

BIRTHING PLACE:  
PLACEMAKING AS WO/MEN'S WORK

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## ABSTRACT

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Placemaking is foundational to the life of a community of faith. It is a process and discipline that has been passed down through millennia as a tactic for the survival of marginalized peoples and groups. Dominant culture has claimed space as the ubiquitous, unbound, cerebral realm where one exercises complete freedom. For those not belonging to the dominant culture, they have had to do the painstaking work of carving concrete place out of this space. Making place is the work of survival, meaning making, and hospitality; and with few exceptions, this work is done primarily by wo/men.

Between May 2022 and December 2023, 20% of United Methodist congregations in the U.S. voted to disaffiliate from the denomination.<sup>1</sup> At the dawn of 2023, four congregations in the Azle, Texas, area voted to disaffiliate, displacing a resilient remnant of wo/men and men who then formed a new congregation. Unified in making a place for LGBTQI+ folx to be welcomed and affirmed, Revive United Methodist Church was birthed as a place that would be open to all sexual orientations, races, and abilities. As this new church came into being, its congregation, especially its wo/men unknowingly employed the eleven principles of placemaking as set forth from the Project for Public Spaces. Following the example of biblical women like Miriam, a placemaker

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<sup>1</sup> <https://um-insight.net/in-the-church/umc-future/updated-report-on-united-methodist-disaffiliating-churches/>

extraordinaire, the wo/men and men of Revive United Methodist Church have made a place of acceptance and welcome where none existed before.

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## Introduction

*Let the beauty we love be what we do.  
There are hundreds of ways to kneel and kiss the ground.  
Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing,  
there is a field. I will meet you there. –Rumi*<sup>2</sup>

There is no such thing as disembodied dirt. Behind memory, story, idea, culture, discourse, and theology—all the things that make up human identity—lies a grounded principle of place. Place is neither abstract nor cerebral; it is visceral, messy, and sensual. The human need for concrete place is one reason why Genesis 1 begins with placemaking, written by human hands in a dis-placed place. “*In the beginning*” and *from the beginning*, the work of placemaking has been primarily the domain of wo/men. In Judeo/Christian traditions, the human story begins in Genesis, when the *ruach* (divine feminine) hovers over the vast, grieving, dark, chaotic wasteland (*tohu vbohu*) and chisels place into being. The point is made even clearer in Genesis 2 where the stuff of earth lingers between divine toes as deity walks in a garden with the “earth creatures.”

If humanity is built from a mixture of dirt and stardust, our very DNA calls out for a place to call our own. Men, traditionally, have used their privilege to define and occupy *space*, taking Genesis 1:26-28 to have “dominion” over the earth as a mandate for exploitative conquest and what has been seen as divine right. By contrast, it has been primarily wo/men<sup>3</sup> who have done the difficult work of re-claiming, re-forming, and

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<sup>2</sup> Rumi, *The Essential Rumi*, trans. Coleman Barks (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2004), 36.

<sup>3</sup> I am borrowing this term wo/men from Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza, who coined it. She explains the term in this way, “In order to lift into consciousness the linguistic violence of so-call generic male-centered language, I write the term wo/men with a slash and use the term wo/men and not men in an inclusive way. I suggest that whenever you read “wo/men,” you understand it in a generic sense. Wo/men includes man, she includes he and female includes male. To use wo/men as an inclusive generic term invites male readers to learn how to think twice and to

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resurrecting amorphous male *space* into *place* where life can be lived and rooted in dirt—shaped by memory and meaning infused into the very ground. Most wo/men do this work of placemaking in their daily lives instinctually, without a thought to the painstaking survival work in which they are engaged. Through my own work with pilgrimage, spirituality, and placemaking as an ordained female itinerant United Methodist elder, I have taught and led groups of wo/men in the art of placemaking. With the realization that they participate in such an artform every day of their lives, these wo/men have come to embrace the tenets of placemaking as profoundly resonant with their lives and callings.

The primary vision of my endeavor is to make Christian wo/men, and within my context United Methodist lay and clergy wo/men in particular, aware of their immense power and propensity to engage as leaders in placemaking for themselves and their communities. With an awareness that this is work in which they actively lead and participate, this project seeks to offer wo/men of faith the theological vocabulary, biblical precedent, social network, and communal framework to conspire with other wo/men to intentionally use placemaking as part and parcel of their Christian identity, their birthright. Beyond an awareness of the placemaking work they are already doing and why it is such a difficult task, wo/men can then use this knowledge to transform the ways in which they engage in mission within their communities and to form better strategies for

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experience what it means not to be addressed specifically.” The way in which I use this term differs from Schussler Fiorenza’s original meaning. I am using this term to be similarly disruptive (as Schussler Fiorenza’s original intent), but also as a category that includes all folx who are not the power-brokers in the dominant culture. In my context, this category includes children, youth, BIPOC folx, LGBTQIA+ folx and neurodivergent folx. More on Schussler Fiorenza’s use of the term, wo/men, can be found in *Congress of Wo/men: Religion, Gender, and Kyriarchal Power* (Oregon: Wipf and Stock Pub., 2016). The above quote is footnoted on page 1 of *Congress of Wo/men*.

collaboration and consensus within existing power structures, including church hierarchies and social justice networks.

When I began to conceptualize the formative question I wanted to explore around the work and discipline of placemaking within the church, I found the structure of the eleven principles of placemaking a unique framework on which to build. My first instinct after acquiring a helpful tool for ministry has always been, “How do I get this tool into the hands of congregational leaders?” My original plan for this project was, therefore, a series of webinars and/or workshops with United Methodist clergywomen and lay women to offer them the structure of the eleven principles of placemaking and converse around the possibilities of its implementation in their differing contexts. Though I have done some of this work through workshops and panels on church planting after disaffiliation, my project, by necessity, shifted from the more programmatic aspects I originally intended to a relational people-centered endeavor, more specifically, the empowerment of the wo/men and men of Revive United Methodist Church. As next steps start to emerge from the intense experience of beginning placemaking as Revive United Methodist Church, I anticipate that the journey of the question of placemaking within the church will shift once again to the programmatic for me. How will this discipline of placemaking take on life and breath as we begin to move into a new future building “good places” as a church.

Returning now to the scope of this project, its theoretical underpinnings can be divided into two broad foundational components. The first is working definitions of place, space, time, “here,” and placemaking. I will explore these terms by engaging the principles of placemaking set forth by the Project for Public Spaces, Judeo/Christian



scholars of theologies of place and space, artists, practitioners, and human geographers; and this exploration will rely heavily on those using a feminist and womanist lenses. I will then explore and describe the placemaking endeavor of Revive United Methodist Church in Azle, Texas, as a current example of how wo/men and men made a place for the displaced and marginalized. The last part envelopes the second foundational component of biblical precedent. In short, reading the narratives of biblical women who engaged in placemaking, with Miriam being the example *par excellence*.

This work is both professional and personal. It has not only informed my work with Revive UMC over this last year but has impacted my ministry in rural Central Texas, as I have worked with congregational leaders to create places of openness and inclusivity for children, wo/men, and the LGBTQIA+ community where none existed before. In this collaborative leadership effort, I have leaned heavily on ritual, biblical narrative, and the principles of placemaking to help carve out places in multiple congregational settings where all can be their authentic selves in community together.

What I have found, almost to my surprise, is that this work of placemaking is usually done by wo/men. Placemaking as the domain of wo/men has proven true within my own experience but is also true for boards of directors and founding members of the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience, Project for Public Spaces, as well as various justice groups working within kyriarchal systems. With few exceptions, wo/men tend to make up the majority of the leadership in these spaces where place is made. Since I am a cradle United Methodist, I used my knowledge of scripture, tradition, experience, and reason to interrogate why this correlation exists between wo/men and placemaking. It is as though wo/men possess an innate knowledge of the necessity to create a sense of

place in our bones; and we do this painstaking work to survive in a world where the culture of dominance, primarily occupied by white men in my context, claim most of the space.

This work is rife with concepts of place, space, placemaking, incarnational theology, pilgrimage, and theologies of place and space from both Christian and Jewish perspectives. I will be leaning heavily on the Hebrew Bible and the notion of women placemakers within those texts to set a precedent for wo/men of today. Within my ministerial context of rural central Texas, I have found that even those with the most conservative ideologies will join in the journey of making a place for others who think, look, and act differently than they do—and more specifically, those who are marginalized—if the journey is grounded in biblical story. The formation of Revive United Methodist Church has been an inclusive one, full of wo/men and men across the political and theological spectrum who joined in a movement of the Spirit to make an open and affirming place while simultaneously being pushed out of the churches that they had called home for decades.

This project/paper is organized into three main sections. The first section explores the definitions of place, space, time, event place (the concept of “here”), and placemaking, with a particular focus on the ways in which wo/men claim authority as placemakers. This first section will also explore the eleven principles of placemaking provided by Project for Public Spaces. They have created these principles for use in the secular sphere, but I have found them to be remarkably relevant when applied to sacred place and sacred placemaking. Place, space, time, event place, and placemaking all

imbricate to make a unique pattern of thought possible and provide a framework for the exploration of a biblical exemplar, Miriam, through the lens of placemaking.

The second section outlines and describes the necessary work of placemaking during disaffiliation in the United Methodist Church. From its inception, Revive United Methodist Church exemplifies why this project makes a difference in real wo/men's lives and the use of the inheritance we have received from women like Miriam to make a place where justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.<sup>4</sup>

The final section delves further into Miriam: her person and character as she was thrice called upon to be a placemaker in her own place, time, and event place. As a biblical character, she is a placemaker prophet at precisely *the* defining moment for the Israelite people after crossing the Re(e)d Sea. In many ways, she is the exemplar and foremother of those in this time and place who employ placemaking work, especially as it relates to liberation and community. In the wide scope of her story and the varying ways in which she makes place, I will look specifically at Miriam at her brother's birth; at the Re(e)d Sea; and towards the end of her life, as she questions Moses' authority, carrying her people's story and water with her as she goes.

In conversation with three biblical texts, I have paired three distinct learnings through my own experiences of placemaking. To begin, Moses' birthing narrative is paired with the study of the biblical narrative as place. Then, Miram as worship artist and prophet leading her people in a dance of freedom and drums while creating a liturgical place for difference to exist and thrive—a place of resistance—is paired with my work of leading fruitful workshops on placemaking for worship artists in this time and place. And

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<sup>4</sup> referencing Amos 5:24

finally, Miriam's questions, "Has God spoken only through Moses? Has God not spoken through us as well?" are allowed to reverberate through clergywomen's voices today who are navigating our place in the church asking similar questions.

## Part I

### Chapter 1:

#### There's No Place Like: Defining Space and Place

*To be rooted is perhaps the most important need of the human soul. It is one of the hardest to define. A human being has roots by virtue of his [sic] real, active, and natural participation in the life of a community which preserves in living shape certain particular treasures of the past and certain particular expectations of the future. —Simone Weil<sup>5</sup>*

The Enlightenment's preference for space, time, and speed over place has dominated public discourse for the last 300 years. Male European Enlightenment thinkers reveled in drawing from the deep well of Greek antiquity that privileged the philosophical and rational forms of space, rather than the storied and interpreted materiality of place.<sup>6</sup> This is a dichotomy with which Western theologians are eerily familiar. It shows up, for example, in Pauline writings as a flesh/spirit divide that has been read and re-inscribed *ad nauseum* in churches around the globe. And the two ends of the flesh/spirit spectrum are not ontologically neutral: spirit has traditionally been valued over flesh, space valued over place, and Greek philosophical thought valued over Hebraic storied locale. Looking at each of these pairs, we must note that the former is gendered male—soul, space, Greek philosophical thought—while the latter is relegated to the female realm—body, place, Hebraic storied locale.<sup>7</sup> Western Christianity has a tense dual inheritance rooted in Hellenistic and Hebraic origins. Even the terms I have used here are dualistic and do not reflect the wide swath of gray that exists between the two

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<sup>5</sup> Simone Weil, *The Need for Roots* (New York: G. P. Puttnam's Sons, 1952), 43.

<sup>6</sup> John Inge, *A Christian Theology of Place* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 8-9.

<sup>7</sup> Doreen Massey, *Space, Place and Gender* (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1994), 257. Doreen Massey articulates the gendered breakdown/dichotomy of space and place in *For Space*, see p. 10-15.

poles. Considering the gendered overlay, should Christian life, by definition, be rooted in a gender queer place/space? What is at stake for wo/men as Western Christianity and wo/men in Western culture seek to reclaim place as the locus of community and meaning-making?

Language about space and place is heavy with imbricated connotations. These terms can often slip the bounds of any simple definitions that are imposed upon them. This slippage can be seen as the concept of time works on the theories and concepts of place and space. These terms are also handmaidens to the larger theses and frameworks that particular academic disciplines employ. In fact, “simple” definitions of space and place are so slippery that many theorists spend a great deal of ink describing space and place in an apophatic manner: defining what space and place *are not* instead of attempting to define what they *are*.

Those thinkers who do try to define the terms of place and space often arrive by mapping out the multiplicity of meaning within each term. For example, Doreen Massey, a feminist geographer, opens her book entitled *Space, Place, and Gender* thus:

The terms space and place have long histories and bear with them a multiplicity of meanings and connotations... 'Space' may call to mind the realm of the dead or the chaos of simultaneity and multiplicity... Likewise with place, though perhaps with more consistency, it can raise an image of one's place in the world... with much greater intimations of mobility and agility, can be used in the context of discussions of positionality.<sup>8</sup>

For theologian John Inge, space conveniently morphs into place when endowed with human familiarity.<sup>9</sup> bell hooks simply describes place by a human sense of wonder/wander as she begins her book *Belonging: A Culture of Place* by stating, “The idea of place, where we belong, is a constant subject for many of us... Many folks feel no

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<sup>8</sup> Massey, *Space, Place and Gender*, 1.

<sup>9</sup> Inge, *A Christian Theology of Place*, 1.

sense of place.”<sup>10</sup> Space, for hooks, has defining characteristics such as genuineness, integrity, creativity, and imaginative process, but not physicality.<sup>11</sup>

The difficulty in (not) defining these terms is hardly novel. In Plato’s *Timaeus*, the account of creation by the Demiurge, “space” (*chora*) is preexistent, and the role of the Demiurge is to manipulate “space” into the shape of “place” (*topos*). Though even Plato sometimes does not distinguish between the two, place seems to generally be more fixed or static than space. Space is too chaotic, too untamed; place is the object of creation.<sup>12</sup> Echoes of Genesis 1 can be heard in the *Timaeus* and even Aristotle’s “forms.” Instead of “space” being referred to as *chora*, Genesis describes “space” as “*tobu vbohu*,” a formless void<sup>13</sup> out of which all was created. Both ancient accounts seem to conceptualize space as a preexistent *something* that begs to be shaped into *something else* or *something more*. Some working definition must be posited for the purposes of this project.

Yi-Fu Tuan, a human geographer, brilliantly and succinctly captures the essential difference between the concepts of space and place: “Space is more abstract than place. What begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value...if we think of space as that which allows movement, then place is pause; each pause in movement makes it possible for location to be transformed into

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<sup>10</sup> bell hooks, *Belonging: A Culture of Place* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 1.

<sup>11</sup> hooks, *Belonging*, 5.

<sup>12</sup> Inge, *A Christian Theology of Place*, 3.

<sup>13</sup> Everett Fox, *The Five Books of Moses: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy*, (New York: Schocken Books, 1997) 13. Footnote 2: “When the earth...: Gen. 1 describes God’s bringing order out of chaos, not creation from nothingness. Wild and waste: Heb. tohu va-vohu, indicating ‘emptiness.’”

place.”<sup>14</sup> Working from Tuan, place is created from space as it is inhabited, known, storied and thereby endowed with meaning and value. Place is a pause in movement which physically locates. Place has boundaries and marks belonging. Place can be holy—though for Christians, the notion of “holy place” is a certainly a complicated matter. Place is constructed by community. One can stand in a place and define where and why they are standing. Place has significant meaning to a particular people and must be claimed as such. Place also has a necessary component: the element of time, which will be explored in depth in chapter 2.

In contrast to place, Inge builds a definition of space thus: “Space means an area of freedom, without coercion or accountability, free of pressures and void of authority. Space may be....characterized by a kind of neutrality or emptiness waiting to be filled by our choosing.”<sup>15</sup> In freedom and emptiness, space is limitless and unbounded. Space is ubiquitous—everywhere and also no-where. Space is cerebral and undefined. And space has long been considered a critical category in the academy. In a 1967 lecture, Michel Foucault argued, “The present epoch will be above all the epoch of space. We are in the epoch of simultaneity: we are in the epoch of juxtaposition, the epoch of the near and far, of the side-by-side, of the dispersed.”<sup>16</sup> With the all-encompassing enormity of space, how could the familiar, known place keep humanity’s imagination and interest? It couldn’t, and the “epoch of space” reigned.

In the conceptual battle for dominance, space won out over place until quite recently. Why? Think about the connotations of space: limitless, infinite, transcendent,

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<sup>14</sup> Barbara E. Mann, *Space and Place in Jewish Studies* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2012) 17.

<sup>15</sup> Inge, *A Christian Theology of Place*, 36.

<sup>16</sup> Mann, *Space and Place in Jewish Studies*, 17.



immense. Now, think about the connotations of place, especially in church settings when the focus is usually on the transcendent: grounded, bounded, embedded, material, imminent. It is an unfair fight: space captured human imagination and philosophy more than place. In his study *The Fate of Place: A Philosophical History*, David Casey explains, “It was in exploring the extensiveness of space, its seemingly undelimitable outspread, its unendingness, that the co-ordinate but distinguishable notions of spatial absoluteness and infinity began to seem irresistible.”<sup>17</sup> One look at the pictures sent back from the James Webb Space Telescope prove that humanity’s fascination with mystery, beauty, and the seeming infinity of space is still well and truly alive. And yet, there seems to be a subtle turn in the last 40 years, especially from groups who are traditionally marginalized, offering a corrective on the ubiquity of space and lifting place as a critical category that begs a closer, more intense look.<sup>18</sup>

If space is conceptualized as an area of freedom and “void” of authority, limitless and boundless, it reflects the values and ambitions of masculocentric colonizing impulses which, in US culture, manifests most often and obviously as white male privilege and entitlement. Sovereignty from constraint is normalized for these dominant cultures, so much so as to be invisible. Who else, then, could claim space but this group? They can claim as much or as little cognitive and material space as they please without needing to negotiate boundaries or fear the ramifications of trespass. The turn toward place is a strategy of survival for those who live outside the well-maintained borders of the dominant culture. This is precisely where and why placemaking must interrupt the

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<sup>17</sup> David E. Casey, *The Fate of Place: A Philosophical History*, (Berkeley California: University of California Press, 1997), 77.

<sup>18</sup> Inge, *A Christian Theology of Place*, 24.

narrative of “free” space. This is also where embodied (though not static) place should join hands with the ultimate abstraction of time to make a place called “here.”

## Chapter 2

*It is impossible to divorce the questions of what we do from the question of where we are—or rather, where we think we are. —Wendell Berry*<sup>19</sup>

### Even Here: Where Place Meets Time

It is tempting when juxtaposing space and place to forget about the role that time plays in each of these concepts. A classic equation of thought is: time > space > place.<sup>20</sup> The fewer boundaries and fewer links to materiality, the better. In this equation space and place are both subservient to the all-encompassing doctrine of time.<sup>21</sup> Compared to time, even amorphous space has less gravitas because *something* (time) has agency over space. Such is the fragility of space. Yet, time plays an imperative role in the making of place.

Space is endowed with all sorts of dynamic properties and connotations that make mere place look like a stodgy, static monolith that could and should be easily ignored. Within Christian circles, the sacred texts of the New Testament point out that the material, the “placed,” is to be transcended; not cherished, treasured, or cultivated. How many times has Romans 12:2 been declared fervently from pulpits? “Present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God.”<sup>22</sup> These dominant voices have proclaimed a word of mind over matter. Spirit over flesh. Slaves obey your masters because you are free in Christ.

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<sup>19</sup> Wendell Berry, *The Unsettling of America* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1977), 51.

<sup>20</sup> Doreen Massey, *For Space*, (Thousand Oaks California: SAGE Pub. Inc., 2005), 31.

<sup>21</sup> Massey, *For Space*, 29.

<sup>22</sup> Romans 12:1-2 NRSVA

The subservience of place is the heritage of the apocalyptic Second Testament because at the heart of its message is the assumption that the Christ will soon return to transform the world. Until that time comes, Paul and others imply that humans should not get too attached to materiality but focus solely on a realm that is beyond the current, physical reality. One cannot underestimate the damage that this Christian narrative has done, especially to those who are not free, who are not fed, who are not male, and who are not privileged citizens of the ruling empire of the time. The Evangelical branches of the Christian tree are the most vocal proponents of time and space, keen to focus on the eternal nature of the soul—and where that soul will end up, depending upon how individually sinful a person is or isn't. This baffling insistence upon “soul saving” colors every facet of life from the loss of any ethical imperative to create a place of equity and justice for black and brown bodies to exist to the current conflict in Israel/Palestine. A myopic focus on time and space over and against place creates real and immediate dangers for those living outside of the protection of the dominant culture.

How far has the Christian narrative strayed from the God of Genesis 2 who plays in the mud and fashions an “earth creature” from the very ground? What does this Christian value system of time > space > place—time over space over place—do to the bodies that inhabit all three critical categories but are confined to the latter? What happens to placed bodies and placed narratives when they are allowed to collude with time? Though the answers to these questions are complex and fraught, they have very real consequences.

The value judgment placed upon the three critical categories of time, space, and place are linked with their ability to change, to transform, and to transcend any and all

confines humanity or the gods can place upon them. In this estimation, place is relegated to the back of the bus, so to speak, because it has been viewed as inert, solid, and material; only taking shape and existing within the confines of meaning and memory that is given to it. Place is acted upon, without any agency of its own. Can this image of place be transfigured if it is put into conversation with time?

When time intersects with place, these two categories create a new, dynamic, transitory category called event/place or more simply, the concept of “here.” “Here” as a critical category is powerful.<sup>23</sup> “Here” is a moment in time grounded in a specific place. “Here” is creation. “Here” is art. “Here” is meaning and memory, ritual, place, and dirt. “Here” is what makes us human. “Here” is also fleeting. “Here” cannot be space but can only be place and time. “Here” is placemaking with bodies that are real, genuine, marginalized, broken, valuable, connected, and grounded.

The concept of “here” shows up every time there is a map with a big red dot saying, “You are here.” The point of knowing where “here” is, is to find the pathway to where the “here” is that one is travelling to. “Here” has ontological *and* eschatological value. The metaphor of mapping and the practice of cartography have been drafted into the conversation of space and time with many geographers and theorists quick to point out the deficiencies of any map as well as the subsequent metaphors that use the language of mapping. “The map-territory metaphor, as powerful and effective as it has been, tends to support the comprehension of territory as static, as stable, as mappable, as graspable

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<sup>23</sup> Massey, *For Space*, 139. “Then ‘here’ is no more (and no less) than our encounter, and what is made of it. It is, irretrievably, here *and* now. It won’t be the same ‘here’ when it is no longer now.”

from some view.”<sup>24</sup> The abject abhorrence this author posits for something that could be found “as mappable” and “as graspable” cannot be hidden.

Mapping has been a sword of the empire, a tool of the politics of power, and a charting of foreignness. Maps are always changing and evolving—even when trying to depict the same “place.” Think about the maps found at the beginning or ending of modern Bibles. The geographical area—the dirt—is the same, but the boundaries—the places of “here”—the borderlines are constantly moving, keeping pace with the story of a people also on the move. Modern maps are updated daily with new routes, new borders, changing coastlines, and elevations. Change the scale of time, and “here” doesn’t seem to be anchored anywhere on a map as continents drift apart, mountain ranges form, species evolve, tribes move.

Changing maps can demonstrate the fleeting nature of “here” as well as its significance. Lives are lived in the places of “here” that exist within a certain place and a time, and then “here” changes. Place is constantly being renegotiated and carved out; being continually endowed with meaning and understanding. In a chapter entitled “The Elusiveness of Place,” Doreen Massey describes “places not as points or areas on maps, but as integrations of space and time, as *spatio-temporal* events.”<sup>25</sup> Place, again, is sculpted from space using the chisel of time. So, what is the relationship of all of these elements of time, space, place, and “here,” to placemaking? What do they have to do with survival, especially of wo/men, those on the margins? What is the point of knowing “here” if the “here” of placemaking is ephemeral and does not offer an eternal anchoring

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<sup>24</sup> Thomas A. Tweed, *Crossing and Dwelling: A Theory of Religion* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 10.

<sup>25</sup> Massey, *For Space*, 130. Emphasis in the original.

to the ground of being? Why is the reclamation and naming of the work of placemaking important?

If a human can carve a place, a “here” and “now,” then they can exist in that place. They can live in that place for however long that place will hold. Placemaking is a survival technique employed by those who are not part of a dominant power structure that proclaims a place is “here” for them. This place can be a Site of Conscience.<sup>26</sup> This place can be an AA or NA meeting. This place can be Reconciling Congregation in the United Methodist denomination. This place can be a classroom where non-binary bodies learn what it means to claim “here” and stand in it boldly. This place can be where wo/men have bodily autonomy without the fear of retributive action. Every time a person diverges from a white, heteronormative, male space, they must *make* a place, a “here,” because the alternative is no place: *no place already exists for them*. No place, or undifferentiated space—in which systematic structures of power and authority of supremacy thrive—works toward the annihilation of any divergence. In space, metanarratives of dominance control meaning. In such an atmosphere making place, especially by people who are pushed out and erased from time and space, is an act of *resistance*. Placemaking is work that is already and always being done. But an understanding of the principles of placemaking could empower those who cannot find a place of survival—their place of “here”—with the tools to excel and make their world a better place.

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<sup>26</sup> As succinctly explained on their website, “The International Coalition of Sites of Conscience is the only global network of historic sites, museums and memory initiatives that connects past struggles to today's movements for human rights. We turn memory into action.” <https://www.sitesofconscience.org/>

### Chapter 3

*Street corners have always been space that has belonged to men – patriarchal territory...In cities women have no outdoor territory to occupy. They must be endlessly moving or enclosed. They must have a destination. They cannot loiter or linger. –bell hooks<sup>27</sup>*

#### **Make Way: Placemaking and Its Principles**

Placemaking is altogether different from the categories of time, space, place, and here. Placemaking is both a process and a philosophy of transforming nebulous spaces into communal places with a specific set of principles guiding their creation. These principles as expressed by Project for Public Spaces are within a secular framework; however, when one thinks about the act of sacred placemaking, the same principles apply. Placemaking is fairly new as a defined discipline, even if it is ancient in its practice.

Since the mid-1990's, Project for Public Spaces has been working with over 1,800 activists and strategists from over 80 countries, leading communities (especially in urban areas) to be more intentional when they undertake placemaking. "More than just promoting urban design, placemaking facilitates creative patterns of use, paying particular attention to the physical, cultural, and social identities that define a place and support its ongoing evolution."<sup>28</sup> Public space becomes a place where social issues like social isolation, social exclusion, homelessness, gentrification, ableism, sexism, and racism (to name a few) become magnified and visible. Public spaces are where marginalized communities make known that, for them, there are no "free spaces." "Public

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<sup>27</sup> Hooks, *Belonging*, 143.

<sup>28</sup> Project for Public Spaces. *Placemaking: What if We Built Our Cities Around Places*, www.pps.org, 2018.



space is where nearly half of violent crimes happen. Public space is where policing ensures safety for some but not others....Public space is for conveying our outrage and our highest aspirations, as well as for laying the most mundane utilities and infrastructure.”<sup>29</sup> Public space has the potential to transform a community. The ways in which public space is utilized as good place or as dangerous space is a mark of the health of the community.

The process of placemaking as well as the places that are created by this process forefront those on the margins of society. If all space in the Western world is essentially white, cis-gendered male space, then placemaking should ultimately be crafted for and by those who have been systematically, historically, and deliberately disenfranchised. It follows that sacred placemaking should be an action of Christ-following communities, if indeed these communities take incarnation and God’s stated preference for the poor seriously.

Various iterations of Christianity, especially those in the Protestant vein, have had a complicated relationship with holy place. However, creating holy places where silenced voices are heard, broken bodies are honored, and diverse community can gather with the courage and ferocity of witness is an ethical imperative.<sup>30</sup> Placemaking at its best can only fulfil its stated goals when it becomes a medium for creativity, expression, and experimentation. In my context, experience, and observations, these disciplines are more

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<sup>29</sup> PPS 2018, 1.

<sup>30</sup> Eusebius be damned! Eusebius thought that “holy places were what Jews and pagans had; Christians, he thought knew better.” R.A. Markus, “How on Earth Could Places Become Holy? Origins of the Christian Idea of Holy Places,” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 2:3, 257-271 (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994.) 258.

frequently employed by oppressed groups because patriarchal white power-structures will not allow for their voices or bodies to be present in normative ways.

Eleven underlying principles ground the process of placemaking.<sup>31</sup> Out of the eleven, the first is the idea is that “the community is the expert.” Begin with the lived experience of the people whose bodies inhabit a place, and let the community propel the project forward, taking care to privilege those who are usually ignored or excluded. Already, from its first stated principle, placemaking theory de-centers dominant voices that are usually propped up as “experts.” Within any given community that seeks to do the work of placemaking there are talents and gifts within the community itself. Instead of looking for and to leaders external to the community for their “expertise” and knowledge, this first principle redirects the power structure to those within the community who hold communal memory, who have lived experiences of what place that community needs to thrive, and who possess intimate knowledge of the critical issues that need to be addressed by a new making of place.

The next step is not to put form over function, or more precisely put in the second principle, to “create a place, not a design.” Design dominates the realm of cognitive space. In its privilege, design has the luxury to be theoretical at best and oppositional to lived experience at its worst. Design is in the realm of space. Transformation from undefined space to vital place requires a geography of landscaping, along with physical markers of memory and significance. In contrast to space, place involves relationships

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<sup>31</sup> The eleven principles identified by the PPS are as follows: 1. The Community is the Expert. 2. Create a Place, Not a Design. 3. Look for Partners 4. They Always say “It can’t be done.” 5. Have a Vision 6. You Can See a Lot Just By Observing. 7. Form Supports Function. 8. Triangulate. 9. Experiment: Lighter, Quicker, Cheaper. 10. Money Is Not the Issue. 11. You Are Never Finished. PPS 2018, 13.

with the community inhabiting it as well as with what surrounds it. Making place also means changing the patterns of interaction within a certain place to foster freedom for those usually confined and defined in spaces. Think of an art gallery curator that has a specific journey planned as each piece is installed. Every encounter, curated with care, will change the place in which the art instillation exists. In this way, place is something that is inherently more than just a sum of its parts. Place is created by encounter and meaning. If the community is the expert and place is created specifically to facilitate encounter among diverse groupings of people, it cannot be done in a vacuum. This is what leads us to the next principle of placemaking.

The third principle states that partners are needed. Neighbors are needed.

Collaborative relationships between existing structures who share a goal of demarcating a safe place where community can gather, form, and be nurtured are necessary. For those who feel powerless, this step is crucial. This is a chance to find a “coalition of the willing” that organizes together for a common good. Throughout history, there have been placemaking movements by subjugated peoples who organized to carve out a place of survival in the midst of a hostile environment. Remember suffragettes who parked themselves outside of Woodrow Wilson’s White House while fighting for the right to vote? Or lunch counters across the American South as black men, wo/men and their allies sat in civil disobedience to racist policies? Think about the First Nation peoples who gathered at Standing Rock to protest environmental racism by protesting an oil pipeline. Or when the Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania sang for their freedom from an oppressive Soviet regime. There is power in bringing enough people together to make a

lived difference in a real place, creating pockets of liberative autonomy within spaces of pervasive hostility.

Those involved in the transformational work of placemaking are likely to encounter obstacles. And so, the fourth principle underlying this work is: “They always say, ‘It can’t be done.’” While this expression speaks to the barriers and difficulties place-makers will inevitably encounter, it also speaks to the further de-centering of power and privilege because place is not created for “them.” That is why “they” say it can’t be done. Who are “they”? The existing structures of power that have a vested interest in keeping communities siloed and isolated. “They” cannot control the creative, communal process necessary to make place. “They” are the ones that will be disrupted and de-centered if genuine place is made. Place limits “their” space to control the metanarrative they author. Inevitably, creating place cannot be done without encountering seemingly insurmountable obstacles and struggling for every inch of ground reclaimed by those who take up space. No space gives way to place willingly. There is no paid profession entitled, “Placemaker.” This work defies the normative, capitalistic culture of profit and exchange. Often wo/men engage in the work of placemaking unconsciously as a survival mechanism, not a conscious act of resistance. And yet, resistance it is. It is holy work that is not easily understood by society at-large. That which cannot be easily understood is often maligned as that which cannot be done.

The fifth principle asserts: “You can see a lot just by observing.” This principle adds the element of time. When wo/men come to a space, it is not always immediately evident what type of place is needed to thrive or simply exist. Placemaking is tediously careful work that is birthed from the needs of a particular community in space and time.

Is the community hungry? Then perhaps it needs a place of feeding. Is the community in danger? Then perhaps it needs a place of safety. Is the community surviving in scarcity and fear? Then perhaps it needs a place of abundance and hope. Is the community adrift in a sea of transition? Then perhaps it needs a place of stability and rootedness. Is the community in search of the holy? Then perhaps a place where the holy dwells can be made. The community can be entrusted to reveal its own deep needs of place over time through observation. Beyond seeing and observing what is needed, place-makers must have courage and vision which then moves others toward meeting those needs. Following close on the heels of the fifth principle is the sixth: “Have a vision.” Place is formed for a purpose, for a time, and for its people. It does not simply exist. Those who organize around making place must have a goal for the place in mind, a place of meaningful encounter. The place will fit its function<sup>32</sup>; form will follow, and thereby support function.

The eighth principle considers how people might move and interact within a place, or “triangulate.” Holly Whyte defines triangulation as the process “by which some external stimulus provides a linkage between people and prompts strangers to talk to other strangers as if they knew each other.”<sup>33</sup> If place is primarily created for and by the community that lives within it, then attention and care need to be given to how those within the community will navigate and negotiate said place: How will it facilitate encounters between diverse groups? And for the purposes of holy place: how will it facilitate holy/human encounter? How will the different elements of the place be mapped so that the community moves about the place in patterns that bring people into

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<sup>32</sup> This is the seventh principle.

<sup>33</sup> <https://www.pps.org/article/11steps>

conversation with each other, so that differing people can meet one another and recognize the inherent worth in the “other”? How can the differing modalities within a place overlap, bringing together affinity groups that might not otherwise come into contact with each other if a place were not created to do so? Triangulation is a difficult task for any place, but if the community sets out with a vision to bring differing marginalized groups together for the purpose of creating strong bonds, then the place will fulfill its function.

The ninth principle counterintuitively shifts the thinking of place to “lighter, quicker, cheaper”—a phrase borrowed from Eric Reynolds<sup>34</sup> which seeks simple, short-term, and low-cost solutions that will have remarkable impact. This principle reminds placemakers of the freedom to experiment with short-term improvements that can be made quickly, cost-effectively, and refined over time. In many cases, people intuitively think of place as static—a subject written about at length in Chapter 2. Place is made with a purpose, but purpose does not equate with permanence. Nothing in the world needs to be permanent; in fact, nothing in the world *can* be permanent. For as much effort as placemaking requires, each place that is made is also ephemeral. Place is alive. It is the nature of living things to be in a constant cycle of transformation. Placemaking is a process and philosophy born out of necessity. When the need for a particular place no longer exists, a current place can be transformed (again) into a new place as the needs of the community change; or as the community moves, a new place is made elsewhere. The practice of placemaking involves knowing that whatever place is “made,” it will change and necessitate being “re-made” as the people inhabiting it do. Moving from secular to

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<sup>34</sup> <https://www.pps.org/article/lighter-quicker-cheaper> Eric Reynolds at Urban Space Management has implemented a low-cost, high impact strategy to development.

sacred placemaking, from this principle of impermanence and evolution, we might posit that holy place looks much more like a tabernacle than a temple.

Those folk who make place usually do not have unlimited resources to do so. Temporary “permanence” requires a degree of capital that would eventually be wasted as the needs of the community change. Again, in the context of sacred place, we might reconsider how large church sanctuaries function: massive spaces built with egregious amounts of money; used once a week for one purpose; with pews bolted to the floor, all facing in one direction, so the average person does not encounter others but sees only the backs of their heads.... It does not take much to see how these spaces lack triangulation and the transformational qualities that would allow congregational space to meet evolving needs. In this way, we can see how sanctuaries are more static and designed space, not a place. In contrast, an open outdoor place that boasts tables and food, a place for children and infants, accessible to those with mobility issues, and multiple points of access for the surrounding community is a successful place. Cheaper, more accessible, able to be moved and changed quickly: this kind of place is able to move where the community goes, to meet current needs, and to foster new relationships and coalitions. This kind of place has a porosity which invites and allows multiple communities to connect within it.

With close ties to the ninth principle, the tenth claims: “Money is not the issue.” Involvement and agency are the driving forces of place and placemaking. What makes a place truly valuable is not the money that is sunk into its creation, but the people who invest their time and talents to hallow it. In applying this to congregational settings, large amounts of money can purchase beauty in the forms of stained glass and arching ceilings

that reach skyward. However, much less money is needed to buy tools and seeds for a community garden that will feed a community.

The last principle admits that the work of placemaking is never finished. Place, although grounded, is never *static*. It morphs with the changing needs of the community that give the place meaning and purpose. As new bodies with diverse voices and needs appear in the place, a well-made place transforms and moves with them. Why is this last principle so important? In short, if a place becomes constant, it also becomes easily controlled. It happens often with church buildings that are no longer sanctuaries (places of safe rest) for those who have no other place. These become stalwart monuments of oppression as much if not more so than the confederate Civil War statues that stand across the streets from their imposing edifices. The community is no longer the expert in these church building places, those who are only interested in keeping up the beautiful facades of these buildings that represent the institution are the ones in charge.

In the United Methodist Church, it had to be written into *The Book of Discipline* that at least one third of the trustees were to be women because those overseeing buildings and physical assets were almost always exclusively male. The recognition that some gender equity within a group that stewards the maintenance of the physical place churches occupy was a small nod to the importance of wo/men's voices around the table in hopes they would bring with them a vision of their community that was more diverse than previously represented. In truth, the United Methodist Church still has a long way to go for all peoples to be represented equally around tables of power. The eleventh principle not only allows for place to continually meet the needs of those inhabiting it, it continually disrupts the movement toward exclusive space.



Even the most carefully reclaimed place can slide back into exclusive space once more if it is not perpetually changing to meet the needs of the community. In terms of sacred place, we might consider the fate of white urban churches over the last fifty years. As the demographics of the communities surrounding these congregations changed, those inside these churches changed only in age.

The purpose of the eleven principles of placemaking is to make not just any place, but *good* place. Good place begins with dirt and creativity, two tools of those folk who have needed to find alternative patterns of life to survive. A good place feels welcoming and comfortable. A good place engages all of the senses. A good place values authenticity and originality from every person that makes that good place. A good place has a positive and memorable identity that is repeated often and loudly.<sup>35</sup>

The above qualities of a good place lead to deeper questions. What is grounding the community that will inhabit this place? Is the place safe or brave? Is it accessible? Can it be seen and explored? Can it be known? Who does it serve? Who does it exclude? Because of the strategies employed by placemakers, one of the strongest markers of the goodness of a place is the presence of women and children and those with black and brown bodies in that place.<sup>36</sup> There are new places aching to be made as long as there are those who are excluded from space. This work is never complete, just as the work of creation is never finished. In participating in placemaking, wo/men are claiming their rightful place as co-creators with their deity.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> These are the four key qualities of place as set forth in the Project for Public Spaces <https://www.pps.org/article/august2005whatmakesplacegreat>

<sup>36</sup> William White, <https://theurbanmycelium.com/william-whyte-recipe-for-good-public-spaces/>

<sup>37</sup> Leonard Hjalmanson, *No Home Like Place: A Christian Theology of Place*, (Portland: Urban Loft Pub, 2015), 101.

## Part 2

### Chapter 4: Place Making in a Place Like Revive United Methodist Church

*Holy is the place I stand  
To give whatever small good I can  
And the empty page, and the open book  
Redemption everywhere I look. – Carrie Newcomer<sup>38</sup>*

The way I see it, a large part of my vocation requires my active participation in placemaking. It is my inheritance. I look to biblical wo/men like Miriam, Esther, Ruth, Rahab, Jael, Tabitha, and countless others named and unnamed to guide my pilgrim journey into placemaking wherever I am. As an ordained woman that serves as priest, prophet, pilgrim, and poet within specific communities in an itinerant system of the United Methodist Church within the Central Texas Conference, placemaking has been a matter of survival as well as an ethical imperative. This has been true throughout my 17 years in full-time professional ministry.

The prominence of placemaking as Biblical inheritance and ethical imperative has also been true of the wo/men I have served alongside, clergy and lay alike, as they have conspired to carve out places of meaning, safety, freedom, and faith within a Church institution whose hostility toward them—which was thinly veiled to begin with—has now come to the forefront, cloaked in a language of “upholding orthodoxy.” The necessary truth of placemaking is written on the weary faces of these wo/men who are being displaced simply because they dared to carve out a place that opened room for difference to exist: a place of hospitality and welcome for those seeking a home, a “here” in a church space that was previously and inexorably closed to them.

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<sup>38</sup> Newcomer, Carrie. Holy As a Day Is Spent, song lyrics, 2012.

Just as the concepts of space, place, time, event-place (here), and placemaking are not new, neither is battle of right belief (orthodoxy) over and above right practice (orthopraxy). The analogy could be drawn thus: orthodoxy is to orthopraxy as space is to place—the former being valued higher than the latter by the dominant culture, or more precisely, the culture of dominance. The United Methodist Church has in no way been immune to this value system since its inception in 1968. With a firmly established *Book of Discipline* and a hierarchical structure disappointingly similar to previous iterations of church structure, the lines of orthodoxy were drawn in large bold lines. This legacy has left United Methodists with a denomination that is overwhelmingly white, male, and heteronormative.

And yet for those wo/men who were brave, free, and defiant enough to act upon it, within this rigid structure and its gatekeepers and rules, there was just enough room and grace to make place for those who needed sanctuary. These were small places of necessity and survival—Reconciling churches, bilingual congregations, alternative communities that fed any and all who were hungry, free from the trappings and fetters of harsh “orthodoxy” from within a denomination that is also non-creedal. These places, growing in number<sup>39</sup> in the last fifty-five years, became intolerable to those who refused to entertain the idea of any place where diverse bodies and ideas were given a chance to thrive. The occupation of space was a zero-sum game. Any reclamation of place out of “their” space was an abomination to God, a god fashioned conveniently in their own image. No sheep from other sheepfolds need apply.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> For instance, the number of Reconciling Congregations and members has grown over the last thirty years. The grass-roots Reconciling Movement now spans four continents, over 1000 churches and 40,000 individuals. <https://rmnetwork.org/who-we-are/>

<sup>40</sup> Referencing John 10:16

In 2019, there was a called United Methodist General Conference to specifically address disagreements within the denomination around issues of human sexuality. The main issue concentrated on whether or not to remove harmful, discriminatory, and punitive language from several phrases in *The Book of Discipline*. The most potent of these phrases, termed the “incompatibility clause” added in 1972, reads: “The practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching. Therefore, self-avowed practicing homosexuals are not to be certified as candidates, ordained as ministers, or appointed to serve in The United Methodist Church.”<sup>41</sup> In every General Conference since 1972 there has been a resolution to remove this offensive passage from *The Book of Discipline*; and every quadrennium, those who value uniformity and their version of orthodoxy have defeated these resolutions.

Ostensibly because of this impasse within the denomination, the 2019 General Conference inserted a paragraph into *The Book of Discipline* whereby congregations who found the current stipulations discriminating against the LGBTQIA+ intolerable could disaffiliate from the United Methodist Church under more favorable terms than had previously been imposed on congregations seeking to leave the denomination. It was termed the “gracious exit” paragraph. The first part of this paragraph reads: “Because of the current deep conflict within The United Methodist Church around issues of human sexuality, a local church shall have a limited right, under the provisions of this paragraph, to disaffiliate from the denomination for reasons of conscience regarding a change in the requirements and provisions of *The Book of Discipline* related to the practice of

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<sup>41</sup> United Methodist Book of Discipline paragraph 304.3

homosexuality or the ordination or marriage of self-avowed practicing homosexuals as resolved and adopted by the 2019 General Conference....”<sup>42</sup>

Though no changes have been made to *The Book of Discipline* since 2019, about 20% of churches within the denomination have taken the opportunity to disaffiliate from the United Methodist Church. The vast majority of those that have disaffiliated have not done so to live into a more open and affirming space, but rather a reactive space of intrenchment and fear that the Church will become a heterodox bastion of acceptance for those that United Methodists have traditionally marginalized and legislated against. The global COVID pandemic beginning in March of 2020 caused the General Conference of that year to be rescheduled until April of 2024. Dissatisfied with the postponement and the continuing impasse over the issue of inclusion, a faction initially called the Wesley Covenant Association broke away to form the Global Methodist Church (GMC), which launched in May of 2022. In its formation, the GMC used a campaign of misinformation alongside a droning rhetoric, urging Methodists to “turn back” to an “orthodox” way. These are the actions that led to the formation of Revive United Methodist Church in Azle, Texas, in March of 2023. What follows is the story of the resilient and resourceful wo/men who led the efforts of placemaking as a new church was created from the ashes of disaffiliation.

In July of 2022, my husband and I were appointed as co-pastors of First United Methodist Church of Azle, Texas (FUMC Azle). We had been assured by our District Superintendent and the previous pastor that FUMC Azle was firmly United Methodist and had no plans to disaffiliate. As a placemaker, I always enter a space—especially a

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<sup>42</sup> <https://www.ctcumc.org/discipline-disaffiliation-paragraphs>

congregational one—looking for who it serves and who it discards. The structuring of church space reveals both who and what the church values as architecture expresses and upholds theology. “Places embody meaning and enacted relationships that cannot be reduced to their physical structure, but that also cannot be wholly disentangled from their physical structure.”<sup>43</sup> A short walk through their building revealed that FUMC valued one specific set of people of a specific age range and socioeconomic status. Those in this group of privileged value and voice enveloped and defined space for FUMC Azle. This group had, over time, created a labyrinthine building that was difficult to navigate for outsiders. As new building projects in the history of the congregation created more space, this group designed these spaces by committee with no thought to how the community would inhabit them or how ministry would be facilitated within them. These spaces were, by every definition, dysfunctional—and intentionally and willfully designed to be so. This group had chosen a damp basement for the children’s ministry area and a hidden upper room for its youth, intentionally keeping children out of sight and mind. In addition, both of these spaces were wildly inaccessible for anyone who had mobility challenges of any kind. These places were physically cut off from the life of the older congregation members. The sub context was clear: no person under sixty was valued in this space.

From our first Sunday on July 3rd, Todd and I tried to pry open small places of hospitality and acceptance. We claimed the communion table as an open one, where everyone who was hungry was invited to join in the feast. As a liturgical artist, Todd brought in colorful banners, depicting multi-hued, joyful people. This was literally the

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<sup>43</sup> Jennifer Allen Craft, *Placemaking and the Arts: Cultivating the Christian Life* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2018) 203.

vision that we had for the church, an open Table of justice and joy. Thinking with Exodus 25-40 and the prolonged description of the worshipping space of the tabernacle for the wandering people of Israel, the physical beauty of place for the tabernacle is important and not static.<sup>44</sup> This beauty Todd created as visual place was immediately embraced by those who found the space of FUMC Azle inhospitable. It was also the place that began a rigid rejection of every gift and grace we brought with us by the space-keepers. This image was deemed “inappropriate” because it used the multi-colored hues of the rainbow (a flagrant nod to LGBTQIA+ folx, apparently), and depicted people of different ethnicities joined in joy of the Spirit. The backlash was immediate and fierce. By July 5<sup>th</sup>, a petition to discuss disaffiliation from the “gay-loving, Bible-changing, liberal United Methodist Church” that Todd and I represented had made its way to our desk. Art and ritual and those that participate in them are powerful placemakers. Like Miriam by the Re(e)d Sea, ritual, art and sacrament open a place of freedom that cannot be controlled. Bread, cup and three pieces of cloth hung in a space that was supposed to be a sanctuary for the people of God became the hand-drums of that declared liberation in a space that would not tolerate place being made.

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<sup>44</sup> Craft, *Placemaking and the Arts*, 128. Craft asserts, “The wilderness tabernacle provides the first space constructed expressly for the divine presence to dwell and at the same time provides one of the most explicit endorsements and longest descriptions of human artistic practice in scripture.”



By November of 2022, the space-keepers of FUMC Azle had begun to organize and send out misinformation about the United Methodist Church. They began a phone and email campaign to rally members to attend a disaffiliation vote scheduled for January



29, 2023. Bishop Reuben Saenz had declared a moratorium on disaffiliation votes during the season of Advent in a well-meaning but detrimental hope that churches would focus on the coming of God-With-Us instead of the tug-of-war for church property during the month leading to Christmas. It was during the month of December that wo/men started coming to me, asking if they could organize and form a group to combat the misinformation that had been going out to the FUMC Azle members. These wo/men were the coalition of the willing, ready to make a place without knowing the work that they were already doing.

The place that these wo/men made began as a virtual place: a Facebook group called “Stay UMC Azle/Weatherford and Surrounding Areas.” While I provided them support and accurate information about the theology and polity of the United Methodist Church, it was lay wo/men who ran this group. It took less than a month for this group to gather over 100 members. By the end of January, the Facebook group had over 300 active members, engaged in creating a place where folx could discuss what it meant to be a United Methodist. It was also a place where those who were silenced in their own congregations by intimidation and fear were able to connect with one another, fulfilling a basic human need to know they were not alone.

The place this Facebook group created was one of solidarity and truth-telling that quickly spread beyond the little corner of North Texas that the wo/men of FUMC Azle had envisioned it serving. All of us were in awe of how quickly this group grew and how much people needed a place of affirmation and collaboration that transcended the goals identified during its creation. This place became the main avenue of getting the word out about future plans for the groups in our area, but also became a place of inspiration for

those not in our area who wanted either a meaningful story of hope or a template for those that might want to place-make in a similar way in their part of the world.

Four United Methodist Churches in our immediate area, FUMC Azle, Silver Creek United Methodist, Smithfield UMC, and FUMC Weatherford had their disaffiliation votes the week of January 29, 2023. Though the average attendance at FUMC Azle was around 150 in worship on a Sunday, more than 300 people turned up to vote. The vote required a two-thirds majority to disaffiliate. 74.9% of those gathered voted to disaffiliate from the United Methodist Church. There are no words to describe the profound disillusionment and feelings of loss and betrayal that reverberated through the room in the immediate aftermath of the vote. The brokenness and heartbreak were compounded as we learned the results from the other churches by similar margins on that same day.

The small place of acceptance and grace that had been made in these churches was in effect quickly and efficiently demolished in one day. And yet, on this same day, people took to the virtual place, the Facebook group of solidarity and coalition building, to post about their collective disappointment, but also their hopes and dreams. It seemed within the space of a breath, that just as one space was colonized another place started to be made—a new place, a new “here,” that would eventually take the form of Revive United Methodist Church.

The Silver Creek UMC pastor (also female) and I scheduled a meeting one week after the vote to do some pastoral care and grief work with those United Methodist refugees from the local churches that suddenly found themselves without a church home. The wo/men who worked so diligently in creating a virtual place spread the word about

the meeting on social media, baked comfort food, and stationed themselves at each door armed with nametags, offerings of coffee, sweet tea, and a crazy quilt of baked goods to welcome the heartbroken people called United Methodist into the sanctuary at FUMC Azle. Rev. Sheila Fiorella and I wanted to make a place where our people could come together in their grief and give them a safe place to ask questions and pray together.

One of the beautiful things about placemaking work is that the place is made by those who inhabit it. Their bodies and souls make that place what it is and what it needs to be. Rev. Fiorella and I created a place for the brokenhearted, expecting it would function in one way—as a place to express grief and anger, and then to possibly explore next steps for those displaced by disaffiliation. However, the Spirit had something different in mind. From the moment the first few people arrived, coming through the doors and past the wo/men who were ready with food and nametags, there was a sound—not the subdued, quiet tones of sadness, but a boisterous roar that was more akin to a family reunion. Those that entered did not plunk their weary backsides immediately in the pews, but gathered around the food, introducing themselves to one another as they signed in and gave us their contact information for further use. There were hugs and handshakes and smiles of a people who had just realized what it felt like to gather in a place with people of a common purpose. Was there still grief? Absolutely. But was the movement of the Spirit even more palpable than the grief? Absolutely. Though these humans had gathered in a virtual place for the last two months, the incarnational nature of the human experience and the importance of physicality—the joy of seeing each other face-to-face in a brave place—caught all of us off guard. Through the sadness and the

hard journey that lay behind them (and in front of all of us, collectively), the dancing had nevertheless begun.

About 60 family units finally settled into their pews with nametags on their chests and food on their laps, sitting closely together, needing to feel the immediacy of each other. Trying to be as inclusive as possible from the very beginning of our journey together, we streamed the meeting via Facebook live, allowing another 20 or so families to join us in real time. Rev. Fiorella opened with a prayer that told the Holy Spirit that the people gathered expected Her to show up and lead. One of the first questions asked was from a woman who looked around the assembly of people and said, “Well, this looks like church to me. How do we make it ‘official?’” I shouldn’t have been surprised. Wo/men do this work all the time. She saw a group of people that needed a place and asked how we all could make it happen. That night the people were full of questions about the creation of a new place, a new church, for which we as facilitators had no answers. Todd and I already had a meeting scheduled with our District Superintendent for the following day, and so we promised them that we would meet again to develop a plan to move forward.

As most meetings with denominational representatives go, I pitched a vision of the creation of a new church and was met with a dubious, “It can’t be done.” That is one of the principles of placemaking that is part and parcel of the process. And yet, our district superintendent took copious notes and could not help but be drawn in despite his doubts to the vision of a new beginning, a new place—a place not of disillusionment and anger, but of hope and resurrection. Those of us who are “professional” ministers know

that the usual lead-time in the development and launching of a new church start is two to five years in the making. Someone neglected to tell the wo/men that fact.

Three weeks after the initial meeting of those that wanted to remain United Methodist, we gathered again on February 26<sup>th</sup>, 2023, in-person, intentionally around tables with lots of food and Communion elements on every table. We invited our denominational representatives to be there to answer questions. We also invited those coming to bring food for the local food pantry, thinking that if we were feeding ourselves, we should also be feeding others from the very beginning. Following the example that Jesus set when he gathered disparate people around food to share their lives and stories, their questions and dreams, we too sought to make a place of grace as we gathered together; a place where the vision of a new church was set in motion. It would be a church that was open and affirming of all people; a church that would be known through its joy and generosity; a church whose only place was in the hearts of its people, not a building that housed them.

Just over 100 people showed up to catch a glimpse of what this new place could be. The wo/men worked all day in the kitchen. They set the tables with candles and flowers. They filled the air with smells of barbeque and hope. There was not one thing that escaped their attention in their placemaking efforts. We collected over 1,000 pounds of food that night for the food pantry. People talked and prayed and broke bread and shared a cup of forgiveness and blessing. They took home seed packets as we began to think about what might be planted. It was announced that we would be launching the first Sunday worship of Revive United Methodist Church just one short week later, on March 5, 2023, though we did not have a venue yet. People wrote checks to Revive UMC

though we didn't have a bank account yet. People asked how they could join a church, a place, that had not fully formed yet. Revive was taking place.



Three days before Revive United Methodist Church launched, we still did not have a venue. Everyone was working on finding a place, but Azle is a small town. Community doors that would have been open to anyone else had been firmly shut by several prominent space-taking people at FUMC Azle. Then, the principal at our son's school called on Friday to let us know she had approved our request to the district, allowing us the use of the school cafeteria for the purposes of worship on Sunday morning. The wo/men got the word out and told everyone where we were gathering. They told everyone to bring their own chairs because elementary school cafeteria seating was not that hospitable. It was the second Sunday in Lent, though with the Spirit's palpable and powerful movement among us it felt like a Pentecost-y Lent. The wo/men had again made food to welcome people to the place. We ensured there was a designated children's area, a place that our littlest disciples would feel at home, with soft rug and toys. Todd created a beautiful focal point with liturgical art and a Table set with bread and cup. And miracle of miracles, at the last minute the school offered 100 folding chairs to use in place of the uncomfortable cafeteria-style seats. The place for Revive United Methodist Church was made.







During the following months, Revive UMC continued to worship on Sunday mornings in the school cafeteria, moving only for the summer months to a local warehouse and then back to the school. Revive UMC received our official charter as a United Methodist congregation on Sunday, May 7, 2023—just two short months after we launched. For perspective, chartering within the United Methodist Church usually takes three to five years.





Apart from Sunday worship, there was also a group that gathered weekly to study the Gospel of Mark—a book written at a time when another community was going through significant trauma. The wo/men of the church opened up their homes and backyards (when we wouldn't fit inside a home) as we began to get to know one another around food and scripture. The lightning speed at which Revive was born can only be attributed to the Spirit's push and challenge and the excellent wo/men who midwived the place into being. Revive's leadership has had questions from around the country from United Methodists in similar situations regarding disaffiliations and church planting in its wake. The wo/men of Revive have been instrumental in aiding other displaced United Methodists in the work of placemaking.

## Chapter 5: Reviving the Principles of Placemaking

*Dear friends, the Scriptures teach us that the Church is the household of God, the body of which Christ is the head, and that it is the design of the gospel to bring together in one all who are in Christ. We have come together to form a new congregation of The United Methodist Church, which is a part of Christ's holy Church. Let us dedicate ourselves to this purpose!  
Will you rise in body or in spirit and let us call one another to worship.*

*Todd: We are the body of Christ!*

*Jenn: The hand clapping, toe tapping, heart pumping, mouth tasting...*

*People: The love extending, arms embracing, justice seeking...*

*Todd: The hymn singing, bread breaking, risk taking...*

*Jenn: The living, breathing, fully alive...*

*People: Body of Christ!*

*Todd: Baptized by one Spirit, we are united as one body.*

*Jenn: Many and varied in gender, color, sexuality, age, class and ability:*

*People: We are members of Christ's beautiful body.*

*Todd: None of us can say to another, "I have no need of you."*

*People: For only together we can find wholeness.*

*Jenn: None of us can say to another, "I will not care for you."*

*People: For we are connected like muscle and bone.*

*If one suffers, we all suffer. If one rejoices, we all rejoice!*

*Todd: Come, let us be filled with Christ, who makes us one!*

*Jenn: Come, let us be revived by the Spirit, who makes us new!*

*People: Come, let us worship God!<sup>45</sup>*

*—Declaration of Purpose and Call to Worship, Revive UMC Chartering*

### 1. The Community is the Expert

No other principle of placemaking could be more true for the place of Revive United Methodist Church than this first one: the community is the expert. Those gathered at the first meeting after the disaffiliation vote were the ones who first spoke of a new place; a place that was founded on the principles of inclusion, grace, welcome, and hospitality. Behind this first principle is the knowledge that, for public spaces, it is not the builders or developers or those that are traditionally counted upon as “experts” who build

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<sup>45</sup> May 7, 2023 Revive United Methodist Church Bulletin for Chartering Sunday

place. This principle de-centers the power and privilege of those outside a community seeking to impose their wants and wishes upon the community, itself. Instead, this principle begins at the ground level: with those that have intimate knowledge of the community and its identity, purpose, vision, goals, wants, and needs.

This principle also stresses leaning into the gifts and graces exhibited by those in the community and building upon those strengths instead of relying upon those outside the community to deliver their expertise. This foundational concept functions to alert those within the community that they already possess the necessary wisdom, and thus have the power to make their own place. This principle allows the community to (re)discover it has inherent worth, in and of itself. For those on the margins that have been treated as though they are less than human, less than the space-takers, this realization of inherent worth in place of inherent deficiency opens a physical and theological place where the community discovers they are meant to be co-creators with God.

For Revive UMC, it was about gathering and listening to those that had been harshly excluded from full participation in their respective churches because they did not fit the ethos or share the values of the Global Methodist Church. For some, it took the vitriol of disaffiliation rhetoric to see that the space where they thought that they had belonged, in some instances for decades, was hostile to the cry of their hearts and distorted their self-worth and image of their Creator. Suddenly, all those who previously tiptoed around the edges of their Church communities found their voices to shape this new place. Those that were fighting for the proverbial crumbs on the floor found that they were invited to be the guests of honor at the Table.

## 2. Create a Place, Not a Design

I have walked into countless beautifully designed church spaces with all the traditional symbols that say to those who enter, “this is a holy space.” Stained glass windows, a brass cross with two brass candlesticks on the altar, a vaulted ceiling that looks like an overturned boat or ark, liturgical colors appropriate for the season, a baptismal font (usually shoved into a corner), all situated within a building with hierarchical seating—where those at the front are literally above everyone else in an inaccessible chancel area (where, it is assumed, that all the holy work is done). These can be spaces of meaning and beauty. These spaces can house cherished memories as the backdrops to weddings and laying loved ones to rest. But unless intentionally set apart otherwise, these spaces can also be highly exclusionary and intimidating—disconnected from the desperate needs of the surrounding community, kept behind heavy doors, high walls, and well-manicured lawns.

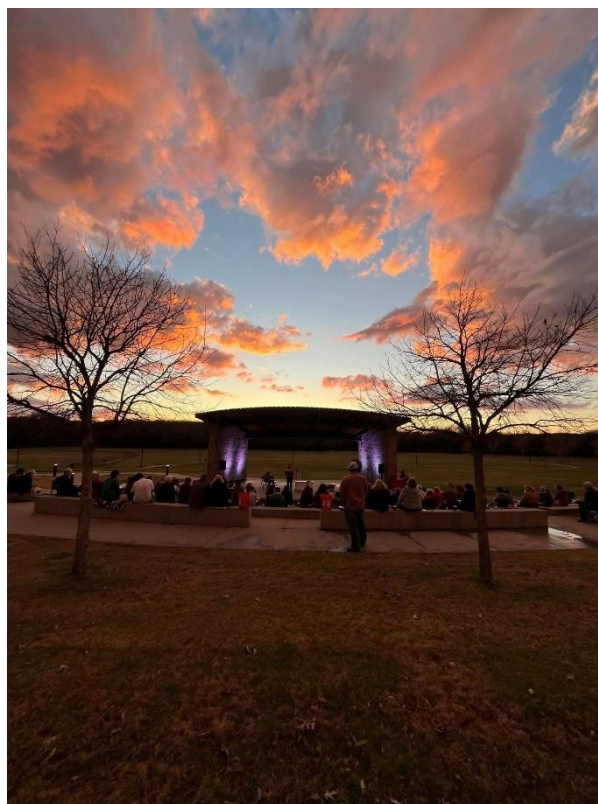
As the wo/men of Revive UMC set to create a place of refuge and faith, not one talked about a building. They wanted to create a place of gathering, a physical place where all would feel welcome, a place where the bar to entry would be low and everyone would be on the same level. And while beggars couldn’t be choosers as we looked in desperation for a venue for our first service, they knew that they were creating a place, not a design. Over the last year, Revive UMC has collected more than five tons of food for the local food pantry. Reusable grocery bags for the hungry in our community replaced designer bags brought in for show. From our initial dinner meeting, feeding neighbor was incorporated into the DNA of this congregation. Hospitality, welcome,

feeding others, and generosity are values the wo/men use to describe the place that is Revive. They did not set out to design it to be such, but rather they carved out a place where these values could be shared and lived.

Another way to conceptualize this principle of place over design is to think about the whole of a place as being more than the sum of its parts. Placemaking is about opening a place of authenticity where relationships are formed and meaning is endowed in the very earth beneath our feet. Any space has the potential to be hallowed ground, to be place, when opened and endowed with meaning by those who previously had no other place. For Revive UMC, holy place began in an elementary school cafeteria and moved as the community moved. It was in the homes of those that hosted Bible Study, and in the park where we held Vacation Bible School and Christmas Eve services. Revive as a place is more than the sum of its parts. This new church start has had people join who have confessed that they have never felt like they “belonged” anywhere—gender queer folx, neurodivergent kids and adults, those with differing physical needs, many of whom would have never gone through the doors of a traditional church building. This place has fluid and porous boundaries that expand and change each time a new person wanders through.







### 3. You Can't Do It Alone

Things would be a lot simpler if I, as the co-pastor, were able to control the place of Revive United Methodist Church. As a pastoral leader, I have my own part to play in the placemaking of this new community of faith, but placemaking is by necessity a collaborative endeavor. Looking to the biblical narrative, we can see that Miriam needed

the midwives and Pharaoh's daughter to keep her brother alive; she needed the whole tribe of women with their hand drums at the Re(e)d Sea; and she needed a community that was thirsty for water to make a place of refreshment in the desert. It is no different for the modern daughters of Miriam.

The need for community partners, denominational structures, and each other is part and parcel of building a community of faith. As a ministerial leader of a new church start formed from the trauma of disaffiliation, I have various roles to play. I am an interpreter of the community's needs and vision; a compass that points to God's constant action as we have set our path towards placemaking; a poet that compels those looking for a place of belonging to hear and see the difference of this place; a priest that organizes the worshipping life of the community gathered and looks after its sacred rituals (making new ones as needed); and shepherd that is always on the lookout for the lost sheep, but who also carries a big stick to beat off the wolves who always seem to be snapping and howling on the fringes, wanting to take back what they see as their space. It is a lot, but I remember that I do not do it alone.

Because our denominational system is so broken and defined by a thick layer of distrust, at least in the Conferences of Texas, not many of the wo/men held out much hope of the United Methodist "connection" aiding us in any significant way. But when a group like those in Revive stepped out in faith, the connection came to our aid. We received monetary donations from all across the country as our story of hope and a new day spread in a season of hopelessness amidst disaffiliation. Revive received donations of hymnals, communion trays, children's musical instruments, a cross for our Table and the prayers of thousands. On the day that Revive launched as a worshipping community,

there was another UMC congregation in our area that celebrated its 100th anniversary. They donated part of their offering that day to us, as well as the prayers of their lips and hearts. In another instance, a member of one of the only Reconciling United Methodist churches in our Conference drove four hours to worship with us and hand-deliver a donation from their congregation to support our church that is also open and affirming. Even those from outside of our denomination have added their support. We partnered with the Christian Church/Disciples of Christ in Azle (the only other church that is open and affirming in town) for Wednesday night activities as well as Ash Wednesday and Holy Week services. This small, struggling congregation has opened their sanctuary to us at no cost for discipling work. Though our theologies differ, we can still be about the work of supporting one another in our placemaking endeavors.

As I take these placemaking principles from the secular world of public places and overlay them onto a sacred framework, there is another undeniable aspect to this third principle. The wo/men of Revive, including myself, do this only through the power of the Holy Spirit. She is the presence that has called this place into being; we are just trying to keep up with her lead. So many things about birthing a new church seemed impossible. The pace the Spirit set was more of a sprint, when those in our Conference offices are used to a Texas mosey. Azle, Texas is anything but a bastion of welcome and acceptance of difference. Sadly, it has a strong, active roots with the KKK as well as a vehement and sometimes violent politically conservative populace—and the theological and ideological beliefs to match. So, a place like Revive should not exist—let alone thrive—in Azle, Texas. Yet, it does exist, through and with the power of the Holy Spirit. In life, in death, in life beyond death, we are not alone. Thanks be to God.

#### 4. You Can See a Lot Just by Observing

When I think about this principle, I think about Jesus asking his disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” Jesus wanted to know if the disciples had their eyes and ears open to the communities around them. Were they listening to the hearts of the people? Did they understand the implied desires of the community through who they wanted Jesus to be? When we started to create an identity for Revive, we asked two questions to those who were displaced by disaffiliation: “What do you need in a United Methodist Church?” and equally important, “What does the community need in a United Methodist Church?”

Some of the answers we received included: “I need a United Methodist Church which holds on to its core values with open minds, open hearts, and open doors with people who are its heart and soul.” Another said, “I have not attended church in over three years, but I would love to see a church that meets the needs of the community, a congregation that shows love in radical ways. A body of believers that will truly listen to those who have been hurt by religion in the past—that sees the sacred in everyone, and a congregation that is not afraid to try new things and start new traditions.” And another: “I would need a United Methodist Church that focuses on building discipleship at all stages of life. One that works in ways that innovate and expand children and youth ministry and really nurtures the bond between congregants of all ages in order to help build strong support systems in faith for everyone involved. We all have so much we can learn from each other, and I think it would have been really nice and beneficial to connect with more people outside of just the other youth in the church.”

After our very first dinner around tables in February 2023, we could tell we were on the right track by this response: “I can’t tell you when the last time I walked into a church or any religious function and actually felt welcomed by everyone. It is typically only a handful of people that truly welcome me and those people I hold very dear to my heart. However, last night was a breath of fresh air. It was the first time I didn’t feel like all eyes were on me just for being me. I am sincerely grateful for each one of you and am overwhelmed with joy to finally be amongst a group of fellow Christians that understand that we are to love all. I am thankful for my friends in Christ that I already had who attended and am excited that I get to join them plus my new friends in Christ as we embrace the true meaning of what it is to be UMC.” You can see a lot by observing and learn a lot just by listening.

One of the aspects that sets Revive apart is that we ask a lot of questions. Each week, before we announce what food items to bring to donate to the local food pantry, the Community Caring Center (CCC), we ask the CCC what it is that they need most. When the wo/men of the church wanted to be in mission to the school that has so generously housed our worshipping community, they asked the teachers and principal what it was that they needed, instead of assuming it was just school supplies. As we were making a congregational care plan, we asked what good care would look like to the faith community. With established faith communities, some of the answers to these questions have been assumed without changing for decades. The art of asking the right questions and acting upon the genuine responses of the community is vital to the health of the place being made. “The question is a great religious act; it helps you live great religious

truth.”<sup>46</sup> The art of the question is complementary to the challenge of keeping those questions fresh as we move forward, especially as the church and the community change.

## 5. Have a Vision

Vision is a difficult thing to define when placemaking. Usually, at least in my experience, the immediacy and necessity of placemaking is all-consuming. Concrete actions needed in order for the survival of a community take precedence over the intention and vision of what that place, at its best, should be. There is a vision, but it is inevitably fuzzy around the edges as it takes shape and form. Once the place is made, then the refinement of the vision can take place.

For Revive, the immediate vision was a place where everyone could simply exist; a refuge from the all the trauma, ugliness, ostracization, and hurt caused by disaffiliation. The vision was a place of radical inclusion and healing; a place to process the feelings of rejection and pain of the last several months as church “family” turned against each other and hurled false rumors and accusations. But as we talked about a vision for this place of refuge—this sanctuary—the clarity of just how we would make this happen remained stubbornly elusive. The vision would need to adapt to the changing needs of the community. It is akin to Jeremiah buying the field at Anathoth: a public act of profound faith, yes, but also one that was not overwritten with plans. In a vision for sacred place, there must be room for God to do with it what God wants. The foundation of the vision as a place of radical inclusion and healing still stands, though the ways in which that is lived out have changed as we have walked along this new path.

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<sup>46</sup> Rabbi Shmuel Sperber, quoted in Jonathan Magonet, *A Rabbi Reads the Bible* (London: SCM, 2004), 27.

## 6. Start with the Petunias – Lighter, Quicker, Cheaper

In planting a church, like planting a garden, there is a steep learning curve. The soil and climate do not allow some things to thrive, and yet other things grow beyond our wildest imaginations. There are always elements that are beyond our control. Even the things that are presumably within our control do not always behave like we expect. No one is really ever trained as a placemaker. It is something that wo/men have done since the beginning of time for their survival. With the infinite possibilities that present themselves when placemaking, it is best to carry the vision and the place as lightly as possible.

“Lighter” and “quicker” are the antithesis to “church-think.” Churches build buildings. And when they have more money, churches tend to build bigger buildings. They then fill these buildings with stuff. Most of the time, each piece of furniture or holy hardware or hymnal has a plaque on it, tracing its lineage. As these pieces fall out of use, they get moved around in the bigger buildings from place to place, becoming artifacts of bygone eras that no one will discard, no matter how irrelevant it is to the current life of the church. Banners hang in dusty corners; storage rooms fill with silk flowers and outdated audio/visual equipment. “Throne chairs” from the chancel, in which pastors sat in generations past, make their way to a Sunday School classroom or the “parlor.” The building soon becomes a museum of the past instead of a testament to the community that flows out of the church building.

It is difficult to re-direct “church-think.” Though many, if not all church people, have heard many a sermon on being a people instead of a building, the living-out of that



concept is foreign to a culture that places great emphasis on material things. Even a brand-new faith community like Revive is not immune to the allure of wanting a building—what they term as a “permanent home.” It is not unlike the people of Israel wanting a king: it is not good for them, but that is all that they know. And what they know brings comfort in uncomfortable times. Yet this sixth principle of placemaking is one of the most important. It changes the ethos of the community. It shows them that good investments are not just in buildings and things, but in the community.

In contrast to FUMC Azle, which would not let the wo/men of the church put in a pray-ground for the children in the worshipping space because they would have had to remove some of the pews in the sanctuary, Revive began its life with a pray-ground because the place was flexible enough to respond to the needs and vision of the community. Not having a permanent building has led the congregation to think of creative ways of being present and visible in the community because there was no other place that it could be. Creativity, innovation, and adaptability over long periods of time can be exhausting, but these are the characteristics that define placemaking. There are no monuments to placemaking work. There is only the lived experience of the community that endows each and every place with meaning and memory for a time before it moves to its next place as the needs of the population change. The importance of this ideology cannot be stressed enough because it changes how we think about the future.

Investment in placemaking at Revive is not about sinking money, time, and energy into permanent structures. It is about hallowing the ground on which we stand. When our leaders talk about “investment” now, they talk about the time spent on and with our children and youth. They talk about cultivating and mentoring the next

generation of leaders within the church instead of claiming all the space for the wants and wishes of those who give the most money. Investment means creating a culture of care for those that are hurting. Investment means creating a culture of hospitality for those that feel excluded from other spaces. The leaders of Revive understand that investment in a place is about the people who inhabit it and hold it lightly.

## **7. Triangulate**

In family systems theory, “triangulation” is a practice to be avoided at all costs. The definition of “triangulation” with which most church leaders are familiar is not the concept of “triangulation” in placemaking. Here, triangulation means to intentionally curate the place in such a way that meaningful interactions happen in multiple ways between people and place. It’s the process by which people find connections, allowing strangers to converse, connect, and share common ground as if they were already friends. Triangulation is absolutely essential in fostering community, especially within a new community of faith.

Revive is the gathering of displaced United Methodists from four different congregations. Unlike other church plants, this new congregation is mostly made up of “churched” people who are used to their own particular ways of worship and fellowship. At FUMC Azle, there were some people who had been going to the same church building for twenty years, but because they worshipped at different times in different styles, they had never met each other. Revive had to be intentional, from the very beginning, to allow for triangulation: to create a place where members of these different congregations could have meaningful encounters each time they met. We began around tables with food

because we knew that as people gathered and ate, it would be natural for them to begin to share their stories, to connect, and to turn from strangers into friends.

Meeting for Bible study in different homes in small groups gave members an opportunity to connect their stories with the community's story and God's story. A crafting group and a bereavement group also sprang up quickly as part of Revive's placemaking, each led by wo/men who saw a need and responded in kind. When the wo/men of the church discovered that we would need to leave the school as a worship place for the summer, they looked for other options, but held the thirty minutes of fellowship and breakfast before worship as a non-negotiable because that is where some of the most meaningful triangulation happens.

Moving forward into the immediate future, triangulation will take on a broader area than just fellowship and community building with those who come to Revive. Place is moveable and dynamic, but it can also expand and adjust through invitational participation. Just as we read in Acts that the church that began in Jerusalem spread to reach places farther afield, so too is the call of Revive. The next step in triangulation is building community partnerships for a mentoring program at the school where we meet. We have covenanted to provide each fourth-grade student with a mentor next year, which means we will need around 100 people to be available and willing to mentor nine to eleven-year-olds. We know that we cannot do this task alone, so we have intentionally set ourselves a goal that will allow more triangulation with the school, the Retired Teachers Association in Azle, other churches, the Lions and Rotary Club, the Chamber of Commerce, and local restaurants in town that will provide snacks for our mentoring days. An outward movement that centers on children from an underserved population within

our community is the natural next step for Revive. We act with the belief that a divided community can be transformed when good place is made.

#### **8. They Always Say, “It Can’t Be Done.”**

Inevitably, the process of placemaking is about the survival of those that the dominant culture has deemed irrelevant or (more often) dangerous because of their bolshie insistence on taking up place. There is a lot at stake in these places’ continuing existence. Their existence provokes powerful forces that want to see these places of refuge, healing, and inclusion obliterated, the first chance “they” get. First Methodist Church (FMC) of Azle (no longer within the UMC connection) still watches Revive UMC closely, with revulsion and derision. The people at FMC Azle are still asking members of Revive when they will return to FMC Azle’s space, not realizing that their space no longer appeals to anyone who has felt the freedom of place at Revive. For those who still occupy the inhospitable and hostile space of FMC Azle, the people of Revive are as incomprehensible as light is to shadow.

Even those that have no malice toward the creation of an open and affirming place of sanctuary had their doubts about making a place like Revive in a space like Azle, Texas. The Central Texas Conference of the United Methodist Church had not chartered a new church in more than a decade. So, when those from the recently disaffiliated FUMC Azle church made their pitch to the district superintendent and the bishop, there was considerable disbelief that a group of people who had just been through such trauma could actually make a place that would survive more than the initial push. One district superintendent told them to start with a book study and then “see where it went.” Another

Conference staff person said that we should first begin by meeting in homes because they had launched a program previously for those left churchless by disaffiliation in homes, called “Oasis Communities.” These small house church “communities” tuned in virtually to larger churches but did not form a connection through place or physical presence.

While no one from the Conference openly stated, “it can’t be done,” there were plenty of messages that said, “It can’t be done the way that you need to do it.” We had one district superintendent who said he was excited about the possibility of a new congregation but offered little support, making it very clear that this endeavor would only be “what we made of it.”

Creating a place that does not fit the framework of previously established patterns within an organization causes much consternation and confusion. The last time that the Methodist Church splintered was during the Civil War, and we split into factions of North and South. This season within the denomination has, at best, bewildered denominational leaders; and, at worst, has paralyzed them into inaction. In truth, The United Methodist Church was not built for much innovation and creativity. Instead, it was a space, a bulwark, that formed in the tumultuous times of the 1960’s. Birthed in that context, therefore, its structure and hierarchy valued stability and consistency over and above agility and transformation. We did not expect the Conference institution to turn on a dime but were disheartened by its inability to follow the Spirit more closely than it seemed to be doing.

## 9. Form Supports Function

This principle of placemaking asserts that the community will shape a place into what it needs it to be, providing that the leadership allows the community genuine agency to do so. A place takes form only as the community who inhabits it shapes it to meet their changing needs. The obstacles the community has overcome, the outreach they have done, the partners that they have brought in along the way, and the clarity of vision that they currently possess all contribute to the formation of place.

Nearing just one year in existence, the form of Revive UMC has been dictated by its reason for being. It has become a body marked by the spaces from which its members were expelled. Their now-disaffiliated churches were formed around the proclivities of those who professed membership. In contrast, the people of Revive wanted to organize around the needs of the community instead of themselves. Coming from spaces that sought to exclude anyone that professed any kind of difference, the people of Revive wanted to fling wide the doors and favor those with unique lives, abilities, and theological diversity over the ubiquity of sameness. Coming from spaces that marginalized children and youth, preferring they neither be seen nor heard, Revive incorporates children and youth into every single aspect of the community. They are seen as well as heard as they act as greeters, read scripture, and pack food for the Community Caring Center. As the congregation of Revive begins to feel surer of their identity, I would imagine most of these forms of placemaking will remain, while others that are independent of their broken history might also begin to emerge.



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## 10. Money Is Not the Issue

This principle can manifest itself in many differing ways within a new faith community. While the churches that the people of Revive left are struggling to keep up with crumbling buildings and overinflated staffing needs with a smaller giving base, Revive has not yet run into any financial issues. We can attribute this in part, to following the sixth principle: lighter, quicker, cheaper. In addition, its people will joyfully and generously give to the things they believe make a difference in their lives and in the lives of others.

Every financial decision at Revive is run through a cost/impact analysis, as opposed to a cost/“benefit to us analysis.” Because we remain a United Methodist Church, the Central Texas Conference has also generously supported the chartering of

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<sup>47</sup> Revive UMC Easter morning 2024. The children and youth lead the closing song.

this new faith community through two different grants. Individuals, as well as other churches within the connection, have also given generously to ensure Revive is off to a good financial footing. On the very first night where we met around tables for dinner just prior to launching, we asked those joining us to estimate their pledged giving for 2023. We knew this would be a big ask since we had not even had a worship service yet. The initial numbers were around \$80,000, and after that night increased as we began our life together.

The largest factor in the financial success of Revive thus far has been its visible impact within the community and beyond. In our short life, we have lived out of a model of God's abundance instead of a model of scarcity. Our people see a need in the community and come to the leadership to ask how we can help. For example, the school district is swimming in lunch debt for the students who cannot pay... can we help? Yes! The nearest women's prison really would like a few Revive wo/men to connect with those wo/men inside that would like to do a Bible study... can we do that? Yes! Charitable giving is down at the Community Caring Center and the cost of food is increasing exponentially... can we do more than just a one-time donation? Yes! The children at elementary school where we worship have to sit in a brick cafeteria with no art on the walls for lunch each day... can we help fill that room with color? Yes! There have been tornadoes in Arkansas and fires on Maui... can we use our connection to the United Methodist Committee on Relief to relieve suffering? Yes! There are underserved communities in Fort Worth that need mentors to read with children one-on-one... can we take a few weeks this summer to read with Project Transformation? Yes! Meals on Wheels needs drivers... can I make an announcement to see if anyone wants to join the



crew in our area? Yes! Underscoring this principle where money is not the main issue is the priority of making the most of the things that do not cost any money, but only need time and effort. Those that feel overcommitted without time and effort to spare can give money to their passions; while those that have no money can give time and effort to what they care most about. The stated expectation at Revive is that each person is involved in the community in some meaningful way: money is not the issue.

### **11. You Are Never Finished**

New places will always call out to be made. Places that have been made will need constant repair work and will need to adapt as the community changes and grows. Every place begs to be seen with fresh eyes, the eyes of one who has no place or excluded from a space they thought they belonged. Place is the pause, but it is not static. It breathes in and out just as the community does. Place can respond to the stories told, the rituals performed, the people included. Place can heal broken hearts. Place can make room for joy to be shared. Place can be liberative, sacred, Spirit- and grace-filled. Place can be sanctuary. Everything that place can be needs constant creation. It involves ongoing work that is, by nature, never completed. As long as there is one human who is hungry or searching or lonely or enslaved or beaten or scared or scarred, active placemaking is still needed. Revive UMC is just starting out, and its wo/men placemakers have been in overdrive for the past year. They are tired, like a woman in labor is tired, knowing that their exhaustion will bring forth new life in a place called Revive.

### Part 3

#### Chapter 6

#### Birthing Through Biblical Narrative: Midwives and Miriam into Place

*I hid by the river, a young lioness, crouching, ready to jump, keeping myself still. And then she came – the princess dressed in her golden clothing...That day changed my life and the life of the princess. I was no longer simply Moses' sister, and she was no longer simply Pharaoh's daughter. We were God's daughters, an army of resisters, with our weapons of love and faith.*  
—Marsha Pravder Mirkin<sup>48</sup>

“I have been studying the Bible longer than you have been *alive*, and I never realized there were women in Exodus!” As I sat down with my Wednesday morning Bible study group from Revive UMC, these were the words proclaimed from the oldest woman in the group as we dove into a new study I had entitled, “The Women of Exodus.” A few others nervously chuckled at her boldness. She continued, “I thought it was just about Moses.” I smiled and laughed, knowing when I chose this topic that it would be an uphill battle with my conservative Texas group, and replied, “I didn’t realize I would need to explain how babies came into the world, and that they do, in fact, need to have mothers.” The Israelites couldn’t very well be “fertile and prolific...multiplied and increased very greatly, so the land was teeming with them”<sup>49</sup> unless females were present. We were off to a good start.

This Bible study group had grown quickly, tripling in size in a matter of a few months as we read through Jonah, 1 Thessalonians, and were now embarking upon the epic of Exodus. In the mud-slinging battle of disaffiliation, one of the strongest (and

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<sup>48</sup> Marsha Pravder Mirkin, “Miriam” in *The Torah: A Women’s Commentary*, ed. Tamara Cohn Eskenazi (New York: URJ Press, 2008) 329.

<sup>49</sup> Exodus 1:7

strangest) criticisms of the United Methodist denomination by the newly formed Global Methodist Church was that United Methodists “did not know” and “were attempting to change” the Bible. In answer to this, we launched a small-group Bible study while simultaneously launching the church. Alongside making a place for worship was the need to make a place for deep, involved, close study of biblical texts. Two places, one church; each place as necessary for survival as the other. When the night Bible study became too large for “small group” study and too large to meet in any one person’s home, we started a second Bible study in the morning. The morning group has remained smaller, 15 or so, as opposed to the 25-30 in the evening study.

A place to study biblical texts that encourages questions, doubts, and difficult conversations about their relevance and ramifications for postmodern society is a brave place to make. It is a place of trust. It is a place of discomfort. It is a place of listening to voices other than our own. For the creation of Revive, it was also an absolute necessity. It was in these places of study, as we met in different physical places each week in congregation members’ homes, that the displaced people of Revive began to process their grief and trauma. As they studied together, they saw their own pain and resurrection stories reflected in the ancient texts. They wanted maps, meanings of Hebrew and Greek words, historical context, sometimes only getting through a couple of verses in an hour and a half session. They shared life-stories and linked them to God’s story, listened to each other, gave and received grace in the reading. They came to know who they were again. They began to dig in the muck of soul and body. It was messy. They were building worlds place by place, as they allowed the words on the page to breathe and take on flesh in their own imaginations. They devoured these studies like they did the potluck

appetizers and desserts that they brought with them to each meeting. This place of meeting became part of them. What had been a contested space of control and power (the biblical texts) had now become a place of meeting, curiosity, and even healing.

This place of study was physical. It was grounded in the dirt. Though it moved from home to home and topic to topic, this was placemaking at its finest with rich narrative at its center. Without exception, each place of biblical study at Revive always has markedly more women than men. When we began the study on the women of Exodus, I had to declare several times that this was not a “women’s study,” but for anyone who wanted to join in a close reading of the Exodus text. Out of my fifteen regulars in the women of Exodus study, three were men. They tended to call one another to ensure the others were coming so as not to be the only male present that week.

Week after week as we read through the Exodus narrative, made connections, raised questions, and saw the absolute resistance and audacity of the women that conspired to keep the Pharaohs of their day from taking all the space, they started to see how reading slowly and deliberately also creates a place in their own time, in their own “here.” In a place like the biblical narrative, these groups created a place that hadn’t been there before, even if they had studied these scriptures previously in their lives. The narrative itself can be place. It can be the pause. Endowed with millennia of meaning, it can morph from space into place through interaction, encounter, and new embodiment. With the women of Exodus, these men and women of Azle, Texas started to look at the headlines they were being fed from Fox news and realizing that a different narrative was not being told. The place where the existence of a divergent present and future is possible is the birthplace of resistance and essential for the reclamation of place. The group waded

into the waters of Exodus to chisel out a place they didn't know that they needed. I recorded all our sessions on Exodus. Here were some of the questions that this place raised: "What is not being said here?" "Why is this story being told this way?" "Who are the pharaohs now?" "Why didn't I learn about this sooner?" "Why did I never see that before?" "Why would God do..." "What about the babies on the border? Is the Rio Grande our Nile?"

These beautiful children of God who made their way on the pilgrim road of Exodus had never been given the opportunity to make a place of questioning study. They were used to lectures; heady spaces in which the "experts" told them what to think. In the spaces they previously inhabited, while the Bible was a space for instruction, it was also always a litmus test of orthodoxy. Scripture remained firmly in the space of the past and was only interpreted by the evangelical, male preachers who were focused on sin and souls, not grace and survival. Carving out the places of close readings of the biblical text can be an intimidating prospect for any leader of a congregation. I've heard several of my colleagues say that it is not their job to lead Bible studies; but rather that worship, pastoral care, and administration demand their limited time and are of more importance than "Sunday School." From my experience, the place of the biblical narrative, especially in spaces like Texas, can inform all of the other spaces and places we inhabit as a people of God. But because there is this place of study at Revive UMC, the definition of "mission" has been transformed for its people. Because they have felt the deep trauma in the place of the text, it has transformed the way they care for one another and for neighbor. Precisely because this place is a tabernacling place, they understand that this place moves with the people of God and is not an artifact to be held up and revered as

idol, never to be touched or breathed onto. This is part and parcel of what they inherited from meeting in the place of the scripture. Miriam taught them well. This place is a good place. The following is a summary of the first part of what we discussed as Miriam's legacy.

Miriam was not the only woman in the narrative world of Exodus to engage in place-making and co-creating by singing a new place into being. She was not even the first. Shiphrah and Puah sang the song of place-making resistance first.<sup>50</sup> Whether Hebrew or Egyptian, these women midwived not only Hebrew baby boys into a place of life instead of death but birthed a familiar refrain of survival, sung from wombs to birthing stools. Was Miriam there in this wo/men's place, singing along with midwives and mother? Was it this song that knit Moses together in Yocheved's womb; did she hum it those long nine months as she carried him, so he would know the sound of rebellious freedom in his bones? Were the women mentioned in the Levite genealogy included in the women's song as a reminder of their priestly/prophetic calling?<sup>51</sup> Did Pharaoh's daughter hear the haunting melody that floated down the Nile from the Hebrew encampments as it accompanied the boy in the ark? No, Miriam was not the first to make place for women's voices to resonate in a narrative dominated by larger-than-life male figures. But after the birthing waters of the Re(e)d Sea broke, she called the women to gather and conspired with the Spirit to make a place of freedom, a place for a dis-placed people.

To read Miriam's story and prophetic actions, one must get accustomed to reading in fragments, filling in missing details from a few words placed here and there in Torah

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<sup>50</sup> Exodus 1:15-21

<sup>51</sup> Exodus 6:14-25

and Prophets. It is the same for most modern wo/men prophets as well; their stories rarely told in their entirety, but in small pieces that stumble through the machinery of patriarchal structures that are built to silence divergent voices and bodies. There really is no place for a woman prophet who is not a mother, wife, or sex worker. Reading in-between the lines and fragments, the text itself lets slip that it is uneasy with Miriam and her place in Israel's history. She is not named as the sister who followed Moses down the river to the Pharaoh's palace, nor named as the one who had the audacity to walk straight up to a foreign princess to ensure that Moses was nursed from the place at Yocheved's breast. Miriam's story of placemaking work begins before her birthing. Her life's work, however, provides a cartography of prophetic audacity that serves as a model for wo/men seeking to take up place and find their voices. In this chapter, we will explore Miriam's placemaking work from broken birthing waters to the waters of the Nile. We begin at the birthing stools, the domain of women, and the first principle of placemaking, "the community is the expert."

It is simultaneously remarkable and surprising that so many women are named at the beginning of Exodus, much less two women midwives, Shiphra and Puah. Mythic stories, larger than life narratives such as the one contained in Exodus, usually begin in an epic, miraculous way—some seemingly insurmountable obstacle being overcome by a supernatural power. In contrast, Exodus' identity-forming, epic tale of an enslaved people's journey to freedom is remarkable in its mundanity: a mother birthing her third child into threat and crisis because of an oppressive regime. How many times in the history of the ancient and modern world has this scenario been played out, over and over again? How many times have mothers and the wo/men that surround them—both ancient

and modern—rebelled against the planned annihilation of their sons and daughters? Shiphrah and Puah were not the only midwives to the Hebrew people. Yocheved was not the only mother whose heart broke along with her birthing waters. Miriam was not the only sister who knew the terror and risk of a family torn apart by a death-dealing king and the harsh reality of slavery. And yet, this community of women made a place for life and hope, trusting each other with a common purpose.



## Chapter 7: Water and Drums

*If you listen to me once  
 You will have to go on listening to me  
 I am Miriam the prophetess  
 Miriam who makes the songs  
 I lead the women in a sacred circle  
 Shaking our breasts and hips  
 With timbrels and with dances  
 Singing how we got over  
 O God of hosts...  
 You will feel me under your footsoles  
 Like cool ground water under porous stone  
 Follow me, follow my drum  
 Follow my drum, follow my drum  
 Follow me, follow my drum  
 Follow my drum. —Alicia Suskin Ostriker<sup>52</sup>*

Over the past year, I have been able to offer placemaking workshops in a few different spaces outside of the local church. At a gathering of pastors and worship artists at Lake Junaluska, I taught a workshop entitled, “Sacred Placemaking.” The description of the workshop was as follows:

Have you had a vision of making your worshipping place, your church building, your services more radically hospitable? Are you looking for ideas to open a pray-ground, a family comfort room, a sensory space for your neurodivergent kiddos? This workshop will give you some on-the-ground ideas that will be useful if you want to let visitors and families know from the moment they walk through your doors that you have thought and prayed about them coming to join your church on a journey of faith.

There is something about placemaking that speaks to congregational leaders, especially wo/men. At a conference that was mostly for music ministry and its leaders, my workshop attracted quite a few people. At first glance, 75% of those that attended this workshop were women, of which half were women of color. Considering that only 10% of the conference attendees were BIPOC folx, the demographic percentages in my

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<sup>52</sup> Alicia Suskin Ostriker, *The Nakedness of the Fathers: Biblical Visions and Revisions* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1994), 146-147.

workshop deviated from the norm. When I asked what attracted them to this topic above the other workshops offered at the same time, they voiced variations of the same answer: there is no place for us, and we have felt the pain in that; and we do not want that to happen to those with whom we minister. They spoke of battles with trustees and senior pastors who do not recognize the need for place within the structure of the church—especially a place for difference, whether that be difference of age (many pastors still exile children and youth from the worshipping life of the community), neurodivergence (exclusionary sensory experiences are difficult to navigate in most worshipping communities), LGBTQIA+ inclusion (being visible is still a threat to the status quo in many UMC communities), ethnic/racial diversity (calling out the lack of representation in leadership at all levels).

As we delved into the principles of placemaking delineated by Project for Public Spaces, the participants were furiously writing notes. Finally, there was a tool—a framework—to organize placemaking in a way that might legitimize their efforts to various church structures and committees. Suddenly, they had a shared vocabulary for what they had been trying to accomplish at every level of church leadership. They were interested in making place. From their questions and the discussions that we had to the follow-up conversations since that conference in June of 2023, the principles of placemaking have helped those who participated more clearly communicate to their congregations why certain places need to be made for the health and future of the community of faith. In this workshop, we also explored Miriam and her role with the other women in marking a place of liberation by the Re(e)d Sea. Within Miriam's story of leading the women with hand drums to mark a place of liberation, these participants—

all ritual artists themselves—heard the truth of this narrative. They had lived it. They were Miriam’s daughters and sons.

The most words that are put into Miriam’s mouth come at the threshold moment of crossing the Re(e)d Sea: “Sing to God, for He has triumphed gloriously / Horse and driver He has hurled into the sea.”<sup>53</sup> Even that, as it reads in the extant text, is a faint echo of Moses’ “Song of the Sea,” the *Shirat Hayam*. For quite some time, most source critics have considered the *Shirat Hayam* an older song that predates the text that surrounds it in scripture, possibly echoing the imagery of Canaanite spirituality where Baal overcomes chaos by surging waters, establishing order to creation through the wind, waves, and sword.<sup>54</sup> The song/poem is written in Archaic Biblical Hebrew, which predates the Classical Biblical Hebrew of much of the Hebrew Bible.<sup>55</sup> Why does that matter? In various later iterations, this song morphs from a defiant, place-making moment led by Miriam and the women of the Hebrews into the mouth of Moses, who believes it is a good time to recite some ancient poetry.

The text has Moses taking up all the space at this fecund, liminal place, and proposes that Miriam and the women offer but a weak epitaph to the original. While reclaiming the *Shirat Hayam* for Miriam is hardly new in scholarly circles, millions of women still read this foundational story of identity believing that Moses *alone* can make the first place of freedom by declaration, and all that the women around him can do is simply parrot it. Why, when there is so much scholarly work and evidence about the

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<sup>53</sup> Exodus 15:21

<sup>54</sup> Carol Meyers, “Miriam’s Song of the Sea: A Woman’s Victory Performance” 2020 [www.torah.com](http://www.torah.com)

<sup>55</sup> Agustinus Gianto, “Archaic Biblical Hebrew,” in *A Handbook of Biblical Hebrew: Volume I: Periods, Corpora, and Reading Traditions*, eds. W. Randall Gar and Steven E. Fassberg (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2016), 19-29.

genre and performance of victory songs as wo/men's song, do recalcitrant biblical editors insist upon titling the section (which they could change) as "Moses' Song of the Sea," without even a passing footnote nod to decades of scholarship that all but proves otherwise? When wo/men act together, breathe together, sing together, prophesy together, that place they are making becomes a dangerous place for men or other kyriarchal structures who have claimed the space as their own.

Imagine being on the brink of freedom before leaving an enslaved existence, wondering what possessions to take on the journey. They must choose things that can be carried a long distance because the destination is yet unclear. What is the one thing that cannot be left behind on the journey to freedom? A victory drum (NOT a "timbrel" or "tambourine", as it is often mistranslated). Not some shiny, sparkly trinket that makes noise for no reason. The wo/men have already done place-making work before they ever take one step toward liberation because they know, instinctively, to bring their drums. How can a place be made without ritual and, therefore, meaning-making? How can that place be made without the sound of drums, echoing the heartbeat of God, joining in the rhythm of a renewed creation? If there ever was a place for drumming victory, it would be in that place.

Here the ideas that underpin placemaking are made visible in the ancient text. "The community is the expert." This is a process the Hebrew wo/men know well. They have rehearsed it, just as they have rehearsed liberation in a thousand small ways within structures that seek to imprison them. Miriam knows that her voice alone, her drum alone, cannot be heard over the din of confused and bitter people. (Perhaps the wailing of Egyptian mothers mourning their first-born is also filling Miriam's ears.) "Look for

Partners” place-making says. The text reads: “Then Miriam the prophet, Aaron’s sister, picked up a hand-drum, and *all the women* went out after her in dance with hand-drums.”<sup>56</sup> This is wo/men’s work. The wo/men know it. Hand-drums at the ready. They are in the company of other wo/men who used music and ritual to create worlds and place beneath their feet: the Spirit that hummed over the vast chaos in the beginning, the Israelite women who celebrate David and Saul’s victories over the Philistines in the same way.<sup>57</sup> Jephthah’s daughter celebrates the victory over the Ammonites with hand-drum and dance.<sup>58</sup> Deborah chants<sup>59</sup> and personified Israel takes up hand-drums and goes forth to the rhythm of the dancers.<sup>60</sup> The community is the expert.

At the edge of the Re(e)d Sea, it is the wo/men who echo the heartbeat of God. “Create place, not design.” Through dance and drums the women make a ritual place that is at once novel and familiar. In this liminal place, they honor the traditions of their epic storied past while narrating their present and looking forward to an immediate future. The sound of drums calls the people to worship while literally hammering out a new identity that no longer includes slavery as a present reality. But this moment of memory and its significance will be passed down through the generations, pointing toward an ethical imperative.

Every time the wo/men pick up their drums, it should remind the people of their story, their place as earth-creatures. These actions of placemaking and ritual carve out a place, even though the people of God are always on the move. Place can move with them

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<sup>56</sup> Exodus 15:20, emphasis mine

<sup>57</sup> 1 Samuel 18:6

<sup>58</sup> Judges 11:34

<sup>59</sup> Judges 5:1

<sup>60</sup> Jeremiah 31:4

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and for them, as long as the wo/men do the work of carving a place out of no place. The drumming recalls the voice of God saying, “You shall not wrong nor oppress a stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.”<sup>61</sup> Miriam calls the wo/men to drum liberation into existence and to create a lasting place that will travel with the people of God, reminding them who they once were as well as what God is calling them forth to be.

“They Always Say ‘It Can’t Be Done’” is the last underlying idea in the principles of place-making. In reading the Exodus story one doesn’t have to look further than a camsteary Moses for who “they” might be in the text. Though Moses shucks off his sandals at the command of a fiery shrub, he also makes many claims about being the exact wrong person to liberate Israel. Perhaps Moses, for once, spoke the truth. Perhaps the real liberators of Israel were the midwives who made a place for women to birth babies into life instead of death. Perhaps the real liberators were in the sisters (for Miriam could not have been the only one) who guided individual arks down the river, pushing them toward other sisters whose arms ached for children to hold. Perhaps the real liberators were in the young women who dared to speak to a foreign princess to propel the narrative of redemption forward. Perhaps the real liberators of Israel were the wo/men who picked up their drums at the *beginning* of the journey; who sang and danced their way through life and death into more life. The “they” that always say that “it can’t be done” never counted on placemaking wo/men with their songs and their drums.

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<sup>61</sup> Exodus 22:20

## Chapter 8: Making a Wilderness Place

***Our daughters ask:*** Does Moses mean what he says when he declares: “Would that all God’s people were prophets, that God put the Divine Spirit upon them!” (11:29)? Is he really willing to share his spiritual leadership with “all God’s people”?

***Miriam the Prophet Answers:*** Judging from how he reacted when Aaron and I challenged his authority shortly after this declaration, I would have to say no...

***Esther the Hidden One Proclaims:*** If only his words were true! If only all of us—men and women, Jew and gentile, high and low, gifted and flawed—were seekers and seers of holiness. That would truly signal the dawn of the messianic age.—Ellen Frankel<sup>62</sup>

There are some words of scripture that hit harder than others. For me, it is usually the questions of biblical women (when they are actually allowed to ask them, much less have them recorded) that are the most poignant. Each question has the potential to open place, to excavate meaning from the ground up. Tracing the pilgrimage of Miriam as the first woman in the Hebrew Bible to be called a prophet and naming her as a placemaker for her people, her questions in Numbers 12, I would venture to say, resonate with every wo/man called by God to lead God’s people: “Has YHWH spoken only through Moses? Has [God] not spoken through us as well?”<sup>63</sup> And although Aaron is standing right beside her asking the same questions, it seemingly is only Miriam that is punished for daring to voice her own prophetic power. Aaron is a man and a priest. Aaron serves a function for YHWH. Aaron cannot be stricken thus, the price of insubordination written on his skin.<sup>64</sup> In a passage dripping with irony, YHWH recalls the special relationship with Moses and

<sup>62</sup> Ellen Frankel, *The Five Books of Miriam* (New York: HarperCollins, 1996), 208.

<sup>63</sup> Numbers 12:2

<sup>64</sup> As a priest, Aaron is an arbiter of God’s holiness. The consequences of Aaron being struck as unclean are much steeper than they would have been for Miriam.

only Moses, that he is spoken to “mouth to mouth,” not in visions or dreams. How does YHWH communicate this to Miriam and Aaron? Mouth to mouth, speaking directly to them in the tent of meeting.

Miriam, who walked straight up to Pharoah’s daughter to ensure the survival of her young brother. Miriam, who did not offer any excuses to a burning bush because God afforded her no such unmistakable sign of her own calling. Miriam, who recognized a place of freedom and life and called all the women to her to establish it. Miriam, who sings the powerful *Shirat Hayam*, only to have it attributed to her brother. And in this place of Numbers 12, after living a long life of service, Miriam asks the impertinent question: “Has YHWH spoken only through Moses?” In this one question, Miriam has fallen off what clergywomen in our own time call “the stained-glass cliff.” The “stained-glass cliff” is defined as “[young women] invited into leadership at high-risk times of organizational crisis or decline.”<sup>65</sup> Miriam and her daughters have stepped out of their place and must be put back in their place before anyone can continue on their journey.

It is the questions and the questioning that get placemakers into the most trouble with the dominant culture. It is the questions that put placemakers on the razor’s edge between life and death. Questions bring injustice into stark relief. Questions confront constructed worlds/space with concrete reality/place. Questions have power. The reclamation of place from space *always* starts with a question. What does the community need to survive? Why are those in power pushing for the extermination or eradication of a marginalized group? What is at stake? Who can speak for and with the people? Why have the needs/gifts/humanity of a community been summarily cast aside? What happens

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<sup>65</sup> Diane Kenaston, “How to Avoid Falling Off the Stained Glass Cliff When Leading a Dying Church,” [www.faithandleadership.com](http://www.faithandleadership.com), January 9, 2024



when the image of YHWH looks a little too much like our own instead of the other way around? Why can YHWH's assault a female prophet, but seemingly not a priest like Aaron? Who controls the narrative and whose interests does it protect? Both Aaron and Moses plead for Miriam, but Miriam's question has obviously gotten stuck in YHWH's craw, like the meat in between the Israelites' teeth in the wilderness. Miriam is a disobedient child who deserves to be spat upon and put in her place by a stern father.<sup>66</sup> After at least nine decades lived in service to YHWH, Miriam still has not been given the chance to ask a question with impunity. Miriam's modern daughters have not outgrown the propensity to ask the impertinent question and be struck down for it.

I have been a full-time pastor, prophet, priest, pilgrim, and poet for the last seventeen years, leading the people of God and living into my calling to the best of my ability. In that time, I too have asked many questions and borne the brunt of the consequences. In that time, I have served three congregations in which I was the first "lady pastor" that they had experienced; the loss of half the congregation upon my appointment to these churches was not uncommon. Also, in that time, I have closed two churches very early in my career and had to utter the saddest words contained in the United Methodist Book of Worship: "This congregation was organized as a part of Christ's holy Church and of the United Methodist Church. It was God's gift for a season. We are thankful for the many ways it has served the mission given to it by Jesus Christ. It

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<sup>66</sup> Danna Nolan Fewell & David M. Gunn. *Gender, Power and Promise: The Subject of the Bible's First Story* (Nashville: Abington Press, 1993) 103.

has accomplished its purpose. And we declare that it is no longer a United Methodist congregation and is now disbanded.”<sup>67</sup>

Too many clergywomen, especially the young ones, know what it is like to be placed in a church that is on hospice. They are tasked with bringing the spices to prepare the body for burial, just as the women did on the first Easter morning. When they begin to ask questions and realize exactly how many young women have been placed into the same situations by their appointive bishops and boards, they are often told that women have the capacity to “care” for a dying church, like a mother. The male pastors, I have been told, do not have the patience to shepherd a congregation through death. Many clergy male counterparts of the same age and experience are given the chance to begin new congregations. In the last year, I have been to countless church planting meetings and gatherings where the majority of the people walking around are white, millennial men in skinny jeans. Where are the wo/men? Has God indeed only spoken through Moses?

Perhaps the truth of our calling is written on our skin, like Miriam. Scripture says that though Miriam was exiled for seven days, the people wouldn’t move without her. They stayed in the place she had created until their placemaker could resume her journey of leadership and make the next place for them, ever closer to the promised land. Though her death is recorded without much fanfare, the loss of her placemaking is felt immediately by the lack of water. The source of life that she carried in her bones and on her skin and in the tenor of her voice is only fully appreciated when those that relied on

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<sup>67</sup> “An Order for the Leave-Taking of a Church Building,” *United Methodist Book of Worship* <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/book-of-worship/an-order-for-the-leave-taking-of-a-church-building>

those things to survive no longer have them. Moses finally gets punished only after there is no longer a woman's body to use for a scapegoat. And yet, the people carry on, finding their way to the promised land. In my imaginings, it is the daughters of Miriam that lead them there, to a place of promise and meaning. This land does not see the lot of wo/men placemakers get any easier; yet they survive, utilizing every tool imaginable to etch out place.

As we imagine the future of Revive UMC, it is the wo/men who are leading the way. They are the ones who are carving out a place. As we discuss leadership structures moving forward, our gaze turns to the women who have been bearers of the vision from the beginning. The women of Revive are the ones who question, who dream of a different story, who are leading the way into a new future with hope. They are ones who have inhabited the study of scripture as place. They are the ones who have looked to those who have been marginalized and created a place for those who have been pushed aside to thrive. They are the ones who are asking God and the United Methodist denomination, "Has God indeed only spoken through Moses?" They too have felt the sting of being stricken with hateful words, told they were stepping out of their place, asked to silence their voices in leadership. And yet, through all of it, they have journeyed in the wilderness, they have led the way with drums. They have brought water to a thirsty, bitter people.

## Finding An Ending Place

*Not long ago, when one stepped off a country road  
almost anywhere in the world, one risked stepping on  
the toe of a spirit, god, or goddess. —Ye Fu Tuan<sup>68</sup>*

As a woman prophet, pilgrim placemaker, the work is never complete. New places call out to be made. In this paper, I first chose to interrogate the critical categories of space, place, time, and event-place (here) in order to prove that the eleven principles of placemaking can serve as a framework for sacred placemaking work. I have told the story of the creation of Revive United Methodist Church, and the wo/men who fearlessly led the way. Each and every principle of placemaking is clearly evident in the story of Revive and is part and parcel of its continuing success. Lastly, I chose to focus on one woman's biblical story, marveling at her identity as a prophet placemaker. With each step on Miriam's journey, I mapped out a corresponding journey of my own with the study of scripture as place, the new ways in which placemaking is coming into its own within the life of local congregations, and a commentary about just who can speak for God.

The wealth of meanings that biblical narrative can open, even through the life of just one woman who has been a victim of erasure and forgotten memory, ask us to remember the legacy just one wo/man placemaker can make. If we look closely, the truth of it is written on our skin as surely as it was written on Miriam's as her leprosy claims her skin as a "drawing board"<sup>69</sup> for God's message. My profound hope is that there will

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<sup>68</sup> Ye Fu Tuan, *Religion: From Place to Placelessness* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 34.

<sup>69</sup> Lori Hope Leftkovitz, *In Scripture: The First Stories of Jewish Sexual Identities* (New York: Roman and Littlefield Pub., 2010) 103. See also Leftkovitz's discussion of Miriam as water goddess or priestess.

always be communities of resistance that will start with a question like Miriam's, that will question how God's voice can be contained in the dominion of the few when there is plenty of evidence to the contrary. Despite the attempts to silence, marginalize and erase wo/men like Miriam, she is still speaking and inspiring and questioning and inspiring her daughters to do the same. And just as it was with Miriam's community, there have been and will be communities that are unwilling to move on without those wo/men prophets in their midst.

The story of the wo/men of Revive United Methodist Church and their intersections with placemaking are only part of their current narrative of faith. We will continue to view the "community as the expert." We will continue to ask insubordinate/pertinent/necessary questions to those that have the power of life and death. We will continue to have a vision that far exceeds what God's people can typically see. We will be told "it can't be done," and do it anyway; we will make a place where none was before. We will move from building to building and place to place, knowing that place is made, sometimes by sheer force of will. And we will know that the holy work of making place, creating and hallowing the ground beneath our feet, is essential work. It is our inheritance, our birthright. We, as wo/men, will continue the work that the creative Spirit began in the beginning and from the beginning. We, the daughters of Miriam, have our hand-drums ready and the Spirit's fire in our bodies.

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