



# I'VE GOT THE **POWER!**

Naming and reclaiming power  
as a force for good

*Jennifer Castro, editor*

*Presentations from the  
Women Doing Theology Conference  
Women in Leadership Project  
Mennonite Church USA*

The background of the entire cover is a grayscale aerial photograph of a dense urban area, likely New York City, showing a grid of streets and numerous skyscrapers. A semi-transparent dark gray rectangle is centered over the image, serving as a backdrop for the title and subtitle.

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*For those who have journeyed this path in  
power before us,  
their lives and stories guiding our steps,  
pointing the way.*

*For those living in power day-in and day-out,  
minute-by-minute  
moving wisely in the world, attentive to  
divine love, light, truth, justice, God.*

*For those on the journey toward awakening,  
just learning to embrace power,  
stepping tentatively and slowly  
gaining confidence.*

*For those who will come after us.*

*May you live with intention—moving in the  
power you hold—grounded in wisdom  
and confidence.*



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# Introduction

There was a time in my life where I didn't recognize that I had much power at all. For a significant portion of my formative years and young adulthood, I couldn't see value in my experience, body knowledge, sensitivity, or intuition. I didn't recognize the strength I could convey through my words or the capability of my voice to influence. I believed I was lacking and couldn't see the power I possessed for what it was.

Slowly, though, I began to recognize the systems and messages around me that had stripped me of power—systems in society, in my community, in my congregation, in my family. And I began tapping into the power I hold and using my voice to speak truth.

The Women Doing Theology conference hosted by the Women in Leadership Project of Mennonite Church USA flows out of a history of Anabaptist theologians, ministers, teachers, activists, creatives and many others gathering together to do theological work born out of women's experiences. As Anabaptists, we understand that our theology is most fully realized together, sharing and learning from our unique experiences with God and life. Our theology is enriched and more deeply grounded as we listen, hold space, challenge, come into new awareness, and practice presence together.

At the 2016 Women Doing Theology conference, *I've got the power! Naming and reclaiming power as a force for good*, we broke long-held silences by speaking frankly and vulnerably about the power we possess and aspire to hold. The papers included in this collection were among those presented at the conference. They reflect the voices of women doing theology across Mennonite Church USA. They create space for discussion and reflection around power and its potential to work good in the world when we claim it rather than deflect or ignore it.

Thank you to the Steering Committee of the Women in Leadership Project: Melissa Florer-Bixler, Maribel Hinojosa, Erica Littlewolf, Chantelle Todman Moore, Linda Gehman Peachey, Regina Shands Stoltzfus, Moniqua Acosta (2012-2016), and Sandra Pérez (2012-2016). Thank you to all our conference presenters—your guidance enriched our experience. Thank you to all who participated in the conference—through our synergy we open up new ways of processing and doing theology together. Thank you, reader of this collection, for continuing to engage, share, and build upon these ideas and this work.

—Jennifer Castro, editor



# 1. Attracted to Power

*Jennifer Davis Sensenig*

I am attracted to power. The poem *Fueled* by Marcie Hans that I learned in childhood contrasts the worldly engineered power of a rocket with the mysterious natural power of a seed breaking through soil. What kind of power have we?

I am attracted to the power which moves through my life—from a monthly cycle indicating readiness to bear life to the tender and fiery work of the Holy Spirit, from the locally grown food that fuels my body to the human relationships that shape my identity.

## **A less-than-comprehensive definition of power**

In general I define power as influence. I have power in the congregation I serve because I have influence. My power as a pastor is positional. It is based in my role. The contours of my class, gender, racial and sexual identity, education, marital status, and experience further define my power as do my personality and my particular context—Community Mennonite Church, the Shenandoah Valley, the Chesapeake Bay watershed, the United States of America.

One fitting image of power as influence comes from my living room. The sun streaming through a window influences the growth pattern of a houseplant and the tendrils are drawn toward the light. Another image of power as influence comes from a hiking trail strewn with cairns. Movement and changes in any single stone's position can shift the balance of power in an otherwise stable system.

As a pastor I've been active in various community organizing efforts over the years, and a couple of years ago with several others, I helped to launch Faith in Action, a multi-faith local justice organization made up of twenty-one congregations, most of them Christian, but also including our local Jewish and Muslim congregations. Through some formal community organizing education I've been introduced to another handy definition of power that I appreciate. It is a little equation that says:

## **organizing people + organizing money + organizing purpose = power**

This collection of essays and the conference in which they first emerged illustrate this kind of power. Although Faith in Action intends to address a variety of justice issues over time, we have focused on local justice for immigrant neighbors in our first year. Having served on the original steering committee and now as president of our executive committee, I have some power in this organization. Perhaps like anyone leading a new venture, I find the complexities of the relationships and responsibilities very challenging. I'm aware of flaws in our fledgling organization and my own weaknesses, especially as a novice in community organizing. Yet, I feel guided by the Holy Spirit.

### **Christlike power**

Several months ago I represented Faith in Action among local poultry workers who are organizing to address safety and human rights in their plants. I shared Faith in Action's support for their organizing efforts and Jesus' beatitude:

*"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for justice, for they will be satisfied." —Matthew 5:6 NLT*

Standing with these workers, I felt that rush of Someone moving through me and ministering beyond me. In a start-up worker center behind a Latino storefront, the Holy Spirit was creating new intercultural relationships of trust in our community where they did not exist before. This is powerful. In September 2016, Faith in Action successfully passed a Welcoming America resolution in our City Council and now we are working toward establishing an immigrant advisory council for inclusion in the city's comprehensive plan.

Through congregational community organizing for justice, I've had opportunities to define and name power in new ways.

In addition to my experience in organizing, I'm deeply shaped by the Bible which testifies to brilliant creative power, exposes abusive power, and provides a design plan for both individuals and groups to exercise power for life. In the New Testament, this power for life is demonstrated through the Holy Spirit, who ignites faith, guides decisions, and replicates the work of Jesus Christ—healing, forgiving, reconciling, teaching, blessing, rebuking, commissioning, and so on. Jesus exercised

power in diverse contexts, especially across social divisions. Jesus' political and social influence was limited by his Galilean heritage and privileged by his gender. Over and over in the gospel accounts of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection we find that by his influence, by his power, people with deficits in agency, health, and status in the community gain something, and people with concentrations of power, money, and privilege lose something. It is as if Jesus' very presence redistributes power, creating coherence, bringing salvation to strong and weak, rich and poor, women and men.

Likewise, the Holy Spirit, replicating the work of Christ, is not limited to working exclusively with traditional power brokers of religious and political leaders, who tend to dominate the public arena and discount women, creation, social outcasts, and ethnic others. Rather, the Holy Spirit disregards the privileges of gender, race, class, and age, empowering young and old, men and women, slave and free, Jew and Gentile. So the Apostle Paul describes the gospel as the power of God for salvation—*saving us from* abusive power structures and *saving us for* a new coherence—a reconciling, healing community bound up by tenacious love. And Paul sends this letter with Phoebe (Romans 16:1-2) to interpret it when she meets these congregations face-to-face. In Christian iconography, the early church leader, Phoebe of Cenchreae, is sometimes depicted with a letter in hand. Those icons which show her empty-handed are ambiguous about the real power that this woman had in her home congregation and in the broader Christian world to interpret theological and ecclesiological material interculturally.

## **Powers Theology**

I have also found the description of Powers Theology by scholars like Walter Wink to be a useful framework for understanding power dynamics in the New Testament letters and in contemporary societies. Wink recognizes the structural powers of a society in three ways simultaneously.

1. The powers are God's good agents created for order, coherence and wholeness.
2. The powers are fallen and rebelling against God's power for life.
3. The powers are being redeemed through the influence of the gospel and those of us who represent the gospel.<sup>1</sup>

To illustrate, there are all kinds of powers—government is a power, sexism is a power, family is a power, religion is a power. Consider how the power of family is simultaneously good, fallen and redeemable.

Family is good. Where would we be without families? Families are established to provide security, identity, food, clothing, and shelter for members. Families provide love in a way that no institution can. Yet, family is fallen. Jesus pointed out that the family as an institution in his society was a problem—valuing women for their reproductive success rather than their humanity, determining future access to land and wealth, requiring allegiance to a patriarch. Families today are also fallen and in rebellion against God. We see within families rigid gender roles, abuse, demands for conformity. Family is in rebellion against God when loyalty to family threatens love of God and love of neighbor. So family is good; family is fallen; and family can be redeemed. Families are being redeemed by the gospel of Jesus Christ and those of us who represent this gospel in our family systems. We see this as families allow God's light to shine into the shadows of their lives, gain resilience, practice forgiveness, and become resources for mission and ministry.

### **Who's got the power?**

I recently led a Bible study on the book of Ruth, and we named all the powerful individuals and groups who made a decent marriage and a viable economic future possible for Ruth. Naomi was a poor widow who exercised power by pointing Ruth toward legal and relational opportunities. Boaz was a privileged, rich patriarch who exercised power by influencing a legal decision in the city gate—the courtroom of the ancient village of Bethlehem. There were also decision makers in the city gate who exercised power by choosing a creative interpretation of their laws and affirming a questionable marriage between Boaz and Ruth. There was also a community of women who exercised power by blessing, rather than rejecting, the Moabite immigrant in their midst and celebrating the birth of a child with multiple ethnicities.

Ruth herself receives and displays the power of God when she makes her famous pledge of faithful love to Naomi, her people, and her God.

*“Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people will be my people, and your God, my God. Where you die, I will die.” —Ruth 1:16b-17a NRSV*

I sometimes call this Old Testament book “The Gospel of Ruth” because

it demonstrates the power of faithful love, *besed*, working in the midst of ethnic conflict, economic distress, family disruption, and emigration. God's love incarnates in the characters of this short love story.

### **On the flip side**

One of my more recent insights about power is that refracted through my life, power has always seemed multidirectional. This has become a fundamental risk for me in my attraction to power. If I am truly sensitive and discerning regarding the outcome, I must admit that directing my influence toward a goal, or a person, or a project sometimes has had mixed results. Reviewing when the “power has gone out of me,” I have noticed that at times the outcome seemed consistent with my Christlike intentions, and I have sensed that my energies and power aligned with God's power in the world. Occasionally, however, unintended and undesirable outcomes have surfaced. Words intended to bless, sometimes hurt. Gratitude expressed to some, may have wounded those whose contributions were forgotten or taken for granted. Plans, practices, and events intended to expand the diversity of our Faith in Action organization have sometimes fallen into old patterns of segregation and exclusion.

Nevertheless, I am convinced that denying my power or failing to confess the fallen dimensions of my exercise of power would be treason in the reign of God. Neither you nor I can escape the real and dangerous powers of our lives. Our faith is that in the ongoing intention to live as Christ in the world, God both saves us from destructive dimensions of power and also saves us for the bold exercise of power. Perhaps God's redeeming work of love in the world is advanced by those whose lives—good, fallen, and redeemed—are offered daily as witness to God's reign among us.

*“Therefore, since through God's mercy we have this ministry, we do not lose heart.” —2 Corinthians 4:1 NIV*

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## About the author



**Jennifer Davis Sensenig** is reading and interpreting scripture in order to equip the church in the U.S. for Christlike mission. She earned a Master of Divinity with a concentration in Biblical Studies from Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary in 1998. She has served pastorates in Cedar Falls, Iowa and Pasadena, California.

Since 2008 she's been serving as lead pastor of Community Mennonite Church in Harrisonburg, Virginia. Jennifer is also president of Faith in Action, a multi-faith coalition of twenty-four congregations in Harrisonburg and Rockingham County addressing local justice issues. She is especially interested in encouraging women God is calling to find good settings in which to explore, deepen and exercise their gifts in Mennonite Church USA. She enjoys her short commute by bicycle and gardening with her spouse, Kent.





## 2. Can I Get a Witness?

### Transforming the Common Shock of Patriarchy

*Sarah Ann Bixler*

#### Introduction: Generation upon generation

*Years after grandpa  
Gave up his plain suit,  
I sat alone with grandma.  
She fingered her covering.  
“Sometimes I wonder  
Why I still wear this thing,”  
She confided in me.<sup>2</sup>*

I have many last names: Brubaker, Shenk, Witmer, Gehman, and Bixler. These represent the generational stories of strong female survivors that live inside me. There is the story of my paternal grandmother, Sara Brubaker, an independent adolescent who walked miles every Sunday to attend a church outside her family's stifling tradition and blossomed into a highly intelligent, self-educated woman. My maternal grandmother, Anna Shenk, convinced her father to let her finish high school and ran a farming operation for years while her husband's health fluctuated. My mother, Lois Witmer, clung to hope in the societal shame of her widowed mother's household and became an educator to ensure that future children would be better equipped to survive trauma. I, Sarah Gehman, ran a community children's ministry as a teenager and am attaining the highest level of theological education after being raised in a tradition that refused to recognize women in ministry. There are the stories of my daughters, Evangeline and Juliet Bixler, which are still unfolding. Each of us represents a Mennonite female who has encountered patriarchy in some form, and generations upon generations of such experiences have lasting impact. In the midst of the intergenerational shock of patriarchy, how will my daughters and I bear witness to these legacies, and what difference will it make?

Not all experiences of patriarchy are equal, and neither are women's responses to it.<sup>3</sup> Patriarchy may elicit trauma reactions, but more often, it evokes what Kaethe Weingarten calls "common shock."<sup>4</sup> Personal accounts of women who emerged as Mennonite leaders in the late twentieth century reveal common shock as a widespread phenomenon, resulting from patriarchy that has plagued the Mennonite church for generations. Drawing on Weingarten's work, this paper argues that compassionate witnesses can transform women's experience of common shock. In considering Weingarten's perspective and hearing the experiences of Mennonite women under patriarchy, we will envision how compassionate witnesses might change the future trajectory for women, particularly those in church leadership. Such witnesses, indeed, have immense power to confer hope and affect transformational change in a system still reeling from patriarchy.

## Common shock

*I was taught that it stood for  
Humility,  
Based on biblical principles  
And that I could wear it, too,  
As a sign of respect  
For the older generation.*

*As I grew  
I wondered  
What else it symbolized.*

Within the field of trauma studies, Kaethe Weingarten has coined the helpful term common shock. Common shock differs from actual trauma, which involves greater intensity or duration. "Traumatic events involve threats to lives or bodies, produce terror and feelings of helplessness, overwhelm an individual's or group's ability to cope or respond to the threat, lead to a sense of loss of control, and challenge a person's or group's sense that life is meaningful and orderly."<sup>5</sup> Common shock, on the other hand, happens constantly to everyone, everywhere, and affects mind, body, and spirit. Weingarten explains, "The witnessing of violence and violation, events that fall on a continuum from the ordinary to the extraordinary, jolts us into a response I call common shock."<sup>6</sup> Often, these instances of common shock go by unnoticed. Sometimes, they can develop into full-fledged complex trauma responses with continuing symptoms.<sup>7</sup>

This paper proceeds under the assumption that patriarchy often results in violence and violation and, as a result, produces common shock. Patriarchy is a social system organized in a way that allows men to function as the primary holders of power. Often, it is intrinsically tied to religious systems. In the Anabaptist Mennonite tradition, with its cultural and religious origins in sixteenth century Europe, family systems and ecclesial structures to this day still operate to some extent under the patriarchal system. The intent of this paper is not to demonize men; men are often unconscious perpetrators of patriarchy who themselves experience harm because of it, and those who do not demonstrate hegemonic masculinity may find the system turning against them. But patriarchy often manifests itself as sexism, bringing with it violence and violation, which results in common shock for both immediate victims and witnesses of all sorts. For the Mennonite church that espouses a theology of nonviolence, examining the prevalence of common shock experiences under patriarchy is especially important since violence and violation infringe upon its theological integrity.

While violence differs from violation, both relate to patriarchy and common shock. In their essay “Defining Violence and Nonviolence,” Stassen and Westmoreland-White state, “Violence is destruction to a victim by means that overpower the victim’s consent.”<sup>8</sup> Weingarten adds a helpful distinction between personal and structural violence. Personal violence has observable consequences and involves harm or injury, whether physical, psychological, spiritual, or material. The experience of Mennonite mission worker Amanda Musselman provides an example. In the early twentieth century, she and a female colleague served the Philadelphia Home Mission, leading Bible schools, ministering in the neighborhood and managing their own funds.<sup>9</sup> After nearly twenty-five years, the Eastern Missions board wished to centralize control of mission funds and passed a resolution to appoint “an ordained man at each mission.” Soon afterward, a man arrived to assume primary leadership of the Philadelphia Home Mission, but Amanda did not give up leadership easily, resisting the “suffocating change.”<sup>10</sup> After an investigation, “the sisters’ many years of steadfast service came to an abrupt and inglorious end.”<sup>11</sup> In 1924, they were released from the place they had identified as their home and calling for most of their life, despite petitions Philadelphia residents sent to the mission board. This example of personal violence involves observable harm inflicted by a patriarchal system: physical eviction, psychological disruption, spiritual subordination, and the withdrawal of material aid.

As compared to instances of personal violence, structural violence proves harder to identify. With less observable consequences, it involves a social system that causes harm to entire groups of individuals, exploiting some people while benefiting others.<sup>12</sup> While it has specific personal manifestations, patriarchy in the Mennonite church can be classified as structural violence. The dress code, outlined clearly in 1943 in the “Statement of Christian doctrine and rules and discipline of the Lancaster [Pennsylvania] Conference of the Mennonite Church,” provides an example. Elizabeth Landis Nissley recalls how adolescent girls were hesitant to join the church because of the strict dress code. She recalls, “It happened when I was in seventh grade. I mean I stood for the invitation, and the next day I went to the local public school with a covering. That was one of the hardest days of my life.”<sup>13</sup> The biographer who recounts Elizabeth’s story explains:

*The boys who stood with Libby ... during those 1955 East Petersburg revival meetings awoke the next morning to completely different circumstances than the girls did. ... Although these young men were certainly expected to carry a witness to their schools, they were not required to wear the witness as a visible sign. Many Lancaster Mennonites—mothers, fathers, leaders, young people, and children—wondered about the wisdom of subjecting only the girls to such extreme changes.*<sup>14</sup>

For years to come, Mennonite women could be singled out in public based on their appearance, while Mennonite men easily blended in with the rest of society. The female head covering, although not usually contested by those who wore it, is likely the last remaining visible sign of the structural violence imposed on women by patriarchy.

Patriarchy also yields violation, the hardest of all to observe. It disrupts the victim’s sense of meaning and evokes a feeling of fear and dread.<sup>15</sup> Stassen and Westmoreland-White further clarify, “The key is not whether the means employed include physical force, but whether they violate (overpower) the victim’s ability to consent or the victim’s human dignity and human rights.”<sup>16</sup> Emma Richards, the first woman ordained in the Mennonite Church of North America in 1973 by Illinois Mennonite Conference, recounts a particular story of violation.<sup>17</sup> She recalls, “As I was coming down from a platform after preaching to a large group, a man found himself caught in front of me, with no escape. He said, ‘Nice sermon. I suppose your husband prepared it for you.’ Meekly,

I replied, ‘No, I did it.’”<sup>18</sup> Emma replayed the scene in her mind many times afterwards, searching for a response that would have restored her dignity. Undoubtedly, patriarchy violates women’s rightful dignity to serve joyfully in positions of ministry and leadership based on their own gifts and response to God’s call. Instead, women are forced into subservient or supportive roles based on the assumption that they are unfit for the pastoral office, while males retain primary positions of power and cite scripture to uphold their authority.

## **The reverberating shockwaves of patriarchy**

*I wondered why Mennonite women  
Could be picked out of a crowd  
But Mennonite men could not.*

*Why Mennonite women  
Gave talks and testimonies,  
Not sermons.*

*Why Mennonite women  
Were excellent Sunday school teachers  
But not elders or bishops.*

Common shock has a cumulative effect. An individual’s repeated witnessing of shock may lead to later severe reactions.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, because the impact of trauma is transmitted intergenerationally, common shock in patriarchal societies can be passed from one generation to the next, morphing with each transmission.<sup>20</sup> Weingarten explains that in the intergenerational transmission of trauma, “a family member who has experienced trauma can ‘expose’ another member to ‘residues’ of that trauma, even though the exposed family member does not directly experience that trauma.”<sup>21</sup> Thus, the impact of the trauma lives on, generation after generation—an initial shock followed by many aftershocks.

The reverberating shockwaves of patriarchal-induced common shock cannot be underestimated. In her work on trauma and recovery, Judith Herman draws a direct connection between trauma and communal life. She asserts, “The damage to relational life is not a secondary effect of trauma, as originally thought. Traumatic events have primary effects not only on the psychological structures of the self, but also on the systems of attachment and meaning that link individual and community.”<sup>22</sup>

The same could be said of common shock, albeit with a lesser degree of severity than trauma. Common shock damages both the individual and her community.

Silence provides the key component for this intergenerational transmission.<sup>23</sup> Naturally, the community wants to forget the trauma, because it involves such deep pain, but this is merely a short-term solution. While victims are shamed into silence, they cannot forget the violence or violation.<sup>24</sup> Silence comes at a high cost to both the individual and the community; it carries “significant effects on our own lives, and our individual responses have ramifications for the society as a whole.”<sup>25</sup> The victim of patriarchy has no choice but to internalize her pain, and a society replete with suppressed pain cannot function in healthy ways. Silence provides the sturdy scaffolding on which fear and confusion can grow.<sup>26</sup>

Silence is not always a conscious response; sometimes silence abides due to a lack of awareness. As Weingarten states, common shock results from witnessing violence and violation, and these witnessing experiences are often inadvertent.<sup>27</sup> Victims and witnesses alike may not understand the violence and violation they see, nor how to interpret it. For generations, women in the Mennonite tradition—as in many religious traditions—often remained unaware that their experience of sexism was a form of oppression. Weingarten cautions, “Witnessing without awareness, while it may have few immediate negative consequences for the witness, has profound negative consequences for the quality of life in our communities.”<sup>28</sup> For Mennonites who cherish their close-knit communities, the commonplace experience of witnessing patriarchy without awareness has especially devastating consequences.

## **The potential of witnessing**

*And the realization  
Punched me deep in my gut  
That sexism  
Is alive and kicking  
In my beloved Mennonite church.*

The role of the aware, compassionate witness is crucial for interrupting and transforming the intergenerational cycle of harm. Witnessing or experiencing violence or violation without processing it in a

compassionate community heightens distress and increases feelings of helplessness.<sup>29</sup> The compassionate witness, however, makes not only an immediate difference for the victim, but also a long-term difference for their shared community. Weingarten insists, “Compassionate witnessing has the potential for transforming violence at every level, from the personal to the societal.”<sup>30</sup> By compassionate witnessing, she means intentional witnessing that assists others and combats feelings of helplessness and being overwhelmed.<sup>31</sup> This act releases creative energy through “the power of speaking the unspeakable ... when the barriers of denial and repression are lifted.”<sup>32</sup> The witness helps break the pattern of silence, bringing violence and violation to light. Once exposed, it can be transformed.

Weingarten identifies four possible witnessing positions, ranging from disempowered and unaware to empowered and aware. This last position is the healthiest, offering the most potential to transform the injustice that evoked common shock.<sup>33</sup> The empowered, aware witness demonstrates the following by:

- being fully present, even if the connection will be brief
- listening deeply without preconceptions
- asking questions that serve the speaker
- recognizing what is implicit but not articulated in what is spoken
- reflecting back to the speaker what one has heard
- telling the speaker what her story has meant and why (optional)<sup>34</sup>

A conversation that follows this model presumes a level of trust between the witness and the victim. Beyond this, the story can be shared in a way that promotes healing if the community is ready to receive it in a trustworthy manner. Weingarten clarifies, “Community can only be a healing resource for witnessing when there is trust between individuals and groups within the community.”<sup>35</sup> Testimonies without trust represent witnessing positions of disempowerment.

Compassionate witnessing is further marked by five personal capacities, each of which can be developed: awareness, safety, empathy, *Aidos*, and compassion.<sup>36</sup> These provide a foundation for action in response to common shock. Awareness must come first; without it, the other capacities cannot be achieved. It requires a focused sense of presence and alertness to one’s surroundings.<sup>37</sup> Further groundwork includes

assessing one's physical and emotional safety and taking steps to reestablish it, if lost.<sup>38</sup> Empathy, or "feeling what another feels," promotes shared humanity and allows one to focus on another's experience, even the experience of the person who committed harm.<sup>39</sup> *Aidos* is a Greek term for "inner integrity and personal honor." It helps one to reinterpret a sense of shame, which may accompany common shock, in light of one's values that uphold integrity and honor.<sup>40</sup> Finally, Weingarten defines compassion as "suffering *with* another with the intention of reliving that person's suffering, not getting mired in it." One's heart is aware without being overwhelmed, and compassion carries discernment without judgment. This intentional act of compassionate witnessing makes all the difference in the world.

Compassionate witnessing is a multidirectional act. The witness practices it both toward others and toward herself. Indeed, the solid foundation of witnessing oneself is prerequisite for compassionate witnessing of others.<sup>41</sup> Weingarten connects the gift of witnessing to the process of remembering, where the scattered parts of oneself are re-membered. Someone else's gift of compassionate witnessing restores the lost capacity for a victim to witness herself.<sup>42</sup> Moreover, perpetrators need witnesses, too, although this comes after the victim has received adequate witnessing so the victim's trust begins to regrow and her story can be shared. Compassionately witnessing those who have perpetrated violence and violation opens the possibility for them to witness themselves, accept responsibility, and witness others with empathy.<sup>43</sup> Once awareness, safety, empathy, *Aidos*, and compassion have been established for the victim and perpetrator, healing practices can follow. Weingarten suggests nonviolence, forgiveness, reconciliation, and restorative justice as practices related to compassionate witnessing, which may occur independently of one another.<sup>44</sup> It is important to remember, however, that while these practices serve as the faith community's ultimate goal, the long road to get there requires the challenging, focused work of compassionate witnessing. Importantly, Weingarten's process offers a model that is consistent with the theological convictions of the Mennonite church, as a historic peace church, regarding nonviolence and reconciling practices.

## Female leaders in a patriarchal system

*Then I had children.  
These realities from my lifetime,  
Will they be part of theirs?  
Will my daughters blossom and grow  
Only to find themselves  
Restricted in how they can follow God's call?*

Silence is an especially poignant symbol for Mennonite women's experience of common shock in the face of patriarchy. Not only is silence expected as a victim's response to violence and violation, but the church has taught it as a biblical mandate for women's behavior. Despite the many passages demonstrating a different vision, this rationale comes from two particular passages. The first relates to general silence: "Women should be silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, as the law also says. If there is anything they desire to know, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church" (1 Cor. 14:34-5 NRSV). Additionally, women are denied official leadership roles: "I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent" (1 Tim. 2:12).<sup>45</sup> In the last quarter of the twentieth century, this position began to change as the Mennonite church reconsidered its patriarchal views in relation to theology and ecclesiology. Male leaders such as the evangelist George R. Brunk, even though he did not support women's ordination, began to act as witnesses and confronted the fallacy of this interpretation. His daughter, Ruth Brunk Stoltzfus, the first woman ordained by Virginia Mennonite Conference in 1989, recalls him telling a fellow pastor, "Men can't latch onto one or two verses in the Bible about silence just to please our own egos."<sup>46</sup> It is no coincidence that three books were published during this time that bear witness to the experiences of women leaders: *Full Circle: Stories of Mennonite Women* (1978), *She Has Done a Good Thing: Mennonite Women Leaders Tell Their Stories* (1999) and *Quiet Shouts: Stories of Lancaster Mennonite Women Leaders* (1999).<sup>47</sup> As compassionate witnesses invited women to share their stories or wrote them as biographies, the intergenerational common shock began to undergo transformation. Among many, three notable stories stand out as testimonies to the power of witnessing.

Minnie Eberly's husband acted as an aware, but unempowered, witness to his wife's ministry gifts. In 1950 Minnie became the second wife of Irvin Holsopple, a pastor and farmer in Johnston, Pennsylvania. A trained nurse, Minnie had the education her husband lacked. She testifies, "I liked being a preacher's wife. Irvin didn't know how to make an outline for his sermons, so I offered to do it for him. You know, I'd be working and I'd have two or three ideas going at a time. I'd stop and write the outline. I was more educated than he was." Minnie literally wrote Irvin's sermons, and he welcomed the help as his gifts resided more in pastoral care than in preaching. Minnie "gathered the ideas, studied the Scripture, wrote the synopses, and finally even preached the sermons in the privacy of their home. No one else knew who authored Irvin's messages. On Friday evenings, Irvin would come in from the fields and ask, 'Minnie, did you make a sermon ready?'"<sup>48</sup> One evening, he commented, "Minnie, you should have been the preacher!" Indeed, she wished she could have.<sup>49</sup> But Irvin's role as an aware witness satisfied Minnie enough, given their rural 1950s context. Unfortunately, after Irvin died and Minnie remarried, her marital relationship changed from a partnership to a hierarchy. Her new husband, a Lancaster bishop, was much more conservative. When Minnie offered to help with his sermons, she recalls, "He told me in no uncertain terms, 'I don't need your help.'"<sup>50</sup> Although in both contexts patriarchy ruled the day, Minnie's experience differed greatly based on the willingness of her husbands to act as witnesses to her gift for the preaching ministry.

Although Jean Kraybill Sherk had gifts in pastoral care, she was relegated by a patriarchal system to the supportive role of a pastor's wife.<sup>51</sup> As she joyfully assisted her husband, Norman, with pastoral visits throughout the 1960s and 70s, she experienced violation being prevented from fully expressing her gifts for ministry. Eventually, she pursued clinical pastoral education (CPE) training with Norman's full support. He testifies, "We [Jean and I] have the clear assumption that when the Holy Spirit gives gifts, neither women nor men need to ask permission to minister. We just need to do the work. As we faithfully do the work, we pave the way for the next generation."<sup>52</sup> During her time in CPE, Jean grew increasingly aware of the need for Lancaster Mennonite Conference to have a chaplain's ministry, and in 1985 requested the bishops' approval to serve in an official chaplaincy role for the conference. One bishop confronted Jean, expressing his hostility: "Well, maybe you've finally found a ministry need that you could fill. But I want you to know you'll never get it."<sup>53</sup> The bishops' leadership

council, however, recommended creating the Mennonite Chaplaincy Advisory Committee and “agreed to commission Jean K. Shenk as a hospital chaplain for visitation to Mennonite patients in the Lancaster area hospitals. The visitation program will supplement the good pastoral care given by our pastors and is not intended to replace their ministry.”<sup>54</sup> This was a step in the right direction.

Based on the foundation of Norman’s compassionate witnessing and her own ability to witness herself, Jean could act as a compassionate witness to her clients’ common shock. On one occasion, she ministered to a dying woman who had, years earlier, left her abusive husband, who then divorced her, resulting in her excommunication from her Mennonite congregation and her own family of origin. Jean recounts, “I told her that the church was ready to listen to stories of abuse from women who have been hurt and victimized. All I could say was I was so sorry the church was not there to support her.”<sup>55</sup> In her role as an aware, empowered witness, Jean facilitated a letter of apology from a Mennonite bishop to the woman’s surviving sons. In 1992, Jean finally received credentials as a deaconess in hospital chaplaincy. She is paid through donations to this official ministry and meets monthly with her chaplaincy support group.

The third story best illustrates the transformative potential of compassionate witnessing. As a female pastor in the mid-1980s, Lois Barrett experienced common shock typical for many in her position. She recalls one particular experience of shock:

*I remember a discussion about licensing and ordination interviews with Kansas Mennonite pastors. To the amazement of the women in the group, every man there said that his interview had been no big deal. None had doubted that the committee would approve him. For all of us women pastors, there had been a large measure of doubt. We had been asked questions we thought were inappropriate. We had been grilled and challenged. We had not been sure that we would be approved for ministry.<sup>56</sup>*

Lois became one of the first female pastors in her regional conference. She remembers vividly how she and Dorothy Nickel Friesen “were introduced as new pastors at South Central Conference. Some of the delegates got up and started protesting that having women as pastors was unbiblical. One of them accosted me in the hall between sessions

with the admonition, ‘Don’t take this personally.’”<sup>57</sup> Remarkably, the conference responded by providing space for compassionate witnessing with a special session on women in leadership, where Lois and Dorothy shared their experiences of call and their congregations offered words of affirmation. A seminary professor, who once authored a book advocating for women’s head coverings, testified that he had received a new revelation and now embraced women in leadership. Barrett believes taking it personally was the answer to the problem. She was an aware, empowered witness to herself; her congregation and others were compassionate witnesses to her. Rather than framing the issue as an abstract theological discussion, she believes people needed to encounter real women in ministry. Lois concludes, “Theology often follows relationships.”<sup>58</sup> Her story illustrates the power of compassionate witnessing to transform common shock and confer hope for a liberated future.

## Hope

*Well, this is going to stop  
With me  
And my generation.  
I refuse to accommodate  
The intergenerational transmission  
Of sexism.  
I will not allow  
The devaluation of women  
To be passed down to my children.*

As we can see, so much depends on witnesses’ ability to recognize when common shock occurs and do something constructive in response. As Kaethe Weingarten insists, “Though unintentional witnessing of violence and violation is harmful, it can be transformed into intentional, compassionate witnessing, which has the potential for addressing and alleviating our misery and the misery of others.”<sup>59</sup> Witnesses have the power to help cocreate a new story out of the experience of patriarchy, to confer power and choose resilience and hope.

Both theorists and theologians cite hope as an important ingredient for the transformation of trauma, which is indeed an appropriate and necessary response. Weingarten suggests the concept of reasonable hope from the position of trauma studies, while Jürgen Moltmann offers the

theological perspective of eschatological hope. Weingarten's reasonable hope is based on actions toward a goal-oriented pathway rather than feelings, even though doubt and despair may remain present.<sup>60</sup> The role of the witness remains important for hope, because "others can help one do reasonable hope, both in imagining the goal and pathways toward it and in taking actions towards the realization of the goal."<sup>61</sup> This type of witness is aware and empowered—a compassionate listener who facilitates action in light of reasonable hope.

Jürgen Moltmann considers hope from the perspective of Christian Theology, connecting it with eschatology. By this, he means "hope which embraces both the object hoped for and also the hope inspired by it. ... Christianity is eschatology, is hope, forward looking and forward moving, and therefore also revolutionizing and transforming the present."<sup>62</sup> A survivor of wartime trauma, Moltmann remarkably presents a future-minded hope "directed towards a *novum ultimum*" that takes action to transform the present into "a new creation of all things by the God of the resurrection of Jesus Christ."<sup>63</sup> Moltmann also addresses the importance of hope being realistic, which may at first sound like Weingarten's call for reasonable hope. Moltmann, however, has a very different basis for reasonableness than Weingarten. Weingarten bases her concept of reasonable hope on human capacity, while Moltmann bases his on God's reason, a God who is the *creator ex nihilo*.<sup>64</sup> Moltmann elaborates:

*Hope alone is to be called "realistic," because it alone takes seriously the possibilities with which all reality is fraught. It does not take things as they happen to stand or to lie, but as progressing, moving things with possibilities of change. ... Thus hopes and anticipations of the future are not a transfiguring glow superimposed upon a darkened existence, but are realistic ways of perceiving the scope of our real possibilities, and as such they set everything in motion and keep it in a state of change. Hope and the kind of thinking that goes with it consequently cannot submit to the reproach of being utopian, for they do not strive after things that have "no place," but after things that have "no place as yet" but can acquire one.*<sup>65</sup>

Thus Moltmann's theology envisions a dynamic reality, one in which a progressive revelation unfolds. He further contends, "God is present

where we wait upon his *[sic]* promises in hope and transformation. When we have a God who calls into being the things that are not, then the things that are not yet, that are future, also become ‘thinkable’ because they can be hoped for.” What God can imagine, God’s people can hope for. And scripture affirms that God “is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine” (Eph. 3:20 NRSV). Sometimes, then, the compassionate witness testifies to the possibilities made realistic by God’s future vision.

God’s vision for reconciliation as revealed in scripture—especially in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus—promises that the Mennonite church can embody this kind of hope, even in the wake of patriarchal violence and violation. What actions, then, might Mennonites take toward a goal-oriented pathway with the hope of women leaders flourishing in the church? Moltmann claims that eschatological hope “makes the Church the source of continual new impulses towards the realization of righteousness, freedom, and humanity here in the light of the promised future that is to come.”<sup>66</sup> What might these new impulses be?

### **Conclusion: Can I get a witness?**

*But I cannot do it alone,  
Because sexism in the Mennonite church  
Is a systemic infection.  
That is why the Women in Leadership Project<sup>67</sup>  
Is so vital  
For the health  
Of us all.*

*This is the gift we give our daughters:  
To recognize, suffer and challenge  
Sexism in our own time  
So they won’t have to.  
To wrestle with discrimination,  
To speak up when it’s easier to be silent,  
To break the cycle  
And assume responsibility  
For the next generation.*

The first impulse for transforming common shock and interrupting its cycle is the public acknowledgement and mourning of the losses patriarchy has caused.<sup>68</sup> While many stories have been shared and the Mennonite church seems to be moving beyond its dark history of patriarchy, it is unclear whether the losses have fully been mourned. Indeed, the losses are great: generations of Mennonite women with gifts for ministry who have been relegated to doing “the back-around work” or denied meaningful positions of service to Christ and his church.<sup>69</sup> If, as Herman says, “Mourning is the only way to give due honor to loss,” then this is an important step that witnesses of the current generation must facilitate so broader healing can occur.<sup>70</sup> In my estimation, the church has moved quickly to combatting sexism without an adequate mourning ritual. Commendably, Mennonite Church USA created the Women in Leadership Project in 2009 “to name and transform sexism in Mennonite Church USA.”<sup>71</sup> While this is important work, unless proper mourning occurs, the community cannot move beyond its common shock.

Along with mourning comes the need for responsibility. Herman points out that public acknowledgement and community action together help restore the breach between the victim and her community. By community action, she means that “recognition and restitution are necessary to rebuild the survivor’s sense of order and justice.”<sup>72</sup> Who will take responsibility for the losses that have occurred? This is where witnessing to both perpetrators and victims, followed by Weingarten’s suggested practices of nonviolence, forgiveness, reconciliation, and restorative justice, come into play.<sup>73</sup> These loving responses help clarify offenses and restore both offenders and victims to a shared community that looks to Jesus for its unity and hope. This is the realistic vision for the Mennonite community held by “a God who calls into being the things that are not,” but for which we can hope because God envisions them for our common future.<sup>74</sup>

The compassionate witness, then, plays a critical role in transforming women’s experience of common shock under patriarchy. As we have seen, common shock is a response to personal and structural violence and violation, whether one experiences it directly or is a witness to it.<sup>75</sup> These effects not only impact individuals, but the community as a whole as generation after generation lived under a patriarchal system. Stories of Mennonite women leaders, specifically those published in the late twentieth century, provide prevalent examples of common shock. They

also testify to the potential impact of witnesses, such as the husbands of Minnie Eberly Holsopple Good and Jean Kraybill Shenk and the ecclesial community of Lois Barrett. As the empowered and aware witness is a compassionate steward of the shock of females under patriarchy, the community may begin to move toward practices that restore its health and vitality. Through such witnesses, victims and their community catch a glimpse of hope—a hope that is not only reasonable but eschatological, hope that moves them together toward mutual flourishing through the transforming power of God demonstrated in Jesus Christ. Prior generations of Mennonite women cry out, “Can I get a witness?” as their echoes reverberate through the years. Who will these witnesses be? The current generation of women leaders such as myself, who bear the pain of our female forebears who suffered violence and violation under the patriarchal system, can be such witnesses. Many of us are in a place of strength where we know the stories but did not have to suffer them directly in our own bodies and psyches. As a result, resilience has been conferred that enables us to serve in the capacity of compassionate witnesses.<sup>76</sup> As we rise to the occasion and bear witness to our community’s common shock, may the Spirit guide us all toward God’s preferred future and to greater participation in God’s reconciling mission in our world. For this we have hope, because God can “accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine” (Eph. 3:20)!

*This is for you,  
Eve and Juliet.  
It stops with me.*

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## About the author



**Sarah Ann Bixler** is a Ph.D. student in practical theology at Princeton Theological Seminary, focusing on Christian education and formation. She also works as the assistant to the director of the Center for Church Planting and Revitalization at Princeton Seminary. She has served throughout Mennonite Church USA in education, youth ministry, curriculum writing, and conference leadership. Sarah lives with her husband, Benjamin, and their three children in New Jersey and they attend Oxford Circle Mennonite Church in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.



### 3. Dare to be a Danielle:

#### Pioneering Women Leaders in the Mennonite Church

*Carol Penner*

It takes a lot of courage to be a gender pioneer—to be the first of your gender in a profession that has actively excluded you. For female leaders in the Mennonite church in the 1960s, '70s, and '80s, pioneering leadership meant standing firm in the face of opposition. It meant being a Danielle in the lion's den, when only Daniels had done the job before you.

In this study, I interview seven women who were gender pioneers in church leadership. I was interested in exploring how these women found the courage to do what they did. I name courage as the inner resource one has to persevere in the face of resistance or opposition. I wanted to hear the stories of what it was like to be a pioneer. I am not the first, and hopefully not the last to do this.<sup>77</sup> Doing research like this is important since some of the women are in their eighties now.

#### **Motivation for this study**

As a child growing up in a Mennonite congregation in the 1960s and early '70s, I saw women who seemed to me to have a great deal of power. They were strong leaders in children's Sunday school, women's groups, and children's clubs; these women had a big impact on my life. At first I didn't even notice that there were areas of the church where they were not allowed to minister. As I grew older, I realized that women were restricted to children's and women's ministry because other avenues were closed to them.

By the time I reached adulthood and was looking for direction for my life, I met female pastoral leaders, some of whom were holding important leadership positions in the Mennonite church. I knew that they were the first generation of female leaders in my area church conference, I knew they were trailblazers. Their modeling and mentoring allowed me to enter ministry relatively painlessly as a woman; I was part of the second generation of female leaders in the Mennonite tradition.

It was only recently in my journey as a minister, when I was called to pastor in the Mennonite Brethren Conference, that I realized more viscerally what it was like for those women to forge the way. The Mennonite Brethren conference in Canada has very few female lead ministers, with almost no women in conference leadership positions. Confident in my role as a minister, after working over ten years in a context more open to female leadership, I didn't think it would bother me very much. I was very much mistaken. While the congregation that hired me was unfailingly supportive, in the larger conference it was very difficult to be a trailblazer; at times I felt invisible and faced subtle and not-so-subtle put-downs. Suddenly it became real to me what my women mentors had endured to do their work. I came to these interviews with a desire to hear their stories. We have a history of excluding women from leadership; the people who were involved in changing exclusionary policies and practices sometimes suffered greatly in the process. Remembering their journey is a way of respecting their contribution.

I include my location in relation to my work, because the narrative inquiry method that I am using (see description below) encourages the researchers to identify their motivation for the research and the way they are embedded in the lives of the people they are researching: "As we tell our stories and listen to participants tell their stories in the inquiry, we, as inquirers, need to pay close attention to who we are in the inquiry and to understand that we, ourselves, are part of the storied landscapes we are studying."<sup>78</sup>

I have shared my personal reasons for this research, but those are not the only reasons why this is important. I also believe that understanding our past is important for charting a way forward into the future. The church still excludes groups of people; seeing how change happened can inform both the institution and the groups working on change. It can help us understand how the large ship that is the church can change course over time.

## **Method**

My research was composed of seven oral interviews. I approached retired women who I knew had worked in some capacity as church leaders in the Mennonite church in Ontario and invited them to be part of the study. All of the women I interviewed are currently part of congregations in Mennonite Church Eastern Canada. Some of them spent their whole working life in Ontario, others at some point worked in other provinces or the United States.

The women who agreed to be part of this study were chosen because I knew some of them; they had been my mentors. Others were acquaintances; they all lived within driving distance of where I lived so that I could do the interviews in person. They ranged in age from their 60s to their 80s (born in the 1930s, 40s, 50s). Some of them began employment in the church as young adults; some began later in life. Most of them were white women who had grown up in Mennonite congregations, which reflected the largely white demographic of the Mennonite church at that time in Ontario.

I used a narrative inquiry method for the interviews. This method has the researcher beginning the interview with a few open-ended questions, rather than following a set of prescribed questions in a certain order.<sup>79</sup> The interview is actually an informal conversation, with the interviewer asking questions that flow out the stories presented by the interviewee.<sup>80</sup> My presence as the interviewer and a sympathetic listener undoubtedly shaped the stories that were presented.<sup>81</sup>

The questions I asked were: “Can you tell me some stories about challenges you faced in ministry? How did you overcome them, or did you overcome them?” While my motivation for this study was specifically about women’s experience of being gender pioneers, I did not ask them to specifically share about this challenge. I was interested to hear what sorts of challenges they considered significant in looking back at their work, and whether they named the issue of being a woman in ministry as one of them. Similarly, I was interested in the concept of courage, but I did not raise that topic, but waited to see whether it emerged from the conversations.

I promised the participants that their identities would be protected, so I have assigned pseudonyms for each of them. You will be hearing from the stories of Anne, Brenda, Carrie, Diane, Elizabeth, Frieda and Greta. I also told the interviewees that I would share my findings with them before they were published, to get feedback. I will conclude my paper with their comments.

Not everyone I invited to participate was eager to talk to me. Not everyone has had a positive experience as a trailblazer in the Mennonite church. There are painful stories in our midst that people are reluctant to share. The personal cost has been very high for some.

The interviews all took place within a two-week period in the fall of 2016. Some of the interviews took place at the college where I work, others happened in the homes of people I was interviewing. I am not identifying the location of the interviews to protect the anonymity of the interviewees. Each interview lasted at least ninety minutes, some conversations lasted longer than that.

In order to help the women decide whether they wanted to participate in my research, each of the women was given the questions ahead of time. Some of them chose to tell their stories chronologically, others were more anecdotal. Some came with point-form notes to talk about, others simply responded from their memory. I didn't give any expectations of how they should prepare, or even if they should prepare, other than inviting them to be a part of a conversation where I would ask these questions.

I recorded the interviews and then transcribed them. Then I read them over again and again, looking for common threads and themes. Part of the nature of narrative inquiry is being open to discovering what is revealed in the narratives of the people being interviewed. Because the initial questions are so open-ended, as a researcher, you have to be willing to not find exactly what you are seeking, but the stories will tell you something important.

In this paper I will begin by outlining some of the challenges that the women related. I will then explore their explanations for how they were able to do the work they did, and conclude with their response to my paper.

## **Challenges**

The stories I heard from the women I interviewed covered a very broad range of challenges that they faced in ministry. Altogether they mentioned forty-nine different challenges, with the majority of the challenges being mentioned only once by one person. Such challenges included, for example, work/life balance, gossip, finding time to reflect, health, singleness, overwork, immigration and housing issues, various theological conflicts, financial constraints, team ministry, and unjust systems. Each of the challenges they named was poignant and significant in their specific story. For this paper, I am looking for common threads, and so I will highlight challenges that reoccurred in a number of the interviewees' stories.

I was wondering if I would hear stories of male resistance to their role as female church leaders. And indeed, this was one of the most frequently mentioned challenges. Five of the seven women told stories of men challenging their authority or ignoring their contributions. Brenda writes about being ignored,

*And there were a hundred of us in that room. Three women and a hundred men, and I was the only one giving a paper ... and it was like totally ignored. It was as if I hadn't said a word. It was totally ignored. And so I just had to leave. I went down to the washroom and there were the other two women, and we were all crying. It was just one of those conferences. ...*<sup>82</sup>

Brenda's phrase "one of those conferences", implies that this was not the only time she experienced this. Being a woman affected how she was viewed as a ministering person, "And so I have always struggled with not getting affirmation from the church community somehow."<sup>83</sup> Elizabeth spoke about being put down more overtly: "One of the single men said to me at one point, and this is so indicative, 'A little girl like you shouldn't be using those big words.' Or big concepts [pause] BOOM! in terms of feeling, right?"<sup>84</sup>

Several of the women told stories about having a difficult time finding a placement as a minister or getting credentialed. Elizabeth went to seminary in the 1950s, and began her ministry in the 1960s:

*You know women didn't have church positions. This was a big deal, people in the church who ran the church, understood 'secretaries.' That's what I was, part-time secretarial assistant. ... One thing I learned was that my education at the seminary, my seminary degree counted for almost zero. I was not encouraged to help with the young people, and I'd been trained to work with young people. ... I was quite conscious of it. But I didn't make a big spiel of it. But I knew that I was not being fully recognized and used.*<sup>85</sup>

Elizabeth went on to observe that as a church secretary in the 1960s, she actually did function in a pastoral way:

*And when the pastor, there was a transition into another pastor, but for a while there was no pastor, I did everything but preach. I connected with the deacons, and they were all male, and would you believe, that church said to me [whispering], "Would you become a deacon?" It would have been a first for women."<sup>86</sup>*

Elizabeth's experience contrasted quite sharply with another woman's story who entered ministry in the early 1980s. Diane shared a couple of hard examples of where she was discriminated against as a woman, however, on the whole she observed, "But generally throughout my ministry, I didn't really see many issues with being accepted as the pastor or one of the pastors, whatever the role was."<sup>87</sup>

Resistance to their ministry did not only come from men. Four of the women shared painful stories of not being supported by women. Greta shared, "But on a personal level that was a really painful sort of ... that women didn't support, didn't support me."<sup>88</sup> Brenda observed, "But the critique that hurt me the most was from [a woman] from my home church who said they hadn't understood a thing I'd said, and from my [female relative] who said, 'What are you trying to do, being so powerful up there,' kind of thing."<sup>89</sup> When Elizabeth was summarily dismissed from a position through the maneuverings of another woman, it was devastating: "I remember going up in the elevator to my room and I was so low. My body was red, was on fire, I was so embarrassed, and hurt, and felt like a big old zero nothing. I'd failed miserably in this wonderful thing that I had longed for for years."<sup>90</sup>

As I reread the interviews, another challenge that frequently surfaced among the interviewees was male violence against women; five of the seven women told a story about this. In one situation the violence was directed at the interviewee, but more often it was them having to deal with the challenge of male violence in pastoral situations. Greta told of dealing with boundary crossings: "I like pleasing people [laughter], I don't like when people are angry at me. So that would be, and those would have come especially with things like the sexual abuse stuff."<sup>91</sup> Carrie commented, "We had to deal with really bad stuff, as far as practices of men taking advantage of women and all kind of family things."<sup>92</sup>

Four of the women talked about the challenge of retirement, which was not surprising considering all of the women I interviewed were in retirement. Retirement was, for some, a very fresh and difficult challenge (as opposed to some of the challenges they were relating that had happened decades earlier). Greta commented:

*One of the challenges I've had since leaving [the ministry position] is that, in a way, is exactly that—leaving. And that you are not just a normal person who has just left and can keep connections, that ... um ... that your perspective isn't valued. There's no place for it after you leave—I'm not sure what I'm trying to say here. When your identity—I think that retirement is a challenge for pastors, finding a new place to be and giving up that identity piece. Knowing where you fit and who you are.<sup>93</sup>*

Retirement was challenging in both an inner and an outer way; challenging in how people treated you and challenging in how you viewed yourself.

Four of the women mentioned navigating LGBTQ issues in the church as a difficulty they faced. Several of them had congregants that came out to them before they came out to their family; others grappled with supporting someone in the face of opposition from an institution. One talked about the difficulties of having a co-pastor who was preaching against homosexuality at a time when she was supportive. One talked about this as an ongoing challenge that she was still struggling to understand.

Three of the women talked about the challenge of self-doubt. Carrie observed: “The fact that things go wrong when you are doing God’s will does not mean that you are not doing it right. But it does raise the issue, ‘Am I doing it right?’ So there’s a lot of self-doubt and a lot of questioning.”<sup>94</sup> Frieda faced challenges that she had never faced before, which left her floundering: “So yeah, I wondered if there was any way I could have intervened in that situation. But didn’t know what on earth it could be, or how to do it.”<sup>95</sup> Carrie also talked about self-doubt in the context of faith:

*There was a lot of learning that had to go on. When you are trying to live a message that is more glorious than humanly possible to live, and you were trying to teach it, you realize your own shortcomings and inability. How do you deal with the issues that come up, knowing your own frailty, where you were missing the mark? I found that to be quite a challenge.<sup>96</sup>*

Three of the women talked about the importance of finding their voice. Anne recalled a recent visit from her pastor:

*Our pastor visited us last night. She's a woman. Towards the end she was talking about different things and she said, "I still have trouble believing that I have something to say in the pulpit." And I said, "Embrace yourself, claim yourself, we have called you to be our pastor and we expect you to do that." You know? And I thought, "Oh my goodness, I remember feeling that way."<sup>97</sup>*

Brenda spoke explicitly about finding your voice when patriarchy has conditioned you to be silent:

*Patriarchy is so internalized in me. So really it's me that has to change. I know that the outside world has to change too, but in many ways most of the challenge has been in changing the patriarchy inside myself. And recognizing that the reason I cannot speak is because I admire these men way too much. That I take their word way too seriously. But I don't see women and what they have to say. I have had to work on the patriarchy within.<sup>98</sup>*

Finding inner strength and power was a challenge for many of the women.

I have profiled the main challenges that were common to the interviewees, but the interviews did not consist primarily of these topics. The interviews revealed that ministry is complex and ministers face a wide variety of challenges.

## **Courage**

My perspective on the women I interviewed was that they were courageous because I knew they had pioneered a way into ministry as women. They had persevered in their course of action in spite of

resistance and opposition. I was interested to see whether they would share any self-understanding of themselves as courageous. Five of the seven interviewees used words with strong emotions as they talked about what it was like being a pioneering female church leader. After failing to receive a position because she was a woman, Diane observed:

*I had assumed that there needed to be some guinea pigs here, you know? Also, I knew I was a foot soldier in a process of social change and that that takes time and there's going to be these kinds of things happen. So that was all going on at one level, the head level. [pause] Yeah, I was really quite devastated.<sup>99</sup>*

Elizabeth shared heartfelt words after relating a particularly difficult story, “I had no recourse. I had no recourse. I had no appeal; no one was my advocate.”<sup>100</sup> Strong emotions accompanied the difficult path they were walking.

Only one woman talked openly about fear. Brenda observed: “The hardest thing for me was to ... try and work with that [all male] committee. I decided I would bite my tongue and just do it. You have to decide—to decide to be with the males and just do that. And do not be afraid.”<sup>101</sup>

As an interviewer, I did not introduce the word “courage” into the conversation. The interviewees used it three times. The first time the word came up was when Anne was talking about her admiration for the biblical character of Martha: “I like that story partly because I see a strength in Martha that people don’t often see. She had the courage to say, ‘I need some help.’ She was reprimanded a bit for that, but she still—that’s what she did.”<sup>102</sup> She drew parallels between herself and this courageous biblical character. Brenda used the word “courage” in a question to me, the interviewer. She was speaking about an educational setting where women joined together to plan a feminist conference:

*So we complained about it. So then we said, “Let’s do something about it.” ... So we organized this conference for our needs. That was the first time I learned that I didn’t need to just succumb to what the institution is saying you should do. You can change the institution even as a student. ... Did you have the courage to do that kind of thing? Were you that courageous?”<sup>103</sup>*

Even though Diane had been denied a position because of her gender, she persevered and applied for another position. She reflects, “I don’t know exactly what it was that gave me the courage to try again. Certainly I had a strong sense of call, you know. And certainly I had a strong sense that I did have a good support system around me, or a good set of support systems around me. I suppose it was those two things.”<sup>104</sup> Diane also talked about how doing one hard thing prepares you to do more hard things, “And that’s what I would go back to sometimes, when I, as a pastor, when I thought, ‘Can I do this sort of hard thing?’ Well, yeah, I could do it at [Mennonite college] and I can do it now [laughter].”<sup>105</sup>

Other interviewees didn’t use the word “courage” but they talked about persevering in the face of resistance. Hear Anne’s words, “That was a challenge. But I survived it. [laughter] ... but that’s kind of been the story of my journey. I have never let things defeat me. Yes, it’s been difficult, but it’s like, ‘I don’t have to let this be the end of me you know!’”<sup>106</sup> Anne also told a story of how the conference resisted her ordination, (the first ordination of a woman in her conference). She related what she said to conference officials in a meeting about her ordination, “[My congregation] sent a letter requesting my ordination; it’s being refused and I need to know why.’ And there was just total silence. And I thought, ‘I can sit through this as long as you can.’”<sup>107</sup>

While some women told stories of resistance and confrontation, Elizabeth talked about maneuvering rather than confronting, “But it’s not necessarily smooth sailing. You have to learn to maneuver these things, you know. I didn’t make big waves about things.”<sup>108</sup> The women showed different strategies for different times.

Courage was spoken of not just in terms of being a gender pioneer, but in the context of being a church leader, of working out what it means to be faithful. Elizabeth spoke of working for peace in a social justice context:

*We had worships every day! We started with Puah and Shiphrah. I mean that’s a very clear indication that you obey God rather than people, bad laws. And you save the baby boys. You’re like Esther, you save your people. You take risk. You’re like Daniel in the lion’s den. You say, “We can do no other.” You’re like Jesus who healed on the Sabbath, because that law was bad. Jesus who*

*loved the poor and the children and the women because what had built up against them was not God's way. And he pushed through all that. Not that we were Jesus, but we were trying to be faithful in our time.*<sup>109</sup>

Carrie talked about the cost of being a church leader, where you are exposed over and over again to very emotionally draining stories. During a time of retreat from her work she realized:

*And I realized that I had put a sort of shell—I call it a tortoise shell—I had put a shell around my heart. Because the pain was too great to be listening to these stories, and crying with everyone. And so I had kind of protected myself by putting this shell around my heart. And I realized that I had to come back to my own human person and discard this tortoise shell.*<sup>110</sup>

In this context, courage can be seen in the choice to be vulnerable, to be open to people and their stories.

When I asked women how they found the power to face the challenges, they had many different answers. I counted twenty-one different explanations they had for succeeding or persevering in the face of challenge. The three that I will highlight here are explanations that surfaced the most often in their stories.

## **Call**

The most striking observation from reading the interviews was that in the course of explaining how they responded to challenges, everyone of the women talked about being called to their work. Elizabeth said:

*So, and then, the baptism happened after that with the inner call, at the baptism which happened when I was eighteen. The scripture given to me by [her minister] was Isaiah 43:1-2: 'When you pass through the waters and the fire, they will not consume you.' And there again it was somebody providing a scriptural basis for life—they seemed prophetic.*<sup>111</sup>

She felt her work was part of God's work: "I think I was the catalyst that was used by God, I think, to morph into something bigger and more meaningful."<sup>112</sup>

Anne talked about an inspiring teacher at seminary who encouraged her with the concept of call. “And a lot of these women were saying, ‘You go, girl! We’re right with you!’ [A teacher] used to say to us, to the women who are considering ministry, ‘God never calls a person and then abandoned them.’ And I’ve often thought of that, you know.”<sup>113</sup> Diane said:

*I think generally I was, I was confident. In that I was exercising the kind of leadership that I was called to do. And that that was, the sense that that would be backed up by the church council. And I think way back at [a Mennonite college] was the place where I developed as a leader, really saw myself in a leadership role.*<sup>114</sup>

Four of the women told stories of Mennonite colleges/seminaries being the place where they were equipped with a call that enabled them to face difficult situations.

Greta identified call as an important part of her life, but initially it was a limited calling:

*But, generally growing up as a young girl in church and also as I grew older, I was often encouraged by older people to use my gifts. But not to think of myself as a pastor, that would have been—as long as I was volunteering—then I was always encouraged and appreciated. But if I ever thought of being paid for it, there would have been more opposition.*<sup>115</sup>

Her call to pastoring as a vocation came later: “It wasn’t until I had [a female minister] as an interim pastor for one year, and there I was really encouraged to use my gifts.”<sup>116</sup> This was confirmed by a male church leader, “I think you should consider seminary. Or chaplaincy somewhere,” he said. “You have the gifts for ministry.”<sup>117</sup>

Frieda returned to the sense of call when she faced difficulties: “So I kept reminding God that I was called and I believed that he/she was in the call, and didn’t come out of isolation, and I was doing what I could, but I needed a lot of help.”<sup>118</sup>

## Supports

All of the women I interviewed talked about support of various kinds that helped them to deal with the challenges they faced. Greta talked

about finding support as one of the challenges:

*But those have been the biggest challenges, finding the kinds of supports, personally and spiritually and professionally that one needs in ministry—to help you when you’ve made a booboo, which happens [laughter], to help you stay on track emotionally, spiritually, and professionally.<sup>119</sup>*

Some of the women spoke about God supporting them. Frieda talked about her own limitations and needing to draw on the Spirit’s power, “That was not me, I left a lot of things for the Spirit to do.”<sup>120</sup> She talked explicitly about being equipped by the Holy Spirit:

*It was as if there was a little bird on my shoulder saying, ‘Say that, no don’t say that. Don’t say that, say this.’ Like it was just there. And I could just count on that, that even when I was floundering for how to respond, there was just sort of that voice there. And you know it was very clear to me, very clear that that was the Holy Spirit. I haven’t heard that since I left office in that way. But it was quite miraculous.<sup>121</sup>*

Four women talked about how finding people with whom to pray was very important. Greta said, “It was a place where we could pray together, not necessarily about our work, just be a human being and talk about what’s happening in my life.”<sup>122</sup> As she talked about that group, she said, “Those relationships sustained me.”<sup>123</sup>

A number of them spoke about scripture passages that were important to them or biblical characters that they found inspirational. Anne commented:

*I was looking for these books, I got some books, and they were all about male ministers. And I thought, “I don’t fit this.” And so I went and read the Gospels and I saw what Jesus did. I think this is really what I want to do. I am called to be like he was, to minister to the people.<sup>124</sup>*

In describing how they responded to challenges, six of the seven women mentioned female friends as supports for their work. Brenda commented: “So I found my support by having two women to meet with. Two women with whom I could talk very frankly about what was

going on.”<sup>125</sup> Anne said:

*When I was in my second year at seminary, a number of us women—I think about five women—would once a week bring their bag lunch, and I would make a pot of tea. We would sit there and talk about what it’s like to be a woman in thinking about ministry and reading some of the stuff that was coming out. It was the early ‘70s.*<sup>126</sup>

Five of the seven women mentioned important teachers or mentors (male and female) who were instrumental in encouraging them through difficult times. Brenda, after speaking of a difficult experience, commented: “I got a letter from [a church leader] afterwards, unsolicited, saying, ‘I know that was a difficult time for you, and I just want to say how we at the conference admire you.’ [choking up as she said those last words]”<sup>127</sup>

## **Humor**

One of the things that surprised me about the interviews was how much laughter there was as the women told their stories. Carrie said, “So trying to keep your own inner balance. And trying to not make too many mistakes [laughter] ... there were so many unknowns.”<sup>128</sup> She also commented: “So here we were at Christmas time without a place to live, looking for where we were going to move to. Feeling like Joseph and Mary [laughter]. Off to Bethlehem.”<sup>129</sup> Diane said, “And I remember [a female friend] saying to me, ‘Okay, so you can’t be angry. I’ll be angry for you.’ And I said, ‘Good. Thank you!’ [laughter]”<sup>130</sup> Greta commented: “My role changed, and that was probably one of the most painful things for me in the whole time. Except there were other things that were painful too [laughter].”<sup>131</sup> Using humor was a way, it seemed to me, that they coped with the challenges they faced. Frieda was the only woman who talked explicitly about humor as a way of dealing with challenges:

*It seemed that the worst situations in some way, there was something funny about it, somehow a sense of humor—inside I was laughing because there was something that had come up that struck me as really funny, and somehow I think that saved me. ... It was a black humor a lot of the time.*<sup>132</sup>

She went on to say,

*I would get a phone call and I would think, “This is awful, this is just awful.” Then it sort of concluded in some way. And I’m just catching my breath and the phone would ring again, and it would be another crisis and I would say, “That one wasn’t so bad after all!” The second one gave me some perspective on the first one. And then there might be a third or a fourth one and I was like “WHOOAAA!” [laughter].<sup>133</sup>*

Laughter was present even as they told some of their most painful stories.

### **The women respond**

When I had written a complete draft of this paper, I sent it to the women, and solicited their feedback. They responded with affirmation for this work. Frieda said, “I like what you’ve done here.”<sup>134</sup> Diane offered, “The combination of call, supports, and humor seems right to me as a common way through our challenges. (Although some of the humor may be more in retrospect!)”<sup>135</sup> Anne wrote, “Each difficult hurdle requiring courage to surmount was a moment of inner empowerment strengthening the resolve to face the next opposition.”<sup>136</sup> Greta wrote, “I trust your research will continue to be inspiring and healing to those who have experienced (and are still experiencing in many parts of the wider church) the brunt of the church’s rejection and reticence to receive the gifts of women. The journey continues.”<sup>137</sup> Elizabeth mused, “As a final thought for now, am wondering how the males who were on the ‘other side’ at the time, would respond now? Guess we’ll never know.”<sup>138</sup>

Frieda wished that the paper said something about how important supportive people were, who recognized when you had a good idea, even when others ignored it, or came up with it later and claimed it as their own:

*[In a discussion a colleague would say] “Frieda suggested that option about ten minutes ago. I think it’s a good idea.” [This was] the first time someone defended something I’d said instead of acting like it was their idea. (That had happened many times.) In some ways I had got immune to that kind of claim and learned to offer ideas like serving cake.<sup>139</sup>*

Both Diane and Frieda wished that something could be said explicitly about the importance of spiritual directors and contemplative spirituality. “They became crucial to me as grounding and support after about five years in ministry. Perhaps spiritual directors fit into the category of mentors in your summary, but to me they are not the same thing.”<sup>140</sup> Greta wrote, “Often my spiritual directors helped me to find my voice as a woman with men to whom I had abdicated my power.”<sup>141</sup>

Anne also noticed, “I saw no mention of what I perceive as complacency among current women pastors who seem to take their positions for granted forgetting the risk takers who made their role possible.”<sup>142</sup>

## **Conclusion**

The majority of the women I interviewed did see being a woman in ministry as a significant challenge in their life. It was not the primary or the only challenge, but it was important enough that many of them mentioned it. Being a ministering person involves responding to numerous and varied challenges.

Looking back over their lives as church leaders, none of the women explicitly said, “I was courageous,” although a couple of them recognized their tenacity in a roundabout way. What came out in the stories was women articulating how a call from God drew them into and sustained them through challenges they faced in ministry. They named numerous supports that allowed them to do their work, including God’s power, prayer, friends, mentors, and a sense of humor.

As we train people to serve the church, this research suggests that educational environments are important places where people are equipped to become leaders. A number of the interviewees named institutions as places where they learned to lead by leading. Discerning a sense of call is central to perseverance in ministry; training programs need to continue to address this. Providing support and mentorship to young leaders is also extremely important.

Speaking personally, I found this research extremely meaningful. I came away from the interviews, and the analysis of the interviews, with a renewed sense of my own calling. I felt that these women had provided support for me in the work that I was called to do. Laughing together about some of the hardest times in their work gave me perspective about the challenges I am facing. I was left with the impression of a strong

group of powerful women still living out their calling to ministry in their retirement years. I will conclude with Greta's own words about ministry at this stage of life:

*And I came across this quote that says, and I can't remember exactly, but it says, 'The test for whether your mission is finished is whether you are still living. If you are still alive your mission isn't finished yet.' Your mission in life, your calling in life, you could call it, whatever. We're still living, we're living, how long? So how do we keep discovering what our calling is in the various times of life?*<sup>2143</sup>

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## About the author



**Carol Penner** lives in Vineland, Ontario with her husband, Eugene, in a house surrounded by apricot trees. She has been a pastor, a freelance writer, and a sessional lecturer. She currently is assistant professor of Theological Studies at Conrad Grebel University College in Waterloo, Ontario, where she teaches Practical

Theology. She has a blog of worship resources which you can find at [www.leadinginworship.com](http://www.leadinginworship.com). In her spare time she likes hiking, quilting and braiding rugs.



## 4. Dancing on the Edges of the Denomination Tent

*Amy Yoder McGloughlin*

*I pastor a congregation that was removed from the denomination. I'll share the story of the removal, explore the dynamics of power, and envision what leading might look like post-denomination.*

I'm the pastor of Germantown Mennonite Church in Philadelphia, the oldest Mennonite congregation in the Western Hemisphere. It is a historically distinguished congregation in many ways. It is the place where the first protest against slavery was written in 1688—100 years before the Quakers spoke out against slavery and 175 years before the Emancipation Proclamation.

We are also distinguished in that we were removed from both the General Conference Mennonite Church and the Mennonite Church, prior to their becoming the Mennonite Church USA in 2002. We were removed from the Mennonite Church in 1997 through Franconia Conference for welcoming queer folks into baptism and membership, and we were removed from the General Conference in 2002 through Eastern District Conference for ordaining a gay man for his work as a chaplain.

So, while we call ourselves Mennonite, have solidly Anabaptist beliefs and practices, we are now an independent Mennonite congregation—which, in our Anabaptist communal theology, feels pretty ridiculous. This afternoon I want to talk to you about being removed from the denomination—both how the congregation has experienced it, and how I was called in the middle of it. I also want to talk about how I navigated it, and how I understand my own power and call post-denomination. I want to say a few things about resilience. How do we stay strong and take care of ourselves when we are in public roles, roles that are inherently full of conflict?

Hester Prynne and I have something in common. Hester, the main character of Nathaniel Hawthorne's classic novel, *The Scarlet Letter*, was forced to wear a scarlet A on her chest, a sign of her sins and of her tarnished reputation. I wear a scarlet GMC, a sign of my association with Germantown Mennonite church, the congregation I began attending in 1996 and have been pastoring since 2010.

For me personally, let me just say—not to be too dramatic about it—this congregation has saved me. I would not be in church, and I would not be a follower of Jesus if it weren't for the folks at Germantown that gave me a safe place to be angry and broken. I arrived at Germantown when I was 22. My mother had just died of cancer, and if one more Christian had told me that if she had had more faith, she'd still be alive, or that God needed another angel, I would have lost my mind, and my pacifist values.

This congregation was good at broken, and they were good at lament. So I felt at home there. It was the first time I'd ever been in a church where I didn't feel like I had to be perfect or together. I could come in angry or sad or however I was feeling, and it was ok.

This congregation—particularly the gay men of the church—showed me what God's love looks and feels like. I grew up in a church that preached God's wrath and anger exclusively. I could not even conceive of love and grace. These folks at GMC modeled the art of being broken and walked through the valley of the shadow of death with me so that I could see and experience love and grace on the other side.

A few years ago, a new attender described Germantown as “the last stop on your way out of the Christian village.” And that rings true for me. I found a congregation where I was able to be honest about my brokenness. And that was such a gift to me. If it weren't for Germantown, I don't know that I could be part of the church.

A year after I arrived at GMC, Franconia Conference leaders came to deliver the inevitable news of our removal from conference. And because I was so connected to this place after only a year, I could not stay away from this meeting. My friends—gay and straight—were hurting and would be devastated by this news. I had to be there for this meeting. I went to the meeting with Franconia Conference leaders in October of 1997 and cried tears of anger and grief with the congregation as we

heard the news—we were being removed from the conference by secret ballot. I watched with disbelief as Ken, a gay man in the congregation, insisted that these conference leaders finish what they started and walk him out of the church building. If the conference was removing this congregation from fellowship, they would have to show us what it meant. They would need to understand for themselves what they were doing to the body of Christ.

We were one of those weird congregations. Ours was part of two denominations—the General Conference Mennonite Church and the Mennonite Church. But they were merging in 2002, and it was pretty clear that the newly forming Mennonite Church USA did not want our naughty little congregation to be a part of things. And we certainly weren't helping things by following the movement of the Spirit in the church.

Two years after being removed from Franconia Conference, we consciously violated church polity by ordaining a gay man to chaplain ministry. So, Eastern District Conference voted publicly to remove us. But, recognizing the brokenness of all of this, we agreed to continue in a “liaison relationship.” Which means, in essence, we acknowledged that this removal was a sign of our human brokenness, and decided we'd keep talking to each other.

There was a long period at Germantown where we were sad and angry. And I think it was understandable. We had been rejected by the denomination we had known and loved for many years. The votes against our congregation were from family members. It was literally mother against daughter and father against gay son. Visitors noted that we sang hymns in minor keys more often than not. There were about ten years in the church where we were like the valley of dry bones. And in the middle of all that sadness and grief, the folks at Germantown—with the leading of the Holy Spirit—pushed me, kicking and screaming, into seminary.

When I entered seminary, it didn't occur to me that it would be that difficult to find a job in the denomination. Even though Germantown was no longer a member of the Mennonite Church USA, we still considered ourselves Mennonite. Being the oldest Mennonite church in the Western Hemisphere, we are the “mother church” after all. But others within the denomination began to name for me the difficulty I would

experience. One pastor I met said to me bluntly, “How in the hell do you ever expect to get a job in the Mennonite Church with GMC on your resume?”

I could feel the scarlet GMC burning on my chest for the first time. I knew there was truth in what he said. Could I get a job? Could I live this call placed in me by my congregation and the Spirit? For the first time, I understood a bit of what it must be like to be queer and Mennonite. It was tempting for me to try to cover up the scarlet GMC, to hide where I came from, to downplay the people that nurtured me to new and deeper faith.

But I just couldn’t do that. I couldn’t hide where I’d come from, even though I was advised by folks in the denomination to do so. This congregation was my community, my family, and because of the bonds we had and the gift they were to me, I couldn’t hide my letters.

Wearing my letters comes at a cost. Before interviewing at Germantown, I interviewed for a job at a little Mennonite church just outside of Philadelphia. And the main reason I didn’t get it was because they were worried I’d bring the queers with me. If they couldn’t handle the scarlet GMC, they were not ready for me to be their pastor.

By God’s grace I was called to be the pastor at Germantown Mennonite. I pastor at one of the few Mennonite congregations that can, at this point, handle my scarlet letters—the congregation that gave me the scarlet letters.

There is a cost to being an ally. There is a cost to associating with a congregation that has the audacity to baptize and welcome queer folks into membership, a congregation that blesses queer unions, and will ordain whomever God has called into the work of the church, regardless of who they love or their gender expression. It has limited my opportunities. It has been the source of some awkward conversations with search committees.

But when I look at what my friends Randy Spaulding and John Linscheid have dealt with in their lives— coming out while they were pastors, losing their credentials, being publicly shamed and condemned—and when I look at my two queer interns, Pax and Doran—who are clearly called to work in the church but who have so few opportunities—or

Russ and Charlie and Brittany—who have prayed for a safe place to be out and Christian—I think a few awkward conversations and some limited opportunities are well worth it. It is the least I can do to express my gratitude for this call and for my spiritual conversion.

Like Hester Prynne, I lovingly embroider my scarlet letters, embellish them with rainbows and glitter—all the beauty that has been shared with me in my congregation. I have a choice. Like the minister, Arthur Dimmsdale, in *The Scarlet Letter*, I can choose to be silent about my associations. But, we know what happened to Dimmsdale. That kind of denial and silence will only result in our spiritual death.

My own power as a woman and as a pastor comes not from anger at the denomination or desire for vengeance. My own power comes in knowing who I am, where I've come from, and allowing that self-awareness to fuel my work. I cannot be afraid to speak about the transformation I have experienced in this controversial congregation. So, back to the story of Germantown Mennonite. After many years of overwhelming, all-consuming grief—the grief of parents voting against children in the Franconia and Eastern District Conference votes, the grief of queer folks feeling completely alienated—this congregation began to experience resurrection.

Babies were being born and adopted, new folks were coming to the church, because they were attracted to our Anabaptist theology and welcoming position. Something was stirring within us.

We really trust the work of the Holy Spirit at Germantown Mennonite, and the Holy Spirit wind came in the form of more difficult news from Eastern District Conference four years ago this weekend. At a fall meeting, Eastern District Conference, who had been in a liaison relationship with us for ten years, voted not to renew that relationship. They voted to sever all ties with Germantown. It was a symbolic vote and a symbolic relationship. But still, it hurt.

The vote caught me and others off guard. From everything I'd heard up until the vote, it was a formality. Delivering the news to the congregation that Sunday brought back a flood of all those old feelings from being removed from the denomination years before. But as one person left church that Sunday, she said to me rather offhandedly, "This doesn't change us; this only changes the conference. We're still the same

followers of Jesus that we were yesterday.”

The truth of what she said was jarring. Nothing had changed at Germantown, so we shouldn’t act like it had. The only thing that changed was that some group of people decided that they no longer wished to relate to us.

That one little comment, combined with an intense reading of scripture through the lens of nonviolent atonement, began to shift our thinking away from being a victim of the denomination, to being followers of Jesus with a call to live out in our community.

So, it’s clear to me that the rest of the world does not look at Germantown Mennonite Church the way I do. The rest of the world often sees that scarlet letter burning on my chest, and they make judgements about me and this community I deeply love.

As the pastor of Germantown Mennonite Church, I’ve received non-specific death threats. I’ve gotten hate mail, and “instructive” mail on how I should teach my congregation the correct way to read the Bible. We were even threatened by Westboro Baptist back in the day.

Those things don’t bother nearly as much as the subtle signals I get from other Mennonites that let me know that we are pariahs—me and my congregation.

Like the time I was invited to speak at a youth event, then disinvited a few weeks later, because “We just aren’t ready for you yet. You understand though right, Amy?”

Or the time that I sat in as an observer on a contentious denominational meeting where the executive conference minister was speaking, and no one talked to me or sat within ten feet of me.

Or that time that my congregation ordained me and folks were afraid to attend because they were worried that their conference might find out. Or when folks hear me talk about the power of scripture to transform and are genuinely surprised that I read the Bible.

I’m very aware that depending on the event I attend in the Mennonite world, it may be hard for people to associate with me, to speak with me

directly, to engage me in conversation. Because I represent something. I represent queerness even though I am not queer. I represent controversy, even though I don't feel or look very controversial. I represent the thing that people fear in this denomination—exile and brokenness.

It's an odd place to be. I didn't come to the congregation as an attender in 1996 because I had a particular position on sexuality. I came because I was looking for Jesus, and I found him in this queer, marginal Mennonite church in Philadelphia.

It's an odd place to be, because I don't think of myself as radical. I think (and my teenagers have confirmed) that I'm boring. I'm a middle-aged white lady married to a middle-aged white guy. We have two kids. We live in a pretty quiet neighborhood in Philadelphia. I drive a minivan, for goodness sake. I don't look in the mirror and think—pariah. I usually look in the mirror and wonder what scarf will look nice with my boring outfit.

I'm a boring, middle-aged pastor, shepherding what others believe to be a controversial church. And yet I feel called to continue to engage the denomination. But, I refuse to engage as a victim, because Jesus didn't do that, because Germantown Mennonite does not live like that. So neither will I.

I feel called to engage the denomination because I am Anabaptist and so are you. And as an Anabaptist, I understand that discipleship is not a solitary journey. I also know that while we disagree on some minor theological matters, we agree on so much more. It is why I show up time after time.

The story that I relate to most from the scripture in this regard is the story of the Gerasene demoniac. The demoniac was healed by Jesus, a healing that terrified the townsfolk. This formerly demon-possessed man who was chained, naked, in the cemetery outside his town, was healed by Jesus. The scripture says that he was then “clothed and in his right mind”, and he said to Jesus, “Let me go with you!” But Jesus said, “No, go back to your community and tell them what I've done for you.” Essentially, Jesus says to this healed man, “Don't let your community scapegoat you anymore. You are healed. Go show them.”

Let me also say, that Jesus doesn't call every person in the Gospels to do this. Jesus called this one formerly demon-possessed person to return.

We have to recognize that there are limits to this analogy. This is not a safe place for everyone that has been healed.

I don't tell you my experience at Germantown Mennonite to garner sympathy or action. Not at all. I'm called to this place. I feel good about the work I do. I feel the spirit at work. I tell you these things because somewhere in my story, I bet you can relate to the feelings of isolation and outsider-ness. Because even if I wasn't the pastor of this infamous congregation, I'd still feel like an outsider in some ways. It's the strange side effect of this role of female pastor. As women leaders in the church, we automatically have a strange apart-ness.

Folks often ask me how I am sustained in a role that is isolated from the denomination. This question assumes something at its core that I feel uncomfortable with: that without the denomination, we are sad and hopeless people. In reality, I have a much easier job than many of you who are in the denomination. I live and work in a vibrant and beautiful community. Coming into denominational events (even one like this) is like walking into a cow pasture. It's pretty and all, but I just never know when I'm going to step into shit.

But I think it's important to acknowledge that I don't have a natural group of supportive pastors with whom I can collaborate or check in. I don't have a conference minister who is asking me good questions and checking in on my spiritual health.

So, here's how I try to manage the shit in the cow pastures of ministry in and around my context. I've broken this up into four categories:

1. Spiritual Practices. The two most important spiritual practices I try to cultivate are silence and Sabbath. I'm terrible at both of them, but I'm somehow gratified to know I'm working on practices and not perfection.

It gives me some hope to keep at them. I understand silence as the practice of stilling my mind, of coming back to myself and reconnecting what's happening in my head to how my body is experiencing it. I've practiced silence in many different ways over the years.

I've done a lot of yoga as a way to practice silence. When I first started practicing yoga, my instructor talked about taking up the

practice as a way to still her monkey mind. That idea resonated with me. My brain goes a mile a minute. I make lists in my head constantly. I make lists of lists I need to make. Yoga's focus is on breath. Breathe in, breathe out. Breathe in and move your body to this pose. Breathe out, and move your body again. Flow through the breath. Focus on the breath. There has been something really wonderful about having someone guide my breath and guide me into silence. All I have to do is breathe in and out when my instructor says so. I've joked that yoga is the only place where I let someone else tell me what to do.

The yoga practice has given way to simpler, more affordable ways to still the monkey mind. On my days off, I like to walk in Fairmount Park, the most incredible park system in the country. I try to walk for several miles. I walk in the woods, clear my head, and focus on breathing in and out.

Monday is my day off, my Sabbath, and I try really, really hard not to do anything work-related. I don't respond to emails, texts, or calls on Mondays. Sometimes emergencies happen, and that's ok. Sometimes people don't get that I'm off, and I have to give a firm, "We'll talk tomorrow" text or phone call. But generally, I try to keep Mondays for quiet.

2. This is not a spiritual discipline per se, but it is something I try to practice as much as possible. I practice opportunities to be human.

Now maybe that sounds like a strange one to you. Because obviously, pastors are human. We all know well our own personal failings. The problem is not our humanity, but the pedestal we are put on by others.

To go from being just Amy to having people call me Pastor Amy was a difficult transition. There's some heaviness associated with that title, and as shepherd of the flock, you don't want to let anyone down. I have found myself dealing with urges to present myself as more pious and godly than I am or ever could be.

And I really try to resist that. I'm a human in a role of leadership in the church. But I am not perfect. My family reminds me of this often, as do my friends. And even my congregation reminds

me. I'm delighted to have people in my life who remind me that I am human. It's important that we practice that as much as possible, that we relish in our failures as a sign that God is still at work on us.

3. As often as possible, I try to worship and participate in unfamiliar contexts. For Jewish High Holy days, I visit Rabbi Linda's congregation. On the Saturday before Easter, I slip into the Easter Vigil service at my neighborhood Episcopal church—they have an incredible choir, the incense is thick, and the worship is worthy of a celebration of resurrection. On Christmas Day, when most Mennonites do not have worship services, I slip into my friend's small Lutheran church and allow someone else to tell me the story in a way I've never heard it before. In this same vein, I participate in a weekly interfaith lectionary text study group with other clergy. We read the scriptures we'll all be working on for the next Sunday and share our observations. Rabbi Adam always brings a profound insight to us about Jesus, or Isaiah, or the psalm. The ways that other traditions read our shared scripture keeps the scripture fresh and alive. Hearing my Lutheran, Presbyterian, Methodist, and Episcopalian friends read the stories with their own theological eyes deepens my own understandings. And not only that, these folks have become my dear friends and colleagues in pastoral and social justice ministry. They keep me sane.

4. A final word on resilience comes from my twelve-year-old daughter, Reba. I asked her how she thought I was able to do this job and not lose my mind or my soul. Because, let's be honest, our kids are watching us, and they have a better sense of our coping skills than we do.

She immediately had the answer in the form of a recent pop song "Elastic Heart" from the artist Sia. She said, "Mom, you've got thick skin and an elastic heart." Thick skin, elastic heart—I like that. And I think that's a pretty amazing compliment from a twelve-year-old.

Ultimately, that's what we need in this work. I can't take every criticism or failing to heart, because the toxicity might just destroy me.

And at the same time, we have to have an open heart for the work, our community, and the congregation we serve. We have to or we will not survive.

Your context does not have to be nearly as complicated as mine to relate to some of what I've talked about today. I sincerely hope it's not. We all work in places that have great potential for toxicity. But in all those places, I pray that you are finding hope, ways to come back to yourself and to God, and people who keep you grounded. May you cultivate those people, places, and experiences in your work and ministry.

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### About the author



**Amy Yoder McGloughlin** has served as pastor with the good folks at Germantown Mennonite since 2010. Before becoming a pastor, Amy worked as a social worker and trainer in the child welfare system in Philadelphia. Amy is passionate about collaborating to create meaningful worship and loves the vulnerable, gut wrenching preaching process. Amy is also actively involved with Christian Peacemaker Teams and leads a multi-faith delegation to Palestine every summer. Amy has been married to Charlie for twenty-three years and together they parent two incredible teenagers, Willem (16) and Reba (13). Amy loves watching her kids grow and do brave things.



## 5. Sophia at the Crossroads:

### Dismantling Patriarchy in the Church through the Biblical Goddess

*Christi Hoover Seidel*

*Then all the men who knew that their wives were burning incense to other gods, along with all the women who were present—a large assembly—and all the people living in Lower and Upper Egypt, said to Jeremiah, “We will not listen to the message you have spoken to us in the name of the LORD! We will certainly do everything we said we would: We will burn incense to the Queen of Heaven and will pour out drink offerings to her just as we and our ancestors, our kings and our officials did in the towns of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem. At that time we had plenty of food and were well off and suffered no harm. But ever since we stopped burning incense to the Queen of Heaven and pouring out drink offerings to her, we have had nothing and have been perishing by sword and famine.”*  
—Jeremiah 44:15-18 NIV

#### It's in the Bible

The Jeremiah passage above exemplifies that divine communion with a goddess figure is nothing new. Worshipping the “Queen of Heaven” was common in the ancient world and even had its place in Israelite society.<sup>144</sup>

#### Beginning the journey

There are a number of tools readers can employ when doing responsible biblical studies work. The Bible is not one book; it is a collection of many books with distinct genres and complex authorship. Each biblical examination in this chapter employs biblical scholarship that is distinct to what is presented by the given texts. Our journey will begin with Sophia's introduction in Proverbs, where the genre of the text is the key to her liberation. The journey will continue through the gospel texts, where parallels will be drawn between the meanings of texts and words used to describe both Jesus and Sophia, with particular emphasis

on John's introduction of Jesus. Then in Acts, the literary device of personification will highlight the distinct character association between Sophia and the Holy Spirit. Finally, the social location of Paul will be leveraged to explain how Sophia is vital to understanding Paul's message of Christ's crucifixion and resurrection. All of these are key texts for understanding how Sophia can guide us in dismantling patriarchy in the church.

The anchoring statement of the book of Proverbs is: *"The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction"* (Prov. 1:7 NRSV).

This statement conveys that there is a divine dimension to Wisdom, and unless we approach Wisdom with awe and wonder, we may miss her. The way to engage her with awe and wonder is to bring curiosity and playfulness to our readership of the Bible. Readers who may still be grappling with permission to interrogate patriarchy in the Bible may want to consider the above passages as the first tiny cracks we encounter on this journey. Even if the texts make us uncomfortable, curiosity can empower us to take a closer look, to consider the possibilities, and to open ourselves to any signs of new life we encounter.

## **Proverbs 8: The birthing of the biblical wisdom tradition and Sophia as Woman Wisdom**

Proverbs is the oldest book of the biblical wisdom literature and where we will encounter one of the largest cracks in the patriarchal asphalt. This is where Woman Wisdom is introduced, a personification in feminine form. Her name is Hochma in ancient Hebrew, the original language of this text. In this examination of the text, I intend to show how the genre of poetry unleashes her power in a way that transcends the patriarchal context in which She was intended to be a prop for teaching young men. Instead, She emerges as the star of the show.

### *Historical context*

The historical context of the book of Proverbs hangs a backdrop, which will serve to deepen the appreciation of Woman Wisdom's emerging role in Proverbs. Proverbs is a collection of oral folk wisdom, passed down over generations, in addition to both pre-exilic and post-exilic collections of wisdom contributed by sages and scribes. The dating of these layers of texts ranges from 950 BCE to the fifth century BCE. This is over a four hundred year span of time, the latest of which would have been the

early post-exilic period, and would likely have included the development of chapters 1-9.<sup>145</sup>

Given the cultural context of this historical timeframe, the book of Proverbs assumes male readership—specifically boys—as the intended recipients of education in the home. It was the role of the mother/wife in a family to serve as the teacher. Because of this, the women described in the book of Proverbs were established and taught as ideals (Woman Wisdom in chapter 8 and The Ideal Woman in chapter 31) or as warnings (Woman Folly in chapter 9) that young men would seek out or avoid. The focus was on success and living a moral and virtuous life that would ideally reap the rewards of wisdom, wealth, longevity, offspring, and satisfaction.<sup>146</sup> The backdrop may be bleak, but the play is about to begin.

### *Literary Context*

Recognizing the patriarchal nature of the text sets the stage upon which She is introduced to the reader. But understanding the way She is called out is vital to how we hear her voice. An appreciation for the distinct literary devices used throughout Proverbs empowers our readership. There is an innate invitation for the reader to participate in acquiring wisdom, the response of which is to practice the art of discernment in order to become wise.<sup>147</sup>

Though there are many literary devices employed throughout the book, one of the most prominent is the poetic and metaphorical device of personification,<sup>148</sup> which is categorized as a figure of speech.<sup>149</sup> The personifications of both Woman Wisdom and Woman Folly, seem to set the stage and hold the necessary tension for discerning appropriate wisdom for any given situation.<sup>150</sup> Proverbs 8 personifies Woman Wisdom with a voice (8:1), a mouth, and lips (8:7), standing in a particular location (8:2) and interacting with those around her (8:4-6). Additionally, the feminine form of the Hebrew word for wisdom, *hochma*, genders her and employs an “I-Wisdom” association that can be used as a proper name, “Hochma” in Hebrew or “Sophia” in Greek, which are both feminine forms of the words.<sup>151</sup> She is also personified as lover, bride, friend, wife, and teacher in earlier portions of the book.<sup>152</sup> According to some scholars, the motto of the book is named in chapter 9, verse 10, “*The fear of the LORD is the beginning of Wisdom.*”<sup>153</sup> The importance of the personification of wisdom as being an “I,” rather than “it,” parallels YHWH’s relationship with humanity and demonstrates the

deity's desire to be sought by humans.<sup>154</sup> Biblical wisdom seems to be concerned with the created order, and the teachings are designed to help conform to that order.<sup>155</sup> Thus, the connecting point of humanity and divinity through wisdom demonstrates both divine intervention and destiny-producing action.<sup>156</sup> Later in chapter 8, Woman Wisdom is described as God's delight in creating the universe, playing in God's presence.<sup>157</sup>

Being familiar with Woman Wisdom alone does not seem to be a complete picture of wisdom. Another key literary feature in Proverbs is the contrasting characterizations of the two women, Wisdom and Folly.<sup>158</sup> The juxtaposition of these characters is intended to aid our understanding of the other. If that is the case, then the characterization present in Proverbs 8 alone cannot completely convey wisdom to the reader. The reader must understand Woman Wisdom by the indirect characterization emerging from her positioning with Woman Folly. This indirect characterization works to polish Woman Wisdom and allow her to shine even more brightly, because Woman Folly is her ominous preface.

Examining the characterization found in Proverbs 8:1-17, we find that the author allows Woman Wisdom to break into the story with a loud demeanor (8:1). The question "Does now wisdom call?" opens the passage with rhetoric.<sup>159</sup> She is intentional about and grounded in her location (8:2) and articulate and persuasive in her self-advertisement,<sup>160</sup> the latter being a direct characterization of herself.<sup>161</sup> She promises her way to be the way that leads to life. Some scholars suggest that the attributes given to her are those of a goddess,<sup>162</sup> though others are careful to point out that such a characterization is intended to be metaphorical, not associated with an actual goddess.<sup>163</sup> What seems to be the consensus is that She has goddess qualities.<sup>164</sup> Imagine that! Even the author of a patriarchal text drew upon known goddess qualities in order to establish her as a character! This is a powerful realization. Others suggest that Wisdom could be understood as hypostasis, an underlying essence, versus a character with attributes.<sup>165</sup> This idea we will explore further in this resource.

This passage is poetry, identifiable by its meter and parallelism. The parallelism used throughout this passage seems to be best categorized by the "A, what's more, B" category of parallelism, which is one that at first appears to be synonymous consecutive lines in different words, but

at a closer look reveals that the second line intensifies or progresses.<sup>166</sup> Two examples are verses 1 and 10:

*Does not wisdom call, and does not understanding raise her  
voice?  
and  
Take my instruction instead of silver, and knowledge rather than  
choice gold.*

This poetry also involves a narrative that underscores the rhetoric. The plot of this passage is that Woman Wisdom, located in a particular setting, is communicating to other characters, for the purpose of pleading for them to find life. The problem is potential destruction, and she is the solution.<sup>167</sup>

All of these devices are used to allow the reader to become familiar with wisdom and to incite the desire of the reader to know the way of wisdom, but what we need to highlight here is that the genre of the passage is art. Poetry is art. Once the author decided to introduce this personification of Sophia in this way, she could no longer be bound to the patriarchal intentions of the book of Proverbs. The art liberates her, and gives the reader permission to interpret her power in new and transcendent ways!

#### *Role of social location of the reader*

What is a play without an audience? Proverbs are statements that contain truth that is recognizable over time and within a communal context.<sup>168</sup> Therefore, the role of the reader is of utmost importance for reading Proverbs. The reader is required to be judicious, because the invitation of the book is to practice the discipline of moral and intellectual discernment<sup>169</sup> from each person's unique social location and in a variety of situations contained therein. The reader must acknowledge the role of mystery, as the practice of wisdom is interconnected with the Divine's desire for creation and the created order, in which the reader is an active participant.<sup>170</sup> The reading of Proverbs itself does not make one wise, rather it the discernment of truth being well applied to life in context.

Exploring commentaries on Proverbs 8 by various biblical scholars helps to illustrate the variety of understandings of Woman Wisdom and how they can be leveraged in liberating ways. We begin with Athalya Brenner, a native-born Israeli and nonreligious Jew, who is a professor of Hebrew

Bible in Amsterdam and Texas. She came from working class origins and is a feminist and a political left leaner. She names her social location as westernized and “Orientalized,” in Edward Said’s sense of the word, meaning that her social identity as an Israeli creates an otherness for Palestinians and others living in the region, whether she likes it or not.<sup>171</sup> Her readership of Proverbs is less faith-oriented and more focused upon literary elements—gender, class, and ideas about knowledge—and the text’s influence on modern life.<sup>172</sup>

Brenner’s awareness of identity and otherness lends to her an understanding of the message of Proverbs to contain dual layering: an androcentric norm being interrupted by a metaphorical goddess figure implying some appreciation of women, albeit probably as an investment in the ongoing male fantasy of virtuous wife and mother.<sup>173</sup> She argues that religious devotion in Proverbs falls to the background as praxis rather than faith or ritual, and that the book is an element of the more generalized culture, which is mostly secular and conformist, promoting the status quo over change. Awareness of her own identity as a westernized, Orientalized and secular person compels her to read Proverbs with a hermeneutic of suspicion. She labels wisdom “consumer goods,” as she sees it contextualized by a life philosophy derived from affluence.<sup>174</sup> She is critical of the universality of the text and contends that the opportunities for betterment were open to males only in the context of the book.<sup>175</sup> However, she does view Woman Wisdom’s goddess-like personification disrupting the male-centered world of the text, which may offer the reader something beyond the intention of the writer.

Elizabeth Stuart, a British theologian specializing in Queer Theology, focuses on the disruption caused by Woman Wisdom’s display in Proverbs 8 and sees it as a necessary undoing of pre-exilic dominant theology. In fact according to Stuart, Hochma queers Divinity with her revelation, shifting creation from a solo performance to a team effort, and revealing plurality at the heart of the created order.<sup>176</sup> Though she acknowledges Hochma’s position to uphold patriarchal values in Proverbs, she contends that Hochma can at least be read as a subversive performance of Divinity. To that end, she reintroduces Hochma as “wisdom in drag,” coming out of the closeted confines of family and into the street.<sup>177</sup> Drag serves as a valuable tool for exposing gender norms in a particular culture, while rearticulating possibilities. By Woman Wisdom taking the feminine into Divinity, male and female are both transcended

and deconstructed. In other words, Woman Wisdom is the undoing of the foundation she is intended to bolster.<sup>178</sup>

Another significant observation of Stuart's is that the contrasting figures of Woman Wisdom and Woman Folly are actually very much alike. According to Stuart, Folly is not the evil twin of Wisdom but the same person viewed from a very different perspective. To those who desire to cling to the foundations of the existing status quo, Hochma is viewed as Woman Folly, because she creates disruption. Likewise, for those who are invested in a foundational undoing, Woman Folly is actually the way to life.<sup>179</sup>

The social location of the reader is vital to discerning truth, not only of individual proverbs, but of the book as a whole. As seen in the examples of Brenner and Stuart, the social location of the reader can offer awareness and tools, such as imagination, to discern the implications of the text for their present day contexts. Part of this process is understanding the social location of the text itself and how it affects characterization of Woman Wisdom. In the examples of Brenner and Stuart, the results range from Woman Wisdom being an acknowledged disruption to the continued androcentric norm to Wisdom appearing in drag to subvert the patriarchal foundation altogether by blurring the gender binary.

### *The emergence of Sophia*

There is another important aspect of social location that applies to readership of Woman Wisdom in Proverbs 8. With respect to the fact that the book of Proverbs was penned in ancient Hebrew, originally void of the Greek translation and the accompanying philosophical concept of Sophia, I want to acknowledge that there is a complex layering and relationship to the Wisdom writings, including the non-canonical (Protestant) writings such as Wisdom of Solomon and Ben Sira, written in Greek during the Jewish Hellenistic period. The latter two writings included the Greek philosophical understanding of Sophia and borrowed heavily from Proverbs 8, combining the Jewish tradition of Hochma with Sophia, a Hellenistic philosophy.<sup>180</sup> When the Hebrew Bible was translated into Greek, known as the Septuagint, Hochma and Sophia began to further overlap, and Woman Wisdom would have gained a more complex identity over time. The writers of the New Testament would have been privy to this cultural influence of Sophia. We will examine how this complexity helps explain the cracks within their writings.

### *My conclusions*

The historical context informs us that the book of Proverbs was intended as a perpetuation of patriarchal family and societal norms. However, I have found that the main literary feature, the art form of poetry, serves an even more profound purpose because it opens a doorway to the character of Woman Wisdom that the author cannot control. The nature of art holds both the intent of the artist and individual meaning for those experiencing the art. This falls in line with the role of social location of the reader. Because Woman Wisdom is presented as poetic personification, her power is limitless, as is the reader's engagement with her. This is the power of this text and the starting point of her liberation. The Hellenistic influence of the translation of "Hochma" as "Sophia" is especially poignant in terms of the poetry, which incurs much of its meaning from the reader. The social location of the reader would also be shaped by this Hellenistic influence, making the reader likely to understand Woman Wisdom as Sophia, a concept we will more closely examine in the next section.

I also pay special attention to the setting of her debut in Proverbs 8:2. The crossroads implies an axis. As Stuart points out, there may really be only one woman, and depending on the viewer's alignment with the status quo, she is seen as Wisdom or Folly. Beyond being a liberating feminine image which can help us interrogate a patriarchal God image, Woman Wisdom calls to us to be wise, to choose the way of life. As an artist, I envision her Folly counterpart to be like a lenticular printing—where you are positioned determines what you see. In this way, Woman Wisdom acts as the true north of my own compass, leading me to position myself against a patriarchal status quo and to seek the way of justice.

Once I see her liberated from her patriarchal fate, she is/connects with my own sense of the Divine Feminine. A goddess standing in front of a patriarchal backdrop is a powerful and healing image for those seeking to dismantle patriarchy. Can you see her?

## **The Gospels: Reconciling Jesus and Sophia**

### *Introduction*

The Gospels are four unique, yet overlapping records of Jesus' life and ministry. They are unique with respect to authorship and literary style, each translating the message of the gospel with distinct emphasis and focus. They overlap, particularly the synoptic trio of Matthew, Mark, and

Luke, in stories and sequence of stories told. By contrast, the gospel of John contains more than ninety percent of material that is unparalleled by the synoptic Gospels. However, it tells the same basic story.

Perhaps one of the most important questions for Christian readers is: “How does Sophia relate to Jesus?” It is not difficult to find interpretations of Proverbs 8 that disregard the feminine aspect of Woman Wisdom and claim the purpose of Wisdom is to point directly to the person of Jesus Christ. However, this interpretation of an Old Testament text is plagued with supersessionism. Supersessionism is a theological view that Christianity is the fulfillment of Judaism, as opposed to a new sect of Judaism, as it would have been understood in the first century community. This understanding undermines the legitimacy of Judaism as its own valuable faith tradition apart from Christianity. In this way, to correlate Christ with Sophia, we must first acknowledge Hochma/Sophia in her own agency in the wisdom tradition that pre-dates the historical Jesus. Knowing her in her own context can help us to draw connections to how she can be seen within the context of Jesus’ life and ministry. Our understanding of Christ is in light of what we know of her, as opposed to giving meaning to her only in light of Christ.

For this section, I include the voices of feminist scholars to help portray the problem of patriarchy around the life and ministry of Jesus. Also in this section, we will journey through the Gospels, examining a crack in each gospel, ending with the gospel of John. John’s gospel offers what is arguably the most profound parallel between Jesus and Sophia.

### *Patriarchy and Jesus*

As a teacher, Jesus embodied Wisdom. However, the personhood and ministry of Jesus Christ is steeped in maleness. This is both a beautiful and destructive reality for Christianity. As a piece of Jesus’ historical social location, his maleness is to be respected just as much as his other cultural identifiers such as family, ethnicity, language, and his Galilean village roots.<sup>181</sup> As one of my New Testament professors reminded us, the gospel is a treasure in earthen vessels—it is divinity tied in with humanity in particular and mysterious ways (2 Cor. 4:7). Jesus’ social location, as we acknowledge at the annual Christmas pageant, was part of the power of his life and message.

On the other hand, the problem with Jesus' maleness lies in the way we have used it to place and maintain maleness at the center of Christianity. Feminist theological analysis names two specific ways this happens. The first is that we use Jesus' maleness to reinforce a male and patriarchal God image. The second is that Jesus' maleness is leveraged to support a belief that the male sex is particularly honorable because it was chosen for Christ's incarnation.<sup>182</sup> To truly honor Christ's message, we must not idolize his maleness.

Because Divine Wisdom seems to fade from view when we move from Jewish Wisdom literature to early Christian writings in the New Testament, close examination of the Gospels can uncover this submerged theology of Wisdom known as "sophialogy." As previously noted, Divine Wisdom was a theological matrix borrowed from Jewish discourse and used within early Christian communities. It is imperative to understand Jesus, with respect to this backdrop, through his relationship to this Divine Wisdom tradition.<sup>183</sup>

### *Mapping the cracks*

An examination of the use of the term *sophia* within the Gospels offers a few glimpses of how this concept relates to the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. I have chosen one from each Gospel, cracks that help us hear her calling out within the incarnate life of Christ.

The birth narrative in Luke highlights one such crack early in the life of Jesus—his childhood. Luke 2:40, NRSV reads:

*The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom [sophia]; and the favor of God was upon him.*

Through Luke's use of *sophia*/wisdom we not only understand Jesus as embodying wisdom, we also see it connected with his relationship with God.

We are exposed to another crack in Mark 6:2, NRSV:

*On the sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were astounded. They said, "Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom [sophia] that has been given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his hands!"*

Here we are shown the connection of wisdom to Jesus’ teaching. Not only is wisdom evidenced in his teachings, it is powerfully confounding to the listeners.

A third crack is found in Matthew 11:19, NRSV:

*The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say,  
“Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and  
sinners!” Yet wisdom [sophia] is vindicated by her deeds.*

Not only are we provided with a glimpse of Wisdom’s feminine form in this passage, we also understand that Wisdom relates to Jesus’ subversion of the status quo. Though Jesus’ acts appear as folly, they will become understood as wisdom’s deeds. Sound familiar?

Though the gospel of John does not employ the word Sophia, there is a gaping crack in the pavement due to the way the gospel sets its introduction of Jesus.

*Sophia and Logos*

The introduction of Jesus in the gospel of John employs the Greek word *Logos* meaning, “The Word.” *Logos* also means “reason” or “plan.” When the gospel passage is compared to the description of Sophia in Proverbs, we can see some clear parallels. In Greek philosophy and theology, this reason is within the universe, giving it form, order and meaning. *Logos* is the established mediator between the Divine and the cosmos, both agents of creation.<sup>184</sup>

In the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament), revelation often came in the form of the Word of God. The Judaic view of Wisdom that drew humans to God is identified in this Word.<sup>185</sup> We find some evidence of this not only in Proverbs (2:6-8), but more predominantly throughout Wisdom of Solomon and Ben Sira. Thus, we have two Greek words referencing wisdom as the revelation of the Divine:

SOPHIA “Wisdom” Feminine Form	LOGOS “Word” “Reason” “Plan” Masculine Form
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Placing the texts of Proverbs 8 and John 1 side by side, we can see the parallels in the descriptions, roles, and human responses to both Sophia and Logos.

SOPHIA Proverbs 8:22-36, NRSV	LOGOS John 1:1-18, NRSV
<p>“The LORD created me at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts of long ago. 23 Ages ago I was set up, at the first, before the beginning of the earth. 24 When there were no depths I was brought forth, when there were no springs abounding with water. 25 Before the mountains had been shaped, before the hills, I was brought forth— 26 when he had not yet made earth and fields, or the world’s first bits of soil. 27 When he established the heavens, I was there, when he drew a circle on the face of the deep, 28 when he made firm the skies above, when he established the fountains of the deep, 29 when he assigned to the sea its limit, so that the waters might not transgress his command, when he marked out the foundations of the earth, 30 then I was beside him, like a master worker; and I was daily his delight, rejoicing before him always,</p>	<p>In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2 He was in the beginning with God. 3 All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being 4 in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. 5 The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. 6 There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. 7 He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. 8 He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. 9 The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. 10 He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. 11 He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. 12 But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God,</p>

<p>SOPHIA Proverbs 8:22-36, NRSV</p>	<p>LOGOS John 1:1-18, NRSV</p>
<p>31 rejoicing in his inhabited world and delighting in the human race.  32 “And now, my children, listen to me: happy are those who keep my ways.  33 Hear instruction and be wise, and do not neglect it.  34 Happy is the one who listens to me, watching daily at my gates, waiting beside my doors.  35 For whoever finds me finds life and obtains favor from the LORD;  36 but those who miss me injure themselves; all who hate me love death.”</p>	<p>13 who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.  14 And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth. 15 (John testified to him and cried out, “This was he of whom I said, ‘He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.’”) 16 From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. 17 The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. 18 No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father’s heart, who has made him known.</p>

Feminist scholar Elizabeth A. Johnson succinctly sums up this comparison:

*The Prologue to [John’s] Gospel, which more than any other scriptural text influences the subsequent development of Christology, actually presents the prehistory of Jesus as the story of Sophia: present “in the beginning,” an active agent in creation, descending from heaven to pitch a tent among the people, rejected by some, giving life to those who seek, a radiant light that darkness cannot overcome (John 1:1-18).<sup>186</sup>*

### *My conclusions*

In each gospel, we see evidence of the concept of sophia relating to the life, ministry, and identity of Jesus. Jesus embodies Sophia as Wisdom incarnate in the form of a male. This should not cause the reader to disregard Wisdom's traditional feminine form, but rather it helps the reader to continue to see her present within the Gospels. Through Christ's life and teachings, we see Divine Wisdom's ability to confound listeners and to subvert the status quo. Jesus was understood as Divinity in human flesh. His incarnation required him to have a particular social location. He was born into a time and space that was under Roman occupation. As the Wisdom tradition demonstrates, understanding has to be applied in particular ways to one's social location in order to be a realized Wisdom. Jesus was no exception. He had to navigate relationships, landscapes, cities, physical needs, and religious authority in addition to living under Roman occupation.

Like Wisdom, Jesus' teaching is subversive to the status quo. It demonstrates the reign of God in the midst of empire. Jesus overthrew the tables of moneychangers in the temple in Jerusalem. He declared that it was impossible to serve both God and Caesar, because both required everything. As the "king" who rode into Jerusalem on a donkey, Jesus subverted earthly kingship and was ultimately executed by the Roman authorities.

Sophia's introduction in Proverbs precedes that of Jesus in John. The similarity of the texts leads us to consider what John borrowed. The parallels between Jesus and Sophia help to alleviate the problematic aspects of Jesus' maleness. Both are Divine intermediaries, and thus we could say that John's use of Logos was a queering of Sophia rather than a replacement. Not only does this help guard against supersessionism, it allows us to consider Logos and Sophia together as undermining gender binary and the hierarchy therein, which is patriarchy. However, the reality is that the church emphasizes only one—the male form. Naming the Christ-Sophia relationship may offer the church a way to keep her present alongside of Logos, instead of allowing Logos to simply replace her.

### **Sophia and the Holy Spirit: An examination of the Book of Acts**

The author of Acts clearly intends to center the reader's attention on the role of the Holy Spirit and how this works with human agency—namely the apostles. Through the literary features of the Acts narrative, I will

demonstrate how the personification of the Holy Spirit helps us to see and hear Sophia calling from this rather large crack within this post-ascension record.

### *Historical context*

As with the book of Proverbs, the historical context of the book of Acts can hang a backdrop for understanding the accounts therein. Acts is a narrative history of events that took place following the ascension of Jesus Christ. The stories recorded in the book of Acts are believed to have unfolded over a period of about thirty years.<sup>187</sup> At the beginning of the book, the community was not understood to be Christian, but rather a sect of Judaism adherent to the teaching of Jesus Christ. Yet Acts is largely about the gospel for the Gentiles. Barriers were being broken and the small but rapidly growing community, enmeshed in the Greco-Roman world, had to discern its relationship with imperial power and surrounding cultures, which involved tension around gender, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status.

### *Literary context*

The genre of the Acts is labeled “narrative history.” Recorded history in the ancient world did not have the same facts-based expectation that modern history has, and careful attention to the literary devices, styles, and shaping can give insights into the intention behind the crafting of the accounts.

One important literary device employed in Acts is personification. Through an in-depth study of Greek terms, scholar Gonzalo Haya-Prats argues that the proper name, Holy Spirit, was a Lukan original, even though common uses of the term can be found in parts of the Old Testament. In being named, the Holy Spirit is personified as a divine being distinct from YHWH.<sup>188</sup>

Additionally, the Holy Spirit is characterized as subversive not only within the church, but also in engagement with the world beyond the church. This is exemplified in a variety of ways throughout the Lukan accounts. Acts 2:43-47 and Acts 4:32-35 portray a communal reality connected to the Spirit’s outpouring at Pentecost. In this reality, hierarchy is diminished and there is great equanimity among the people. These accounts may be read as the established vision for the church in Acts. If so, focus on the Holy Spirit’s subversive nature as well as on the human actions serves as fodder for discernment throughout the book of Acts.

How we read Acts is crucial to understanding the role of the Holy Spirit. Acts should be read as a narrative in which the Holy Spirit conducts the main acts.<sup>189</sup> A reading of Acts should prioritize observing the actual roles the Holy Spirit plays in Acts, over the lens of Christian tradition, which has systematized the role of the Holy Spirit.<sup>190</sup> In this way, the point of reading Acts is to learn from the interactions of the Holy Spirit with people, to get to know the Holy Spirit as a divine entity, engaged with the actions of people who may or may not be aligned with the Spirit's purpose.

### *The character and role of the Holy Spirit*

How does the work of the Spirit play out in Acts? The Holy Spirit is associated with Divine activity and presence throughout the book. Moreover, the effects of the first encounter with the Spirit, in Acts 2, is noteworthy in that it results in both the ability and inability of people to see the work of the Spirit, depending on their position and perspective. Those who cannot see write off the Spirit as drunkenness, and those who experience the Spirit understand the gospel message.<sup>191</sup> So the Holy Spirit's activity can be seen as folly or wisdom, depending on perspective. Also within this account, we see an intimate act of communication by the Holy Spirit, as each one hears the gospel in his or her own language. This shows that social location is important and that there is a close relationship between the divine and human actors.

The Spirit also acts as a leveling Spirit who works to undermine unbalanced access, inspiring the corporate use of resources as a way for all to experience love, peace, and justice, which is presented in the Pentecostal vision (Acts 2:43-47; 4:32-35).<sup>192</sup> Additionally, one of the most important messages in the book of Acts is that the gospel is intended for the Gentiles (Acts 10-15). There is now access across barriers, leveled by the Spirit, which demonstrates the subversive nature of the Spirit. The act of leveling differs from mere reversal. Instead of flipping the hierarchy, which simply establishes a new hierarchy, the Spirit subverts boundaries and fosters both unity and equality among the diverse community.

Throughout the book of Acts, there is a close relationship between justice and mission, as exemplified in the inclusion of widows and Gentiles.<sup>193</sup> Examining Acts 6:1-6, we find a marginalized group, the Hellenists, advocating for their widows. Though it's not clear whether or not the widows are being served or being allowed to serve, what is clear is that the apostles decide who will be preaching and who will be

serving. Seven are appointed by the apostles to respond to the need, so that the apostles can continue *their* work. These seven are described, in verse 3, as “full of the Holy Spirit and of wisdom.” Immediately following this account is the story of Stephen’s arrest, his lengthy sermon, and his martyrdom. If Stephen was to be serving, why was he preaching? This is one example of how the Holy Spirit seems to break molds and preconceptions and is characteristically not prone to manipulation nor fixated on absolutes.<sup>194</sup> The Holy Spirit plays a role in confronting values that need to be subverted, and in this case, it may be the hierarchy established by the apostles.

The Spirit promotes life, as seen in numerous accounts of conversion, healing, unity, and fellowship throughout Acts. In the midst of this, we find the community in Troas being comforted when Eutychus is brought back to life, after falling from a window during Paul’s speech (Acts 20). The comfort felt by the community describes the human connection of this divine wonder, contrasting to the fear unleashed in the community following the deaths of Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5. The human responses in these passages may provide an indirect characterization of the Spirit.

### *Sophia and Spirit dance together*

Being familiar with Woman Wisdom in Proverbs, we can glimpse the parallels between her personification and that of the Holy Spirit in Acts. First, we know that Wisdom and Folly are interpreted through one’s vantage point, determined by one’s relationship to a given status quo. Unpacking this further, perspective is understood in relationship to alignment with the status quo. Not only is the Spirit’s activity labeled “drunkenness” (folly) in Acts, the act of breaking down the barriers between Jews and Gentiles was subversive to the status quo of the Greco-Roman empire.

The Spirit also seems to subvert the hierarchies established by the apostles within the church. Characters like Stephen are commissioned for minor roles by the apostles, who intend to remain the preachers. But Stephen, who is described as “full of the Spirit and wisdom,” goes on to play a major role in both speech and martyrdom. There is a clear connection between the Divine and human agency through Spirit’s work in Acts, paralleling the way of Sophia.

As the way of Wisdom is Life, we see the life-giving nature of the Spirit throughout the many accounts of conversion, fellowship, healing, and even literally reviving the dead! This life-giving Spirit contributed to the awe and joy experienced by the growing community, mirroring Sophia's playful nature.

### *My conclusions*

The literary devices of personification and characterization offered by the author of Acts, are clearly meant to draw the reader's focus to the Holy Spirit. The work of locating, valuing, and liberating Sophia in Proverbs frees the reader to recognize her in other parts of the Bible. But in Acts, we see another personification that is characterized in such similar ways as the personification of Wisdom in Proverbs, that the resemblance is undeniable! Clear parallels can be drawn between the personifications of the Holy Spirit in Acts and Sophia in Proverbs. Doing so does not detract from the value or role of the Holy Spirit in Acts but can actually deepen the reader's appreciation and understanding of this divine counterpart. If the cracks reveal that Sophia is embodied in both Jesus and the Holy Spirit, we may begin to wonder about the system of roots below the cracks, buried beneath the asphalt. Perhaps there is something larger and more complex to be experienced?

### **The Wisdom message preached by Paul: Christ's crucifixion and resurrection**

We have established that wisdom is realized when it is discerned in relationship to one's particular social location. As a central figure in the spread of Christianity in the first century, Paul was uniquely positioned to preach Sophia, Divine Wisdom, specifically through the cross of Christ, based on his Jewish identity, his personal suffering, and his Christian experience within the Greco-Roman empire. In doing so, his message is a channel of a Christian hypostasis, Christ-Sophia, in whom the power of God is realized.

*For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written,  
"I will destroy the wisdom of the wise,  
and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart."*

*Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles,<sup>24</sup> but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.*

—1 Corinthians 1:18-25 NRSV

### *Paul's social location and historical context*

Paul was a Pharisee prior to his conversion experience, which means he would have been masterfully familiar with the Torah, the Law. Paul does not simply quote the Torah in this passage; it is part of his theological basis. His new relationship with scripture is interpreting it as a follower of Jesus within the Greco-Roman Empire and surrounding culture.<sup>195</sup> Paul does not abandon a Torah-centric view of wisdom, rather he extends the wisdom of the text to his Christian life.<sup>196</sup> Paul takes a Hellenistic Jewish teaching of the law as wisdom, which was perceived to be “a breath of the power of God ... emanation of the radiance of the Almighty” (Wis. 7:25) and connects it to Christ through interpretation. For Paul, Christ is the instruction of the wisdom of God—though not merely as a wisdom teacher as he is sometimes portrayed in the Gospels, nor as wisdom personified as portrayed in wisdom literature. Paul, rather, identifies “Christ crucified” as the wisdom of God. This is an extension of God's wisdom through Christ, alive now with the emerging church, through a Jewish follower of Christ.<sup>197</sup>

In the 1 Corinthians passage, we see Paul's first move, which is the subversion of all Greco-Roman status markers, including class, wealth, wisdom, skill, strength, and beauty. He inverts all of these standards with the cross. The cross symbolizes a condemned and crucified man, which was one of the lowest statuses imaginable. Moreover, God chooses to reveal salvation through the cross, which means that God chooses to impart highest status upon the world's lowliest. In the Greco-Roman context, this would have included the weak, the lowborn, and the foolish.<sup>198</sup> Paul's use of rhetoric in this passage contrasts human wisdom to God's wisdom, the climax of which is stated in chapter 1, verse 25:

“God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom.”<sup>199</sup> *Sophia anthropon*, “human wisdom,” is contrasted to “God’s mystery,” or “the message of the cross.”<sup>200</sup> At this point, Paul reintroduces Sophia as God’s wisdom through the cross.<sup>201</sup>

Though Paul manages to re-narrate Sophia, he is still confined, in part, by the Greco-Roman culture in which he resides. For example, his argument does not diminish hierarchy; it merely inverts it. While this is powerful, it does still uphold hierarchy, a patriarchal status quo. Yet, within Pauline communities, marginalized people, including women, had an opportunity to advance socially, which attracted followers.<sup>202</sup>

A very personal element of Paul’s social location was Paul’s physical weakness.<sup>203</sup> In 2 Corinthians 12: 7-8, Paul specifically addresses this suffering. Paul is clearly drawing a connection to God’s power and human weakness, which undergirds the inverted hierarchy. Beyond this personal “thorn,” he suffers as a follower of Christ. Suffering becomes a mode of Paul’s identification with Christ, and he implements this in his preaching. Thus, suffering and Sophia become key elements of the Christian life to Paul, who is a central figure in articulating God’s salvation plan.<sup>204</sup>

As previously stated, Paul’s scripture base was the Tanakh and Hellenistic Jewish wisdom literature, which includes Proverbs. As a former Pharisee, Paul was well versed in these writings, and they become fodder for theological interpretation in Paul’s articulation of the Christian life.

### *Paul’s message*

In the 1 Corinthians passage, Paul repeatedly emphasizes the wisdom of God over the wisdom of the world. In this light, it is not surprising that Paul redefines the wisdom of God in the light of Christ, nor that he does not simply assign a new identity of wisdom as Christ. Instead, Paul reflects upon a specific intersection of Christ and Sophia in the cross.<sup>205</sup> The cross is simultaneously folly and salvation, and how it is interpreted corresponds to one’s worldly status.

In her book *Law and Wisdom*, biblical scholar Barbara Schnabel points out that many scholars acknowledge that Paul, in 1 Corinthians 1:24, 30, ascribes to Jesus the role of salvation originally ascribed to Sophia in the Jewish wisdom tradition.<sup>206</sup> This intersection is necessary in order to

give the cross the power of salvation.<sup>207</sup> Sophia is the pathway to life, the creative power of the Divine. According to Schnabel, “Christ, as is divine wisdom in the Jewish sapiential theology, is the creative and salvational power and action of God.”<sup>208</sup> Just as Woman Wisdom and Woman Folly of Proverbs can be viewed as the same woman, and Sophia can be interpreted through one’s alignment with the status quo, Sophia present in the crucifixion gives Christ crucified the subversive power necessary to reveal salvation through Divine Wisdom.<sup>209</sup> In other words, crucifixion was the empire’s way of stripping all worldly dignity, strength, and life from a person. Divine Wisdom makes the kingdom of God present, powerful, and driven by life at this very same point. We may recognize this as the crossroads where Wisdom and Folly intersect, depending on one’s alignment with the status quo.

Paul clearly interprets Sophia through the message of Christ crucified. Christ-Sophia brings together creation and redemption, which may be understood as a fuller expression of God than either Christ or Sophia can offer alone.<sup>210</sup> Though Paul will later incorporate the resurrection of Christ, as in 1 Corinthians 15, he concentrates his preaching on Christ crucified. Joseph Fitzmeyer declares this to be, “the heart of Pauline Christology.”<sup>211</sup> Indeed, if Paul was suffering as a follower of Christ and preaching to Christians suffering within the Greco-Roman empire, it makes sense that Paul was not quick to embark on the power of resurrection over suffering. Though resurrection may be the underlying hope, it was not the lived experience of Christ’s followers. Given that Christ-Sophia is present in the inverted relationship between earthly power and God’s power, Paul is making Christ-Sophia relevant to Christianity in his own context. In the words of New Testament scholar Bruce N. Fisk, “To proclaim ‘Christ crucified’ is to declare not only that God has allowed Israel’s Messiah to suffer a shameful execution, but also that Christ’s humiliating death was (incredibly) God’s glorious triumph.”<sup>212</sup>

Even though the cross was at the core of Paul’s preaching, he did not end with the crucifixion.<sup>213</sup> It was the resurrected Christ that appeared to Paul, forever transforming his identity, life, and work in the world. Paul’s encounter with the resurrected Christ may have been the basis for his claim to be an apostle because, unlike the disciples, Paul had not known Christ prior to his death and resurrection.

*And if Christ has not been raised, then empty [too] is our preaching; empty, too, your faith.*  
—1 Corinthians 15:14 NABRE

Indeed, Christ's death and resurrection are not to be separated.<sup>214</sup> According to Paul, the wisdom of the cross is intended to bring life to those who seek it.

### *A feminist interpretation*

In his writings, Paul offered some focus to the glory and power present in Christ's resurrection. In 1 Corinthians 1:24, Paul "declared the risen Christ to be 'the power of God and the wisdom (Sophia) of God.'"<sup>215</sup> For Paul, knowing Christ-Sophia cannot be separated from the resurrection. It is foundational for faith in Christ, as Paul asserts in 1 Corinthians 15:17: "If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins."<sup>216</sup>

The naming of the crucifixion as a shameful execution indicts the power of empire as the cause of Christ's death, while God's creative wisdom and pathway to life, Sophia, was present to overcome death-dealing oppressive forces. Feminist scholar Elizabeth Johnson draws upon the creative power of Sophia to conclude the following about Jesus' suffering:

*(Jesus' suffering) is neither passive, useless, nor divinely ordained, but is linked to the ways of Sophia forging justice and peace in an antagonistic world. As such, the cross is part of the larger mystery of pain-to-life, of that struggle for the new creation evocative of the rhythm of pregnancy, delivery, and birth so familiar to women of all times.*<sup>217</sup>

Here God's power is at work to transform human existence.<sup>218</sup>

Additionally, Christ-Sophia becomes a new metaphor, and lends itself to an inclusive Christology by recapturing "the lost feminine in the Second Person of the Trinity."<sup>219</sup> Sophia adds the *she* pronoun to language about Christ, and can allow the liberating power of the resurrection to be more fully known, experienced, and understood in the world even today.<sup>220</sup> It is because of the resurrection that Christ-Sophia continues the redeeming process not only for human beings, but also for all of creation.<sup>221</sup> According to Johnson, "The victory of shalom is won

not by the sword of the warrior god but by the awesome power of compassionate love, in and through solidarity with those who suffer.”<sup>222</sup> For Paul, the intersection of Christ and Sophia in the suffering on the cross exemplifies this victory.

### *My conclusions*

One of the main approaches to reading wisdom literature is to discern the application and production of knowledge in relationship to one’s particular social location, historical context, and relationship to the Divine.<sup>223</sup> Paul was a particular human being who embodied not only physical weakness of some kind, but also passion for the message of Christ and the ability to use the Hellenistic tool of rhetoric to preach the message of Christ against the oppressive forces within the Greco-Roman empire. For Paul, this meant preaching the message of Christ crucified as an inversion of the cultural hierarchy and patriarchy that marginalized those who were disempowered within its social system. Paul’s Jewish heritage and familiarity with scripture, as a former Pharisee, enabled him to interpret the Hebrew text in the light of following Christ. Paul, in many ways, was uniquely positioned to be an effective central figure in the spread of Christianity in the first century.

Proverbs’ personification of wisdom grants Sophia divine agency apart from Paul’s rhetorical use because she was known in the Tanakh prior to the gospel tradition. The Gospels highlight her presence in Jesus’ life. In 1 Corinthians Paul’s preaching the wisdom of God in Christ crucified brings to light the Christ-Sophia relationship, as the cross inverts the relationship between worldly and divine status. While Christ crucified was the heart of Paul’s preaching in the midst of suffering, Paul did not disconnect the cross from the resurrection. If the resurrection is the undergirding hope of Christianity, the Christ-Sophia relationship present in the cross may be fully understood in the resurrection, as new life is birthed in divine wisdom.

From this, a hypostasis, or a new essence, Christ-Sophia, can be understood. Within this essence, the fullness of the power of God is realized because it blurs the binary opposition of male and female, which has the potential to liberate readers to see a fuller picture of gospel message. Though Paul’s wisdom of the cross inverts the hierarchy, the wisdom of the resurrected Christ-Sophia subverts hierarchy altogether. Could this essence be part of the larger system of roots growing beneath the patriarchal asphalt? Will we name and embrace it?<sup>224</sup>

## Summary

Woman Wisdom is not confined to the book of Proverbs. Her introduction through the genre of poetry was her key to liberation from the patriarchal intentions of the book. Understanding the Hellenistic philosophical influence upon the translation of the Hebrew Bible in addition to the theological contributions of Wisdom of Solomon and Ben Sira, we begin to see Sophia as Wisdom, in her divine agency.

From that point, our journey was to look for the cracks in other parts of the Bible where we could see her, hear her breaking through the text like cyclamen through concrete. Bringing the watering can of a variety of biblical studies approaches, uniquely applied to each book, we have seen her queered as Logos in John, mirrored by the personification of the Holy Spirit in Acts, and understood as the very pivotal essence of Paul's message of wisdom through Christ's crucifixion and resurrection. These are all key texts that have historically been used to advance patriarchy in the church. But what we come to realize, when we examine the cracks, is that there is a larger system of roots below the asphalt. From this root system, something bigger emerges for Christianity—a Christ-Sophia hypostasis.

With Sophia as a guide for our reading, we are empowered to see a new way forward—the path that leads to life beyond patriarchy. It is a path of the Divine reincarnated, extending radical hospitality to humanity, her children, to join her in cocreating justice. Though this may appear to be folly for those who are comfortable with the status quo, her seekers recognize her as Wisdom, Sophia.

She offers the way to life. By moving toward life, by resurrecting Sophia, we begin to understand that the key to our liberation is to dismantle the systemic oppression in all its intersections. Coined as “kyriarchy,”<sup>225</sup> this intersection of racism, sexism, heterosexism, environmental degradation, ableism, classism and other hierarchies has kept humanity, the earth, and even the church in shackles.

Implications for this are a new image of the Divine as Goddess—seen as wisdom to those who do not align with the status quo. How does she appear? She is black. Queer. Palestinian. She is Earth and her creatures. She is water—the source of life. She is loud. She is persuasive. She is the reclaiming of feminine Divinity, voice and agency. She is a reclaiming of biblical interpretation, Jesus, and theology. She is a reclaiming of the vision of justice. She is calling us to walk the path toward life, perhaps

life that can even be found in the church.

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### About the author



**Christi Hoover Seidel** joined the Mennonite community as an adult working with Mennonite Central Committee in Palestine. Since then, she has worked as staff for the Peace and Justice Support Network of Mennonite Mission Network, Community Mennonite Church of Lancaster, and the Center for Justice and

Peacebuilding at Eastern Mennonite University. Chris is also a spiritual director and Reiki practitioner whose relationship with the church has been empowered through choosing subversive ways to image and relate to the Divine. She attended Lancaster Theological Seminary to better understand the biblical text and ultimately read against the grain of the text in order to hear the voice of the Divine Feminine within Christianity. Chris nurtures her spirituality through creating art, listening to the earth, and laughing intensely. She has found that befriending difficult questions and speaking authentically fosters freedom for herself and others. She is committed to positioning herself to be a midwife to justice in all areas of life. Chris continues her journey of reclaiming her body, voice, and inner Wisdom, and longs for the day when she or her daughter can depend on the church to truly love all who identify as women.



## 6. Mary Magdalene:

### A Readers Theater for Three Voices<sup>226</sup>

*Kristy Shellenberger*

**Bold letters** indicate “all voices.”

VOICE ONE:

When I was a young girl, I liked to write my name,  
over and over and over again,  
Spilling lettered beauty across the page,  
engaging my identity—Miriam *ba migdal-eder*,  
“Miriam, Tower of the Flock.”

**ALL:**

**Mary Magdalene is my name.**

VOICE ONE:

I was named after my ancestor Miriam *ba-neviah*—Miriam, the prophet,  
who hid her baby brother Moses  
deep in the bulrushes of the Nile  
to evade Pharaoh’s orders that he be killed.

Miriam *ba-neviah*—Miriam, the prophet,  
who led her people and was herself led  
out of a land of slavery and oppression,  
into the wilderness of freedom and release.

With cymbals and dancing,  
joy and song did she lead them.  
Miriam *ba-neviah*—Miriam, the prophet.

Like my ancestor and namesake, Miriam, I too have hidden a cherished  
one deep in the bulrushes of my heart.  
I too have led a people, and have myself been led  
out of a land of slavery and oppression,

into a wilderness of freedom and release.  
With lavish love and anointing oils,  
the deepest joy and most indelible sorrow I have led us.  
Miriam *ba migdal-eder*—Miriam, Tower of the Flock.

**ALL:**

**Mary Magdalene is my name.**

VOICE ONE:

But like my ancestor, Miriam,  
I too am being forgotten.  
The stories of my “brothers,” Peter and Paul,  
like Miriam’s brothers, Moses and Aaron,  
take center stage  
in our texts and tradition.

My story, my experiences, my teachings, and my wisdom,  
like those of many of my ancestresses before me,  
remain largely hidden,  
though, sometimes, in plain sight,  
and, yet, unseen.

Like my ancestor, Miriam *ba-neviah*,  
I too possess a hidden thing  
that the rulers of *my* people seek to destroy:  
my very self,  
its deepest loves, truest stories, and life-learned wisdom—  
a liberator I must nurture deeply in the weeds  
until the time is ripe for its blossoming and release.

Miriam *ba migdal-eder*—Miriam, Tower of the Flock.

**ALL:**

**Mary Magdalene is my name.**

VOICE ONE:

I remember my days as a young girl,  
sitting at the back of the synagogue of my Jewish community,  
peering over heads and shoulders,  
as sacred words from sacred scrolls  
sung themselves off the page

deep into my own living being.

Like words from the Hebrew love song, the Song of Songs,  
whose lead voice is that of the Shulammitte,  
woman of shalom (*ba shulammit*, the Shulammitte):

“Black am I and beautiful,” the Shulammitte proclaims of herself  
“Black am I and beautiful.”

I would listen to this woman—this woman of shalom—the Shulammitte  
as she sings of her blackness, exalts in her hiddenness,  
as she reveals herself behind curtain and veil,  
in clefts of rock and on mountaintops:

“Like the god of my people,”  
I would ponder when I heard  
the Shulammitte’s story sung.  
“Like the god of my people,  
who also lives behind curtain and veil,  
in clefts of rock and on mountaintop,  
who reveals in the night and in the silence,  
as the night and as the silence—  
a god no one ever gets to see,  
a black and beautiful and hidden god.”

“Black am I and beautiful,” the Shulammitte proclaims.  
“Black am *I* and beautiful,” I would echo of myself.

“The sons of my mother were hot with me,” the Shulammitte continues,  
“The sons of my mother were hot with me. They forced me to be keeper  
of their vineyards.” “My own vineyard, the one that is mine, I have not  
kept,” the Shulammitte laments.

“*My* own vineyard, the one that is mine, *I* have not kept,” I reflect  
silently.

Miriam *ba migdal-eder*:

**ALL:**

**Mary Magdalene is my name.**

VOICE TWO:

You see, I too have been enslaved by my brothers,  
forced to keep their “vineyards”—  
their bodies, their needs, their agendas, their stories.

My own vineyard, the one that is mine, I have not kept.

“Where is the one whom *my* soul loves?”  
I would call from my bed at night.  
“Where do *you* shepherd your flock;  
where do *you* make to lie down?  
*Where are you?*”  
I would whisper into the night.

And then one night, the voice of my beloved, the one my whole being loves, came to me like music, like the pounding of my own soul:

*“You know for yourself, most beautiful among women. Get yourself out in the heels of the flock, in the margins of the fold, and shepherd your own doelings next to the dwelling of the shepherd you seek.”*

So I got up, disassociated from my brothers’ control, repeating the Shulammite’s words now become my own: “I will arise now and go about the city, in the streets and through the squares, I will seek the one my own self loves.”

I sought him, but found him not; I called to him, but he answered not. They found me, the guards of the city walls. They found me, this single, unwed woman roaming the streets, calling out like an unbound prostitute. They beat me, they bruised me, they took my finery away from me, these guards of city walls.

Scarcely had I passed them by when I found—when I heard—the voice of my beloved. I crossed the Jordan River as he was emerging from the waters of his baptism. I found my way to the place where he was teaching. A crowd had gathered around him. I hid myself in the back of the crowd, peering over heads and shoulders, as I had done as a young girl in the synagogue.<sup>227</sup>

“And while he was speaking, he glanced at me, caught my gaze, and something passed between us. An energy and vibration filled my whole body. My sight opened and I saw his true form and my own as light and fire and truth. And a love such as I had never known welled up in me.”<sup>228</sup>

I waited for the crowd to dwindle, and then I sought him again. I sought him and *I found him*. I seized him, and would not let him go. We sat down. He looked at me. My own vineyard was before me, and he saw it.

He saw the vineyard, the one that is mine, the one that is I. He saw it—he saw *me*—and he honored me with his attentiveness and listening.

Miriam *ba migdal-eder*.

**ALL:**

**Mary Magdalene is my name.**

VOICE THREE:

Through my brief encounters with this beloved, but mostly in the space between the encounters, I gained the strength to confront the demons that had bound me for so long to the powers of this world, to vineyards not my own—demons in the form of my hot-headed brothers and brutal guardians of city walls. These brothers and guardians, I came to realize, exist not only as external oppressors but also as internal ones—oppressors in my own heart, subjugators in my own soul—that prevent me from burgeoning into the living, embodied spirit I was created to be.

I grappled with my *own* hot-headedness: my rage, contentiousness and judgment, my intolerance, indifference, jealousy, and greed. I wrestled with *these* “seven demons” that had bound me, that had coerced me, into tending fruits not of my own living spirit: small, hard, sour grapes of bitterness and wrath.<sup>229</sup>

But, eventually, I passed through them.

Just as I passed through the city guards who beat me and bruised me on my way to seek my beloved, I now passed through these internal oppressors, these attitudes of mind and heart that prevented me from becoming the person *I am created to be*.

I did this work. I did it by myself. In the wilderness of solitude, space, and privacy.

But I was not alone. I dwelt next to my beloved, who also grappled with temptations in the wilderness, who was also comforted by our companionship.<sup>230</sup>

I began to realize that seeking what my soul loves is not so much about seeking a person as it is about seeking a space—an inner, virginal space, unbound by the demons that seek to control and enslave me. It is allowing the chords of love to pull me toward this place. It is welcoming my beloved to guard me on this journey, as I guard him, with respect, loyalty, and the fiercest joy.

I began to think about how Jesus moved along this path, away from the tyranny of the oppressors, toward the “little point of nothingness”—the image of God—“at the center of his being.”<sup>231</sup>

The “brothers” and “guards” were hot with *Jesus* now. They fought, they argued, they contended with him.

But rather than contest and defend, Jesus simply refused to play their game. He disengaged from the center of power and journeyed out into the margins of the flock, among the weakest and the most vulnerable—the place to which he had summoned me years earlier.

Miriam *ba migdal-eder*.

**ALL:**

**Mary Magdalene is my name.**

VOICE ONE:

I wanted to mark and honor Jesus’ movement along this path, so I prepared a feast. Like the Shulammitte does for *her* beloved in the Song of Songs, I surrounded my beloved, “my nard gave off its fragrance.” I drenched Jesus’ feet in it, wiping them with my hair. I kissed. I wept. The whole house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.

They did not like that, the brothers. They fought. They argued. They contended over what they perceived as a waste: “She should have sold the perfume and given the money to the poor.” They deliberated, they

intellectualized, they threw a tantrum over my free gift of love and anointing for death.

Jesus rebuked them, saying: *“Leave her alone. Leave her alone. Leave her alone. Truly I tell you, wherever the gospel is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will also be told in memory of her.”*<sup>232</sup>

Miriam *ba migdal-eder*.

**ALL:**

**Mary Magdalene is my name.**

VOICE THREE:

Just as they had found me earlier, the guards found *Jesus* soon after this. And like they had done to me earlier, the guards now did to Jesus: they beat him, they bruised him, they hung him up to die, these guards of city (and temple) walls.

But Jesus was not alone. As he had held me, I now held Jesus in the fire of this love. I stood there at the foot of the cross, catching his gaze, as he had caught mine years earlier, speaking words of shalom—of peace, of wholeness, of harmony, and restoration—straight from the mouth of the Shulammite herself: “Love is as strong as death, passion as fierce as the grave. Its flashes are flashes of fire, the very flame of Yah.”<sup>233</sup>

As he had held me, I now held Jesus in the fire of this love. I was there at his crucifixion. I was there at his burial. I was there at his resurrection. And the three days in between.

When the other disciples feared and fled,

**ALL:**

**I stayed.**

VOICE THREE:

When the other disciples returned home,

**ALL:**

**I stayed.**

VOICE THREE:

When Peter denied Jesus three times,

**ALL:**

**I stayed.**

VOICE THREE:

My heart stayed next to Jesus' heart the whole time, holding him in the deepest human love, weeping him into resurrection, *weeping* him into resurrection, weeping him into *resurrection!*

VOICE TWO:

I returned home that day, my heart burning to tell my friends and family all I had seen and known, eager to share the good news of healing and liberation. Some of my friends opened up space for me to share. Others strove to shut me down, to silence me, to set me up to tend *their* stories of who I am and who Jesus was.

But, like Jesus, I also refuse to play their game. I refuse to contend for *my* place at the center of the fold, I refuse to tend vineyards not my own. And so, as I had done years earlier, I disengage from *these* oppressors—*these* brothers of *religious* power and control. And I continue my journey out: out into heels of the flock, the margins of the fold, into the weakest and most vulnerable places of life itself.

VOICE ONE:

Like my ancestor Miriam *ba-neviah*, Miriam, the prophet,

I too have hidden a cherished one deep in the bulrushes of my heart—

my very self, its deepest loves, truest stories, and life-learned wisdom—

I too have led a people, and have myself been led,

out of a land of slavery and oppression

into the wilderness of healing and liberation.

With lavish love and anointing oils,

the deepest joy and most indelible sorrow

have I led us.

Miriam *ba-migdal-eder*—

VOICE TWO: Miriam, Tower of the Flock.

**ALL: Mary Magdalene is my name.**

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### About the author



In 2016, **Kristy Shellenberger** graduated from Bethany Theological Seminary with a Master of Arts in biblical studies. Her M.A. thesis, *A Mare Among Stallions: the Song of Songs and Its Shulammite*, is under contract with Wipf & Stock publishers to be published in 2018.

It is a translation and commentary of the Old Testament love song, the Song of Songs. In addition to getting her book ready for publication, Kristy spends her time as a mother of three growing and delightful kids, Meiling (15), Sophia (14), and Luke (12), and works part time at Found International Art Gallery in downtown Goshen, Indiana. Her husband, Eric, and family attend Assembly Mennonite Church, Goshen.



## 7. Nonbinary Identity in Ruth and the Restructuring of Power

*Steph Chandler Burns*

*Dedicated to Kevin Johnston*

*Friend, mentor, role model, family*

*March 13, 1959—April 13, 2016*

### Introduction

According to Ken Stone, postmodern biblical interpretation has provided a place for the emergence of a growing variety of interpretive questions to be placed on the biblical texts while at the same time, outside of the realm of Biblical studies, queer theory is also experiencing a growth in scholarship.<sup>234</sup> Through the works of a number of scholars, such as Stone, Guest, and Cheng, queer lenses have begun to be applied to Biblical scholarship.<sup>235</sup>

In my overview of queer hermeneutics it is this reifying of boundaries between homosexual and heterosexual that stands out.<sup>236</sup> While Stone and Guest both discuss “queer hermeneutics” as the attempt to break from these polarized boundaries, they still speak from their own limited perspectives thus breaking these boundaries with only limited success.<sup>237</sup> My initial impression of queer hermeneutics is that more attention should be paid to breaking from these binary categories. While scholars such as Stone and Guest have set the stage well for queer readings of the texts, deliberately nonbinary readings are a necessary next step. Indeed, in the anthologies read, many of the articles and explorations, while breaking with “traditional,” normative readings of the text, are often still located within binary understandings of sexuality. Thus, a bisexual reading seems not only justified, but necessary for further study, exploring insights within the text that are hidden due to our understanding of what is considered “normative.”

This bisexual reading of the book of Ruth will attempt to do just that: to locate meaning amongst the nonbinary identities that are expressed in the character of Ruth the Moabite.<sup>238</sup> The goal here is largely exploratory: what questions, assumptions, and breaks within traditional readings of the texts can bring this text alive for a nonbinary reader? Ruth provides an explicit example of nonbinary identity throughout this narrative in a number of ways: first, as noted throughout the narrative, she upsets categories of Moabite and Israelite, straddling this binary somewhere in between. Furthermore, she is depicted in meaningful intimate relationships with both Naomi and Boaz—a fact that is not only accepted within the narrative, but embraced by God in God's redemptive work, and looks forward to the subversive nature of Christ's life.

### Introduction to Queer Hermeneutics

Queer hermeneutics, while somewhat obscure, is a field of significant size and breadth. It is thus a lofty goal to provide a brief and complete overview of some guiding assumptions, questions, and principles prevalent in the works of those who come before me, in attempt to align my work with the wider field of study. While this work is more specifically a bisexual hermeneutic, it draws much legitimacy and guidance from the wider study of queer hermeneutics and theology, and other works written for more specific audiences. While I will soon delve into what makes this specifically “bisexual” in nature, let us first spend some time in the wider realm of queer hermeneutics as both a starting place and a jumping off point.

It is prudent to begin with an understanding of the meaning of the term “queer,” particularly as it applies to Biblical interpretation. In *Radical Love: An Introduction to Queer Theology*, Patrick Cheng outlines three meanings of the term “queer.” For Cheng, “queer” is an umbrella term, a transgressive action, and the act of erasing boundaries.<sup>239</sup> As an umbrella term, Cheng notes that “queer” is used to encompass a number of different identities and experiences, all of which are loosely tied together due to their status as non-normative expressions of gender or sexuality within the wider context of society.<sup>240</sup> Thus, the term is loosely applied to cover a variety of experiences ranging from gay, lesbian, and bisexual, to asexual, and transgender experiences, to name a few.<sup>241</sup> In contrast Deryn Guest, discusses the wide variety represented within this category, reminding readers of the potential for erasure of identities due to the application of such a wide umbrella term, noting that “identity categories will inevitably exclude as they include.”<sup>242</sup> Guest argues that

it is the “acknowledgement of difference that sparks creativity, creates awareness”<sup>243</sup> and finds common ground between diverse identities, in order to create a more positive world for a variety of identities.<sup>244</sup> With this as her primary goal and reasoning, Guest attempts to create a distinctly lesbian-identified hermeneutic, in order to avoid the erasure of identity that occurs under the term “queer,” while simultaneously recognizing the similar risk with using the term “lesbian.”<sup>245</sup>

Ken Stone notes the effect of social location on queer readings of scripture, noting it is more accurate to say there are “many queer readings,” reminding us that interpreters from varied backgrounds, contexts, and experiences will be shaped in diverse ways that will bring differing meanings to the biblical texts.<sup>246</sup> Deryn Guest provides one such reading in her lesbian-identified hermeneutic but does note that this is still only one reading of the text, and cannot encompass all experiences.<sup>247</sup> Further, this wide array is represented within the anthology that Stone edits, *Queer Commentary and the Hebrew Bible*.<sup>248</sup>

In addition to being an umbrella term, according to Cheng, queer encompasses the transgressive action of opposing these normative categories of sexuality and gender, turning societal expectations upside down and creating new subversive spaces.<sup>249</sup> Cheng thus notes that this transgressive action is “about seeing things in a different light and reclaiming voices and sources that previously had been ignored, silenced, or discarded.”<sup>250</sup>

Lastly, Cheng outlines the erasing of boundaries implicit within the term queer. According to Cheng, queer theory is skeptical of the traditional notions of sexuality and gender identity which are “reduced to fixed binary categories.”<sup>251</sup> Queer theory thus calls into question the social constructions that create normalized categories, such as “homosexual” or “heterosexual,” and “male” or “female.”<sup>252</sup> Cheng illustrates this point by calling upon the work of Foucault, noting that specific terms and labels for sexuality, such as the term homosexual, are relatively recent additions to modern vocabulary. In creating this vocabulary, sexuality began to define identity in a new way. Whereas prior to the existence of the term, same-sex acts were simply an action, we now understand and classify identity in terms of sexuality and gender.<sup>253</sup> Thus, according to Cheng the realm of queer theology also encompasses a number of differing possibilities. First, Cheng notes that queer theology, simply put, can be theology that is undertaken by queer persons.<sup>254</sup>

Next, queer theology can explicitly encompass the act of “talking about God in a self-consciously transgressive manner, especially in terms of challenging societal norms about sexuality and gender.”<sup>255</sup> Finally, queer theology can be doing theology in a way “that critiques the binary categories of sexuality and gender identity as socially constructed.”<sup>256</sup>

### **Justification for this bisexual hermeneutic**

In his article “Isaiah” in *The Queer Bible Commentary*, Timothy Koch uses a metaphor of a coal mine in order to describe queer readings of scripture as “highly selective work.”<sup>257</sup> According to Koch, when seeking what the Bible might say to LGBTQ folk, one is looking for very specific information, amongst a wealth of other information. This is similar to coal mining. In mining, there is plenty of material to search through, but when looking for coal, one does not attend to this other material. Similarly, with a queer reading of scripture, there is plenty of other material, yet the focus remains on what the scripture might have to say in a specific case. Koch claims that just as one does not need to attend to the shale in coal mining, in searching the scriptures for an LGBTQ reading, one does not need to attend to the question of what the Bible has to say about homosexual acts, just because others claim it is important.<sup>258</sup> My own bisexual reading will thus be my own highly selective work.

Deryn Guest claims the term “lesbian” as opposed to “queer” with the hopes of “highlighting the concerns of a particularly located constituency of readers who speak from a stigmatized place and who know what it feels like to be positioned as a deviant subject.”<sup>259</sup> I, too, choose to use the more limited term “bisexual” to apply to my reading. As Guest notes, “acknowledgement of difference [...] sparks creativity, creates awareness and facilitates attempts to make common cause with those other identified as outside the structures, in order to define and seek a world in which we can all flourish.”<sup>260</sup> May this bisexual reading contribute to continued varied and creative selective readings within the wider realm of Queer Theology.

Cheng’s three understandings of Queer Theology are helpful in defining my own bisexual reading of Ruth. First and foremost, this is a bisexual reading, as it is a reading undertaken through the eyes of someone who is self-identified as bisexual. Secondly, this reading will attempt the transgressive action of “challenging societal norms about sex and gender.”<sup>261</sup> Finally, a bisexual reading is well suited to the “critique of

binary categories of sexuality and gender identity,”<sup>262</sup> as bisexuality itself falls outside of these categories.

As Guest discusses in her work, any label comes with its challenges.<sup>263</sup> This, of course, remains the case with the application of the term bisexual. According to the San Francisco Human Rights Commission report, some feel the term reinforces a binary in gender expression, whereas others choose to identify with the term bisexual to avoid the above-mentioned erasure that takes place when using a wider umbrella term such as queer.<sup>264</sup> Thus, it becomes important to state the understanding of bisexuality within which I work. According to Sam Killermann, on his popular LGBTQ\* blog *It's Pronounced Metrosexual*, bisexual refers to “a person emotionally, physically, and/or sexually attracted to male/men and females/women.”<sup>265</sup> This definition is quite limiting, and expresses the problem identified by the Human Rights Commission. Killermann thus expands the definition, noting that “other individuals may use this to indicate an attraction to individuals who identify outside of the gender binary as well and may use bisexual as a way to indicate an interest in more than one gender or sex.”<sup>266</sup> It is this broader definition with which I will be working.

Finally, the San Francisco Human Rights Commission discusses the reality of and problems associated with bisexual invisibility. According to their report *Bisexual Invisibility: Impacts and Recommendations*, bisexuals “experience high rates of being ignored, discriminated against, demonized, or rendered invisible by both the heterosexual world and the lesbian and gay communities.”<sup>267</sup> In analysing the book of Ruth from a bisexual perspective, I hope to give voice to a specific bisexual experience, claiming existence from out of invisibility. As Mary Hunt writes in the foreword of *Blessed Bi Spirit: Bisexual People of Faith*:

*Once bisexual people join the conversation as full partners, it is harder to see the world in binary categories—heterosexual/homosexual; out/closeted; ally/enemy. The world no longer breaks down into hierarchically dualistic categories, with one of the categories always good, the other negative or bad. In fact, the binaries are no longer operative because something has come along to break their spell. Enter bisexuality, a third option among, perhaps, many.*<sup>268</sup>

## Guiding principles to a bisexual hermeneutic

In *When Deborah Met Jael*, Deryn Guest outlines four principles that guide her lesbian-identified reading of the texts. These she calls Resistance, Rupture, Reclamation, and Re-engagement.<sup>269</sup> This bisexual hermeneutic will draw, in part, upon these principles, as it focuses most specifically upon hermeneutics of suspicion and reclamation.

### *Hermeneutic of suspicion*

According to Guest, “commitment to a hermeneutic of hetero-suspicion uses a variety of means to disrupt and resist the ways in which the scriptures are used to sustain hetero-normativity.”<sup>270</sup> This is, of course, a necessary first step in developing a bisexual reading of the text. Guest’s second hermeneutical principle, rupture, identifies the importance of disrupting binaries of sex and gender.<sup>271</sup> For the purposes of this bisexual reading, the principle of suspicion is vital. From a bisexual context, however, what Guest distinguishes as two hermeneutical principles may overlap into one principle of suspicion. In this bisexual perspective, it is key to hold suspicion of both heteronormative readings, and readings that support the creation of binary categories for identity and experience. This idea of suspicion will thus pay attention to portions of the texts with assumed heteronormative or binary experiences.

### *Hermeneutic of reclamation*

Once these problematic or limited uses of the texts are noticed through the lens of suspicion, these texts and stories can be reclaimed for a bisexual audience. Guest notes that recognizing these limited or problematic readings of the text does not provide reframing into more positive tellings.<sup>272</sup> Thus, she notes the need for creative reimagining of the texts and their interpretations.<sup>273</sup> She notes that such reconstructions of the text “do not necessarily run against the grain of the text so much as against the dominant history of reception.”<sup>274</sup> Thus, while this bisexual reading will appear to be against the traditional understandings of the book of Ruth, it is important to note the validity in such an interpretation. Finally, Cheng notes the movement of queer Biblical readings towards combatting anti-queer readings of the texts by “interpreting it positively and constructively from their own perspectives.”<sup>275</sup>

## Bisexual reading of Ruth

With these principles of suspicion and reclamation in mind, let us proceed with a selected reading from the book of Ruth, noting Ruth’s

nonbinary identities as places of hope and visibility for bisexual readers of the text. In a read-through of the book of Ruth, one notices two key facets of her identity that fall outside of binary expectations of identity when reading with a bisexual lens. In the sections that follow, I will analyze how the nonbinary character of Ruth, through her relationships with both Boaz and Naomi, as well as her nonbinary identity as neither truly Moabite nor Israelite, provides a uniquely bisexual reading of the text.

### **Ruth as neither Moabite nor Israelite**

Within the book of Ruth, the title character, Ruth the Moabite, is depicted as forsaking her binary identity as Moabite through the act of returning to Israel with Naomi. She takes a risk in leaving Moab, subverting expectations in order to accompany the other woman. While in Israel, Ruth is not fully embraced by this new community in which she finds herself. In fact, throughout the narrative, Ruth remains “Ruth the Moabite.”<sup>276</sup> Although Ruth has specifically and radically left Moab, and thus this part of her identity, in a very real and even physical way, she is not seen as such by those with whom she now interacts.

In the realm of queer studies, strong emphasis is placed on allowing people to self-identify and choose the labels, pronouns, and identity meaningful to them. Assumptions are not welcome, nor safe. In the case of Ruth, the right to her own labels, even to create her own identity, is removed from her. Instead, in the book of Ruth, we see that labels are ascribed to her by external sources. There is also significant biblical evidence that Moabite is possibly the worst label that could be assigned within Israelite society.<sup>277</sup> Thus, throughout the text, we are reminded of Ruth’s identity as “other.” However, in leaving Moab, the label of Moabite also becomes insufficient to define and categorize Ruth. While she is certainly not “Israelite,” Ruth, in leaving Moab, transgresses her Moabite identity as well, thus falling somewhere between the identities of Israelite and Moabite.

It is common within the bisexual experience to find oneself in between identifying categories, somewhere not homosexual and not heterosexual. Certainly straight media and mainstream heterosexual society are wary of the bisexual,<sup>278</sup> and likewise, the bisexual is typically not fully accepted by the queer community either.<sup>279</sup> Often, as a bisexual individual, one is viewed as a member of whatever group you appear to be in, based on current partnership.

Thus, binary identity is normally still assumed. In Ruth's case, she appears by association to be Israelite, yet we receive the constant reminder that she is not Israelite, through the constant refrain reminding us that she is "Ruth the Moabite" in reference to her status as an outsider.<sup>280</sup> This is relatable for one who identifies as bisexual: whether appearing straight or gay, neither community truly embraces such an identity.<sup>281</sup>

### **Ruth's relationships with both Naomi and Boaz**

Ruth is perhaps the best biblical example of a character who might fall into our contemporary category of "bisexual," based on her relationships within the text with both Naomi and Boaz. Nevertheless, it is important to note that our modern understandings of sexuality and gender vary greatly from the categories familiar to the ancient world.<sup>282</sup> Thus, this is a highly anachronistic claim. It is thus more helpful to use these relationships simply as an example of another way that Ruth falls outside our own assumptions of binary categories, remaining careful not to assume bisexual identity in the same ways we might today. We cannot know for sure to what degree these relationships make up important pieces of Ruth's nonbinary identity, but it is significant that we have record of them here in the scripture.

As I have been engaging with a variety of commentaries, I have noticed that many scholars tend to focus on one relationship or the other (at least romantically/sexually). Either may be an accurate reading of this text. However, upon viewing the text myself, I am struck by the acknowledgment within the text of two covenants: one with Naomi, and the other with Boaz. First, in Ruth 1:16-18, Ruth names her commitment to Naomi explicitly. The language used in this text, according to James McKeown in his commentary *Ruth*, is reminiscent of Biblical covenant language.<sup>283</sup> Here, Ruth is making a significant, lifelong, dedicated covenant, committing herself to the God of Naomi and to relationship with Naomi herself. Ruth promises to be at Naomi's side, to follow, and to lodge with her.<sup>284</sup> Later, in Ruth 4:9-12, a covenant is made between Boaz and Ruth, and readers get a glimpse into some form of covenanting ceremony—presumably the wedding of Ruth and Boaz.<sup>285</sup> When this occurs, there is no sign of the termination of Ruth's covenant with Naomi. Readers do not get any indication that Ruth's commitment to stay by Naomi's side ends with this new commitment to Boaz. Indeed, if anything, Ruth's commitment to Naomi is solidified with the birth of a son, whom the text refers to as "a son for Naomi."<sup>286</sup>

In “Ruth” in *The Queer Bible Commentary*, Mona West discusses these three as an example of a queer family seeking safety in a world hostile to their nonbinary identities. West compares these relationships in the book of Ruth to lesbians living with a bisexual man or a gay man who acts as sperm donor for his lesbian friends.<sup>287</sup> While this is an interesting idea, I find it strange that she does not engage with the idea that Ruth may experience attraction, love, or affection for both the persons that she is in a covenanted relationship with in the text.<sup>288</sup>

It is difficult, given the difference in culture and the limited information that we have in the book of Ruth, to draw many conclusions about Ruth and Naomi’s relationship or Ruth and Boaz’s. It is dangerous to place our own agendas on the text and our own contemporary understandings of gender and sexuality. Is Ruth a biblical representation of a bisexual character? Perhaps, and yet perhaps not. It is both appropriate and ironic that we are unable to narrow this question to a binary answer. Regardless of the specifics of Ruth’s situation, the story of Ruth provides an important example of a biblical figure who resists binary categories of identity and allows for multiple conceptions of appropriate scriptural models of relationships and experience.

Finally, it is significant that Ruth—Moabite, outsider, possible sexual minority—perhaps feeling invisible in the nonbinary nature of her experiences, is embraced by God. With Boaz as kinsman redeemer, Ruth bears a son, Obed, found on the very family tree of Jesus, in the line of David.<sup>289</sup> As a minority and an outsider, arguably not worthy of the God of Israel, Ruth is instead embraced as part of Christ’s radical and royal lineage. In the presence of such an outsider, a minority in the branches of God’s family tree, we look forward towards a subversive Christ, a redeemer who embraces the weak, vulnerable, and the nonbinary.<sup>290</sup>

### **An anecdote from a(n invisible) bisexual Christian**

In his overview of queer theology, Patrick Cheng discusses a number of sources of queer theology. Cheng’s sources include the queering of scripture, which we have begun to do in the paragraphs above.<sup>291</sup> According to Cheng, another important source of Queer Theology comes from the lived experiences of queer Christians.<sup>292</sup> It thus feels appropriate to allow a small amount of my own personal anecdotal experience to color the above analysis.

The book of Ruth provides, for me, the possibility of recognition and affirmation of my whole identity, instead of forcing fractured pieces to exist in competition with one another. In my own experience, I can affirm that feelings of invisibility are real and are, at times, exhausting. Since coming out in 2010, I have felt there have been times when it has been incredibly frustrating that my identity is assumed, based on the partners to whom I commit myself. *Only in singleness did I not feel invisible.*

Since meeting and marrying a man, my heterosexuality is thus assumed amongst most company. Normally, this is not a particularly problematic dynamic, and in fact, it occasionally allows me the privilege of modifying my identity based on how safe I feel around others. There are, however, times when it is exhausting to feel invisible. In her article “Jesus, Bread, Wine and Roses: a Bisexual Feminist at the Catholic Worker” in *Blessed Bi Spirit*, Laurel Dykstra notes feeling as if she is stuck living in “in-between places.”<sup>293</sup> She notices how easy it is to tell stories of oneself while leaving out an important piece of identity. She realizes the pain and discomfort that comes from reducing oneself in such ways. She discusses the interconnectivity of her entire identity: her sexuality, spirituality, physical body, and nationality.<sup>294</sup> It is, perhaps, the disconnection of these interrelated parts of myself that leaves me feeling this invisibility, as it leaves Dykstra feeling “in-between.”

It is thus in the book of Ruth where I find hope of another way. Ruth’s nonbinary identities allow her to be used by God in profound ways. In many commentaries she is praised for her friendship, loyalty,<sup>295</sup> and initiative.<sup>296</sup> These characteristics allow God to care for her and Naomi, and despite, or perhaps even because of, her Moabite identity, God uses her to further God’s plan.

From a bisexual perspective, I see God’s use of Ruth towards God’s plan can be seen from a (my) bisexual perspective as an affirmation that one’s whole identity, when embraced, allows for wholeness and redemption in radical and unexpected ways.

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## About the author



**Steph Chandler Burns** (she/her) holds a Master of Theological Studies degree from Conrad Grebel University College, where she focused on queer theology. She is passionate about LGBTQ+ advocacy and learning what queerness can teach us about God. She is involved with ministry, advocacy, and justice

work in various capacities, and is interested in exploring the ways that the academy and the church can enter into deeper dialogue. When she isn't dreaming about the church's future, she enjoys playing board games with her family, sleeping, or hanging out with her two cats.





## 8. Inescapable Dream:

### Hannah Arendt and Theories of Power

Catherine Thiel Lee

*"I must end, always, by replacing  
our beginning there, ourselves and our blades,  
the flowing in of history, putting back what I took away,  
trying always with the same pain of foreknowledge  
to build all that we have built, but destroy nothing..."*

*...I see that my mind is not good enough.  
I see that I am eager to own the earth and to own men.*

*...Where are the sleeps that escape such dreams?"* <sup>297</sup>

*"I dream an inescapable dream."*

That is how Wendell Berry begins his poem "Dream." Berry is a novelist, essayist, and poet, who advocates, among other things, for lighter and more localized use of land. His poem is a dream for the earth, of the ways he longs to restore used-up, beaten-down fields and forests.

Berry's dream is complex. He longs for the land to flourish and dreams of a removal of human beings, so the land can be left to itself. But he can't stay away. His dream shifts and he reenters the world, "putting back what I took away," trying this time to build without destruction. And he confesses that he can't; he's limited by his weakness and eagerness to "own men." He sees the violence he and we have done to the earth. He longs for escape from a circular dream of futility.

Now, I'm not here to debate Berry's agrarianism, nor his patriarchal echoes, or even to talk poetry. But I think that his poem articulates a jumping off point for us—he is talking about a dream of power and power's faults and failings.

The faults and failures of how human beings use power are too common to ignore. Even in our Christian traditions.

For example, I have spent a fair amount of time working with the book of Esther. Yes, Esther uses her power to become Queen and save her people. And if we read to the end of the book (we usually don't), we learn that Esther also orchestrates a vengeful reverse attempt at genocide. And then there's David. And the Pharisees. And the Protestant Reformers. And the Mennonites. And ...

We have biblical and theological traditions that are full of people who, despite good intentions for renewal of a land or a people or a religious tradition, come in with dreams that end in nightmares.

We, like Berry, want to “put back all that we have built, but destroy nothing.” We want to create. We cannot remove ourselves from the worlds we care about and live in, nor do we want to. But when we reenter the cycles and spheres of power, we often end up, well, reentering the same cycles and spheres of power. Last year's victims become next year's despots. Last week's principled rebel becomes next week's strongman. The oppressed become the oppressors. We've seen this story before.

And if we choose to ignore that tendency toward domination with a bland, “but when *I* have power, when *I* rule the world, *I* will do better,” we are ignoring history—frequently to our own peril.

Here is our dilemma, which Berry presents to us so clearly: we have this inescapable dream of power. If we take seriously and humbly the fact that many before us (even many women) have stumbled down the path which leads to an oppressive use of power, what do we do? Are there ways of dreaming of power which do not lead to inevitable fault and failure? Can we dream new dreams?

I want to share with you how I think that Hannah Arendt can help us dream new dreams of power.

Hannah Arendt is a twentieth century political theorist, scholar, and lecturer. A German-born Jew, she escaped Europe during the Holocaust in 1933 and eventually made her way to America. She wrote and taught on the nature of totalitarianism, violence, revolution, politics, and action.

Arendt also wrote extensively about power, offering theories on the nature of power which stand in contrast to many of our received philosophical perspectives and our common, everyday language. Arendt talks about power differently than most people, including you and me.

Let's start by looking at two deceptively simple claims:

1. Power is collective.
2. Power is distinct from violence.

These concepts, in theory, are likely pretty palatable to Anabaptist women. Anabaptist polities of consensus and community, as well as feminine socialization and survival strategies oriented towards collaboration might predispose us to a kind of “of course power is collective” response. And since we hold resolutely to lived values of nonviolence, we have probably found (or at least want and are looking for) a way to talk about and use power *without violence*.

But I think it would be difficult to overstate the radical nature of Arendt's claims. Even if we think we agree with her, it is worth paying close attention to see how far she is pushing us.

For instance, Arendt does not say that power is sometimes or most effectively collective. For Arendt, power “corresponds to the human ability ... *to act in concert*.”<sup>298</sup> Power always exists in a group. Arendt states clearly, repeatedly, and unequivocally that “power is *never* the property of an individual; it belongs to a group and remains in existence only so long as the group keeps together.”<sup>299</sup>

Power's collectivity means it is always political, dealing with “the total complex of relations between people living in society.”<sup>300</sup> And if power is never individual, never personal, it changes any conversation we have that talks about “my” individual power.

Arendt does not devalue individuality or say that individuals are weak. But she locates power exclusively in the arena of community. Arendt works hard to draw distinctions among concepts she believes we mistakenly collapse into one another, thus reducing them to concepts of dominion—words like power, strength, force, authority, and violence. She instead delineates the concepts, teasing them apart and freeing their “authentic diversity.”<sup>301</sup>

For example, she clearly distinguishes power from strength. Unlike power, which is always collective, strength is “inherent in an object or person and belongs to its character.”<sup>302</sup> Individuals possess strength. You are a “strong woman.” Your particular organization or muscle or perspective has strength. But an individual does not—cannot—in and of herself possess power.

Arendt’s distinctions help to explain lots of weird things. Like the fact that “the strength of even the strongest individual can always be overpowered by the many.”<sup>303</sup> Power is “boundless.” “Like action ... its only limitation is the existence of other people, but this limitation is not accidental, because human power corresponds to the condition of plurality to being with.”<sup>304</sup> Power can also “be divided without decreasing it,” and the interplay of power’s checks and balances among people can even generate more power, as long as “the interplay is alive and has not resulted in a stalemate.”<sup>305</sup>

Along these lines, Arendt is particularly careful to distinguish between power and violence. While she acknowledges that “nothing is more common than the combination of violence and power,”<sup>306</sup> Arendt argues that power and violence are completely different.

Arendt defines violence as instrumental. Violence requires tools, implements, things used by people.<sup>307</sup> Part of the reason we conflate power and violence is that governments and hierarchies often use violence “as a last resort to keep power structure[s] intact against individual challengers.” It can look as though “violence [is] a prerequisite for power.”<sup>308</sup> But while governments frequently engage in violence, it does not follow that power and violence are the same.<sup>309</sup>

Violence is instrumental, but power is not. Power is not a means or a weapon, even a peaceful one, to lob back to the other side when violence is perpetrated. So we cannot, strictly speaking, marshal power against violence.

But Arendt goes a step further to say that power and violence are even opposites. “Violence appears where power is in jeopardy.” And though “violence can destroy power ... it is utterly incapable of creating [power].”<sup>310</sup>

And if violence and power are opposites, then “where one rules absolutely, the other is absent.”<sup>311</sup> Violence is not a sign of power; violence is a sign of the disintegration of power.

If this is true, then violence can serve as a signal, however terribly borne, that power is waning among those who are perpetrating it. Violence can serve as a call and opportunity for people to gather together, act in concert, and exercise power in the face of those administering violence.

This is not just a rosy prediction. Arendt, we remember, is a survivor of the Holocaust who spent her life thinking, writing, and seeking to understand the nature of violence and tyranny. She is all too aware of the horrors and banality of evil. She is always and ever a realist.<sup>312</sup>

Nonetheless, she is a surprisingly optimistic realist. Over and over again she circles around to statements of confidence. She still has faith in power.

And now we come to the clincher: Arendt’s biggest game changer of all, her greatest challenge to our conceptions of power. For Arendt, power is not only radically collective and non-instrumental; power is not, strictly speaking, a “thing” at all.

Listen: “Power is always...*a power potential* and not an unchangeable, measurable, and reliable *entity* like force or strength. ... Power springs up between [people]<sup>313</sup> when they act together and vanishes the moment they disperse.”<sup>314</sup> For Arendt, power is an immaterial potentiality which exists spontaneously among people, rather than a commodity which human beings can hold.

Power’s immateriality is its advantage and mystery. Power cannot “be possessed ... or applied.” Power is instead “dependent upon the unreliable and only temporary agreement of many wills and intentions.” Power’s immateriality renders it boundless, limited only by the willingness of people to act together.<sup>315</sup> (This might be why it sometimes seems to slip away.)

Power is also largely independent of material factors like numbers or means. This is why “a comparatively small but well-organized group of men can rule almost indefinitely over large and populous empires, and it is not infrequent ... that small and poor countries get the better of

great and rich nations.”<sup>316</sup> Again we see how Arendt’s insights open up flexible explanations of paradoxes and oddities we find when we look at power closely, including the ways that small, weak, or under-resourced communities triumph or fail at utilizing their power.

And because power is not a commodity, “power cannot be stored up and kept in reserve for emergencies, like instruments of violence. [Power] exists only in its actualization. Where power is not actualized, it passes away.”<sup>317</sup>

Arendt’s notion that power “springs up” among people when they act together is radically different from our more materialized, reified notions of power. She changes the way we talk about power. Arendt’s power cannot be held, traded, or welded.

So here’s an incredibly imperfect metaphor to illustrate how power’s essential immateriality and unstockability upends our usual modes of thinking and conversing about power.

It’s like power is cookies. I have three power cookies, so I spend my time thinking about how to distribute the cookies. If you have no cookies, should I give you one of mine? Two? All three? What are the advantages and disadvantages of my cookie sharing plans? Are they productive or virtuous? If I give you all my cookies, do I have to get cookies from someone else? Should I keep my cookies so that I can invest them?

Or should we work on taking cookies from someone else (because I noticed that guy over there, he has six cookies)? Or maybe we should just find a way to make more cookies? Or do we even need cookies? Maybe we should just give up cookies all together?

And on and on we go, always talking about power as though it is a material thing—cookies.

And then Arendt goes and suggests that the cookie conversation misses the point entirely. Because for her, power is not cookies; power is not a commodity to be kept, traded, shared, stolen, multiplied, or given up.

She is not saying that cookies aren’t important. She is saying that cookies aren’t power. Cookies are perhaps wealth, or privilege, or access to safety, or education, or influence, or strength, or any other myriad

concrete things that we normally mean when we causally say people “have power.”

So, then what? It is pretty disappointing if we can't have power, can't get power and share it with others, can't trade power as a commodity. If power is not an implement that we can use, what can we do? To say instead that power is merely to come together to act and allow power to “spring up” sounds kind of hokey and disembodied and pointless.

But maybe that's Arendt's point. Once we come together, we have the opportunity to engage with the question, “Now what?” Together, we have the opportunity to speak and act new worlds into being. To follow through on our ideas and speech and actions.

And all of that is power.

Arendt suggests to us that rather than engage in cyclical conversation about how to hold and weld and share power (which if we look back at Berry's poem and the history of humanity, tends to end badly), we do something ... different. Because power is not a commodity to fight over. Power is rather an invitation to relationship—to act in word and deed with other people.

This is the invitation of our gathering this weekend. Our power is not in our positions within our denomination, in our particular theological concepts, in our place in the hierarchy of the Mennonite church. Power is not a commodity for us to trade or to wrest from others. Power is instead the potentiality that springs up when we gather, speak words with one another, act together to tend our world and communities. “See, I am doing a new thing,” says the prophet Isaiah, “Now it springs up ... making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland.” (Isaiah 43:19 NIV)

Now, Arendt's theory is not without its problems.

Her definitions are occasionally belabored and sometimes sound a little contradictory. Her philosophical work relies a lot on classical political models that will make any good Anabaptist squirm a bit. She's hardly a feminist and at times sounds platonically disembodied.

And yet, engaging with Arendt is for me a generative experience. I don't know if Arendt is right about everything here. But I do know she pushes

me to ask new and constructive questions. Engaging with her ideas about power is a powerful experience. And it transforms my theological questions about the ways I consider the confusing, paradoxical manner in which power appears in Jesus' ministry, his death and resurrection, our life as the body of Christ.

So these are the questions Arendt leaves us with, and in them I believe there is an invitation to new dreams of power.

What if power is only collective? What is power is really, purely collective, and not just giving lip-service to the value of community while scurrying off to do our own thing, building our own kingdoms, covering our own butts?

What if power is not the same as violence? What if, when we find ourselves or others engaged in violence, we recognize it not as a sign of power, but of weakness, of power waning?

And what if power isn't something we can hold, keep, take, give up, build, or share?

What if "I've got the power" is a statement that doesn't make any sense, because with power there is no "I" and there is no "got?"

This gives us the chance to encounter each other, to power spring up between us as we stand to speak and act together.

And dream new dreams.

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## About the author



**Catherine Thiel Lee** is a chaplain and preacher, working at Transitions Hospice and University of North Carolina Hospitals, and serving her congregation at Chapel Hill Mennonite Fellowship. She has a Master of Divinity from Regent College and worked with refugee claimants in Vancouver, British Columbia. She is fascinated and confounded by modern conceptions of power and Hannah Arendt tops her list of “if you could have a conversation with any one dead or alive...” Catherine lives, plays, reads, and lovingly tends a scrappy garden in Chapel Hill with her husband, Michael, and two sons.



## 9. On Earth as in Heaven

Erica Lea-Simka

*Some call me nature. Others call me Mother Nature. I've been here for over 4.5 billion years. Twenty-two thousand five hundred times longer than you. I don't really need people. But people need me. Yes, your future depends on me. When I thrive, you thrive. When I falter, you falter. Or worse. I've been here for eons. I have fed species greater than you, and I have starved species greater than you. My oceans. My soil. My flowing streams. My forests. They all can take you. Or leave you.<sup>318</sup>*

Julia Roberts narrates this powerful monologue as incredible footage of lush forests, booming waterfalls, mushrooms maturing, and majestic ocean creatures swim freely. Conservation International produced the moving short film, *Nature is Speaking*, along with many others, as part of its ongoing ecological activism and awareness efforts. Essentially, we need Creation more than we can imagine.

Recognizing the interconnectedness between people and all of Creation benefits all parts of Creation. Devastating damage has occurred to the Earth over time. Is it possible to heal the damage that has been done? What do we do now? What do the Earth and environment out there have to do with me and the interwoven ecology here?

The theme of this year's Women Doing Theology Conference is *I've Got the Power: Naming and Reclaiming Power as A Force for Good*. Creation is power. Whether we realize it or not, you and I create every day. We create a meal. We create a mood or tone. We create relationships. We create words. Some days we even create babies! We also create garbage and waste; we create fossil fuels or at least use them; we create self-propelled energy; we create shortage; we create abundance. We create *individually*. We create *collectively*. Is it possible to un-create? Is it possible to re-create?

We did not get to where we are today on our own, and we did not plop down from the sky on a random blip on the cosmic timeline. We are here together, bound by time and space, reaping the benefits and consequences of decisions made before our time. We are responding to the needs and realities around us. And we are considering what *will* be and what *could* be ahead of us.

The Bible talks about God being with us yesterday, today, and forever. If you understand God to be Creator, and that in the beginning God created, then Creation is with us yesterday, today, and forever. *Maybe* forever. In order to understand ourselves, to understand God, to understand Creation, let's consider yesterday, today, and forever.

## Prequel

*The New Catholic Encyclopedia describes Ecofeminism and Ecofeminist Theology as:*

*The fundamental reenvisioning of the whole of reality, including human relationship to non-human nature. ... Ecofeminism draws attention to the connection between the domination of women and the exploitation of nonhuman nature in patriarchal societies. ... There is no liberation for women and no solution to the ecological crisis within a society whose fundamental model of relationships is one of domination. Ecofeminists, therefore, engage in a twofold advocacy on behalf of:*

*(1) the well-being of women and other persons diminished by patriarchy (due to racism, ethnic prejudice, classism [homophobia, transphobia] and colonialism) and*

*(2) the health of the planet exploited by persons in power for their own economic advantage.*

*Ecofeminism reflects a commitment to ecology as an all-encompassing organic and social reality.<sup>319</sup>*

It is not enough to hold hands on Pentecost and World Communion Sunday and sing about how we are all one global people or how we are “one in the Spirit.” Interdependence and interconnection go beyond who you can see and what you can see. As Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 12, the church is one body with many parts. What if we expand this concept out to, as James Lovelock writes, “the entire planet is a living system,

behaving as a unified organism”<sup>320</sup>?

### **Interdependence and interconnection go beyond people.**

For example, “90 percent of the world’s nutrition is pollinated by bees.”<sup>321</sup> When bees don’t pollinate, food crop production suffers. Bee Colony Collapse has become an epic problem. “The number of bee colonies per hectare has declined by 90 percent since 1962.”<sup>322</sup> Bees are dying as a result of: pesticides, drought, habitat destruction, air pollution, global warming, and other factors. Bee Colony Collapse is primarily caused by irresponsible human behavior. We, collectively, are shooting ourselves in the foot.

At the end of the day, we are all at the mercy of taxes, our digestive system, and bees. Where have our delusions of independence come from?

### **Yesterday**

In her book, *Gaia and God*, Rosemary Radford Ruether, to whom I am deeply indebted, begins at the beginning. The Bible tells us that God created people to have dominion.<sup>323</sup> This has often been interpreted as control or domination. Hierarchy, entitlement, and unchecked privilege are at the heart of domination, and domination is the heart of sin. Bishop Katherine Jefferts Schori says the word *dominion* comes from Greek *domus* and *oikos* together meaning domestic ecology or caring for the household.<sup>324</sup> We are to be the housewives of the Earth. We are created in the image of God, the Divine Caregiver. Schori also says the phrase “subdue the Earth” in Genesis 1 should be interpreted as help it to be fruitful. Our current situation is far removed from this interconnected, fruitful, domestic ecology.

Why?

### **Primarily, a legacy of Christian Escapism Theology.**

There is a fine line between trusting in God as the final redeemer and divine agent of justice, and disengaging from the world and Creation, because “this world will soon pass away” anyway. Ironically, this legacy of Christian Escapism Theology has implications for Incarnational Theology. As the physicality of Creation is rejected, so is the embodiment of ourselves and Jesus the Christ.

Emmanuel—God with us. Part of where we have historically gone wrong is *overly* separating Creation from Creator. If you believe Jesus was God

and God came in human flesh, then you can logically conclude Creation and Creator are intimately connected.

Perhaps you have a literal reading of Revelation and “I’ll Fly Away” is your favorite hymn, or maybe your beliefs are more in line with Humanism and you consider all stewardship responsibility to be on people’s shoulders. Likely you are somewhere in between. Regardless, irresponsible theological readings reeking of Gnosticism have impacted our Christian history in how we relate to Creation by overly separating the so-called physical with the so-called spiritual.

As a false dichotomy or false hierarchy of spirit over matter grows, the struggle to recognize Jesus as the embodied Divine, and the struggle to recognize embodiment as sacredly beautiful grows.

## **Today**

It is *hard* to follow the Way of Jesus and simultaneously reject the sacredness of women’s bodies, black or brown bodies, queer bodies, and especially when all of these bodies are unified in one person. Recognizing the beauty of embodiment, incarnation, is essential to recognizing the value and sacredness of all created matter which points us to the Creator. When there is a breakdown in recognizing and celebrating embodiment, women and other minorities disproportionately suffer.

Feminist scholars often write of the gendered nature of spirit as feminine, and matter or body as masculine. It is no wonder that in our patriarchal reality, consistent Incarnational Theology is devastatingly inconvenient for those people who are desperate to maintain their power. To equally value, celebrate, preserve, and respect feminine spirit or non-physical matter and masculine physical matter, requires an elevation of women and femininity from being “the second sex,” as Simone de Beauvoir painfully calls us.

Trans and gender non-conforming people of color are perceived as a special type of threat and are therefore harassed and murdered at disproportionate rates. Embodiment matters. Incarnation matters. We cannot separate body from spirit, and we cannot separate ourselves from Creation. The song goes, “Lord, send a revival and let it begin in me.” I say, “Lord, send Creation care and let it begin with me!”

“If dominating and destructive relations to the earth are interrelated with gender, class, and racial domination, then a healed relation to the earth cannot come about simply through technological ‘fixes.’ It demands social reordering to bring about just and loving interrelationship.”<sup>325</sup> Sometimes I feel overwhelmed because I am overwhelmed. Resist the temptation to disengage. Like avoiding cleaning out the fridge until the stench of rank dairy and fuzzy leftovers take over, disengaging until the point of implosion only compounds the problem.

Remember, what is good for my roommates is good for me. St. Francis extols Brother Sun, Sister Moon, Brother Fire, Sister Water.<sup>326</sup> We live together or we die together. Was it not one God, one Creator, one voice, one breath, one Spirit who created all? One Creator and one Earth, yet we are not one people.

Ruether identifies a number of causes for what she calls “destruction.” These include disproportionate population growth in poor areas of the world, disproportionate consumption in wealthy areas of the world, unsustainable oil and agriculture production, burning fossil fuels, climate change, radiation and other collateral damage from militarism, and dwindling biodiversity.<sup>327</sup>

The Earth speaks truth to our human power when she shows us her limits.

There is an abundance of possible comments and expansion on each of these areas Ruether identifies. Of this list, dwindling biodiversity may receive the *least* publicity or may seem a less obvious destroyer of Creation. What’s the harm in tinkering with plant genetics, for example, to build a so-called stronger species?

A relatively recent example happened between 1845 and 1852. The Great Famine or the Irish Potato Famine killed or displaced about one-fourth of Ireland’s population with many immigrating to the United States. The famine happened because there were a few causes that came together including problematic tax laws and social structure. The main reason, however, was a disease called potato blight that wiped out the potato crop. It was able to do so because the same genetic strain dominated the potato crop rather than the typical genetic variations in a crop.<sup>328</sup> Biodiversity decreased. In other words—uniformity led to disaster.

## Tomorrow

Diversity is strength. Where there is human diversity there is struggle to overcome this conformity-equals-safe mentality. We can outsmart this reflex to perceive the *other* as a threat, and we can embrace and celebrate diversity through prayerful introspection. Speak truth to your own power. Seek sincere relationships with people whose identities differ from your own. Recognize that each part of Creation gives to you and receives from you when it operates as a unified organism.

However, Ruether says, “While we should not hold ourselves culpable for the entire system of sin, much less for biological mortality, we also should not imagine ourselves purely innocent either. We are an integral part of this whole reality. We need not only compassionate solidarity with those who are most victimized, but also realistic acknowledgement of how we have *benefitted* from such injustices.”<sup>329</sup>

The systemic abuses of Creation, including groups of people, began before us. The current state of the world and of Creation does not rest solely on our shoulders. Even though, we are called to act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with God,<sup>330</sup> much damage has been done. Is it possible for us to heal Creation?

In short, no.

Creation care and Creation healing are divine acts. People do divine things every day, but we do not do them alone. We cocreate with God as the Spirit empowers us. At the risk of sounding Lutheran, healing or *salvation* for Creation is a matter of grace. God gives grace.

Ruether says, “Healing is possible through recognition and transformation of the way in which Western culture, enshrined in part in Christianity, has justified domination.”<sup>331</sup> As we address issues of racism and sexism and ethnocentrism and colonialism and homophobia and xenophobia, we contribute to pushing back against the instinct and culture to dominate one another, and therefore reduce dominance of all parts of Creation.

To care for Creation is what it means to faithfully fulfill our creatureliness. We are made to love God and love our neighbor. Sometimes our neighbor looks like a non-human and very important part of Creation.

May we be transformed by the renewing of our minds,<sup>332</sup> the renewing of our hands, the renewing of our strength, the renewing of our hearts.

*Author's note: I am forever indebted to my Feminist scholar foremothers, especially Rosemary Radford Ruether, whose work is the inspiration and guiding source for this paper.*

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### **About the author**

**Erica Lea-Simka** is a graduate of San Jacinto College, Texas A&M, and Truett Theological Seminary. She has served Baptist and Mennonite congregations in Wyoming, Texas, North Carolina, and Washington D.C. Erica began serving as Pastor of Albuquerque

Mennonite Church in November 2017. When not at church or serving the community, she enjoys cooking, walking, movies, traveling, and time with her sweetheart. Connect with Erica online: Twitter- @RevEricaLea; [revericalea.org](http://revericalea.org).





# 10. In the Light of the Moment:

## Reverence, Imagination, and Justice

*Dr. Mary J. Wade*

### Introduction

Every moment in history holds challenges to the human experience that threaten the integrity of humanity both individually and collectively. Yet during that same period, a spark of light always manages to penetrate the darkness and despair, shining rays of hope. Often that spark is led by the underprivileged and dispossessed. Often that leader is a woman. She is an individual who comes on the scene in humility and power, bringing with her words of wisdom, hope, and committed action. As a result, she breaks through the darkness and awakens the souls of a people, unveiling both the yearning and the possibility of righteous change. This is the power of the living God within.

It takes only a cursory view of media, the airways, and attitudes of too many citizens and people in high places to realize that there are serious problems in the affairs of the nation. Hour after hour during a twenty-four hour cycle, multiple episodes of murders are viewed by young and old alike. Profanity has become the norm so much that educators must spend time continuously reprimanding children for vulgar language. So common is cursing that the child is often unaware of doing it. Threatening and harming people of many races, religions, and cultures have created an environment of helplessness, fear, and suspicion. Unveiled hatred grows in leaps and bounds. Attacks on innocent people by youth gangs for no apparent reason continue to catch us by surprise.

Mass incarcerations, often as a result of unequal representation or harsh, unfair penalties for minor offenses, have separated families causing too many children to grow up around a prison culture. Perhaps most perplexing is the disrespect of the environment, including willingness to continuously pollute the air we breathe, water we drink, and soil that nurtures our food. This disregard threatens the physical as well as emotional well-being of every person and life.

Caught in a web of national disunity, political brinkmanship, gross economic inequality, and racial, religious indifference, responses to this current state of national affairs have been disastrous. Combined with intimidation and imprisonment of the dispossessed, these responses cause us to flounder and sink lower and lower into the abyss of despair, anger, hate, and greed. Widespread appeal to our worst instincts threatens the long-term possibility of healing. These challenges are not new but seem to have reached a critical mass where their effect and influence have poisoned the nation's spiritual environment as much as air pollution threatens the physical environment. As with all poison, there is a slow and debilitating movement toward certain death. Those of us ordinary people, suffering with our backs against the wall, are yearning for the chance to take power over our lives and situations.

Theologian, educator, and civil rights leader, Dr. Howard Thurman in his seminal work, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, focuses on the attitude of those whose self-determination, self-respect and vital needs were denied under Roman authority. He views Jews suffering under Roman authority as having their "backs against the wall." Those who have little power and authority over their own lives, who suffer the degradation and humiliation of abuse, must be wary of falling into the trap of the abuser. "Fear, hypocrisy, and hatred, the three hounds of hell that track the trail of the disinherited, need have no dominion over them," Thurman said.<sup>333</sup>

He reminds us that in order to struggle against tyrants, bullies, and those who would lord power over us, it is essential for us to cultivate the quality of the inner life. Cultivating inner quality is possible when the Kingdom of God is within each of us. It is by seeking and searching to live in tune and under the guidance of God that we defeat the hounds of hell.

Thurman recognizes with authentic realism that anyone who permits another to "determine the quality of his inner life gives into the hands of the other the keys to his destiny."<sup>334</sup> Indian author and spiritual guide Amit Ray reminds us that if we are to take control of our lives, we must, "pay attention to this present moment."<sup>335</sup>

*In the moment* we are present. *In the moment* we are conscious and aware. *In the moment* we wrestle with the stuff of life, the issues of life with the opportunity to choose a way of being that either enhances or diminishes life. Proverbs 20:27 tells us that the human spirit is the

candle of God, roaming our inmost part. It is this inner light that makes it possible for us to see and recognize the truth and light in life and all things. Through this movement of God within—searching, revealing, guiding and directing, moment by moment—we gain knowledge and access our power.

The purpose of this paper is not to concentrate on our negative state of affairs. Instead it is to look into the light present in, what for many is, a moment of despair and offer possibilities for accessing our wisdom, clarity, power, and personal healing. The paper demonstrates the necessity to go deeper within ourselves and connect with the power of God. As we travel inward, we become more aware of and are better able to access and nurture three keys to our strength and understanding: reverence, imagination and justice. These three are fueled by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in our lives through the grace of God.

## **Reverence**

Accessing the gifts through reverence is the greatest gift we can give ourselves. We do this first of all, by committing to a life of reverence for God. Reverence is to develop a deep connecting relationship with God so as to be near enough to embrace and be embraced by God. In a mindset and heart set of deep respect and awe, we bow in submission to God. We consciously and continually breathe the internal breath of life from the Creator of life. In such a relationship, as we humble ourselves, we allow the self to be nurtured by the presence, wisdom and power of God.

By reverencing God, God's guiding light calms us and directs us to self-control, self-discipline and wise living. Our relationships with self and others are affected. Rudeness, hatefulness, deceit, greed, selfishness and divisiveness lose their grip. Courtesy, kindness, compassion, fairness, helpfulness and lifting up others take over and become a natural way of life. Openness to God enables us to be open to others and open to life itself. We relate to others as we relate to God. We feel the need to honor others as we honor God. We approach even what appears to be the worst person with humility and respect for life.

In emphasizing the importance of reverence, writer Paul Woodruff describes an ancient Greek and Chinese virtue dating back thousands of years. Woodruff states that reverence “survives among us in half-forgotten patterns of behavior and in the vestiges of old ceremonies we

have lost sight of.”<sup>336</sup> He considers reverence to be deeper than respect and aligned with eternal truth.

Dr. Thurman acknowledges the need for reverence in his book *Inward Journey*. He speaks of reverence as essential to living life fully and completely.

*There is a sense of wholeness at the core of man  
That must abound in all he does;  
That marks with reverence his ev'ry step;  
That has its sway when all else fails;  
That wearies out all evil things;  
That warms the depth of frozen fears  
Making friend of foe,  
Making love of hate,  
And lasts beyond the living and the dead,  
Beyond the goals of peace, the ends of war!  
This man seeks through all his years:  
To be complete and of one piece, within, without.*<sup>337</sup>

This call to reverence is the defining quality in living a meaningful life. Reverence is biblical. The apostle Paul in the book of Hebrews states, “Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us give thanks, by which we may offer to God an acceptable worship with reverence and awe” (Heb. 12:28 NRSV).

### **Benefit of living a reverent life**

Without reverence, there is not real religious experience. Without awe for the Creator, creative process, and resulting life, we have only words, thoughts, and deeds that are not anchored in God. Our awe of God leads to knowledge on how to live in agreement with God, and the natural order seeps into our soul and tempers our attitudes and actions.

The primary effect of reverence is that it strengthens our knowledge of and acquaintance with God. In the book of Proverbs, Solomon writes, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom” (Prov. 9:10 NRSV). The first thing in knowledge is reverence for the eternal. Wisdom is simply knowledge what comes from God. This reverence or fear of God is absolutely essential to grow in understanding how to live this life in ways pleasing to God. Out of knowledge of God, comes understanding. Out of this understanding of who God is comes fear (overwhelming awe

and trembling), mingled with respect and esteem, honor, veneration, and adoration.

Reverence takes us inside the door to eternity. Dr. Thurman says “Human beings never get to the heart of mystery.”<sup>338</sup> I believe the journey into reverence gets us closer to God. The closer we get to God, the deeper we get into God’s presence, and the storehouse of knowledge toward wisdom. We access the bounty, wisdom, and beauty of God. Enlightened in the knowledge and ways of God, the Creator, in infinite wisdom, gently and continuously releases the power inside and all around us. We are thereby strengthened and not consumed.

Reverence gives clarity in the moment. It is only in this state of reverence for God that we gain clarity through the revelation of God’s understanding. We can study from now into eternity, but only through reverence do we begin to differentiate between what is sacred and what is profane and we are drawn to choose the sacred. We begin to recognize what minimizes God and what elevates God in our life and find that our lives are more meaningful when we elevate God. We are then better able to choose ways of living that uplift God and, through God, all life.

Reverence liberates. The power of reverence is liberating. It stretches the boundaries of our understanding. As we are liberated, we are humbled. In the humbling, we willingly lower even further our limited power to the dominion of God. Relinquishing our limited sight, we are better able to see through God’s sight and grow in God’s knowledge. This liberating power holds the keys to freedom. Everything that binds vanishes. The clear distinction between what constricts and constrains us and what releases us to be our true self emerges. We are free to be who and what we choose to be. Freed from the constrictions and constraints, we are able to see more clearly our connections to others and how to live in relationship to others.

Hindu monk Swami Vivekananda, in recognition of the importance of reverence in our lives and relationships, observes, “The moment I have realized God sitting in the temple of every human body, the moment I stand in reverence before every human being and see God in him, that moment, I am free from bondage.”<sup>339</sup> With this recognition of the connection with others, indeed all life, comes a change in attitude, temperament, and actions. We are better able to understand and more

willing to grow in harmony with others. Dr. Thurman more succinctly states this fact, “When I go down deep within myself, I come up in every other person.”<sup>340</sup> In other words, as I grow in knowledge of who I am, I see more clearly that sameness in others.

As we grow in clarity and experience, a sense of liberation and power develops and reverence grows. We long to be closer to the source that is freeing us personally and in relationship with others.

## **Why reverence?**

*I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints.*

—Ephesians 1: 17-18 NRSV

## **Reverence and imagination**

Once we access the eternal through reverence, then we can merge reverence with imagination. Then we can journey into the mysteries of the deep. In the spiritual life, imagination has two meanings. First, it is a human faculty, the part of us that traffics in images, symbols, myths, and stories. It is the capacity we all have for innovative thinking and creative expression. Second, imagination is an inner reality, a boundless realm not defined by our senses or reason that we know from our dreams and can enter via certain exercises while awake. Imagining may start as fanciful and maybe even feel a bit indulgent, but continuing the journey, we recognize our imagination becomes a powerful force that helps to generate great ideas. The human ability to imagine can propel us into action and bring about change.

The practice of imagination enables us to explore the inner realm of our existence. The importance of reverence to imagination is that reverence reinforces appreciation for our connection with God as well as with each other. It feeds imagination in ways that create positive life-giving images, thus enhancing our longing to further embrace creative life and living.

## **Imagination and knowledge**

We have been taught to seek knowledge. We go about becoming aware of and familiar with person, subject, issue, and fact, and we gain

information from various avenues. We then believe that we know, and, in a limited way, we do know. But to get beyond the scope of intellect, to continue learning, we must delve into those areas that cannot be measured and codified. We must get into the realm of the unseen.

Imagining is an act of self-discovery. As with reverence, the more we use our imagination, the deeper the access into our inherent knowing and personal uniqueness. As we wrestle with the internal confusion that stems from not knowing ourselves and our possibilities, clear images of our own reality and truth emerge. As we travel deeper and deeper into the depths of our relationship with God, the human faculty peers deeper and deeper into the mysteries. Again, this journey brings together those things that are seen with things that are unseen. Imagination can be used to envision what future society should be. In order to do so, one must stop looking at the world and look inside where the soul resides, nurtured by the spirit of reverence. It changes our internal social structure so that we become inclusive of all life.

### **Imagination and action**

The natural inclination of imagination is toward action. Living is putting the fruits of our imagination into action. Imagining without action is daydreaming, and it is easy to be seduced into a stage of forever dreaming. This requires no work but rather acts as a vehicle to escape life. For example, if a poet imagines a poem, satisfaction comes from the completion of putting pen to paper. If an artist imagines a painting, the fulfillment of the imagination is imagery put to easel. So it is with music and all creative expression.

Imagining is then the first step toward creating a desired outcome or environment. The process continues with thought, planning, work, challenges, heartache, and hope. We improve the fruits of our creativity through continued imagining. For example, if we long for justice, we develop ordinances to bring rights under legal statutes. Along with laws, we develop practices that can be implemented to bring the laws to life while continuing to promote the love for justice with all we encounter. And as we think for justice and act for justice, the imagination takes us deeper into the storehouse for means to achieve justice.

### **Imagination and justice**

British author and playwright J.K. Rowling speaks to the power of human beings to change the world observing, “We do not need magic to

transform our world. We carry all the power we need inside ourselves; we have the power to imagine better.”<sup>341</sup> Rowling, an advocate for civil rights, justice, and peace, uses her imagination and resulting creativity to influence the lives of young and old alike. In her work, Rowling merges imagination with justice. One of the most profound grievances in our society today is that of unequal justice: a system of distribution and retribution based on race, religion, color, culture, and money. Unequal justice builds walls and barriers as it undermines humanity.

Here the pronouncement of right and wrong and dispensing of denial or rewards are based on attributes society deems to be worthy or unworthy, rather than the merits of one’s character and abilities. As we open our eyes and see the need for justice and open our hearts and feel the need for justice, we are imbued with the power to imagine justice. This justice is based on the principles of fairness, moral rightness, and human decency.

### **Prophetic imagination**

Theologian and educator Walter Brueggemann bring us in contact with the essential nature of imagination for those who long for justice—prophetic imagination. Imagination taps into the sacred, the Divine, with a glimpse into the possibilities of righteous living. “The prophet engages in future fantasy. The prophet does not ask if the vision can be implemented, for questions of implementation are of no consequence until the vision can be imagined.”<sup>342</sup> Imagination must come before implementation. Our culture is competent to implement almost anything and to imagine little. The same consciousness that makes it possible to implement anything and everything is the one that shrinks imagination because imagination is a danger.

According to Brueggemann, “Every totalitarian regime is frightened of the artist. It is the vocation of prophets to keep alive the ministry of imagination.”<sup>343</sup> Their creative, life-generating approach to include all life is critical to getting beyond the divide. As such, they are called to “keep on conjuring and proposing future alternatives to the single one the king wants to urge as the only thinkable one.”<sup>344</sup>

Through prophetic imagination we get to the reverent work of justice. The task of the seeker of justice is continuously imagining justice. Opening the mind purifies and clarifies our thoughts. Opening the heart expands our feeling for the connections of all life. Heart and mind

together empower us to do the work for justice. As with imagination, justice is freeing, justice opens the path to live life free of fear and inhibitions stemming from inequality, authoritarianism, bigotry, and the like. As justice frees, it enables the individual to live life and be more alive.

In an address to the graduating class at Spelman College, Dr. Thurman advised students, “There is something within you that waits for the sound of the genuine in yourself.”<sup>345</sup> Learning to live your true life is answered by waiting and listening to one’s inner truth, to hear one’s inner truth and live by the dictates of that which upholds integrity and personal dignity. The freedom that comes out of creative imagination is essential to living by the dictates of one’s soul, and that comes out of the internal longing for justice and urgency to extend justice to all.

## **Conclusion**

There is a moment when all the troubles of the world lose their power over us. That is the moment that we turn our attention away from the world and the things of the world. We turn from the finite to the infinite. We turn from yearning for personal power to accessing the power already within us. We turn from the darkness to the light. At such moments instead of wallowing in confusion, anger, and fear we embrace the revelations, clarity, hope, peace, and power of the living God. We bow our heads and hearts in absolute awe and amazement of God. We feel and demonstrate a real affection for God.

In reverence, we embrace God and allow ourselves to be embraced by God. We willingly stand in, sit in, and relish in the presence of God. We allow ourselves to sense the very fragrance of God and feel the mighty power of God’s touch and wisdom flowing through us. It is a beautiful thing. Practicing reverence must be the key in all our interactions and striving. Out of it we gain access to our creative imagination that provides images and insights that highlight the wonders, wisdom, and beauty of life. In touch with eternal truth, this prophetic imagination points toward universal connections and inclusiveness of all life.

The commonality, the mutuality that occurs when reverence, imagination, and action merge brings forth not only the seed, but the means to justice. It is this belief in the possibility to get beyond the divisions and tap into the eternal that John Lennon put to song. He articulates what I believe to be our deepest longing, a world where justice, peace and love live together in the same space.

*Imagine no possessions  
I wonder if you can  
No need for greed or hunger  
A brotherhood of man  
Imagine all the people  
Sharing all the world  
You may say that I'm a dreamer  
But I'm not the only one  
I hope someday you'll join us  
And the world will be as one.<sup>346</sup>  
—John Lennon, “Imagine”*

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### About the author



**Dr. Mary Jones Wade** was born in Savannah, Georgia and raised in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. She currently serves as associate minister at Wayland Temple Baptist Church. Born ten minutes after her twin sister Marilyn, Mary is the third of thirteen children born to Abraham and Mary Holmes Jones. Mary's education includes

a Bachelor of Arts degree from the University of Dayton in Ohio, a Master's degree in International Relations from Boston University, and a Doctor of Philosophy from George Mason University. Her dissertation is *Spirituality and Conflict Resolution: A Study of the Life and Teachings of Dr. Howard Thurman*. Mary is the author of seven books of poetry, two study guides, and various articles. Among the awards she has received are the Pennsylvania Human Services Award (1978), George Mason University Distinguished Alumni Award (2011), and Honorary Mayor's award for her youth work in Baton Rouge. A minister, public speaker and poet, Mary also organizes conferences, workshops, and retreats, in addition to personal counseling and coaching. *With God, all things are possible. To God be the glory.*



# Endnotes

## 1. Davis Sensenig

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## 2. Bixler

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9. Louise Stoltzfus, *Quiet Shouts: Stories of Lancaster Mennonite Women Leaders* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1999), 23, 28.
10. Ibid., 33.
11. Ibid., 34–5.
12. Weingarten, 5.
13. Stoltzfus, 172.
14. Ibid., 174. An interesting connection could also be made between the forced "witness" of boys versus girls during this time. As girls were forced to be visible witnesses for their faith, who was available to serve as a witness to their experience of oppression?
15. Weingarten, 5–6.
16. Ibid., 20.
17. Emma Sommers Richards, "Pioneer Pastor," *She Has Done a Good Thing: Mennonite Women Leaders Tell Their Stories*, ed. Mary Swartley and Rhoda Keener (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1999), 59.
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24. Herman, 8; Weingarten, *Common Shock*, 142.
25. Weingarten, *Common Shock*, 17.
26. Ibid., 133.
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29. Ibid., 27.
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38. Ibid., 165.
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41. Ibid., 169–71, 224.
42. Ibid., 152, 196.
43. Ibid., 218.
44. Ibid., 171.
45. Ruth Brunk Stoltzfus, "By God's Providence," *She Has Done a Good Thing: Mennonite Women Leaders Tell Their Stories*, ed. Mary Swartley and Rhoda Keener (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1999), 131.
46. Ibid., 126.
47. I am exceedingly grateful to be a direct beneficiary of these witnesses. From 2014–16, I received seminary scholarships funded in part by the sale of Quiet Shouts. The Quiet Shouts Scholarship Fund supports female seminarians who are members of Lancaster Mennonite Conference. I also received seminary grant funding from the Grant and Ruth Brunk Stoltzfus Ministerial Training and Trust Fund of Virginia Mennonite Conference.

48. Stoltzfus, *Quiet Shouts*, 82.
49. Ibid., 83.
50. Ibid., 85.
51. In the interest of full disclosure, Jean's husband, Norman, is my mother's first cousin.
52. Stoltzfus, *Quiet Shouts*, 131.
53. Ibid., 135–7.
54. Ibid., 138.
55. Ibid., 138–40.
56. Lois Barrett, "Nudged by God," *She Has Done a Good Thing: Mennonite Women Leaders Tell Their Stories*, ed. Mary Swartley and Rhoda Keener (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1999), 43.
57. Ibid.
58. Ibid., 43–4.
59. Weingarten, *Common Shock*, 6–7.
60. Kaethe Weingarten, "Reasonable Hope: Construct, Clinical Applications, and Supports," *Family Process* 49, no. 1 (2010): 7, 16.
61. Ibid., 16.
62. Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope On the Ground and Implications of a Christian Eschatology*, trans. James W. Leitch (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 16.
63. Ibid., 33.
64. Ibid., 32.
65. Ibid., 25.
66. Ibid., 22.
67. Learn more about the Women in Leadership Project of Mennonite Church USA at <http://mennoniteusa.org/what-we-do/peacebuilding/women-in-leadership-project/>.
68. Weingarten, *Common Shock*, 149.
69. Stoltzfus, *Quiet Shouts*, 94.
70. Herman, 190.
71. "Women in Leadership Project," accessed April 29, 2016, <http://mennoniteusa.org/what-we-do/peacebuilding/women-in-leadership-project/>.
72. Herman, 70.
73. Ibid., 171.
74. Moltmann, 30.
75. Weingarten, *Common Shock*, 3–4.
76. Yoder, 45.

### 3. Penner

77. Books have been written about and by pioneering women leaders in the Mennonite church. See, for example, Mary A. Schiedel, *Pioneers in Ministry: Women Pastors in Ontario Mennonite Churches, 1973–2003* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 2003; copublished with Herald Press).
78. D. Jean Clandinin, *Engaging in Narrative Inquiry* (Walnut Creek, California: Left Coast Press, 2013), 30.
79. Kathleen Wells, *Narrative Inquiry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 24.
80. Wells, *Narrative Inquiry*, 27.
81. “As we tell our stories and listen to participants tell their stories in the inquiry, we, as inquirers, need to pay close attention to who we are in the inquiry and to understand that we are part of the storied landscapes we are studying.” Clandinin, *Engaging in Narrative Inquiry*, 24.
82. All references to interviewees use pseudonyms. Brenda, interview by author, October 24, 2016.
83. Brenda, interview by author, October 24, 2016.
84. Elizabeth, interview by author, October 25, 2016.
85. Ibid.
86. Ibid.
87. Diane, interview by author, October 27, 2016.
88. Greta, interview by author, October 27, 2016.
89. Brenda, interview by author, October 24, 2016.
90. Elizabeth, interview by author, October 25, 2016.
91. Greta, interview by author, October 27, 2016.
92. Carrie, interview by author, October 24, 2016.
93. Greta, interview by author, October 27, 2016.
94. Carrie, interview by author, October 24, 2016.
95. Frieda, interview by author, November 1, 2016.
96. Carrie, interview by author, October 24, 2016.
97. Anne, interview by author, October 19, 2016.
98. Brenda, interview by author, October 24, 2016.
99. Diane, interview by author, October 27, 2016.
100. Elizabeth, interview by author, October 25, 2016.
101. Brenda, interview by author, October 24, 2016.
102. Anne, interview by author, October 19, 2016.
103. Brenda, interview by author, October 24, 2016.
104. Diane, interview by author, October 27, 2016.

105. Ibid.
106. Anne, interview by author, October 19, 2016.
107. Ibid.
108. Elizabeth, interview by author, October 25, 2016.
109. Ibid.
110. Carrie, interview by author, October 24, 2016.
111. Elizabeth, interview by author, October 25, 2016.
112. Ibid.
113. Anne, interview by author, October 19, 2016.
114. Diane, interview by author, October 27, 2016.
115. Greta, interview by author, October 27, 2016.
116. Ibid.
117. Ibid.
118. Frieda, interview by author, November 1, 2016.
119. Greta, interview by author, October 27, 2016.
120. Frieda, interview by author, November 1, 2016.
121. Ibid.
122. Greta, interview by author, October 27, 2016.
123. Ibid.
124. Anne, interview by author, October 19, 2016.
125. Brenda, interview by author, October 24, 2016.
126. Anne, interview by author, October 19, 2016.
127. Brenda, interview by author, October 24, 2016.
128. Carrie, interview by author, October 24, 2016.
129. Ibid.
130. Diane, interview by author, October 27, 2016.
131. Greta, interview by author, October 27, 2016.
132. Frieda, interview by author, November 1, 2016.
133. Ibid.
134. Frieda, e-mail message to author, January 13, 2017.
135. Diane, e-mail message to author, January 8, 2017.
136. Anne, e-mail message to author, January 11, 2017.
137. Greta, e-mail message to author, January 9, 2017.
138. Elizabeth, e-mail message to author, January 9, 2017.
139. Frieda, e-mail message to author, January 13, 2017.
140. Diane, e-mail message to author, January 8, 2017.
141. Greta, e-mail message to author, January 9, 2017.

142. Anne, e-mail message to author, January 11, 2017.
143. Greta, interview by author, October 27, 2016. In her response to my paper, Greta provided the actual quote: “Here is the test to find whether your mission on Earth is finished: if you’re alive, it isn’t.” Richard Bach

## 5. Hoover Seidel

144. Rodney Hutton, “Jeremiah,” *The New Oxford Annotated Bible: New Revised Standard Version: With the Apocrypha: An Ecumenical Study Bible*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (Oxford: England UP, 2010), 1, 128.
145. Katherine Dell, “Proverbs,” *The New Oxford Annotated Bible: New Revised Standard Version: With the Apocrypha: An Ecumenical Study Bible*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (Oxford: England UP, 2010), 897–898.
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148. Charles F. Melchert, “Woman Wisdom: Education as Playing in the Presence of God,” *Wise Teaching: Biblical Wisdom and Educational Ministry* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity International, 1998), 185.
149. Adele Berlin, “Introduction to Hebrew Poetry,” *The New Interpreter’s Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes*. Vol. IV (Nashville, Abingdon, 2005), 313.
150. John Collins, *Introduction to the Hebrew Bible*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2014), 516.
151. Bruce K. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs: Chapters 1–15* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), 388.
152. Athalya Brenner, “Proverbs,” *Global Bible Commentary* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2004), 166.
153. Harold C. Washington, “Proverbs,” *Theological Bible Commentary* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 191.
154. David Noel Freedman, *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Si–Z ed. Vol. 6 (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 927.
155. Ibid., 922.
156. Ibid., 923.
157. Melchert, 190.
158. Collins, 521.
159. Christine Elizabeth Yoder, *Proverbs*, (Nashville: Abingdon, 2009), 89.
160. Brenner, 169.
161. Freedman, 923.
162. Collins, 521.
163. Alice M. Sinnott, *The Personification of Wisdom* (Aldershot, England: Ashgate Publishing, 2005), 17.

164. Comparisons have been made between Sophia/Hochma and goddesses from surrounding cultures, such as the Egyptian goddess Ma'at or the Canaanite goddess Asherah (NOAB 359, 906). Given the historical context, it is reasonable to assume that Sophia appears in the biblical text with goddess attributes. Even amidst patriarchy, the biblical witness offers a basis to re-member her as a way of imaging the divine.
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166. Berlin, 304–305.
167. Yoder, 90.
168. Ibid., 233.
169. Washington, 192.
170. Yoder, 236.
171. Brenner, 163–164.
172. Ibid., 164.
173. Ibid., 171.
174. Ibid., 164.
175. Ibid., 165.
176. Elizabeth Stuart, “Proverbs,” in *The Queer Bible Commentary* (London: SCM, 2006), 327.
177. Ibid., 328.
178. Ibid., 329.
179. Ibid., 330.
180. Collins, 604.
181. Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 72.
182. Ibid., 152.
183. Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Jesus: Miriam's Child, Sophia's Prophet* (New York: Continuum, 1994), 139.
184. Encyclopedia Britannica Online, s.v. “Logos,” accessed April 19, 2016, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/logos>.
185. Ibid.
186. Johnson, 96–97.
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188. Gonzalo Haya-Prats, *Empowered Believer: The Holy Spirit in the Book of Acts* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2011), 27, 93.

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193. Ibid., 94.
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195. H.H. Drake Williams III, *The Wisdom of the Wise: The Presence and Function of Scripture within 1 Cor. 1:18–3:23*. (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 22.
196. Ibid., 8.
197. Joseph A. Fitzmeyer, *First Corinthians* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 161.
198. Jouette M. Bassler, “1 Corinthians,” *Women’s Bible Commentary*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2012), 558.
199. Pheme Perkins, *First Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012)
200. Fitzmeyer, 171.
201. Ibid., 174.
202. David John Lull and William A Beardslee, *1 Corinthians* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2007), 19.
203. Fitzmeyer, 172.
204. H.H. Drake Williams III, 229.
205. Fitzmeyer, 153.
206. Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Law and Wisdom from Ben Sira to Paul: A Tradition Historical Enquiry into the Relation of Law, Wisdom, and Ethics* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1985), 243.
207. Fitzmeyer, 161.
208. Schnabel, 245.
209. Stuart, 330.
210. Antoinette Clark Wire, *The Corinthian Women Prophets: A Reconstruction through Paul’s Rhetoric*. (Augsburg: Fortress, 2003), 23.
211. Fitzmeyer, 172.
212. Bruce N. Fisk, *First Corinthians* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000), 9–10.
213. Ibid., 10.
214. Ibid.
215. Jann Aldredge-Clanton, *In Search of the Christ-Sophia: An Inclusive Christology for Liberating Christians* (Mystic, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 1995), 54.

216. Ibid.
217. Johnson, 159.
218. Lull, 18.
219. Aldredge-Clanton, 6.
220. Ibid.
221. Ibid., 55.
222. Johnson, 159.
223. Christi Hoover-Seidel, "Proverbs 8:1-17," (Capstone paper, April 2015). Lancaster Theological Seminary.
224. Jann Aldredge-Clanton has explored practices of the church that embody Christ-Sophia including a radical equality, free exercise of diverse gifts, transformation of individuals and communities, and an inclusive worship community experience. See her work, *In Search of the Christ-Sophia: An Inclusive Christology for Liberating Christians* (96–108).
225. Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, *Wisdom Ways: Introducing Feminist Biblical Interpretation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2001)

## 6. Shellenberger

226. This piece was originally created for a Mary Magdalene Feast Day Celebration, July 22, 2016, Goshen, Indiana.
227. This story of Jesus and Mary becoming acquainted comes from a later tradition of Christianity, recorded in Tau Malachi, *Living Gnosis: A Practical Guide to Gnostic Christianity* (Woodbury, Minn.: Llewellyn Publications, 2005), 52–56. Some scholars feel that Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well of John 4:5–26 may also be a veiled description of their first meeting. For more detail, see Cynthia Bourgeault, *The Meaning of Mary Magdalene: Discovering the Woman at the Heart of Christianity* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 2010), 113.
228. Tau Malachi.
229. I am grateful to Cynthia Bourgeault, who guided me in my understanding that the seven "demons" cast out of Mary Magdalene in Luke 8:2 and Mark 16:9, simply refers to Mary Magdalene's having 'done her psychological work' (Bourgeault, 14, quoting Jean-Yves Leloup, *The Gospel of Mary Magdalene* [Rochester, Vt.: Inner Traditions, 2002], 106-109). I am also drawing on Mary's engagement with the Seven Powers of Wrath from the Gospel of Mary Magdalene and her vision of the Great Tree of Life in *The Gospel of the Beloved Companion* in order to explore Mary Magdalene's own Holy Week work of spiritual descent and ascent. Cynthia Bourgeault's 11-part audio series (Through Holy Week with Mary Magdalene) has also been instrumental in my exploration of the spiritual life and work of Mary Magdalene.

230. "Love consists of this, that two solitudes protect and touch and greet each other." Rainer Maria Rilke
231. Thomas Merton from his essay "A Member of the Human Race," in *A Merton Reader*, ed. Thomas P. McDonnell (New York: Image Books, 1989), p. 347.
232. Matthew 14:9
233. Song of Songs 8:6, my translation

## 7. Chandler Burns

234. Ken Stone, "Queer Commentary and Biblical Interpretation: An Introduction," *Queer Commentary and the Hebrew Bible*, ed. Ken Stone (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2001), 11.
235. Ibid., 11–12.
236. Ibid., 45.
237. Deryn Guest, *When Deborah Met Jael: Lesbian Biblical Hermeneutics* (London: SCM Press, 2005) and Ken Stone, "Queer Commentary and Biblical Interpretation: An Introduction," in *Queer Commentary and the Hebrew Bible*, ed. Ken Stone (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2001).
238. Ruth 2:2.
239. Patrick Cheng, *Radical Love: An Introduction to Queer Theology* (New York: Seabury Books, 2011), 3.
240. Ibid.
241. Ibid.
242. Deryn Guest, 53.
243. Ibid., 55.
244. Ibid.
245. Ibid.
246. Ken Stone, 16.
247. Deryn Guest, 9–58.
248. Ken Stone, "Queer Commentary and Biblical Interpretation: An Introduction," in *Queer Commentary and the Hebrew Bible*, ed. Ken Stone (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2001).
249. Patrick Cheng, *Radical Love: An Introduction to Queer Theology* (New York: Seabury Books, 2011), 6.
250. Ibid.
251. Ibid.
252. Ibid., 6–7.
253. Ibid., 7.
254. Ibid., 9.

255. Ibid.
256. Ibid., 10.
257. Timothy Koch, "Isaiah," *The Queer Bible Commentary*, ed. Deryn Guest, Robert E. Goss, Mona West, and Thomas Bohache (London: SCM Press, 2006), 372.
258. Ibid., 371–372.
259. Deryn Guest, *When Deborah Met Jael: Lesbian Biblical Hermeneutics* (London: SCM Press, 2005), 57.
260. Ibid., 55 (quoting Audre Lorde).
261. Patrick Cheng, *Radical Love: An Introduction to Queer Theology* (New York: Seabury Books, 2011), 9.
262. Ibid., 10.
263. Deryn Guest, 53–58.
264. "Bisexual Invisibility: Impacts and Recommendations," March 2011, LGBTQ Advisory Committee, San Francisco Human Rights Commission. [http://sf-hrc.org/sites/default/files/Documents/HRC\\_Publications/Articles/Bisexual\\_Invisibility\\_Impacts\\_and\\_Recommendations\\_March\\_2011.pdf](http://sf-hrc.org/sites/default/files/Documents/HRC_Publications/Articles/Bisexual_Invisibility_Impacts_and_Recommendations_March_2011.pdf).
265. Sam Killermann "Comprehensive\* List of LGBTQ+ Term Definitions," On It's *Pronounced Metrosexual* (blog), January 2013, <http://itspronouncedmetrosexual.com/2013/01/a-comprehensive-list-of-lgbtq-term-definitions>.
266. Ibid.
267. "Bisexual Invisibility"
268. Mary Hunt, "Foreword: Conjectures of a Supportive Bi-Stander" *Blessed Bi Spirit*, ed. Debra R. Kolodny (New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group, 2000), xv.
269. Deryn Guest, v.
270. Ibid., 155.
271. Ibid., 159.
272. Ibid., 219–220.
273. Ibid., 220.
274. Ibid., 209.
275. Patrick Cheng, *Radical Love: An Introduction to Queer Theology* (New York: Seabury Books, 2011), 12.
276. Ruth 1:22; 2:2, 6, 21; 4:5, 10.
277. Derek Suderman, TS 610 Lecture. (Waterloo: Conrad Grebel University College, 2015).

278. I'm reminded particularly of an old episode of *Ally McBeal* on television. Ally is dating a new partner and finds out he is bisexual. Upon learning this, Ally has a very difficult time with the news, assuming that bisexuality correlates to promiscuity. David E. Kelley, *Ally McBeal: Pursuit of Loneliness* (Season 3, Episode 13). Directed by Jonathan Pontell. Los Angeles: 20th Century Fox, 2000.
279. "Bisexual Invisibility."
280. Ruth 1:22, 2:2, 6, 21, 4:5, 10.
281. "Bisexual Invisibility."
282. Carolyn Osiek and Jennifer Pouya, "Chapter 3: Constructions of Gender in the Roman Imperial World," *Understanding the Social World of the New Testament*, ed. Dietmar Neufeld and Richard E. DeMaris (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010), 45.
283. James McKeown, *Ruth* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2015), 25.
284. *Ibid.*, 25.
285. *Ibid.*, 65–66.
286. Ruth 4:17.
287. Mona West, "Ruth," *The Queer Bible Commentary*, ed. Deryn Guest, Robert E. Goss, Mona West, and Thomas Bohache (London: SCM Press, 2006), 193.
288. There is plenty of room here for someone to argue that the story of Ruth is the story of polyamorous relationships, though I feel largely unequipped to make this claim.
289. James McKeown, *Ruth* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2015), 70.
290. *Ibid.*
291. Patrick Cheng, *Radical Love: An Introduction to Queer Theology* (New York: Seabury Books, 2011), 12.
292. *Ibid.*, 18.
293. Laurel Dykstra, "Jesus, Bread, Wine and Roses: A Bisexual Feminist at the Catholic Worker," in *Blessed Bi Spirit*, ed. Debra R. Kolodny (New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group, 2000), 78–79.
294. *Ibid.*, 80
295. James McKeown, 13.
296. *Ibid.*, 57.

## 8. Thiel Lee

297. Wendell, Berry, *The Dream*, Collected Poems 1957-1982 (New York: North Point Press, 1985), 64.
298. Hannah Arendt, *On Violence* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1969), 44. Emphasis mine.
299. Ibid., emphasis mine.
300. Merriam-Webster Dictionary, s.v. "politics," accessed November 2, 2016.
301. Hannah Arendt, 44.
302. Ibid.
303. Ibid. She goes on, "the many, who will often combine for no other purpose than to ruin strength precisely because of its peculiar independence."
304. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1958), 180.
305. Ibid.
306. Hannah Arendt, *On Violence*, 47.
307. Ibid., 46.
308. Ibid., 47.
309. Ibid., 51.
310. Ibid., 56.
311. Ibid.
312. Arendt is candid about the fact that violence is extremely effective in dismantling power. "Those who oppose violence with mere power will soon find that they are confronted not by men but by men's artifacts, whose inhumanity and destructive effectiveness increase in proportion to the distance separating the opponents. Violence can always destroy power; out of the barrel of a gun grows the most effective command, resulting in the most instant and perfect obedience." Ibid., 53.
313. The original reads "men."
314. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 179. Emphasis mine.
315. Ibid., 180.
316. Ibid., 179.
317. Ibid., 178. Here Arendt's concepts of power reveal an interesting affinity with theories of creativity which espouse that ideas, inspirations, and creative energy are "like manna," that they do not keep and must be grasped and actualized in the moment, or that artists are obliged to create "when the Muse speaks," lest she slip away, never to return again in the same capacity.

## 9. Lea-Simka

- 318. "Nature Is Speaking: Julia Roberts is Mother Nature," Conservation International. Video, Oct. 5 2014.
- 319. A. Clifford, "Ecofeminism and Ecofeminist Theology," *New Catholic Encyclopedia*. 2003 Encyclopedia.com. 2003. 7 June 2016.
- 320. Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Gaia and God: An Ecofeminist Theology of Earth Healing*. (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco), 1992.
- 321. "Save the Bees," Greenpeace USA, accessed Nov. 1 2016, <http://www.greenpeace.org/usa/sustainable-agriculture/save-the-bees/>.
- 322. Ibid.
- 323. Genesis 1:28.
- 324. Schori, Katharine J., "Created for Abundant Life." Lecture presented at *Fridays at the Seminary*, Virginia Theological Seminary, Alexandria, VA, May 6, 2016.
- 325. Ruether, 2.
- 326. St. Francis of Assisi. "The Canticle of Brother Sun." *Franciscan Friars Third Order Regular*, accessed Nov. 1, 2016. <https://ignatiansolidarity.net/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/Canticle-of-Brother-Sun-and-Sister-Moon.pdf>
- 327. Ruether, 85–111.
- 328. Barbara Kingsolver, "A Fist in the Eye of God," *Small Wonder*. (New York: HarperCollins, 2002), 93–108.
- 329. Ruether, 142.
- 330. Micah 6:8
- 331. Ruether, 1.
- 332. Romans 12:2

## 10. Wade

- 333. Howard Thurman, *Jesus of the Disinherited* (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1949), 29.
- 334. Ibid., 28.
- 335. Amit Ray, *Mindfulness: Living in the Moment, Living in the Breath* (Inner Light Publishers, 2017), 21.
- 336. Paul Woodruff, *Reverence: Renewing a Forgotten Virtue*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Oxford Press, 2014), 1.
- 337. Howard Thurman, *The Inward Journey* (Richmond, Indiana: Friends United Press, 1961), 96.
- 338. Howard Thurman, *With Head and Heart* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1979), 270.

339. Swami Adiswarananda, *Vivekananda, World Teacher: His Teachings on the Spiritual Unity of Humankind*. (Woodstock, Vermont: Skylight Paths Publishing, 2006), 91.
340. George K. Makechnie, *Howard Thurman, His Enduring Dream* (Boston: Boston University Press, 1988), 10.
341. J.K. Rowling, "The Fringe Benefits of Failure and the Importance of Imagination," commencement address, Harvard University, June 5, 2008, youtube.com, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UibfDUPJAEU&list=PL309451B70B1DE1FF&index=1>.
342. Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 40.
343. Ibid.
344. Ibid.
345. Howard Thurman, "Sound of the Genuine" *Baccalaureate Address at Spelman College*, May 4, 1980, ed. Jo Moore Stewart, *The Spelman Messenger*, vol. 96 no.4 (Summer 1980), 14–15.
346. John Lennon, *Imagine*. (Apple Records, 1971).







# Women in Leadership Project

The Women in Leadership Project works to dismantle patriarchal systems in Mennonite Church USA by empowering women to live out the call of God on their lives, increase their capacities, and contribute their wisdom in congregations, area conferences, agencies and institutions.

**"Our faith is that in the ongoing intention to live as Christ in the world, God both saves us from destructive dimensions of power and also saves us for the bold exercise of power."**

**— Jennifer Davis Sensenig**

**"Practicing reverence must be the key in all our interactions and striving. Out of it we gain access to our creative imagination that provides images and insights that highlight the wonders, wisdom, and beauty of life."**

**— Dr. Mary Wade**

**"People do divine things every day, but we do not do them alone. We cocreate with God as the Spirit empowers us."**

**— Erica Lea-Simka**

**Jennifer Castro** is coordinator of the Women in Leadership Project of Mennonite Church USA. She's an educator and has worked in community and women's health, public education, and development. She lives in San Antonio, Texas, with her spouse and their three kids.



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