



THE PRESBYTERIAN **OUTLOOK**

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Beyond inclusion

*Fulfilling the
dream of Beloved
Community*



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READER'S OUTLOOK

RE: Empathy: Embodying the good news in our everyday lives
Presbyterian Outlook magazine, March 2026

Father, forgive Donald Trump: Holy Friday's profound empathy

I loved the *Outlook* issue on empathy. Here's an addition to it.

For me, the core of Jesus's ministry is unconditional empathy. It was expressed in his life's most profound moments, the moments just before his death on what is sometimes called "Holy (or Good) Friday." After praying to God on behalf of the soldiers who slew and mocked him, saying, "Father, forgive them," he explained this plea. He said, "for they do not know what they are doing." (Luke, NASB) But he justified his compassion/forgiveness differently.

The standard explanation of the soldiers not knowing is that they didn't know he was the Son of God. That runs afoul of the likelihood that knowing of his divinity wouldn't have stopped them. So their ignorance of his divinity most likely can't explain their heinous behavior. But modern psychology helps.

The modern analog to Jesus's near-cryptic explanation of terrible behavior is found in the writings of Sigmund Freud and his heirs. He wrote that unconscious self-hatred in the form of guilt – his heirs include shame – is at the root of problems. Jesus's not knowing "what they are doing" is analogous to this idea. Freud would say the soldiers were unaware of the self-denigration they were "doing" in their minds that generated their horrible behavior.

(Continued on page 9)

ABOUT THIS ISSUE:

As we were working on this issue of the *Outlook*, an incident arose at the British Acting and Film Awards (BAFTAs). An audience member who lives with Tourette's syndrome and is an advocate for others who live with Tourette's syndrome shouted out a racial slur as two Black actors came on stage to present an award. The audience member, who quickly left, later offered an apology, as did BAFTA and the BBC (which failed to bleep out the slur). An emotion-filled photograph of the actors filled the internet. There has since been much discussion about the nuance of inclusion, generosity and responsibility. Who was or was not protected here?

Had this happened during a church service, what would the discussion have been?

Most of us like to think we're inclusive. Inclusion, however, is expansive, and it asks those who already sit on the inside to reconsider "normal." If you need to wonder, then you're probably on the inside. Inclusion is a roundhouse intersection of race and ethnicity, neurodiversity, gender identity, age, socioeconomic situations, physical abilities and needs, education and faith. Discerning who is or isn't at our table requires asking hard questions of our spaces and our own selves.

In this issue of the *Outlook*, we hear from those who advocate for inclusivity, emphasizing the importance of love, acceptance, and understanding across different backgrounds, cultures, historical understanding and beliefs. ○



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EDITOR'S OUTLOOK

Worlds we imagine, worlds we make

Teri McDowell Ott

As a child of the 1980s, I grew up on syndicated reruns of “The Jetsons.” Hanna-Barbera’s futuristic counterpart to “The Flintstones” successfully predicted much of our everyday technology, including video calls, AI assistants and robotic vacuums. Where it succeeded in imagining tools, however, it failed spectacularly in imagining people. The future it offered was sleek and efficient — and stunningly homogeneous. There are no brown people. No people of color at all. Even the family android sounds White.

Acclaimed science fiction writer N.K. Jemisin writes about “The Jetsons” in her essay, “How Long ‘Til Black Future Month”:

“This is supposed to be the real world’s future, right? Albeit in silly, humorous form. Thing is, not-white-people make up most of the world’s population, now as well as back in the Sixties when the show was created. So what happened to all those people, in the minds of this show’s creators? Are they down beneath the clouds, where the Jetsons never go? Was there an apocalypse, or maybe a pogrom? Was there a memo? I’m watching the Jetsons, and it’s creeping me right the f!\$% out.”*

That omission matters.

Science fiction writers have a name for the work of imagining futures: world-building. Before a story can unfold, writers carefully map geography, history, social structures and power dynamics.

But world-building is not just the work of fiction.

We are always constructing the world we inhabit — through our policies, our institutions, our habits, our silences, and our courage. Religion aids us in this work, proclaiming a vision of the world as God intends, and calling us to do the patient, difficult work of moving toward it. One such vision is Beloved Community.

In her 2017 memoir *My Life, My Love, My Legacy*, Coretta Scott King writes that Beloved Community is “a realistic vision of an achievable society, one in which problems and conflicts exist, but are resolved peacefully and without bitterness.” It is not a utopia. It does not deny conflict or suffering. Instead, it names a way of being together marked by hope, goodwill, and a commitment to justice that “transcends all boundaries and barriers and embraces all creation.”

Beloved Community is often misunderstood as a gathering of like-minded, likable people who get along easily. But Beloved Community includes opponents and enemies. It calls us not to humiliation, but to understanding; not to domination, but to dignity. It asks us to resist injustice through nonviolence, not because it is easy, but because violence leaves behind only bitterness, while nonviolence makes room for something new to grow.

Unlike “The Jetsons,” Beloved Community envisions a world that “transcends all boundaries and barriers.” A table at which everyone — even creation itself — has a seat.

Is that “realistic,” as King says?

Today, with all our polarization, Beloved Community feels impossible. But Coretta Scott King did not speak from a place of naïveté. She lived with death threats, surveillance, grief and exclusion. She led in a male-dominated world that discounted and dismissed her as a Black woman. She knew the cost of the vision she named. And still, she called Beloved Community “achievable.”

Imagination is not neutral. The futures we fail to imagine have consequences — and so do the futures we dare to claim.

Beloved Community is not wishful thinking. It is a moral compass. It gives us direction when the path is unclear and reminds us who belongs, when fear tempts us to draw smaller circles. To call it *realistic* is to insist that exclusion is not inevitable, cruelty is not necessary, and division is not our destiny.

The question before us is not whether we will participate in world-building. We already are. The question is whether the future we are building now will reflect what we are able to envision and willing to protect. If we love justice, inclusion, and peace, then those commitments must shape our policies, our churches, our neighborhoods. Beloved Community must be built — carefully, imperfectly, faithfully — by people who trust that love still has creative power. ○



Teri

Two teams announce they will stand for co-moderators



The Rev. Marta Pumroy-Cordero and the Rev. Dr. Kristopher D. Schondelmeyer



The Rev. Dr. Frances Lin and the Rev. Dr. Sean Chow

The Rev. Marta Pumroy-Cordero, along with the Rev. Dr. Kristopher D. Schondelmeyer, and the Rev. Dr. Frances Lin along with the Rev. Dr. Sean Chow, have announced they will stand as teams at the conclusion of GA, which will be held online and in person in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, June 22-July 2. The election is scheduled for the Assembly's final day. The elected team as co-moderators would continue through the 228th General Assembly (2028).

The Rev. Marta Pumroy-Cordero and the Rev. Dr. Kristopher D. Schondelmeyer

Pumroy-Cordero is the border ministry coordinator for the Tres Rios Border Foundation in Tres Rios Presbytery. Schondelmeyer is pastor and head of staff at First Presbyterian Church of Davenport, Iowa, and moderator of the Presbytery of East Iowa. Both have been endorsed in their call to stand by their respective presbyteries.

"Our call emerges from the lived reality of our ministries: churches and communities carrying wounds of division, fear, and exhaustion, yet overflowing with creativity, compassion, and courageous hope," the two wrote in a letter announcing their intention to stand. "Rooted in the vision of Revelation 22, we believe the church in this time is being invited to 'Be the Leaves' for the healing and flourishing of every congregation and community we are called to serve."

While Pumroy-Cordero is a recently ordained pastor, Schondelmeyer's sense of call goes back to high school, when he became an inquirer. While at a youth conference, a pastor sexually assaulted him. "It took me a decade to come to terms with that," he told Presbyterian News

Service. "I have since used that experience to encourage the church to create safe and sacred space."

He eventually completed doctoral degree studies related to designing a compassion-based framework for moderating civil discourse at the intersection of religion and public policy.

While he was working on his doctoral degree, Schondelmeyer learned about listening sessions that Pumroy-Cordero was holding as a co-moderator of the PC(USA)'s Special Committee on Racism, Truth and Reconciliation. "She said a profound thing," he recalled. "As she is listening to people, one thing she tries to do is listen to the heart of the person. ... What she was describing is empathetic listening, listening to the feelings behind what people are saying."

Before attending seminary and her ordination as a teaching elder, Pumroy-Cordero taught middle school students for 20 years — half of those years in public schools and half in Catholic schools. "God has been sending me to all sorts of places," she said.

She grew up in Iowa, completed college, accepted a teaching position in Houston and met and married a man. They had a daughter and then divorced. Pumroy-Cordero returned to Iowa, where First Presbyterian Church of Marion "opened itself to me," she said. "The pastoral care I was given meant the world to me." Church members "loved having a baby around," and she started working with the church's high school students.

Pumroy-Cordero explained the Tres Rios Border Foundation makes presentations about "what's going on at the border," hosts three-day encounters and gives "direct support to areas with the most need." Now that the

U.S. asylum process has ground to a halt, the work has shifted, she said. "People's needs are now transitional, like school uniforms," she said. "We also do vigils outside the courthouse weekly."

The Rev. Dr. Frances Lin and the Rev. Dr. Sean Chow

The Rev. Dr. Frances Lin, the presbytery leader of Riverside Presbytery, and the Rev. Dr. Sean Chow, executive director of the Presbytery of San Diego,

In a news release announcing their candidacy, the Rev. Dr. Frances Lin, presbytery leader of Riverside Presbytery, and the Rev. Dr. Sean Chow, executive director of the Presbytery of San Diego, said their shared theme, "God's Abundance," "grows out of the conviction that even in seasons of anxiety, change and loss, God has given and continues to give the church what it needs."

"This abundance is seen in the grace that sustains us through hardship, the hope that emerges when all seems lost, and the renewal that springs forth in times of transition," they said in the release. "It is present in the laughter of children, the wisdom of elders and the daily acts of care, generosity and hospitality that bind us together. Abundance is experienced when resources are shared, gifts are recognized and every person is valued for who they are."

Chow is a fourth-generation Chinese American, while Lin is a 1.5-generation Taiwanese American. They've known one another for years, as Lin previously served as Stated Clerk of the Presbytery of San Diego.

"Our stories are deeply rooted in the experiences of our families and communities, shaped by journeys of migration, hope and perseverance," they said in their release. "We are profoundly grateful to God for loving us unconditionally and to a church that has welcomed and valued us along the way."

"At the same time, we recognize that there remain mountains to climb and barriers to overcome in the ongoing pursuit of God's justice and true belonging for all. It is with humility, gratitude and a sense of responsibility that we offer ourselves to this work, trusting that God will continue to guide and strengthen us and the church as we move forward together with our siblings in Christ."

"We both have a passion for church planting and for new worshipping communities," Lin told Presbyterian News Service.

"We have always thought the same way about the

church and about abundance," Chow said. "God is an abundant God. How do we use the blessings God has given us?"

Before coming to the Presbytery of San Diego, Chow was Associate for Training with 1001 New Worshipping Communities. He developed and led training platforms and workshops for presbyteries to better support worshipping communities.

Lin said she treasures her identity and service as a ruling elder, which she has held even longer than her role as a minister of Word and Sacrament. As a member of the Unification Commission, she's served on the Relationship Coordination Committee. "I came to appreciate that people want what's best for this denomination," she said. "Pivoting is something that's uncomfortable, yet people have a sense of openness to give it a try. That's encouraging for me and I would like to continue to be that bridge."

The final day for those who wish to stand for co-moderators is May 7.

— *Presbyterian News Agency*

Join us for a Presbyterian Outlook webinar for co-moderator candidates on June 17.



For years, the *Outlook* has facilitated conversations with co-moderator candidates before the General Assembly so that commissioners and those interested can get to know the candidates better.

Details:

- Teri Ott, editor and publisher of the *Outlook*, will host the webinar via Zoom from 7 p.m. – 8:30 p.m. ET, on June 17.
- This webinar will be a "name your price" webinar. All donations will support the *Outlook's* ministry of independent publishing.

**Register
here**



BOOKMARK



Rebecca Sue

A Sister's Reflections on Disability, Faith, and Love

Kathleen Norris

IVP Formation, 240 pages, Published September 16, 2025



REVIEWED BY THE REV. AMY PAGLIARELLA, the *Outlook's* book review editor and a PC(USA) pastor with Fourth Presbyterian Church in Chicago, Illinois.

“I’d say that her faith is childlike and solid,” Kathleen Norris writes about her sister Becky. These words could also describe Becky. Deprived of oxygen during her birth, Becky’s brain remains childlike, despite the very adult challenges she solidly faces. Norris explores the fullness of Becky’s life, ensuring that her beloved little sister is defined not by her many diagnoses, but by her humanity.

Rebecca Sue unfolds in short vignettes that read like journal entries. Norris honors her sister’s voice by inserting excerpts from Becky’s own letters. Becky is heartbreakingly candid; in one breath, she recounts harrowing stories of men who take advantage and, on occasion, attempt to assault her, while in the next, she breezily wonders if she should perm her hair or try a new lipstick.

At times frustrated by Becky’s increasingly erratic behavior, Norris explores her family’s helplessness, a gift to families in similar situations who require language for their own frustration. And yet Norris offers sweet glimpses of the two sisters reveling in action movies or supporting one another in grief, reminding us that Becky is more than her challenges.

A recurring theme of *Rebecca Sue* is that Becky yearns for places where she can belong and grow, and a partner by her side. While Becky’s fragile mental health and developmental limitations prevent her from fully achieving this, she possesses an earnest faith in a God “who loved and cared for her” no matter what. In Kathleen Norris’ trustworthy hands, Becky’s life becomes a witness to this God and an inspiration to us. ☉

FROM THE OUTLOOK ARCHIVES

43 YEARS AGO, MAY 23 1983, VOLUME 165-21

“Staff Women Pledge to Work for Inclusiveness”

Sixty-five Presbyterian staff women have called on the soon-to-be-formed Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) “to implement the inclusiveness and participation promised in the Plan for Reunion.”

Women from the United Presbyterian Church and the Presbyterian Church U.S. in Louisville for a meeting of men and women staff members from throughout the country, affirmed that “we rejoice in the reuniting of our churches, while having concern for the roles of women.”

Five specifics were listed ... “with confidence that those concerns will be considered in planning for the effective establishment of the renewed church”:

- Placement of racial-ethnic persons, especially women, in professional and volunteer decision-making positions, particularly those involving fiscal matters.

- Employment “beyond tokenism” with budget to make participation in the larger church possible.
- Racial-ethnic ministries “as a priority of the church in mission, rather than racial-ethnic persons as objects of mission.”
- Establishment and maintenance of “supportive networks to build and sustain trust.”
- Recognition of the gifts and strengths that racial-ethnic persons and congregations bring to the church.

Declaring that “racism and sexism can be overcome in the new church if their presence and power are acknowledged and confronted,” the group pledged to be on the forefront of that acknowledgment and confrontation in the new church God is calling.”

— **Outlook staff report**

READER'S OUTLOOK

(Continued from page 4)

To obviate sinful behavior, the modern heirs of Freud counter shaming/guilt-mongering ideas with empathetic explanations. There are plenty of real-life stories demonstrating that process. But without Jesus's and Freud's beautifully expressed idea that, in everyone's life, there always is a relieving understanding that evokes our compassion-filled forgiveness, few would go looking for it.

To appreciate that this idea has the power to change lives, consider that there is emerging proof that empathy transforms people like the soldiers who mocked him. Little-known empathy-based transformations of White supremacists and criminal sociopaths challenge our ingrained belief that sociopathic people are unwilling to change. For example, a musician with no training in social work or psychotherapy, Daryl Davis, dramatically helped change many Ku Klux Klan members. He explained, "You fix the ignorance, there's nothing to fear. If there's nothing to fear, there's nothing to hate." Notice the correspondence between Jesus's "know not" and Davis's "ignorance."

Add that in my interviews of two formerly violent criminal sociopaths, I discovered in compelling detail how empathy transformed them. Some prestigious experts concur that criminal sociopaths are amenable to empathy, but only to profound versions of it.

The unconditional quality of Jesus's empathy is most scandalously expressed in the words of Ngak'chang Rinpoche, a Buddhist monk. He said, "One has to also have compassion for Hitler, for Stalin, for Mussolini, for whomever." To explain his compassion, he empathetically explained, "One has to understand their very terrible situation." Trump cannot be an exception.

Many life-giving, counter-cultural implications of Holy Friday empathy beg consideration. Not the least of them is that everyone warrants empathy. None of us is beyond God's understanding and the compassion it justifies.

— **Rev. John McFadden,**
San Francisco, California

RE: Our faith calls us to share in letting empathy loose,
by Alfred Walker, *Presbyterian Outlook*, February 2026

I was moved by Alfred Walker's brilliant reflection about empathy through the letter of an inmate in 1989. I regularly exchange letters with a prisoner and, as Alfred wrote, our correspondence is "a mirror for reflecting ... faith." Hardly sin, empathy is holiness writ large, which I learn with each written letter.

—**The Rev. Dr. Andrew Taylor-Troutman,**
Chapel Hill, North Carolina

Re: Why Christian clergy see risk as part of their moral calling,
by Laura E. Alexander for *The Conversation*,
***Presbyterian Outlook* online, February 18, 2026**

Is the only risk-taking worth talking about that of putting your life on the line? I wish I could be one of those clergy who fly to Minneapolis and risk arrest. I wish I could stand at the front of a crowd with a bullhorn in my hand, encouraging people to resist. However, I take risks each Sunday when I stand before the congregation I serve and utter the word "immigration." The response to my talking about immigration was that one couple stood up and left the sanctuary with real dramatic flair. They now leave the worship service after the anthem regularly, because they won't stay for the sermon. I risk my job and livelihood each Sunday by preaching the gospel. I can't begin to tell you how often I have been accused of caring too much about social justice.

Let's remember it was an Episcopal bishop who spoke out about becoming martyrs. I haven't heard anyone in the PC(USA) call for that kind of action. Maybe it's because so many of us called to the ministry of Word and Sacrament are afraid of taking bigger risks than we do each week. We preach weekly to congregations that don't know the gospel and don't want to hear anything that they feel is unpleasant. In a large congregation in NYC, I was once told, "You talk too much about the poor. People on Park Avenue have problems, too."

So, before you ask us to risk our lives, help us face the risk of being so unpopular that we lose our jobs. That has happened to me twice. From congregations that want to hear the prosperity gospel.

There are other risks than facing arrest or losing one's life. Help us with financial support as we face hostile congregations.

—**The Rev. Deborah Packard,**
West Warwick, Rhode Island

Welcoming neurodiversity in worship

A neurodiversity lens invites us to reconsider what we define as “normal” in how we think, perceive and experience the world.

Jen Bluestein

During outdoor worship at a recent weekend camp retreat for children and parents, one young girl sat apart from the group and drew on the concrete floor with sidewalk chalk. Later, the girl’s mother shared with me that her daughter has attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, or ADHD. The mother asked if it was okay that her child had been sitting apart and drawing during the worship service. The mother quickly added, “She is absorbing a lot more than it looks like she might be.”

This mother’s experience of social norms about what it means for a child to participate in worship in other environments had conditioned her to expect that she needed to apologize for and defend

her child’s behavior — even at an outdoor camp worship service that was designed for kids and their parents.

Another child, Olivia, a fourth grader with dyslexia, reports that reading small print and single-spaced bulletins is challenging for her, which prevents her from participating in prayers.

A children’s ministry director at a Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) congregation, Kate, is autistic. Kate received a call from a distraught mother whose autistic son had been excluded from other congregations because those congregations “were not equipped to handle” the child. Kate also tells of another mother whose autistic preschooler became emotionally dysregulated during worship. The



mother carried the child outside the sanctuary, and then a well-meaning but poorly informed congregant approached to ask if she could help “get her child under control.”

Over many years of serving children and their families, including many neurodivergent children, I have seen families struggle to conform a child’s behavior to the (sometimes unspoken) congregational norm that expects a quiet child to sit in a pew for an hour-long worship service. These expectations, which can challenge even neurotypical children, can be even more difficult when a child’s brain perceives sensory stimuli differently, making the sound of rustling bulletins or the smell of a nearby person’s perfume or

cologne overwhelming. Parents whose early elementary-age autistic children have aged out of the childcare offered during worship can struggle to help their child join worship because other congregants have deemed the child’s activity level to be disruptive, or because the loud organ music and bright lights can overstimulate the child, leading to a meltdown. These neurodivergent children and their families suffer from the stigma and shame associated with failing to meet these social expectations in church life.

... employing a neurodiversity lens allows us to interrogate our standards for what is considered a “normal” way of thinking and experiencing the world.

WHAT IS NEURODIVERSITY?

Neurodiversity is a relatively new term, coined in the 1990s and often attributed to autistic activist and social scientist Judy Singer. Neurodiversity reflects the reality that human beings are created and experience the world in diverse ways. In other words, our nervous systems process sensory stimuli in varying ways, and of course, everyone thinks differently. Since its first use, the term “neurodiversity” has sparked a neurodiversity movement that has gained momentum toward including the voices and experiences of those who are neurodivergent — whose brains function in ways that differ from dominant societal norms.

Many people think only of autism when they hear the term “neurodivergent.” However, neurodivergence includes the reality of people who have ADHD, sensory processing challenges, Tourette’s syndrome, certain learning disabilities and many other ways of experiencing the world. When we understand the experiences of neurodivergent people through the lens of neurodiversity, we resist pathologizing God’s

children who experience the world in these ways — we resist the temptation to view their brain differences as something to be fixed. Instead, employing a neurodiversity lens allows us to interrogate our standards for what is considered a “normal” way of thinking and experiencing the world. We ask whether what we think about the church, our worship practices, our Sunday school classes and even God is shared by others in our church environment who experience it very differently.

If we listen to the stories shared by neurodivergent people — such as the parents of a boy with ADHD who worried that their child would be excluded from Sunday school because he needed to move frequently and struggled to follow directions, or the adult who struggles to shake hands and make eye contact during passing of the peace — we may learn something new about how others experience church.

BARRIERS TO INCLUDING NEURODIVERGENCE

Disability scholar Erik Carter, in his 2007 book *Including People with Disabilities in Faith Communities: A Guide for Service Providers, Families, and Congregations*, identifies an “attitudinal barrier” to the inclusion of disabled children in congregational life. While our congregations publish statements of welcome and have a genuine, wholehearted desire to include all, attitudinal barriers for neurodivergent people

may show up in subtle, unexpected ways. These barriers may include the idea that a congregation must have a disability ministry or that people need exceptional credentials to welcome and include those with disabilities, including those who are neurodivergent. Often, attitudinal barriers in our churches manifest as unwritten social rules, such as the belief that it is rude or disrespectful not to make eye contact when speaking with someone.

... for neurodivergent people who process sensory information differently ... participating in and experiencing God in worship may look different from the ableist expectation of what it means to be an engaged participant.

For neurodivergent children and their parents, attitudinal barriers may look or feel like judgment of parenting practices when some congregants — or even the parents themselves — indicate that the children are distracting when they are not sitting still or are being too noisy. These beliefs often result from what a person was taught as a child about “appropriate” behavior in church. When we embrace neurodiversity, however, we begin to examine these unwritten rules to ask: Are they true? Does this belief reflect how God calls us to be in community, or is it an arbitrary expectation that we have designed?

Neurodivergent children and adults may struggle to participate in many aspects of worship services. Some, especially those with dyslexia, can find the highly verbal nature of worship challenging. For others, the requirement to sit still for a sermon may make worship uncomfortable.

For neurodivergent children and their parents, attitudinal barriers may look or feel like judgment of parenting practices when some congregants — or even the parents themselves — indicate that the children are distracting when they are not sitting still or are being too noisy.

Many enjoy parts of worship services, like passing the peace or playing dramatic musical pieces, that people with sensory processing issues may find overwhelming or even painful.

Ableism – the ways the world is constructed to privilege able-bodied experiences, both individually and systemically – is the biggest impediment to including people with disabilities in the church. Within church culture are deeply ingrained ableist views that someone is only participating in and learning from worship if they sit with other worshipers and appear to be paying attention. Yet we know that faith is more “caught” than taught and that worship environments are among the contexts in which children catch language about God. In her 2015 book *Saying Is Believing: The Necessity of Testimony in Adolescent Spiritual Development*, theologian Amanda Hontz Drury recounts how her three-year-old child absorbed and later used language about God’s healing without being explicitly taught it. This story illustrates the capacity of even very young children to form their understanding of God from the language they hear.

However, for neurodivergent people who process sensory information differently than others do, participating in and experiencing God in worship may look different from the ableist expectation of what it means to be an engaged participant.

THE IMPORTANCE OF NEUROINCLUSIVE WORSHIP

The need to transform worship to include neurodivergent people has increased as our understanding of disorders such as autism and ADHD has increased. In 2023, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in 2023 released findings that show that nearly 3% of children in the United States have autism, and almost 10% have ADHD. However, autism, ADHD and other neurodivergent experiences are not concerns only of childhood. Autism Speaks, a national advocacy group for those with autism, indicates that one in 45 adults in the U.S. has autism. Adults with ADHD diagnoses, many of whom do not receive

a diagnosis until adulthood, account for 6% or 15.5 million adults, according to the CDC.

In 2023, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention released findings that show that nearly **3%** of children in the United States have autism, and almost **10%** have ADHD. However, autism, ADHD and other neurodivergent experiences are not concerns only of childhood. Autism Speaks, a national advocacy group for those with autism, indicates that **one in 45** adults in the U.S. has autism. Adults with ADHD diagnoses, many of whom do not receive a diagnosis until adulthood, account for **6% or 15.5m** adults, according to the CDC.

Limited research has studied the intersection of neurodiversity and faith. However, one recent review of 13 studies of autistic adolescents revealed that autistic teens and their caregivers consider spirituality to be essential to their lives and that caregivers want their teens to have opportunities to participate in religious communities. Despite this indication that religious practice is important to autistic teens and their caregivers, a 2018 study by sociologist Andrew Whitehead found that the odds that a child with autism will never attend a worship service are almost double that of a child without autism.

Many neurodivergent people and their families are changing churches in hopes of finding a church that is a better fit — or are simply opting out of worship.

One of the greatest gifts of the church is its role as an intergenerational community, especially for children who have few opportunities to interact with people beyond their parents' generation. In intergenerational worship, people of all ages experience their place in God's story and should feel loved and seen. Yet this intergenerational community presents challenges for neurodivergent children. While churches regularly offer large-print bulletins, hearing devices and wheelchair-accessible spaces to include people who have physical disabilities, practices that promote neuroinclusive worship environments have been more slowly implemented.

In her 2025 book *Blessed Minds: Breaking the Silence about Neurodiversity*, pastor Sarah Griffith Lund encourages readers to consider how the church can become neuroinclusive, or adopt "an approach or environment that actively includes and accommodates people with diverse brain functions." Many neurodivergent people and their families are changing churches in hopes of finding a church that is a better fit — or are simply opting out of worship. The lack of neuroinclusive practices limits the worship experience for neurodivergent individuals and deprives the congregation of the contributions they might make to its worship life.

WAYS TO MAKE WORSHIP NEUROINCLUSIVE

With funding from the Lilly Endowment Inc.'s Nurturing Children through Worship and Prayer Initiative, two groups within the PC(USA) are inviting churches to delve more deeply into the work of becoming more neuroinclusive.

Big Faith Resources, based at Westminster Presbyterian Church in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, is working to remove barriers and foster belonging by equipping congregations and their leaders to make their churches into places of welcome and wonder. Through their videos, discussion guides and downloadable materials, Big Faith Resources helps churches to learn more about the experiences of neurodivergent children and their families — and to consider how changes

to the church environment might help the church become more neuroinclusive.

And through the grant-funded Renewed Grace project, Grace Presbytery is working with cohorts of its churches to develop a process of education, assessment and experimentation with changes to worship practices to promote neuroinclusive worship. The first cohort of the presbytery's nine churches launched a yearlong process this past fall. As part of Renewed Grace, the presbytery staff is also conducting listening sessions with neurodivergent children and their families and will share what they learn with congregations. Through these listening sessions, they are already learning from parents of neurodivergent children that one of their deepest desires is for the church to be a place where they feel safe from the judgment they experience in other areas of their lives — a place that will welcome their child as a uniquely created child of God who has gifts to offer the church.

... becoming a neuroinclusive church is a process that a congregation must repeatedly engage in.

In their 2025 volume *Neurodiversity, Faith Formation, and Theological Education*, editors and theologians Michael Paul Cartledge and Erin Rafferty describe the development of their online course *Cultivating God's Brainforest*, hosted by Princeton Theological Seminary's Institute for Youth Ministry. Cartledge and Rafferty write that they learned that "inclusion is a dynamic rather than static process, where congregations themselves need to be learning and adapting their approaches alongside neurodivergent leaders." In other words, becoming a neuroinclusive church is a process that a congregation must repeatedly engage in.

START BY LEARNING ABOUT NEURODIVERSITY

Because attitudinal barriers persist, the path to becoming more neuroinclusive begins with educating ourselves and examining our understandings of neurodiversity. The resources mentioned in this article are only a small portion of the growing number of books, websites and other materials available for churches to learn about neurodiversity. Congregations that are invested in becoming neuroinclusive will begin by listening to the neurodivergent people in their own communities. These conversations are best held in a humble posture of curiosity about how the church might currently be contributing to injustice and exclusion, and how it might adapt its practices to include neurodivergent people as active participants.

Jesus cared deeply about those excluded from the community and criticized those who upheld rules that kept them out. Perhaps Jesus, with his own need for periods of quiet and his questioning of social norms, was himself neurodivergent? How might we see God differently when we create communities in which neurodiversity is not just welcomed but celebrated? ○

Congregations that are invested in becoming neuroinclusive will begin by listening to the neurodivergent people in their own communities. These conversations are best held in a humble posture of curiosity about how the church might currently be contributing to injustice and exclusion, and how it might adapt its practices to include neurodivergent people as active participants.



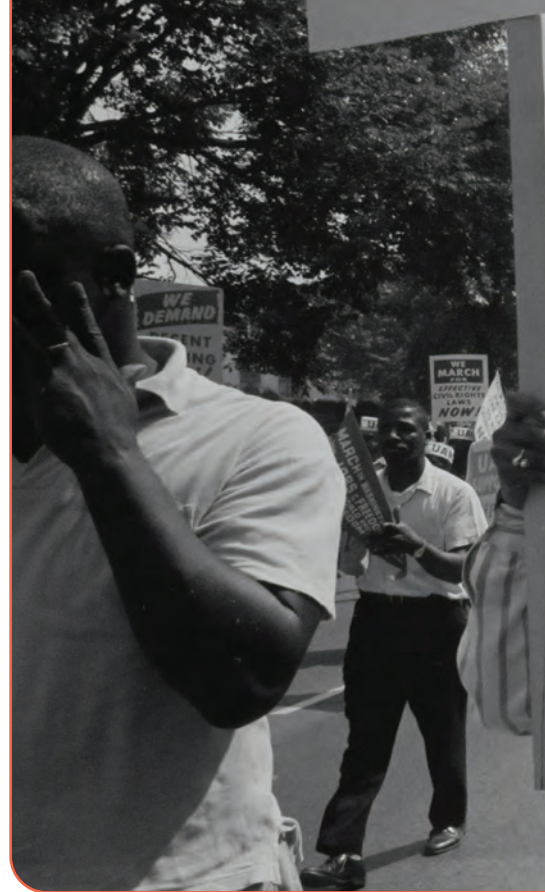
THE REV. DR. JEN BLUESTEIN is the coordinator of generational leadership development for Grace Presbytery and the project director for Renewed Grace, an initiative of Grace Presbytery. She previously served as a pediatric chaplain and in churches in Texas and Arkansas.



Beyond inclusion

White supremacist institutions cannot be reformed to realize Martin Luther King Jr.'s dream. New structures are needed.

David Evans



“Do I really want to be integrated into a burning house?”

In his 1963 book *The Fire Next Time*, James Baldwin asked this question in the context of an America that was on fire over desegregation mandates. The question reflected African Americans' concerns about the meaning of racial integration in 1962, eight years after the U.S. Supreme Court declared racial segregation unconstitutional and then mandated desegregation of the public school system. That same year, James

Meredith, a 29-year-old army veteran, enrolled at the University of Mississippi as the first Black student admitted to the White institution.

But Americans who hoped that Black people's inclusion in the nation's public schools would create Martin Luther King Jr.'s Beloved Community were disappointed. That is because Black history reveals a persistent pattern in America: White supremacist institutions cannot be reformed enough to become spaces for King's freedom dream of ecumenical,

... our collective dreaming must be grounded in building new freedom-seeking structures where we can practice living in Beloved Community.



Civil rights march on Washington, D.C. / [WKL]." Original black and white negative by Warren K. Leffler. Taken August 28th, 1963, Washington D.C, United States (@libraryofcongress).

international communities marked by love. We must build new structures to fulfill those dreams.

Later that year, killers of that dream voted to elect George Wallace as governor of Alabama. His election reinforced America's White supremacist pattern and demonstrated that calls for inclusion were not enough. Wallace declared in opposition: "Segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever!" His inaugural declaration spoke loudly to the masses who resisted Black freedom.

Massive resistance was a movement that began in Virginia and spread throughout the South. More than a declaration, massive resistance was a Southern strategy to sustain White supremacist laws and policies that would guarantee elite White men control over public institutions and private property. The varied strategies included closing public schools while

opening private Christian ones, as well as supporting White citizen rallies to block Black children's entrance to school buildings. The movement grew to embrace violent bombings of churches and homes as well as drive-by shootings of pro-integration sites. Ultimately, the movement created conditions that set parts of the American homeland ablaze. The American empire was crashing in on itself. Anti-imperialists had predicted that outcome for years — because empires, being parasitic plunderers of labor and resources, always crash and burn.

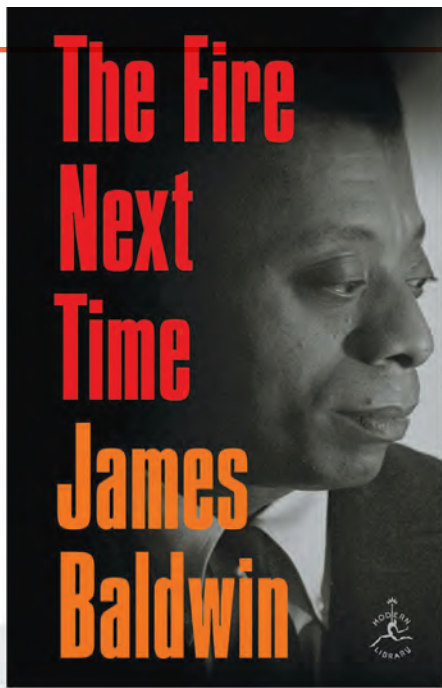
Almost three-quarters of a century later, the American empire is still aflame. Immigrants and citizens alike fear for their safety. Students struggle in schools that ban books and hide histories. Politicians debate the validity of the climate crisis while corporations build energy-sucking data centers that promise unlimited revenue at the price of the nation's water supply. Young

people, who want only to believe they have a future, have become targets in the culture wars. Families stress over rising food costs and house payments.

... empires, being parasitic plunderers of labor and resources, always crash and burn.

The gap between the rich and the poor grows. Houses of worship appear more content to serve national interests and less inclined to serve the least of these. In this context, Baldwin's question feels ever more pressing to ever more people: *Do we want to be integrated into a burning house?*

As I travel the nation, sharing insights from my 2025 book *Damned*



Whiteness: How White Christian Allies Failed the Black Freedom Movement, concerned people respond with earnest questions. Where are the Black leaders like those of yesteryear? Are we adequately prepared for the crises that are growing and coming our way? Can we vote our way out of these problems? What can we do? These questions represent the existential urgency of the many issues that threaten our communities. I am sometimes tempted to allow the moment to carry me away. However, my historical sensibilities remind me, as Oscar Romero once said, “to take the long view.”

THE LONG VIEW

From where I sit, the long view in America looks through the lens of Black freedom history. This view reminds me that Black people have built structures that are strong enough to withstand the worst of times. Through the Middle Passage, enslavement, segregation and mass incarceration, Black folks have long fought imperialism and its tools

of White supremacy, patriarchy and capitalism. Sometimes militantly and other times nonviolently, Black folks have fought for freedom by building strategies, philosophies, movements and institutions that sustained them through urgent crises.

It is in this spirit that I propose that our best response to the burning house of America is to learn from Black freedom fighters about the importance of consistently building structures for planting, growing, organizing, informing and connecting. The patterns of American history predict that we will face hard times again and again, but we must persist.

Many Americans today agree that the American house is on fire. Some want us to become firefighters to save the house, while others say the house is unsalvageable and that it is time to build a new one. We are asked to choose between reform and revolution. In my research, I have found that White allies' calls for reform often appeal to the idea of forming friendships. These

pleas take the form of diversity and inclusion initiatives in predominantly White institutions, where Black and brown people must assimilate to White norms and experience tokenization. In my assessment, such reformist measures keep too many oppressive structures intact.

I do not want to integrate into a burning house. So I suggest we move beyond inclusion to build a new house that is structurally sound and fire-resistant. This work takes time, skills and materials that many of us do not think we have. The structures in which we currently live have not prepared us for what we will need to maintain the structures of the new home or to interact with the people with whom we are to live.

But we cannot wait. We cannot wait for politicians to fix our problems, and we cannot afford to go without a home. What are we to do between the burning house and the time needed to complete the new one?

The structures in which we currently live have not prepared us for what we will need to maintain the structures of the new home or to interact with the people with whom we are to live.

MOVING FROM INCLUSION TO REVOLUTION

First, we must recognize that social transformations are built through sustained practices. Second, we must understand that for the revolution to last, it must be marked by love.

In other words, we must practice King's concept of Beloved Community. Practice involves unlearning what empire has taught us and then learning together how to build a community skilled in loving actions like listening, study, mutuality, confrontation, repair, laughter, safety, challenge, communication and accountability. Such a community requires that people commit to building solidarity based in freedom movements.

In this spirit, I explore two priorities to which people interested in such a community should dedicate their time and resources:

- Join or support a community organization that is rooted in the Black freedom tradition.
- Build neighborhood networks where people can organize for freedom, build community, practice life skills and rely on one another.

SUPPORTING BLACK FREEDOM ORGANIZATIONS

First, look for Black community organizations to support or join. One lesson I learned in my research was that good intentions can waste time and resources. We must prioritize impact over intentions, and we must value being effective over staying busy.

If we value social transformation, then we need to learn how to effectively achieve freedom goals. I know of no better way to learn than to seek out organizations that can mentor people in Black freedom traditions. I think here of long-standing organizations like the National Association for the

Advancement of Colored People and more recently formed movements like Black Lives Matter. These nationally recognized Black freedom organizations are important for what they have accomplished in the past — and for what they are working toward in the present.

Local community leaders have also historically provided the foundation for movements before they achieve national renown. These lesser-known community leaders and organizations are often overlooked by people outside Black communities. A few years ago, a White friend moved to a major East Coast city with a large Black population. He had decades of experience in ministry, government aid leadership and community organizing. He was aware of major initiatives to fight injustice and support struggling people. However, he was unaware of any efforts in his new city that were working to deal with gun violence. Troubled by what he saw, he called me to share his desire to start a conversation in the city — to do something about the problem. Though I had no personal community experience with the city — I had only visited a few

times — I assured him that at least three organizations were discussing the issue and organizing to address it. He was not so certain. I asked him to do some research and call me back in a week. The next week, he called to let me know he had found several community organizations he could support.

I have found that concerned people are meeting in every city or county where I have lived. Sometimes the gatherings only bring two or three people. Other gatherings may be standing-room only. This reality reminds me of something Mr. Rogers said years ago: “Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping.” But moving beyond inclusion requires us to do more than look for the helpers. We must also endeavor to become the helpers. The best helping is practiced together with folks who have knowledge of the region — its people, its history and its structures of power.

Experienced community organizers are untapped resources in a world on fire with crises. They also generally have fewer financial resources and fewer people working closely with them than national organizations have. What could community organizations accomplish if churches and politically minded individuals

... moving beyond inclusion requires us to do more than look for the helpers. We must also endeavor to become the helpers.



were just as passionate about joining community organizations that tutor underprivileged children as they were about registering people to vote?

I lament the deferred freedom dreams of people who are taught to wait two to four years to enter a voting booth to choose a political party candidate, but who have never known they can practice debt relief politics in their community every day.

BUILDING LOCAL SYSTEMS TO SUPPORT THE COMMON GOOD

Waiting for politicians to put out fires that they started is not working. We cannot wait. So the second thing we must do is to recognize that the structures of our society have not been built for the ecumenical, international, loving community we envision.

The good news is that we can begin building the common structures that we need right now.

We can follow the advice of Kali Akuno, cofounder and codirector of Cooperate Jackson in Jackson, Mississippi, who recommends that every lawn can become a garden and every garage can become a workshop. Imagine if, instead of wasting water and fertilizer on grass, we turned our lawns into spaces of food sovereignty. Imagine if garages, instead of serving only as warehouses for surplus belongings or containers for our cars, could become workshops where neighbors could share tools and building plans.

What if we allowed that vision to inspire us to make every porch a town hall and every house a community center? Can you imagine neighbors

What could community organizations accomplish if churches and politically minded individuals were just as passionate about joining community organizations that tutor underprivileged children as they were about registering people to vote?

gathering for porch-sits, eating snacks and drinking refreshments, while they organized to transform their community? Can you imagine if homes with empty rooms or underutilized spaces could offer shelter or recreation for neighbors? What a wonderful world this could be!

Building neighborhood networks is not all work. In addition to providing recreation spaces, our backyards and streets could become gathering spaces for cookouts and celebrations. One of the exciting activities in my local community organization, Cooperate Shenandoah, is making our backyards into cookout spaces where like-minded community members come together to share good music, good food and fun. This gathering with friends in pursuit of freedom is also a space where serious conversations break out among people doing great work around town, but who might not know each other well. New initiatives are born out of these gatherings, and the work continues. We do not always accomplish everything we set out to do on our porches, in our gardens, out in the backyard, in the garage or in the streets — but we understand that learning how to build and then building together are essential to the work.

FIREFIGHTING ALTERNATIVES

My work is not primarily of the firefighting variety. I believe that we will not overcome the most pressing issues of our day merely by including more people in structures that are designed to accommodate imperialism, capitalism, racism, sexism, materialism or militarism. We must work instead to build alternative houses of mutuality in which we organize for freedom.

Certainly, we must also put out fires because we are all affected directly or indirectly by the flames that engulf the nation in which we live. That said, I do not want to be integrated into a house on fire with injustice and oppression or into a structure smoldering with embers that could burst into flames at any moment. Rather than being included in the imperial, White supremacist, patriarchal, capitalist spaces destroying the world, I want to join movements that are made for freedom — where love binds people together, and where mutual support empowers international and ecumenical communities to determine their own destiny. Such a destiny can be realized only by dreaming beyond inclusion. To fulfill these destinies, our collective dreaming must be grounded in building new freedom-seeking structures where we can practice living in Beloved Community. ○



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Scan here for a book review of *Damned Whiteness*.

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A SURPRISING INTERSECTION:

Queer theology and disability theology

This convergence reimagines divisions and offers fresh insight across systematic and moral theologies, church history and biblical studies.

Tony Stiff

If we are not mindful, we can miss the opportunity to wonder about the church of flesh and bone that the future holds for us if we just slow down and attend to the surprising intersections occurring in our midst.

There I was, feeling anxious and out of place, about to present my first disability theology paper at an international conference exploring disability from a variety of faith perspectives. In the room with me, I thought, could be my future doctoral adviser from the University of Aberdeen. But he would not arrive until later. Instead, I was met with a different voice that invited me to consider a surprising intersection between disability theology and another theological discipline.

Some backstory here: Our son was born with a congenital disability, eosinophilic esophagitis. His body misidentifies food proteins, mistaking them for viral invaders. So instead of welcoming specific food proteins as nutrients – building blocks for life – his body erects barricades, sending out responders to neutralize supposedly dangerous intruders. In the words of one writer who has explored food-related disabilities, our son’s body experiences “friendly fire” in its autoimmune response. Like other disabilities, food-related disabilities can cause a cascade of other bodily challenges that can themselves become specific forms of disability.

Like many parents of children with disabilities, we became aware of the unexamined privileges of our own able-bodied lives. Our perceptions that the church and many other public places are hospitable were undone. Before our son’s disability, we experienced life in the church and public spaces as touched by systemic privileges but otherwise broadly accessible for meeting basic daily needs. We believed the church and public spaces welcomed all types of lived experiences. We discovered that was not the case for our son — and for a host of others needing disability accommodations.

What seemed like understandable food accommodation requests for including our son in the church where I served as a pastor were treated as outrageous constraints on others’ freedom. To use the language of food-related disabilities, the body of Christ itself misidentified the “healthy nutrients of inclusion” as dangerous constrictions on liberty — unwelcome requests

from bothersome guests. Expecting that our son’s disability would elicit empathy on the part of church leadership, we found instead that the existing intractable able-bodied barriers were hardened. We were surprised that disability accommodations were far easier to secure in our local public school than in our family’s place of worship, which was, in my case, my place of employment as well.

Like many parents of children with disabilities, we became aware of the unexamined privileges of our own able-bodied lives.

“Surely,” I said to myself, “the broader Christian disability community would be accepting of my son. No, even more than just accepting — joyfully inclusive and friendly toward food-related disabilities. At least the Christian academics will be kinder than some of those within the church ... right?” Unfortunately, within the disability community, a strange exclusion or power-dynamic game can play out as “Are you disabled enough to be disabled?” This form of ableism is a microaggression that involves boundary-keeping.

EXPANDING THE BOUNDARIES OF “DISABILITY”

At the international gathering on faith and disability, I was the first to explore food-related disabilities, which meant I was about to expand the boundary. One parent of a child with a better-known, visually observable disability, who was himself a disability theology contributor, asked me why my son had to have a “disability.” He wondered aloud whether my son’s disability harmed the place of food-related disabilities at the table. So instead of being intimidated about speaking at the conference, I now wondered whether I even wanted to stay, or whether I should consider earning a second doctorate in disability

theology. My first doctorate was in liturgical studies and missiology. Those areas were both known parts of my life as a pastor, but I felt like a complete novice in the pastoral care of individuals with disabilities. Now, after this conversation, I found myself wondering whether individuals with food-related disabilities would be treated as unwelcome guests in the Christian academic discourse of disability theology. If so, should I even be there? I was present in the room, but did I belong?

Thankfully, in speaking with other presenters and participants at the conference, I found that the interaction reflected a very personal journey for that individual disability theologian, not an absence of welcome from the broader community in its views toward food-related disabilities. People were excited to see a new disability subject emerge and to see disability models used and explored in new ways. That struggle to attain inner security and belonging touches every one of us. As parents and friends of individuals with disabilities, and as disabled persons ourselves, we are all people who live in a beautiful yet delicate creation that we tend together before the face of God.

THE INTERSECTION OF DISABILITY WITH QUEER THEOLOGY

As shared above, I encountered another surprising intersection at this conference: a queer theologian who was the only presenter to explore the intersection of queer and disability theology. They were a fascinating presenter, and I found a kindred spirit in them. They dared to transgress boundaries and to make the body strange and wondrous. They reminded presenters that the problem of the idealized “normate body” – the socially constructed ideal of the body, as Amos Yong called it in the 2011 book *The Bible, Disability, and the Church: A New Vision of the People of God* – is not unique to questions of disability but extends to gender and sexuality.

As an affirming pastor, now also with a Ph.D. in disability theology, I rarely see the surprising

intersection of those two experiences named and explored in either academic or ecclesial spaces. Queer theology and disability theology are what I call “neighboring theological discourse.” As neighbors, they share a lot of the same lived experiences of embrace and exclusion. For example, both at times are misidentified as “contextual theologies.” They are also treated as subcategories of inquiry within the larger field of practical theology.

Queer and disability theologies can reimagine traditional divisions within theological studies, providing fresh insights into widely used motifs within systematic theology, biblical studies, moral theology and church history.

But those approaches to grasping queer and disability theology are a myopic way to understand just how unique and expansive their discourses truly are. Queer and disability theologies can reimagine traditional divisions within theological studies, providing fresh insights into widely used motifs within systematic theology, biblical studies, moral theology and church history.

Queer and disability theologies are neighboring theological discourses because they share several busy streets as they make sense of the world and the Divine. Standard queer and disability theology introduction texts – examining what are called the “front matters” or “theological prolegomena” (first things) –

explore nontheological critical theories about queerness and disability that come out of queer studies and disability studies. Queer theory and disability models become dance partners whose bodies define the distinct movements made by the theologians reflecting on them. One commonly finds queer and disability theologians critiquing the limitations in nontheological accounts of things like queer theory or, in the case of disability, the medical and social model of disability.

This pairing plays out in the 2007 volume edited by Gerard Loughlin, *Queer Theology: Rethinking the Western Body*, and in Deborah Beth Creamer's comments on models of disability in her 2009 book *Disability and Christian Theology: Embodied Limits and Constructive Possibilities*. Queer and disability theologies not only dance with critical models from their respective fields of study, but they also reimagine theology itself before moving on to reimagine theological anthropology. Marcella Althaus-Reid's 2003 book, *The Queer God*, and Nancy L. Eiesland's 1994 book, *The Disabled God*, offer examples of how reimaginings in theology lead to new imaginations of what it means to be human and, conversely, how particular human embodiments provide lenses onto the Divine.

Both queer and disability theologies also have well-known "clobber texts," groupings of Scripture passages with a history of being used as texts of terror to invite the formation of unhealthy and exclusionary biases — texts that require queer and disability hermeneutical rereadings of Scripture. Both communities, sadly, have experienced a widely documented history of traumatic ecclesial encounters, and both face systemic issues preventing their full inclusion. Heteronormativity and ableism, as unexamined

passengers in the liturgical traditions of churches, leave behind their own challenges for both discourses to unmask and confront. Liturgies that harm, that reflect the work not of the people but of "dis-membered bodies" who disfigure the image of Christ, are part of both theologies' sacred imaginative work to re-member Christ's body.

HOW QUEER AND DISABILITY THEOLOGIES CAN EXPAND THE EXPERIENCE OF CHURCH

Queer and disability communities are populated by such beautiful and complex voices, sounding out the strangeness and wonder of what it means to live embodied. How can exploring these many intersections between queerness and disability help the church reimagine the tables we share together: the fellowship of story and song we weave together, the prayers and silence we hold together, the bandages and shoelaces we apply to our shared wounds and walks? We spend so much time in Presbyterian spaces dreading the passing of the church that was, the wood and stone of the institutional body. If we are not mindful, we may miss the chance to wonder about the flesh-and-bone church the future holds — if only we slow down and pay attention to the surprising intersections unfolding in our midst. The term "transgressions" has had a pejorative resonance in some previous theological discussions in the church's confessional life. Perhaps the future church will "transgress" upon the smallness of our former boundaries with the largeness of God's kin-dom, in the words of Ada María Isasi-Díaz in her 1996 *Mujerista Theology: A Theology for the Twenty-First Century*. Perhaps we will make our body curious and make the liminal ends of the table boundless. ☉



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'Beautiful the way you are.'

Church support and care for transgender congregants

Patrice Gaines

At age 18, Vontrice Hemingway joined the Episcopal church that was within walking distance of her house.

"I am a Christian," said Hemingway, a transgender woman who, as a child, was teased and bullied because she did not fit other people's definition of what a boy or man should look like. Hemingway, now 33, hoped attending her new church would bring her comfort.

But the first time she wore a woman's wig to church, the pastor kicked her out.

"She said I had to leave because I was confusing the children and it was not right," Hemingway recalled. "She said, 'You're going to hell because homosexuality is a sin.'"

Hemingway didn't return to that church and eventually found a new place to worship: Sacred Souls United Church of Christ.

"It felt great. I felt loved. I felt

welcomed," Hemingway said.

There are 2.8 million people in the United States who identify as transgender, according to an August 2025 study done by the UCLA School of Law Williams Institute, and a progression of state- and national-level legislation has targeted their medical, personal and legal rights.

In 2021, 153 bills that would have negative impacts on the lives of trans people were considered. Of these, 18 passed, according to Trans Legislation Tracker, an independent organization that follows legislation affecting the lives of trans and gender-diverse people. By 2025, those numbers had expanded to 1,022 bills considered and 128 passed. Areas of impact scaled every part of life, including education (taking aim at gender non-conformity and preferred pronouns), healthcare (sometimes making provision to gender-affirming hormones for minors a felony punishable by life



Scan here for suggestions on making inclusive spaces for people of all genders.



... churches today still vary in their level of inclusivity.

... churches today still vary in their level of inclusivity.

imprisonment), sports (codifying gender identification and banning trans athletes from participation), bathroom accessibility (requiring people to use the bathroom of the gender assigned at birth), and performance (focusing on functions that challenge traditional gender expression and presentation, such as drag or gender-neutral fashion shows).

In January 2025, the White House issued an order that eliminated the option of gender choice on passports, stating "we only issue a passport with an M or F sex marker that matches the customer's biological sex at birth." A page on the Department of State's website further notes a response to a district court injunction, stating "we

are only issuing passports reflecting sex at birth." Current passports with an "X" marker would be valid until expiration, replacement, or changes in federal regulations. As of March 2026, 738 bills that would adversely impact trans and non-binary people are being considered, according to Trans Legislation Tracker, and the number is expected to grow.

In spaces of faith, visibility, safety and participation vary with a denomination's inclusivity.

In 2011, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) removed barriers for all LGBTQ+ individuals, allowing for ordination with a "local option" provision for individual presbyteries' discretion on candidates' ordination.

In 2018, the General Assembly voted for the full welcome and inclusion of transgender and non-binary people in the church's life. More recently, at the 226th General Assembly in 2024, a joint resolution was passed recognizing March 31 as Transgender Day of Visibility on the Presbyterian Church calendar.

In November 2025, the PC(USA) joined other major denominations in issuing a landmark statement supporting trans, intersex and non-binary people as holy, beloved, and worthy of full dignity.

But while the national body of the PC(USA) is affirming, as well as other denominations, individual experiences and local church cultures can still vary.

"There is a growing awareness in the Presbyterian Church that our trans siblings are both making valuable contributions to our life in church and facing increasing threats in the broader society," said

While the national body of PC(USA) is affirming, ... individual experiences and local church cultures can still vary.

Brian Ellison, executive director of the Covenant Network of Presbyterians, which seeks equity for LGBTQIA+ people in church and society. “I think many congregations want to be supportive and affirming and struggle with how best to do that.”

Hemingway’s saving grace was Sacred Souls United Church of Christ (UCC) in Charlotte, founded by Bishop Tonyia Rawls, who recalls the first time Hemingway attended.

“She came with a dress and said, ‘I was coming from work, and I didn’t have time to put on my full face.’ I said, ‘You are beautiful the way you are.’ Hemingway had not known a clergy person to support her in her early stages of transition.

“I opened Sacred Souls United Church of Christ to open a spiritual door that would welcome and support all of God’s children,” said Rawls, who founded her church 25 years ago specifically for the LGBTQ+ community because, she said, she has seen the “church-hurt” suffered by many others.

THE LEVEL OF INCLUSIVITY CAN VARY

There is a lot to be learned from the pioneering work of the United Church of Christ, as it has welcomed gay people as full members of its congregations. In 1972, UCC became the first of the mainline Protestant denominations to ordain an openly gay minister, and in 2005, it became the first mainline Protestant denomination to affirm same-sex marriage.

But, like other denominations, churches today still vary in their level of inclusivity.

“We’re honest in the reality that our denomination is not fully affirming. Probably 35% of UCC is affirming; the rest is not,” said Rachael Ward (they/them), a member of the Open and Affirming Coalition of UCC and Minister for Gender and Sexuality Justice for the church. “You could walk

into any UCC church and experience God differently. I think that’s profound. Of course, that comes with complexities.”

But Ward is glad that local churches can make their own decisions about how inclusive they want to be. “What behooves any denomination is to see that people see there is a way for your national setting and your version of open and affirming to work together in parallel and not be at odds with each other,” said Ward.

Ward also put out a call to UCC churches for liturgies, prayers and devotional resources that affirmed the LGBTQ+ community and created *Love is Louder: The Book of Love*, a free digital download available to anyone on the UCC website.

“We want churches to reach out and ask for help or ask, ‘Can I run these questions by you?’” said Ward.

“If anyone is asking what they can do, I say pick one thing. If there’s a group that no longer has a place to meet and you have space at your church, let them meet there. If there are books they need, you can make a library. God asks us to attend to each other. Tending isn’t clean. It isn’t just one step.”

PEOPLE JUST WANT TO LOVE THEIR NEIGHBORS

At the 226th General Assembly in 2024, the PC(USA) approved amendments to the denomination’s *Book of Order* to add gender identity and sexual orientation to the list of protected categories in the church’s anti-discrimination clause. The amendment was subsequently ratified by a majority of the presbyteries, making it a permanent part of the constitution.

Nevertheless, as with other denominations, the level of inclusivity of LGBTQIA+ members in the full life of the church varies.

“Since I started, there has been a steady increase in the number of

congregations that are interested in learning more about LGBTQIA+ members, specifically the trans community,” said the Rev. Claudia Aguilar Rubalcava, who has been director of engagement for More Light Presbyterians for three years. More Light Presbyterians is a non-profit organization dedicated to allowing the full participation of LGBTQIA+ people in the PC(USA) church and in society.

“I think many churches are not going to be More Light churches,” Rubalcava said, “but they are seeing more of a need for serving people in the margins, and those people right now are trans.”

Last year, for Transgender Visibility Day, Hickory Grove Presbyterian Church in Charlotte invited a transgender health organization to hold an educational panel. A physician, a therapist and two transgender people shared their experiences with attendees.

“For us at The Grove, it is as simple as saying we believe that all people are created in the image of God,” said Pastor Kate Murphy. “We have guiding principles and the first is ‘We believe that Jesus Christ is our Lord and Savior, therefore we welcome, include, respect and serve all of God’s children.’ It is clear then that at this time, the trans community is incredibly vulnerable and vilified, and the church needs to come along the side of them.”

First Presbyterian Church in Daytona Beach, Florida, contacted Rubalcava of More Light last year with what she described as “a very small but tangible way of loving your queer and trans siblings.”

“They emailed me and said, ‘We want to write love letters to our queer friends, and we can just send them to you, and you can distribute them,’” said Rubalcava, who put out an additional call and received letters from other churches as well.

“There is a new worshipping community with Latinx immigrants ... they reached out and said ‘hey, we

are not open and affirming, but we are Christian and we have a trans person that has started coming to our church and we want to know how to love this person,” Rubalcava said. “It was the most honest and loving thing I’ve seen. I think people just want to love their neighbors. Even if they don’t quite understand things or know what to do.”

Rubalcava’s observations may indicate that actions by the General Assembly have helped encourage churches to do the work of becoming more inclusive.

“There has definitely been an uptick in the last 12 months that has been a little bigger increase than I’ve seen in the last few years before,” she said. “I see more congregations trying to grapple with the whole idea of pronouns — and welcoming.”

Rubalcava still observes a lot of resistance “to the usage specifically of any pronouns that are not he or she,” which she thinks is absurd, noting that when she uses the wrong pronoun, she simply apologizes and corrects herself.

On the other hand, she has witnessed some impressive changes that give her hope.

“The few trans pastors that I know are having a little less resistance,” she said. “Some of them are getting good jobs in good congregations where people are trying to provide for them, respect them and follow their lead. That is a major positive change.”

She said More Light is receiving more requests for their education workshops, such as Trans 101, and that the workshops are well-attended. Still, Rubalcava also hears churches express caution about changing.

“One thing I hear quite often is we want to do this but don’t want to be

known as the ‘gay church,’” she said. “People say, ‘We don’t know what the consequences of loving our neighbor will be.’ Some churches say if we do this, we will be vandalized, we will be persecuted by our neighbors or attacked.”

In Boise, Idaho, Pastor T.J. Remaley said his congregation has tried to consider all the ways it is possible to give trans and nonbinary members the same worship experience other people receive and participate in, which often means not calling attention to their gender.

“We have guiding principles, and the first is ‘We believe that Jesus Christ is our Lord and Savior, therefore we welcome, include, respect and serve all of God’s children.’ It is clear then that at this time, the trans community is incredibly vulnerable and vilified, and the church needs to come along the side of them.”

— *Pastor Kate Murphy*

“I hear it over and over again that it’s exhausting to have to define your own humanity and worth as your identity is being attacked. To come to a sanctuary on Sunday morning and not have to defend their existence is a balm in a time of trial,” said Remaley, pastor of Southminster Presbyterian Church and co-moderator of the board of the Covenant Network of Presbyterians. “So, for me as a pastor, what that has led me to learn in these past couple of years is to emphasize a ministry in a way that trans and nonbinary folks are *not* the topic.

“What I have found at Southminster as our practice of inclusion and affirmation is lived out, is that our trans and nonbinary members and friends are yearning and desperate for a place where they don’t have to explain or defend their existence in order to just belong,” said Remaley, “I’ve been trying to do a whole lot more listening to hear what it feels like and how I can best stand up to support and be a pastoral presence.”

In his work with Covenant Network, he said, he’s seen an increase in the number of calls “to walk alongside sessions and pastors as they seek to become more authentically welcoming.”

Though Southminster has joined other congregations in holding ecumenical events specifically for the trans and nonbinary community, *within* the church, the congregation’s focus is to simply build upon Southminster’s legacy of affirming and including everyone in full membership as they worship.

“We do this through worship language,” Remaley said, offering an example. “The use of pronouns and that kind of thing.”

He said his church answered questions such as: If a trans member joins the church, can they serve on sessions or as deacons? Do they light the Advent candle in the month before Christmas? Or, is there a barrier there, and what are those barriers?

“For me, it is a question of ‘how do trans folks experience safety and belonging in the building?’” said Remaley.

Southminster is dedicated to ensuring that everyone can serve as a full member of the church. A trans and nonbinary member occasionally leads a popular book study series on *Transforming: The Bible and the Lives of Transgender Christians* by

Austen Hartke.

The church tried to assign bathrooms so that every member would feel comfortable.

“Part of what affirmation looks like is safety and a sense of belonging. We have single-stall, all-gender restrooms, and we also have assigned gender bathrooms in other parts of the building,” Remaley said.

Southminster celebrates Transgender Day of Remembrance, an international event held each November 20 to memorialize people murdered as a result of transphobia. Last year, the church also joined other local congregations to have a

paperwork party for everyone, but especially for trans folks who needed to do paperwork for passports, driver’s licenses, birth certificates and other documents. An attorney and a notary were present to assist in completing legal papers. Remaley said at least one of his church members has received a passport on which the gender marker was changed without their permission.

In the meantime, pastors and activists say there is so much work that congregations and church members can do on the local level.

“Go to your city council, get involved with local groups, look for alliances like the ACLU of your state,” said Rubalcava.

She suggests Presbyterians educate themselves and sign up to receive newsletters and alerts from the Office of Public Witness. <https://pcusa.org/news-storytelling/newsletters>.

“Show up at board meetings or public hearings. Testify in front of committee hearings,” said Remaley. “Show up at rallies and protests. Those sort of public acts of witness are part of what we see as moving beyond symbolism and into greater solidarity.

“I think one of the biggest failures we can make is the failure of silence, as a faith leader, as a congregation, as a denomination.”



PATRICE GAINES is an elder at Allison Creek Presbyterian Church in York, South Carolina, where she occasionally preaches. She attended Union Presbyterian Seminary in Charlotte, North Carolina. Patrice is an author and former Washington Post reporter.

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OUTLOOK DISCUSSION GUIDE

Welcoming neurodiversity in worship (p.10)**Jen Bluestein****QUESTIONS:**

1. If neurodiversity and neurodivergent are new concepts for you, how has this article helped you to understand their meaning?
2. Are you aware of any neurodivergent children or youth in your congregation? If so, how has your church responded to the child's or youth's needs?
3. It is likely that there are several or more neurodivergent adults in your congregation, and they probably have gifts or abilities to share. If you are aware of them, how do they participate? And how are they welcomed?
4. How has this article helped you think about and relate to people in your congregation who are identified as neurodivergent?
5. What are some ways your church could plan and conduct worship and other activities to be more welcoming of neurodivergent persons?

Beyond inclusion (p.16)**David F. Evans****QUESTIONS:**

1. In the paragraph that begins, "As I travel the nation ..." the author poses four questions. What are your responses to one or more of those questions?

2. The author uses the image of America as a "house on fire or ablaze" with a key question being whether to reform the "house" or rebuild the "house by revolution." What do you think of these two alternatives? Is there a third option?
3. Reread the last paragraph of the article. To what extent do the author's words reflect some of your own thoughts?
4. What are some tangible ways your church might be a resource and force for building the Beloved Community?

A surprising intersection: Queer theology and disability theology (p.22)**Tony Stiff****QUESTIONS:**

1. What do you find most interesting or challenging in this article?
2. Are the concepts of queer theology and disability theology new to you? If so, how has this article helped you to understand these concepts? If they are not new, what fresh insights did you gain from the article?
3. What are some ways you see the intersection of queer and disability theologies playing out in your denomination and/or church?
4. When you consider your church's worship services, educational programs, and other activities, how have those ministries welcomed

queer and disabled children, youth and adults?

Church support and care for transgender congregants (p.26)**Patrice Gaines****QUESTIONS:**

1. Are you aware of any transgender persons attending your church, or active in your church's life? If so, how have they been treated? In what ways do they participate in your church's ministry?
2. How would you describe the inclusivity posture of your church toward transgender persons?
3. Has your church offered any classes or presentations focused on being open to and affirming of LGBTQIA+ persons? If so, what was the experience of those who attended? If not, should leaders consider that?
4. To what extent are you aware of the actions of several General Assemblies related to open and affirming matters since 2011? What are your opinions regarding those actions?
5. If someone were to propose to the leadership of your church that the Transgender Day of Remembrance on March 31 be recognized, how might that proposal be received and responded to?



THE REV. DR. DONALD L. GRIGGS, a PC(USA) pastor, has served as associate minister for several congregations and is a former professor at Union Presbyterian Seminary in Richmond, Virginia. He has written many books featuring Christian education and Bible studies. His latest book is *Growing in Faith and Practice*, his memoirs of 65 years of educational ministry.



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THE PRESBYTERIAN OUTLOOK

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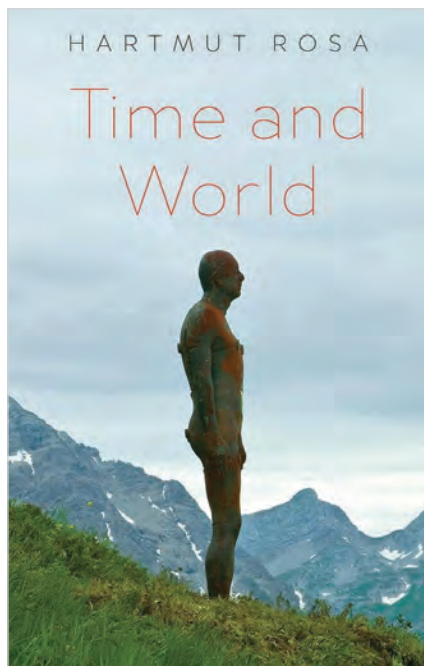
THE PRESBYTERIAN OUTLOOK



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Time and World

By Hartmut Rosa

Polity Press, 220 pages
Published December 10, 2025

According to Rosa, our obsession with control leaves us increasingly detached from the world. Resonance, by contrast, is a mutual, transforming relationship with it.



REVIEWED BY:

THE REV. DR. PHILIP J. REED, who splits his time between Michigan and Florida, and **DR. CHRISTIAN R. REED**, who holds a Ph.D. in American literature and lives in Los Angeles, California.

BOOK IN REVIEW

Retired Presbyterian minister Phil Reed discusses Hartmut Rosa's new book, *Time and World*, with his son Chris, who teaches English and philosophy to high school and college students.

Phil: Chris, how would you introduce Rosa to readers who may never have heard of him?

Chris: Rosa is a “big-idea” German sociologist. He asks a large, philosophical question: Why do we live the way we live?

Time and World is a collection of Rosa's essays and an effective introduction to his perspective. Two of his big ideas are front and center: acceleration, which describes how we experience time, and resonance, which describes how we relate to the world.

The title echoes Andrew Marvell's line, “Had we but world enough and time ...” Rosa argues that modern people live as if we have neither. When I'm busy, and one of my kids asks for help, I'll say, “I'll be with you in a minute.” And then I hear, “Siri, set a timer for one minute.” This moment captures Rosa's insight. Technology promises to save time, but instead accelerates life.

Phil: Rosa calls this “dynamic stabilization.” I see it constantly in the church. Churches have declined by nearly every measurable standard. Our response has been relentless innovation to bring new people in. In a world where time feels accelerated and scarce, and the future uncertain, growth becomes the primary way we justify our viability.

Chris: Rosa's response to acceleration is his most distinctive idea: resonance. Resonance names moments when we stop trying to control the world and open ourselves to connection and transcendence. This reminds me of what Jonathan Edwards called “the sense of the heart,” a sudden awakening to excellence that cannot be manufactured by the will. Rosa is not a theologian, but he is pointing toward a reality larger than the self.

Phil: According to Rosa, our obsession with control leaves us increasingly detached from the world. Resonance, by contrast, is a mutual, transforming relationship with it. Contemporary theologians like Andrew Root pick up on Rosa's analysis and offer theological interpretation. Root insists that ministry must not begin with control or innovation, but with attentiveness to God's agency.

Chris: Rosa's way of thinking has limits. His work reflects a largely Western, White experience of time and world. I found myself wishing the “we” in “how we live” reflected a richer array of voices.

Phil: Let me ask you a practical question. Would you recommend *Time and World* to your students?

Chris: To my high-school students? Probably not. Rosa is too conceptual. They would get lost reading philosophers like Charles Taylor, historians like Reinhart Koselleck, and sociological thinkers like Niklas Luhmann. Still, reading Rosa makes me a better teacher. His account of resonance points to our capacity to be affected by the world, and that opens us to new ways of living. My turn: Would you recommend *Time and World* to your ministry colleagues?

Phil: Yes, but not as a how-to manual. Church leaders looking for quick strategies to reverse decline and increase relevance will be disappointed. Pastors who are looking for a deeper sense of what it means to live in our modern world will find Rosa clarifying. I'd say, “This book won't save your ministry, but it might save your soul.”

BOOK IN REVIEW

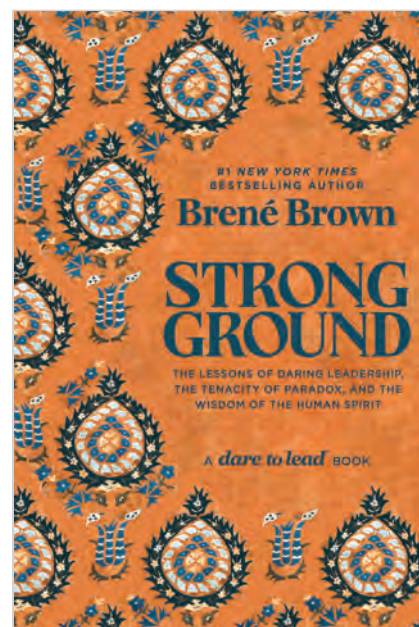
Brené Brown, prolific in her research and writing about emotions – particularly shame and vulnerability – continues to expand her work with *Strong Ground*. Her research at the University of Houston’s College of Social Work helps people understand emotions and use that knowledge about themselves and others to navigate daily life more effectively — work she now brings to her consulting with Fortune 500 companies and that she applied to leadership in 2018’s *Dare to Lead*.

Strong Ground often feels like you are participating in one of Brown’s workshops; her voice and humor shine through the conversational writing style and her thoughts are organized into short “sessions,” with each chapter focused on a specific tool or leadership framework. Her premise is that we live in a tumultuous time, and the world around us constantly shifts. To thrive in this unstable world, we need strong leaders who put kindness first and help us connect to our humanity, fostering connection and collaboration. In Brown’s opinion, this is in stark contrast to the popular view of bombastic leaders who use bravado and force to manipulate people. While many of us shy away from the paradoxes of modern life, the daring leader will embrace that tension. In companies, paradox shows up in many forms: profit and purpose, discipline and creativity, control and autonomy, to name a few. Brown quotes James March in one paradox she returns to throughout the book: “(L)eadership is plumbing and poetry.”

Church leaders can relate: we are called to be prophetic, while quite literally keeping the plumbing and electricity working. A pastor might play the roles of plumber and poet on the same day! While *Strong Ground* might provide church leaders with tools and general encouragement, it is probably not the best playbook for this work, as Brown’s research focuses on larger organizations with clear goals for profit and product. Some of her frameworks, such as the “Engaged Feedback Checklist,” could be helpful for church leaders to model, but they will not work in all church settings.

She dedicates many chapters to “introducing” the reader to other writers and their work, often inserting long excerpts from their books or interviews from her podcast. This highlights many great thinkers in the areas of leadership science and sociology and offers readers a snapshot of their work, but it feels quite redundant for those already familiar with these works. Similarly, Brown recycles much of her own research and writing from earlier books, articles, and podcasts, which can be repetitive for some readers.

Overall, *Strong Ground* offers deep insights about how leaders can shape companies and individuals to better navigate our uncertain world. Her target audience is team leaders in large organizations, and so Christians seeking to live their faith in the workplace will find her specific and actionable tools applicable. It is refreshing to see research-backed data showing that leaders who are kind and compassionate, and who guide with connection and collaboration rather than an iron fist, are making a positive impact in the business world today. ☉



Strong Ground *The Lessons of Daring Leadership, the Tenacity of Paradox, and the Wisdom of the Holy Spirit*

By Brené Brown

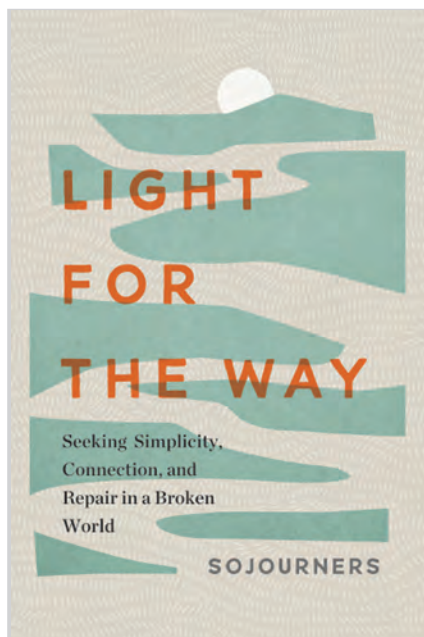
Random House, 448 pages
 Published September 23, 2025

(Brown’s) premise is that we live in a tumultuous time, and the world around us constantly shifts. To thrive in this unstable world, we need strong leaders who put kindness first and help us connect to our humanity, creating connection and collaboration.



REVIEWED BY:

MIRIAM NELSON, director of welcome and involvement at First Presbyterian Church in Fort Collins, Colorado, where, among other responsibilities, she leads a monthly book study for the community.



Light for the Way *Seeking Simplicity,* *Connection, and Repair* *in a Broken World*

By The Editors of
Sojourners Magazine

Broadleaf Books, 336 pages
Published January 13, 2026

A major strength of (Light for the Way) is its embrace of diverse and relevant issues, such as pursuing contemplative practices, prioritizing rest, living simply, respecting the land, and accepting our neighbors — all presented in ways that push the boundaries of traditional spiritual discourse.

BOOK IN REVIEW

The title, *Light for the Way: Seeking Simplicity, Connection, and Repair in a Broken World*, perfectly describes this potpourri of essays selected from 38 years of Sojourners magazine. Deeply rooted in peace and social justice, Sojourners' legacy is deliberately countercultural — a resistance to American societal patterns of extreme individualism, consumerism and environmental insensitivity. As Christian nationalism and authoritarianism become increasingly prominent in evangelical settings, this collection offers an alternative narrative.

A major strength of this volume is its embrace of diverse and relevant issues, such as pursuing contemplative practices, prioritizing rest, living simply, respecting the land, and accepting our neighbors — all presented in ways that push the boundaries of traditional spiritual discourse. Its weakness is the attempt to cover so many divergent issues in a single volume. But what it lacks in depth is counterbalanced by its ability to stretch our imaginations, offering alternative ways to reflect on both theory and praxis in authentic Christian living. Consider these brief but provocative observations:

“The function of prayer is to change my own mind, to put on the mind of Christ, to enable grace to break into me.” (Joan Chittister)

“We do not need roadmaps on this journey as much as fellow travelers.” (Jonathan Wilson Hartgrove)

“... silence is the only thing deep enough, spacious enough and wide enough to hold all of the contradictions that words cannot contain or reconcile.” (Richard Rohr)

“To demonstrate the belief that the way of Christ is the ultimate reality is to radically assert that present realities are not ultimate.” (Jim Wallis)

“The Bible ... is replete with a theology of trees and the environment.” (Seán McDonagh)

While contributors such as Walter Brueggemann, Brian McLaren, Margaret Atwood and Rose Marie Berger will be familiar to many, lesser-known authors also present stimulating and challenging ideas rarely expressed in mainstream writing. Cynthia Bourgeault, for example, an Episcopal priest building bridges between contemplative Christianity and action, draws on St. Paul's understanding that we are all part of Christ's body to describe a “higher collectivity” among believers. “Community,” she suggests, “... is the threshold for the oneness in the collective body of Christ,” allowing a significant number of people to move from whole to part, acting as one.

The essays effectively balance guidance on individual behavior as well as communal engagement. Joshua Grace describes how his Philadelphia church paid off each member's credit card debt, eliminating more than \$100,000 in principal obligation among its parishioners and restraining the impact of the dominant corporate banking culture.

Rather than read from start to finish, I encourage readers to seek out the topics and authors that address their needs. On a first reading, I noticed considerable disconnects, but when rereading essays related to my interests, the experience was far more fulfilling. And while *Light for the Way* is ideal for individual contemplation, it would also be suitable for adult discussion groups focused on social change and justice. ○



REVIEWED BY:

DR. EMERY J. CUMMINS, SDSU emeritus professor of counseling and past moderator of the Presbytery of San Diego. Emery is an elder at the Pt. Loma Community Presbyterian Church, California.

2025-2026 PRESBYTERIAN WOMEN

Horizons Bible Study

Finding resilience, joy and our identity in Jesus Christ

LESSON 9: *Luke 24:13-35 — The Road to Emmaus*

The story of the road to Emmaus is a tale of raw emotion. The despondency of two disciples following the death of Jesus is met with the sudden thrill of the resurrected Christ walking beside them. Initially, they do not recognize him. How could they? They believe Jesus is stone-cold dead. Their doubt is tangled with perplexity over the women's report of an empty tomb.

We often share this doubt. It arises when a prognosis is grim, during financial hardship, or when national turmoil leads to the deaths of foreigners and U.S. citizens alike. As I write this, thousands are protesting the lethal force used by Immigration and Customs Enforcement. Watching the news cycle, it is easy to doubt that Christ is at work.

A disciple named Cleopas says, "We had hoped that Jesus was the one to redeem Israel." There is such poignancy in that phrase of longing. We know the disappointment of hope unfulfilled: "We had hoped the medicine would work." "We had hoped she would get the job." "I had hoped the marriage would last."

Cleopas is walking with another disciple, perhaps his wife. Jesus listens to their disillusionment, but he does not offer a standard pastoral response. He doesn't say, "I understand your disappointment." Instead, he grows indignant.

"So thick-headed! So slow-hearted!" he says. "Why can't you simply believe all that the prophets said?" Like a teacher determined not to let his students fail, Jesus addresses their "denseness" by explaining the Scriptures, from Moses through the prophets.

As the day fades into dusk, the disciples invite Jesus to stay. At dinner, Jesus takes the bread, blesses it, and breaks it. In that moment, they recognize him — and then he vanishes. The disciples turn to each other: "Did not our hearts burn within us as he explained the scriptures? (Luke 24:32)"

Have you ever had the experience of Scripture grabbing your imagination and changing you?

I think of several people "claimed" by the Word. A friend listening to a sermon on Isaiah 61 felt compelled to volunteer at an inner-city Bible school, despite her family's fears. A wealthy woman, after nine months of Bible study, felt called to ministry in Haiti. A teenager struggling with his appearance listened to a preacher with a crooked spine speak of God's love. The boy thought, "If he feels the love of God, then God can love me, too."

I remember a college lecture on Genesis 1. For the first time, I truly heard that I was made in the image of God, and the realization felt like electricity. When Scripture penetrates us and changes us for the better, Christ is walking with us.

He is present at the sickbed and in the hospital room. I once saw a family keep vigil by a dying man, playing hymns and praying the Lord's Prayer aloud. Christ was in that room.

Jesus is made known to us through Scripture, prayer, and hymns. Sometimes, he is present in the words of a stranger or a friend. Other times, he appears in a call to action. Believing all people are precious to God, 100 clergy members once blocked a terminal in Minneapolis where immigrants were being deported. They were arrested one by one. In such committed action, we see Christ at work.

We live in chaotic times where the foundations of our lives feel threatened. It is easy to feel overwhelmed. Yet, it is vital that we hold fast to the belief that Christ walks with us. That presence gives us the stamina to continue the work of justice, mercy and kindness. ☉

Look for Rosalind Banbury's overview of the 2026-27 Horizons Bible Study in the May issue of the *Presbyterian Outlook*.



THE REV. ROSALIND BANBURY has served in small, medium and large congregations, and she has a heart for faith formation. She is now retired.



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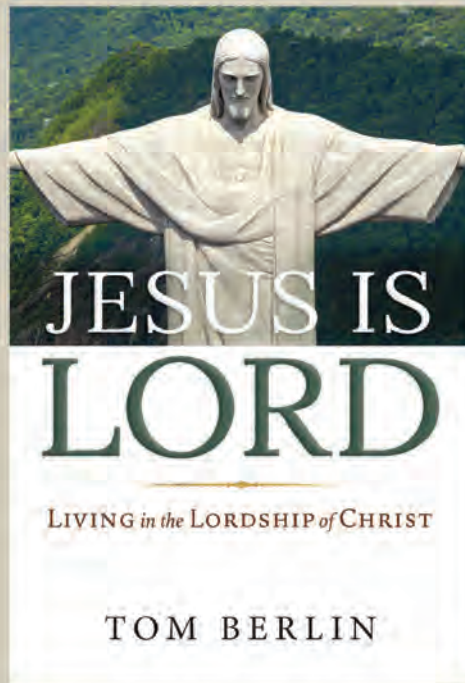
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PASTOR /HEAD OF STAFF

Grace Presbyterian Church is prayerfully seeking a full-time **Pastor (Head of Staff)** to lead our congregation into its next chapter of ministry. We're a welcoming, engaged church looking for a pastor who:

- Leads with faith, humility, and joy
- Preaches with clarity, warmth, and purpose
- Values collaboration, compassion, and community connection
- Enjoys walking alongside people of all ages in their spiritual journeys

Minimum qualifications include:

- Ordination in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)
- 2–5 years of ministry experience

This role includes preaching and worship leadership, pastoral care, staff and volunteer collaboration, and helping guide Grace as we continue to grow, serve, and live out God's love in our community.

- Location: Temple, Texas

Learn more and apply online through the PC(USA) Church Leadership Connection, or contact the nominating committee Chair, Kevin Cushman at vcushman.gathey@gmail.com for more information. Know someone who feels called? Tag, share, or DM them — this might be their next faithful yes.

SENIOR PASTOR/HEAD OF STAFF

Wallingford Presbyterian Church, in suburban Philadelphia, is seeking a new **Senior Pastor/Head of Staff**, following the retirement of our previous Head of Staff. We are a dynamic, progressive, mission-

oriented congregation, and we have a dedicated and energetic staff, including an associate pastor, director of music ministry, office administrator, and communications coordinator. In addition to weekly worship, Sunday school, and education programs, we host a nursery school, an elementary-age after-school program, and several Scout troops. Please check us out at wallingfordpres.org and find our MDP profile on the CLC website at: clc.pcusa.org/mdp/12451/view/

FULL-TIME PASTOR

Community Presbyterian Church of West Fargo, North Dakota, is seeking a **Full-time Pastor** to lead a congregation of approximately 100 members. We are looking for someone who works well with youth and families with the goal of growing the congregation but also has the ability to provide pastoral care and ministry that is inclusive of all age groups. To learn more about our church and to see the full job description, go to cpcwf.org.

SOLO PASTOR

Connecticut Farms Presbyterian Church, a multicultural congregation 17 miles from NYC, seeks a charismatic, thoughtful **Pastor** to lead with energy, theological depth, and compassion — nurturing faith, fostering creative growth, inspiring outreach, and strengthening our church's presence in the wider community with warmth and vision. Please apply at ctfarmspnc@gmail.com, or ctfarmschurch.org, or clc.pcusa.org (MDP ID: 12785).

FULL-TIME MINISTER

Are you the minister we're praying for? Santiago Community Church, Chile, seeks a **Full-time Minister** for her international, interdenominational English-speaking congregation for an initial 3-year term. We seek an engaging preacher, a thoughtful educator and a compassionate shepherd. Must be a fluent English-speaker, in good standing with his or her denomination, with min. 5 years experience as a qualified minister. See: santiagochurch.org/wordpress/pastoral-search/

PART-TIME BRIDGE PASTOR

The Peace Memorial Presbyterian Church of Clearwater, Florida Located in the heart of downtown Clearwater, The Peace Memorial Presbyterian Church is a vibrant worshiping community of fewer than 100 active disciples. We are seeking a **Part-time Bridge Pastor** to preach, teach and serve alongside us from May 1, 2026 – April 30, 2027, while we prayerfully seek our next shepherd. We know to whom we belong and to what we are called. Most of us are retired. A few of us are working professionals. Even fewer have children in the home. We gather to worship in the reformed tradition. We fellowship around the table. We seek to better know Christ through spiritual formation.

We contribute more than 20% of our pledged income to local responsible charities in Pinellas County and our Presbyterian-Reformed sister in Cuba. We feed hungry children weekly in our neighborhood school. We sponsor staff and fund a youth fellowship

for our youth and their many friends, including annual Montreat Conference and Cedarkirk Camp excursions. We offer a celebrated concert series from October through March. We minister in unity. We have defined our mission and vision. We have aligned our staffing model and adopted a stewardship plan to live out this call. We have implemented a strategic plan to ensure the long-term care of our historic facility

And now we wait. We meditate. We pray. We listen. We discern. Energy. Imagination. Enthusiasm. Come share your call to ministry with us! We are eager to share a place we call home. Contact us at ministrycandidate@peacememorial.org or (800) 479-8846.

SENIOR PASTOR/HEAD OF STAFF

Westwood Presbyterian Church (Los Angeles) is a multi-generational community of 300+ members with an informal motto of "More Jesus, More Fun." We emphasize inspirational Reformed worship, classical liturgical choral music, and social mission. We are a Matthew 25 church and an Earth Care congregation. We seek a **Senior pastor and Head of Staff** who is a dynamic preacher and can take our church, established in 1947, into its next era. In addition to providing pastoral care, our new pastor will shepherd us through the construction of new on-campus facilities for our church and preschool. Visit westwoodpres.org to learn more. Apply here: clc.pcusa.org/mdp/13022/view/ or send resumes to pnc@westwoodpres.org.

PASTOR

Lake Waccamaw Presbyterian Church is seeking a pastor. Located on a beautiful bay ;lake near North Carolina coastal beaches, our 75-member congregation is mission-oriented and active in our community. Contact pam.craven1@gmail.com or hjedmond@gmail.com.

FULL-TIME PASTOR/HEAD OF STAFF

The United Presbyterian Church of Cleburne is seeking a vibrant, forward-looking **Pastor** to lead our congregation into the future. Born of joining two historic Cleburne Presbyterian churches into one, the United Presbyterian Church has evolved into a welcoming, loving, spirit-filled congregation. We are active in worldwide missions and local outreach. The church is known for its inclusiveness, friendly members, and laughter. We gather in small groups, Bible studies, delicious dinners, and meaningful worship. Cleburne is located just south of the DFW metroplex with easy access to both Fort Worth and Dallas. Cleburne is a fast-growing small city that will provide a fertile foundation for the future of UPC. We strive to live out our mission statement: "To worship Christ together with Minds that serve, Hearts that share and Lives that serve. To learn more about our church, go to upccleburne.org and our MDP clc.pcusa.org/mdp12872 or phone (817) 641-6646

INSTALLED PASTOR

Bandon is a small, rural coastal town on the beautiful southern

coast of Oregon. Many people who have moved here do so after visiting Bandon and decide this is a great place to live. We are seeking an **Installed Pastor**.

FPC is a small (approximately 50) active congregation. The majority of our members are retired. We are an active, mission-oriented congregation. Some of our mission activities include: hunger, survival kits, chemo therapy bags and more.

Detailed job description; **MDP #12545** on the CLC site. Please send inquiries and resumes to marjenem@frontier.com Bandon COC — bandon.com

TRANSITIONAL PASTOR

Hunting Ridge Presbyterian Church, an intentionally multicultural church in Baltimore, is seeking a **Transitional Pastor** with the possibility of a permanent call. We are a welcoming congregation, growing in faith, embracing our differences and actively engaging in our community. We are seeking an individual to provide a balanced ministry of preaching, teaching, pastoral care, and organizational leadership. The preferred application method is via the Church Leadership Connection (clc.pcusa.org) **MPV#ID12714** or send resume to jbj7667@gmail.com.

FULL-TIME SOLO PASTOR

Presbyterian Kirk in the Pines, located in the gated community of Hot Springs Village, Arkansas, seeks a **Full-time Solo Pastor** to serve a vibrant congregation of 170 members. Caring, nurturing, and welcoming, the Kirk is characterized by joyful worship, Christ-centered

community outreach, loving fellowship, growthful educational opportunities of varying kinds, and an acclaimed music program.

Hot Springs Village, situated 20 miles from the city of Hot Springs and 40 miles from the state capital of Little Rock, offers an extraordinary array of recreational and service opportunities to its primarily retired residents. It's often said that if one wishes to initiate an activity in the Village, all he or she has to do is ask for volunteers.

We seek a dynamic, outreach-oriented leader with strong pastoral skills. A commitment to engaging other faith leaders in the broader community is desired, as we believe

there is ample opportunity to light the way for others in the Village. Information about this position can be found at bit.ly/KirkPastor. For additional information, please visit our website, kirkinthepines.org or contact Randy Toney, PNC Chair at **(225) 573-6493**.

PASTOR

The First Presbyterian Church in Hamilton, Montana, nestled in the beautiful Bitterroot Valley, is looking to hire a new **Pastor**. We are a very friendly, open, involved, and loving congregation. Please apply at clc.pcusa.org or email at pndfpchamilton@gmail.com.

INSTALLED MINISTER

Presbyterian Church of Barnet, Vermont, is searching for an **Installed Minister**. Barnet is a rural community with an active congregation of 63 members, community outreach, and Sunday School for elementary children. Pcbarnetvt.org



FULL-TIME SOLO PASTOR



Honey Brook Presbyterian Church, located in Eastern Pennsylvania, seeks a dedicated **Pastor** committed to community engagement beyond the church walls. Our congregation is situated in Honey Brook, surrounded by Amish farmland yet conveniently close to suburban amenities. For details on our vision, mission, and position description, please refer to our Ministry Discernment Profile at clc.pcusa.org/mdp/11755 or visit our website at honeybrookpres.org. For further information, contact us at honeybrookpnc@gmail.com

Head of Staff/Senior Pastor



Are you eager to lead a church with deep roots and bold vision as we courageously serve our changing world? First United Presbyterian in beautiful Fayetteville, Arkansas is the flagship Presbyterian Church in Northwest Arkansas. Our city is consistently rated as one of the best places to live in America. As part of a college community, our congregation is theologically diverse, welcoming, and highly inclusive. Older than the city itself, we have proclaimed and served Christ in our community for nearly 200 years. We are seeking a **Head of Staff/Senior Pastor** for our mid-sized congregation who will lead and work with us as we strive to achieve our mission statement: "Called to be a light on the hill, we boldly proclaim and serve Christ, the hope of our changing world!" Our vision for our church is: Reaching out as a visible expression of God's grace, we will meet people where they are, inviting all into Christ's family through engaging worship, fellowship, learning, and service. We seek a leader who is spiritually grounded and visionary — able to embrace tradition while exploring new expressions of worship in ministry. The successful candidate should hold a Master of Divinity from an accredited seminary (PCUSA preferred) and be comfortable with technology that streamlines communication and outreach. Our MDP can be found at: CLC.pcusa.org/mdp/12911/view. If you feel you may be a candidate for this opportunity, you may also send your cover letter and resume directly to pncfupcfay@gmail.com.

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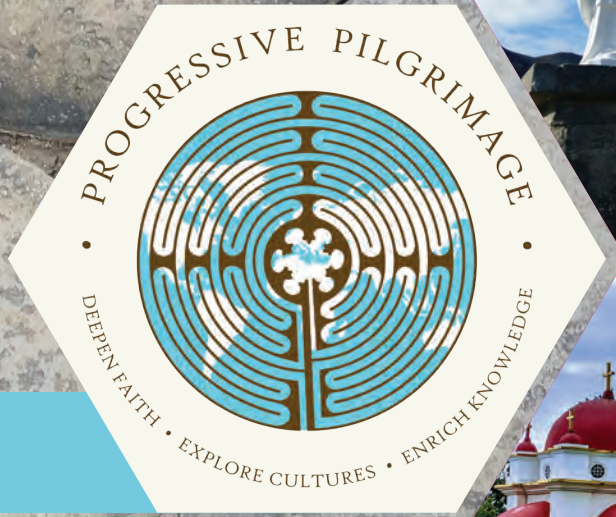
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BENEDICTORY

Gracious exclusion: Courage to name the no in our yes

By Rebecca Messman



For many years, we have hosted a Christmas open house. Every year, I bake the big, fussy cake on the Southern Living cover. Committing to that cake spares me from the paralysis of infinite internet options. One baked-

in “yes” gives me a host of helpful “noes.”

That principle applies to more than cake. The open house began as a simple gathering — neighbors meeting family, sharing the cake rather than eating it all ourselves. But over time, the guest list ballooned, and the joy drained out. I berated myself: *What kind of foolish pastor adds more gatherings during Advent?*

Then COVID-19 provided a chance to rethink. I realized there is deep grace in not including everyone all the time. We drew the circle smaller: actual neighbors and people who knew our family. The invitation felt more sincere. There was enough time, space and cake for a joyful welcome.

For people who care deeply about inclusion, it is liberating to name the times when more is not always merrier. Gracious exclusion means having the courage to name the “no” required for a sincere “yes.”

As a Christian, I believe fiercely in the wideness of God’s mercy. Y’all means all. When it comes to who is loved, treasured and called to serve, draw the circle wide. And yet, inclusion is not just a posture or a mindset. It requires intention.

Priya Parker, an expert in gatherings, writes that exclusion can protect both your guests and your purpose. Sometimes safety, group closeness and power dynamics make saying “no” essential.

“This is purposeful,” she says, “not personal.”

Inclusion without planning shifts the burden onto the most vulnerable. While planning for a large interfaith gathering, several pastors wanted to leave registration open until the last minute. A rabbi spoke up: “I wish this weren’t the case, but for the sake of safety, we no longer offer registration at the door.” The group decided the purpose — deep sharing — was more important than hospitality to last-minute arrivals. We cut off registration early.

We are working carefully to be a church where neurodiverse children can participate fully. One child with severe autism struggles to sit in the Godly Play circle. He prefers to wander, to gaze out the window in the other room.

Without additional support, he might be unsafe, and other children were growing frustrated.

Rather than quietly suggesting he wasn’t welcome, our Christian education director gathered the team.

“Sometimes holding the circle is the most important thing we do,” she said. “We need to think about what it takes to say yes well.”

We added volunteers and gave older children roles in modeling welcome so that this child could join the circle or stay by the window.

In March, a troubled teenager spray-painted hateful words and symbols near the church. We responded with a bold “yes” and a clear “no.” Children and youth covered the sidewalks with chalk words of love. Teens made a large art structure facing the road that read: *You are loved.*

The same week, a group of clergy gathered to renounce the hate. When a news microphone was pressed toward my mouth, I said, “No. These words do not belong. These symbols have no place here.”

When pressed to condemn the perpetrator, I refused.

“This was a troubled teen who clearly needs belonging. That’s what we do. If anyone feels lost or lonely, come on in.”

Jesus shocked the world with his “yes” and his “no.”

He welcomed despised tax collectors and healed people whose illness, checkered past or legal status made the crowd uncomfortable. He helped a Roman centurion, an agent of empire who may have caused harm in the larger community. His “yes” was expansive, disruptive and costly.

Yes, he fed the multitudes without a sign-up sheet, but he also gathered a small group in an upper room: guest list limited, logistics arranged, a password required. He said “no” to the masses in service of truth-telling, intimacy and love for his disciples.

He also said “no” to money changers at the Temple, to constant availability at the expense of prayer, and to violence done in his name. Ultimately, he said “no” to self-protection, trusting that God’s “yes” would be enough.

The church, myself included, often wants Jesus’ radical inclusion without his clarity of purpose or the risk of the cross. Sometimes the most courageous, Christlike thing we can do is name the “no” that makes our “yes” true. ○

THE REV. REBECCA MESSMAN is the senior pastor of Burke Presbyterian Church in the Washington, D.C. area. She is a parent, pun-maker, poet and preacher.

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St. John on the Desert Presbyterian Church,
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