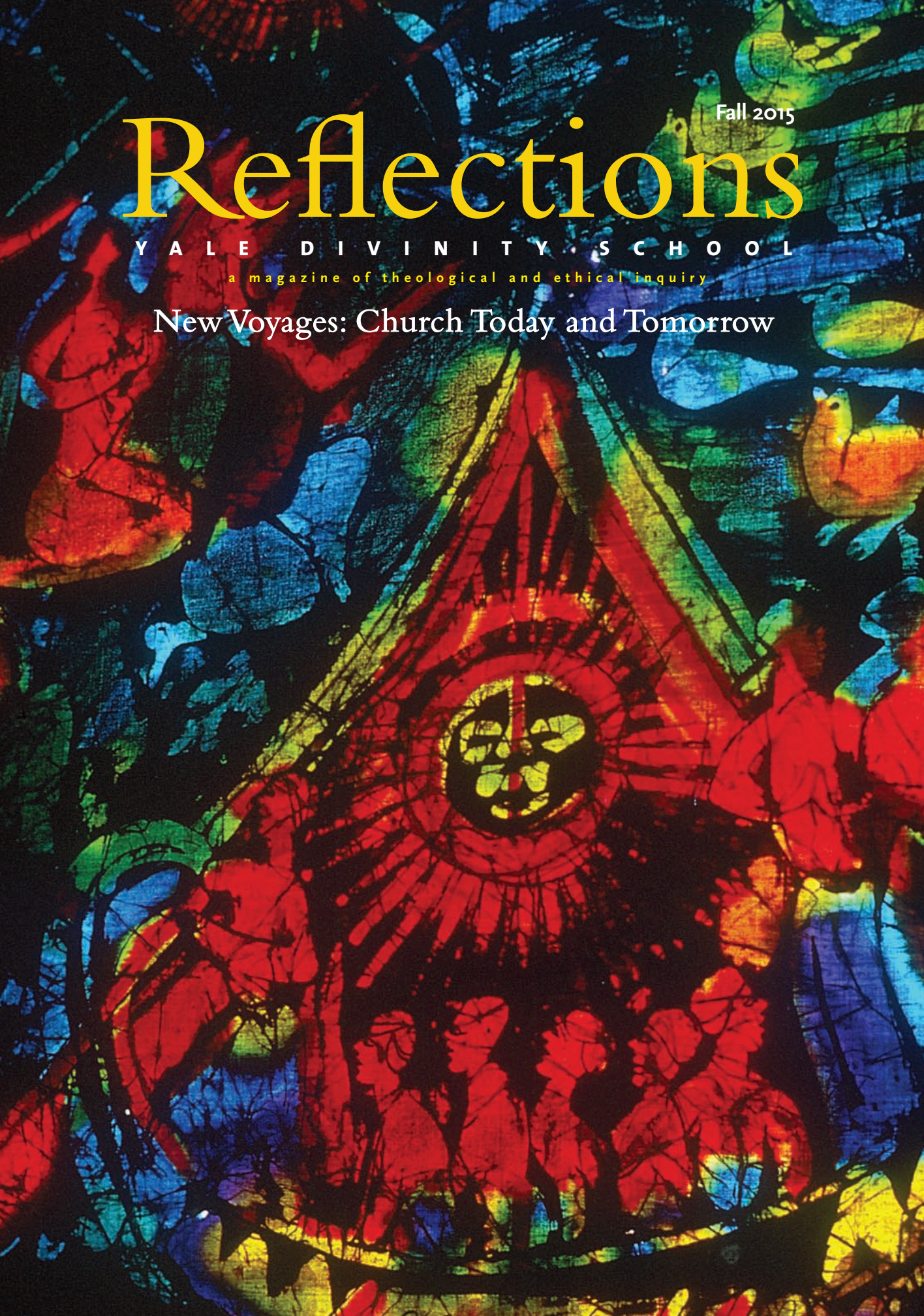

Fall 2015

# Reflections

YALE DIVINITY SCHOOL

a magazine of theological and ethical inquiry

## New Voyages: Church Today and Tomorrow

# YALE DIVINITY SCHOOL

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Reflections
YALE DIVINITY SCHOOL
Fall 2015

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**COVER ART**

Nalini Jayasuriya '84 M.A.R.

*Ark* (front cover)
*God's Singing Tree* (back cover)

Nalini Jayasuriya, who died last year, was a Sri Lankan Christian painter, musician, sculptor, potter, writer, broadcaster, and lecturer. Her art reflected spiritual styles of East and West, using biblical themes to convey the world's turbulence and wonder, the human search for God.

"The needs of all people are the same," she wrote in *A Time for My Singing: Witness of a Life*, (Overseas Ministries Study Center, 2004) a book about her work.

"They need protection from fear and a hope for blessing. There is a galaxy within us – an unpredictable portion of our being, beyond the constraints of the rational and the reasonable that can surprise the world with profound expressions of faith."

Her work can be seen at the art gallery page at the Overseas Ministries Study Center website, omsc.org. She was artist-in-residence at OMSC, in New Haven, CT, from 2001-2003.

**INTERIOR PHOTOGRAPHY**

Anne Wetzel

Early on, Anne Wetzel's photography centered on her love of gardening and landscapes. Then, in 1995, she attended Holy Week services at St. James (Episcopal) Cathedral in Chicago – and she found a new subject, the worship of God.

"I was deeply struck by the visual power of these ancient rites," she says.

"I wanted to explore and capture with the camera the interplay of darkness and light; the juxtaposition of the familiar and the strange; moments of inwardness, isolation, intimacy and communion; the vulnerable human being moving in community to encounter the mystery of God."

Her work in this *Reflections* includes images from those Holy Week services as well as photos from visits to Chartres Cathedral in France and the ancient ruins of Petra in Jordan.

Her work has been displayed in various exhibits and was featured in *Through the Window of the Ordinary: Experiences of Holy Week* (Church Publishing Incorporated, 2001). Anne Wetzel attends a small Episcopal parish near her home in Mt. Desert, Maine.

# From the Dean's Desk

Gregory E. Sterling
The Reverend Henry L. Slack
Dean of Yale Divinity School
& Lillian Claus Professor
of New Testament

We have all read the worrisome statistics about the losses of members in our churches. This decline has had a direct impact on divinity schools as well.

Nationally, applications to institutions accredited by the Association of Theological Schools have dropped 1.5 percent per annum since 2004. Dan Aleshire, the executive director of ATS, estimates that 20 percent of ATS-accredited schools could not survive financially if they sold all of their assets and had to live on them for a year. Seminaries and churches are both struggling.

There are, however, churches (and divinity schools) that are flourishing, including those that have experienced renewal by defying conventional wisdom about what it takes to grow and thrive. We asked some of the people who lead these growing churches to reflect on the factors that have contributed to the health of their congregations. This Fall issue of *Reflections* is a collection of their responses. I would like to add to their voices by reminding us of three basic principles – principles that surface repeatedly in the following essays.

Christianity is fundamentally not an institution but a relationship. The good news in the New Testament is not about the church; it is about what God has done for humanity in Jesus Christ. One of the great challenges we face today is that many in our society – especially among those who are 18-29 – do not trust institutions. It is not hard to understand why. They have witnessed the scandals of the established church and the near-collapse of Wall Street. We need to return to our roots in the New Testament and let people know that we do not proclaim an institution but a savior. People have not lost their need or appetite for spirituality; they have lost their confidence in institutions.

Related to this is the need to take the biblical text seriously while recognizing its ancient character. A failure to take it seriously will reduce a homily to a group therapy session or a political commentary. A failure to recognize its ancient character leads to a naiveté that will erode the credibility of our explanations. We can neither replace Scripture nor reify it. We must proclaim it with the realization that it is part of the mystery of the human-divine encounter. If we remove the mystery of that encounter, we take the power out of Christianity.

Finally, many of the essays point to a fundamental truth about Christianity: We are called to serve people. We may need to learn how to connect with people via new media, but the fundamental truth is that no matter how the connections are made, people need to come first. The world does not care about our doctrines; it cares about the way we treat human beings. This is a standard comment by those who have no religious affiliation: Churches seem to care more about what to believe than about the welfare of human beings.

Ancient Christians understood this. I will never forget the first time that I read the apology of the 2nd-century Christian Aristides. Aristides opened his little treatise with a brief philosophical discussion of God and then asked who understood God. He considered and set aside the Chaldeans, the Greeks, the Egyptians, and the Jews. He then came to Christians. I expected Aristides to provide a Middle Platonic or Peripatetic description of God and attribute it to Christians. Instead, Aristides said that Christians demonstrate that they understand God by the way they live: They practice love and care for others. Ultimately, I think he was correct. The value of our religion is determined by the way we treat other people. The strongest witness to Christianity is a life lived in faith and love.

Gregory E. Sterling
Dean

# A World of New Connections

By Kaji Douša '06 M.Div.

*I had never seen my church like this before. It was Saturday morning, and artisans and shopkeepers clustered throughout the space. Some were seated on the floor with makeshift picnics, on blankets, their children crawling about, banging things, while others stood and watched the band.*

Some of our regular folk were in the kitchen, getting things ready for Sunday. No one in the packed room was over 40. I thought: *This is church*.

Many of us talk about church as a place to seek God's inspiration, a way to connect "the world's need with our gifts." Until now, I have spent my career trying to place people in the church, connecting them to existing ministries or committees. There is holiness in this work, I believe, particularly when there is a match.

Often, there is no good match, and these manufactured connections do not stick. The energy fades or shifts elsewhere. Much of my experience has been taken up forcing a connection. This is not something I do any longer.

**A New Calculus**

One recent Saturday, we had a room full of artisans, hipsters, mostly young women with young children, an elusive demographic. They have lots of demands on their life, and church does not always make their list.

But they wanted to be together – enterprising young women trying to make ends meet for their families, starting part-time cottage businesses, seeking local markets, sharing their passions. Working full-time would make childcare cost-prohibitive. I get this. Half of my income goes to childcare. The calculus just doesn't work for most families.

So these entrepreneurs started their small businesses in the free time after the babies were fed and put to bed. They felt solidarity. But work done in the wee hours is work done alone. When one local business offered this opportunity for them to connect, they needed a place to assemble.

Enter our church.

We had not envisioned this, but making a space for the vocation of others is very much ministry. And this group of artisans, after a few meetings, got to know the space of the church as their own. Many of them now come to regular church events – like our monthly babywearing support event that pulls in dozens of young moms, or our bi-weekly breastfeeding support group. Or they find my office, or the church's office, where a number of them seek help in a life crisis.

**We can sigh and weep and close another church. Or we can help church help people in new ways and honor that as holy.**

Recently, I started offering these families free marriage support sessions. Many face struggles but without the money for professional marriage counsel. So in exchange for up to six sessions with me, I ask them to volunteer up to six hours on Sunday mornings around worship time.

In this unpredictable, unplanned way our church has become a home for young moms and their families. And, little by little, a good number of them have been visiting us on Sunday mornings for worship.

But church membership or Sunday attendance cannot be our end game.

What I have learned is that we have to understand *each connection point* as holy. We cannot call ourselves hospitable if our goal is to get them to church on Sunday. We have to realize their gatherings invite the Spirit of God with as much authenticity as any other church meeting. Just because it is new, just because it does not carry the familiar brand, does not make it something other than church.

Many of my colleagues would hold such ministries in suspicion. But we can analyze and complain all we want as we weep and close another church. Or we can help church help people in new ways and honor that as holy. And somehow see that as church.

What makes it church? Here's what I know: Jesus improved lives. He interrupted them, he changed them, he made things better. Sometimes people disrupted the disciples' urgent time with Jesus. They showed up with needs. They did not have a proper appointment or follow protocol. But Jesus did not put them off. He did not require that they come back during office hours or at Sunday morning worship time. He met them without qualification.

As disciples, we seek to do the same, united in a spirit of love. The shape of that abiding love is active, morphing, growing, full of impact, improving lives. That is our mission.

---

*Kaji Douša '06 M.Div. has been senior minister at The Table (United Church of Christ of La Mesa, CA) since 2013. A former Beatitudes Fellow, she previously served churches in Minnesota, New York, and New England, and has been on various national boards of the UCC.*

## HOW WE ADDRESSED OUR EMPTY CHURCH PROBLEM

**When I arrived as minister, we worshiped at 8:30 and 10 a.m. Visitors came. Many joined. Each service drew anywhere from 25-75 people in a space that could accommodate maybe four times that. We were a hearty, dedicated bunch.**

**But to newcomers, the empty seats signaled a broader, scarier story. The space seemed to communicate: *We built this for more, but something about us isn't right.* (It also signaled: *We loved the 1970s.*)**

**We needed something different. This takes time to discover, however.**

**We cancelled both worship services and created a brand new liturgy. We refreshed the space without spending money: The dusty curtains came off, the windows overlooking the beautiful gardens were cleaned. We took out pews, repositioning some, moving the altar so people would gather around a central table.**

**We started calling ourselves "The Table" partly because our town, La Mesa, means that in Spanish, but more because we wanted to communicate welcome to Christ's table, remembrance of a tomb that sits empty, hospitality in the name of the one who bids us to gather.**

**We instituted most of these changes – with some weeping and gnashing of teeth, granted – this past Lent. Since then, we have seen steady increases in worship attendance. Our pews are full almost every Sunday. Newcomers keep arriving – and coming back.**

**Addressing worship attendance is not as hard as it might seem. Here are some practical steps:**

**1. Resist the temptation of mediocrity. Make worship consistently, powerfully transcendent and transformational. We found many ways to address this. We invited a higher level of musicianship from our musical leaders and choir. They were entirely capable of this with some shifts in their approach to singing. I needed to preach inspiring, biblically based sermons week after week. We broadened the scope of the worship planners to ensure that the liturgy coalesces around a central message inspired from the week's text, giving worshipers a multisensory experience of the theme. Worship should be at the core. Our new service draws in a greater number than our separate services ever did: Our people now feel the joy of hope that we will not just survive but can thrive.**

**2. Be healthy enough to grow. My church had gone through a lengthy interim period, so when I arrived, there were a number of non-members who had been waiting for me to come. They joined immediately once they sensed I was going to be a decent leader. Truth is, the congregation was not ready for them. The newcomers were turned off by contentiousness at meetings and gossip at coffee hour. Nearly half the earlier joiners – and we grew about 20 percent my first year – are now missing in action or attending other churches. With God's help, we are trying to resolve the unfinished business of old, festering conflicts.**

**3. Improve people's lives. That's the crux of our work. We are truly living our calling when our community knows us not just as a place for worship or emergency help, but as a place that takes its power seriously and channels it in order to transform people's lives for the better. This means finding the balance between charity and justice. It means providing meals but also improving overall access to food. It means setting aside fears of wading into political waters and taking a Christ-centered stand for the oppressed. Our congregations must earn the trust of people to convey God's love in their everyday lives and help them take the barrage of bad news they receive and translate it through the lens of Jesus' Good News.**

**– Kaji Douša**

# Trusting This Generation

By Tim Ahrens '85 M.Div.

*During my nearly 16 years as senior minister of First Congregational Church (UCC) in downtown Columbus, Ohio, five of 11 downtown churches have closed. Of the remaining six, two are in decline, two are holding their own, and two are growing.*

Since January 2000, my congregation has doubled in size and grown younger every year – membership today is 1,119 adults and 324 children. A third of the church is now millennials. Born between 1981-2001, this rockin' rollin' middle of the congregation is exciting, joyful, energizing, and at times unnerving and exasperating. Let me explain.

Over time, our congregation has drawn up a series of three-year long-range plans to guide our future. We dream together, focus our vision, and put it into action. The current committee is half millennials, half 35 and older. One co-chair is a millennial pastor, the other a 60-something creative genius.

**The millennials in our congregation are exciting, joyful, energizing, and at times unnerving and exasperating. Let me explain.**

### Where Were They?

At a recent planning meeting, most of our millennials were missing. At first, I was a little disturbed by their absence. I had worked hard to get them on the committee. But, in truth, they had more important places to be that night. One was leading the charge to change local ordinances to grant LGBTQ persons employment benefits and equal recognition under the law. Another was organizing a "Black Lives Matter" march. Another was leading a businesswomen's retreat for rising stars in our city. Another was home with her young son who was sick. They were all in places of leadership, parenting, and activism where we *really* needed them that night.

At another meeting, one young millennial said, "We need to figure out how to help people give to the church. How can we be good stewards – or whatever the word is you use?" It turns out this dynamic local entrepreneurial leader doesn't have a checkbook. But she does make her bill payments online, and she felt we could improve our congregational efforts through the latest technology. It turned out that four other millennials on the committee have never used a checkbook either. It was a jaw-dropping moment for our older leaders. The generations do life and church very differently.

Recently a young couple in their early 20s stopped me in the parking lot after worship. They love our church and worship. They considered themselves "members" even though they had only been to church twice in the last six months and I had never met them. They began to quote my sermons which they read and listen to on our website. They had tweeted, texted, and Facebooked my writings and homilies. As we stood there, they started asking pointed questions about the details of recent sermons. Although they did not attend regular worship, they were tuned in and very much in touch! Now if only we could hook them up for direct deposit weekly tithing ...

Yes, it is an exciting time to be the church.

### Mending Body and Soul

What makes for a flourishing congregation today? In our case, I believe it is a passion for social justice combined with a clear sense of loving and serving people – their physical and spiritual needs – right where we meet them. Love and justice, prayer and merciful ministries are woven together in our fabric

of faith. At the heart of it all in the heart of Ohio is meaningful worship, with quality music, prayers, preaching, and Christ's powerful presence.

These keep us growing in faith and action.

On June 26, hours after the U.S. Supreme Court ruled on marriage equality, we opened our doors to the greater Columbus area for an evening service of celebration. We called it our "Decision Day" service. It offered poetry, scripture, hymns, and songs of joy. Hundreds of people gathered. They found us through Twitter and Facebook. Our friends at Equality Ohio counted it among the glorious celebrations of that monumental day. Those who came were of all faiths and no faith, all races and nationalities. LGBTQ and straight men, women, and children gathered to pray and praise God.

**The Spirit of Gladden**

What Washington Gladden, a patriarch of the Social Gospel movement and our senior minister from 1882-1918, called "the Municipal Church" was alive that night. The Municipal Church serves the city on urgent issues of the day. In Gladden's words, "The Municipal Church is the church uniting to investigate and alleviate human suffering. ... It is the church recovering the sacred and vital functions which, in their division, have suffered to lapse." (*The Ohio State Journal,* October 1892)

The spirit of the Social Gospel moves within the rising generation. They are seeking to serve and alleviate human suffering. They know the planet and all its inhabitants cannot continue to spiral down. They know the church cannot continue to spiral down. What millennials bring to the task is an endearing spirit of enthusiasm and joy. They come to this project called "church" from many directions, with possibilities for both personal transformation and congregational renewal.

How do we honor that spirit from day to day? In our rapidly aging congregations, we need to trust millennial leaders and their new ways of doing things. We need to put them in charge and lead us forward. Our old ways aren't winning the new day. Let's try something different.

This can be harder than it sounds.

Last fall, I turned the stewardship campaign over to a millennial leader. I had some misgivings. He and his group of young organizers met in pubs and Paneras to plan our campaign. They challenged the congregation to "Imagine More." It was a simple, clear message that spoke to the heart. Disregarding most of our traditional communication procedures, the young leaders created excellent new materials, which they distributed themselves. The congregation responded by stepping up and into our best stewardship campaign in the church's 163-year history. Our giving grew by 15 percent – but the spirit of giving grew even more.

**"I Got This"**

At one point I was asking all sorts of questions about the campaign. Our young leader said, "Tim, you have to trust me and let me lead. I got this." He was right. He had it. Although it looked, sounded, and felt different from anything we had done before, he delivered the church ahead of where we had ever been before. The less anxious I became the more successful our young leaders became. Letting God work through our youthful visionaries worked for all of us.

**The Social Gospel spirit moves within the rising generation. They seek to alleviate human suffering. They know the planet's inhabitants cannot continue to spiral down. They know the church cannot continue to spiral down.**

Every day I feel a deep sense of gratitude to be serving the church in this generation. When I read reports of an increasing number of non-affiliated people, I see possibilities, not problems. When I see the culture shifting away from traditional ways of doing church and pouring into the streets of need and the avenues of greed to address the wrongs of our times, I see hope. When I hear people say they don't like "organized religion," I invite them to join us, adding, "as Congregationalists we are rather 'disorganized' and 'not very religious,' so you might feel at home here." Most show up at some point and many find a place called home.

We need to trust our rising leaders to be the change we know we need. When we empower them to step up and lead, good things will happen.

---

*The Rev. Tim Ahrens '85 M. Div. received YDS's William Sloane Coffin Award for Peace and Justice in 2008. This year he earned a D.Min. from Chicago Theological Seminary. His thesis was entitled: "Young and Growing Stronger: Creating a Model of Social Justice with a New Generation of 21st-Century Prophetic Witness Leaders."*

# Rethinking Christianity in the 21st Century

By Gregory E. Sterling

*Christianity is changing – rapidly – in a century where commerce, communications, and travel are connected globally in unprecedented ways. How do we understand these changes in the faith, and what impact will global connectedness have on the church?*

Trends have not dramatically eroded the relative number of Christians in the world. The overall percentage has been relatively stable. In 1910, approximately 35 percent of the world's total population were Christians; a century later, Christians comprised 32 percent.[1]

What has changed is Christianity's global geographical distribution. The basic shifts have been from the Northern Hemisphere to the Southern and from the West to the East. In 1910, 66 percent of the world's Christians resided in Europe; in 2010, this percentage had fallen to 26 percent.[2] This is not due simply to the growth of Christianity elsewhere but to the secularization of Europe. Today churches there are being converted into other types of establishments at an alarming rate. In England there have been debates over the nature of the businesses that may take over church property – e.g., a pub is acceptable but a sex shop is not.

**Today's global developments of the faith appear to be roughly analogous to the state of Christianity in the first three centuries C.E.**

### World War and Bingo Nights

There are numerous reasons for the decline of Christianity in Europe. Two world wars have scarred the minds of many Europeans: People wondered where God was. Other factors are at work. One of the most interesting observations I have heard came from a Lutheran bishop in Sweden. At a dinner in Lund, I asked her how things were in her diocese. She said people attended bingo nights during the week in far greater numbers than worship services on Sunday. I asked why. She suggested that the socialism of the Swedish government was a significant reason. The government had taken over the role that used to belong to the church. Instead of the church bringing meals to the ill or cleaning their house or providing a ride to the doctor, the government provided all of these services. The church had lost its role in society. Whatever the causes for the decline of Christianity in Europe, the reality of its decline is undeniable.

### The African Century?

By contrast, Christianity has been exploding in Africa. In 1910, only 1 percent of the world's Christians lived in sub-Saharan Africa; in 2010, this percentage had risen to 24 percent.[3] The growth has not only come in Pentecostal or charismatic movements but in mainline Christian traditions. In 1900, more than 80 percent of Anglicans lived in Britain; in 2008, that number had fallen to 33 percent. By 2008, the number of Anglicans in sub-Saharan Africa had reached 55 percent.[4]

Similarly, the Roman Catholic Church has grown exponentially in Africa over the last 100 years – from less than 1 percent of the world's Catholic population in 1900 to 16 percent of the global Catholic population in 2010.[5]

One overlooked factor is that many in Africa associate Christianity with democracy and economic prosperity. People gravitate to it as a means of upward mobility.

Christianity has increased in Latin America. Looking at Catholicism, we can see this growth: In 1910, 24 percent of the world's Catholics lived in

South America or the Caribbean; by 2010, this had risen to 39 percent.[6]

All these numbers tell the story of the southern migration of Christianity. In 1910, only 9 percent of the world's Christians lived in the South. In 2010, this had grown to 24 percent.[7]

Christianity has expanded in the East. It is estimated that in 1910, 4.5 percent of the world's Christians lived in the Asia Pacific region; in 2010, this number had blossomed to 13 percent.[8] The most impressive Christian growth is taking place in China, although it is impossible to know exactly how fast. Since 1949 there has been an official church in communist China. Those unwilling to register have formed underground or house churches. Since the time of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), these have proliferated. One recent estimate places the total number of Christians in China at 67,070,000.[9]

**Many in Africa associate Christianity with democracy and economic prosperity, gravitating to it as a means of upward mobility.**

**Pluralism Rising**

There is one other trend to take into account: When thinking about the global church, it is impossible to ignore the presence of other religions. With 32 percent of the world's population, Christianity is the largest religion today. However, Muslims comprise 23 percent, unaffiliated individuals 16 percent, Hindus 15 percent, Buddhists 7 percent, folk religionists 6 percent. All other groups are less than 1 percent.[10]

How should we respond to the shifting landscapes of the religious world? Let me offer four responses.

**1) A Changing Center of Gravity.** Christianity's numerical shift from North to South and from West to East will alter its character in significant ways. For those Christians who belong to a worldwide communion, the presence of Africans will become more and more evident. Among Protestants this means the African churches will soon – if they do not already – have more votes than their northern counterparts. Some tensions already exist between North and South. Christians in the Southern Hemisphere tend to be more ethically conservative. Churches like the Anglican Communion or the United Methodists will need to negotiate these differences. The election of a Latin American pope has shaken up the ethos of Catholicism. Further change is likely in store when the church one day elects a pope from Africa. In short, we cannot consider the future of the worldwide faith without regarding the churches in the Southern Hemisphere as a rising force.

**2) Theology.** If we believe experience is a vehicle of theology, we will need to learn to respect the different experiences that shape theologies across the world. These will have a direct impact on our theological reflection. In China there are natural tensions between the official church and the underground or house churches, although these appear to be improving. In Africa, Christians struggle with the relationship between their spirituality and indigenous religions.[11] The spirituality of African Christians is often a blend of native and Christian expressions.

These developments appear to me to be roughly analogous to the state of Christianity in the first three centuries C.E. At one time, there was a model of thinking of the early church as a single monolithic tradition. The tradition began with Jesus Christ, was developed by the apostles, and came to full expression in the work of the bishops who succeeded the

**WHY I STILL GO**
**By J. Barrie Shepherd '64 B.D., '65 M.A.**

**For all their quirks and quibbles, all their foibles,**
**squabbles, even downright donnybrooks,**
**I find my people there.**
**Recalcitrant, to be sure, concerning this issue,**
**or that. As reluctant as those first followers**
**to accept what fairest Jesus brought to life.**
**Yet singing the same sweet songs.**
**Murmuring familiar prayers.**
**Admitting, as I must, that another week**
**has worn its way, no closer to the kingdom.**
**Hungering, across years of disappointment,**
**for words that ring so clear they melt**
**the frozen marrow, drag you back again –**
**despite – to trust, compassion, even resolution.**

**For all my weary, reasoned doubt,**
**the continuing disillusion and despair**
**of this already blood-drenched century,**
**for all my anger at her blind echoing**
**of the worst that hides in all of us,**
**come Sunday morning, somehow,**
**I still find myself in church.**

apostles. Some offshoots from this tradition were heterodox, but they were exposed by the apostles and then by the heresiologists. This model of Christian origins is largely the construction of early Christian heresiologists like Irenaeus.

Twentieth-century scholarship overturned this model. Today it is recognized that Christianity emerged in different forms in various locales.[12] The experience of Christianity in 1st-century Jerusalem was quite different than the Christianity in Corinth. Initially there was no such thing as orthodoxy in the sense of a uniform and well-defined movement. Orthodoxy emerged from the coalescence of various forms or patterns of Christianity. This does not mean that there was no continuity with the earliest forms of Christianity, but that orthodoxy was a clear development. It was not enforceable until the rise of bishops and the adoption of Christianity by Constantine.

**It is impossible to ignore the presence of other religions when thinking of Christianity globally. We must find ways to be loyal to our own beliefs and yet be tolerant of others.**

In other words, rather than thinking of enforced uniformity, we need to think of diversity within a larger unity. If this is unnerving, we should remember that it was the diversity of the early centuries that helped to give Christianity its vibrancy and allowed it to take root in multiple circumstances throughout the Roman world. I think we need to allow for the same freedom today.

**3) Community.** The digital world is the greatest innovation since the printing press, and it has altered the way we think about community. The statistical rise of the "nones" has generated a new sociological category – people who have a sense of spirituality but are allergic to religious institutions. This generation forms customized cyber-communities rather than flesh-and-blood communities. The fact that two-thirds of the nones in the U.S. are spiritual but not religious makes them different from their more secular European counterparts. Notably, the phenomenon of non-affiliation is generational: 32 percent of those age 18-29 consider themselves nones, compared to only 9 percent of those over 65.

The current generation is wary of institutional forms of Christianity for many reasons. The scandals of the institutional church, the larger distrust of institutions, the failure of churches to proclaim the gospel clearly or authentically have all contributed. In my opinion, a crucial factor is the way younger people think about community and by extension religion. They regard religion as a matter of optional personal programming. Many create their own networks rather than join one that incorporates them. They do not join churches. Congregations are struggling to relate. As one minister memorably remarked: "We have too many eight-track churches in a MP3 world."[14] We need to learn how to build communities through digital communications that address the needs of flesh-and-blood human beings. We need to show how diverse people can live together and love one another in the spirit of Christ.

**4) From Faith to Faith.** We must recognize that we are only one-third of the world's population. How should we think of the other two-thirds? In practical ways, the issue is more pressing for some Christians than for others. In the last decade, 45 percent of new marriages in the U.S. crossed major confessional lines or were interfaith. In 1950, only 20 percent of the marriages were interdenominational or interfaith. One possible implication of this is that it will promote good relations among the communities of faith. We will need to maintain our civility as the mix of faiths changes. On the other hand, studies suggest interfaith marriages face higher rates of dissatisfaction or failure. I do not expect these marriages to become less frequent, but acknowledge that they can be a challenge.

### Credibility at Risk

Meanwhile, there are too many places in our world where religion is used as a pretext for violence. This should concern all people of faith. It threatens to increase the percentage of unaffiliated dramatically. It is a threat to the credibility of all faiths.

We must find ways to be loyal to our own beliefs or practices and yet be tolerant of others. As a Christian I cannot say what Mahatma Gandhi said when asked if he was a Hindu. Gandhi replied, "Yes I am. I am also a Christian, a Muslim, a Buddhist, and a Jew." As much as I admire Gandhi, I can only confess that I am a Christian. My loyalty to Christ is exclusive. This does not, however, require that I take an exclusive stance to religion. As a Christian I

**We must learn how to build communities through digital communications that address the needs of flesh-and-blood human beings.**

have a Bible that contains the Jewish Bible. It would be incredibly foolish of me to deny that Jews understand God or deny the validity of the majority of my own Scriptures.

The world is moving in profound ways. We should not think that Christianity is disappearing. It is, however, changing.

**The Ends of the Earth**

I have spent a good deal of my life studying Luke-Acts in the New Testament. In my opinion, the two works offer a self-definition of Christianity within the larger ancient Greco-Roman world. The author did not think locally but globally. The Gospel opens and closes in Jerusalem. Acts opens in Jerusalem and closes in Rome, a symbolic geographical move. The author set this up at the beginning of Acts when Jesus said to the apostles: "You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."[15] The most fascinating aspect of this declaration about "the ends of the earth" is that it is left open. Paul is taken to Rome where he awaits trial, but never comes to trial. As readers we want to know what happened to him. The author does not tell us. Why not? I do not believe it is because the author did not know Paul's fate, but that the author wanted us to understand that the story was not over. It continued. This was the author's way to challenge us to continue the story "to the ends of the earth."

We live in a world that the author of Acts never imagined but did allow for when taking the story to the ends of the earth. I will say to you what I say to the students at Yale Divinity School. Christianity is changing in our globalized world; I do not know what it will look like in 50 years, but I know that you will write its history with your lives. Write it well.

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## Notes

1 Luis Lugo and Alan Cooperman, "Global Christianity – A Report on the Size and Distribution of the World's Christian Population," Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion and Public Life (Dec. 19, 2011). The estimated numbers are 611,810,000 of the world's 1,758,410,000 total population in 1910 and 2,184,060,000 of the world's 6,895,890,000 total population in 2010.

2 Lugo and Cooperman, "Global Christianity."

3 Lugo and Cooperman, "Global Christianity."

4 Luis Gugo, Brian J. Grim, and Elizabeth Podrebarac, "Global Anglicanism at a Crossroads," Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion and Public Life (June 19, 2008).

5 "The Global Catholic Population," Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion and Public Life (Feb. 13, 2013). The numbers are from less than 1 million to 171 million.

6 "The Global Catholic Population." The estimated numbers are 70,650,000 in 1910 and 425,400,000 in 2010.

7 Lugo and Cooperman, "Global Christianity."

8 Lugo and Cooperman, "Global Christianity."

9 Lugo and Cooperman, "Global Christianity." There have been several recent attempts to count Christians. For consistency I have used the Pew numbers.

10 "The Global Religious Landscape," Pew Research Center Religion and Public Life Project (Dec. 18, 2012). The estimated numbers are 2.2 billion Christians, 1.6 billion Muslims, 1.1 billion unaffiliated, 1 billion Hindus, 500 million Buddhists, 400 million folk religionists (e.g., African tribal religions, Chinese folk religions, North American religions, or Australian aboriginal religions), and 14 million Jews.

11 Among the studies that address this, Lamin Sanneh's *West African Christianity: The Religious Impact* (Hurst, 1983) and Gerrie ter Haar, *How God became African: African Spirituality and Western Secular Thought* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), are notable.

12 The classic statement of this is Walter Bauer, *Rechtgläubigkeit und Ketzerei in ältesten Christentum* (BHT 10; Tübingen: Mohr, 1934, 19642). There is an English translation, *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity* (trans. Robert A. Kraft and Gerhard Krobel, Fortress, 1971).

13 This has been reported by many, most famously in "'Nones' on the Rise," Pew Research Center Religion and Public Life Project (Oct. 9, 2012).

14 Otis Moss III in the Beecher Lectures, Yale Divinity School (October 2014).

15 Acts 1:8. See the echo in Acts 13:47.

*Last summer, Bishop Michael B. Curry '78 M.Div. and the Episcopal Church made history: Denominational delegates elected Curry as Presiding Bishop, the first African American to lead the church body.*

*His election culminates a ministry of nearly 40 years as a parish priest and, mostly recently, bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of North Carolina.*

*Curry is known for strengthening support for local parish ministry, organizing investment in inner-city neighborhoods, and supporting campaigns for the Millennium Development Goals.*

*In his 2013 book* Crazy Christians: A Call to Follow Jesus, *Curry writes of God's intentions for the world from biblical times until now, a vision of challenging injustice and cruelty. Jesus "showed us the way to live beyond what often are the nightmares of our own sin-filled human design and into the direction of God's dream." He spoke to* Reflections *in August.*

**REFLECTIONS:** ***As Presiding Bishop, is there a particular theme you'll want to emphasize?***

**THE MOST REV. MICHAEL CURRY:** One thing I've already been talking about is: I really do believe we need to see ourselves as a movement – a Jesus movement – rather than as an institution. That's what Jesus was about. He inaugurated a movement to make God's dream happen. To see ourselves this way changes everything. It means our institutional configurations must be designed to serve the movement and not the other way around. The movement serves life. There is no life in serving the institution.

**REFLECTIONS:** ***How do we go about this practically in a world of budgets, programs, and infrastructure?***

**CURRY:** I go back to what (lay theologian) William Stringfellow (1928-85) taught us. We must become radically biblical and theological. We must enter our communities deeply and intentionally, with love. If we do that, then we'll find a way to deal with our buildings and budgets. They'll find a new purpose. But it all starts with Bible study and prayer. These things lead to action. You can't read the Book of Exodus without being stirred by the theme of the liberation of people. We have to engage with the Word deeply – that's what Dietrich Bonhoeffer did, that's what Martin Luther King Jr. did. There are no institutional quick fixes or gimmicks that will turn a church around. Bible and prayer – then you deal with the institutions. Then you can transform institutions into servants of the Jesus movement.

**REFLECTIONS:** ***What does success look like?***

**CURRY:** Success will always be blood-stained: It is linked to life-giving sacrifice. A congregation that lives only for itself will die by itself. A congregation that lives for God and others will live. For example, there's a historically African American congregation in North Carolina that decided to give up its historic identity and reach out to the changing neighborhood. The result was to welcome its Latino neighbors and start creating a truly multiethnic church. Confirmations have dramatically increased. They opened themselves to the world. Any community that does that is going to have life.

**REFLECTIONS:** ***Thinking back to your YDS days, do particular mentors and ideas remain important to you?***

**CURRY:** YDS was and is a place of creative ferment – ecumenical, interfaith – that helped me be open to the idea that God is the source of all truth. This freed me to converse with other traditions without fear. Where truth is found, God is there. I think of Brevard Childs, who taught Old Testament. He helped me see the Bible as a whole, but also in its details it had a message for us each day. Before the word "spirituality" became popular, Henri Nouwen taught us how to pray, unhinging our prayers from our egotistical needs. Leon Watts made us see the connection between world and Word. He stressed that Jesus is as much about saving broken bodies as about saving souls.

**REFLECTIONS:** ***We're accustomed to statistics about declines in church membership. Do you have advice for for seminarians entering parish ministry?***

**CURRY:** I'm very familiar with the Pew Research numbers, but I don't think this era is any more challenging than what Bonhoeffer faced in Nazi Germany or what Harriet Beecher Stowe confronted before the Civil War. We are encountering new complexities in our time, but I don't think they're anything substantially different from the time of the Acts of the Apostles. The challenge always is to hear the radical call of Jesus to turn the world upside down – that is, to set it back right side up again! We'll know we're on the road toward that when real love is seen and experienced as the practical law that liberates our lives. It reveals itself in a commitment to seek the well-being of others before my own self-interest. In such a world, we won't allow children to go to bed hungry or deny them an education that would enable them to fulfill God's intentions for them. And our politics will be focused on the common good, and poverty will be a thing of the past. Then we'll know we're moving toward God's dream.

# Public Confession: From Shadows to Grace

By Molly Phinney Baskette '96 M.Div.

*Recently my friend took her 12-year-old daughter to see Taylor Swift in concert. She described the LED wristbands adorning the hands of the 60,000 tweenage girls and their moms, programmed to light up in sync with the music so that even the people in the nosebleed seats could feel like they were part of the magic.*

She described the budding-feminist coaching talk from Swift, the thrill of ego boundaries falling away into the collective tumult, the incandescent joy of a stadium full of blooming womanhood.

"It really was the most amazing, positive, secular, extremely professional and well-orchestrated-down-to-the-second church I've ever experienced," my friend said.

As she talked, I found myself getting jealous. I have a nine-year-old daughter, and I first blamed my feelings on missing a chance to win Mom points by taking her to the concert myself.

But the truth was: I was the one who wanted the transcendent moment, the priceless worship experience for the low, low cost of $145.

I'm a pastor – the pastor of a church where 75 percent of my congregation is younger than me: under 45. They have tattoos and piercings and interesting facial hair; they are full-on church nerds and nones.

**Neglected Statistic**

We are not a megachurch. We are not a hybrid newvangelical emerging-type hipster church. We are a mainline Protestant (albeit wildly progressive) church that has had a dramatic renewal. Why do the millennials come to us? Because they're looking for something: that same experience of transcendence that 60,000 screaming girls find at a Taylor Swift concert.

The Pew Research Center, which regularly surveys the decline of Christian institutions (why thank you!) has a curiously optimistic and easily overlooked stat buried in its last oracle of doom for the mainline church. The percentage of millennials who say a "very religious life" is important to them? Fully 30 percent. Thirty percent! That's almost 30 million young people looking for the kind of guidance, spiritual practices, authentic community, and yes, transcendence, that our churches can offer them. Take that, naysayers.

Problem is, the millennials are more sophisticated and demanding of authenticity and beauty than previous generations. The truth is, most of our churches probably don't have the resources or aesthetic chops of a Taylor Swift or even an emerging church. I know mine doesn't.

But we do have something arguably even better. We have our stories, in which God is the protagonist, if we tell them right. We have our ancient scripture stories – and we have our modern personal stories, which we can see better in the light cast by those vintage stories.

**The percentage of millennials who say a "very religious life" is important to them? Fully 30 percent. That's almost 30 million young people looking for the kind of community and transcendence our churches can offer. Take that, naysayers.**

And we can tell our personal stories, of failure and triumph, in a holy way, to people who know us well (or will, after we tell-all). We have a way, each week, of "putting our woundedness into the service of others," as the late, extraordinary Henri Nouwen urged us.

Last year I wrote a book about our church's rise from the (near) dead. People were always wanting to know the "one thing" we did to turn things around. I got tired of telling them it wasn't one thing, it was 200 things, so I wrote them all down.

But in our short-attention-span, anxious, busy modern life, people still wanted to know the *one* thing, so I told them it was this: our longtime practice of weekly lay-led testimony, a confession of our sins and deepest vulnerabilities, offered in our sanctuary during Sunday morning worship.

**Knees Knocking**

Fifty-two weeks a year, someone in our congregation climbs the steps to the chancel, with their knees knocking and their mouth going dry. They step up to the microphone, clear their throat, and say, "Now is the time when we bring our own stories before God."

Then they tell of a time when they broke down, broke bad, or made Jesus want to cry. They confess their sins and their vulnerabilities.

*"I've been bulimic since I was 13 ..."*

*"He used to come into my room at night ..."*

*"The first time I tried crystal meth ..."*

*"And that's when I threw the toy truck across the room and screamed at him ..."*

*"I thought I was one of the good white people – the ones who 'got it' ..."*

Jacques Derrida said that anything we fall silent before has become our god. When there are topics that are verboten in church, we've allowed them to eclipse the God who made us (*every* part of us, even the shady bits). And any power that worship has to help us heal and integrate is rendered useless.

That's why, in my congregation, we make it a point to talk about everything: drugs, sex, and rock 'n' roll, addiction, racism, every strain of mental health crisis, nose-diving marriages, pride, ego and ambition, as well as the biggest taboo in church, money. We talk about them not as abstract concepts but as real sins – wrongs done to us and wrongs done by us. There is nothing our people must leave outside the doors of our church – not one piece or part of ourselves that is not welcome, no matter how ugly, shameful, or stigmatized.

**By confessing, we haul everything into the light of day, where we can get a good look at what was living in the shadow so it doesn't get the best of us.**

Confessing our sin returns us to God's great democracy. It puts everybody on the same level, the homeless drunk and the Wall Street tycoon. It also breaks down the fourth wall when we do this, destroying the fiction that the people up here on the chancel are different or better or have it more together than the people down there in the pews.

**Shadowland**

And confessing helps us deal with the shadow side that Jung (thank you!) warned is in every one of us. By confessing, we haul everything into the light of day, where we can get a good look at what was living in the shadow so it doesn't get the best of us.

We can see ourselves and show ourselves as we really are, and still be loved.

I've attended or served New England Congregational churches my whole life. I've met wonderful people in all of them: good-hearted, well-meaning, God-loving people. I've also encountered, in many of those churches, an unbelievable number of skeletons in the closet: sexual abuse, family violence, undiagnosed mental illness that led to grave trauma, all because church was a place where folks felt the need to present well. But if you're already naked, you've got nothing to hide. Confessing our little sins helps us identify and name the big ones before they destroy us, our lives and families.

The Gospel of Thomas says: "if you bring forth what is within you, what you bring forth will save you. If you do not bring forth what is within you, what you do not bring forth will destroy you." Or as the late, great Maya Angelou put it millennia later, "there is no greater agony than bearing an untold story."

**The Great Physician**

It is worth remembering that the Greek word for Christ's wounds, *stigmata*, is the plural for stigma. Our wounds need light and air to heal. When folks offer testimony, we get to see the Great Physician's activity in a kind of divine montage sequence. And we believe. We believe not just for the testifier, but for ourselves: *"If God did that for X, God could do it for me ..."*

We often weep as we tell our stories. Tears are a sign that the Holy Spirit is present. And those sitting in the pews, many of whom have taken their turn already on a Sunday previous, hold those who are speaking – with our eyes, with our callbacks, and sometimes with our arms – so they can hold it together until they get to the end and get to talk about grace.

Because we always end with grace. Nouwen said we are to share wounds that are already well on their way to healing – this is the way to minister to each other. There comes a moment, toward the end of each confession, when the tone changes. It's usually a version of, *"And that's when the light went on."* And we tell each other how God entered the story, and wrote a different ending, and held up the mirror so we could see ourselves: beautiful and beloved, just as we are, and as we are becoming.

**God in Disguise**

But a regular practice of confession is more than reclaiming the ancient, biblical power of testimony in sweet, halting words that declare the power of God to transform our lives.

It's also pastoral care, when, preparing for the next Sunday liturgy, I ask probing and pruning questions that move each testimony from first draft to final.

It's communion and community-building, as people mentor each other into health, strength, and recovery from addiction or trauma.

It's theological reflection, as layfolk (who would blush to hear "theological reflection" used to describe what they are doing) discern God's movement in their lives, and ferret out the application of scriptural wisdom to their experience.

And this practice has expanded our view of the One who made us and is still exponentially active in our lives. We get to see God wearing a lot of different disguises in these stories of grace: rock-bottom, best friend or spouse, final confrontation, peace that passeth all understanding, Higher Power, deathbed conversion, chance encounter, college counseling center, pastor, fellow pew-sitter, dark night of the soul, Savior, midnight conversation, wake-up call, letter in the mail, Co-Creator and Co-Conspirator in redemption.

Every one of those knock-kneed people, age 9 to 92, and every one of those stories, becomes a finger pointing to God. It's real good church. It's the best church. And it's free.

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*Molly Phinney Baskette '96 M.Div. is minister of First Church Somerville MA UCC. Her new book is* Standing Naked Before God: The Art of Public Confession *(Pilgrim Press). This essay is adapted from the book with permission from the publisher. She is also author of* Real Good Church: How Our Church Came Back from the Dead and Yours Can Too *(Pilgrim Press, 2014).*

## COMING BACK DOWN

**By Donovan McAbee**

**The power of suggestion,**
**a need for release,**
**or what was it landed me**

**flat on my back against**
**the cold concrete floor**
**of that little storefront church?**

**The preacher uttering sounds**
**disconnected from language**
**over my laid-out body**

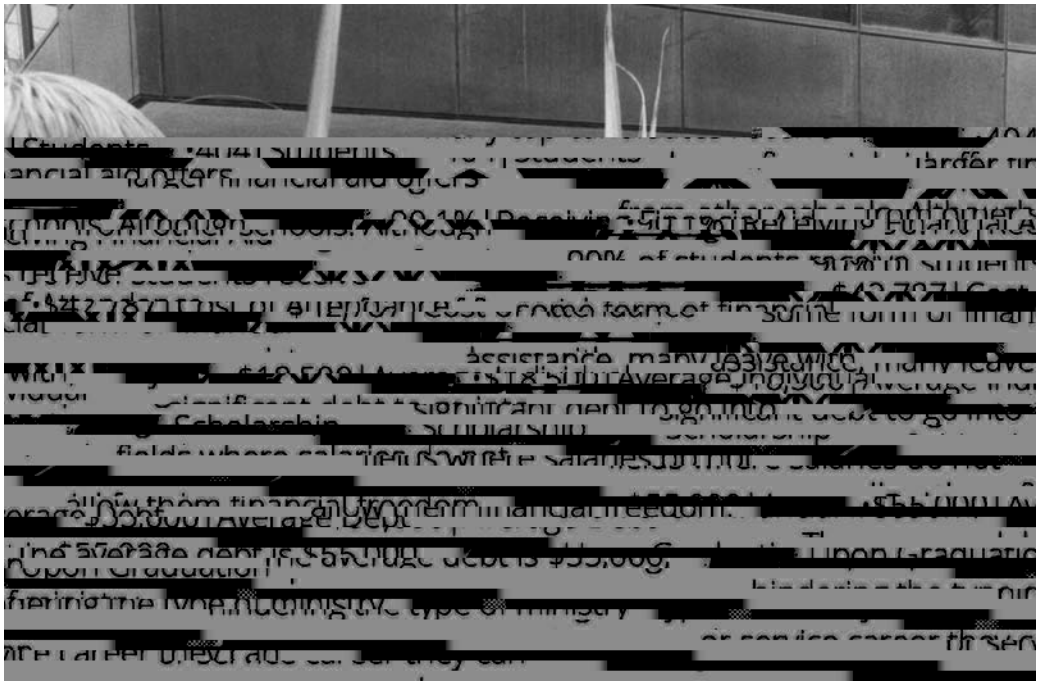
**as that high and lonesome gospel**
**lifted me elsewhere, beyond**
**the trials of my teenaged self.**

**Mama helped me stagger to the car,**
**weak-kneed and Spirit-drunk**
**when the worship service ended.**

**I'd never been to a church like that.**
**I don't know what it was**
**made the preacher single me out.**

**Maybe I looked an easy target,**
**or maybe he read on my face the signs**
**of someone in need of a good dose of wonder.**

**Whatever it was, that afternoon,**
**as we drove through the mountains,**
**I couldn't stop crying for the beauty of it all.**



# *From the Editor: Sunday Best*

**By Ray Waddle**

I once knew a minister who sent a memo to his flock of 1,000 imploring them to dress better for Sunday worship. Please, no flip-flops or tank tops, he declared. You're in church, for heaven's sake – let's make a special effort for God.

The memo was an unusual decree, and it made page-one news. He wasn't mean about it. He just thought society was changing in unthinking ways, getting too lax about important practices. Standards were at stake. This was the late 1990s, when democratizing trends of informality, evident in American society since the 1960s, would soon be irreversible.

I think the pastor was trying to make a point about the distinctiveness of the Christian faith: Church should be different from the rest of the week. Alas, his strategy looked self-defeating and inhospitable. He had also underestimated a force barreling through the culture for decades if not centuries – the individual's power of choice, the choice to show up as we are, the choice to show up not at all.

As much as anything since World War II, this has changed the dynamics of churchgoing in America.

Before the modern period, religion was a taken-for-granted fact of life. One's tradition of belief was mostly an accident of birth, part of one's identity in an unalterable social fabric. Not so long ago, churchgoing was a social expectation. People dressed for it. But the grinding forces of modern history undermined that architecture of stable assumptions. Hierarchies fell, social consensus weakened, the economy turned punishing. And individual choice awakened. The individual was liberated, free to craft a personal destiny, a personal path to truth in an internet-inflected cosmos. Trust in traditional gatekeepers of knowledge declined.

According to certain academic orthodoxies, religion itself was supposed to evaporate under such secularizing stresses. Yes, traditional belief by now shows measurable diminishment. But religion and spirituality do not. In his 2011 memoir *Adventures of an Accidental Sociologist*, Peter Berger amended the secularization theory to say: "Modernity does not necessarily secularize; it necessarily pluralizes." Pluralism erodes religion's taken-for-granted status, but it doesn't destroy religion. It creates more spiritual choices, a cacophony of gods.

This has inaugurated a long season of soul-searching for congregations. If churchgoing is now a matter of choice, not fate, then it's plausible to expect fewer people will attend, at least at first. Those who choose to attend don't have to be there – they arrive and they stay for their own good reasons, perhaps more purposefully than many did before.

In such conditions, religious institutions are endeavoring anew to make the case for belief. They can no longer depend on brand loyalty or a captive audience. They are reaching for fresh vocabularies to retell the story and renew the gospel adventure.

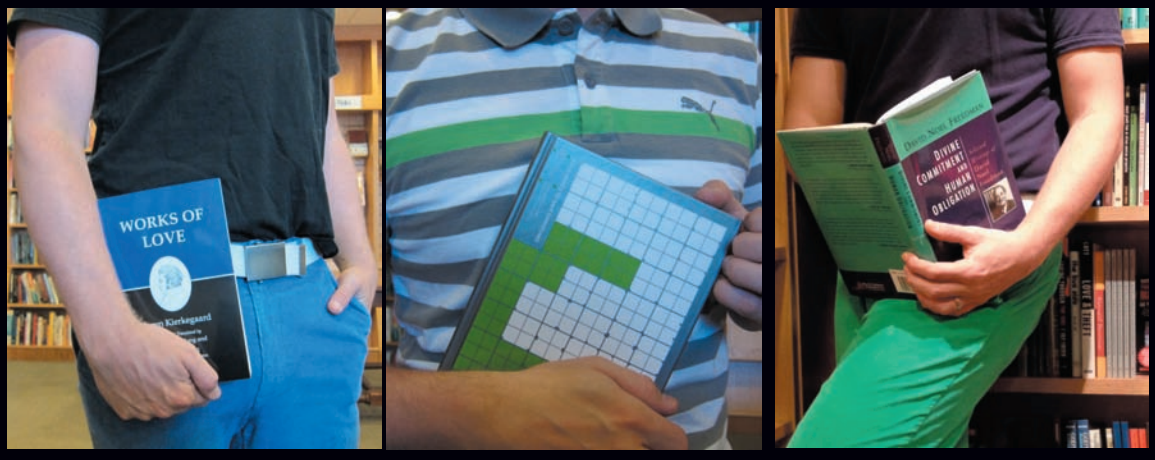
In all sorts of ways, the writers in this Fall 2015 *Reflections* are declaring the urgency of church today – witnessing to the power of public confession, the courage to make new neighborhood connections, the wisdom of the long view.

Despite the dazzle and disasters of the 21st-century, human nature hasn't changed. Old-fashioned brokenness and devastation haven't moved off center. A church is the place where the soul is acknowledged, where a person can hear oneself think, connect to vast currents of holiness, or find common cause with a stranger. Congregations are also partners in democracy: People learn to work with others, put aside despair over our political, class, or racial divides – or learn to break through them.

Congregations are the last places in America, I think the very last, where time is set aside for values and motives that resist the oceanic self-promotion of culture, the laws of raw self-interest, or the sleepless digital fear of missing out.

G.K. Chesterton once said a person should always be in opposition to the strongest thing in one's time, "for the strongest thing of the time is always too strong." The church of the present and future will be a spiritual, political presence that can stand up to the inhuman powers of every moment – the violent solutions, national myths, ruthless materialistic advantage, and lack of skepticism about these things.

The reign of God is always near, very near. The writers in this issue all speak to the distinctiveness of that calling – which includes prayer, reverence, mirth, vulnerable emotion, beauty, and thankless acts of mercy. A Sunday morning dress code isn't on the list.

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