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November 3, 2021

THE Christian CENTURY

Thinking Critically, Living Faithfully

Willie Jennings
THE PLACE OF RACE

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From the editor/publisher

Peter W. Marty

Public grace

There's plenty of discouragement to go around when we think about how often our political and economic systems fail to deliver public goods and services. We've grown accustomed to watching legislation that could readily help tackle society's more intractable inequalities just languish and die. The gap between rich and poor widens with each year. Persistent racial segregation, inadequate housing, discriminatory practices in real estate, unaffordable child care, disparities in health care and education, and environmental hazards in low-income communities are just a few of the ugly problems that cripple efforts to build a more equitable society.

Many of us look for small signs of hope that might circumvent national politics and render relief to people on the margins. Happily, in this regard, the New York Public Library recently made a beautiful announcement. The library will no longer charge late fees on overdue books and media resources, and it will waive all fines accrued from the past. While this may sound like minor tinkering with a tiny piece of everyday life, its impact is huge.

NYPL is the largest library system in the country and the fourth largest in the world. It consists of 53 million items spread over 92 separate locations in Manhattan, the Bronx, and Staten Island. (Margaret Kearney wrote about the nearby Brooklyn Public Library in our last issue ["Freely lent," Oct. 20].) In fiscal year 2019, the library collected more than $3.2 million in late fees. Before its recent decision, more than 400,000 New Yorkers were blocked from accessing books because they owed more than $15 in late fees. The vast majority of those unable to check out a book resided in poor neighborhoods, which meant that those with the least ability to afford fines—low-income New Yorkers, many of them children—had no access to basic tools for learning.

Libraries are "crucial to our democracy of informed citizens," NYPL president Tony Marx wrote recently. In addition to the full library collection, patrons can find Wi-Fi access, citizenship classes, literacy programs, children's reading sessions, and English language tutoring. A public library is one of the most democratic institutions we have in the United States. The idea behind a public library is that no one, regardless of background or circumstance, should have to face an access barrier when it comes to reading. "This [elimination of fines] is a step towards a more equitable society," Marx said. "We are proud to make it happen."

It's a gracious institutional move on the part of an enormous library reaching out into a sometimes ungracious world. To suddenly erase fees while trusting patrons to bring books back sounds an awful lot like the arithmetic of grace. The oddity and wonder of that five-letter word is that it's undeserved, unexpected, and often astonishing. Grace has a way of dispensing with things we've been taught: *Pay your dues, or else. There's a fee for that. Don't expect a freebie.*

Lew Smedes, a mentor of mine, was fond of saying that "grace happens when it finally dawns on you that, in Christ, your past isn't going to catch up to you." *Grace* was never meant to be an exclusively religious word, devoid of all meaning in the wider culture. So perhaps NYPL should adopt this as a new tagline, minus the words *in Christ*, to underscore its lovely new policy.

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Cover photo by Mara Lavitt for Yale Divinity School

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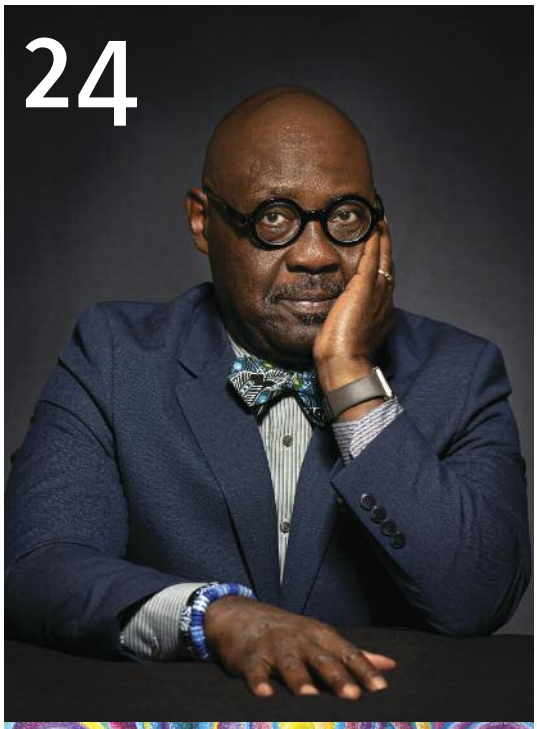

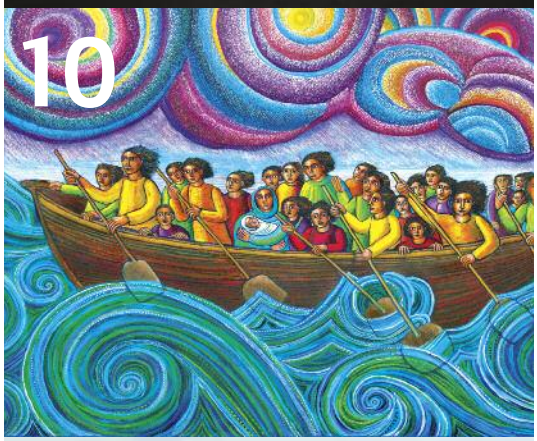

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Climate in focus

Ragan Sutterfield's essay ("Climate change is a symptom," Sept. 22) is beautifully written and makes an important point about the limitations of narrowly focused solutions to the climate crisis. The idea of converting church lawns into wildlife refuges is delightful.

However, I don't think it's helpful to speak of "what passes for environmentalism these days" or of "decontextualized carbon-cutting" as if the people urging us to act were ill-informed and should have taken more time to think things through. Environmentalists—from Al Gore to Bill McKibben, from Jim Hansen to Stephanie Mills—have been thinking about the climate *and* our wider mistreatment of nature for decades. If they are mistaken in anything, it is not for lack of contemplation. Gore, for instance, sees climate change as a contributing cause of other ecological crises. If environmentalists seem to focus mostly on cutting carbon, it's because their repeated calls for a simple life in harmony with nature have failed to reach most wealthy and middle-class people.

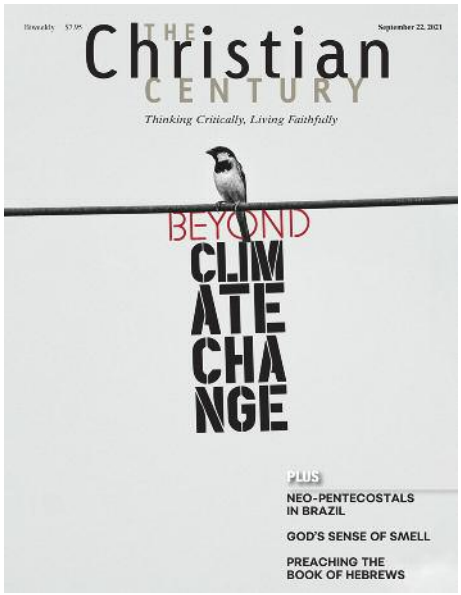
Barbara Bazyn
Chelsea, IA

Experiencing communion . . .

I greatly appreciated the story at the end of Peter Marty's column on communion ("Grace beyond belief," Oct. 6). Stories about people with disabilities and how they experience communion can be profoundly powerful, often pointing to the heart of its meaning for all of us.

At the state institution where I had my first chaplain's job, I would distribute communion using the words, "The body of Christ, broken for you. Jesus loves you." Early in my tenure there, one woman responded, "Oh, yeah, who told you?" The next month she replied, "How come?" And the third, she said, "I know, I know!"

Years later I was chaplain of a smaller institution in Rochester where we started a clinical pastoral education program. One of the students submitted a verbatim



about a man attending a communion service with her. Overflowing with excitement after the service, he said to her: "I ate with you in church today." She replied, "You know why we do that, don't you? Before Jesus died, he had a supper. . . ." The man interrupted her, exclaiming, "No, no, no, don't tell me about that part. Tell me about the part of my getting to eat with everyone in church today."

Bill Gaventa
Austin, TX

I was intrigued to read Marty's column because I too have been dismayed by how Christians qualify the openness of their table. Often in preparing my congregation for communion I would remind them of the conditions under which Jesus instituted the Last Supper. Everyone to whom he offered the bread and the wine, his body and blood, would within a few hours either betray, abandon, or deny him. Jesus knew what they would do, but he did not hesitate to offer them the bread and wine.

Communion is not a reward for your faith, belief, or baptism. It is a symbol of God's unconditional love, a challenge to accept and embody that love, and an invitation to live into the fellowship and respond to the call to follow Jesus. When we set limits on participating in this holy meal, we negate Jesus' invitation and the promise that God offers to all.

Kevin S. Munroe
Ocean View, DE

Here is the invitation I would offer: "All you who want to experience God's unconditional love for you and, having experienced that love, are willing to commit yourselves to trying to live the way of God's all-inclusive, forgiving, sacrificial love, as exemplified by Jesus—you are invited to this table." I would leave it to the unseen work of the Holy Spirit within the human soul to determine who accepts this invitation.

John Alexander Wright
christiancentury.org comment

Nesting birds . . .

I was glad to read Austin Crenshaw Shelley's lectionary column on Psalm 84 (Aug. 11). That psalm has special meaning for me. My daughter has been a Russian Orthodox nun for 25 years. I thought of her as a swallow nesting by the Lord's altar. How many parents have had a phone call from a child, her voice almost singing: "I've had the most wonderful day, almost all of it in church!" Then she told me that Psalm 84 is part of the nuns' daily prayers.

More recently robins, nesting in the rafters over our patio, showed me how life goes on without the nest of my late husband's companionship—and how death is like the fledglings leaving a nest. They may see worms wiggling in the ground below, and they may see nearby bushes to rest on. But they can't see the creek over the hill or the garden on the other side of the house, and they have no concept of the world's size. They jump into the great unknown with only an instinctive drive to bring them to full growth.

We have only our trust in God's promises and scriptural hints of a heaven that is beyond our imaginings. The birds have to leap when their time comes, and so do we.

Deborah Detering
christiancentury.org comment

THE Christian CENTURY

A step forward against hunger

November 3, 2021

The general dysfunction in Washington continues. The Republican minority shows little interest in the responsibilities of governance, while the Democratic majority is too thin and too fractious to attend to them alone. It's hard enough for this Congress to fund the government's basic functions and pay its bills, let alone enact new solutions to the multiple crises the nation faces.

In such a climate, it's easy not to notice when some small good thing is accomplished by the federal government. Last month, the US Department of Agriculture increased the benefits available through the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, also known as food stamps. SNAP is perhaps the federal program most effective at mitigating poverty across generations.

SNAP's overall parameters are set by Congress every five years in the farm bill. What the USDA did was update its "thrifty food plan," which details the specific grocery needs for SNAP recipients. These updates amount to an average benefits increase of 40 cents per person per meal.

This was long overdue. The old standards, devised in the 1960s, embodied some outdated assumptions about how family meals get prepared. ("If you are poor enough for food stamps," wrote Jeffrey Steingarten in a 1993 article about his efforts to live on the thrifty food plan, "it is assumed you will have all the time in the world to cook everything from scratch.") Other anti-hunger programs, such as local food banks, have struggled for years to keep up with the need—a problem that's been significantly exacerbated during the pandemic. Since early last year, food insecurity has gone up around the country, by as much as 25 percent in some counties.

SNAP fights poverty by directly meeting a basic need. And because it's an entitlement program—meaning that Congress sets only its benefits and eligibility standards, not an overall spending cap—the program grows to meet the growth of that need. When a bad economy leaves more Americans hungry, SNAP is there to help feed them.

This also helps the overall economy recover. SNAP benefits are a terrific form of fiscal stimulus—both because they grow to keep pace with the problem and because people don't stash them away or use them to pay off debt. They buy food with them, injecting money into food production and distribution networks. SNAP accomplishes a lot, on multiple fronts.

SNAP recipients badly need this increase—especially since a separate increase, passed early in the pandemic as an emergency measure, expired last month. A larger expansion of the program is needed as well—to address the shameful reality of people going hungry in a nation with more than enough food. Such an expansion can't be done unilaterally by the USDA; it will have to come from Congress.

Whatever else is going on in Washington, SNAP benefits just got better.

Still, the recent change to SNAP is an important reminder. Even when Congress and the White House are at loggerheads, unable to find the path to so much as keep the lights on, it still matters who runs the federal agencies—and what they see as their mission. They are in a position to do measurable good for people who need it.

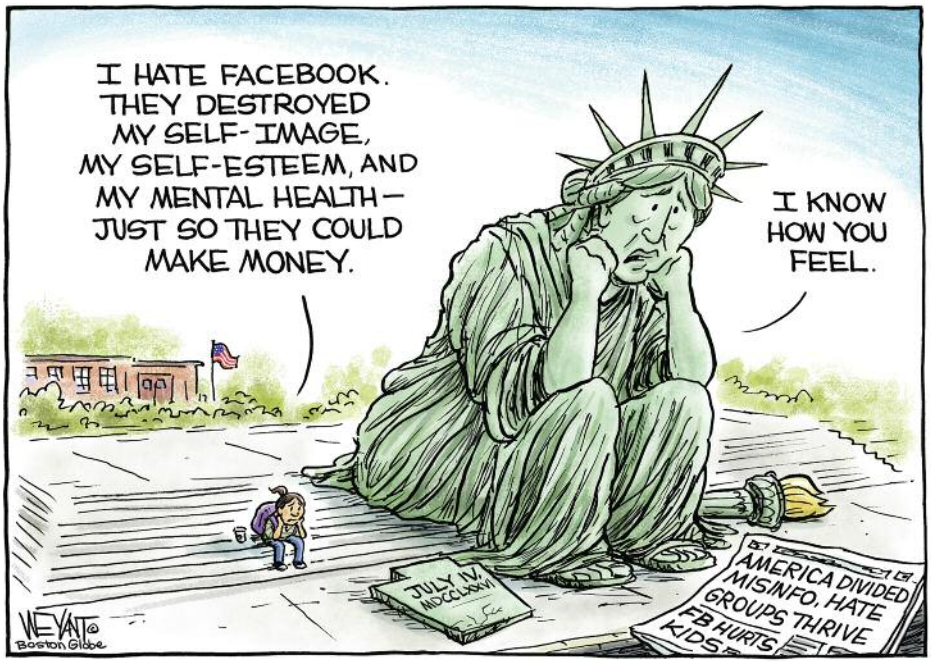
—The Editors

CENTURY marks

OUR BODIES, OUR CELLS: When Henrietta Lacks died of cancer in October 1951, she had no idea that tissue samples were taken from her body—nor that they would be used by scientists to create an indefinitely reproducible stem cell line. Her estate is now suing Thermo Fisher Scientific, one of the biotech companies that profits from the clones of her cells. "Why is it they have intellectual rights to her cells and can benefit billions of dollars," asked civil rights attorney Ben Crump, "when her family, her flesh and blood, her Black children, get nothing?" (Associated Press, October 4).

SINCERELY HELD: Vaccine mandates with faith-based exemptions are causing many people to wonder what a "sincerely held religious belief" is. According to US legal precedent, your religious beliefs are protected based not on what you believe but on how you believe it. The concept was shaped in large part by the 1965 case *US v. Seeger*, in which conscientious objector Daniel Seeger, who did not believe in a higher power or belong to a church, argued successfully that his "religious belief in a purely ethical creed" exempted him from military service. The legality of vaccine exemptions remains murky, however, because they may cause harm to others, not just the believer in question (*New Republic*, September 27).

HOBBY ROBBY: Hobby Lobby's Steve Green has made headlines multiple times for the questionable provenance of antiquities in his Museum of the Bible, which has had to return 99 percent of the antiquities purchased for its collections amid strong evidence of looting, forgery, and shady acquisitions practices. Green has protested that he "trusted the wrong people." Erin Thompson, a professor of art crime at John Jay College, argues that the museum didn't "accidentally drift into the black market" and that Green was well aware of the dangers inherent in antiquities sales. Thompson says she could teach an entire class on art and heritage crimes using examples from the Museum of the Bible alone (*Slate*, October 4).



REBUILT: Formal renovation has begun on Notre Dame Cathedral, with a projected rededication and reopening in time for the 2024 Olympic Games in Paris. The cathedral was badly damaged by fire in 2019, and its restoration was delayed during the pandemic. News of this final stage arrived in tandem with survey results showing religious faith continuing to decline in France, despite hopes that the partial destruction of the Gothic landmark had reawakened religious feelings among French nationals (*Church Times*, October 1).

MOTHER TONGUE: When Marie Wilcox died in September at age 88, the number of fluent Wukchumni speakers went from one to zero. Wukchumni, a dialect of the Tule-Kaweah Yokuts language, was traditionally spoken by a subset of the Yokut people, who are indigenous to central California. Wilcox and her daughter, Jennifer Malone, worked for 20 years to document and preserve Wukchumni, creating its first dictionary and teaching language classes. Malone and other family members intend to continue this effort to keep their language alive (*Emergence*, October 3 email).

STILL SINGING: The Fisk Jubilee Singers introduced spirituals to the

world 150 years ago, setting out from Fisk University, the historically Black university founded by abolitionists in Nashville, to perform across the country. The ensemble continues to travel and sing some of the same songs as the original group, many of them songs of enslaved people. In 2020 it won a Grammy for an album that also included country music, blues, and gospel. Musical director Paul Kwami said he believes the Fisk Jubilee Singers "transformed the Negro spiritual into an art form" (RNS, October 6).

DIVERSE DOLLS: Mattel has introduced a new collection of American Girl doll clothes and accessories for six cultural celebrations, including Christmas, Hanukkah, Diwali, Kwanzaa, and the Chinese Lunar New Year. Next year the company will introduce a traditional outfit for Eid al-Fitr, the Muslim holiday marking the end of Ramadan. The new collection comes after years of petitions asking the company to make their products more inclusive (RNS, October 5).

PAPAL APPROVAL: A new survey reports that 83 percent of US Catholics view Pope Francis favorably. The pope's approval rating was 80 percent among those who go to mass seldom or never and 71 percent among those who identify as Republican or lean GOP. Despite recent controversy over the pope's decision to restore limits on the Tridentine rite (popularly known as the Latin mass), nearly two-thirds of the Catholics polled said they'd never heard this news (*Crux*, October 8).

TOUCHING BOOKS: At Bell's Books, a nearly 100-year-old used book store in Palo Alto, California, staff members have noticed that customers are treating books a little differently since they've reopened. "You could sort of hear the sigh of relief to just touch books again, and some of them would stand and gaze and they would put their hands on the books," Faith Bell, the owner, said. "It was almost like a religious experience to be back in a bookstore again. Some of them who normally would have put their stuff down next to the register to go on and browse some more, would just hug them. They'd just hold these books next to their chests" (*Stanford Daily*, September 15).

PLAYING THE MARTYR: If you've ever wondered how you might fare as a religious martyr, there's now a board game for that. Martyr: Bloody Theater 1528 is a strategy game in which players take on the persona of an Anabaptist martyr during the Reformation as they work their way around the board, claiming doctrine pieces and managing their final breaths. The game's creator says knowledge of Anabaptist history isn't necessary to enjoy the game—but there's a historical guide just in case. The game is available online as a print-on-demand product (*Anabaptist World*, September 16).

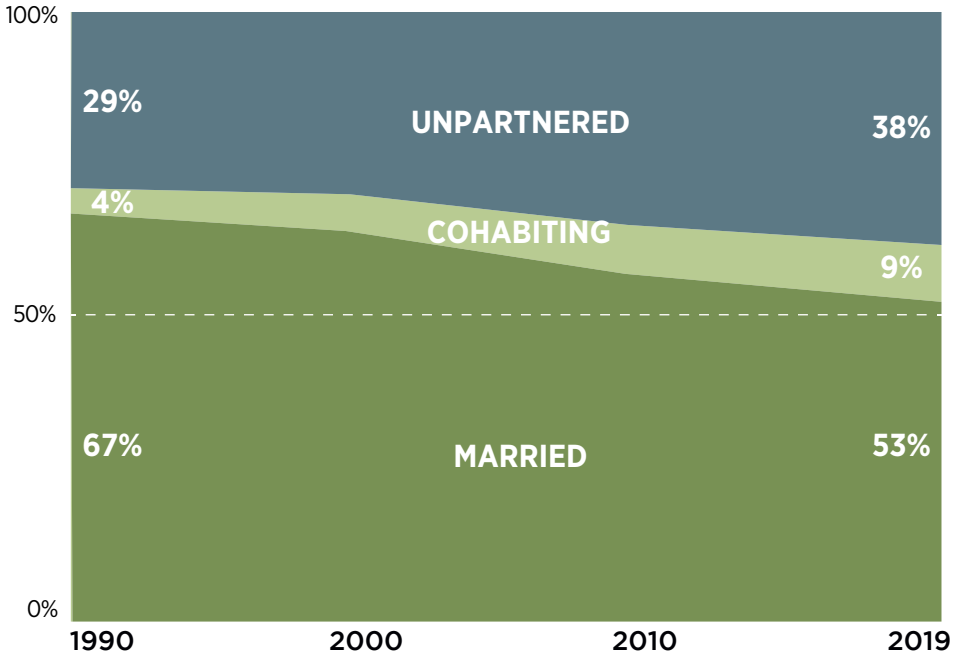
> "I don't really know what is the meaning of that word [*safe*]. Feeling safe is not something that I have done in Afghanistan for the past 20 years so I cannot tell you."
>
> — **Mahbouba Seraj**, an Afghan women's rights activist in her 70s, upon being asked if she feels safe in Kabul [*BBC World News*, August 31]

> "You can come with respect, and that respect is mutual. . . . I think that's not there in any of our conversations. That's what so has pained me about what's happening with America now. We're not having those dialogues and places of love and respect."
>
> — Author **Sandra Cisneros** [*The Literary Life* podcast, September 27]

EVOLVING LIFESTYLES

SOURCE: PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Percentage of US population age 25 to 54 who are . . .

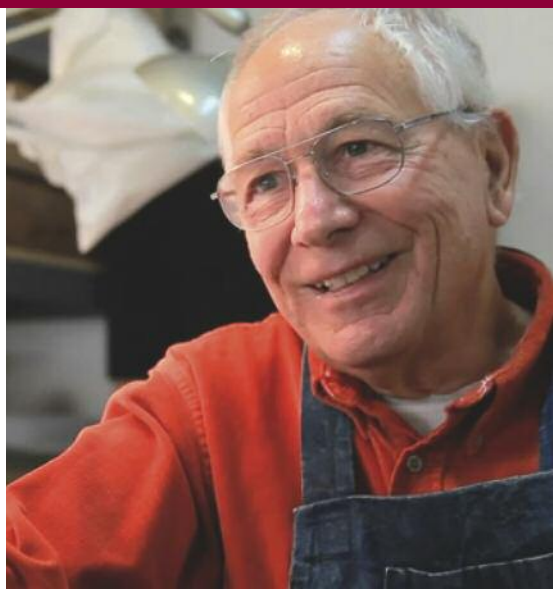


Note: Unpartnered adults are those who are neither married nor living with an unmarried partner.

John August Swanson, 1938–2021

Holy simplicity

by R. Guy Erwin



IMAGES COURTESY OF JOHN AUGUST SWANSON STUDIO

AT FIRST GLANCE, the art of John August Swanson seems simple and bright, a cheerful and untroubled expression of joy and hope in God and the world around us. It would be easy to stop there, as I did through many years of seeing his work on the covers of church bulletins, on religious greeting cards, and occasionally on a colleague's office wall. The sunny and humane images didn't seem to me to require much thought, and for a long time I appreciated them for their cheerfulness alone. I also assumed the artist was a Lutheran, given the name Swanson and the fact that I saw his work most often in Lutheran settings.

But then life took me into his orbit. I left the Northeast and took a teaching position in Southern California, at California Lutheran University. There, too, I found a bright array of his serigraph prints and their reproductions adorning the walls. It seemed like everyone I knew had one in their office or home, the latter often in the dining room, as if to invite fellowship and conviviality with the cheerfulness of the colors. It was in Los Angeles that I learned that Swanson's story was far more complex than I had known—and that he was the child of immigrants from Sweden and Mexico, a devout Catholic, and a truly wonderful person. I came to know people whose lives he'd touched. And finally, I met the man himself.

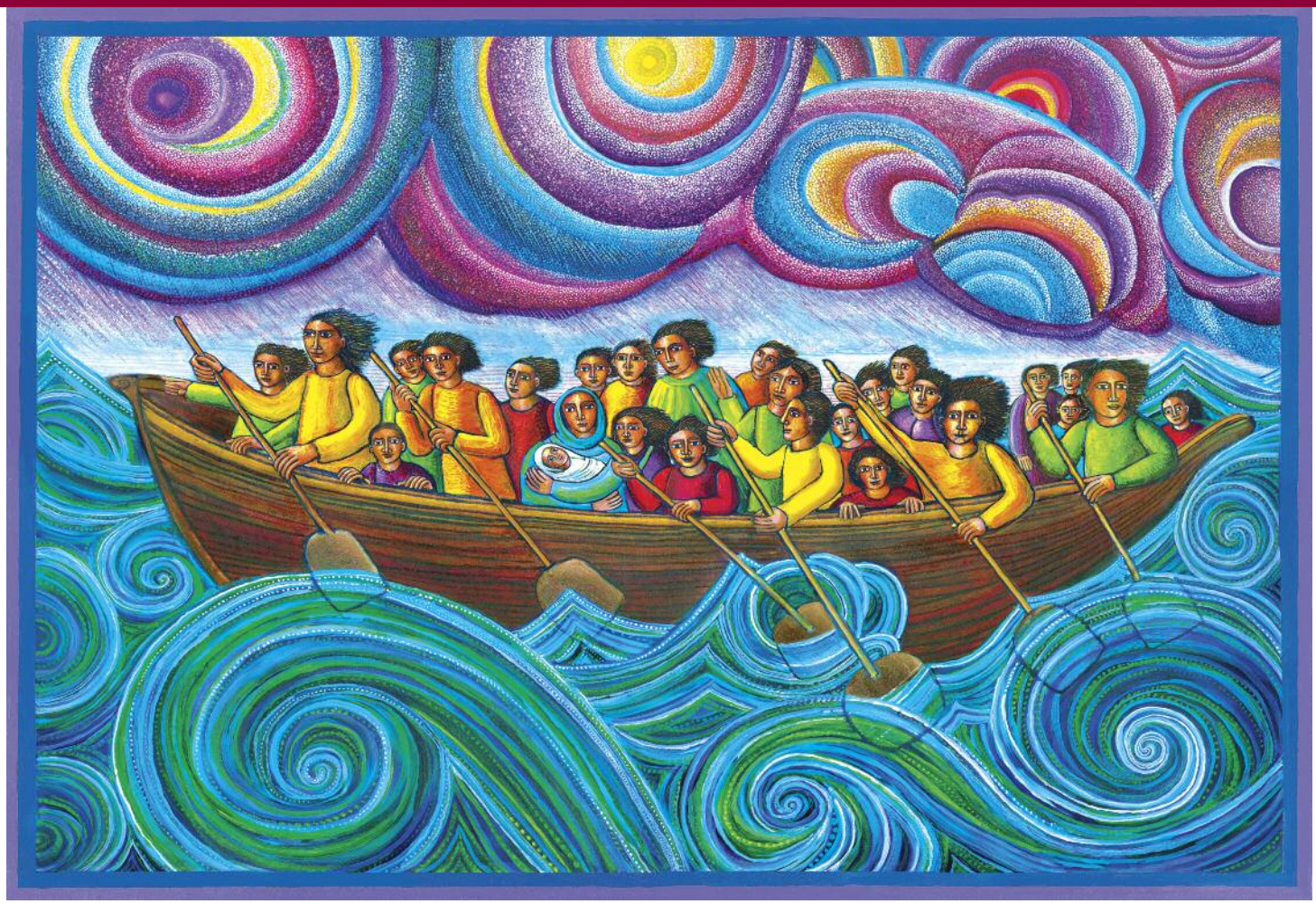
It was not a planned or even a very dramatic meeting. I was attending worship at the church of a Lutheran pastor friend, and during the service a slight, elderly man named John stood up and played a simple but truly lovely violin solo. I sat down next to him at the coffee hour afterward and asked him if he was a professional musician. He just said, "No, I mostly make art," and introduced himself as John. At that moment my pastor friend joined us and told me that this was John August Swanson, the artist. I was a bit starstruck. John was self-effacing and didn't want compliments. It was a short conversation, but before I left, John took my hand and told me he was glad to have me as a friend.

Somehow that encounter opened John's art up to me in a new way. Until then I had enjoyed it but not paid it much attention—it was brighter and more cheerful than my usual taste in art. What I hadn't reckoned with was how much it was like the man who created it: a many-layered experience of profundity expressed in simplicity, of a nuanced joy expressed in a deeply humane way. I began to look at the images more closely. I asked friends and associates who had John's art on their walls what drew them to the images. And I began a conversation with John and his art that continues to this day. Though he had many friends who knew him better and longer than I did, his friendship was very important to me, and it and his art strengthened me as they did so many others.

> Swanson's art is like the man who created it: joyful, loving, and gently curious.

From the day I met him, I rejoiced at every opportunity I had to spend time with John. His lack of guile, his unforced charm, his openness to whomever he was with—to talk with John was to be embraced by a gently curious, deeply loving person. I've never known anyone like him, and it is no surprise to me that many who knew him thought of him as being close to a living saint. Though he was internationally renowned and his art hung in collections around the world, he was fully caught up in being present in the moment with anyone he encountered. It was fun to watch him take people by the arm and show them something he wanted them to see in his images. His joy in sharing his work was palpable. When I saw him at conferences, selling posters and prints and cards, I always had the sense that if he hadn't had people there to help him, he might have just given it all away for free.

When I look at John's art, it's this openness to people that I now see most strongly. There are always people in it, and they are what is most compelling. They're depicted simply but with great affection, a kind of invitation to put oneself into the image. I remember particularly one of his depictions of the Last Supper, which he kindly permitted me to have printed on a large vinyl banner for use as a backdrop at events, and which



The Storm ***(2020), by John August Swanson***

dominated one wall of my office's conference room. I always tried to sit opposite it, and looking at it never got old. The disciples gathered around the round table in the picture were not strongly individualized—they were just human beings. That a few of them (but only a few) had beards suggested at least that some were male and some were female—but it was the gender fluidity of the images that really caught my attention. They were just *people*, gathered at a meal, with a man they truly loved. Jesus himself was not much different from the others, except for his central position and a halo, which also could have been the moon outside.

Holiness depicted in simplicity is characteristic of John's art, and nowhere did life and art come closer together for him than in his depictions of Francis of Assisi. St. Francis was important to John, and we talked about how Francis lived in the world yet always seemed to have a foot outside of it, with Jesus. Much of my friendship with John came during the pontificate of Pope Francis, and John was overjoyed that this man who bore the name of his favorite saint should also himself be an inspiration. John listened closely to Pope Francis's messages, and some of them ended up in his later works, especially in his last great image, called *The Storm*, which was inspired by the pope's Urbi et Orbi address from 2020, delivered in solitude, in the rain, in St. Peter's Square. In this speech, the pope alluded to the global pandemic as a storm humankind needs to weather together, all of us in the same boat in the same storm.

In the summer of 2020, John took this image of a community in a boat together and created a gorgeous painting with swirls of color for sea and winds and sky and a group of passengers huddled together and trying to row. The painting is dramatic and dynamic but also hopeful. The passengers (as in many of John's works) are not sharply individualized—they represent us, too, and our struggles to keep trusting God and hoping in the future. A large print of this painting hangs on my office wall today, a gift from John and other friends as I left California and moved back East to a new call. It was a parting gift in more ways than I can say, since I never got to see John in life again. But every glimpse of the vibrant colors speaks to me of his quiet but vibrant life—and the love of God he represented to me and all who love his work. CC

R. Guy Erwin is president of United Lutheran Seminary in Philadelphia and Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. He is the former bishop of the Southwest California Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

Preaching All Souls after two gutting deaths

The stories that change us

by Liz Tichenor

I STAND in front of the altar, looking out at the congregation. The room is packed, and morning light streams in through the funky midcentury stained-glass windows. When I'm nervous, I tend to dance around a little instead of standing still. So I glance at my feet just before I begin preaching—I don't want to misjudge the edge and fall down the steps.

We are celebrating the feasts of All Saints and All Souls, an occasion when, right on the heels of the humor and mischief of Halloween, we turn our hearts toward all those we love and see no longer. We remember people formally recognized as saints and also those whose wonder and grace will be largely forgotten.

It has been less than four years since my newborn son died and just over five since I lost my mother to suicide. Days like this one are still raw for me. They are particularly challenging days to preach on, but that is the path I've chosen: between these two deaths, I was ordained as an Episcopal priest. While our sacred stories always intertwine with our lives, in this case there is no question. I am living this story every day, especially with our youngest child, Sam, now two and a half years old.

In my sermon, I speak of a recent night when bedtime was a slog. First Sam needed water, then help finding something, then more snuggles. Then he turned to the preacher's kid's classic stalling tactic: asking for another prayer. Tired and annoyed, I took a deep breath. "God, pour out your blessing on Sam," I began.

He promptly interrupted me. "Who poured out my ashes?" he asked.

"What?" I replied, having heard his words clearly yet not comprehending them.

"Who poured out my ashes when I was a baby?" he asked again, more insistently. I took another deep breath, shaking my head in the dark. I explained to him that no one had, because he hadn't died. "I'm alive?" he asked. Yes, I assured him. So very, very alive. Sam has been asking questions constantly about his brother Fritz, our second child, who died before Sam was born. He was still for a long moment, and then asked me, "Who came?"

Under the wide rafters of the sanctuary, I pause to take in the full pews, all the people here, themselves a living witness to the story. "Who came?" I continue, feeling myself trembling slightly. "He's been fascinated by this one. Who came for his brother's funeral? Who showed up? Who poured out his ashes? Who threw the dirt?" This is the story my son wants to hear, again and again. We rehearse the guest list, all these beloveds who came to help us bury Fritz, those who embody for us the communion of saints. They stood close around us in the kicked-up dust, their hands still coated in dirt fresh from the grave.

> My newborn child died shortly after my mother died. In between, I was ordained a priest.

I am not necessarily supposed to be preaching about all this, to be sharing so candidly what this day churns up in my heart. Some of the more traditional mentors will coach seminarians to "preach from your scars, not your wounds." *The congregation is not your therapist!* they insist. I agree with them, wholeheartedly. Healthy boundaries are critical. Yet I also wonder how authentically I can engage our sacred stories without acknowledging how my own grief both informs and sometimes challenges my faith. These stories are never far from me, especially in the pulpit.

When I greet parishioners after the service, some take my hand with pity. Some come forward with palpable awkwardness, offering platitudes or advice that purports to somehow solve the problem of this dead son of ours. But from still others, I register vivid relief, deeper connection, and—most astonishing to me—gratitude. I tell them the truth of my sorrow, and they reply saying, simply, "Thank you."

How was it that some people could receive this story not as a rueful burden but as a gift? How might I continue to share it, I wondered? For whom, and why? I didn't know the answers, not fully, but I felt the tug to write. Homilies, yes, but also to write in service of healing, both others' and my own. I doubled down, kneading my narrative of death and, slowly, of new life. I wrote it all out so that I myself could hold it, and maybe—I wasn't yet sure—so I could tell my story, too.

Entering in with such immediacy and purpose terrified me, but I kept coming back to the page, trying to find the words to set down what I'd lived somewhere outside my body. I feared I would get stuck in the story, so mired in the sharp

Photo © Gaschwald / iStock / Getty

memories and still-present grief that I'd miss the life happening all around me when I emerged. I worried, every time I wrote, that I would return to my living kids numb, unable to engage their wonder or be present for their needs and delight. Still, I wrote.

Another year passed, my kids now three and a half and just shy of seven. My mom's suicide had gutted me, and there had also been a corollary fear: How would I ever tell her story to my kids? How do you explain a death like that? I didn't want them to inherit the shroud of secrecy that so often accompanies addiction and suicide; I also had no idea what to say. I had comforted myself by insisting that they weren't ready, they were too young—that I'd figure all this out down the line.

But when I finally closed the teal cover of a three-inch binder over my first attempt at chronicling my grieving and my living, it struck me. It was never that my kids weren't ready for it, though their now more-developed language was helpful. I had been the one who was not prepared to tell them the truth, to carry this sad story into their young hearts.

In the quiet of the morning, in the same room where I had learned of my mother's death six years earlier, I pulled my son and daughter close. Cuddled in a nest of all our extra pillows and blankets thrown together on my bed, I told them gently, and with all the courage I could summon, that I had a sad and important story to share with them. "I want you to have the whole truth," I said, "and I want you to know that you can ask all the questions you have, right now or anytime later." They were quiet, waiting.

I held my kids a little too tightly as I explained how my mom had been sick for many years, pausing to define key words like "alcohol" and "addiction." I told them how sometimes when a person's brain is very sick, it can be difficult to make good decisions, and sometimes people can decide they simply do not want to keep on living. I told them that this had been their grandmother's choice, and I told them how she jumped. I told them that I wished she had gotten more help, that there is always help. I said how desperately I still missed her. Finally, I stopped, drew a long and shallow breath, and clutched their small bodies for ballast.

In the quiet after I finished speaking, my daughter, Alice, asked just one question: "Who was it who told you, Mommy?" When my mom died, that is, who told *me* the story?

It matters, she seemed to be reminding me—it matters so very much that we tell these stories. It matters who tells them, and when, and how. The very act of telling them changes us, too, reshaping us as these words are received. Sitting with my kids, relieved and exhausted from the act of sharing this truth, I realized that while I will always carry this pain with me, it no longer terrifies me. Telling my story freed my body and mind of the weight of carrying so much sorrow in myself alone. Having written it all down, I found I could live with this story.

Yes, of course we miss the mark. I have overshared, and I've shared too soon. I've shied away, omitting too much of what's real; I've been held back by shame or fear. And still, if we're going to find our way and find each other, we need to answer my son's question with our own lives. *Who came?* So many. And we do now. We come to the grave, and we come also for great joy. We come together to tell the story of our hearts and to receive the same from another. We come to hallow that space of truth shared aloud, reverencing it by bearing witness. We then can walk away from that space transformed, now able to really live. CC

Liz Tichenor is rector at the Episcopal Church of the Resurrection, Pleasant Hill, California, and author of The Night Lake: A Young Priest Maps the Topography of Grief.

It's destructive. It also makes my life better.

I just can't quit Facebook

by Jessica Mesman

I LOGGED IN to Facebook for the first time in 2008, when the teenager who babysat for my daughter sat me down and walked me through the process of setting up a profile. I was in my early 30s and had already moved across the country multiple times with my academic husband. Facebook quickly became the easiest way to share photos and information across those distances. It gave me a chance I wouldn't have had to watch my friends' and cousins' kids grow up.

I didn't yet have a smartphone. I remember the babysitter showing me how to upload my very first profile photo from my digital camera. I used to print digital photos of my children and organize them in real photo albums or share them with family members via a link to a website, but soon all that seemed redundant. Facebook became my personal baby book. I now have 12 years' worth of family photos in digital albums hosted by Facebook and Instagram.

I also have 12 years' worth of online friendships that became cherished real-life friendships, plus acquaintances, publishing contacts, and group memberships that give me access to people around the world who share some of my more obscure interests. Try finding just one person to parse the finer points of 1970s British folk horror teleplays with when you live in rural northern Michigan or the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains. On Facebook, I connected to thousands of them. In 2014, friends and I started our own group for Catholic writers and artists, which immediately outpaced the blog we'd started. For the next few years my entire professional life—and much of my spiritual life—was entirely bound up with Mark Zuckerberg's machine. I was invited to speak about how to build online communities, sitting on panels and giving talks that, looking back, were free advertising for Facebook products.

It's true that social media—Facebook, in particular—made my life as a writer and stay-at-home mom of young children so much richer and more interesting, and I was a staunch defender until 2016 when, like so many others, I started to sense that something wasn't quite right. What had once felt good was starting to feel bad.

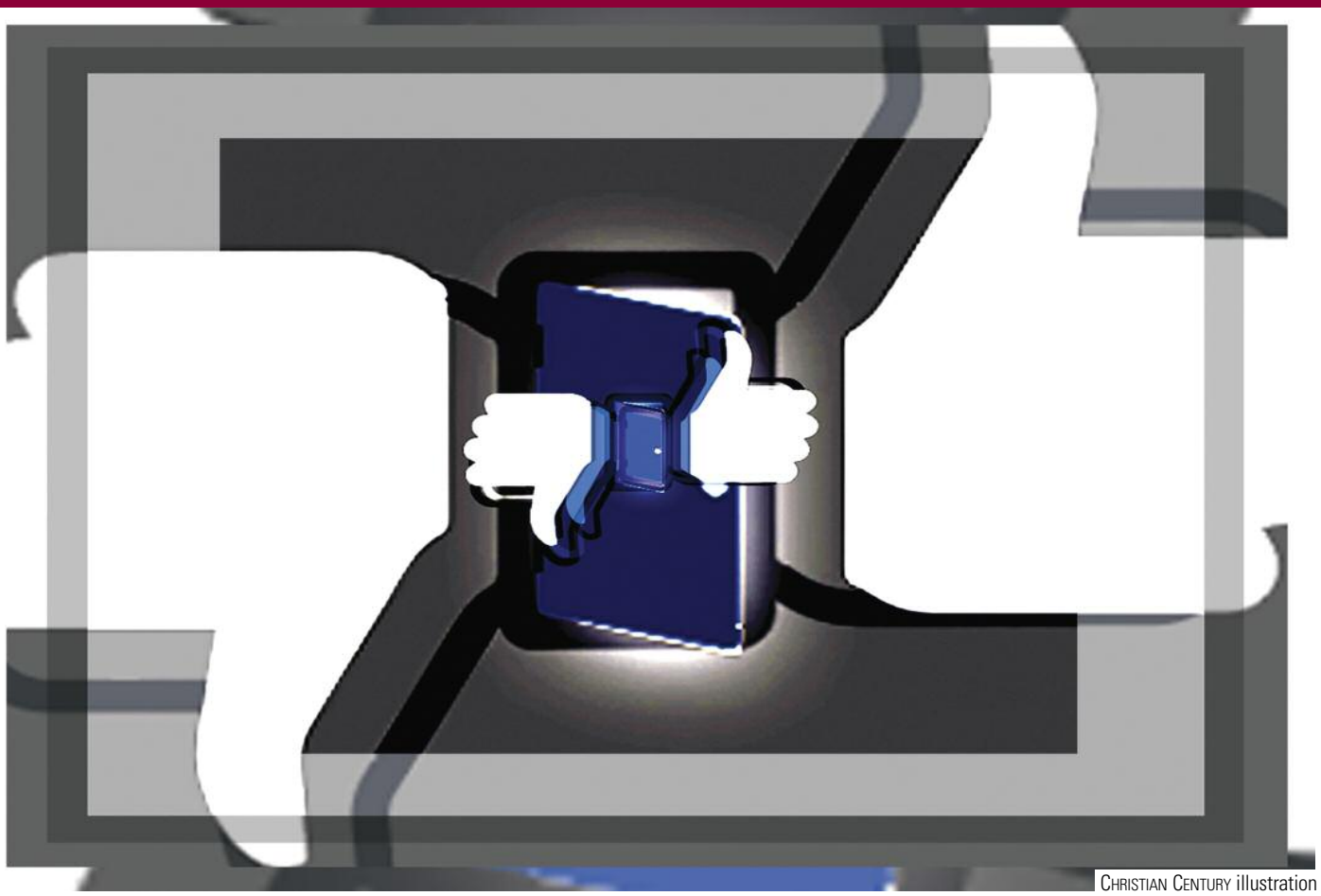
One night, when yet another distant family member materialized in the comments on one of my enraged posts about Donald Trump's presidential candidacy, I angrily asked why he only ever commented on my political posts, never the posts about my writing or my children. He responded: But all you ever post about is politics! He'd never even seen those other posts in his newsfeed. I think that's when I first began to consider the costs of being manipulated by an algorithm. I didn't delete Facebook, though. I just (mostly) stopped arguing about politics there and became a quick draw with the block button.

> Every time another friend deletes their account, I think, *Does staying make me a bad person?*

Frances Haugen, the whistleblower who recently brought thousands of Facebook's internal documents to Congress and the US Securities and Exchange Commission, isn't the first to accuse Facebook of dividing people, weakening democracy, and hurting children in its efforts to grow quickly and make what Haugen calls "astronomical profits." External critics have been raising these issues with Facebook executives for years. But Haugen brought receipts that prove Facebook is aware—from its own internal research—how harmful its practices are to individuals and society and has chosen not to protect the well-being of either.

Facebook, a $1 trillion company, engages in practices that maximize profit but result in "actual violence that harms and even kills people," Haugen testified before a Senate subcommittee. With 2.8 billion users—that's 60 percent of all internet users on the planet—we've already tasted the bitter fruit. We know Russian troll farms used Facebook to spread misinformation and interfere with US elections; we know the Myanmar government used the platform to launch a genocide; we know the insurrectionists used it to orchestrate the January 6 riot at the Capitol. And now we know that Facebook knew it too and did little to protect people.

"No one at Facebook is malevolent," Haugen told CBS News, "but the incentives are misaligned. Facebook makes more money when you consume more



Christian Century illustration

content. People enjoy engaging with things that elicit an emotional reaction. And the more anger that they get exposed to, the more they interact and the more they consume." Haugen produced evidence that European leaders have said Facebook's algorithm pushed them into extremist positions to curry social media attention, the only kind of attention that matters anymore.

Facebook also knows that its products, including Instagram, harm our children. Haugen leaked an internal study that showed 13.5 percent of British teen girls reported an increase in suicidal thoughts after looking at Instagram. Another study found that 17 percent of teen girls said it made their eating disorders worse.

Those of us who watched *The Social Dilemma* in 2020 were not surprised to hear how harmful social media is, and by design. The Netflix docudrama drew attention to how social media companies rely on research in the psychology of addiction to hook us and our kids, and it precipitated a minor exodus from Facebook, the first wave of people announcing they were deleting their profiles as an act of protest or self-protection. In the days after Haugen's testimony, I saw more friends leave, some using the hashtag #deletefacebook, and felt a mix of envy and irritation at what amounts to a moral flex I'm not willing to make. I envy their ability to let it all go—the low-commitment "friend" groups, the easy connectivity, the ready-made platform for sharing work and life from anywhere. I'm irritated that their departure makes me consider, again, what I'm trading for all that, and if "all that" is really worth that much after all. Every time someone goes, I think, does staying make me a bad person?

In the television show *The Good Place*, which is set in the afterlife, hand-wringing moral philosopher Chidi finds himself in hell because he's always trying to discern the lesser evil and so is unable to make choices at all. He is accompanied by Eleanor, who in life was motivated by outrageous selfishness, and Tahani, who always desperately needed to feel like a good person. I feel like these characters are my companions through the moral realms of Facebook. I know I'm in the Bad Place, where we act as hapless minions making lots of money for the very few by lending our support to a system that destroys families and tears at the fabric of society. But I feel trapped there by real connections, personal and professional, that make my life better. Of course I want to protect children—and democracy. But I don't want to give up access to my perimenopause support group! It's *almost* laughable. The doors of hell really are locked from the inside.

More than the people I see leaving now, I envy those who never logged in, those whose current careers and friendships can't be traced back through more than a decade's intricate web of likes, adds, and "people you may know." But that's not me. The social network was my only access to a network at all, and I hate that I am grateful for it. CC

Jessica Mesman is an associate editor of the CENTURY.

330,000 French children victims of church sexual abuse

Victims of abuse within France's Catholic Church welcomed a historic turning point on October 5 after a new report estimated that 330,000 children in France were sexually abused over the past 70 years, providing the country's first accounting of the worldwide phenomenon.

The figure includes abuses committed by some 3,000 priests and an unknown number of other people involved in the church—wrongdoing that Catholic authorities covered up over decades in a "systemic manner," according to the president of the commission that issued the report, Jean-Marc Sauvé.

The 2,500-page report said the tally of 330,000 victims includes an estimated 216,000 people abused by priests and other clerics and the rest by church figures such as scout leaders or camp counselors. The estimates are based on broader research by France's National Institute of Health and Medical Research into sexual abuse of children in the country.

The study's authors estimate 80 percent of the church's victims were boys, while the broader study of sexual abuse found that 75 percent of the victims overall were girls.

François Devaux, head of the victims' group La Parole Libérée (the Liberated Word), said it was "a turning point in our history." He denounced the cover-ups that permitted "mass crimes for decades."

"But even worse, there was a betrayal: betrayal of trust, betrayal of morality, betrayal of children, betrayal of innocence," he added.

Olivier Savignac, the head of victims association Parler et Revivre (Speak Out and Live Again), contributed to the investigation. In an interview, he said that the high ratio of victims per abuser was particularly "terrifying for French society, for the Catholic Church."

The commission worked for two and a half years, listening to victims and witnesses and studying church, court, police, and news archives starting from the 1950s. Sauvé characterized the church's attitude until the beginning of the 2000s as "a deep, cruel indifference toward victims."

"Sometimes church officials did not denounce [the sexual abuses] and even exposed children to risks by putting them in contact with predators," he stressed.

The president of the Bishops' Conference of France, Éric de Moulins-Beaufort, said French bishops "are appalled" at the conclusions of the report.

"No one expected such a high number [of victims] to come out of the survey, and that is properly frightening and out of proportion with the perception that we've had on the ground," he said in an interview.

Luc Crepy, the bishop of Versailles who heads an office fighting pedophilia, said, "This is more than a shock. It is a deep feeling of shame."

Crepy said a process was underway to put together funds and create an independent commission to handle church compensation for the victims.

Vatican spokesman Matteo Bruni said Pope Francis learned about the report's findings "with sorrow."

"His thoughts go in first place to the victims, with a profound sadness for their wounds and gratitude for their courage to speak out," he said.

Francis issued in May 2019 a groundbreaking new church law requiring all Catholic priests and nuns to report clergy sexual abuse and cover-ups by their superiors to church authorities. In June, Francis said a process of reform was necessary and every bishop must take responsibility for the "catastrophe" of the sexual abuse crisis.

The shocking estimate of more than a quarter million potential victims dwarfs numbers released by other countries that have also faced national reckoning with

AP PHOTO / MICHEL EULER

BETRAYAL OF TRUST: People pray for the victims of child sexual abuse during a special service at the Sainte-Jeanne d'Arc de la Mutualité church in Saint-Denis, outside Paris, on October 5.

THOMAS COEX, POOL VIA AP

DOCUMENTED ABUSE: Commission president Jean-Marc Sauvé* (left) *hands copies of the report to Éric de Moulins-Beaufort, president of the Bishops' Conference of France, at the release of a report by an independent commission into sexual abuse by church officials on October 5 in Paris.

church sexual abuse. But each country has investigated the problem in different ways.

Instead of limiting itself to specific cases, France's report made an estimate of the overall scale of the problem, extrapolating the number of victims based on studying specific incidents and nationwide surveys. —Sylvie Corbet, Associated Press. Masha Macpherson contributed from Paris and Nicolas Vaux-Montagny contributed from Lyon, France.

United Methodist Publishing House sells campus

The United Methodist Publishing House announced on October 4 that the sale of its Nashville property has been completed, at a price of $24.5 million. The lakefront campus was sold to R2, a Chicago-based real estate investment firm.

UMPH is the denomination's oldest continuous entity, dating to 1789. However, recent decades have seen it contracting along with the denomination's US membership.

In 2012, UMPH announced that it would be closing all of its brick-and-mortar Cokesbury bookstores. In 2014, the agency sold its downtown Nashville property and moved operations to the lakefront campus outfitted with state-of-the-art digital technology.

When the COVID-19 pandemic closed churches in March 2020, UMPH's sales plummeted—including for vacation Bible school and Sunday school materials. The agency underwent layoffs while also shifting to remote operations. For April 2020, sales were just 64 percent of what they had been a year earlier, and the next few months weren't much better.

By May, UMPH had reached a tentative agreement with R2.

Though most employees continue to work remotely, UMPH is leasing space in the United Methodist Communications building, on Nashville's 12th Avenue South, for core information technology and financial services.

Brian Milford, UMPH's president and publisher, said sales picked up somewhat this spring, but when the delta strain caused COVID infection rates to rise again, church participation and UMPH sales both faced setbacks.

"Sales are directly linked to the rate and magnitude of return to in-person worship, Sunday school, and other congregational activities," he added.

The agency expects final accounting for the fiscal year will show a nearly $3 million deficit. —Sam Hodges, United Methodist News Service

UNITED METHODIST NEWS / MIKE DUBOSE

SOLD: The parking lot of the United Methodist Publishing House in Nashville, Tennessee, stands empty at midday on May 1, 2020. Later that same month, the publisher reached a tentative agreement to sell the property. The sale was finalized in September.

Catholic nonprofit trains youths on ending religious conflict in Nigeria

Nigeria, a country of more than 200 million people, is deeply divided along religious lines. For two decades, violent clashes between Muslims and Christians have claimed thousands of lives. For instance, in November 2008, violence broke out among Muslims and Christians in Jos, Nigeria, a city in the country's middle region.

About 760 people were killed. Samuel Sunkur, a Christian who was 13 at the time, said he was devastated when his aunt's house was destroyed and razed by mobs. Afterward, Sunkur started thinking of ways to take revenge.

"My reaction was that violence must be met with violence," he said. "After all, even the Bible has it that 'an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.'"

In these conflicts, young people like Sunkur are almost always on the front lines. But after participating in a one-day workshop in May organized by the Africa Faith and Justice Network, a Washington-based social justice organization, Sunkur, now 26, said he has recommitted to nonviolence.

Established in 1983, the AFJN has been working in Africa to promote social justice and to advocate for human rights. In Nigeria—especially in Jos—the nonprofit has been training hundreds of young people in peacebuilding initiatives in an effort to end religious violence.

Eucharia Madueke, the coordinator of AFJN's Women's Empowerment Project and a Sister of Notre Dame de Namur, said the purpose of the May workshop was to help young Nigerians recognize their role in peacebuilding.

"We believe the future of the society is in the hands of the young people. So we educate them on how best to react to social issues and cases of violence—because youth's reaction affects quality of life," she said.

About 100 young adults attended the May training workshop, which was moderated by conflict experts. And it quickly made an impact. One month after the training, more than 40 people went on air


AP PHOTO / BEN CURTIS


AP PHOTO / SUNDAY ALAMBA

BUILDING PEACE: On February 17, 2019, churchgoers* (left) *pray at Saint Charles Catholic Church in Kano, Nigeria, which was bombed by the Islamic extremist group Boko Haram in 2014. On January 23, 2012, Muslim men in Kano* (right) *pray for peace and for the people who died in a series of attacks by Boko Haram several days before.

at a Jos radio station to discuss the negative impact of violence and how dialogue and collaboration can be used for peacebuilding. Afterward, they took to the streets to distribute handbills. "Say no to violence," they chanted into megaphones.

Paulina Ogbonnaya, a Dominican Sister of St. Catherine of Siena, Nigeria, was one of the trainers at the spring workshop. She said her goal was realized because the training kindled a fire in the participants.

"It was like we were waiting for something like this for a long time, and it seems it is coming together now. We are happy because we can see it from the work they started doing after the program," she said.

And yet, the lack of adequate funding for organizing workshops and mobilizing young people remains a major challenge for AFJN. Madueke says these activities are sometimes delayed for financial reasons.

"But we will not stop training and supporting the youths," she said.

Sunkur, who is studying sociology at the University of Jos, said he hopes to continue working with AFJN and other local organizations to advocate for peace across the country. The AFJN training also inspired him to resume work on a book about how to end religious violence through dialogue and collaboration—because, he said, he realizes there's a need for him to take action in order to change society.

"One way of doing this is writing books to de-radicalize our people so that they accept dialogue and collaboration as the best approach to violence."
—Patrick Egwu, Ekpali Saint

Southern Baptist panel to open legal records for abuse probe

THE SOUTHERN Baptist Convention's executive committee agreed on October 5 to open up legally protected records to investigators who will look into how it handled, or mishandled, cases of sexual abuse within the nation's largest Protestant denomination over the past two decades.

The third vote on the matter in less than three weeks reversed two previous ones that would have maintained attorney-client privilege. Waiving that privilege is considered crucial to enabling a transparent reckoning into how the denomination's leaders responded to abuse and abusers in its churches and institutions.

The 44–31 vote followed unsuccessful efforts to negotiate a compromise and the resignation of several board members who had previously opposed the waiver.

Pressure on the executive committee had built from within the denomination, with groups of pastors saying a refusal to heed opinions on the attorney-client privilege issue could jeopardize trust among rank-and-file Baptists. They also said it could put at risk donations to the convention's unified budget, which funds seminaries and missionaries.
—Peter Smith, Associated Press

Rural chaplains support communities facing isolation, labor shortages, hate groups

On any given day, Bob Klingler, a rural chaplain in northwestern Pennsylvania, might be cleaning a flooded basement, facilitating an antiracist workshop, or leading worship from the bay of a livestock auction barn. Meanwhile, in Suffolk, England, rural chaplain Graham Miles could be answering a midnight phone call or helping a ewe give birth.

To Miles and Klingler, it's all ministry.

According to Klingler, rural chaplaincy offers a different approach than other forms of chaplaincy. "We tend to work on a more practical level," said Klingler. "We're helping people to find new ways to make money, we're educating people, we're trying to advocate for things like rural health care or transportation in rural areas."

An ordained elder in the United

Methodist Church, Klingler pastors a six-church cooperative ministry south of Erie, Pennsylvania, in addition to his chaplaincy work. "On committees, I tend to be the voice that speaks up and says, 'Yes, but what about the folks outside the cities? What are you doing in the rural areas?'" said Klingler.

Such advocacy is vital. Today, rural communities are facing an onslaught of pandemic-era challenges caused by labor shortages, ecological crises, and changes in supply and demand.

"People don't realize farmers are probably not making enough personal income, and a lot of farm families end up getting food stamps," said Klingler. "In a lot of cases, dairy farmers are losing money on milk these days. So rural chaplains are a way to have people on the ground who can deal with those sorts of issues and help train others."

Klingler was one of the first to be certified as a rural chaplain by the Rural Chaplains Association, which formed in 1991 in response to the US farm crisis of the 1980s. A sudden drop in the price of land caused the nation's farm debt to double between 1978 and 1984, and thousands of farms faced financial collapse. According to the National Farm Medicine Center, more than 900 farmers died by suicide in five Upper Midwest states during the 1980s.

Klingler said the crisis also fed the growth of hate groups, which gained sympathy by using intimidation—at times with weapons—to block sheriffs' sales of foreclosed farmland. It was out of this context that the UMC provided a grant to start the Rural Chaplains Association, now a self-funded nonprofit that provides training and networking opportunities for 72 rural chaplains around the world.

The association requires applicants to attend annual meetings and meet with a review committee before being approved for certification. Ordination is not a requirement, and while currently all association members are Christians, Judy Matheny, an administrative staff person at the association, said they would be open to having applicants from other faith traditions.

While farmers in places like California endured a drought-stricken summer, Klingler said the farmers in his area have had an ideal growing season. Rather than focusing on agriculture, Klingler has been working to quell the spread of hate groups, which are prevalent in the area.

Following the 2020 election, a KKK group came through the area distributing invitations to join them. Klingler was part of a rally that responded to the hate group and has led seminars and study groups on antiracism.

In Fairmont, West Virginia, rural chaplain Dick Bowyer partnered with local pastors and young people to put together a protest and prayer service in response to the killing of George Floyd.

PHOTO BY BOB KLINGLER

PRACTICAL NEEDS: A Rural Chaplains Association event at a Vermont farm in October 2017. Rural chaplain Bob Klingler says the practical and spiritual needs of rural people are often overlooked in his more urban church work.

Bowyer said the young people in his small, rural community are especially vulnerable to challenges like addictions. "West Virginia still ranks number one in terms of the opioid crisis," said Bowyer.

Between 1999 and 2015, the rate of deaths due to opioids quadrupled in rural communities among people age 18 to 25, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Data collected by the National Institute on Drug Abuse in 2018 showed that in West Virginia there are more than 42 opioid-involved overdose deaths per 100,000 people, the most of any state.

Though Bowyer is largely retired, as a rural chaplain he partners with local organizations in the former mining town to provide programs and jobs for those dealing with substance abuse and unemployment. One ongoing project involves the conversion of a former church into a community center.

Miles is not affiliated with the Rural Chaplains Association. Instead, he was licensed to become a rural chaplain through the Church of England in 2019. Miles says his farming background allows him both to empathize with farmers' struggles and to provide hands-on support. He once helped a farmer with lambing at three in the morning.

"I don't go onto the farm preaching, and I don't wear a collar, which I find helps sometimes," said Miles. "It's just about coming alongside them. Nine times out of ten, I just have to listen."

Listening has been especially important during the pandemic, when Miles says farmers in Suffolk have faced extreme isolation. "I've been getting phone calls from farmers, with loneliness, depression, anxiety, and suicidal thoughts," he said. "The phone calls come in late at night, after 11, 12."

In addition to isolation, the pandemic has also ushered in some unexpected challenges in rural communities. Miles said the UK is experiencing a delivery driver shortage, sending sugar beet farmers in the UK scrambling to figure out how to deliver their crops.

In Klingler's Pennsylvania community, locals are seeing an influx of eggs that are impacting the local economy.

"A lot of folks in the area, because of the pandemic, started raising chickens," said Klingler. "And so those folks who depended on selling eggs as part of their living now have more competition, and the prices have just plummeted at the local auction house."

Klingler noted rural chaplains can act as translators for pastors who arrive in rural communities without any previous exposure. Their spiritual support and practical expertise can make a significant impact on communities where people often feel overlooked.

"The rural communities are the heartland of this country," said Klingler. "And there's a lot of really fine people out here that really feel like they get left behind."

—Kathryn Post, Religion News Service

Remnants of Black church uncovered at Colonial Williamsburg

The brick foundation of one of the nation's oldest Black churches has been unearthed at Colonial Williamsburg, a living history museum in Virginia that continues to reckon with its past storytelling about the country's origins and the role of Black Americans.

The First Baptist Church was formed in 1776 by free and enslaved Black people. They initially met secretly in fields and under trees, in defiance of laws that prevented African Americans from congregating.

By 1818, the church had its first building in the former colonial capital. The 16-foot by 20-foot structure was destroyed by a tornado in 1834.

First Baptist's second structure, built in 1856, stood there for a century. But an expanding Colonial Williamsburg bought the property in 1956 and turned it into a parking lot.

First Baptist pastor Reginald F. Davis, whose church now stands elsewhere in Williamsburg, said the uncovering of the church's first home is "a rediscovery of the humanity of a people."

"This helps to erase the historical and social amnesia that has afflicted this country for so many years," he said.

On October 7, Colonial Williamsburg announced that it had located the foundation after analyzing layers of soil and artifacts such as a one-cent coin.

For decades, Colonial Williamsburg had ignored the stories of colonial Black Americans. But in recent years, the museum has placed a growing emphasis on African American history.

The museum tells the story of the city and includes more than 400 restored or reconstructed buildings. More than half of the 2,000 people who lived in Williamsburg in the late 18th century were Black, and many of them were enslaved.

First Baptist has been at the center of an initiative to reintroduce African Americans to the museum. For instance, Colonial Williamsburg's historic conservation experts repaired the church's long-silenced bell several years ago.

Congregants and museum archaeologists are now plotting a way forward together on how best to excavate the site and to tell First Baptist's story. The relationship is starkly different from the one in the mid-20th century.

"Imagine being a child going to this church, and riding by and seeing a parking lot . . . where possibly people you knew and loved are buried," said Connie Matthews Harshaw, a member of First Baptist. She is also board president of the Let Freedom Ring Foundation, which is aimed at preserving the church's history.

"It's a healing process . . . to see it being uncovered," Harshaw said. "And the community has really come together around this. And I'm talking Black and White."

The excavation began last year. So far, 25 graves have been located, based on the discoloration of the soil in areas where a plot was dug, according to Jack Gary, Colonial Williamsburg's director of archaeology.

Gary said some congregants have already expressed an interest in analyzing bones to get a better idea of the lives of the deceased and to discover familial connections. He said some graves appear to predate the building of the second church.

It's unclear exactly when First Baptist's first church was built. Some researchers have said it may already have been standing when it was offered to the congregation by Jesse Cole, a White man who owned the property at the time.

First Baptist is mentioned in tax records from 1818 for an adjacent property.

Gary said the original foundation was confirmed by analyzing layers of soil and artifacts found in them. They included a one-cent coin from 1817 and copper pins that held together clothing in the early 18th century.

Colonial Williamsburg and the congregation want to eventually reconstruct the church.

Jody Lynn Allen, a history professor at the nearby College of William and Mary, said the excavation is part of a larger reckoning on race and slavery at historic sites across the world.

"It's not that all of a sudden, magically, these primary sources are appearing," Allen said. "They've been in the archives or in people's basements or attics. But they weren't seen as valuable."

Allen, who is on the board of First Baptist's Let Freedom Ring Foundation, said physical evidence like a church foundation can help people connect more strongly to the past.

"The fact that the church still exists—that it's still thriving—that story needs to be told," Allen said. "People need to understand that there was a great resilience in the African American community." —Ben Finley, Associated Press

AP PHOTO / BEN FINLEY

HISTORY UNEARTHED: First Baptist Church pastor Reginald F. Davis* (left), *First Baptist member Connie Matthews Harshaw, and Colonial Williamsburg director of archaeology Jack Gary stand at the foundation of one of the oldest Black churches in the United States on October 6.

People

COURTESY OF THE LUTHERAN WORLD FEDERATION

■ On September 26, **Bertha Godfrey Munkhondya** became the first woman ordained in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Malawi.

In a congratulatory letter to Munkhondya and the ELCM, Lutheran World Federation general secretary Martin Junge expressed gratitude for Munkhondya's willingness to serve the church.

"May Munkhondya's ordination inspire girls and women to pursue theological education and respond to the call to ministry. Gender justice in the church and society is our shared commitment and our witness to the world," he wrote.

Munkhondya, originally from Chisenga, Chitipa, Malawi, studied theology at the Tumaini University Makumira in Arusha, Tanzania, and will serve as associate pastor of the ELCM cathedral in Lilongwe.

Bishop Joseph P. Bvumbwe presided at the ordination. Participants in the event included delegations from the Lutheran Communion in Southern Africa, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa, and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania.

"The ELCM took time before it ordained a female pastor, but there is full acceptance of Rev. Munkhondya," Bvumbwe said. "We ask for your prayers for our church and encourage churches that are still meditating or discerning the process of ordaining female pastors."

The ELCM has been an LWF member church since 1988 and has 111,000 members. —Lutheran World Federation

■ **Pat Robertson**, who turned a tiny Virginia television station into a global religious broadcasting network, is stepping down after a half century running *The 700 Club* on daily TV, the Christian Broadcasting Network announced on October 1.

AP PHOTO / STEVE HELBER

Robertson, 91, said in a statement that he had hosted the network's flagship program for the last time and that his son Gordon Robertson would immediately take over.

Robertson's CBN started broadcasting on October 1, 1961, after he bought a bankrupt television station in Portsmouth, Virginia. *The 700 Club* began production in 1966.

One of Robertson's innovations with *The 700 Club* was to use the secular talk-show format, a break from more traditional broadcasts of revival meetings or church services.

As *The 700 Club* host, Robertson sometimes found himself in hot water for his on-air pronouncements. In 2005, he called for the assassination of Venezuelan president Hugo Chávez and warned residents of a rural Pennsylvania town not to be surprised if disaster struck them because they voted out school board members who favored teaching "intelligent design" rather than evolutionary science.

But Robertson also called for ending mandatory prison sentences for marijuana possession convictions. He later said on *The 700 Club* that marijuana should be legalized and treated like alcohol because the government's war on drugs had failed.

Robertson will still appear on a monthly, interactive episode of *The 700 Club* and will come on the program "occasionally as news warrants," the network said.

Gordon Robertson, 63, is a Yale-educated former real estate lawyer. He is chief executive of CBN and has served as executive producer of *The 700 Club* for 20 years. He said viewers should expect little to change about the show.

"Let's feed the poor," he said. "Let's clothe the naked. Let's give shelter to people in need. When disasters strike, let's strike back with love and compassion." —Ben Finley, Associated Press

■ **Emma Jordan-Simpson** has been named the next president of Auburn Seminary. She succeeds Katharine Henderson, who announced last year that she would be stepping down after a decade of leadership at the Presbyterian-founded institution in New York.

AUBURN SEMINARY

Jordan-Simpson comes to Auburn from the Fellowship of Reconciliation USA, where she was executive director. Prior to that, Jordan-Simpson was the executive director of the New York branch of the Children's Defense Fund. She also serves as executive pastor at Concord Baptist Church of Christ in Brooklyn.

She is currently president of the board of American Baptist Churches of Metropolitan New York and sits on the board of the Federation of Protestant Welfare Agencies. She was the founding executive director of Girls Inc. of New York City and has also served as executive vice president of the Bedford Stuyvesant Restoration Corporation, the nation's first community development corporation.

"Emma is a quiet storm whose winds sweep you safely to waters you might not have been able to imagine," said Auburn Seminary board member Kim Anderson in a statement. "This is the time for both Auburn and Emma to build upon Katharine's incredible legacy and step forth into new possibilities and purpose, called in new ways that continue to emerge."

In the same statement, Jordan-Simpson called the appointment an honor.

"I am excited to find ways for Auburn to grow with care and integrity as it continues to support leaders to heal historic wounds, and move closer to the ideals of democracy where we share the responsibility of welcoming all." —Dawn Araujo-Hawkins

LIVING BY The Word

November 14, 33rd Sunday in Ordinary Time
1 Samuel 1:4–20

REFLECTING ON THIS text and on Hannah's story, I remember listening to New Testament scholar Amy Lindeman Allen explain what she called a "children's reading of the text." She said that children are very rarely the center of biblical text and interpretation. Instead, they are usually just an appendage or afterthought, when they're mentioned at all. She made the rather audacious claim that in the US context, when we list different marginalized people and groups, we should include children. Children are often left without voices, and, particularly relevant for us, they are seldom considered in sermons, theology, homiletics, lectures, papers, articles, lectionaries, and workshops. What about the children?

What about the children in this post-truth era? Fake news, alternative facts, and conspiratorial views of reality present a daily challenge for adults and our sanity. How much more so for children? How should they know what to believe? What about the children? What about the displays of violence, hate, intolerance, and bigotry that we adults mimic before them? What are the ramifications of adults acting badly and viciously in front of children?

What about the children in a time when anti-immigrant sentiment is on the rise across the globe, from the United States to Italy, to Austria, to Germany, and to more places in the world than I can name? In preparing this reflection, I looked at several lists of the chief challenges facing children worldwide: poverty, life as refugees, violence through indoctrination, lack of access to education, child neglect, child labor, child abuse, rape and molestation, child prostitution, child trafficking and slavery, military use of children, hunger, and climate change, to name a few. What about the children? What if we got busy and active for the children? What do our reflections on this text of 1 Samuel have to do with children?

Hannah has a word for our commitment to children. Let's look at an interpretation of the text that puts children at the center.

Hannah is completely stressed out—she weeps bitterly and will not eat. The text says that one day, "Hannah rose." She goes to the temple and weeps in the bitterness of her soul, saying, *God, if only you will give me a son, then I will give him back to you, to serve you all the days of his life*. Her lips are moving, but she is not making a sound—she is groaning to God quietly, from the depth of her soul.

Eli, the priest, answers her and says, "Go in peace, and may the God of Israel grant what you have asked." After hearing this, she goes on her way and her face is no longer downcast. The next morning she and her husband go to worship and then back home, where they have sex together—and Hannah conceives. She gives birth to a son, Samuel. *I asked the Lord for him*, she says. And, having borne this child she considers sacred, Hannah gives him back to God as she promised.

What if we had a sacred view of children, rather than seeing them as mere appendages to the perspectives of adults?

Do we regard children as sacred in our US context and culture? Do we regard children outside of our group, ethnicity, or race as sacred? Are immigrant children sacred? What if children were the center of the world instead of adults? What if children were the center of textual interpretation? What if children were the center of our policies and decisions, the behaviors and attitudes of this nation?

In a time of pandemic, when effective vaccines are available to adults but not yet to young children, elected officials often seem more concerned about keeping bars and restaurants open than safely opening schools, which hold the future of 50 million children in the balance. What about the children? By early this August, only 29 states had recommended that students wear masks to make in-person school as safe as possible. Are children being held sacred when we allow political posturing to take precedence over public health?

What if we put children at the center of our policies and decisions?

An August 21 *New York Times* editorial argues that "the learning catastrophe that has befallen the country's most vulnerable children" because of the pandemic will have negative ripple effects for decades to come. How will we prioritize the children who struggled with learning during the pandemic, many of whom were already the most at risk, in the most vulnerable communities? How will we ensure that we bring all of our children back to their appropriate grade level?

I applaud President Biden's efforts to reduce child poverty by half as part of the American Families Plan. We need more determination and more action by others as well. What about the adults who refuse to prioritize children enough to effect change across our nation and world? Do we adults know how sacred children really are?

November 21, Reign of Christ Sunday
John 18:33–37

WHEN PILATE interrogates Jesus, he sounds much like the disciples who thought the kingdom Jesus kept referring to was a political one. "Are you the king of the Jews?" he asks Jesus.

Jesus responds, "Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?" Pilate points out that he is not Jewish and that Jesus' own people have handed him over. "What have you done?" he asks.

Jesus responds, "My kingdom is not of this world." Despite expectations, he is not of an earthly empire that will chase out the oppressive Romans and institute a political reign that will usher in the age of blessing for Israel. His kingdom, his realm, is not of this world.

If we were listening carefully to John and to the synoptic gospels, we would know how Jesus is going to respond here. Though we, like Jesus' disciples, don't always talk much about the kingdom, this is pretty much all that Jesus talks about.

In Mark, Jesus comes into Galilee preaching the Good News of the kingdom of God (1:14)—at the very beginning and inaugural point of his ministry, Jesus is talking about the kingdom. Luke records Jesus' words: "I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God to the other cities also, because this is why I was sent" (4:43). Jesus goes through every city and village preaching and demonstrating the Good News of the kingdom of God.

"But seek ye first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well" (Matt. 6:33). "The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you" (Matt. 13:11). "You are not far from the kingdom of God" (Mark 12:34). "The kingdom of God does not come with your careful observation, nor will people say, 'Here it is,' or 'There it is,' because the kingdom of God is within you" (Luke 17:20–21). Jesus talks about God's reign more than he talks about anything else.

The kingdom of God is God's reign—not over a country or a group of people but over the whole of human history. This realm of God affirms what is good, true, and just in every age, and it corrects what is misguided, unjust, and wrong. It is not about a geographical country nor a particular race or ethnicity. God's realm does not settle on boundaries that we make, such as a particular version of the Christian faith that we endorse. The reign of God is not about a sentimental vagueness that requires nothing of us except that we try to be nice. Nor is God's realm a national or a political entity.

It is a community in God's care that lives in radical love, joy, peace, truth, and righteousness.

The kingdom is rooted in the paradoxical name and nature of God. The realm of God is preached and therefore inaugurated: it is here, but it is also on the way. God's reign is plain, but it is also mysterious. God's realm is open to everybody, but it is also hidden. Though it somehow is never fully realized, it is so profound and so real that we cannot escape its claim. The church is God's realm in its visible form; though fallible, it participates in the inauguration of the reign of God. This kingdom is the most beautiful and alluring thing in life, yet it is also the most demanding and radical thing one could ever know or do. The kingdom of God is paradoxical.

The kingdom of God is under divine sovereignty. Ultimately, the reign of God is God's government set up in the human heart. God comes into the human heart at the point of regeneration and makes that heart a holy habitation. God's government invades the human heart such that God's authority is established in a person's mind and will. When God occupies a human heart, then the kingdom has come to earth. When God sets up government in a human heart, then peace shall reign. When God sets up government in a human heart, then we shall beat our swords into plowshares. When God sets up government in enough human hearts, then we shall study war no more.

> God's reign affirms what is good, true, and just in every age, and it corrects what is misguided, unjust, and wrong.

The question is whether we, each of us, serve a government of this world. Can we say with Jesus that the government we serve is not of this world? Is God's government set up in our human hearts?

The author is Frank A. Thomas*, professor of homiletics and director of the Academy of Preaching and Celebration at Christian Theological Seminary.*

Photo by Mara Lavitt for Yale Divinity School

THEOLOGIAN
WILLIE JENNINGS

The geography of Whiteness

interview by Matthew Vega

WILLIE JENNINGS TEACHES systematic theology and Africana studies at Yale Divinity School. His most recent book is After Whiteness: An Education in Belonging.

Let's start with your understanding of this thing we call race. What is it?

Race is a distorted way of seeing the world within Christian thought. We might want to say that race is a distorted view of creation, a distorted view of the order of the body and of the relationship between the body and land, and a distorted view of the relations that should exist because of those views of body and land.

Matthew Vega is a graduate student in theology at the University of Chicago. He interviewed Jennings as part of the Veritas Forum, an organization that invites speakers from different perspectives and worldviews to dialogue around life's biggest questions.

There was a time on this planet when no one would have imagined themselves encased in something called race. That's not to say that there were not always elements that later on would coalesce into the racial imagination—people identifying others differently from themselves or springing off things like phenotype and bodily description. But race is not part of the created order. It is a particular historical emergence of a way of perceiving oneself and the world. While inexplicable in its forming, it became self-explanatory while also explaining the world.

You say that race was formed within Christian thought. What does it have to do with theology?

The modern vision of race would not be possible without Christianity. This is a complicated statement, but I want people to think about this.

Inside the modern racial consciousness there is a Christian architecture, and also there is a racial architecture inside of modern Christian existence. There are three things we have to put on the table in order to understand how deeply race is tied to Christianity. The first brings us back to the very heart of Christianity, the very heart of the story that makes Christian life intelligible.

That story is simply this: through a particular people called Israel, God brought the redemption of the world. That people's story becomes the means through which we understand who God is and what God has done. Christianity is inside Israel's story. At a certain point in time, the people who began to believe that story were more than just the people of Israel, more than just Jews. And at some point in time, those new believers, the gentiles, got tired of being told that they were strangers brought into someone else's story—that this was not their story. They began—very early and very clearly—to push Israel out from its own story. They narrated their Christian existence as if Israel were not crucial to it.

The fact that Christians came to identify themselves as the chosen people is already a profound distortion of the story. But this is where they are when we come to the colonial moment. They believe that they are at the very center of what God wants to do in the world. This belief is in everything they do and say: the way they read the Bible, the way they form their theology, the way they teach, the way they carry out their Christian lives.

As they begin to realize their power, they also realize the power to shape the perceptions of themselves and others. That is, they begin to understand that not only do they have the power to transform the landscape and the built environment, but they also have the power to force people into a different perception of the world and of themselves.

This is what we came to call European: the power to transform the land and the perception of the people. A racial vision started to emerge. It floated around in many places with many differences in body type, skin color, and so forth. It didn't come out of nowhere. But now, inside this matrix, it starts to harden. It starts to become a way of perception, not simply of a conjecture. This is where Whiteness begins.

So unless you know that this is a Christian operation, you cannot grasp the absolute power of race to define existence right now, even when people move beyond that Christian matrix and say they don't confess it or agree with it. They are still inside it. That's my definition of Whiteness: it is a way of perceiving the world and organizing and ordering the world by the perception of one's distorted place within it. But it is also more than a perception: Whiteness includes the power to place that perception on other people and to sustain it.

How does this understanding shape the American landscape?

The challenge for these colonists when they came to the new world was twofold. One was trying to make sense of the vastness. They were seeing a world that they had only imagined existed, and it was utterly breathtaking—not only in terms of the landscapes and the flora and the fauna and the mountains and the oceans and so forth, but also the vast variety of peoples, all speaking different languages and with different ways of life. The colonists were overwhelmed by that reality.

And they had the desire to make sense of that. Why am I here? What does this mean? This combined with the reality of having absolute power. In a very short time, they came to understand that they could take everything they wanted, and this began to have a further distorting effect on their faith.

"Changing the social fabric of this country begins with changing the geographic fabric."

In the old world, you've lived your whole life in, say, a 150-mile radius, or even a 60-mile radius. Then you come to the new world. The royalty of the old world gives you 80,000 acres of land and everything that's in it, because of your faithful service or whatever. Whatever vision of life you have with God is now shaped inside this unbelievable reality of power and greed. You hear the royalty of the old world say, *This is all yours*. And you hear the spirit of God saying to you, *This is all yours, my son*. This is your—let's use this phrase—private property.

Now, the first thing you have to do to maintain your private property is to dispel any notion that the people who live on *your land* live anywhere else than on your land. Many of them had an idea that they were profoundly connected to the land, that their identities were tied to the land, water, mountains, and animals. When you would ask them who they were, many indigenous people would tell stories about the land.

For the missionary colonialist, this was nonsense. They even saw it as demonically derived nonsense: the devil was working on these people and engaging them in some kind of nature worship. So they needed to dispel this idea. This is another way that we can see—and it is really important to understand—that the modern racial vision and the modern vision of private property are two sides of the same coin.

The newly White people had to extract people from the land and extract the land from people. They needed everyone to believe that one piece of land is just as good as any other. They introduced the idea of possession—specifically, possession as private property owned by an individual who can then sell that land to someone else. For the indigenous people, this idea was utterly foreign and profoundly destructive.

Now let's add one more layer. The colonial Europeans also brought with them commodities called slaves. Many indigenous people also became slaves as the colonies were forming. Both indigenous people and the newly arrived slaves were forced into service of the White body. They cared for its needs and attended to its moods, its forms of desire, its ways of loving, its ways of reaching out and touching God, its ways of thinking about God.

And so Christianity and the Western world form inside this ongoing, convoluted negotiation of White subjectivity, the inner life of Whiteness. For so many people, their Christianity is caught up yet inside those realities. And many people have fought against it.

Christianity itself continues to face the unfinished work of pulling itself out from inside the reality of White intimacy and out of a spiritual life that remains so caught up in what is true, what is good, what is beautiful, what is noble, what is honorable, and therefore what is desirable—from a White point of view. All of us have to go through the fiery brook of the redefinition of our desires away from Whiteness, and for so many people that fiery brook is too deep and too long to traverse. They are still caught in the midst of it.

Is it possible to move beyond race? Or do we have to go through race?

The way that the dilemma is often articulated to us is still a part of the dilemma. One of the difficulties is to get people who are White, who have made themselves White, to see that they're actually inside something that's been created. It's like those old black-and-white movies, where White people are always, always in the center of the screen, and every once in a while you see a non-White person show up at the very edge.

First we have to narrate the story of those folks who enter stage left and exit. We have to put them in the center and notice how White people are pushing themselves onto a stage where they don't belong.

But to be shaped inside of Whiteness in the West is to be shaped inside a sense of comfort and safety. Things revolve around you, and it seems to require some kind of Herculean or religiously heroic effort for you to decenter yourself.

This is what has to be challenged now. And it's not just an idea; it's a reality of a sense of comfort, a sense of what's normal and what's safe. Those realities are not just in the head. They are registered socially, economically, intellectually, academically, and especially geographically—especially in the way communities are shaped in Whiteness.

This idea of place is a major theme in your work. How are we trained to relate to place, and what are the implications for race and theology?

This is one of the most difficult things for some people to get their minds around. We have a distorted sense of what it means to inhabit place. We have been deeply habituated into what I call an unrelenting reality of displacement. This has implications for how we understand ourselves, our connectivity, our relationality, and the ethics of that relationality.

For most of us, trained in this distorted view, one place is just as good as another. You could pick us up and drop us off anywhere in the world. If we have a Starbucks and a McDonald's, we're good. This is not a historical accident. This is part of the trajectory of displacing people from land and turning all land into private property.

The implications are immense. Once we understand this displacement, we can see the racial configuration of place: we are inside a racial geography in which the flows of goods and services and opportunities flow around White bodies first. Then they might extend out from that to others, or they do a circuit around a few others and then back to their main source of energy.

The difficulty is to get people to understand the placement reality of White supremacy, of racial antagonism. It's not a matter of people's personal behaviors and certainly not of their beliefs. It is structured into the very ground itself.

"Wholeness begins with being able to inhabit the whole story of America."

We can look at this in terms of policing. All policing practice follows zoning policy. You will not change policing practice until you change zoning policy, because in the case of Black and Brown bodies, most of those killed by police either were in some place they were not supposed to be, according to the racial geography, or the police found themselves in a place they considered hostile territory. The very place itself drew their bodies into the pedagogy of violence.

We have to understand that all of our efforts at changing the social fabric of this country must begin with changing the geographic fabric. That's where the real fight is. People will not fight you at all when you say we need to learn to love each other. But if you say that the configuration of real estate must show how we love one another, they will fight you tooth and nail.

What is your vision for wholeness in America?

I believe wholeness begins with being able to inhabit the whole story of America and the story of the West. Those of us in education mourn because so many people in this country have been given harmless history. They have been shaped inside it. People haven't been given a full, rich sense of the glory and the horror of the Western world and of this country. They are operating in very small slices of the reality of their own lives.

Wholeness begins by starting to see the full picture. Do students see how they are born into the long story of land takeover and land seizure that continues with the configuration of neighborhoods that keep certain people in and push other people out? Are they taught the history and reality of redlining? If you've been to school in most parts of this country, whether private or public, you aren't taught any of that. People arrive at college with a very thin sense of the long history of racial struggle—not just the struggle for civil rights but the struggle that takes place because we live in Whiteness. This is the struggle that comes with a particular kind of formation and conformity to a way of being.

Wholeness begins with knowing that story, because without

that full story we really don't know what to do. We're just hoping and wishing, and for so many people it comes down to this: *I just wish we could like each other, could be friends with each other.*

OK, but do you understand where you are? That's the problem for so many people in this country. They're not even able to see the fabric. They cannot see the reality of America on their bodies.

We don't need people saying it would be great if White and non-White people could learn to live together. That's a useless statement. Here's a better statement: it'd be great if we could reconfigure neighborhoods, cities, suburbs, rural areas. Then the next step is that there has to be a new intentionality about how we configure habitation and city.

One thing we have to do for wholeness is to ban all gated communities. There should not be any gated communities—they should be illegal.

What do you think that restructuring would look like in the short term, perhaps five to ten years time?

The first step is the great unveiling. For the first time probably in history for most cases, the decisions about real estate, development, how much houses will cost, where apartments will be—these decisions will be not only democratized but completely opened to everyone to see. In a process of shared governance, ordinary people will say, "Oh, hold on. I don't think it's a good idea to build this subdivision of homes that start at $700,000."

Now for this to take place, there will have to be an incredible struggle—because there are people with vested interests all around us. The kind of open process I am describing is the last thing they want. Huge sectors of this planet's land are controlled by a just few people. There are people who don't live anywhere near where we live making decisions about what happens in our neighborhoods.

I'm not trying to evoke a new kind of nativism or provincial control. But in the short term, what has to happen is that all the decisions about place need to be made public—and slowed down so that decisions are not made without the involvement of those they affect.

Longer term, we need to create a set of standards, a moral compass, for the creation of habitation that does not exist in this world anywhere. What drives habitation is capitalism, pure and simple. So we need a moral compass to drive capitalism.

For example, we would say that no city, no town, no community may have people without homes. Homelessness is illegal: not for the person experiencing it but for the community. You have to house people; no one is to be on the street. That requires the fundamental reconfiguration of space.

We also have to think not only about property and land but about transportation of goods and services and about how bodies flow through space. We have to challenge all of that. We have to challenge the way in which municipalities structure themselves in ways that are always detrimental to those who are poor and without voice.

How do we start that restructuring?

It starts by educating yourself about who the people are who are making those decisions in your community, in your neighborhood. You say, "We want to know what's going on. We want to understand." Oftentimes city planning meetings are poorly attended. A few activists try to get more people to come, but folks are so busy. But that's where decisions get made and where this moral compass is needed. It helps a lot to educate yourself about the place where you live, its history, and how it came to be configured as it is.

What would you ask the church to do?

The reality is that so many Christians in the West don't know their own story—that is to say, that we were gentiles brought into another people's story. What's supposed to come with that is a sense of humility, a sense of having been brought inside by grace through love.

Our job is not to take the story over. It's like being invited to somebody's house, someone whom you love, and being introduced to the family. You hope they will accept you, but you're there in vulnerability because this is not yours. You are there hoping to be a part.

Most Christians in the West are formed without any of that feeling—the sense of vulnerability, the sense of gratefulness for having been brought inside. They have no sense of what it means to be an outsider. What if we had all been inculcated with this deep sense of humility, of what it means to enter into another people? And what if we had cultivated over the centuries the ability to enter into the lives of other peoples without either trying to take their lives over or losing ourselves?

Where we should begin, individually and collectively, is reintroducing the church to the story of what it means to be a Christian: the constant entering into and becoming a part of other peoples for the sake of love. Too many Christians talk about reconciliation while imagining themselves as centered hosts. CC

The Ross of Mull

The year's door shuts. The last red berries fall
and leave the rowan branches bare and dark
when in the night the wind begins to lift.
The sea booms white and huge;
a ledge of snow hallows the ben's bare head. And then
it's still: stars breathe the blue-black sky like brine.
The only colour left next day is grey
except when sudden sunlight comes to glow
the granite headland out across the sound,
firing the rubbled rock a bonfire orange bright
so all there is to do is stand and watch
as though some miracle were being born
and God was speaking through the stone once more—
that strange and still small voice of calm alive.

Kenneth Steven

Kenneth Steven lives on the west coast of Scotland and has published 16 collections of poetry.

The shared history that fuels the US-Iran standoff

Fundamentalism and oil

by K. L. Marshall

THE UNITED STATES is at a critical moment in its relationship with oil. It is also at a critical moment in its relationship with Iran. As the United States discusses both climate action and its approach to an increasingly hostile Iranian regime, it's important not to overlook something the two countries have in common: a history of religious fundamentalism intertwined with the economy of oil.

When I talk about fundamentalism, I am referring to religious groups, especially those that have emerged since the 1970s, that define themselves using militant terms or embrace militant strategies (including a strictly policed, patriarchal moral code) in their effort to preserve what they see as an uncritical, high view of their scriptures. However different the United States and Iran are, they share this history: a decade of turmoil in the 1970s, centered around oil, that ended in a resurgence of fundamentalism of this sort.

In 1979 Jerry Falwell founded the Moral Majority. That same year, the Islamic Revolution in Iran helped to sever formal relations between the two countries. Since then, the troubled relationship has continued. The US religious right has consistently pushed to deepen our dependence on oil and other fossil fuels while also urging a harder and harder line on Iran. This culminated in President Donald Trump's removal of the United States from a negotiated nuclear deal, following a pattern that Falwell established in the 1980s.

In Iran, leaders have struggled to make the most of an oil-based economy while also moving farther to the right politically. Most recently, Iran elected the far-right cleric Ebrahim Raisi as its president in what outside observers saw as an unfair election. Raisi has advocated continuing Iran's support for militant groups throughout the Middle East, including the Houthis in Yemen, Hezbollah in Lebanon, and Hamas in Palestine.

To understand the connection between the rise of the religious right in the United States and the Islamic Revolution in Iran, we might start with the international oil embargo of 1973–1974. In 1960, Iran became one of the founding members of the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries, an economic cartel formed in response to developed countries in the West and their attempts to control the oil supplies of less-developed countries. Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and Venezuela came together to make an economic pact that would allow them to control their own oil industries. Not incidentally, four of the five countries in OPEC are in the Middle East and historically have objected to the actions of Israel in relation to the Palestinians. The United States, on the other hand, has consistently been seen by OPEC as disregarding Palestinian rights in favor of an unconditionally pro-military, pro-expansionist position for Israel.

During the three-week Yom Kippur War in 1973, the United States armed Israel against Arab states that were attacking it. To punish America for what OPEC countries saw as further delegitimizing Palestinian rights and the goal of Palestinian statehood, OPEC issued an oil embargo.

Different though they were, the Moral Majority and the Islamic Revolution had much in common.

While America's geographical distance from the Middle East had long protected it, the realities of engaging in the region's complex politics now came right into people's homes. With no oil coming in from the world's main oil-producing countries, energy prices quadrupled almost overnight. The cost of shipping goods to stores increased, so the cost of the goods themselves did, too. During the 1970s, inflation soared into double digits, while workers who did not face layoffs sometimes did not receive their full paychecks. In short, the OPEC embargo caused the US economy to all but collapse.

In late 1973, Jerry Falwell began declaring that the OPEC embargo was the wrath of God on America. He railed against American moral failings, including recent gains in rights for women, African Americans, and the LGBTQ community. He warned of the destruction to come. His solution was that America had to "return" to what he saw as biblical morality: outlawing pornography, executing drug dealers, and reversing the gains made by liberation movements during the 1960s. It also included a wide array of policy stances, including supporting the nuclear buildup against the Soviet Union, ending welfare programs, and reducing

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PETRO-CONSERVATIVES: The Iranian Revolution, which saw the rise to power of Ayatollah Khomeini, and the founding of the Moral Majority by Jerry Falwell* (right)*—both in 1979—had in common a deep investment in the economics of oil.

taxes and regulation on business. All of this was frequently couched in apocalyptic terms about God's plan for the end of time.

Later analyses have shown that despite the Moral Majority's extensive advocacy for "pro-family" positions, most people who supported Moral Majority politicians based their votes instead on economic issues. "Biblical morality" was in no small part an economic agenda. According to Falwell, God was heavily invested in America's economic matters and had sent the OPEC embargo as a wake-up call. The embargo and the ensuing energy crisis and economic collapse were foundational to the formation of the religious right.

Things get more complicated when we recognize that Falwell and the religious right in America had long been funded by oil companies. I call this the fundamentalist-oil empire, a vast network of fundamentalist enterprises whose initial endowments came from oil money. Both *The Fundamentals* and the Bible Institute of Los Angeles (now Biola University) were funded by the oilman Lyman Stewart in the early 20th century, when he was locked in a struggle against the titan of oil, J. D. Rockefeller.

In the mid-20th century, J. Howard Pew, whose family owned the Sun Oil Company, provided the funds for the journal *Christian Economics*, which championed unregulated capitalism, as well as for *Christianity Today*. Other institutions in the fundamentalist-oil empire include Fuller Seminary and Oral Roberts University; although Fuller Seminary, like Biola, has come to embrace a broader and more inclusive evangelicalism, it was originally funded by the radio evangelist and oilman Charles Fuller. Falwell credited Fuller's radio show with his conversion to fundamentalist Christianity and styled his own show after it. In short, the development of the religious right was part of a broader history of Protestant fundamentalism in the United States funded by the oil industry.

The OPEC embargo lit the flame for fundamentalist leaders like Falwell to make their economic agenda public and perhaps engage a voting bloc that could turn that agenda into public policy. While backlash against the liberation movements of the 1960s was certainly significant in the formation of the religious right, the economic collapse caused by the OPEC embargo allowed Falwell and others to engage large swaths of the American public who may not have been keen on their efforts to preserve segregation and keep women at home.

Meanwhile in Iran, oil had been the center of the country's economy since the early 20th century. The Qajar dynasty (1789–1925) had driven Iran to the brink of bankruptcy, and by the turn of the 20th century the shah was selling off Iran's assets in an effort to secure some revenue. One asset that the shah sold off was Iran's oil—all of it. A contract called the D'Arcy Concession, signed in 1901, gave a British man named William D'Arcy, and later the British government, the exclusive right to any oil that might lie under Iran's surface. Turns out there was a lot of oil, enough to fuel the British navy to victory in both World Wars.

The Anglo-Persian Oil Company was formed to extract the oil. APOC—which was soon taken over by the British government and later became British Petroleum, or BP—paid workers a pittance to live in inhumane conditions and work themselves to death, while also paying a small royalty to the Iranian government. Some researchers have suggested that because of the oil industry, British control over Iran was so strong that the coun-

try's final shah—Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, who reigned from 1941 to 1979—functioned as a puppet of the British government. Already an unpopular figure, the shah became even more despised after a 1953 US-backed coup ousted Mohammad Mosaddegh, Iran's first democratically elected prime minister, in order to shore up the shah's power. Mosaddegh's campaign platform? He would take control of Iran's oil industry away from the British.

The factors that led to the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran are complex and by no means universally agreed upon by scholars. But as with Falwell's Moral Majority, we can see both religious and economic elements.

Clerics opposed the shah for introducing reforms. Just as Falwell believed that the liberation movements of the 1960s were un-Christian, the clerics saw the liberalizing actions of the shah as contrary to Islam. And just as Falwell saw the OPEC embargo as the wrath of God, the clerics saw Iran's relation to APOC as corrupt. Many vehemently objected to the role the shah had played in the coup against Mosaddegh.

Ayatollah Khomeini, who would become a galvanizing figure for opposition to the monarchy, opposed the shah for all these reasons. In addition, he believed the shah was too friendly with Israel, at the expense of Palestinian dignity. Around the time that the United States chose to arm Israel against calls for Palestinian statehood, protests against the shah turned deadly. Police and the military opened fire against civilians. The ensuing upheaval led to the Islamic Revolution in 1979, the deposing of the shah, and the beginning of the long-standing breakdown in US-Iranian relations.

In the United States, oil has long been at the center of our political discontent, and we are only now even beginning to make an effort to end our dependence on foreign oil.

We have seen where a Christian fundamentalist response to Iranian fundamentalism has led: a deadly stalemate in which Iran increases its nuclear capacity and strengthens militant groups throughout the Middle East, while America unilaterally supports the militant Israeli expansion that fuels these groups' ire. Brutal wars in Syria and Yemen, supported by Iran's militant interests and often serving as proxy wars between different oil interests, have devastated an entire generation of children. In the United States, we see a refusal to disengage from the oil that financed the early fundamentalist movement and still underpins our economy, while creating wars in places like Iraq and Afghanistan in part to protect our access to the region's oil. America's fundamentalist response to Iran's fundamentalist government has led to a Middle East that is in as much catastrophe as our climate is.

What would a non-fundamentalist Christian response to Iran look like? Could Christians play a role in opening up a diplomacy that might involve mutual benefit, compassion for the suffering of Iranian citizens, and cultural exchange?

While there are many causes for our poor relationship with Iran, a better trajectory begins with ending our dependence on oil. We cannot merely end our dependence on foreign oil, as if national oil were the answer to America's energy challenges. Depending on oil at all, for-

Washing my daughter's hair

Let everything happen to you: beauty and terror. —Rainer Maria Rilke

In copious curls, her brown hair
  reaches the small of her back,
    a tangle she can barely brush

for she feels as though a thousand needles
  perforate her scalp and a vise
    tightens on her temples,

as the iron weight of this unknown
  affliction crushes her,
    month after unrelenting month.

It's the not-knowing, she says,
  that prowls through her days like a shadow

unhinged from her 27-year-old body,
  haunting every corner of the house,
    darkening her mind's acute angles.

Rendered helpless as a supplicant,
  she kneels before the bathtub,
    leaves her aching arms at her side, bends

beneath the faucet.
  I soak her hair, lather
    citrus-scented shampoo throughout—

I must be gentle—
  caressing her tresses,

then rinse and massage in conditioner.
  I want to free beauty from terror,
    so with wide-toothed comb, I work

my way up from the ends, unknotting
  each strand from the other,
    then rinse again, wishing all the while

to mix in a Pentecostal fire,
  spirit more immediate than prayer,
    to muster a miracle from water and fear.

Julie L. Moore

Julie L. Moore is the author of four poetry collections, including, most recently, Full Worm Moon.

eign or national, drives climate change; it is also a significant driver of fundamentalism. Dependence on oil feeds an apocalyptic worldview. It limits our ability to plan for a thriving future. It is a source of fear.

This arena is where we can bring non-fundamentalist Christian values into the political sphere in ways that can productively shape American relations with Iran. Not incidentally, the values that are necessary to ending our dependence on oil are exactly those that Jesus highlights in the Sermon on the Mount and the parable of the Good Samaritan. We begin by practicing integrity and humility in the form of encouraging our churches, public institutions, and elected leaders to reject funding from oil dollars and divest from the oil industry. Compassion may take the form of joining with advocates in low-income communities who are asking for access to clean, renewable energy.

The US fundamentalist response to Iran's fundamentalism has led to catastrophe in the region.

If we can apply our Christian values to help America end its addiction to oil, we can then encourage diplomatic relations with Iran in which oil is not part of any negotiations. Those same values can take precedence in navigating the murky waters of opening formal American-Iranian relations for the first time in four decades. What might values-based diplomacy look like with Iran? It begins with the principles of interfaith dialogue: appreciating Iranian culture and the people's strong connection with their Persian heritage and, for many, their Islamic beliefs. The corollary is rejecting any form of colonialism: we must refuse to exploit Iran or any other country for short-term economic gain.

We can then work to address human rights violations while also working to correct the systemic injustices in our own country. We can resume negotiations to limit nuclear capacity, including in our own country. We can support grassroots industries that enhance human flourishing in communities rather than enriching oil cartels. We can encourage partnerships that lead to creative problem-solving and innovation, especially regarding climate change and economic development. And where necessary, we can provide humanitarian support to lift communities out of poverty and enhance the quality of life for vulnerable populations.

Restoring relations with Iran in a manner that is values-based and oil-free will necessarily include recognizing Palestinian rights and seeing Palestinian people as created in the image of God. Otherwise, the ones that continue to take up their cause will be militant regimes, such as those that are currently supported by Iran.

We can begin promoting social justice in Iran and some of the most troubled places in the world when we are engaging with our values rather than with our need for oil.

Bringing our values as Christians into the political arena is always a challenge, especially as we seek to act with wisdom rather than naïveté. How can we wisely show compassion when dealing with state-sponsored terrorism? How can we show humility in the face of a nuclear threat? But if our faith compels us to move beyond fear and engage with the deeper challenges of social justice, then we have the opportunity to find ways to practice these values, even in the political minefield of restoring diplomatic relations with Iran.

When Jesus said, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven," he wasn't giving political advice for American diplomacy. As Christian voters, though, we can bring values such as integrity, honesty, courage, accountability, humility, and compassion into the process of democratic engagement—including how we talk with our neighbors and our elected officials about Iran. The United States might never become poor in spirit or inherit the kingdom of God. But we as US citizens and Christians might become a blessing to the people of Iran. CC

Fear like love and death and beauty

Because I could not drive, my mother had to drive me
to the phobia clinic where I went to get over my fear of driving,
when I was twenty. My mother blazed along at a faster clip
than the speed limit, in love with the road more than where the road led,
a love I would never know. I daydreamed beside her, wondering
what the world's history would have been, beginning with the Bible,
if essential characters had been phobic. If Samson suffered from melissophobia—
he with the strength to bring down pillars, frightened of the little insect—
what then, of the lion's side slain, sweet salvage of honey, and no riddle
to come out of Timnah's vineyards? Would Eden still be ours,
if Eve had ophidiophobia—that serpent, Satan, Old Scratch, foiled?
Forty-two years after I was twenty, it seemed I still had nothing but fear
while my mother feared nothing: she with cane and then walker,
still shuttling me here and there with her approaching ninety;
and I still daydreaming of the Bible, where fear could be a pact
with the divine, the beginning of wisdom if only done right.
Hadn't fear like love and death and beauty laid claim
to the human world, not to be left out of Creation's narrative?
As if fear and love could embrace in order to praise,
like two hands that need each other to clap, to pray.

Valerie Wohlfeld

Valerie Wohlfeld won the Yale Series of Younger Poets Prize in 1994. Her most recent book is Woman with Wing Removed *(Truman State University Press).*

Why are so many LDS women influencers?

Mormon motherhood online

by Dawn Araujo-Hawkins

IN 2011, JORDAN PAGE, then 24, decided to start a family finance blog.

Page and her husband had recently recovered from what she commonly calls their "financial disaster." They had put all of their savings into building a home they ultimately couldn't buy and then accrued $15,000 in credit card debt trying to stay afloat as Page quit her job to stay at home with the couple's first child and her husband launched a new start-up business.

None of the advice from the celebrity finance gurus had worked for the Pages, so they had pieced together their own money management system. And it worked. Page was excited to share what she had learned with other moms, and thus Fun Cheap or Free was born.

"I started this blog really more as a creative outlet—as a way for me to simply help other moms while still being a stay-at-home mom," she says. "And it was great, this hobby blog."

Today, Page has eight children and what was once a hobby blog is now her job.

She has 915,000 subscribers to her YouTube channel and a combined 950,000 Instagram followers across her six accounts devoted to tips and tricks for making motherhood more manageable. She has appeared on both the *Today Show* and the *Rachael Ray Show*.

On her website, Page now sells budgeting and productivity boot camps along with planners and a baby carrier that she designed. Her company, the Page Company, has 20 employees and is one of the 500 fastest-growing private companies in the United States, according to *Inc*. magazine.

Perhaps the only thing more surprising than the astronomical growth of her brand over the last decade is the fact that Page is Mormon—and that this isn't really an anomaly. About four years ago, people started noticing a trend: a lot of the most influential moms on the internet were members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Like Page, some of these women had amassed hundreds of thousands of followers on social media by sharing their tried-and-true motherhood tips—sometimes in posts sponsored by companies like Hershey's, Unilever, and Lowe's. And, also like Page, many of them had spun their internet fame into real-world businesses or book deals.

"Genuinely asking," queried one Reddit user in October 2017, "why are there so many Mormon bloggers?"

It would be easy to assume that Mormon mothers are prevalent on the internet because they tend to have large families (almost twice as large as the average family in the United States, according to the Pew Research Center) and they are encouraged not to work outside the home if they can help it. Of course some of them might use their downtime to post online about mothering.

And yet, other religious groups hold similar values about family size and motherhood, and the mothers in those other groups haven't become the darlings of the internet—at least not at the same rate as Mormon women. Why?

Internet culture and LDS theology fit together surprisingly well.

As it turns out, there's no one, definitive answer. But it seems that over the last decade, there's been a symbiosis of internet culture in general with aspects of Mormon culture and theology in particular. One could say Mormon mothers are simply having their Esther moment: their church has helped form them for such a time as this.

The internet has become an integral parenting resource. Catherine Archer, who studies social media at Murdoch University in Perth, Australia, says that in the absence of a physical village, mothers around the world are now creating digital villages to help them shoulder the load of raising children.

"It's really a liminal time," Archer says of motherhood. "You're going through so many changes that you're really hungry for information; you want reassurance. You're almost, in some ways, vulnerable as well. So there is that need to reach out and have that community."

It didn't take long for advertisers to realize that the digital communities created by mom bloggers like Jordan Page (and later, social media influencers) represented a veritable goldmine.

Mothers control 85 percent of household purchases in the United States, with their spending power topping $2.4 trillion. In the mid-aughts, many a hobby blog suddenly became a

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Photo by Jessica Rockowitz on Unsplash

source of income for the women who ran them as brands decided to partner with them in an effort to reach their loyal and engaged audiences.

Pretty soon, it was commonplace to see "mompreneurs" (as Archer calls them) getting paid to post photos of certain products to Instagram or including personalized discount codes alongside product reviews on YouTube that ensured they would get a cut of whatever sales their video generated for a company. Selling motherhood became a potentially lucrative cottage industry that anyone with an HD camera could try her hand at.

This cultural moment dovetailed perfectly with the Mormon belief that the intentional, public sharing of joyful motherhood is something akin to a religious duty. For advertisers, it was a match made in heaven, and Mormon women were quickly ruling the algorithm game.

"The culture of Mormonism encourages a kind of genre of family life," says Laura Vance, author of *Women in New Religions*. "It's such an oversimplification to call it an all-Americanness, but this way of being family I do think is very appealing—especially in the modern world, where the reality of life is so much more complicated for many, many people."

It's not that Mormon mothers don't share hard things on the internet. When a 2008 plane crash left Stephanie Nielson, a Mormon mother of three, with 80 percent of her body severely burned, she chronicled her painful physical and emotional recovery on her blog NieNie Dialogues. In 2018, Corrine Stokoe, a Mormon mother of four, used her blog and Instagram account to share the devastating effects of her husband's pornography addiction. But undergirding these stories and others like them is a tenacious faith in God, God's goodness, and the deep importance of family.

That isn't an accident. Within Mormonism, there's a belief that every member of the church ought to act as a missionary in their particular sphere of influence. For women, that's traditionally been in the home, but increasingly, it's been among their social media followers too.

The idea that motherhood is a woman's highest calling may not be unique to Mormonism. But Ann Duncan—associate professor of American studies and religion at Goucher College and the author of an upcoming book on women who view pregnancy as a spiritual experience—says the Mormon conceptualization of motherhood is truly distinct, and it's one of the reasons Mormon women are so conspicuous online. They have a strong sense that their voices matter.

"If you think about evangelical Christianity or you think about Catholicism, there's certainly a strong patriarchal tradition that confines women . . . to maternal roles—[but] that doesn't necessarily elevate the mother and motherhood at the same time," Duncan said. "But it absolutely happens in Mormonism."

The structure of the LDS Church is undeniably patriarchal: women cannot be ordained, and LDS leadership remains entirely White and entirely male. But where other religious groups say they revere motherhood only to turn around and relegate mother work to a place of lesser importance than the work of the church or even the work of capitalism, in Mormonism, mother work is integral to God's plan of salvation.

In 1995, LDS Church leaders issued *The Family: A Proclamation to the World*, which codified the church's view of the family. Families, they declared, were "central to the Creator's plan for the eternal destiny of His children."

At the church's general conference the following year, LDS leader Robert D. Hales expanded on this idea in a talk on the LDS doctrine of the eternal family—the belief that if Mormons make and keep sacred covenants in a Mormon temple, their families will be together forever in heaven. It has always been God's plan that family love and companionship continue into eternity, Hales said.

"If we return home alone to our Heavenly Father," he said, "we will be asked, 'Where is the rest of the family?'"

The role that mothers play in this ethos is of cosmic importance. It is in birthing children that women allow premortal spirits to be embodied. It is in raising faithful, Mormon children that women are securing the happiness of an eternal family not only for themselves but for generations to come.

In Mormonism, mother work is integral to God's plan of salvation.

The result of operating within this paradigm is that Mormon mothers feel empowered within their religion, says Duncan. "I wouldn't say they use the term *feminist* necessarily, but it's certainly not a position of submission," she says.

Laid on top of this sense of empowerment is the fact that Mormonism encourages women to document their lives for a public audience. It tells them that their lived experiences are worth documenting because their lives can inspire faith in others, including non-Mormons. It's an ethic that works well on the internet and social media, although it predates both.

Nancy Ross, a former member of the LDS Church who is now an ordained elder in the more liberal, LDS-adjacent Community of Christ, said that multigeneration Mormon families often count the diaries written by their 19th-century foremothers, who trekked out west to Salt Lake Valley, to be among their greatest treasures.

"These are precious," Ross says. "Mormon women's writing has always been precious to Mormon women. And sacred."

Adolescent Mormon girls are strongly encouraged to keep a journal, many of them with the understanding that the true audience for their journals is their future descendants. Even before the emergence of social media, Mormon mothers used blogging platforms like Blogspot and WordPress to share photos and family updates—a sort of proto-Instagram that helped them evangelize about the joys of motherhood.

Page, the home finance blogger, says that the whole point of starting her blog was to share her personal experiences in order to help other women navigate the chaos of motherhood. She never intended to build a brand. She never intended to build a company. But, she says, the entire purpose of the Page Company is to help build stronger families, and that's what keeps her invested in it. If her advice or products can help just one woman to streamline her household responsibilities, thus giving her more time and energy to prioritize her kids and husband, then it would all be worth it.

"We're not here to sell planners, we're not here to make YouTube videos, we're not here to beat our sales from last year," Page says. "We're here to build stronger families—and then all of those things have happened organically."

Of course, being a Mormon mother on the internet isn't always cute family photos and cushy brand sponsorships. By putting themselves out there so publicly, Mormon mothers open themselves up to mom shaming from strangers, potentially millions of them.

Page says that when her audience was smaller, she almost never got comments from trolls. But now the insults come frequently. In fact, there are online forums, housed on multiple platforms, where people do nothing but bash Page and her parenting. Page says it's hard not to let that get under your skin.

"You can tell me all day long that you hate my face. There's nothing I can do about that; I was born that way," she says. "But it really is a punch in the gut when it's something like parenting that maybe you feel self-conscious about anyway. Because there's no rule book, there's no perfect way. You figure it out—and make mistakes a lot."

Mormon social media influencers also have to deal with the psychological effects of constantly performing for a digital audience. In her research, Archer has found that some mom bloggers—exhausted by the endless drive to market themselves and grow their audiences—have started retreating to closed Facebook groups, where they have relative privacy.

"They don't want to upset the brands, and they don't want to upset their readers. But they still want to do what they did originally, which is to have that shared space," Archer says.

"So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows."

for Sophia, on her confirmation

Sold often by the handful (pocket change
could purchase just enough for peasant's lunch)
these denizens of dusty roadside range
were no one's haute cuisine. Assorted bunch
of species inconspicuous and small—
White-throated, Swamp, Clay-colored, Field, Song, Sage—
in color drab as simple in their call,
this trope of commonplace in every age
is yet, each one, with thought precisely planned,
each painted feather, perfect in its place,
a flawless masterwork. A Master Hand
has formed each one, bestowed them all with grace.
Then you, moreso redeemed by blood, rejoice,
and ne'er deny your worth, nor mute your voice.

Phillip Martin

Phillip Martin is senior pastor of Epiphany Lutheran Church in Richmond, Virginia.

Because documenting their lives for public consumption is tied to their religious devotion, Mormon mothers aren't likely to be among those influencers retreating to private groups. But several women have shuttered their blogs completely as the cracks in their marriages and in their faith made holding up the facade of perfection too much to bear.

Being a Mormon mother on the internet isn't all cute photos and cushy sponsorships.

In 2016, Natalie Lovin, then Natalie Holbrook, shut down her popular ten-year-old blog Hey Natalie Jean after she and her husband divorced. She had left the LDS Church two years earlier, writing at the time that she was a square peg who was a "member of a very round church."

When Lovin resurrected her blog in 2018—this time repackaged as a "love letter" to herself, now a tattooed single mom—she described its previous, ultra-curated iteration as a "self-flagellating prison."

Page admits that blogging and social media are hard. She counts her job as her biggest blessing after her family, but she doesn't recommend it. When other women come to her for advice on launching their own brand, she laughs and tells them to take up knitting instead.

"It's really fun, and nobody stalks you on the web," she says.

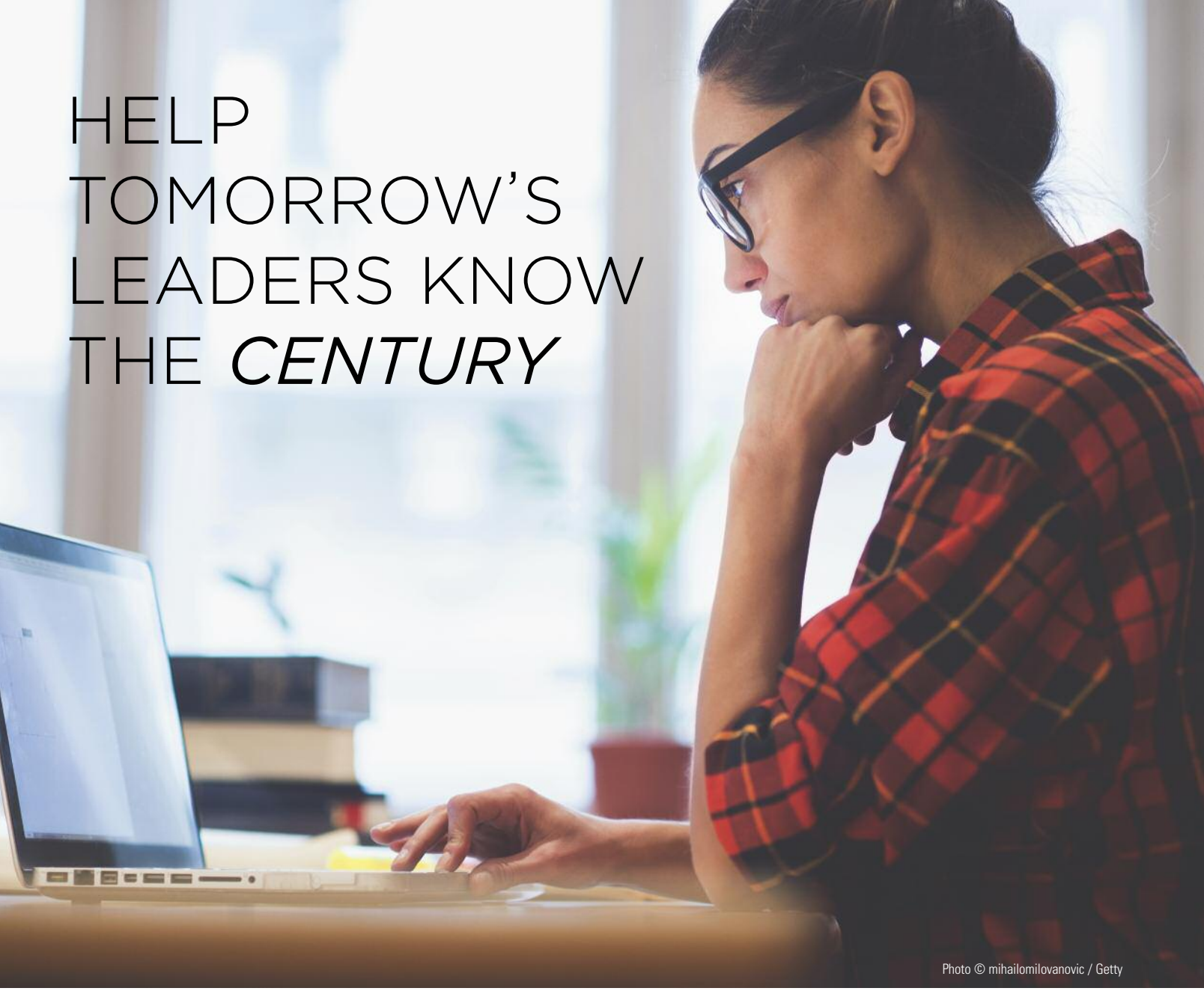
And yet, Page says she has seen a "beautiful shift" in the ways Mormon mothers use social media, a shift toward something that seems healthier and more sustainable, though she wishes that Mormon moms felt free to be more explicitly religious online, instead of hoping to entice people with the happy family life that is the fruit of their faith.

"Every once in a while, I will go on and hit the Jesus thing hard," she says. "But because our religion is very highly scrutinized, we're very careful to try not to be too preachy. We are already looked at as very strange, and I think we want to try to fit in as much as possible and teach by way of example."

Overall, Mormon mothers on the internet seem to be embracing a less exacting vision of motherhood—and sharing that vision with their followers.

"Motherhood is freaking hard," Page says. And more and more, Mormon women are starting to feel comfortable being honest about that, about the times that their houses are messy or they haven't liked their husbands or they haven't had it all together.

"Jesus Christ and my Heavenly Father are perfect, and the principles they teach are perfect," Page says. "Beyond that, everybody's flawed." CC



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THE
MARTIN E. MARTY
LEGACY CIRCLE

Faith MATTERS

by Isaac S. Villegas

What the water remembers

ONE AFTERNOON during this long pandemic, several of us from church meet on the bank of a river for a baptism. A deacon begins our service with a water prayer from our hymnal. "God of grace, creator of waters, your Spirit hovered over the deep." Her words drift across the river. The candidate and I kick off our sandals and step into the shallows. "We remember when you flooded the earth," the deacon prays as we wade farther out. "We remember your Son, who, like all of us, arrived in the waters of childbirth." Once we're waist-deep, we stop and find our footing.

He leans back into my arm across his shoulders. "I baptize you with water," I announce as I plunge his body into the current, "in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, one God, mother of us all." After I pull him up, as he wipes the water from his eyes, I glimpse in his face something of my own face from all those years ago—at my baptism, as a teenager, when my grandfather cradled and then dunked me. In the instant before I went under, he tilted his head toward the sky and called out over the waters, "En el nobre del Padre, del Hijo, y del Espíritu Santo."

Through baptism, we find Christ's life in the water. "There is one body and one Spirit," we read in Ephesians, "one Lord, one faith, one baptism." In the water, the Spirit draws us into God's life. In the water we're reborn as members of one another, a union across geographies and eras.

After the baptism, as we dry off, I notice an earthy taste in my mouth, leftovers from a splash of river water. I remember that passage late in Marilynne Robinson's novel *Housekeeping*, where the narrator retells the early chapters of Genesis as a plotline that culminates with the flood, a second creation to wash away the sin and loss which have already become too much for history to bear: "Let God purge this wicked sadness away with a flood, and let the waters recede to pools and ponds and ditches, and let every one of them mirror heaven. Still, they taste a bit of blood and hair."

The waters remember. The seas and streams have absorbed the generations. Redemption doesn't disappear the past. Even when lakes and creeks glisten with heaven, there remains "a certain pungency and savor in the water," Robinson writes.

At the baptism, primordial life must have lingered on my tongue. Even so, I lack a palate sophisticated enough to understand what the waters communicate—the stories passed along in the layers of rich mustiness and bright minerals in every droplet. Maybe our taste buds will evolve to decipher the language of water—if we, as a species, survive long enough.

The waters have been a witness across the span of human existence, a companion to life—an ancient flow whose cycle unites the sky above to the surface here below, a current that circulates through each of our bodies. This living thing, with us since before our beginnings, might know us better than we know ourselves—as close to us as we are to ourselves since it makes up more than half of our bodies, each of us as a blurred commingling of water and human.

In the 16th century, in Central Europe, Anabaptist communities passed around an anonymous tract, *The Mystery of Baptism*, which invited peasants to consider other-than-human creatures as Christ's evangelists. "In the gospel of all creatures nothing else is shown and preached but the crucified Christ alone," the author explains. "But not Christ as the head alone, rather the whole Christ with all his members—this is the Christ that all creatures preach and teach." According to this theological vision, God has commissioned animals and rivers and landscapes as guides into Christ's revelations, Christocentric theophanies, a gospel for human and nonhuman creatures alike.

What was the earthy taste of river water telling me?

Baptism is our immersion into Christ's death and resurrection, our creaturely union with the waters as we undergo the labor of another world being born within this one. In the baptismal waters we join nature's ache for redemption, for restoration. "Creation waits with eager longing," Paul writes in Romans, to "be set free from its bondage to decay."

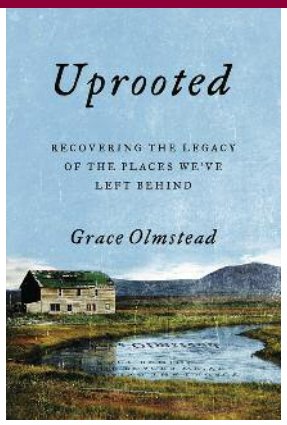
Perhaps the savor of that river water in my mouth was the taste of earth's longing for heaven, for a healing of our legacies of harm, for creation to be transfigured with God's glory, for all creatures to be "united and bound together through the bond of love," as *The Mystery of Baptism* declares, our belonging "with Christ, one body with many members."

As we confront our environmental devastation, our climate catastrophe, our polluted world, we remember our baptisms as a communion with creation—our initiation into a life of solidarity with the waters, God's primeval creature.

Isaac S. Villegas is pastor of Chapel Hill Mennonite Fellowship in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, and serves on the governing board of the North Carolina Council of Churches.

Stickers and boomers

by Valerie Weaver-Zercher



Uprooted: Recovering the Legacy of the Places We've Left Behind
By Grace Olmstead
Sentinel, 272 pp., $27.00

On the way to church each week I pass the Great American Neighborhood. It's one of at least five developments in my area living under that registered trademark. The development company says it builds "places as special as the people who live in them." It's a fascinating notion, customizing a place to folks who are not yet there, and one so pretentious that only late capitalism could have dreamed it up. We want everything—even the cornfield to which we have not yet moved—to speak our name.

At the center of journalist Grace Olmstead's new book is the kind of town this development (with its summer movie nights, "shared spaces to be enjoyed with neighbors and friends," and "sense of timelessness") feigns to be. *Uprooted* is an inquiry into a farming community and the lives of those the novelist Wallace Stegner calls "stickers," or people who commit to a place, as well as their antithesis, "boomers," those who move to a place until it suits them to leave. Olmstead describes Stegner's archetypes thusly: "*Stickers* are those who settle down and invest. *Boomers* come to extract value from a place and then leave."

Uprooted serves as a reverent ode to stickers—in particular, those in Emmett, Idaho, a farm town where Olmstead's family lived for generations and which serves as the beating heart of her project. It's a place of cherry orchards and dairy farms, fields of sugar beets and alfalfa—and, increasingly, a place spun dry by the centrifugal forces of modernity. Like Wendell Berry writes of Port William, the fictional town at the center of much of his fiction, Emmett is "the sort of place that pretentious or ambitious people were inclined to leave."

Stegner's binary is one to which Olmstead returns throughout the book, although she complicates it by musing also about the *stuck*: those who don't have enough resources to move away. I wonder as well about the *pushed* and the *brought*: indigenous populations and enslaved people. And isn't *sticker* sometimes just another word for *settler*? Still, it's an illuminating frame, as far as "two kinds of people in the world" heuristics go.

Olmstead's great-grandparents, Grandpa Dad and Grandma Mom, were stickers, she says, who had less than five dollars when they moved into their first house. They helped build roads around Emmett, dug irrigation ditches, and cared for their neighbors during hard times. They put more into the land and the people than they took out, and they become the heroes of Olmstead's narrative. "The more I studied the history of my own community, the more I realized that most of its struggles with depletion and brokenness were caused by those who leave," she writes. "The only times things were mended and restored were the times when someone, somewhere, chose to stay."

Stickers like her great-grandparents defy the siren song of educational and career advancement, social mobility, and a good sushi bar on the corner. Meanwhile, those who leave places too provincial to handle their ambition—the boomers—tend to look askance at those who stay put.

After doing interviews at the local high school, Olmstead writes, she figures out that a lot of students "don't seem to have any concrete plans for exodus, just a sense that it's good to say you have big plans." Ironically enough, those with big plans often end up in places that simulate the places they've left behind. The Great American Neighborhood is designed to make booming look and feel like sticking.

Uprooted joins books like Sarah Smarsh's *Heartland* and Marie Mockett's *American Harvest* in offering up portraits of rural America that both dignify and diagnose. It is at once an elegy for an agricultural way of life Olmstead fears is no longer possible and an indictment of the forces that brought us here.

Culprits include agribusiness and the cash subsidies that sustain it, biotechnology that depletes the soil in the name of production, proprietary seed sales, suburban development and the ensuing loss of local food systems, capitalism's perpetual drive toward profit, and widespread illusions that the smartest people are the most mobile and least dirty. "This valley's transformation over the past two centuries has not been the benign work of an invisible hand," Olmstead writes. "It was the result of deliberate choices to maximize profit rather than embrace limits."

Valerie Weaver-Zercher is an editor and writer in Mechanicsburg, Pennsylvania.

Olmstead mourns the weakening social capital that has us increasingly bowling alone. Many communities in flyover country are increasingly "empty of people and of hope," she writes. No matter one's allegiance to a place like Emmett, leaving begins to make its own kind of sense. The author herself moved to the East Coast for college, got married, had kids, and settled down. Throughout the book she perseverates over having left, and the question of whether she should go back to Emmett, to become part of the solution to the manifold problems of rural America, sits at the center of the project.

It's a unique and increasingly rare dilemma—how many people have a sense of a home to which to return, let alone the option of returning there? Within Olmstead's privileged conundrum, however, is a quintessentially modern question: Do I belong to the place where I live, or do I move to the place where I will belong?

The biggest risk in a book like *Uprooted*, written by a White writer, is nostalgia for a rural idyll that never existed—"the way we never were," as historian Stephanie Coontz puts it. At times Olmstead seems aware of that romanticizing impulse. She narrates the plight of Black farmers, Japanese immigrants, and other migrants to Idaho in centuries past who were chased away by policy and prejudice. And she summarizes the contemporary realities of undocumented farmworkers, including low wages, lack of labor protections, maltreatment by employers, and pesticide poisoning.

Olmstead doesn't feature any of their stories, however, and at points she appears unaware of the racialized nature of nostalgia for the heartland—failing to mention Donald Trump, for example, until three-quarters of the way through the book. Whether that is an admirable show of writerly restraint or a White woman's prim avoidance of the nasty politics that could confirm suspicions about her people is open to debate. But ultimately, in a 2021 book about rural places inhabited mostly by White people, can you in good conscience wait that long to talk about Trump?

At its best, however, Olmstead's prose manages to be both lyrical and investigative. She is a keen observer of places and people, and she serves as a thoughtful and informed tour guide of her hometown and the people who still populate it. She explains complicated agricultural realities well, and she narrates her encounters with the locals of Emmett with vivid description.

We meet farmers like Matt Williams, the owner of Waterwheel Gardens, which grows "a little of a lot of things" and sells produce in nearby cities. "Everything about Waterwheel Gardens is antithetical to the large, specialized monocropping model" that reigns in the United States, she writes, and if there's any answer to the problems she identifies in *Uprooted*, this

type of diversified farm gets close to solving it.

There's an ominous note to Olmstead's book, one that any honest treatment of land and community must include in 2021. Climate change, the loss of acreage to suburban malls and developments, and the fraying social fabric of small communities are only intensifying. Even the Williams farm, which serves mostly as evidence of hope in her investigation, was purchased before the real estate boom that now has the Boise exurbs creeping toward her hometown. Whether anyone planning to do small-scale, labor-intensive farming, like the Williams family, could afford to buy land around Emmett today is severely in doubt.

So nostalgia of a certain kind is not entirely misplaced. Unless local planners implement strategies of land preservation, Olmstead claims, "newcomers to this land could eliminate the very 'foodscape' their presence demands." She cites one study that suggests that Treasure Valley, where her hometown is located, "could lose between 59 percent and 64 percent of its farmland by 2100."

Still, what Olmstead calls "quiet legacies of faithfulness" persist in Emmett. She finds hope in the steadfastness and commitment of the farmers she interviews, who live out virtues of constancy, hard work, thrift, and fidelity to community and land despite pressures from all sides.

During the time I was reading *Uprooted*, I attended the memorial service for a friend's father, who had served as a doctor in a rural county in Pennsylvania. The stories people told about Doc, as he was known—from cross-country skiing across a field in a storm to see a patient, to practicing with his barbershop quartet on Thursdays, to bringing along his whole family to interview a young colleague—spoke of a man deeply committed to a place.

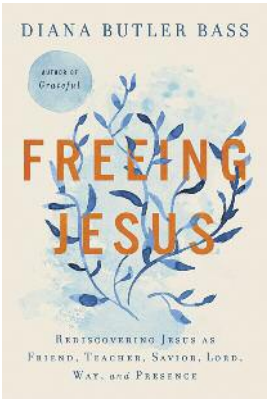
Sitting in a folding chair in a community center and listening to Doc's friends remember his life, I marveled at the frequency with which the word *we* was spoken—the sense of belonging expressed over and over again. There was no trademark here, no simulacra. I thought, too, of Wallace Stegner's words—that boomers are those who "pillage and run," while stickers are "those who settle, and love the life they have made and the place they have made it in." Doc planted deep roots in that small Pennsylvania town, just as Olmstead's people did in Emmett, clearly loving the life he had made and the place in which he made it.

Yet in reality, none of us is either a boomer or a sticker. Or perhaps we are both. Doc didn't pillage, but he did eventually run, leaving town to start a new family and a new practice several states away. Olmstead left too, although she describes habits of rootedness she has taken with her from Emmett. And the new residents of that erstwhile cornfield who apparently long to be stickers: who's to say ersatz, corporate-brokered community won't someday lead to the real thing?

So I am not ready to assent to Stegner's binary, no matter how neatly Olmstead's great-grandparents fit within it. Leaving a place does not mean extraction is happening, and staying put doesn't mean it isn't. Organic farmers often move to places they've never lived, and real estate developers' roots sometimes sink generations deep into the very soil systems their bulldozers destroy.

Stegner himself concedes that an "extractive frenzy" can fall upon even the most earnest stickers, who must learn to resist it. Ideally the local church becomes salient at this juncture, nurturing within us commitments to God and place and people that can stave off the extractive frenzies of our age. In my ideal world, my congregation helps me tamp down my impulses to extract and commodify. In my real world, the developer is leading worship.

We're left, then, with the contradictions Kathleen Norris identified in Lemmon, South Dakota, where her mother grew up and where she wrote *Dakota*—between "hospitality and insularity, change and inertia, stability and instability, possibility and limitation, between hope and despair, between open hearts and closed minds." We're left with the truth that we can root or uproot, enrich or extract, and must daily hone our instincts toward the former.



Freeing Jesus: Rediscovering Jesus as Friend, Teacher, Savior, Lord, Way, and Presence
By Diana Butler Bass
HarperOne, 320 pp., $26.99

By her own account, Diana Butler Bass did not set out to write a book devoted to Jesus. Instead, she felt led to write an accessible systematic theology for those who not only had lost faith but also had lost interest in the Christian faith. She wanted to give the thoughtful people she encountered a way to engage—or reengage—the Christian story. She intended to write a book that took up the dominant Christian beliefs and practices and shared them in a way that would demonstrate that you can stay Christian without becoming "dogmatic, narrow, or pietistic." She would consider the doctrines of the church without being doctrinaire. She would tell the Christian story.

The first chapter Bass wrote—the one that seemed most ripe and ready for picking—was a chapter on Jesus. Eighty pages later, and still writing about Jesus, Bass concluded that he was her topic. She would write a book dedicated to Jesus.

This is a different kind of book about Jesus than we have come to expect from someone with a PhD. Writing and talking about Jesus is quite different from expressing devotion; it is the difference between describing someone and writing a love letter to that person. Bass, in this book, does both.

Reviewed by Martin B. Copenhaver, *a* CENTURY *contributing editor, who recently retired as president of Andover Newton Seminary.*

This is both Bass's most overtly theological book and her most personal book to date. She brings all of her learning and scholarship to bear in helping us consider different ways of understanding Jesus. In addition, however, she speaks devotionally about her relationship with Jesus and her love for him. She does so in an unabashed manner that can be a bit startling at first, but it gives her narrative its verve.

In one typical passage, Bass writes, "Jesus has always been there, a memory, a presence, and a person. We grew up together, Jesus and me." And elsewhere:

> Over the years, when quizzed why I am still a Christian, I have always responded, "Because of Jesus. I know it sounds corny, but I love Jesus." If you love Jesus, if you somehow believe in and believe Jesus, that comes pretty near the definition of what it means to be a Christian. Although I'm not quite at the end point yet, my eulogy might say I was a "cradle to grave" Jesus person.

We are not used to reading such words of devotion from someone who might be described as a progressive. I have never understood why expressing love of Jesus is assumed to be the province of those whose theology is more conservative, but for the most part that is the case. When I describe myself as "a liberal who loves Jesus," it usually gets people's attention.

Bass shares "six Jesuses whom I experienced," with a chapter devoted to each: friend, teacher, savior, Lord, way, and presence. It is not an exhaustive list, as Bass is quick to point out. It is her testimony. Unlike a creed, which attempts to articulate a single definitive understanding, a testimony can be offered alongside others without attempting to reconcile them in some uniform system. A faithful testimony does not obliterate other testimonies. It makes room for—and even elicits—the testimonies of others. While Bass speaks from her own experience in this book, she leaves room for others to share theirs as well.

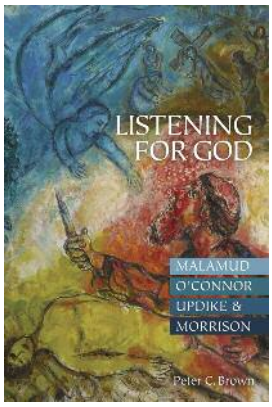
Bass describes her approach as "memoir theology," which is "understanding the nature of God—through the text of our own lives and taking seriously how we have encountered Jesus." (She insists that this is quite different from "theological memoir," although she never explains the distinction.) Bass claims that her approach is feminist because she takes her own experience seriously. She writes that when men write of their experience of Jesus it is called theology, but when women reflect on their experience of Jesus it is described dismissively as memoir. At the same time, she lifts up the writings of Paul—not usually thought of as a feminist—as the model of memoir theology.

I once attended a lecture at a large gathering of United Church of Christ ministers in which one speaker challenged us with the question: "When was the last time you told your congregation what Jesus means to you?" At the hotel

bar afterward, his remarks sparked a lively exchange. Many felt that the speaker's question was dangerously naive, too simplistic, and smacked of fundamentalism. For them, it represented the kind of piety they had hoped to escape by joining a liberal denomination like the United Church of Christ.

I was among those who felt that the speaker's question was a challenging and appropriate one. In fact, I was haunted by it. I could not answer it with certainty. I became determined that, in addition to all of my talk about Jesus, I would regularly speak devotionally, sharing my love of Jesus.

This is one reason I particularly welcome this book. Bass has given us a model of how to speak of one's love of Jesus in a way that has both depth and integrity. And, like all powerful testimonies, her story is an invitation for us to tell our own stories. The title of the book is misleading, for it is not Jesus who needs to be freed. We who would speak of our love of Jesus, and yet have felt constrained in doing so, are the ones who need to be freed. By telling her story, Bass helps free us to tell our own.



Listening for God: Malamud, O'Connor, Updike, and Morrison
By Peter C. Brown
Mercer University Press, 272 pp., $35.00

"What chutzpa!" Peter C. Brown exclaims in a passage about the murderous character known as the Misfit in Flannery O'Connor's "A Good Man Is Hard to Find." He continues as though he were O'Connor's cousin: "But as Mary Flannery would say, you gotta love him. He's just so mixed up!" In another passage, referring to John Updike's Rabbit Angstrom character, Brown writes, "He is on the hook before the face of God. The BIG hook. The only hook that is not just human power, prejudice, prudence, or propaganda in disguise. Let's see how he wiggles."

With its academic publisher and its promise to explicate works by O'Connor, Updike, Bernard Malamud, and Toni Morrison, *Listening for God* appears to be a book for literary scholars. Yet while scholars and students will find the book useful for its take on four of the finest American authors, it is far from a mere work of literary criticism. Brown has a much more urgent and personal project in mind—as his regular outbursts of earnest and intimate rhetoric show.

He wants nothing less than to hear the voice of the wholly other God in the works of four important religious existentialist fiction writers. He convinces us that he can faintly make out that voice, which takes the varying forms of YHWH, the sternly inexplicable God of American Catholics and Protestants, and the blended European and African ideas of God crafted by formerly enslaved people.

While Brown's discussions of these authors' works are informed and detailed, he has little interest in the typical literary moves. He neither explicates the authors' plots and imagery nor points to an unjust hegemony their narratives might aid and abet. Instead, he wonders whether their writings might help us—some of us—with the forlorn hope that there is a God in this cold and lonely and unpredictably sad world, a God certain authors, such as his four, have listened for doggedly and perhaps helped us to hear, very faintly, between their lines.

Brown taught philosophy and a Great Books course at Mercer University for many years, mainly "following my nose," as he describes it. Clearly, Malamud, O'Connor, Updike, and Morrison were on his syllabi. Brown's nose led him into existential philosophy and literature but also into a theology of the *totaliter aliter*—the wholly other God who, far from acting as our friend in prayer and the blesser of our daily activities, is so far distant as to be nearly undetectable.

And God's distance, as these authors show with their attention to antisemitism, Protestant religious pride, suburban ennui, and vicious American racism, has made us even more aware of a broken world that is often extremely difficult to bear. Brown hopes, with many of us, that literature discloses a God who receives us in our desperation and despair and who gives us a reason to live in this shattered place. He posits a God who is "both transcendent and present," perhaps only "tangential," that is, "touching our experience without entering into it."

Brown's courses must have been deeply committed to faith formation and intellectual transformation. His book overflows with explanations, credos, extensions, scaffolding, funny tidbits, and impertinent commentary. Dozens of his pages present more words of footnote than text, suggesting that he just cannot stop teaching those liberal arts connections.

Yet he confines himself to a mere 18 pages of introductory material, which he titles, in self-deprecating Kierkegaardian style, "Preface in Lieu of a Sermon" and "An Interpretive Strategy: Briefly." Here, Brown suggests that these authors are valuable precisely because they are morally and ethically diffident. They write a literature of radical openness, offering no hope that anyone might arrange a life according to a new, attractive code they alone have discovered.

Brown urges us to embrace Keats's "negative capability," to relinquish our own favored manners and moral lessons to become open to this openness. Only then might we listen for God in these works and, presumably, in our lives.

Then each of his authors gets her or his due. Brown tends to follow his nose as writer as well as professor, so his agenda builds slowly. Eventually it becomes clear that Malamud struggled, especially

in *The Natural*, with what it meant to be a chosen people when the Chooser abandons us to our naïveté amid a murderous, ongoing Holocaust. O'Connor struggled in "Revelation," "Everything That Rises Must Converge," and "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" to align God's love with the human tendency to smallness, pride, cruelty, and inner nihilism.

In his Rabbit tetralogy, Updike struggled to work out how God could love and support a "negligible" person like the underemployed "jerk" (these are Brown's words) at the heart of his stories, Harry "Rabbit" Angstrom. Morrison struggled in *The Bluest Eye* and *Paradise* to understand how she and her people can be "Chosen and Covenanted" by God yet endlessly the unlovable alien other in White America's eyes.

In these four chapters, a pattern emerges. Brown ably discusses the dilemmas posed by these authors and their works, suggesting the theological implications of their stories. Then, as each chapter closes, he turns for framing to an apparent personal hero, the 20th-century French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas.

"To be human means to live as if one were not a being among beings," Levinas wrote opaquely, in a passage that appears more than once in *Listening for God*. In his "Philosophical Coda," Brown helps us to understand what Levinas might mean. Characteristically, Brown explains in a rather impassioned footnote on his second-to-last page: "It is simply infantile at this stage of human history to insist we're not ready yet to shoulder our responsibility for our neighbor (maybe tomorrow after I get a raise?)."

Levinas, we know, believed that philosophy was not the "love of learning" but the "learning of love"—neighbor-love, that is. Brown's amusing, searching book thinks that such love is possible. What chutzpa!

Reviewed by David Crowe*, who teaches modern and contemporary American literature at Augustana College in Rock Island, Illinois. His latest book is* Hemingway and Ho Chi Minh in Paris.

BookMarks

Toni Morrison's Spiritual Vision: Faith, Folktales, and Feminism in her Life and Literature

By Nadra Nittle
Fortress, 192 pp., $24.00 paperback

Toni Morrison's religious sensibilities have often been outshone by the explosive racial and sexual dynamics of her fiction. In this concise volume, journalist and literary scholar Nadra Nittle explores the influences and instincts that guided the spiritual shape of Morrison's work. Nittle elucidates the hybridity of Catholicism, folk wisdom, and oral traditions with Morrison's sense of the feminine divine and its embodiment in the lives of many of her characters. While Morrison had a rich spiritual vocabulary that she deployed in both historical and contemporary settings, she was also unsparing in her perception of the harsh sides of religion—exclusion, shame, and violence. Nittle also notes the ways in which Morrison's images and understandings have had a lasting impact on American culture.

The Spiritual Work of Racial Justice: A Month of Meditations with Ignatius of Loyola

By Patrick Saint-Jean, SJ
Anamchara Books, 402 pp., $28.99 paperback

In this lovely book, Patrick Saint-Jean, a Jesuit who was born in Haiti and grew up in a Southern Baptist family, uses Ignatius's Spiritual Exercises as a lens "for exploring the ways Christ calls us to the work of antiracism." Born out of the confluence of the events of 2020–2021 and the 500th anniversary of Ignatius's conversion, it is simultaneously a gentle primer in Ignatian spirituality and a compendium of antiracist wisdom that draws on recent books and events as well as the author's own life experiences as a Black man and a Jesuit in the United States. Saint-Jean's prose is both beautiful and challenging, and each of the 30 chapters ends with prompts for writing, reflecting, and prayer.

SCREEN time

by Kathryn Reklis

Dangerous celebrity

Tammy Faye Bakker was a caricature even while she was alive. A prosperity preacher, an exuberant performer, and the cofounder of the Praise the Lord media empire (with her husband Jim Bakker, who was later convicted of fraud and conspiracy), her outlandish makeup and outsize personality were parodied on late-night television and vilified by most commentators. Every portrayal of a big-haired, overly made-up evangelical preacher wife since then has had a little Tammy Faye in it.

The Eyes of Tammy Faye (directed by Michael Showalter) wants us to know Tammy Faye beyond this caricature. In an early scene, Tammy (Jessica Chastain) and Jim (Andrew Garfield) are having a chaste picnic on the lawn of their conservative Bible seminary, having found each other in an exegesis class where Tammy defended Jim's early prosperity teaching and Jim defended her choice of provocative makeup and tight-fitting sweaters. In sharing their conversion stories, Jim confesses that before he found the Lord he wanted to be a DJ. To his embarrassed delight, Tammy stands up, starts belting out "Blueberry Hill," and insists that Jim dance with her on the lawn.

This is Tammy's spiritual gift, the movie suggests: an exuberant love of life and of other people that is fueled by her sense of God's capacious, inexhaustible love. We see this extravagance in action repeatedly, from her first puppet shows for children to her controversial decision to openly embrace a gay pastor who was HIV-positive at the height of the AIDS crisis.

Her insistence on the radical love of God is positioned as a counterweight to the rising religious right, dominated by serious men in serious suits like Jerry Falwell (Vincent D'Onofrio) and Pat Robertson (Gabriel Olds), who are at once envious of the Bakkers' media reach and wary of their feel-good prosperity teaching. (Falwell and Robertson want to remind the nation of its precipitous fall into the sins of liberalism, feminism, and homosexuality.) Falwell's shadow, especially, looms hawklike over the Bakkers' rise and eventual fall. The movie wants us to see Tammy as a victim of this patriarchal overreach but also as a counterforce refusing to be domineered. Tammy was preaching something too wild and lavish to be contained by the reactionary culture wars.

But surely there is some connection between the extravagance of God's love she offered so willingly to everyone and the extravagance of her own lifestyle which contributed to the Bakkers' public scandal and Jim Bakker's conviction for fraud. The film doesn't quite know what to do with this paradox—is Tammy a victim of a patriarchal power struggle that didn't know what to do with her unwieldy theology, or is that theology itself part of the problem?

SEARCHLIGHT PICTURES

TV PERSONALITIES: Tammy Faye Bakker* (Jessica Chastain, right) *and Jim Bakker* (Andrew Garfield, left) *rose to media prominence on their exuberant prosperity teachings.

Kathryn Reklis teaches theology at Fordham University.

In the final scene of the movie, Tammy is invited to sing at an Oral Roberts University homecoming, after the sting of her public disgrace has mellowed. She is singing solo on stage, but the film shows us how Tammy experiences it—full choir rising up behind her, a return to the glory of the height of her fame—and the camera zooms in on the twinkle in her eyes. This could be the gleam of a con artist who has played the long game and found her mark. Or it could be the bedazzled joy of someone experiencing the grace she always taught. One way or another, Tammy is determined to tap into the power that threatens to eject and disgrace her and to make that power her own.

Explaining the powerful mix of celebrity culture, charisma, and patriarchal fetish is the obsession of a new long-form podcast, *The Rise and Fall of Mars Hill*, produced by *Christianity Today* and hosted by Mike Cosper. It is about Mark Driscoll, erstwhile superstar of evangelical counterculture in the early 2000s, and the collapse of the church network he built. It circles around its topic, going back in time to trace the roots of Mars Hill Church and to situate the "young, restless, and Reformed movement" in a longer genealogy. It brings in experts of all kinds—insiders with first-person accounts, sociologists, anthropologists, historians, trauma specialists—to peel the layers of the Driscoll onion.

If you were formed in this tradition or wounded by it or professionally invested in understanding it, the podcast is electrifying listening. But it is clearly created for people still inside evangelicalism, and it walks a strange line between exposing the truth in the name of the gospel and trying to convince evangelical listeners that Christians are allowed to expose the truth in the first place. It has garnered criticism both from evangelicals who accuse it of pandering to secular standards and from outsiders who think it pulls punches when it comes to the extent of Driscoll's paranoid abusive power.

It was first recommended to me, however, by a friend who has no experience with Christianity and no previous knowledge of Driscoll or the twists and turns of evangelical church movements. She was hooked by the sheer strength of Cosper's storytelling and analysis and fascinated by how much it helped explain something larger about American culture to her.

The desire to explain Driscoll and Mars Hill comes at moment when it is also clear that spiritual and theological sickness do not mean a lessening of cultural or political power. There is a general despair as many struggle to understand why so many White evangelicals voted overwhelmingly for Donald Trump and why so many of them have eased so comfortably into open White nationalism.

This larger field of explanation seems to be Cosper's intention too. The tone is compassionate and humane—real people found meaning in this movement, and they weren't all dupes—but the conclusion is clear: what went wrong at Mars Hill is a symptom of a much deeper sickness in White American evangelicalism.

But the podcast oscillates as to what the root cause and symptoms of this sickness are. For the first several episodes, it focuses primarily on the hypermasculinity of Driscoll's theology and public persona and the trauma his patriarchal authority inflicted. As the podcast develops, celebrity itself becomes the root evil, along with the willingness of churches to give platforms to charismatic leaders who aren't mature enough in the faith (or maybe just as people). After four years with a reality-TV star president, it is hard to argue with that.

The Eyes of Tammy Faye complicates this narrative. Her life was tangled in the same web of prosperity and charisma that ensnared Driscoll, and all the clues were already present in her own life to predict where a church like Mars Hill would later be headed. But unlike with Driscoll's macho persona, it is impossible to imagine anyone taking back the nation under the banner of her eye makeup or feel-good preaching, no matter how charismatic she was. Revisiting her story in the shadow of Driscoll, who is an inheritor of the patriarchal control that hemmed in Tammy's life at every turn, her hyperfemininity seems like a shield against a coming storm. As we try to find our bearings in that storm, we need both of these stories to complicate and inform each other—and to help us figure out what else we haven't had eyes to see.

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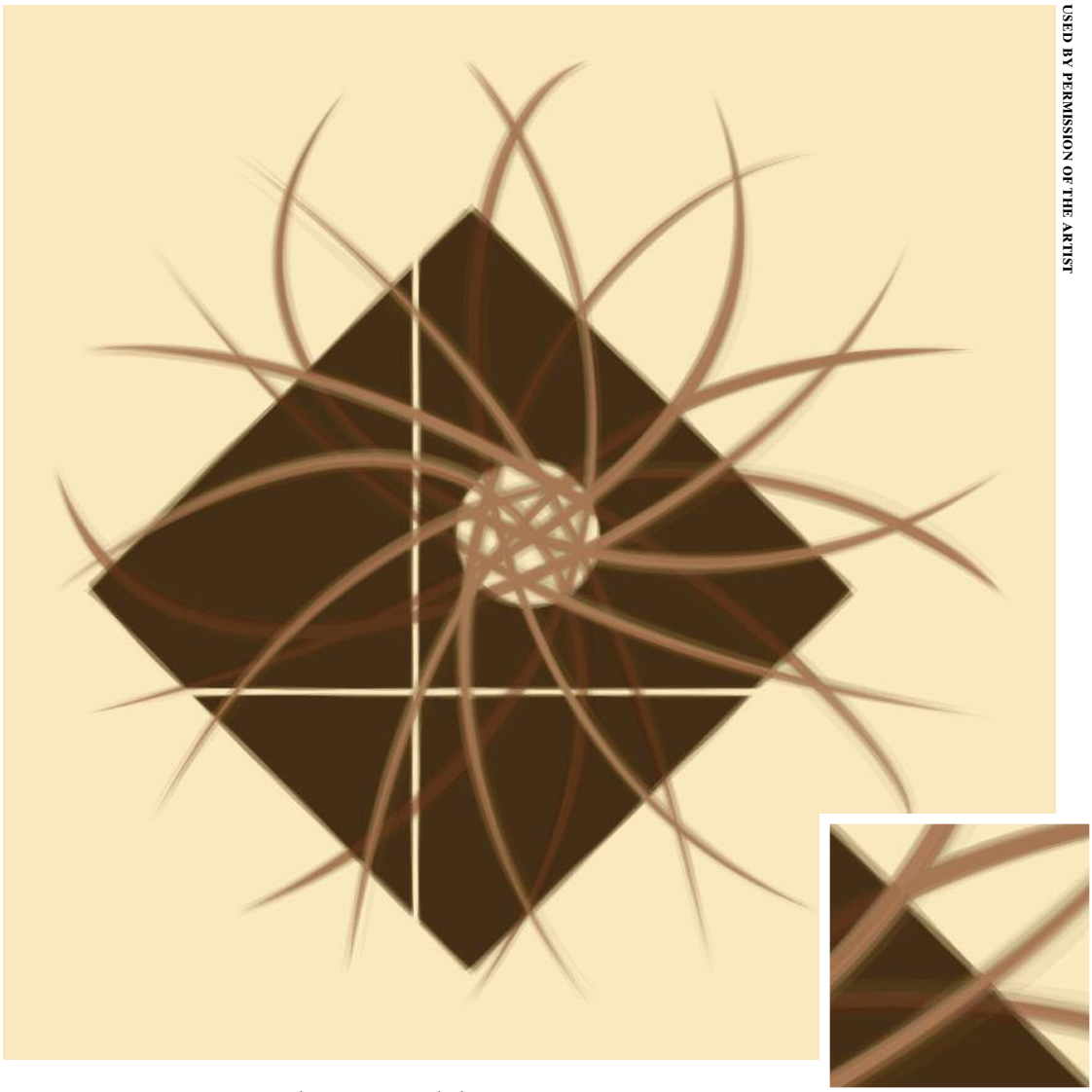
POSITIONS AVAILABLE

Fairmount Presbyterian Church seeks our next SENIOR PASTOR to walk beside us as we live out our historic commitment to service and social justice as a Matthew 25 church and realize our mission to follow Christ, grow in faith, serve together, and care for all. Among the largest congregations in NE Ohio, Fairmount is centered in the leafy, culture-rich suburb of Cleveland Heights, where our friendly, diverse, and educated congregation engages with our community with active ministries and financial support. A talented staff of ten, committed lay leadership, vibrant music ministry, and solid finances and facilities await the right leader to dream with us and realize new ways of caring for each other, our community, and our faith. We invite you to learn more about Fairmount at our website at fpccle.org, view our MIF 06372.AH0, and submit your PIF for review at clc.pcusa.org.

INTERIM ASSOCIATE PASTOR—Southminster Presbyterian Church in Dayton, OH, is an inclusive, compassionate, caring family of faith hoping to find someone to serve as our interim associate for two years. The primary focus would be fostering the spiritual growth and fellowship of our members. Learn more at www.sminster.com under "Job Opportunities" at the bottom of the home page.

First Parish in Lincoln, a mid-sized liberal Protestant parish with roots in the 1750s, seeks a settled full-time SENIOR MINISTER, starting August 2022. Located in suburban Boston, FPL is an interdenominational church (UUA-UCC) open to all, serving a membership that includes a wide range of faith backgrounds. We have a long tradition of active lay leadership that has creatively sustained and engaged our congregation throughout the pandemic. We seek an experienced, substantive, and inspiring speaker; a dedicated, caring pastor; and a skillful, energetic collaborator willing to take active part in community life, to nurture growth and diversity in our membership, and to support FPL's social justice and environmental action initiatives in our region and beyond. Adjacent parsonage available. For details about the search, visit www.fplincoln.org/ministerial-search/, which will be updated with additional information about our church and community throughout the fall.



USED BY PERMISSION OF THE ARTIST

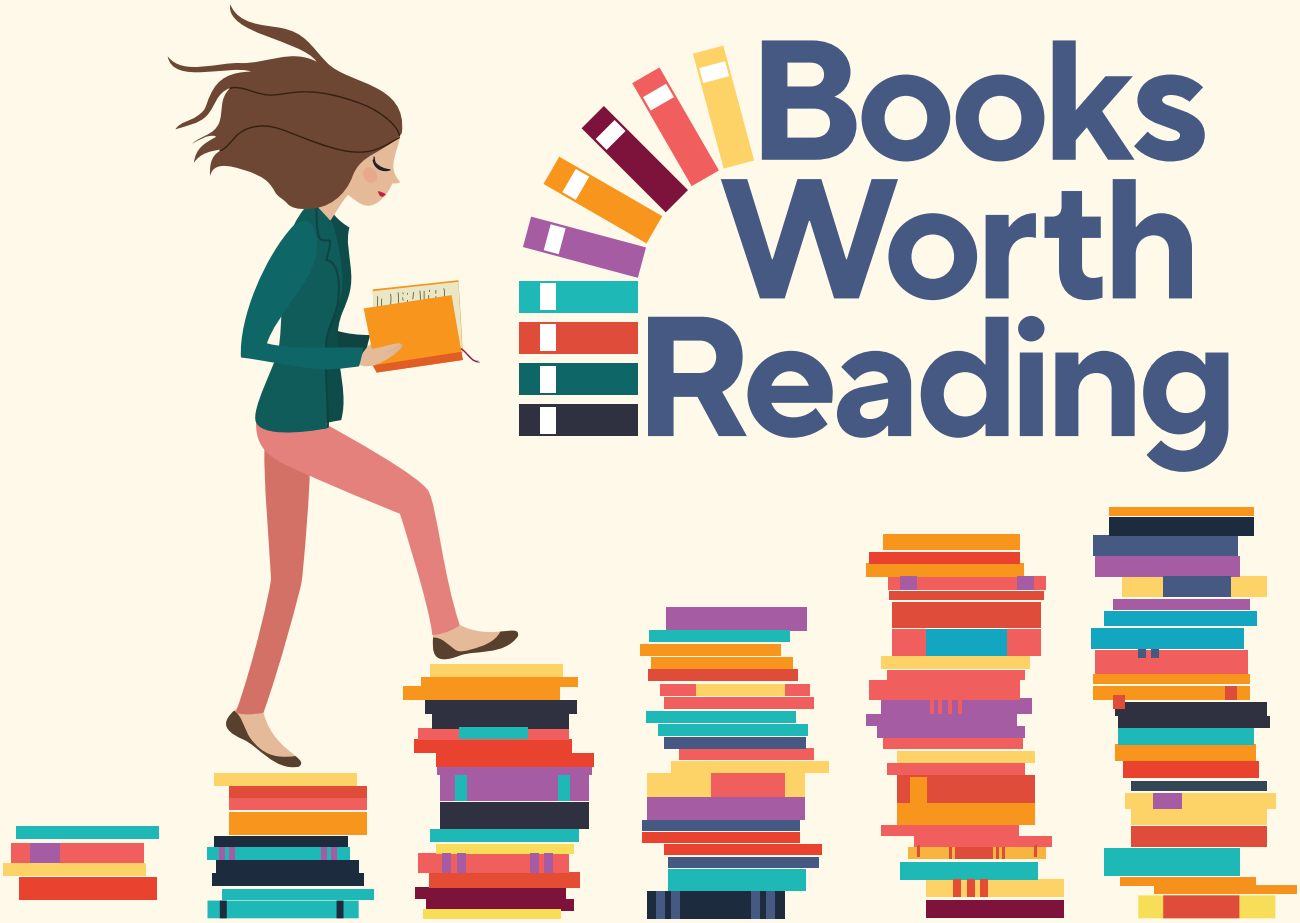
***The Letter and the Spirit,* by David Wojkowicz**

Czech printmaker David Wojkowicz challenges our traditional ways of visualizing biblical narrative. A theologian and an amateur photographer, he developed a graphic vector software program to create what he calls "abstract Bible illustrations," combining as many as seven overlapping and offset images in handcrafted digital prints. Wojkowicz's nonfigurative art pieces are inspired by Bible texts, both well known and obscure. By linking word to image, he encourages viewers to tease out their own meanings in the interplay of simple geometric forms and patterns.

The Letter and the Spirit, based on 2 Corinthians 3:6b ("The letter kills, but the Spirit gives life"), lends itself easily to imaginative interpretation. The letter of the law is suggested by a uniform brown square, intersected by cruciform perpendicular lines. The Spirit is represented by a vaguely outlined, curvilinear shape, which penetrates and perhaps rotates the solid mass, bringing to mind germinating seeds, neural synapses, or swarming aquatic life caught in freeze-frame. One image is inorganic; the other pulses with life.

Wojkowicz welcomes multiple readings of his visionary prints. He says he believes that "a true work of art is one where the viewer understands the image better than its author."

Art selection and commentary by John Kohan*, a writer and art collector (sacredartpilgrim.com).*

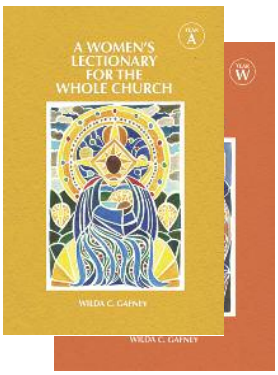


Books Worth Reading

Christian Century books editor **Elizabeth Palmer** sorts through her stacks

Each month, **Books Worth Reading** newsletter subscribers are automatically entered to win a book selected by *CC*'s books editor Elizabeth Palmer.

November's books, *A Women's Lectionary for the Whole Church* (Years A & W: Two-book set), by Wilda C. Gafney, are provided by Church Publishing.



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