

New Worshiping Communities

A Theological Exploration

Vera White and Charles Wiley

WJK WESTMINSTER
JOHN KNOX PRESS
LOUISVILLE • KENTUCKY

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First edition

Published by Westminster John Knox Press
Louisville, Kentucky

18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27—10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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Book design by Drew Stevens
Cover design by Mary Ann Smith

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: White, Vera K., author.

Title: New worshiping communities : a theological exploration / Vera White and Charles Wiley.

Description: Louisville, KY : Westminster John Knox Press, 2017. | Includes bibliographical references.

Identifiers: LCCN 2017047278 (print) | LCCN 2017048185 (ebook) | ISBN 9781611648461 (ebk.) | ISBN 9780664263096 (pbk. : alk. paper)

Subjects: LCSH: Church development, New. | Church development, New—Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) | Church. | Public worship.

Classification: LCC BV652.24 (ebook) | LCC BV652.24 .W45 2017 (print) | DDC 285/.137—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2017047278>

∞ The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of the American National Standard for Information Sciences—Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI Z39.48-1992.

Most Westminster John Knox Press books are available at special quantity discounts when purchased in bulk by corporations, organizations, and special-interest groups. For more information, please e-mail SpecialSales@wjkbooks.com.

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Introduction

In the 1990s, something cracked in denominational new church development offices and programs. Leaders noticed conversations happening across the church, from some very unexpected places, about the nature of the church.

Something essential was changing about the church, and leaders struggled to understand or define it. Traditional church vocabulary gave no words for the phenomenon they were seeing: people of faith meeting under a bridge, a for-profit coffee shop that transformed into a church on Sunday evening, a busload of traveling artists and musicians pulling into a truck stop for a Communion service. Was this church? Who was in charge? Why was it happening? Conversations were buzzing, but mostly they seemed to be outside of the church building and church hours.

One professor at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary opened his home to a small group of seminary students, pastors, and ordinary people exploring a call to start what are now called new worshipping communities. They read and prayed together—and they talked.

A conversation by its very definition means that no one is the expert or the leader, that many voices need to be heard, that there is not a formula for shared work, that each person spends more time listening than talking, that there are more questions than answers. A conversation creates space to argue about things, even things we don't believe in, to try to get to the truth. We find that the truth is among us, but

sometimes we can get at it only by argument, dissection, and passionate debate. A conversation is dynamic.

So when a group of theologians and practitioners came together at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary in November 2015 to talk about new worshiping communities, they engaged in conversation. This time the conversation centered on biblical and theological reflections on the new reality of church they were observing in their midst. This book reflects the results of that conversation. Conversation is where new worshiping communities incubate, and when it includes both theologians (those who think about church) and practitioners (those who engage in the work of the church), the conversation becomes rich and layered. A new level of accountability also develops. Experimentation and exploration become deeply grounded in theology; theology puts on its work clothes and takes to the streets.

WHAT IS IN THIS BOOK

What you will find in the pages ahead are the results of conversations among theologians and practitioners who have reflected deeply on the occurrence of new worshiping communities. Some of the participants have come to the table with skepticism about the very idea that church might need to take on new forms in this new century. The very idea of contextualizing the gospel is disconcerting. Others jumped in enthusiastically, even blindly, and began reflecting later.

These conversations are, of course, not limited to one denomination, one gathering, one language, or one nation. They are part of a much larger conversation in the church of Jesus Christ. The contributors to the conversations in this book all have deep connections to the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), not because we claim any predestined right to ownership of the movement but because we believe this denomination has something to say—that it represents one important strand of the conversation.

A NEW MOVEMENT

The PC(USA) jumped into the movement of missional church planting without a lot of reflection. Buoyed by our Protestant work ethic, our historical passion for engaging unchurched people, and a deep gratitude for the fresh expressions of God's presence in a complex and

changing world, the PC(USA) launched the 1001 New Worshiping Communities initiative by action of its General Assembly in the summer of 2012—without a theological apologetic or a written manual but with loads of enthusiasm and energy.

Part of the genius of the 1001 New Worshiping Communities initiative is that we didn't try to figure everything out before we started. New church development in past decades had become so organizationally heavy and capital dependent that midcouncils and congregations were reluctant to start anything new. Most regional councils claimed at least one story of an expensive and embarrassing failure that led to many declarations of "We already tried that and it doesn't work."

This new movement started with a vision and encouragement to act. Now that several hundred new worshiping communities have been established, the need for a more robust theological framework is evident. We look back over the past few years and reflect on what God's Holy Spirit has been up to among us. This book is the result of some of our reflections. We believe that the PC(USA) has a word to say within the broader conversation. Because of its rich history of church planting around the world, the breadth of its Reformed theology, its tradition of inclusion, and its flexibility in worship expression, the PC(USA) is well-suited to play a role in contemporary church-planting experiments. Although we suspect that the primary audience for this book will be found among those who serve within the Reformed branches of the church, we hope that the story of what God is doing in our little corner of the church may be of interest to all those who are seeking to be faithful in a time of constant change.

A DEFINITION

Our starting point for the conversation is the definition that was developed at the beginning of the initiative in 2012. It's kind of odd to start out with a definition, but that's what we called it. The definition is an elaboration on three terms: *new, worshiping, communities*.

New

- Seeking to make and form new disciples of Jesus Christ
- Taking on varied forms of church for our changing culture

Worshipping

- Gathered by the Spirit to meet Jesus Christ in Word and sacrament
- Sent by the Spirit to join God's mission for the transformation of the world

Communities

- Practicing mutual care and accountability
- Developing sustainability in leadership and finances

The definition is short and simple and is not meant to be prescriptive. Taken as a whole, it assumes a core ecclesiology. New worshipping communities *are* church, not a shortcut or a substitute for the real thing. For those who participate in them, new worshipping communities contain all the elements of church. In the pages ahead, each of the bullet points in the definition will be fleshed out, dissected, and affirmed. The structure of the book loosely follows the order of the definition.

CONVERSATION PARTNERS

Conversation partners in this project include

- Christopher Brown, then serving as organizing copastor of the Upper Room and coordinator of the Church Planting Initiative, Pittsburgh Theological Seminary
- Darrell Guder, professor of missional and ecumenical theology emeritus, Princeton Theological Seminary
- Scott Hagley, assistant professor of missiology, Pittsburgh Theological Seminary
- Sara Hayden, associate for 1001 New Worshipping Communities, PC(USA)
- Libby Tedder Hugus, pastor of the Table in Casper, Wyoming
- Christopher James, assistant professor of evangelism and missional theology, University of Dubuque Theological Seminary
- Jin Kim, pastor of Church of All Nations, Columbia Heights, Minnesota

- Cynthia L. Rigby, W. C. Brown Professor of Theology, Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary
- Edwin van Driel, Directors' Bicentennial Associate Professor of Theology, Pittsburgh Theological Seminary
- Vera White, coordinator, 1001 New Worshiping Communities, PC(USA)
- Charles Wiley, coordinator, Office of Theology and Worship, Presbyterian Mission Agency
- Steve Yamaguchi, dean of students and assistant professor of pastoral theology, Fuller Theological Seminary

Each chapter draws on the insights of one or two of these respected theologians and practitioners. Charles Wiley and Vera White have drawn upon the articles written by the other participants to shape this book, which provides an overview of the conversations. A collection of all the original articles in their entirety is forthcoming. When an extensive quotation is used, the presenter's name is in parentheses after the quotation.

Our hope is that you will use this book as a discussion starter for your own group to have a conversation about the current challenges and opportunities of the church of the twenty-first century.

1

Communities of Grace and Gratitude

What's the point?

That's what a lot of folks inside the church and outside the church are asking about Christianity, about church, about faith in Jesus Christ. And here we are talking about the importance of forming new worshiping communities, communities formed around Jesus Christ. What's the point?

New worshiping communities are not a technical fix to what is ailing the church. They are not a technique that any community can apply in order to flourish. New worshiping communities are a contextually appropriate way to embody the gospel of Jesus Christ in a world that needs this good news. Thus it is important that we spend some time reflecting on the nature of this gospel and how we communicate it and live it.

THE GOSPEL SUMMARIZED: GRACE AND GRATITUDE

So much of the way we talk about the church is small—not in terms of size but of vision. We end up talking about the nature of the church in ways that are not compelling, not life-changing. Our message is not big enough for our vision. How might we conceive of and practice church in a way that is compelling and life-changing? What emerges from the

core of our identity that compels us to practice Christian community, proclaim the gospel, and work for justice?

We believe that the theme of *grace and gratitude* provides this compelling message. Grace and gratitude succinctly and winsomely describe the charism, the gift of the Reformed tradition. Within the church ecumenical, different traditions have gifts that they offer to the wider church. We in the Reformed movement learn the discipline of not conforming to the surrounding culture from the Mennonites, an appreciation for God's presence in the sacraments from Roman Catholics, a commitment to engage the structures of society from the National Baptists, and the exuberance of the Spirit from Pentecostals. Grace and gratitude are our gifts to the wider church.

This description comes alive in Brian A. Gerrish's book *Grace and Gratitude*, in which Gerrish explores John Calvin's theology of the Lord's Supper. At the table, the relation of God and humanity is exhibited. God calls us to the table and feeds us with Christ himself, and we are sent forth in gratitude for God's gracious movement toward us. The relationship broken by sin is restored at God's initiative—we offer our thanks with our whole lives. More than a characterization of Calvin's theology of the Lord's Supper, grace and gratitude are a simple yet deep description of Calvin's entire theological vision.

Grace and gratitude are our theological and spiritual vision. They give us an expansive vision of God. What is our picture of God? The gracious one who comes to us in creation, in the law, in the prophets, and ultimately in the person of Jesus Christ. The God who sustains us with the ongoing grace of the Holy Spirit. The God who calls us through the church. The God who is for us.

Grace

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.

The apostle Paul greets worshiping communities with these words throughout his epistles. In a very real sense, this is a summary of the good news, the gospel, of Jesus Christ. God's grace has come to us in the person of Jesus Christ, a grace that is with us, is near to us, surrounds us.

We live in a time when grace is needed but isn't necessarily part of the everyday language of most people. Grace is important enough

that we must try to recover its meaning. Grace expresses the character of God in a way that is especially important in our context where the church often functions as a symbol of guilt and obligation.

Why grace?

A profound articulation of grace comes from the French baptismal liturgy developed by the Huguenot church in the Reformation:

Little one, for you Jesus Christ came into the world:
 for you he lived and showed God's love;
 for you he suffered the darkness of Calvary
 and cried at the last, "It is accomplished";
 for you he triumphed over death and rose in newness of life;
 for you he ascended to reign at God's right hand.
 All this he did for you, little one,
 though you do not know it yet.
 And so the word of Scripture is fulfilled:
 "We love because God loved us first."¹

That is grace.

Be with You

What makes this such good news is that grace is directional rather than static. Paul's statement is also a blessing: "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you." It is the direction of God toward human beings before we ever thought to turn toward God. It is the movement of God toward us when we are moving away from God. It is the movement of God toward us when we are oblivious. It is the movement of God toward us when we don't care.

Grace comes to us in the person of Jesus Christ, the one who ate with sinners, welcomed children, and identified with the dispossessed. Grace comes to us, lives among us, envelopes us.

Transforming Grace

This grace that comes to us as we are does not leave us as we were. Our encounter with Jesus Christ transforms us. Reflecting on this mystery, the sixteenth-century church leader John Calvin spoke of grace as having a double effect.

The first effect is to take away our guilt from sin. For centuries, Christians have proclaimed the good news of the forgiveness of sins as

unabashed good news. Everyone knew they were sinners. The question was whether they were saved from that sin. However, not everyone shares that common conviction now. In a real sense, we must begin with the profound gift of grace grounded in God's overflowing love for us. Over time, through the proclamation of the gospel, the Holy Spirit will work in the hearts of people so that they will begin to see the depth of their sin and become even more grateful for the grace shown to them in Jesus Christ.

The second effect is transformation. Grace takes away our guilt, but it also transforms us. In 2 Corinthians, Paul writes that those who are in Christ are new creations. This transformation isn't fast, unfortunately. While we may want everything now, it doesn't work that way. John Calvin used the image of crawling on our hands and knees. We get somewhere, but it isn't fast or without effort.

Gratitude

What is the appropriate response to grace? Gratitude. Gratitude for our lives, for our treasure, for our community. Gratitude that compels us to share the love of Christ in the community and to do justice and love mercy for all God's children. Karl Barth wrote, "[Grace and gratitude] belong together like heaven and earth. Grace evokes gratitude like the voice an echo. Gratitude follows grace like thunder [follows] lightning."² If God is, in essence, grace, then we are, in essence, gratitude.

We hear grace and gratitude in the last clause in Question 86 of the Heidelberg Catechism:

**Q. Since we have been delivered
from our misery
by grace through Christ
without any merit of our own,
why then should we do good works?**

A. Because Christ, having redeemed us by his blood,
is also restoring us by his Spirit into his image,
so that with our whole lives
we may show that we are thankful to God
for his benefits.³

The answer to Question 86 addresses one of the perennial questions in the Christian tradition: If we are saved by grace, then why do

good works? Why do we have to do anything? The succinct answer in the Catechism can be expressed in an even briefer form: You don't. You don't *have* to do anything. We live lives of faithfulness because we want to, because we are grateful. St. Augustine described the Christian life in these words: "Love God and do what you want."⁴ That is, when we love God, our wants are transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit.

The theological and spiritual vision of grace and gratitude, central to our core identity, is an enduring legacy, worthy of our time and engagement. While institutional survival is not sufficient for our investment, seeing new and existing worshipping communities shaped by grace and gratitude is. We want to see communities shaped by grace and gratitude.

Stanley Hauerwas says that good theology does not necessarily lead us to good ethics but that bad theology eventually leads us to bad ethics. Gratitude sounds like a feeling where comfortable Presbyterians sit around and talk about how grateful they are for their stuff and how motivated they are to give away some of it. Gratitude is not fundamentally a feeling. It is a disposition; it is a profound thankfulness that is a response of faith to a God of grace.

If gratitude is the shape of our lives in response to a God of grace, then we can ask the question of what gratitude looks like in specific cases. We've thought a bit about what gratitude looks like in the context of polity: It looks like shared leadership for the sake of the gospel. There are so many crucial areas of ministry where we can ask these questions:

What does gratitude look like in the context of structural racism?

What does gratitude look like in the face of persistent sin?

What does gratitude look like in the context of people living paycheck to paycheck?

What does gratitude look like in the formation of children to follow Christ?

What does gratitude look like in a world where some don't have clean water?

What does gratitude look like in a context of government-sponsored violence?

Communities of Gratitude

One of the geniuses of the 1001 New Worshiping Communities initiative is that it embraces a nonlinear approach to the establishment of new worshiping communities. In the past, the effort would go into forming new congregations, and new congregations had a definite shape. Attempts to establish new congregations would begin in a predictable sequence: The first formal act of the community would be a worship service. After attracting a congregation to this worship service, the community would form, and eventually it would engage in formation around the Scriptures, would be involved in caring for one another, and eventually would reach out in mission. The 1001 initiative doesn't prescribe such a rigid sequence. A new community might begin by engaging in mission together or by gathering together around caregiving or Bible study. It might begin with a group of friends looking to extend to others their love for Jesus Christ, or it might begin with a group of strangers who come together around common commitments. Worshiping together might be the first act in the progression of this community or the last, or it might emerge somewhere in the process.

We find the phrase *communities of gratitude* helpful in describing this nonlinear development of the worshiping community. Because gratitude encompasses the entirety of the believer's life in response to a God of grace, it also encompasses the entirety of the community's life in response to a God of grace.

What does this gratitude in the community look like?

A Confessing Community. A people assured of God's grace in Christ is a community that is enabled to confess its sin. However, in the old model, we assumed that everyone knew they were sinful and that the job of the Christian community was to give them space to confess their sins and receive assurance of forgiveness. Worshiping communities now engage many people who don't think they're sinful and thus have no sense of their need for forgiveness. We need not panic, thinking that the gospel does not apply here. In an odd way, in this moment, part of our ministry is to teach people that they are indeed sinful. It may sound funny, but we offer people a gift when we help them learn that they are sinful and in need of forgiveness.

How so? John Calvin said that the knowledge of God and the knowledge of ourselves are intertwined. When we encounter the holy beauty of God, it is like a mirror being held up to us, and we see ourselves as

both beautiful creations of God and as sinful people in need of forgiveness. And God is not surprised by this sin. Traditionally this happens in worship when we come into encounter with God and find the need to confess our sins. But we may also have this mirror put up before our eyes when we are involved in ministry to the homeless, or in building a community garden, or while talking with a friend over coffee.

A Faithful Community. As a forgiven community, one of the gifts of grace we receive is freedom. When we answer the question “If God saves you by grace, why do you have to do anything?” in terms of grace, we emphasize a deep and abiding freedom to the person who follows Christ. We rest in God’s grace and are energized and satisfied with being faithful. We cannot be responsible for fixing the world. We can be free and dedicated to following Christ into the most difficult of situations, seeking to establish the kingdom of God.

A Peaceful Community. Paul greeted New Testament communities by saying, “Grace *and* peace be with you.” The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ brings us peace with God and with one another. Few acts in worship, formal or informal, are as profound as passing the peace of Christ to one another.

I (Charles) didn’t grow up with passing the peace, so I resisted actually saying, “The peace of Christ,” to others in worship. It wasn’t until my wife and I became part of Blacknall Memorial Presbyterian Church in Durham, North Carolina, that this movement of the service began to take root in my life. There I learned that this liturgical expression was the first act of gratitude, the first act of living reconciliation within the Christian community. Christ is our peace (Eph. 2:14).

Our gratitude for God’s grace is intensely personal, yet it moves beyond the personal. God’s grace is not limited to my needs or the needs of my congregation, for God loves the world. The Scriptures are clear about God’s concern for the poor, God’s desire for justice, God’s mercy on the oppressed.

Our lives and our prayers should reflect these dual, related realities. Within a worshiping community, we need to be close enough to some that we can share our need for prayer in matters that are quite personal. And within a worshiping community, our prayers should attend to all those around the world who are in need. We need to pray about jobs and health—and for those who are hungry, are victims of violence, are addicted, are oppressed. We need to ask the question of our own

complicity or even active engagement in systems that oppress others. Just as peace has been extended to us, we extend it to one another.

As we will see in a deeper way in the chapter on the missional character of new worshiping communities, communities of gratitude see their calling as focused on those outside the community, those whom God loves and desires to be drawn into the new realm of God. There is no doubt that a healthy community will practice mutual care, a bonding together as a community, a community bond of joy, but this internal strength becomes not a boundary to those outside it but an impetus to love them. The peace of Christ calls us to a missional life.

A Generous Community. Worshiping communities are formed around a God who loves out of pure grace, out of pure generosity. Thus worshiping communities reflect this generosity back toward God and one another. This is generosity in all its dimensions. Being generous with our judgments of each other may be one of the greatest gifts we can give one another. John Calvin wrote that we humans are unable to see what is truly in another person's heart, so we must treat one another with a generous judgment.

Generosity of time is one of the secrets to a true community—giving the time to become a true community instead of just an association of individuals. Overwhelmed by busyness in our own lives, we struggle with giving time to the people in our worshiping communities.

Speaking of a generosity of our possessions is always a bit tricky in Christian communities because many of us have been turned off by ministers and other Christian leaders who are always asking for money. We will look at this more closely in chapter 9, but our generosity involves our stuff, including our money. In a startling reflection on what it means to obey the commandment “Do not steal,” the Westminster Larger Catechism gives a much broader meaning, including “giving and lending freely” and to “endeavor by all just and lawful means to procure, preserve, and further the wealth and outward estate of others.”⁵ This means that all that we have is from God and is to be used for God's purposes. The point of a generous life is not to support a worshiping community but to be a blessing to others with all that we have.

A Bold Community. One of the things we most dislike about common portrayals of Christians these days is that we just aren't that interesting, that we are a kind of bland yet judgmental people. A community of gratitude is a community that knows God is the one who holds all

things, so we can be bold and creative and take risks because we don't have to figure everything out or ensure a particular outcome. One of the most profound sentences in the polity of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is that a worshiping community "is to be a community of faith, entrusting itself to God alone, even at the risk of losing its life."⁶ Part of the DNA of new worshiping communities is that they are bold, risk-taking communities whose life together may last only a few years or might last for decades. Instead of trying to build long-term institutions, we hope to see creative, faithful communities whose witness isn't hampered by the need for institutional survival.

New Worshiping Communities as Communities of Gratitude. The vision of establishing 1001 New Worshiping Communities grows out of this assurance that the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ is with us, is for us, is for all. This presence of Jesus Christ is winsome, welcoming, transforming. It is a grace that comes to us just as we are but will not leave us as we are. It is a transforming grace. And all we can do in response is to express gratitude for the Spirit's presence in our life and in the life of the community.

1001 New Worshiping Communities is not a measurable goal to save a dying church or to rescue a denomination. If that is all it were, it would be a colossal waste of time. It is far more important than these pedestrian goals.

Because we believe that this is genuinely good news, we want to proclaim it, live it, celebrate it. It is this vision of a gracious God who comes to us in the person of Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit that draws from us a wholehearted grateful response. It is this vision that drives the 1001 New Worshiping Communities initiative.