agree with. My question to her always was, “Did what I say make you feel put down as a person?” As long as the answer was “no,” I knew I did an ok job. She told me she appreciated that I made a point of stressing there are other opinions in the room besides my own, and that chances are none of us are completely right on any topic. We all have things to learn, and we all have ideas to contribute. As long as she felt addressed with respect during worship, I knew I had not overstepped in my wording.

I did not kowtow to her, however. I made the points I felt I was being called to make, but I also felt called to be pastor to *all* of my congregation, not just those who thought like me. I did not want those who thought differently to feel they had been cast out during worship. Keeping open communication with my critic from the “other side” allowed me to better monitor how my sermons were being received.

Planning Together

As helpful as feedback is following a worship service incorporating difficult material, planning worship together with a worship team is equally beneficial. Planning together incorporates more voices and, therefore, more creativity and insight in creating the worship service. More voices mean more ideas, and a chance to experiment with possible approaches. Whenever possible, one should not work on such difficult services alone.

Even in the absence of a worship team, congregants can assist in the planning and implementation of such services. Asking the congregation what difficult topics they would like to explore in worship captures their attention and involves them in the planning process from the beginning. Offering their personal stories, as discussed previously, lends expertise from worshippers to the service. Involving congregants in researching, suggesting, and leading follow-up activities regarding the worship subject, such as mission projects or a debriefing session, takes additional work off the shoulders of the pastor and increases the investment of the laity in the difficult subject in question. Utilizing members of the congregation in the planning and implementation process both assures a variety of ideas and “spreads the wealth” of the work that needs to be done.

#### Offering Forewarnings

There were topics I could not breach in my previous appointment, but when I did muster up enough courage to lead a difficult conversation in worship, I oftentimes offered a forewarning to the church. A day or two prior to worship, I sent an email to the church membership informing them of the topic to be discussed. When such an email is utilized, it is best presented as an invitation to venture into a challenging topic through the lens of

faith.<sup>67</sup> While I never said, “Don’t come if such a topic bothers you,” sending the email allowed congregants to make that decision on their own. Such emails always ended with an invitation to provide feedback following the service (positive or negative), and always spoke of my desire not to put anyone down because of their opinion, but instead related the topic in question to faith and offered a time of reflection and possible action steps for those who felt inclined to go further.

Such invitations and explanations can foster what Adam Grant calls “psychological safety . . . a climate of respect, trust, and openness in which people can raise concerns and suggestions without fear of reprisal.”<sup>68</sup> While I did receive the occasional immediate response of, “You shouldn’t be talking about this in church,” no one ever walked out on a sermon. I credit that to the forewarning email. If they were going to walk out, they’d already done it by choosing not to attend worship that day. All who *do attend* worship after an invitational email announcing a political or potentially divisive subject should be praised. From Ellen Ott Marshall, “When I welcome people into a difficult conversation, I always begin by commending them for their courage.”<sup>69</sup>

Forewarnings also provide a needed caution to those for whom the subject matter is personal. Difficult conversations are even harder for those who have a personal tie to the subject matter. Having a conversation in worship about abortion is difficult in and of itself; being present for such a conversation when you have *had* an abortion can be even more nerve-wracking. Not that those who have personal ties to the subject in question

---

<sup>67</sup> Charleston, *Good News*, 6.

<sup>68</sup> Grant, *Think Again*, 209.

<sup>69</sup> Marshall, *Introduction to Christian Ethics*, 135.

should avoid such a service—quite the contrary; if they know ahead of time the topic will be raised, they can better prepare themselves mentally and choose to be present, or not.

### Follow-Up

Ideally, difficult conversations are held in small groups where everyone can not only listen, but respond. As this is oftentimes not possible in the church setting, with our stationary pews and limited time for true conversation, there are other ways of providing the opportunity for response through follow-up with the congregation. Asking for email responses is one option. Another is to schedule a “continue the conversation” session sometime during the following week. This could be held virtually and/or in person with the pastor or worship leader. One cannot overemphasize the effectiveness of learning in small groups. Worship services “tend to be didactic: we talk, we sing, we dance, they listen, they watch. Small groups by nature are experiential and discussion oriented and, as a result, more likely to foster life change.”<sup>70</sup> The more difficult the subject matter, the more important the follow-up.

A good model in beginning a follow-up session could utilize the “Circle Process,” in which each person present is allowed time to respond to guided questions without interruption or comment.<sup>71</sup> Follow-up sessions, as well as the presentation within the worship service, should end with hope. One way to do this is to explore the power of imagination by “brainstorming possible solutions and dreaming a preferred future”

---

<sup>70</sup> Ferguson, Ferguson, and Bramlett, *The Big Idea*, 40.

<sup>71</sup> Justpeace Center, *Engage Conflict*, 7.

together.<sup>72</sup> From the Justpeace Center, “People in conflict often find points of connection when sharing dreams of a preferred future that builds on their stories.”<sup>73</sup>

From a pastoral care perspective, if a difficult conversation held in worship is particularly personal to certain congregants, both a forewarning and a follow-up call should be made by the pastor. For example, if the pastor/worship leader is planning to talk about gun control, or the lack of, and knows a parishioner lost his daughter to a school shooting, letting the parishioner know the topic will be discussed and then following up with him after the service to check on his personal well-being (as well as asking for feedback) would be appropriate. Asking the father if he would like to participate in the service in some way (sharing his story, reading scripture, etc) would also be appropriate, but he should not be pressured to do so. First-hand stories are the most effective in conveying a message; they are, though, often painful to share.

#### What to Do with Resistance

Many churches offer resistance toward the incorporation of political and/or potentially divisive subject matter in worship. When (not if) this resistance is faced, it is best to remind church leadership of whom we follow as Christians—Jesus the Christ. As was addressed in Chapter 1 of this project, Jesus was political. To follow Jesus is to become political ourselves for the betterment of humanity. Jesus had difficult conversations with those around him through both his words and his actions. Healing on the Sabbath, teaching at the temple, feeding multitudes, speaking with women, and calling those in distress “blessed” were all political and divisive words and actions, but

---

<sup>72</sup> Justpeace Center, *Engage Conflict*, 4.

<sup>73</sup> Justpeace Center, *Engage Conflict*, 10.

they had and have a purpose—they bring this world a little closer to what it is meant to be, honoring the prayer that “(God’s) will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” As Christians, our calling is the same. We cannot hope to get there without difficult conversations.

Resistance was raised by my own Conference of the United Methodist Church when leadership denied my proposal to offer a workshop on this topic on the Conference level.<sup>74</sup> The resistance revolved around John Wesley’s mandate to “Do no harm.” It was asserted that difficult conversations in worship *would* do harm and should therefore not be promoted. Though I was silent on the phone call informing me of this decision, I later found myself thinking, “What about the harm being done by *not* having difficult conversations? What about all the oppressive systems that continue partly because the church is silent in reference to them? What about the difficulties congregants face on a day-to-day basis that are never raised in church because such topics are deemed political or potentially divisive?” In the words of Ellen Ott Marshal,

*When the foolishness of some costs the lives and livelihoods of others, when greed and selfishness continue to overrun the common good and care for the vulnerable, when hatred and killing are all around us unashamed and on full display I want to close my eyes too. However, the targets of all of this awfulness cannot close their eyes. And they need us not only to resist but to be witnesses and companions . . . We must lavish our care and attention and love on those who bear the burden of the things that do not change.<sup>75</sup>*

Pastors and worship leaders should not let resistance encountered cause *them*, in turn, to be resistant to having difficult conversations in worship. Jesus had difficult conversations often. Such is the work of spreading the Gospel. The Holy Spirit is always

---

<sup>74</sup> See Appendix 2.

<sup>75</sup> Marshall, *Introduction to Christian Ethics*, 145-146.



at work, moving toward renewal and right relationship amongst all humanity, but that work is accomplished through people.<sup>76</sup> In order to embark upon such work, we must have the necessary conversations, and those conversations are difficult. In the words of Lenny Duncan, “Dear Church, we can be divisive. If we are dividing what is life giving from what is empire, if we are dividing what is of God from what isn’t, if we are dividing what is love from what is hate, then we are walking the path of our savior.”<sup>77</sup>

### Interruptions

But what if the worst happens and a pastor/worship leader is interrupted by a parishioner reacting negatively to difficult material being explored? Parishioners are people; people have emotions, and sometimes those emotions overflow into actions we would rather not witness. From Rev. Steven Charleston, “Our religious beliefs are our most intimate beliefs. They are our identity. They are our passion. They are strongly held, but when they are questioned, they make us feel threatened and vulnerable.”<sup>78</sup> This threat of vulnerability can lead to negative words and/or actions. If a congregant begins mocking the pastor, making audible negative comments, or rips up the bulletin and walks out, what is the presenter to do? If a covenant is being used, offering a reminder of it might be effective. Calling attention to the Communion table and the fact that we are all brothers and sisters of Christ who care for one another is an approach. A pause to pray for the Holy Spirit to calm the nerves of those in attendance and lead the presenter is another option. In the case of someone walking out, it is best to not follow or call

---

<sup>76</sup> Justpeace Center, *Engage Conflict*, 12.

<sup>77</sup> Duncan, *Dear Church*, 138.

<sup>78</sup> Charleston, *Good News*, 16.

attention to it. Let them be and have their space; reach out to them later or the next day as an act of pastoral care, without judgement. If an interruption continues, it is appropriate for the pastor to ask the parishioner to leave, or better yet, have a staff member or lay person on stand-by who is willing to lead the parishioner to another space for conversation. It is my hope that the best practices offered previously in this study would serve to avoid such a confrontation in the first place, but the job of the facilitator in such an event is “putting the interruption back in its place and remembering the story disrupted by it.”<sup>79</sup>

### Prayer

Lastly, but most important, the process of planning and implementing difficult conversations in worship should be bathed in prayer. Preachers and worship leaders do what they do for God. If one feels God does not want a particular subject talked about in church, don't do it. On the other hand, if one feels a calling toward introducing a difficult, political and/or potentially divisive topic, this should be done, regardless of the fear of doing so. In all things, the leading of the Holy Spirit should be followed. As is stated in 2 Timothy 1:6-7, “For this reason I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you . . . for God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but of power and of love . . .” Pastors should ask for the prayers of congregants and church leadership as they prepare for all services, but especially ones with potentially divisive and/or political material. When the entire church approaches difficult conversations with prayer, God can't help but be in the midst of both the preparation and the worship service itself.

---

<sup>79</sup> Marshall, *Introduction to Christian Ethics*, 154.

## CHAPTER SIX

### CONCLUSION

“There is no more powerful way to initiate significant change than to convene a conversation.”<sup>1</sup> This quote by Margaret Wheatley speaks to me of the importance of the incorporation of political and/or potentially divisive subject matter in the worship service. As Christians, and as the Church, we are always looking to move in the direction of positive change, toward the anticipated establishment of the Kingdom of God “on earth as it is in heaven.” Such change is impossible without our addressing what really matters—the absence of “abundant life” (see Jn 10:10) for so many, due to societal ills that are not being talked about in church. Such discussions are difficult, political, and potentially divisive. They are also necessary.

In this project, I have offered the theology and tradition supporting such discussions, and suggestions to implement successful teaching through difficult subject material in worship that leads toward congregants truly seeing each other, and all humanity, as worthy of abundant living. I have provided recommendations for incorporation of political and/or potentially divisive conversations through various worship elements, and proffered guidance on the preparation, execution, and follow-up necessary for such conversations. While the information presented here is applicable to all Christian traditions, I write from a United Methodist standpoint. It is my hope that the United Methodist Church will embrace its self-proclaimed calling “to make disciples of

---

<sup>1</sup> Wheatley, *Turning to One Another*, 26.

Jesus Christ *for the transformation of the world*" (emphasis added). The world cannot be transformed in the direction of the Kingdom of God without our churches' pastors and worship leaders leading difficult conversations in worship.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Allen Jr., O. Wesley. *Preaching in the Era of Trump*. Saint Louis: Chalice Press, 2017.
- The Arbinger Institute. *The Anatomy of Peace: Resolving the Heart of Conflict*. Oakland: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2015.
- The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church*. Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2016. CBD Reader.
- Cardwine, Richard, "Methodists, Politics, and the Coming of the American Civil War," *Church History* 69, no. 3 (2000): 578-609. ATLA Religion.
- Carvalhaes, Claudio. *What's Worship Got to Do with It?: Interpreting Life Liturgically*. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2018.
- Charleston, Steven. *Good News: A Congregational Resource for Reconciliation*. Cambridge: Episcopal Divinity School, 2003.
- Duncan, Lenny. *Dear Church: A Love Letter from a Black Preacher to the Whitest Denomination in the U.S.* Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2019.
- Ellison II, Gregory C. *Fearless Dialogues: A New Movement for Justice*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2017.
- Feldmeir, Mark. *A House Divided: Engaging the Issues through the Politics of Compassion*. Saint Louis: Chalice Press, 2020.
- Ferguson, Dave, Jon Ferguson, and Eric Bramlett. *The Big Idea*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007.
- Field, David N. "The Unrealized Ethical Potential of the Methodist Theology of Prevenient Grace," *Hervormde Teologiese Studies* 71, no. 1 (2015): 1-8. Proquest Religion.
- Grant, Adam. *Think Again: The Power of Knowing What You Don't Know*. New York: Viking, 2021.
- Hamilton, Adam. *Seeing Gray in a World of Black and White: Thoughts on Religion, Morality, and Politics*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2008.
- Hamilton, Adam. *When Christians Get It Wrong*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2013.

- Johnson-DeBaufre, Melanie. "A Citizen's Agenda." Sermon at Drew Theological School, Madison, NJ, January 28, 2021. Accessed April 4, 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BU5mmLrL18>
- JustPeace Center for Mediation and Conflict Transformation. *Engage Conflict Well: A Guide to Prepare Yourself and Engage Others in Conflict Transformation*. Washington, DC: JustPeace Center for Mediation and Conflict Transformation, 2011.
- Liu, Gerald C. and Williams, Khalia J. *A Worship Workbook: A Practical Guide for Extraordinary Liturgy*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2021.
- Ketcham, Sharon. *Reciprocal Church: Becoming a Community Where Faith Flourishes Beyond High School*. Downer's Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2018.
- Marshall, Ellen Ott. *Introduction to Christian Ethics: Conflict, Faith, and Human Life*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2108.
- McCreary, Micah L. "Theological Dissonance: How Do We Respond?" August 18, 2017. Accessed December 18, 2020. <https://www.nbts.edu/theological-dissonance-respond/>
- Pui-Lan, Kwok and Burns, Stephen. *Postcolonial Practice of Ministry: Leadership, Liturgy, and Interfaith Engagement*. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2016. EBSCO eBook.
- Rauschenbusch, Walter. *Christianity and the Social Crisis in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: The Classic That Woke Up the Church*. New York: Harper One, 2007.
- Rauschenbusch, Paul. Introduction to *Christianity and the Social Crisis in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: The Classic That Woke Up the Church*, by Walter Rauschenbusch, xi-xvii. New York: Harper One, 2007.
- Repairers of the Breach. "Higher Ground Moral Declaration: Call to Action for a Moral Agenda." 2016. Accessed April 21, 2021. [breachrepairers.org/moralagenda](http://breachrepairers.org/moralagenda)
- Schiess, Kaitlyn. *The Liturgy of Politics: Spiritual Formation for the Sake of Our Neighbor*. Downer's Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2020.
- Wallis, Jim. Foreword to *Seeing Gray in a World of Black and White: Thoughts on Religion, Morality, and Politics*, by Adam Hamilton, ix-xii. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2008.
- Weatley, Margaret J. *Turning to One Another: Simple Conversations to Restore Hope to the Future*. Berret-Koehler Publishers, 2009. ProQuest eBook.

Weber, Theodore R. "Political Order in Ordo Salutis: A Wesleyan Theory of Political Institutions," *Journal of Church and State* 37, no. 3 (1995): 537-554. Proquest Religion.

Wesley, John. *Thoughts upon Slavery*. London: Methodist Church House, 2006.

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

*The United Methodist Book of Worship*. Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1992.

*The United Methodist Hymnal: Book of United Methodist Worship*. Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1989.

## APPENDIX 1

### Professional Interviews

Grace Pak:

Rev. Dr. Grace Pak is a pastor, teacher, coach, strategy expert, trainer and workshop leader specializing in intercultural competency. Her lifelong calling, and ongoing mission, has been to build up the Beloved Community where the love for God and love for all people are boundless, and fulfilling the Great Commission of Matthew 28:19a – “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations...” Her cultural understanding and sensitivity stems from 45 years of living in liminal spaces between different cultures which began when she moved to the United States from South Korea in 1976. As an ordained Elder in the United Methodist Church with over 25 years of experience in ministry, she served as the Director of Cross Racial/Cross Cultural Leadership at the General Commission on Religion and Race of the United Methodist Church, the General agency of the UMC, at various leadership levels throughout the Greater New Jersey Annual Conference and denomination judicatories, as well as an adjunct professor at Drew Theological School and pastor at local churches.<sup>1</sup>

Tanya Linn Bennet:

Rev. Dr. Tanya Linn Bennett is Associate Dean for Formation & Vocation and Associate Professor in the Practice of Public Theology & Vocation at Drew Theological School of Drew University, where she teaches in the areas of emerging worship, and church and society, with particular interest in youth, social justice and urban ministries. She believes that interactive, inspiring public proclamation moves us towards justice-making and inclusivity. She is a commissioned elder in the Greater New Jersey Annual Conference of The United Methodist Church. Bennett holds both MDiv and PhD degrees from Drew University.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> “Shalom IDEA,” accessed March 23, 2022, <http://www.shalomidea.com/about-the-founder>

<sup>2</sup> “Abingdon Press Authors,” accessed March 23, 2022, [http://www.abingdonpress.com/tanya\\_linn\\_bennett](http://www.abingdonpress.com/tanya_linn_bennett); “Wild Goose Festival,” accessed March 23, 2022, <http://www.wildgoosefestival.org/tanya-linn-bennett18>



## APPENDIX 2

“Difficult Conversations in Worship” workshop held on Zoom,  
February 11, 2022.

### Background

I had first approached my conference of the United Methodist Church about holding this workshop in August of 2021. In follow-up conversations, I was repeatedly told mine was interesting material and the workshop would happen. As the workshop neared, however, I was presented with various obstacles. First, it was requested that I submit my material ahead of time to be reviewed. A date for the workshop would not be given until I did so. I submitted an in-depth outline and requested a date for the workshop (to be added to the calendar but not announced) while leadership reviewed the material. I was graciously given a date. Two weeks later I received a phone call from my District Superintendent informing me the workshop would not happen. The reasoning was as follows: 1) There was not sufficient time in the calendar for the workshop (though I had already been given a date). 2) There was not enough information in the outline (though it was a detailed outline and my answers to questions raised did not affect the outcome). 3) There were concerns raised that this workshop would go against John Wesley’s mandate to “Do no harm.” Subject matter such as I was suggesting should be included in worship was viewed as potentially harmful.

Disappointed in the lack of both courage of the Conference and trust in its pastors, I turned to announcing the workshop via the United Methodist Clergy Facebook Page. I received 13 registrations, from eight different Conferences, including two in Africa. I was looking forward to the diversity of participation.

Unfortunately, I found myself disappointed again, as only three of those registered attended the workshop. Though we had productive conversation that was meaningful, informative, and inspiring, due to the low number of attendees I consider it a failed attempt at bringing my findings on this project to public knowledge. I hope to lead a workshop again someday, and I pray the Conference will acknowledge the importance of addressing difficult subject matter in worship, and partner with me in my endeavor.

Workshop slides, surveys, and my workshop outline follow.

## Workshop Slides

# Difficult Conversations

Incorporating Political and/or Potentially Divisive  
Subject Matter in Worship  
Rev. Amanda Hemenetz DMin Student

## Agenda

- Intro
- Why we should be addressing difficult issues in worship
- How to do it well
- Questions

My  
Project

---

Doctoral student at  
Drew Theological  
School (DMin)

---

Context—from a  
moderate church to an  
ultra progressive church

Who are we?

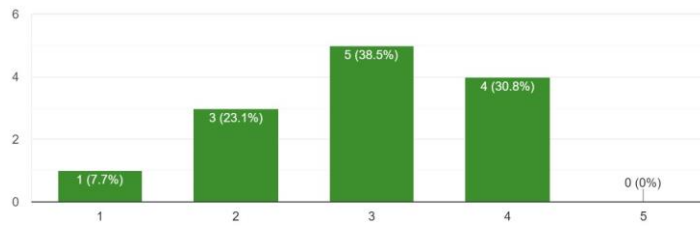
---



## Who are we?

How likely are you to consider presenting a topic that is political and/or potentially divisive in worship?

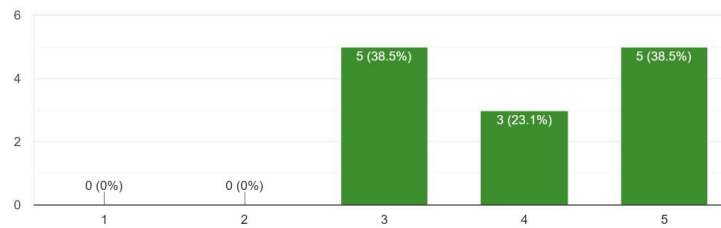
13 responses



## Who are we?

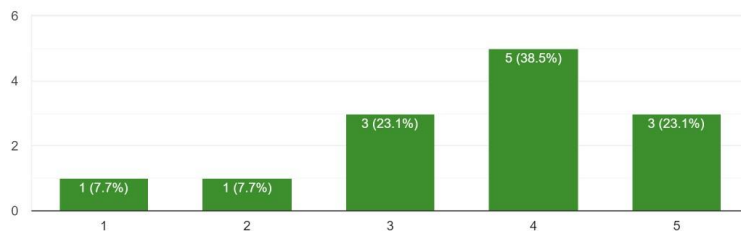
How much of a role do you think teaching should have in worship?

13 responses



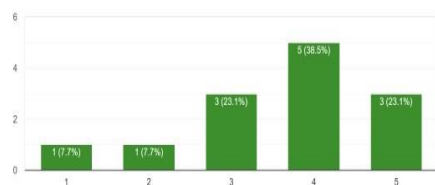
## Who are we?

Do subjects perceived as political and/or potentially divisive belong in worship?  
13 responses

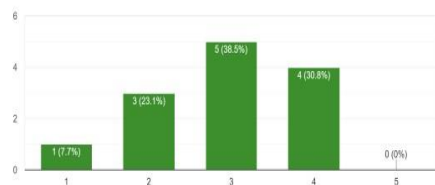


## Who are we?

Do subjects perceived as political and/or potentially divisive belong in worship?  
13 responses



How likely are you to consider presenting a topic that is political and/or potentially divisive in worship?  
13 responses



## FOR/AGAINST

---

Addressing political/potentially divisive subjects in worship

## FOR/AGAINST

---

### FOR

- Scripture
- Tradition
- Membership concerns/Pastoral care
- Jesus
- Kingdom of God/Change
- Whole-person Christianity
- Reducing theological dissonance

### AGAINST

- Scripture
- Tradition
- Membership concerns/Pastoral care

## Worship as a Place of Teaching

---

- Why? The majority of church members only attend worship
- Importance of spiritual formation
  - Goals: to believe, to live your beliefs
- Leads to whole-person Christianity, less theological dissonance, potential societal change toward the Kingdom of God

## Where can we (do we) teach about politics in worship?

---

- Sermon
- Scripture
- Prayers
- Hymns/music selections
- The Sacraments
- Other liturgy/responsive readings/affirmations of faith/the arts



## Teaching Politics Deliberately

---

- Can stick to one or two worship elements (or three, or four . . .)
- Can use all elements to make a political/potentially divisive subject THE focus of worship
- When to talk politics/potentially divisive subjects
  - Planned incorporation/Special Sundays
  - Sermon series
  - In response to current events

## Best Practices

---

- Respecting church individuality
- Use of language
  - Inclusive
  - Positive
- Know yourself and your people
- Present real information
- Use of true stories
- One consistent message per service
- Bathed in prayer

## Checks and Balances

---

- Importance of critiques
- Offering forewarnings
- Offering follow-up
- Planning with a team

## What to do with resistance

---

Back to our “FOR” chart

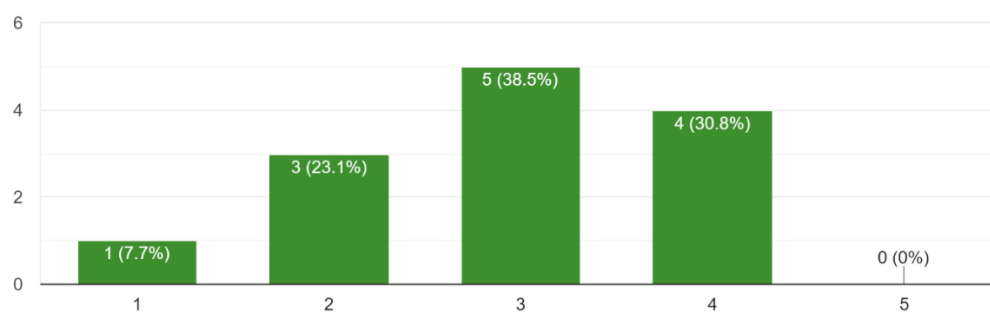
## FOR

- Scripture
- Tradition
- Membership concerns/Pastoral care
- Jesus
- Kingdom of God/Change
- Whole-person Christianity
- Reducing theological dissonance

### Workshop Pre-Survey Responses

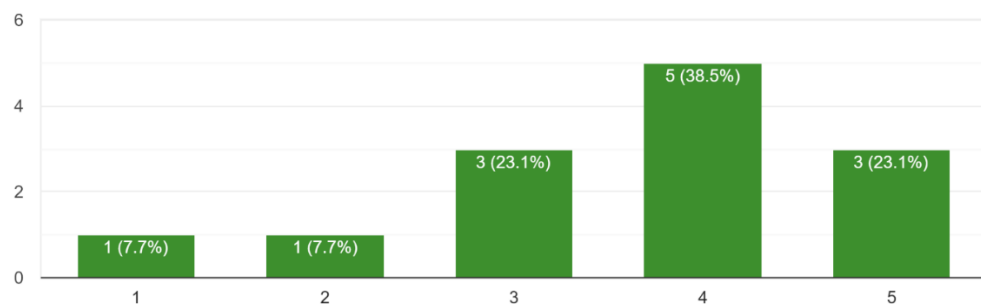
How likely are you to consider presenting a topic that is political and/or potentially divisive in worship?

13 responses



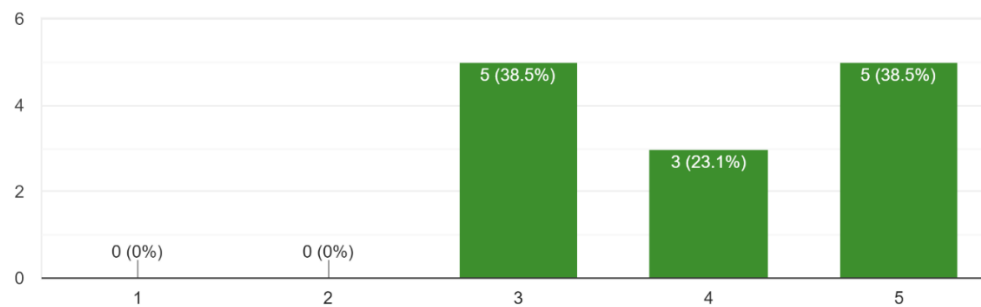
Do subjects perceived as political and/or potentially divisive belong in worship?

13 responses



How much of a role do you think teaching should have in worship?

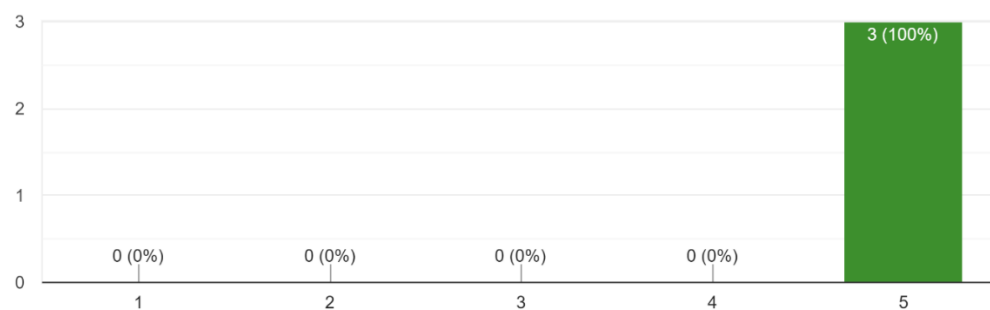
13 responses



### Workshop Post-Survey Responses

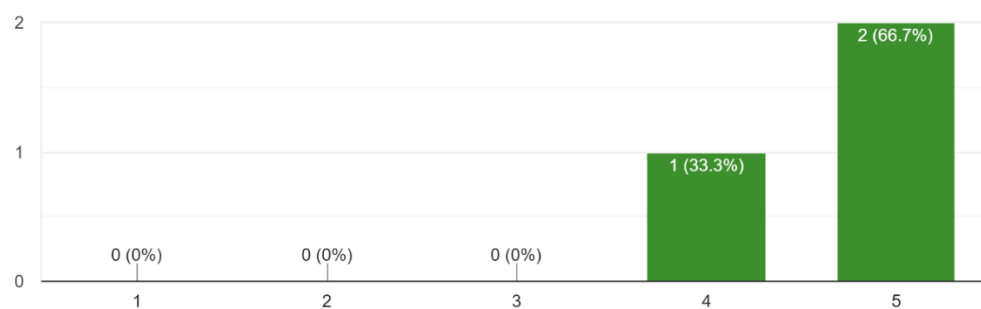
Was this workshop helpful?

3 responses



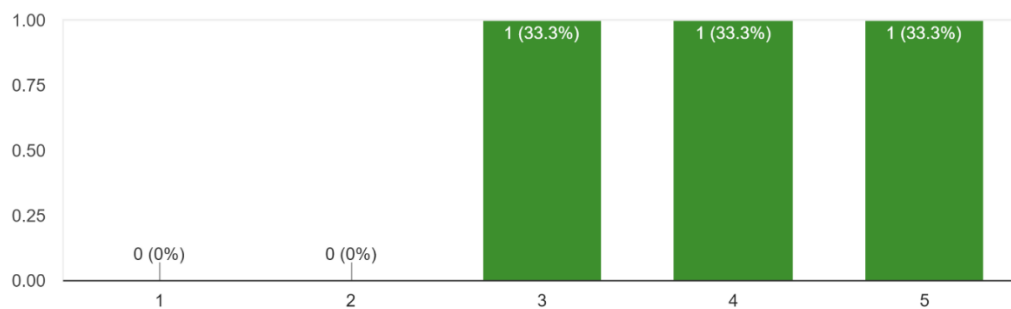
Do subjects perceived as political and/or potentially divisive belong in worship?

3 responses



How likely are you to consider presenting a topic that is political and/or potentially divisive in worship?

3 responses



Comments Section from Workshop Post-Survey

“Thanks! Look forward to reading your work. I’m glad you offered incremental ideas, that feels achievable. I wanted to ask about internal integrity and appreciated that you also lifted up the idea to add small things that feed our souls, meet those needs without putting ourselves on the cross.”

“It helped to hear ready-made responses for why we should address political topics in worship, the variety of ways we can weave political themes through services, and the importance of teaching within worship. Not only did I gain practical tips, but also the encouragement that I am not alone in the difficult discernment about when and how to address political topics in worship.”

“Thank you for the reminders that this is what Jesus would address”

### Workshop Outline as Submitted to the Conference

Title: Incorporating Political/Potentially Divisive Subject Matter in Worship

Presenter: Rev. Amanda Hemenetz, UMC Elder, Doctor of Ministry student

(Drew Theological School)

Date: Tuesday, February 8, 2022

Time: ?

Length: 1 hour 30 minutes

- I. Introduction
  - A. Welcome
  - B. Polls:
    - 1) In worship, how likely are you to address a subject that is political and/or potentially divisive?
    - 2) How much of a role do you believe teaching has in worship?
    - 3) Do subjects perceived as political and/or potentially divisive belong in worship?
    - 4) Same question as 3 above, but answer from your church’s perspective.
  - C. Intro to me and my project. What we will discuss:

- 1) Part 1—Why we should be addressing political/potentially divisive issues in worship.
- 2) Part 2—How to do it well.

II. Part 1

A. In breakout rooms, name and write down reasons FOR and AGAINST addressing political/potentially divisive subjects in worship.

B. Back together—create FOR/AGAINST chart. Add to include the following:

- 1) Scripture (both)
- 2) Tradition (both)
- 3) Membership concerns/Pastoral care (both)
- 4) Jesus (for)
- 5) Kingdom of God/Change (for)
- 6) Whole-person Christianity (for)
- 7) Reducing theological dissonance (for)

C. My definition of ‘politics’: *Politics refers to any and all systems of principles, thought, and/or action developed for the mediation of relationships among people.* Return to above list in II. B. and discuss from this perspective.

D. A plea for worship as a place of teaching, not just prayer, praise, and ritual.

- 1) Why? Oftentimes worship is the only time our congregants set aside for spiritual formation.
- 2) Spiritual formation. Goals: to believe; to live your beliefs. Ex: Mission statement of UMC.
- 3) Learning to incorporate faith in life (all aspects) leads to whole-person Christianity, less theological dissonance, potential societal changes toward the Kingdom of God.

III. Short break

IV. Part 2

A. Where do we (already) teach about politics in worship?

- 1) Sermon
  - 2) Scripture
  - 3) Prayers
  - 4) Hymns/music selections
  - 5) The Sacraments
  - 6) Other liturgy/responsive readings/affirmations of faith
- B. Teaching politics deliberately
- 1) Can stick to one or two worship elements from above
  - 2) Can use all elements and be the subject of worship
  - 3) When to talk politics/potentially divisive subjects
    - a) Planned incorporation/special Sundays
    - b) Sermon series
    - c) In response to current events
- C. Best practices
- 1) Respecting church individuality
  - 2) Use of inclusive language/positive talk/representing different sides
  - 3) One consistent message per service
  - 4) Present real information
  - 5) Use of true stories
  - 6) Bathed in prayer
- D. Checks & balances
- 1) Importance of critiques
  - 2) Offering forewarnings
  - 3) Follow-up
- E. What to do with resistance—back to “FOR” chart from II. B.
- V. Closing
- A. Questions/comments
  - B. Thank you
  - C. Survey will be emailed
  - D. Close with prayer