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What Is This Place: Encountering the Body of Christ in Prison and Church through Sacrament and Ritual Musicking

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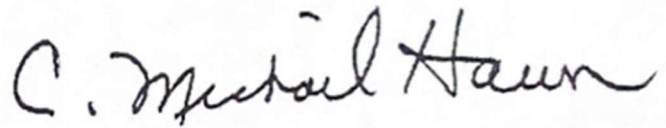
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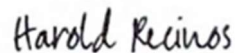
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THROUGH SACRAMENT AND RITUAL MUSICKING

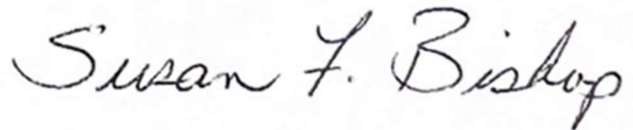
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WHAT IS THIS PLACE:
ENCOUNTERING THE BODY OF CHRIST IN PRISON AND CHURCH
THROUGH SACRAMENT AND RITUAL MUSICKING

A Thesis Presented to the Graduate Faculty of Perkins School of Theology

Southern Methodist University

in

Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the degree of

Doctor of Pastoral Music

by

Bryan F. Black

B.M., Organ, Samford University
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May 2024

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Amy and Margaret (my wife and daughter) have supported me while writing this thesis just as they have selflessly contributed to every worship service and choir rehearsal I have led for thirty years. Their care for me and sacrifice for others is a lasting testimony of Christian devotion and evidence of their own pastoral gifts.

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The 2020 DPM Cohort was shaped by a pandemic, the death of George Floyd, political violence, and other personal challenges. Darrell, Darnell, Michael, Bryan, David, and Alan have persevered with me and become my brothers.

It now seems improbable that I first contacted Dr. Michael Hawn to inquire about this doctoral program in 2019. My family had just endured a two-year period of intense disruption that tested our resilience, yet a new way opened before me and I pursued it with the strength of others who carried us forward. I am indebted to each of them:

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Jimmy Post
Cassie Register
Cecelia Ropp
John and Allison Salter
Susan Stensland
Fr. Matt Torpey, OCSO
Beverly Vander Molen
Harris Wheeler
Bobby and Pat Whitmire

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to Amy and Margaret, my wife and daughter.

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What Is This Place:

Encountering the Body of Christ in Prison and Church
through Sacrament and Ritual Musicking

Advisor: Dr. C. Michael Hawn

Doctor of Pastoral Music conferred TBA

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ABSTRACT

Churches in the United States have faced institutional decline due in part to an unprecedented half-century of intense cultural shift and digital acceleration. Many leaders responded to this disorientation with technical fixes that have exacerbated divisiveness rather than addressing the underlying crisis of alienation and loneliness. Driven by fear of decline, communities of faith have forsaken their alterity of purpose and become lost in the marketplace as a “purveyor of religious goods and services” (George Hunsberger). This thesis considers the imagery of Huub Oosterhuis’s hymn “What Is This Place?” in theological dialogue with the Voices of Hope—a choir of female offenders incarcerated at Georgia’s Lee Arrendale State Prison. Their collaborative ministry with Chaplain Susan Bishop models an adaptive response formed by the spirit of improvisation that sustains community under constant threat for survival. Through ritual musicking in a liminal context, the Voices of Hope embody an alterity of identity rooted in mutuality, inclusion, and wholeness. An ethnographic analysis of their lived example reorients questions of institutional decline away from technical fixes toward sacramental awareness best revealed, practiced, and sung together in holy relationship for the sake of others before God.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

A place for questions

“What is this place?” opens this thesis with a question taken from the first line of Huub Oosterhuis’s hymn:

What is this place, where we are meeting?
Only a house the earth its floor.
Walls and a roof, sheltering people,
Windows for light, an open door.
Yet it becomes a body that lives when we are gathered here
And know our God is here.¹

It appeared in 1967 amidst a simultaneous upheaval in society and the church as the impact of Vatican II was being felt by Catholic and Protestant congregations around the globe. Social customs and religious practices that had remained largely unchanged for centuries were now the topic of newspaper articles grappling to understand changing gender roles, declining vocations for the priesthood, and dwindling attendance at public worship services.² Some fifty years later, the perspective found in Oosterhuis’s hymn remains compelling and even more relevant as it acknowledges the skeptic’s doubt, affirms the believer’s faith, and proclaims the mystical presence of Christ’s body embracing the world. It is a hymn written for a secular age that has abandoned dogma, yet still longs for wholeness and community with each other and, perhaps, even intimacy with the living God. This question—“What is this place?”—reflects the paradox of faith practiced within a disinterested postmodern society and voices the church’s constant anxiety: Will people continue meeting together under church roofs? Does anything really

¹ Huub Oosterhuis, 1968; trans. David Smith, 1970. © 1967 Gooi En Sticht, Bv, Baarn, The Netherlands.

² Edward B. Fiske, “Dutch Catholicism Facing Problems.” *The New York Times* (September 7, 1969): 1.

“happen” during the liturgy? Are declining congregations not evidence that Christianity itself has been discarded by a secular society?

Because my lifetime as a member of “Gen X” has spanned the same decades since “What Is This Place?” was written, these pressing questions of personal faith, congregational life, and communal musicking are not theoretical musings. Rather, they are my lived experiences as a pastoral musician: social and theological disorientation as “worship wars,” denominational conflicts, technological acceleration, and the aftershocks of a global pandemic have eroded institutional trust and threatened individual well-being. Even when promising efforts or small achievements seem to momentarily stem dwindling worship attendance, there is always a pervasive subtext at any professional or informal gathering of church leaders: “What should we do to stop this spiral of decline? How do we attract people into failing congregations? Please help us.”

For those who frame this decline as a failure of consumer marketing, the response has largely been informed by a reliance on *technical fixes* rather than addressing the underlying adaptive challenges rooted in persistent social problems and spiritual longings. Technical fixes are not limited to technology—they can take many forms such as forming a new committee, upgrading buildings and furnishings, adding attractional programming, or finding a handy scapegoat.³ When faced with the unpleasant disequilibrium associated with any complex problem, the attraction of a technical fix is powerful. Complex problems are combinations of technical elements and adaptive elements. Discerning them from each other is messy and time-consuming; there are no shortcuts. As time passes, the mounting disequilibrium becomes

³ Ronald Heifetz, *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership* (Boston: Harvard Business Press, 2009), 31.

seemingly intolerable, and a technical fix is applied. This slows or stops the spinning temporarily but short-circuits the necessary adaptive work. Heifetz asserts: “you know there is an adaptive challenge facing your organization or community [when] the problem persists even after a series of attempted technical fixes.”⁴ By that definition, the church’s fondness for technical fixes in the decades following Vatican II reveals a denial of reality and failure of spiritual discernment. These cycles of fixes (often taking the form of reactive changes to liturgy, worship culture, and music) suggest that the church often functions as a “vendor of religious goods and services”⁵ constantly seeking the *dynamic stabilization* promised by more consumers even as underlying systemic problems are ignored.

While neglecting the adaptive work in favor of technical fixes in any arena is a self-evident failure, this avoidance has done further harm by weakening the church’s credibility in the wider cultural context and exacerbating mistrust within the church. Yet even if the hard interior work of the soul were finally to be taken up in earnest and technical fixes gave way to substantive adaptation, there is no promise of a miraculous reversal for the church. For example, many people now find a Sunday spent with family at a soccer game as an acceptable experience of sabbath rest and group interaction free from religious obligation. Such choices embody an increasingly secular cultural norm that rejects religion while embracing a vague spirituality with engaging social rituals that gather the community around ideals of competition or demographic identity. One manifestation is an organization such as *Citizen University*, based in Seattle, Washington, that responded to what the U.S. Surgeon General calls “Our Epidemic of Loneliness

⁴ Ronald Heifetz, *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership* (Boston: Harvard Business Press, 2009), 70.

⁵ Marva Dawn, *A Royal “Waste” of Time* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1999), 121. Quoting George R. Hunsberger.

and Isolation”⁶ by hosting Civic Saturday events designed to “strengthen social ties and rebuild faith in one another—and our democracy.”⁷ This laudable effort by *Citizen University* imagines “bringing people together and planning events with creativity and spirit [in] a new ‘civic ritual’ strengthening our community’s infrastructure.”⁸ Founder Eric Liu described it in an NPR interview, “Like a faith gathering, but not.”⁹ While clearly conceived as a non-sectarian response to social and political issues, one cannot fail to notice this organization’s acknowledgment that a day set aside to observe embodied ritual evokes a powerful sense of transcendent purpose—exactly the emotional empowerment necessary to mount a sustainable response in the face of persistent societal problems that they seek to address.

Parallels between this particular model of social innovation and the practice of Christian worship as the locus of sacramental nourishment to sustain the beloved community of faith are easily drawn, but they are not easily reconciled in a secular age. College students might scoff at creationist museums and a literal understanding of Genesis, but an informal poll of Stephen Asma’s students found that eighty percent believe in ghosts and fifty percent in astrology. He notes they are indeed disaffected about organized institutional religion, however: “They are devoted to mysticism and supernaturalism and think the idea of heaven and hell is ridiculous, [yet regard] karma and reincarnation as manifestly obvious.”¹⁰ As expressed by Richard Beck: “God may be dead, but we sure do miss him.”¹¹

⁶ Vivek H. Murthy, “Our Epidemic of Loneliness: The US Surgeon General’s Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community” (2023): <https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-social-connection-advisory.pdf> (accessed 29 Nov. 2023).

⁷ “Citizenship University,” (n.d.) <https://citizenuniversity.us/> (accessed 29 Nov. 2023).

⁸ <https://citizenuniversity.us/> (accessed 29 Nov. 2023).

⁹ “Why the U.S. surgeon general says feeling lonely could lead to an early death,” NPR (posted May 3, 2023): <https://www.npr.org/2023/05/03/1173612050/why-the-u-s-surgeon-general-says-feeling-lonely-could-lead-to-an-early-death> (accessed 29 Nov. 2023).

¹⁰ Richard Beck, *Hunting Magic Eels* (Minneapolis: Broadleaf Books, 2021), 13. Quoting Asma.

¹¹ Richard Beck, *Hunting Magic Eels*, 10.

More than fifty years after “What Is This Place?” was written, questions of gathering under the roof of an institutional church as the body of Christ seem increasingly preposterous for time-starved women and men living in a secular age detached from the weekly and yearly rhythms of sacred ritual. Even so, what remains unchanged since the 1960s (and indeed across all generations) is a deep hunger to gather in sacred places, or at least places that summon a certain reverence, and offer physical grounding when confronted with occasions of great joy or sorrow. There always remains a constant hunger for emotional well-being, spiritual nourishment, and purposeful living. Of course, these essential aspects of psychological self-actualization and spiritual formation, which were widely understood in relationship to God for centuries, have never been the exclusive domain of clergy and religion. The so-called sacred and so-called secular have always coexisted in philosophical juxtaposition. Hidden saints have always defied the boundaries of dogma and doctrine as they struggled for truth and justice. However, the church remains preoccupied with technical fixes as a seismic shift reorients society, personal well-being, and community life toward practices that find God unnecessary.

An epidemic of loneliness and isolation surrounds churches on every street corner in America, yet people in desperate need of social connection and community sense the church’s fearful grip on self-preservation and have grown weary of technical fixes incapable of sustaining transformative personal growth and healthy community. Leaders unwilling to endure the inescapable disequilibrium created by this shift have fled from the lived experiences of loneliness and isolation in fear of the institutional church’s collapse. Instead of engaging with this messy reality of isolation and courageously loving those who are adrift in it, they stabilize the “problem” with technical fixes, bemoan the lack of resources, and regard those who are estranged and lonely as somehow responsible for their own predicament. Above all, the constant

avoidance of disequilibrium inhibits those necessary periods of extended uncertainty which summon improvisatory responses grounded in living orthodoxy and solidarity with those in need.

An unexpected place

The Doctor of Pastoral Music degree program includes an applied studies course designed to enhance an existing skill or cultivate a new competency with practical application in the student's context. While considering what form this course might take for me, our cohort was invited to observe a rehearsal of the Dallas Street Choir conducted by Dr. Jonathan Palant held at the First Presbyterian Church of Dallas, Texas. This organization offers a musical outlet for those affected by homelessness that “demonstrates [how] participation in a consistent, safe environment better equips individuals to find a job, secure housing, and improve their overall lifestyle.”¹² One hallmark of the choir's rehearsal culture that contributes to an immediate sense of acceptance and welcome is the pedagogical decision to forego traditional musical notation in favor of rote learning by ear. Notebooks with words are provided to the singers which aid in memorization and compositional structure, but the aural teaching of melody and rhythm maximizes the effectiveness of limited rehearsal time with participants of varying ages, skills, and abilities. Our cohort was invited to sit with members of the Street Choir for this rehearsal and in the process experienced first-hand the process of aural teaching. Learning music in this way is an ancient, venerable practice. The effectiveness of rote learning in this atypical context is astonishing and empowers the members to immediately access their innate musicianship without the stigma of being “musically illiterate.” Feeling the power of this rehearsal as voices found

¹² “Dallas Street Choir,” (n.d.) <https://dallasstreetchoir.org/about/> (accessed 29 Nov. 2023).

their confidence with renewed dignity inspired me to pursue rote or “paperless” learning as the focus of my applied studies course in the summer of 2022.

Chaplain Susan Bishop and the Voices of Hope Choir became my local oral music making experts for this course. Susan has worked for forty-one years as a clinical chaplain with the Georgia Department of Corrections, and her choir meets behind the bars of Lee Arrendale State Prison, a maximum-security facility located seventy miles north of Atlanta in rural Habersham County. Informal music-making is common among incarcerated populations, as are ensembles in prisoner-led worship services. What makes the Voices of Hope uncommon is the choir’s privilege of leaving the prison with an armed security detail to perform for churches and civic events across metro Atlanta. Winning the support of wardens who bear the ultimate responsibility for such outings has been no small task for Chaplain Bishop; the opportunity comes with equally high expectations for inmate behavior. Susan, who was ordained as a Southern Baptist minister in 1979, artfully blends her pastoral vocation with advanced training in music education (Georgia State University) and theology (Emory University) to impact the women who audition for the Voices of Hope, the general population of 1,700 inmates at Arrendale Prison, and the community at large who experience the choir’s ministry beyond the prison walls.

Having hosted the Voices of Hope for a worship service in my church more than ten years ago, it occurred to me that Susan and the choir might allow me to reconnect with them at Arrendale as a visitor in their weekly rehearsals. Her teaching skills and the choir’s learning culture presented a rare setting to expand my capacity for rote learning and improvisation along with an underlying dimension of pastoral care. Susan generously agreed to this proposal which first required a state-mandated background check and specialized training for long-term

volunteers with the Georgia Department of Corrections.¹³ Following my accreditation, Susan invited me to spend time in rehearsal teaching music to the women and challenged me to play keyboard using only chord charts along with one of the inmates who is an accomplished guitarist.

After visiting rehearsals for several months, the requirements for my applied studies course had been successfully met. My desire to become more confident when teaching by rote had been fulfilled, and improvising at the keyboard without notation was no longer as nerve-wracking; the inmate who graciously accompanied me with her guitar despite my obvious shortcomings radiated a confidence which warmed my own. The degree coursework had led me back to Susan and the choir simply to acquire a new skill, but the visits to Arrendale had also become occasions to reflect on conversations with inmates while driving back home. In moments outside of rehearsal, Susan elaborated on what practices had sustained her vocation under such demanding circumstances for so long with so few resources.¹⁴

Although my work as an organist/choirmaster in a suburban, Episcopal parish could not be more different than a chaplain teaching music behind bars, my acceptance by Susan and the choir had gradually formed a new framework for ministry in my mind and put new resolve in my spirit. Looming anxieties and the ever-present “crisis of decline” preoccupying local churches in a secular age now appeared differently when seen through the lens of life and ministry in prison.¹⁵ While distinct in many outward ways, the joys and struggles of pastoral music in a

¹³ The author holds a state issued ID badge allowing interaction with offenders under supervision of the warden and chaplain. By law, he cannot reveal names, provide any personal information, or take photographs of inmates. This ID badge was issued following a background check and day-long seminar held at the Georgia Department of Correction headquarters in 2022 with situation specific training, complementing the IRB process of Southern Methodist University.

¹⁴ As of 2022, there were 175 staff positions with 130 vacancies at Arrendale Prison.

¹⁵ Andrew Root, *Churches and the Crisis of Decline* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2022).

typical church setting and a faith community behind prison walls are not foreign to each other. However, most of the obstacles found so perplexing by the institutional church pale when considered from the perspective of prison chaplaincy and life as an incarcerated person. Arrendale's offenders continue to sing, observe rituals, and serve the community's needs as lay ministers while navigating an epidemic of suicide and violence inside the institution. Although local congregations grapple with increasingly complex social issues, they benefit from relative stability and recognized legal status. The life of a faith community in prison responds to harsh, embodied realities without warning which demands tangible responses in the moment. Any event, assembly, or rehearsal can be thrown into chaos by an emergency headcount.

My internship with the Voices of Hope and experiences of Chaplain Bishop's shared pastoral ministry with the choir demonstrate the practice of improvisation as a musical skill and ecclesiological concept of enormous importance. As Susan says, "Flexibility and patience. That's what this job requires more than anything else."¹⁶ With judicious application, this improvisatory spirit can sustain periods of disequilibrium in congregational and personal life and avoids the temptation of cheap technical fixes doomed to fail institutions and people. It answers outward lack with inward abundance and accepts the reality of uncertainty without succumbing to fatalism or despair—an attribute of even greater import when the institutions and people are already weakened by chronic anxiety and psychological trauma.

¹⁶ Allison O. Adams, "Chap," *Emory Magazine* 72, no. 3 (Autumn 1996): n.p.: https://www.emory.edu/EMORY_MAGAZINE/fall96/bishop.html (accessed 29 Nov. 2023).

Methodology

“What Is This Place?” was considered earlier in this introduction as a hymn that responded to the emerging doubts and challenges of the 1960s by suggesting that gathering under a roof is more than a quaint custom but a radical manifestation of the Body of Christ present in the world. Since this hymn was written by a former Dutch Jesuit priest, one can reasonably assume Oosterhuis had the roof of a church in mind since it is the expected gathering place for congregations. Furthermore, the institutional church was being called to account for itself amidst cultural upheaval. The intervening fifty-plus years have only seen an intensification and acceleration of cultural change as even fewer people now gather under church roofs. And yet, the hymn’s straightforward language allows an imagined congregation to presumably gather under any imaginable roof.¹⁷ While some gather under a church roof, there are others wearing khaki jumpsuits gathered under a prison gymnasium roof, holding Sunday worship on a hot Georgia afternoon.

This thesis will consider what the congregation gathered under a church roof may have to learn from their separated Christian sisters as they gather and sing under the leaky gymnasium roof behind prison walls. In a “flatland” of loneliness and isolation, can the institutional church embrace an improvisational ecclesiology rooted in ritual musicking and seek to recover its alterity of identity and purpose as the Body of Christ? As an elaboration of what unfolded in my applied studies course, the pastoral practices of Susan Bishop and lived experiences of her choir members will be examined as a case study over a two-year period through ongoing participation in choir rehearsals, community life, and Sunday worship services at Arrendale. Observing these

¹⁷ The original title in Dutch literally translates as “Only A Roof”—nothing more, nothing less.

activities in their cultural context through a descriptive ethnographic approach seeks a greater understanding of the sung faith embodied by incarcerated women. Interpretation of collected data will serve to inform a potential model of application for ministry in challenging circumstances of increasing uncertainty centered around communal and ritual musicking.

Narrative material from Chaplain Bishop and her shared ministry with the Voices of Hope will be referenced throughout the thesis in counterpoint with aspects of pastoral music in a secular age. **Chapter 2: “What is this place?”** presents a musical and theological analysis of Oosterhuis’s hymn as a poetic expression of the church’s alterity of identity and purpose as the Body of Christ. Does place still matter? The ongoing tension between digital vs. analog worship following the global pandemic reveals competing ideological positions are influencing our basic understanding of community and place.

Chapter 3: “What Time Is It?” will consider the impact of technological and societal acceleration in late modernity, a phenomenon German sociologist and political scientist Hartmut Rosa refers to as *Zeitkrankheit* (“time sickness”).¹⁸ Rosa informs Andrew Root’s theological synthesis which recognizes our changing experience of time as a critical shift that has pervasively weakened the church’s alterity of perspective. This acceleration means that many feel as if they live in a “time desert”—a wasteland requiring one to move faster simply to stay in the same place. In contrast, the incarcerated population experiences a “time vortex” imposed on them during their prison sentence which severs the expected rhythms of life, interrupts aspirations, and strains family dynamics. What do the time desert and the time vortex say to us as acceleration continues to pressure our psychological and spiritual lives?

¹⁸ Hartmut Rosa, *Social Acceleration: A New Theory of Modernity* (New York: Columbia University, 2015).

Chapter 4: “Who Are You?” addresses the fluid roles of guest and host in the context of sacred spaces and ritual musicking. Chaplain Bishop is among the very few prison chaplains whose musical training allows her to lead inmates outside of prison in order to perform as guests in churches and for civic occasions. My experience hosting the Voices of Hope outside of prison and later collaborations with the choir inside prison will serve as primary material. Specifically, the dynamics of “guest/host” and “offender/citizen” as fluid roles will be considered from the perspective of volunteer, inmate, and ex-offenders as they transition into society.

Chapter 5: “Why Are You Singing?” considers the distinction between music as entertainment (freedom from responsibility, experiential autonomy) or music with an ethical imperative in a lived community (collective responsibility, common identity). At Arrendale, musical improvisation is the foundational value that optimizes modest resources and empowers an incarcerated population to sing and play for each other. Improvisation is also reflected in Chaplain Bishop’s mindset, sustaining her daily work despite staffing shortages, Federal investigations, gang activity, and a schedule prone to disruption by emergency situations which constitute a stressful daily reality. Emphasizing improvisation as an essential musical and pastoral competency within the demanding prison environment presents the neglected potential of adaptive, improvisational musicking as a needed spiritual discipline in more conventional local congregations.

Chapter 6: “Dreams, Signs, and Wonders” is another phrase taken from Oosterhuis’s hymn. It represents a musical ecclesiology of renewal in the experience of disequilibrium and change which invites the church into a humbler posture of servanthood within and outside the physical building. Ethical, shared musicking in ritual context is a sacramental experience for participants and a living sign for the world. As many are fed from the one loaf broken and shared

in Christ's name, musicking draws the many to become one in breath, sound, and time. An ethnographic examination of these proximate, interwoven sacramental experiences will consider liturgical gatherings led by the Voices of Hope.

CHAPTER 2

“What Is This Place”: A Church Inside the Fence

*Zomaar een dak boven wat hoofden,
Deur die naar stilte openstaat.
Muren van huid, ramen als ogen,
Speurend naar hoop en dageraad.
Huis dat een levend lichaam wordt
Als wij er binnegaan
Om recht voor God te staan.
(Huub Oosterhuis)*

What is this place, where we are meeting?
Only a house the earth its floor.
Walls and a roof, sheltering people,
Windows for light, an open door.
Yet it becomes a body that lives
When we are gathered here
And know our God is here.
(Oosterhuis, trans. David Smith)

“What Is This Place” (“Zomaar een dak”) is one of the more than seven hundred hymns written by Huub Oosterhuis. Because the English translation begins with a question, it serves to heighten the singer’s awareness of place (church) and purpose (worship). The text presumably has a typical church building in mind, but when the first line is considered in the context of female inmates gathering for worship in a prison chapel its imaginative language takes on an unexpected dimension of significance.

Oosterhuis’s output remains in the original Dutch; a translation by David Smith in 1970 introduced “What Is This Place” to English speaking congregations and his translation now appears in sixteen hymnals.¹ Those hymnals span several denominations from Presbyterian (*Glory to God*) to Mennonite (*Voices Together*) and include the well-used *Gather* hymnal series found in many Catholic parishes. This broad appeal and usage of the hymn in both Protestant and Catholic contexts is not only the case for English speakers; Oosterhuis has been highly regarded

¹ “What is this place,” “Hymnary.org,” (n.d.) https://hymnary.org/text/what_is_this_place_where_we_are_meeting (accessed 29 Nov. 2023).

among Protestant and Catholic communities in Holland for decades—a notable achievement but one not without controversy.

“What Is This Place” was written the year before a 1969 *New York Times* article announcing “Dutch Catholicism Facing Problems” with alarming statistics: the number of ordinations had decreased sixty-one percent over the last decade and the numbers of priests leaving the ministry was five times what it was in 1965.² Aside from a growing number of Dutch citizens who were no longer interested in organized religion, the central issue among priests had to do with marriage. Of the 8,000 priests surveyed at the time, 81% were in favor of allowing marriage. Oosterhuis was among the majority. While dissatisfaction eventually led him to leave the Jesuit order and marry, he was among the brightest and most creative minds who responded to the new possibilities coming from the Vatican II deliberations and contributed to the exceptionally vibrant reputation of the Dutch church in the second half of the 1960s. Social issues such as contraception, liturgical reform, and the marriage of priests were debated across the spectrum of conservative and liberal perspectives within the church, but one quote by Fr. Louis ter Steeg summarized the progressive viewpoint which most strongly resonated with the moment: “The church means nothing in itself. It is important only insofar as it helps people to live human lives in relation to God and each other.”³ This conviction, succinctly articulated by ter Steeg, is found at every turn in Oosterhuis’s writing. Although these debates were specific to the liturgical expression of Catholic doctrine in the 1960s, acknowledgement of the individual’s lived experience also affirms essential theological imperatives of the Reformation. Luther and others criticized sacramental mysteries being reduced to the *hocus pocus* of magic disconnected

² Edward B. Fiske, “Dutch Catholicism Facing Problems.” *The New York Times* 518, no. 40,768 (September 7, 1969): 1. <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1969/09/07/issue.html> (accessed 29 Nov. 2023).

³ Fiske, “Dutch Catholicism Facing Problems,” 18.

from the intellectual grasp and spiritual wellbeing of common folk assembled for worship.

Accordingly, recognizing the human person made in God's image as the actual locus of religious experience and spiritual transformation is central to Oosterhuis's 1972 book, *Open Your Hearts*:

Not the language of a pretentious Church system of thought, with its dogmas and categories. . . but the language of peaching and the liturgy, of witness and singing the birth language of faith. Singing is becoming part of a greater whole, joining in, agreeing with many other people, using words which you cannot make true if you sing them alone, but you can only venture to sing along with others.⁴

Above all, Oosterhuis probes and questions what is at stake when people gather in Christian community. Just being in the church building is not enough; observing the sacred ritual is not enough. Superficial experiences are inadequate. The title of his hymn "Zomaar een dak" takes the form of a question in English translation: "What is this place?" This was the first line of David Smith's translation as it is now called in many hymnals. His translated title gave the hymn an evocative character in English, yet the original Dutch is not a question but rather a simple statement: "Only a roof." Despite this casualty of translation, Oosterhuis's text clearly welcomes the reader's inquiry into the lived experience of worship and communal musicking—every facet of the hymn questions the where, what, and how of gathered community in a sacred space.

Despite the unintentional question resulting from Smith's English translation, "What Is This Place" remains for many their sole encounter with Oosterhuis's prophetic voice that effectively captured the spirit of 1960s Dutch Catholicism and its creative interpretation of Vatican II. Since poetic translations are notoriously fraught with compromises as they must convey meaning within syllabic constraints, it is helpful to consider a literal translation or alternate poetic renderings. In the case of Oosterhuis and this particular hymn, we benefit from a

⁴ Huub Oosterhuis, *Open Your Hearts* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1972), 108.

relationship formed in the early 1970s with Tony Barr, a British church musician who attended workshops in Holland and crafted more idiomatic translations from the Dutch into English. They remained close friends for decades until Oosterhuis's recent death in 2023. Barr now serves as director of the Huijbers-Oosterhuis archives at St. John's University in Collegeville, Minnesota, a position he has held since 2016.⁵ Barr emphasized in correspondence that Smith's translation of Oosterhuis asked a question which does not exist in the original language. It is "as down to earth a statement as you could wish to make—it's *only a roof, nothing else!* The geography is of little importance; it's about the people gathered there."⁶ This provides insight into the compromises of translation but more importantly clarifies Oosterhuis's use of direct language and syntax.

Barr wrote his own singing translation of "Zomaar een dak" in 1984 entitled "Only a Roof" which avoids Smith's problematic question:

Only a roof, shelter for people,
doorway that opens into calm.
Walls out of flesh, eyes are the windows,
waiting in hope for each new dawn.
House that becomes a body, alive
when we are gathered here
for justice to appear.⁷

The title and content of the three stanzas given in "Only a Roof" also align on the whole more closely with the voice of Oosterhuis as a "theo-poet" as Barr describes him. Nevertheless, both translations insist that the "we" of gathered community is indispensable. The church "becomes a body when **we** are gathered here." At times of worship, "**We** in this place remember and speak again what **we** have heard." And most powerfully: "Here in this world, dying and living / **We** are

⁵ Tony Barr, "The Bernard Huijbers–Huub Oosterhuis Collaboration," *The Hymn* 70, No. 3 (Summer 2019): 11.

⁶ Correspondence with Tony Barr, January 6, 2023. Emphasis original.

⁷ © Tony Barr, Jabulani Music, 1984. Used by permission of the author.

each other's bread and wine."⁸ These three lines from the hymn capture Oosterhuis's earlier conviction that such words "cannot [be made] true if you sing them alone"⁹ but necessitate the gathered, embodied community as a living symbol of God's action in the world.

Suggesting that ordinary people can become each other's spiritual bread and wine is an interesting poetic image but one that might trigger suspicion if read literally in more conservative Protestant contexts. It could provoke even greater suspicion which considered from a conservative Catholic viewpoint which observes such reverence around the real presence of Christ revealed in the Eucharist. Oosterhuis is opening the door wide, perhaps even wider than expected. Quoting again from Barr's letter:

The song is definitely not about the miracle of transubstantiation (**which he said you could take it or leave it**), but the miracle (sign) is that people continue to gather, week in and week out, and have done so for two thousand years. And they do this to celebrate more than a memory, but a presence of the risen Jesus within the community. Since the resurrection, Jesus continues to be entangled in our DNA. And because of the priestly nature of baptism (I Pet 2), we are all priests, forming the celebrant-assembly.¹⁰

This quotation from Barr confirms Oosterhuis is not merely tinkering with poetic imagery, but plunging headfirst into deep theological waters with intention. Few would expect a priest to express a "take it or leave it" attitude about what is one of the most contested facets of Christian sacramental theology. From this, we can sense something of the spirit which brought him to write "Only A Roof" in 1968 and has made his hymnody so widely known and appreciated in Holland. Of the thousand or so entries in the Dutch *Liedboek voor de Kerken* (first published in 1973), around eighty belong to Oosterhuis.¹¹ Such a significant representation and the hymnal's

⁸ Huub Oosterhuis, 1968; trans. David Smith, 1970. © 1967 Gooi En Sticht, Bv, Baarn, The Netherlands.

⁹ Oosterhuis, *Open Your Hearts*, 108.

¹⁰ Correspondence with Tony Barr, January 6, 2023. Emphasis added.

¹¹ Emily R. Brink, "Reflections on Huijbers-Oosterhuis Collaboration." *The Hymn* 70, No. 3 (Summer 2019): 19.

favorable use in Protestant and Catholic parishes attests to an uncommonly broad sense of ecumenicism forged around his provocative yet pastoral sensibilities.

Oosterhuis enjoyed a long musical collaboration with Bernard Huijbers (1922–2003), another Dutch Jesuit priest who set many of his texts to music. While immersed in the Gregorian chant and polyphony of pre-Vatican II, he also appreciated the singability of Protestant hymnody and developed a musical style suitable for the emerging liturgical renewal movement of the 1960s. As noted by Barr, “What Luther had initiated in the sixteenth century was becoming a reality for Rome.”¹² Many of the well-known Oosterhuis hymns in Dutch stem from this collaboration which paired fresh use of language with vernacular musical styles. However, “What Is This Place” was not paired with a new tune but set to a seventeenth-century Dutch folk song published by Adrian Valerius (1575–1625) and included in his *Nederlandtsche Gedenck-clanck*¹³ appearing posthumously in 1626:



Only a melody with tablature is given in the original edition.¹⁴ The original text, “Komt nu met zang,” is a song of thanksgiving following the Zeelanders victory freeing them from Spanish

¹² Barr, “The Bernard Huijbers–Huub Oosterhuis Collaboration,” 12.

¹³ Adriaan Valerius, <https://opac.kbr.be/Library/doc/SYRACUSE/16271726/neder-landtsche-gedenck-clanck-kortelick-openbarende-de-voornaemste-geschiedenissen-van-de-seventhie> (accessed 29 Nov. 2023).

¹⁴ “Liedboek Compendium,” (n.d.) <https://www.liedboekcompendium.nl> (accessed 29 Nov. 2023).

rule. Three stanzas with acclamations such as “Shout to God, his praises multiply” and “Call out with a great shout” pair well with the exuberant tune identified as a Bransle Guinée in the *Gedenck clanck*.¹⁵ The *bransle*, a rustic circle dance, animates the rhythm in the original “Komt nu met zang” and provides a familiar platform for Oosterhuis’s “What Is This Place”—a likeable pairing that has contributed to the hymn’s positive reception in its native Holland and English-speaking communities. The bar form tune accommodates an uncommon 9.8.9.8.9.6.6. meter, but supports Oosterhuis’s *abcdee* rhyme scheme with a sturdy yet lighthearted character. In modern hymnals, the tune is pitched in the key of B-flat that sets a relatively high tessitura for congregational song. The first four notes are repeated pitches (high *do*) followed by the upward leap of a major third from B-flat to D giving the voice a triumphant lift. This opening melodic contour is intensified by the distinctive *Corta-Figur* rhythmic motif (♩ ♪ ♪) featuring a combination of note values such that two of them result in the length of the third.¹⁶ “What Is This Place” immediately attracts the listener and singer with its high key, ascending melodic contour, and joyful rhythmic motif. In contrast, the harmonic structure is decidedly modest with common practice cadential formulas and no altered notes save for one E-natural resulting in a secondary dominant (V/V) in the last line. Such a simple harmonic language, driven by the bransle dance form and *Corta-Figur*, propel the melody and words with confidence and a strong sense of forward motion.

“What Is This Place” spans the melodic range of a tenth: fourth line D to the ledger line B-flat below the staff. That low B-flat is the lowest note in the melody and appears only once in the final line. The listener generally associates a melody’s emotional apex with the highest

¹⁵ Carl P. Daw, Jr., *Glory to God: A Companion* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2016), 411.

¹⁶ “Liedboek Compendium.” <https://www.liedboekcompendium.nl> (accessed 29 Nov. 2023).

note—a summit only reached once before descending to an earlier starting point. In the case of “What Is This Place,” this emotional arrival is reserved for the *lowest* note in the melody—a surprising, upside-down destination well suited to Oosterhuis’s penetrating observations that challenge deadening liturgical conventions and draw attention to holy mysteries revealed in the unexpected and seemingly commonplace occasions of human interaction.

Does place still matter?

Many of the sociological dynamics and theological questions that Oosterhuis engaged through his hymn from the late 1960s remain relevant in our time—even more so as they relate to media and the acceleration of technology. We once only held books in our hands which could be read aloud to others. This gave way to early broadcast radio and TV which encouraged us to experience shows together on a fixed schedule. However, unlike earlier media revolutions, the digital age is situated in a non-spatial reality. As noted by Jay Kim, “The digital age is about speed, choices, and individuality. Fixed locations and physical mediums are seen as impediments to such values.”¹⁷ His assessment appears accurate as consumers continue to abandon shopping malls in favor of digital commerce transacted on smart phones. Likewise, church consultants who frame the crisis of declining religious affiliation as a failure of marketing strategy insist that churches must quickly reflect the new values and habits of the digital age or succumb to obsolescence along with dying shopping malls and other cultural artifacts. When seen from the perspective of business-leadership models responding to decline and threatened survival, church buildings and every object which might be contained in them are therefore just a burdensome

¹⁷ Jay Y. Kim, *Analog Church* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2020), 23.

remnant tethered to physicality. All manifestations of the earlier, embodied reality are made redundant by the new authority of non-spatial, digital reality.

Kim's stark critique of digital values should not be mistaken for nostalgia which advocates technological regression or a wholesale rejection of modernity. He is, in fact, the thirty-something pastor of West Gate Church located in California's Silicon Valley—the global epicenter of digital technology driven by speed, choices, and individuality. Although the church outwardly reflects the digital age's values and has gathered a strong congregation, Kim wisely took note of a comment made on their website by an anonymous young woman. She had visited the church several times but stated, “If I'm going to roll out of bed, I'd rather hear a cool old pipe organ and some good vocal harmonies than someone's extended electric guitar solo.” She and her boyfriend eventually moved on because they got tired of the “rock concert atmosphere.”¹⁸ Her comment was not interpreted as a mandate to discard electric guitars in worship and build a pipe organ. Rather, Kim was struck by her honesty and came to question how decisions regarding technology's influence and digital age values may have subverted the worship life of the gathered church. Marshall McLuhan's (1911–1980) Four Laws of Media provided a philosophical framework for the church to consider the impact of liturgical choices—most notably, that “when any form of media is pushed to its extreme, it eventually reverses in on itself and works in direct opposition to the very human capacity it was intended to enhance.”¹⁹ The sounds and sights of worship at West Gate Church had been calibrated as a *technical fix* to reflect the presumed demographic identifiers of the unaffiliated young woman and her boyfriend, however McLuhan's law suggested how the *reversal effect* led them to reject the “rock concert

¹⁸ Kim, *Analog Church*, 34.

¹⁹ Kim, *Analog Church*, 41.

atmosphere” presumably in search of more distinctive liturgical practices informed by the alterity of Trinitarian worship.

Why alterity matters

Huub Oosterhuis’s hymn leads us to ponder, “What is this place?”—the where and why of people gathered to worship God. He knows they have come to experience the Paschal Mystery of the Eucharist, but guides us to look deeper with the eye of the heart and be astonished by the gathering itself a miraculous sign of “the risen Jesus within the community.”²⁰ From this perspective, we grasp that the miracles handled in the Eucharist cannot fully be received alone. Only as part of the gathered community can we dare to “use words which you cannot make true if you sing them alone, but only venture to sing along with others.”²¹ Likewise, Jay Kim was spurred by a young woman’s comments to consider the possibility that uncritical liturgical choices could subvert worship at West Gate Church in such a way that it became indistinguishable from a “rock concert atmosphere.”

Oosterhuis and Kim are convinced that there is far more at stake than attracting people into church buildings. Through poetic imagination and theological effort, they avoid superficial disagreements which are ultimately meaningless and call us deeper into elusive dimensions of transcendent importance. Oosterhuis appreciates ritual and place, but encounters the mystical presence of Christ in the gathered community. Kim makes no apology for using electric guitars in worship, but recognizes the values of the digital age as a subversive threat. While vastly different in age and cultural context, they share a common concern for loss of alterity. Alterity

²⁰ Correspondence with Tony Barr, January 6, 2023.

²¹ Oosterhuis, *Open Your Hearts*, 108.

(from the Latin *alter*) describes otherness—what makes something distinguishable apart from others. Miroslav Volf gives this example:

As a teacher of theology, my task is to take the kaleidoscope apart, and put inside it a piece so strange that when the students place the kaleidoscope back to their eye they will exclaim, ‘Wait a minute, this should not be here!’ **I am a guardian of the Christian tradition’s alterity, its otherness.** The students must learn not to trivialize the wisdom of the tradition by taking from it only what they happen to need, recycling what they can use in a different form, and disregarding the rest. **With alterity lost,** teachers and students of theology remain incarcerated within the circle of their own familiarity, incapable of hearing anything but echoes of their own voices.²²

Training others to recognize what is contrary to the Christian tradition’s alterity is no small task; naming oneself as “guardian” assumes enormous responsibility and exposes potential for abuse and possessiveness. In response, Marva Dawn (who championed alterity as a theological and liturgical concept) affirmed Volf’s warning and cautioned that “we all need to learn to feast more richly *with* all the saints of our long heritage for the sake of our own theological depth.”²³ Her emphasis on “*with* all the saints” is an essential expression of the Christian tradition’s creedal alterity: the communion of saints. This admonition toward depth urges us away from applying one dimensional, business-leadership models to ecclesiological issues such as the so-called “crisis of decline” and consider it with eschatological awareness in company with saints on earth and in heaven. Christianity is not a solitary faith. If we are truly with others in humble community, a commitment to the church’s alterity of identity and purpose resists objectification as we “become each other’s bread and wine.”²⁴ In isolation, we risk becoming enslaved to outward practices and dead to the vital alterity which sustains the Body of Christ in all places and times.

²² Miroslav Volf, “Teachers, Crusts, and Toppings,” *The Christian Century* 113, No. 5 (February 7–14, 1996): 135. Emphasis added. <http://proxy.libraries.smu.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/magazines/teachers-crusts-toppings/docview/217195675/se-2> (accessed 29 Nov. 2023)

²³ Marva Dawn, *The Sense of the Call* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 210. Emphasis added.

²⁴ Oosterhuis, trans. David Smith, 1970. © 1967 Gooi En Sticht, Bv, Baarn, The Netherlands.

Only a roof

In a digitized, non-spatial reality, churches often make decisions to mitigate their fixed location as a liability and offer a liturgy that values speed, choices, and individuality in hopes of reaching the elusive young adult population. West Gate’s pastor has responded to the digital age by advocating for *analog church*—a spiritual mandate to “gather, slow down, and commune.”²⁵ His approach, which might seem counterintuitive to congregations threatened by decline, is precisely the way Chaplain Bishop and the Voices of Hope minister to each other and the incarcerated population at Arrendale Prison. While more typical congregations might weigh the relative merits of meeting the digital age on its own terms or embracing Kim’s ideas of analog church, analog is the default paradigm for life and ministry in prison. Questions of digital or analog values in the context of prison life are negligible; life unfolds within a fixed location physically defined by fences and a guard line. Access to media is limited to snail mail, print, or broadcast TV; no personal electronic devices offer constant access to the internet or any versions of social media. One notable exception is an allowance made for prisoners to “virtually” attend funerals of immediate family members on Zoom or Facebook in the chaplaincy office—a uniquely painful experience of grief estranged from the touch of physical comfort. (In some cases, prisoners’ families may pay the sheriff of their home county to transport them from state custody for a funeral.) Messages from prisoners to Chaplain Bishop or other state employees are handwritten on slips of paper and delivered across the campus. Nothing moves quickly. Unlike those on the outside, prisoners live their daily existence within their assigned range and dormitory according to a rigid schedule. Movement between buildings for classes or rehearsal is a complicated

²⁵ Kim, *Analog Church*, 26.

process requiring authorization on the prisoner's daily agenda and, in most cases, an officer to escort them from point to point.

The digital ideals of speed, choice, and individuality are absent in such a strictly managed environment, yet one building represents the juxtaposition of free choice within the limitations of incarcerated life. A four-hundred-seat chapel erected by the state in 1965 sits prominently in front of the old main building and can be easily seen by passing cars from the highway. It served its intended purpose for decades, but deferred maintenance eventually rendered it unusable. State funding replaced the HVAC system after much effort in 2017, but the discovery of asbestos tile underneath deteriorating carpet required a lengthy remediation process which coincided with the COVID-19 pandemic. As of June 2023, it sadly remains empty. Chaplain Bishop has continued to gather donations from Atlanta area churches and hopes to complete painting and flooring before November because it is proposed that the population of Arrendale (and members of her choir) will be dispersed to a new facility in south Georgia.

During the intervening six years of the chapel's disuse, Chaplain Bishop has led Sunday worship in the prison gymnasium despite considerable effort required by her inmate assistants to set up the necessary risers and sound equipment for services. Gathering in the gymnasium is by no means an ideal environment; there is no fixed pulpit, altar, or pews—only concrete block walls painted with the stenciled suicide prevention hotline number and a dedicated telephone. Despite the stark environment, Chaplain Bishop's capacity for improvisation has made it a place of welcome, refuge, and sanctuary for the women who live inside Arrendale. Sunday services have continued under her leadership except for times when COVID-19 transmission prevented large gatherings. Her determination and the women's faith suggest they truly "celebrate more

than a memory, but the presence of the risen Jesus within the community.”²⁶ Equally important, their improvised gathering under an inadequate roof affirms Oosterhuis’s contention that the gathering itself makes the place holy. As his hymn imagines—even in a prison gymnasium:

House that becomes a body, alive
when we are gathered here
for justice to appear.²⁷

²⁶ Correspondence with Tony Barr, January 6, 2023.

²⁷ Oosterhuis, “What Is This Place,” trans. Barr.

CHAPTER 3

WHAT TIME IS IT?

In Chapter 1, Oosterhuis's hymn "What Is This Place?" led us to consider the interplay of place and purpose as a community gathers to sing, worship, and witness. The hymn responded sensitively to dynamics of social change and religious practice in the late 1960s—a thoroughly modern time, but well before the digital revolution, wireless connectivity, and social media. In today's digital age, matters of liturgical relevance and spiritual identity remain essential but are now mediated through the sensory-numbing capacities of "virtual" platforms targeted to individual consumers. We once read advertisements in the newspapers; now, the advertisements read us and anticipate our next purchase by analyzing our web searches and how long we hover over an image before clicking on the next. This torrent of information, entertainment, and commerce permeates and intensifies the same themes of social change and religious practice that captured Oosterhuis's attention in the 1960s and continue to evolve. In response to an existential sense of isolation, physical or analog gatherings in the digital age appear as counter-cultural manifestations of a more profound longing for connection—a hopeful expression of alterity uniquely understood in Christian theology as the gathered Body of Christ. Although analog gatherings for civic purposes and worship reclaim a sense of place and strengthen community, they face an immediate and formidable adversary in high modernity: time. We constantly lament our schedules, appearing "crazy busy" while pursuing some unattainable balance of achievement and recreation that never brings satisfaction or a sense of fulfillment.

In contrast to the non-spatial reality and perceived scarcity of time in the digital age, all gatherings at Arrendale Prison are analog. Every aspect of life takes place in one physical

context—whatever small choices are available to inmates exist behind fences. Likewise, each day is experienced in one shared temporal context governed by a master schedule across the entire facility. This constrained experience of place and time is the result of sentences imposed on inmates through the judicial process for serious offenses; the majority of women in Chaplain Bishop’s choir have been convicted of crimes resulting in loss of life. “Hard” time in prison is a reality, not a turn of phrase. However, any inclination which might objectify the women’s daily life in prison or sensationalize the circumstances that brought them there is entirely inappropriate and contrary to the purpose of this narrative. Instead, the intention is to give the reader an appreciation for the marked differences of place and time as experienced in prison compared to the perceived absolutes more commonly experienced in open society. While many individuals in the secular-digital age are constantly bombarded with a stream of infinite choices and options for purchase, they ironically do so in a perceptual “time famine,” as described by Hartmut Rosa.¹ By contrast, those in prison experience an absence of choice in what might be called an embodied “time vortex” of relentless monotony that distorts the passing years.

Where did the time go?

Andrew Root, Professor of Youth and Family Ministry at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota, asserts that the major influences on congregational vitality and associated questions of perception in the secular age have to do with timekeeping, acceleration, and a hopeful prospect described as *resonance*. Faithful responses to Christian sacraments and rituals have never been without obstacles of heart, mind, and culture; in high modernity, however, these

¹ Hartmut Rosa, *Alienation and Acceleration: Towards a Critical Theory of Late-Modern Temporality* (Malmö, Sweden: NSU Press, 2014), 20.

intrinsic challenges of faith communities are intensified by the values of those keeping time, the realization that time itself is speeding up, and the idolization of change as preferable to the more complex work of transformation. Root observes, “We have a nagging awareness that we’re running faster to stay in the same place.”² This painfully accurate description underscores our misguided preoccupation with maintaining a sense of fullness through constant busyness. Why do we have to run faster? Why do we sacrifice ourselves to busyness? Root points to fourteenth-century Avignon as a symbolic placeholder for the way time was once observed:

Sacred time was the baseline. It was the speed limit of society. Modernity has exchanged a gathered time heavy with meaning and divine consequence for an accelerating time [because] busyness is fullness in the logic of acceleration. To get time to speed up, it had to have its meaning hollowed out, unhooked from divine consequence.³

Well before Avignon, with its well-ordered seasons of the liturgical year and bells tolling to announce Mass in the cathedral, the early church maintained an eschatological orientation within chronological time in contrast to the pagan world around it by enacting “a narrative of Jesus’ final days each week, correlating their own being to Jesus’ own time.”⁴ This alterity of timekeeping alarmed the Roman power structure, to say the least. These early Christians boldly lived in “the time of the Spirit, *unthreatened even by death.*”⁵

In contrast to the timekeeping of Avignon and the early church, we now find our lives ordered by the timekeepers of Silicon Valley, who shrewdly understand the implications of an accelerated technological decay rate and its inevitable sociological impact. The decay rate of technology can be observed in how quickly an object becomes obsolete. For instance, it once took a decade for a typewriter to become obsolete and decay from “new” to “old,” becoming an

² Andrew Root, *The Congregation in a Secular Age* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2021), 36.

³ Root, *The Congregation in a Secular Age*, 50.

⁴ Root, *The Congregation in a Secular Age*, 52.

⁵ Root, *The Congregation in a Secular Age*, 53. (emphasis mine)

object from the past. By contrast, the decay rate for a computer is three or four years at best; the decay rate for an iPad is far less. Another example of this acceleration was forecast by Gordon Moore in 1965 when he predicted that chip density—and thus all kinds of computing power—would double every eighteen months or so.⁶ He has been proven correct. German philosopher Hartmut Rosa enumerates a similar phenomenon from the history of innovation diffusion, noting:

The period from the invention of the radio at the end of the nineteenth century to its distribution to fifty million listeners lasted thirty-eight years; the television, introduced a quarter century later, needed only thirteen to achieve this, while the Internet went from the first to the fifty-millionth connection in barely four years.⁷

This dynamic of acceleration observed through the rate of technological decay and diffusion of innovation means “the present is not what it used to be. Our present has been compressed.”⁸ Addressing the *compressed present* as a central source of anxiety and disorientation in high modernity reveals how Silicon Valley has claimed its right as our timekeeper.⁹

Beyond the technological examples evident in accelerated rates of decay, Root sees a correlated sociological impact of significant ethical consequence. He says: “Whoever keeps time will determine the moral shape—and decay rate—of production and reproduction.” Silicon Valley is not a “righteous timekeeper,” by his estimation. Because time no longer correlates with the sacred, we inhabit a secular age. “Time is free of transcendence and mystery”¹⁰, and we are exhausted by a sense of alienation and yearn for experiences that will bind us together in relationship and depth, freeing us from the imposter of busyness.

⁶ Root, *The Congregation in a Secular Age*, 66.

⁷ Hartmut Rosa, *Social Acceleration: A New Theory of Modernity* (New York: Columbia University, 2015), 75.

⁸ Andrew Root, *The Congregation in a Secular Age* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2021), 82.

⁹ Root, *The Congregation in a Secular Age*, 84.

¹⁰ Root, *The Congregation in a Secular Age*, 193.

Longing for resonance

Neither Root nor Hartmut Rosa's original scholarship naïvely suggests deceleration as a response to the consequences of acceleration; the exponential increase of computing power and implications of AI (artificial intelligence) point to a bewildering future fraught with promise and equal potential for deception and misuse. However, understanding the values which inform the digital age and grasping the associated dynamics of acceleration does much to explain the church's anxiety and preoccupation with technical fixes in the so-called crisis of decline. Root asserts: "Acceleration is a disease that promises victory over the crisis of decline but ends in spiritual disaster."¹¹ His choice of framing the church's misguided attempt to keep pace with acceleration as a self-inflicted spiritual disaster is significant. Superficial responses to quell the heaving disequilibrium experienced as the church navigates through a secular age are understandably attractive. But by reorienting the church to its true alterity of identity and purpose, attention is redirected away from the crisis of decline toward the crisis of ultimate importance and transcendent consequence—an encounter with the living God, the God who is Wholly Other. Addressing the church's earthly fears with earthly fixes is an abandonment of ecclesiological alterity. Further, Rosa warns that "Solving the crisis of decline can give you religion, but it will keep your church from waiting on the encounter of the living God who is God."¹² Such an ersatz religion can be the guiding principle of a congregation which essentially functions as a service organization at the speed of sociological acceleration disconnected from righteous timekeeping. Rejecting the empty solutions promised by acceleration and technical

¹¹ Andrew Root, *When Church Stops Working* (Grand Rapids MI: Brazos Press, 2023), 42.

¹² Root, *When Church Stops Working*, 99.

fixes requires an intellectual determination, but, more importantly, a spiritual resolve of expectant waiting formed by the example of those who have experienced God's actions in the world, Christ's healing touch, and the Holy Spirit's sustaining power.

Root senses the church's peril when tempted to rely on secular answers for spiritual questions, but his broad theological scholarship incorporates parallel themes found in the contemporary philosophy of Hartmut Rosa and his analysis of social alienation as the result of acceleration driven by technology. Rosa not only identifies the *Zeitkrankheit* ("time sickness") afflicting our existence but also offers a hopeful response to alienation in the concept he calls *resonance*: "[Resonance] is a mode of relating to the world in which the subject feels touched, moved, or addressed by the people, places, objects, etc., he or she encounters."¹³ His choice of *resonance* as a conceptual antidote to alienation is notable thanks to its associations with acoustical phenomena relating to sound—the physical energy interpreted by our senses as music. Examples such as the Æolian harp, whose strings hum with overtones when the wind vibrates them, or "sympathetic vibrations" caused by adjacent instruments playing a resonant frequency in the orchestra quickly come to mind. In these physical examples and Rosa's experiential concept, the critical factor is relationship: something or someone is touched by another. Root states: "In resonance, we rest in the good of the present."¹⁴ Such a description hints at the profoundly human experience of resonance and its transcendent aspects, which defy scientific language. Despite these limitations, Rosa names four characteristic aspects of the resonant experience:

¹³ Hartmut Rosa, "The Mindset of Growth and the Resonance Conception" in *The Good Life Beyond Growth*, ed. Hartmut Rosa and Christoph Henning (London: Routledge, 2019), 46.

¹⁴ Root, *The Congregation in a Secular Age*, 196.

1. *affection* (touched or moved by someone/something encountered)
2. *emotion* (react with the body and mind through touching the other)
3. *transformation* (a sense of co-production)
4. *elusiveness* (impossible to predict or control).¹⁵

To clarify his particular use of *affection*, he renders it with an arrow as **af←fection** to emphasize that it comes from beyond us and moves us out of ourselves. The second aspect, *emotion*, is rendered in the other direction as **e→motion**, emphasizing our response to the feeling of *affection* and our “answer by giving a response and thus establishing a connection.”¹⁶ The first dimension of resonance (whose elements are *af←fection* and *e→motion*) emphasizes that resonance is not an emotional state but a “mode of relationship.”¹⁷

The second dimension of resonance also has two elements: *transformation* and *elusiveness*. Without this second dimension, the first dimension (*affection* and *emotion*) is inadequate against persistent alienation and cannot point beyond the initial experience because of its impermanent nature. Accordingly, this second dimension called *efficacy* “is experienced when we realize that we are capable of actually reaching out to and affecting others, that they truly listen and connect to us and answer in turn.”¹⁸ Root considers *efficacy* in theological terms as the call to act within the story of God’s redemption and move out into the world for the sake of ministry through a “concrete encounter with our neighbor.”¹⁹ Within *efficacy*, the elements of *transformation* emphasize the potential impact of a resonant occurrence for lasting good and the *elusiveness* of such occurrences that cannot be predicted or controlled. For Root, this quality of

¹⁵ Root, *The Congregation in a Secular Age*, 211.

¹⁶ Rosa, “Mindset of Growth,” 47.

¹⁷ Hartmut Rosa, *Resonance: A Sociology of Our Relationship to the World* (Medford, MA: Polity, 2019), chap. 5, sec. 3.

¹⁸ Rosa, “Mindset of Growth,” 47.

¹⁹ Root, *The Congregation in a Secular Age*, 208.

elusiveness is symbolic of a God who “arrives speaking and calling, interrupting us with new visions of a good life.”²⁰

Baskets and bulrushes

By grasping “time sickness” as a theory to explain the pathology of speed and alienation in high modernity, we better understand how this sickness impacts individuals and their collective relationships as a congregation in the secular age. Since nothing suggests that technology will self-limit its speed or restrain its expansion and influence, any meaningful response to its toxic effects must do so without expecting a slower pace. Even if some miraculous reversal of the “time desert” were possible, a slowdown does not guarantee healthy emotional connections or more vital congregations. This can be shown by the experience of incarcerated women in a “time vortex” while serving sentences at Arrendale. The abundance of time may assist some motivated prisoners in the rehabilitation process. Still, a young person facing a life sentence can be overwhelmed by despair and the negative aspects of prison culture. With decades of incarceration stretching out before them, the reality of separation provokes self-destructive behavior, fuels violent outbursts, and predisposes them to substance abuse.

Provided that a young woman’s sentence includes the possibility of parole, she is unlikely to be granted one before serving at least twenty years. The Georgia State Board of Pardons and Paroles has become known for denying the application of inmates who have served twenty-five or thirty years, even with exemplary behavior, educational accomplishments, and the assistance of *pro bono* counsel from prestigious Atlanta law firms. Sue Bell Cobb, former Chief Justice of

²⁰ Root, *The Congregation in a Secular Age*, 211.

the Alabama Supreme Court and executive director of “Redemption Earned,”²¹ has drawn attention to a similarly discouraging precedent found in decisions made by the Alabama Parole Board, including the case of 71-year-old Leola Harris, who is wheelchair bound and slowly dying from renal failure. Harris already met the statutory criteria for medical parole, yet, after serving nineteen years in Tutwiler Prison, the Alabama board denied her application in six minutes and set the next hearing for five years in the future.²² Chaplain Bishop looks hopefully to the efforts of “Redemption Earned” as a catalyst against the demoralizing attitude of parole boards. Judge Cobb’s commitment to a more equitable review process draws attention to this lack of empathy and affirms the chaplain’s decades of ministry as she tended to the spiritual lives of inmates—particularly those whose efforts at reform and parole have been met with crushing disappointment.

This rejection has been quite poignant in the summer of 2023 for her women. One member of the Voices of Hope, an accomplished guitarist, has performed with the choir on numerous “outside” engagements, including collaborations with Emily Saliers and Amy Ray, a duo commonly known in folk-rock circles as the Indigo Girls. She has been entrusted with many administrative tasks in the chaplaincy office including management of the sound equipment used in worship services. Most notably, she established a music program for inmates from the general population who wanted to learn guitar and organized group lessons in the choir room. Her parole was denied after twenty years of exemplary behavior, service to fellow inmates, and strong positive recommendations. One can only marvel at how members of a parole board who inhabit the “time desert” of modernity (which moves at an ever-increasing pace) appear largely unmoved

²¹ “Redemption Earned,” (n.d.) <https://www.redemptionearned.org/> (accessed 29 Nov. 2023).

²² Ellie Taube, “Redemption Earned,” *Alabama Alumni Magazine* 103, No. 3 (Summer 2023): 27.

by those who have convincingly shown remorse for their crimes and sought reprieve from the “time vortex” of incarceration.

Despite these disappointments, Chaplain Bishop and her community continue to go about their weekly routines of choir rehearsal, pastoral care, and practical ministry by providing liturgical leadership in Sunday worship and distributing crates of donated toiletry products throughout the week for indigent inmates who cannot afford their own. This multi-dimensional, grueling work was shared for several years with another clinical chaplain, but she left the Department of Corrections in the spring of 2023 for a civilian job placing an enormous strain on Chaplain Bishop’s already massive responsibilities to the 1,200 women at Arrendale, including one on death row. These challenges are further complicated by the Department of Correction’s decision to significantly downsize the institution, leaving only a four-hundred-bed, minimum-security transitional center. At the same time, the remaining prisoners would be moved to a newly purchased facility in McRae, Georgia.

This process will impact the entire staff at Arrendale. Bishop’s continued ministry with the Voices of Hope depends on the singers with life sentences who will be transferred some two-hundred miles south—a distance that precludes commuting from her home in Decatur, a suburb of Atlanta. She formed the Voices of Hope at Atlanta’s Metro State Prison in 1992, skillfully negotiating the transfer of most of her singers from Metro to Arrendale in 2005 when it became a women’s prison. During these eighteen years, she has resolutely made a 140-mile round-trip commute; an even longer commute is impossible. And yet, Bishop has not retreated from this looming transition but responded to interruption and uncertainty by pursuing a plan that might hide the Voices of Hope among “baskets and bulrushes,” as she says, and keep them at Arrendale. Just as Moses was hidden by his mother in a basket on the banks of the Nile to spare

him from death, Chaplain Bishop hopes her choir members can be retained at Arrendale with permanent jobs as orderlies and continue to serve in the repurposed institution.

The Father of Time

Her concern and fierce determination to advocate for the well-being of her incarcerated community are driven by more than just personal dedication and an enormous capacity for improvisation. When considered through the lens of Hartmut Rosa's theory of *resonance*, it is evident that a subtle interplay of the four elements (*affection, emotion, transformation, and elusiveness*) has sustained Chaplain Bishop's vision and nourished the community she loves. Rosa insists that the first pair (*affection and emotion*) is a "mode of relationship" far more consequential than a passing feeling. Bishop embraces this mode of relationship with her women.²³ More importantly, this mode of relationship enlivens the second pair (*transformation and elusiveness*) that blossoms in co-production: singing together with mutuality of purpose and regard for each individual. Above all, the element of *elusiveness*—the unexpected God who reorients us—permeates the daily life of Chaplain Bishop and the Voices of Hope.

Elusive may bring thoughts of fleeting beauty to mind. However, the interruptions of disappointment, emergency counts, violent disturbances, and crumbling infrastructure are *elusive* and cannot be predicted or controlled. After decades of experience, the inmates and their chaplain have cultivated a familiarity with *elusiveness* and befriended it as a part of the shared *resonance* that drives back alienation and renews faith in unexpected ways. Those in society

²³ Bishop's extensive use of rote teaching in her choral rehearsals is pedagogically similar to Rosa's "mode of relationship" as it deemphasizes the hierarchy of a musically literate teacher placed above illiterate students in favor of modeling a song until the teacher and student become one in the music.

suffering from the alienation of “time sickness” or those in prison overwhelmed by the estrangement of incarceration’s “time vortex” reject the *elusive* as an unnecessary annoyance and either withdraw from the painful disequilibrium or miss its message entirely. Chaplain Bishop’s gifts as an improvisatory teacher willing to be in a mutual relationship have enabled a powerful music ministry co-production sensitive to life’s impermanent, elusive nature. Taken as a whole, these are precisely the elements described in Rosa’s theory of *resonance* and suggest an alchemy of the human and divine bringing hope into the world.

In the spring of 2023, a musician volunteering with Chaplain Bishop offered a songwriting workshop during one of the Voices of Hope rehearsals. An inmate recounted that she was initially filled with feelings of inadequacy and was on the verge of returning to her dormitory. Happily, she was persuaded to stay in the choir room and eventually felt at ease with other singers who had found places on an old sofa next to the keyboard. This workshop yielded a song entitled “Locked Up Free”—a driving tune that claims freedom in bondage and refers to God as the “Father of Time” who is unconstrained and all-powerful. “Locked Up Free” resonates with deeply personal longings, enduring faith, and universal themes any congregation might sing from the heart. Still, this song bears an imprint unique to the incarcerated women who truly know what time it is and the God in whom time itself exists. Huub Oosterhuis must have had this kind of songwriting workshop in mind when he wrote:

SINGING: because you are talked about, knocked out, because you are sad and want to be cheered up. Huddled together at the wailing wall, crying *help, help, help*, are all those who cannot save themselves. Singing songs of guilt and fear, frustration and longing. Psalms out of the depths; inside the belly of the monster; in ghettos and gas chambers. Or fixed to a stake: Why have you forsaken me? That’s real singing. To sing against overwhelming odds. Against invisible foes. Against the deadly fire of plain facts. Against the flames, and up out of the flames: a song in the fiery furnace.²⁴

²⁴ Huub Oosterhuis, *At Times I See* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1974), 114.

CHAPTER 4

WHO ARE YOU?

The preceding chapters considered the impact of place and time on liturgical practices in modernity and now point to a third question: Who are you? If our daily experience is now mediated through a non-spatial reality while constantly gaining technological speed, the epidemic of alienation can be understood as the manifestation of an individual and collective identity crisis. In the last year of his life, Carl Jung, founder of analytical psychology, reflected on the nature of this human crisis:

The meaning of my existence is that life has addressed a question to me. Or, conversely, I myself am a question which is addressed to the world, and I must communicate my answer, for otherwise I am dependent upon the world's answer.¹

When Jung responded to the existential questions of identity in the early 1960s, he likely could not have imagined the potential psychological implications of Rosa's *Zeitkrankheit* (time sickness) as sociological acceleration sickens the individual in a "time famine." Even worse, the individual, while isolated in a famine of alienation, is inundated by digital stimulation scientifically calibrated to engage and monetize feelings of inadequacy for commercial benefit.

Examples of the individual's dependency on the digital world to answer its question of meaning and identity are abundant in the sociological context of late modernity; any glance at social media newsfeeds or celebrity journalism provides a more than ample sampling. In contrast, women experiencing incarceration at Arrendale prison face an abrupt type of identity crisis as they become collectively known as "offenders" wearing numbered ID badges when sentenced to prison. Additionally, they must contend for decades or years with the relentless

¹ Carl Jung, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* (New York: Random House / Vintage Books, 1961), 318.

emotional stress of life in dormitory ranges² where identity is manipulated, challenged, and exploited as women struggle for physical and psychological dominance.

The search for individual identity in open society and within prison obviously takes place in different outward ways, yet the inward dynamics are animated by the same compulsions. An attempt to understand the essence of these yearnings was presented in a brief televised talk given by the eminent Catholic priest, writer, and teacher, Henri Nouwen. His insightful responses to the question of “Who am I?” penetrated the core of true individual identity through an integrated understanding of psychology, theology, and spiritual formation.³ After drawing an imaginary line representing the chronology of a person’s life experiences from birth to death, Nouwen demonstrated that over time our achievements, relationships, and possessions are referenced by the ego and meld into a self-curated composite identity. The self then habitually answers the question of identity with three fundamental responses:

1. I am what I do.
2. I am what other people say about me.
3. I am what I have.

If the individual’s identity is derived from the associated emotional content represented by these statements, any fluctuation in life circumstances not only threatens tangible loss but provokes a crisis of identity. Nouwen then draws parallels from these habitual psychological responses to the devil’s archetypal temptations of Jesus recorded in the fourth chapter of Matthew’s gospel. The first temptation (turning stones into bread) asks Jesus to **do something**. The second temptation

² Ranges are specific groups of beds or rooms within a dormitory that define inmates’ closest daily contacts.

³ Robert Schuller’s Hour of Power, “Being The Beloved-Henri Nouwen,” 1992, https://youtu.be/trG7Oh_PopM (accessed 29 Nov. 2023).

(leap from the temple) asks Jesus for a stunt so the crowd will **speak well of him**. The third (kneeling before the devil) asks Jesus for his loyalty in exchange for **possessions**.

At this point in the talk, Nouwen emphatically drew a giant “X” over the three statements written on a flip chart and, in a voice trembling with conviction, shouted to the congregation:

This whole thing is wrong! That is not who you are, and not who I am. Jesus says, that’s a lie! That’s the greatest lie that makes you and me enter into relationships of violence and destruction! [Like Jesus] I know who I am because the Spirit came upon me and said, “You are the beloved child.⁴ You are my beloved daughters and sons. On you my favor rests.” That’s who you are. That’s who I am. I am the beloved before I was born.⁵

Nouwen’s description of psychological struggles within a theological framework bears many similarities to the “true self / false self” imagery found extensively throughout Thomas Merton’s writings. Nouwen’s “beloved child” substantially equates to Merton’s “true self” in contrast to the **false self** existing:

. . . only in my own egocentric desires [that] is the fundamental reality of life to which everything else in the universe is ordered. Thus, I use up my life in the desire for pleasures and the thirst for experiences, for power, honor, knowledge and love, to clothe this **false self** and construct its nothingness into something objectively real. And I wind experiences around myself and cover myself with pleasures and glory like bandages in order to make myself perceptible to myself and to the world, as if I were an invisible body that could only become visible when something visible covered its surface.⁶

Another image of the “beloved child” or “true self” comes from Fr. Matt Torpey (1927–2023), who entered the Trappist Monastery of Gethsemani in 1950 and was Thomas Merton’s student. In spiritual direction with Fr. Matt, he would often reference the “no-name me” known intimately by God—the self that was beloved by God without name before birth. This

⁴ Nouwen suggests that the word spoken to Jesus at his baptism found in Matthew 3:17 NIV (“This is my Son whom I love; with him I am well pleased”) is a word spoken to all humanity from eternity.

⁵ Robert Schuller’s Hour of Power, “Being The Beloved-Henri Nouwen,” 1992, https://youtu.be/trG7Oh_PopM (accessed 29 Nov. 2023).

⁶ Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1972), 34. (emphasis added)

perspective of being known secretly by God even before birth is beautifully seen in Psalm 139:15a: “My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret.”⁷ By “no-name me,” he meant that the name given by our parents is an important but ultimately impermanent identity that serves as a label passing through the successes and failures of life just as Nouwen’s chronology suggested. After our death, Torpey believed that God calls us by our real name—a name mysteriously unknown to our intellect and reason—an unspeakable name that our soul will instantly recognize as the “beloved child” received by the loving Father throughout eternity.⁸ Nouwen’s “beloved child,” Merton’s “true self,” and Torpey’s “no-name me” are helpful images precisely because they resist the ego’s insatiable appetite for manufactured identity. They relocate the crisis of identity from a matter of outward struggle to an inward recovery of soul and eschatological awareness greater than the imminent reality amplified by digital speed.

Just as Nouwen recognized Jesus’ archetypal temptations as the same threats to our true identity as beloved daughters and sons, Andrew Root looks to the Acts of the Apostles for parallels as the church faces a crisis of identity in the secular age. He observes that Luke’s sequel to his Gospel “recounts human action directed to God, [but] the main point is God’s action directed to humans,” playfully suggesting the book’s name should really be the “Acts of God.”⁹ With a similar disposition as the anxious church of today, the early church did a poor job of waiting as evidenced in Acts 1:12-26. The Holy Spirit would not come until Pentecost in chapter two, but Peter undertook the project of replacing Judas Iscariot in the meantime by casting lots which resulted in the selection of Matthias—who is never heard from again in Acts. Root dryly

⁷ Psalm 139:15, English Standard Version

⁸ Fr. Torpey was a Trappist monk for seventy-three years. He came to the Monastery of the Holy Spirit south of Atlanta in 1967 and was the author’s spiritual director from 2000 until the time of his death in 2023.

⁹ Andrew Root and Blair D. Bertrand, *When Church Stops Working* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2023), 22.

comments, “They were supposed to wait, not administrate.”¹⁰ Like Merton who imagined the “false self” attempting to become visible by wrapping itself in bandages of glory, the church still administrates mightily to be noticed by the world. It falls prey to the persistent temptations to do something, wield influence, and possess resources apart from the Holy Spirit’s power. Both the “false self” and the busy church claim to be the necessary center of the universe. In the acceleration of a secular age, it is now even more important to recognize with great humility that “the church is essential, but only as it realizes and confesses that it is *not* the star of its own story. The church is called to rehearse and remember the stories of God’s acts where the church is waiting right now.”¹¹

Waiting to sing

My invitation for the Voices of Hope to serve as guest choir in worship at Marietta First United Methodist more than a decade ago was also my first interaction with Chaplain Bishop and the procedures for taking the women outside of prison. Once the Sunday for their visit was selected and approved by the warden, she and a security detail from the Department of Corrections visited the church weeks in advance to become familiar with the layout of the parking lot, outside doors, and restrooms. While these preparations were known months ahead of time to the congregation, the Voices of Hope had no idea an outside appearance was scheduled. The locations of these outside appearances were never revealed to the inmates in advance as part of the necessary

¹⁰ Root and Bertrand, *When Church Stops Working*, 68.

¹¹ Root and Bertrand, *When Church Stops Working*, 75. (emphasis added)

security protocol. The dates of the appearances were only revealed a couple of days in advance to prepare uniforms, robes, and boots.

The choir has not traveled outside of Arrendale since before the pandemic, but before COVID restrictions and extreme staffing shortages they would routinely use three or four passenger vans for trips across north Georgia. Gaining access to the prison requires passing through X-ray machines and waiting to be buzzed through two chain link fences, two steel doors, more locked gates, and finally navigating locked doors inside every room and closet of every building. However, once inside the facility, the officers never carry firearms and are surprisingly inconspicuous under normal conditions. The women inmates are identified by khaki or orange uniforms but otherwise move about in their dormitories and walk across campus to other buildings as their schedules allow in relative freedom because the “guard line” perimeter is so well fortified. Watch towers, double rows of razor wire, searchlights, and a constantly patrolling perimeter car make escape highly unlikely. However, taking thirty medium-security inmates outside of this facility is not a normal condition for the inmates or officers and places everyone under exceptional scrutiny. Making a trip outside means putting the women into transport restraints, including handcuffs and leg irons, which are both attached to locked chains wrapped around their waists. Officers are in full dress uniform, some armed with pistols, to escort the women into the waiting vans.

After the two-hour drive from Arrendale to Marietta, the vans arrived in the church parking lot for unloading. Seeing the women in khaki uniforms and polished boots is commonplace in prison, but watching them awkwardly climb out of the cramped vans in full transport restraints made the circumstances of their incarceration and identity as offenders a public event in plain sight for anyone to see. Once assembled in the parking lot, the officers led

them up an outdoor staircase. As they walked, the leg irons forced them to shuffle slowly with great care so as not to trip over the chains; they managed to steady themselves against the handrails and continued across the parking lot into the building.

Chaplain Bishop then instructed the officers to lead the women into the choir room. With no wasted time, she immediately began a song and had the women join in as they formed a large semi-circle around the piano. The officers passed in front of each woman as they continued singing and began unlocking the handcuffs and leg irons. Finally, the chains, wrapped like belts around their waists, were loosened, and the officers dropped the restraints into a pile of hardware at the feet of each woman with a heavy, metallic thud. Chaplain Bishop and the women sang without interruption as this process was repeated thirty times: rattling keys, clicking locks and chains—*thud*.¹² The Voices of Hope were now free to move about the room and find their choir robes that had travelled with them from Arrendale in carefully packed hanging bags. Only the shiny boots and khaki pants barely visible below the robes distinguished them from any typical church choir on a Sunday morning preparing for worship.

Once warmed up and supplied with hymnals and bulletins, the choir was escorted to the sanctuary and found their places in the loft as the organist's prelude began. The chains were taken off and the robes put on, but the juxtaposition of offenders serving in morning worship was unmistakable: armed officers took their places around the perimeter of the sanctuary. Unarmed officers sat in the choir loft. Their eyes remained fixed on the women with emotionless gazes for the entire service as the congregation gathered for worship with their guests from Arrendale. In over thirty years of traveling with the Voices of Hope going out at least once a month, there have

¹² Charles Wesley's 1738 hymn "And Can It Be" came alive in this moment: "My chains fell off, my heart was free / I rose, went forth, and followed Thee." The physical experience of falling chains is an indelible memory.

been no security incidents whatsoever. This is a testimony to the women's understanding of what a privilege and responsibility they have been given.

Chaplain Bishop selects music for Voices of Hope calibrated to successfully affirm their musical skills, engage their experience as offenders in a theological context, and draw on the worship culture they once knew in their home churches—largely gospel style—before incarceration. These considerations demonstrate her sensitive, focused chaplaincy guided primarily by the women's struggles inside prison. When the Voices of Hope sang this curated repertoire outside of prison for the congregation in Marietta, the performance created a mutual exchange of emotion between offenders and citizens as the energetic gospel tunes filled the sanctuary.

The choir's visit to Marietta not only brought joy to the congregation but opened a reciprocal conversation resulting in the church's Chancel Choir visiting Arrendale at the prison's invitation to sing for a Sunday night service. Chaplain Bishop later made introductions at my request to the chaplain at Coastal State Prison—a maximum-security facility for men in Savannah, GA—allowing me to take the church's Youth Choir on tour and sing for over a thousand men in the prison gymnasium. Just as the exchange of emotion and understanding had moved the Marietta congregation when visited by the Voices of Hope, the teenagers were overwhelmed by the welcome and courtesy of the male prisoners in Savannah. Between services, a group of inmates who were politely admiring the keyboard and sound equipment we had brought, asked if they could play for a moment. The teenagers sat in astonishment as the men gathered around the keyboard and began singing in harmony for their visitors from Marietta—an

unexpected, ephemeral moment of *resonance*¹³ that reflected the promised Kingdom of God on earth.

Becoming God's offering

The notion of prisoners with felony convictions leading a congregation in worship while supervised by armed officers stretches the limits of legal protocol and defies societal expectations. For most congregations and organizations that have hosted the Voices of Hope, the choir remains their singular in-person encounter with incarcerated offenders. Chaplain Bishop's grueling work to make these outside trips possible continued for decades through changes of leadership in the prison system which did not always support her efforts. These considerable risks and persistent challenges would easily dissuade most pastoral leaders from attempting such an unconventional ministry. And yet, her proleptic vision has flourished as the embodiment of hope itself—reversing roles and defying expectations as a choir from the “inside” sings for those on the “outside.” It has proven transformational for both the givers and the receivers.

When the Voices of Hope sang an offertory anthem at the church service in Marietta, they provided the customary need for music as the collection plates were passed up and down the aisles and received applause of gratitude from the congregation. Though the Lord's Supper was not observed at that morning's service, the offering always points liturgically toward the Eucharist even when it is not physically received. Participating in the Eucharist is participating in the future; we are “tomorrow's people” according to Jean-Jacques von Allmen.¹⁴ Furthermore, the Eucharist is our fullest encounter with an eschatological perspective—the necessary

¹³ Rosa's four elements of *resonance* are found on page seven in Chapter 2. Resonant experiences, such as the prisoners singing for the teenagers, are impossible to predict or control—hence the fourth element is called *elusive* by Rosa. This fleeting, ephemeral dimension defines the fourth element.

¹⁴ Jean-Jacques von Allmen, *The Lord's Supper* (Richmond, Va.: John Knox Press, 1966), 106.

relocation of time within eternity that challenges a linear understanding of personal or collective experiences. As described by Martha L. Moore-Keish, “Past, present, and future are not mutually exclusive phases of history; the power of God’s future animates our gatherings even today.”¹⁵ The offertory sung by the Voices of Hope became a sacramental manifestation of the “already but not yet” dynamic that morning in Marietta as linear expectations yielded in a “thin place.”¹⁶ Earth and heaven drew together in holy *resonance*. In that liminal space of awareness, the ego’s three great lies (I am what I do / I am what others say / I am what I have) were exposed; distinctions of offender or citizen, weak or strong, poor or wealthy, common or important all lost their power to divide in that sacred hour of worship. Such encounters confirm Hartmut Rosa’s conviction that *resonant* experiences are indeed elusive—fully receiving them requires an *alterity* of perspective and an eccentric posture oriented to a God that stands apart as Wholly Other. It comes from a deep loyalty to hope—even in prison or a declining church—that accepts a genuine *catastrophe* may be filled with suffering and failure, yet there is also the possibility of *eucatastrophe* (a word coined by J.R.R. Tolkien) marked by “the sudden joyous turn” which is an experience of “sudden and miraculous grace.”¹⁷ Or in Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s words, “Help must come from the outside.”¹⁸

¹⁵ Martha L. Moore-Keish, *Eucharist / Eschatology*, in *A More Profound Alleluia*, ed. Leanne Van Dyk (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 114.

¹⁶ A term from Celtic spirituality for a location or encounter where the space between the transcendent and commonplace is palpable owing to its metaphorical “thinness.”

¹⁷ Richard Beck, *Hunting Magic Eels* (Minneapolis: Broadleaf Books, 2021), 97.

¹⁸ Beck, *Hunting Magic Eels*, 97.

Hearing our name

Just as eschatological themes can be encountered sacramentally in the Eucharist, an equal abundance of symbolism can be found in the rituals of Christian baptism that reorient our individual identities and reestablish the church's *alterity* of purpose in the world. Early baptismal liturgies bore a striking resemblance to funerals. While saying, "Buried with him in baptism," the priest would plunge the postulant under the water. On lifting them out, the priest proclaimed, "Risen to new life in Christ." This symbolism is of significance to the anxious, post-Christian church that frets over its survival. As M. Craig Barnes notes,

The rationale for this burial form of baptism was to make the members of the church go through "dying" and get it over with. Once they were no longer anxious about Caesar's persecutions of the church, they were free to boldly proclaim the gospel. *You can't scare dead people.*¹⁹

In baptism, the experience of dying and being brought to new life pointed toward a future hope and simultaneously altered the new Christian's daily experiences with a radical change of perspective. Becoming more fully aware of the "already/not yet" dynamic present in the Eucharist and baptism avoids misunderstanding them in a way sometimes known as escape pod theology—a perspective concerned only with the great hereafter.

Entering into the fullness of sacramental mysteries as a means of eschatological reorientation requires a willingness to remember something that is yet to happen—an openness to a greater reality that is larger than the imminent realm of experience. This longing can be approached through theories of identity and systematic theology, but the essentially transcendent nature of such an altered perspective is perhaps best suited to mystical theologians and poets

¹⁹ M. Craig Barnes, "The Post-Anxiety Church," *The Christian Century* 133, No. 3 (Feb. 2016): 33. (emphasis added)

such as Huub Oosterhuis who was convinced such things cannot “[be made] true if you sing them alone, but you can only venture to *sing along with others*.”²⁰

Oosterhuis’s eighty-fifth birthday was celebrated in 2018 at the Koninklijk Theatre Carré with a tribute concert of his works performed before a large audience.²¹ The concert prominently featured his daughter, Trijntje, singing “Dan Zal Ik Leven” (“Then I Shall Live”) which he wrote in 1979 with a musical setting by Antoine Oomen. While not explicitly referencing the sacraments, the text immediately evokes the Paschal mystery and resurrection: “The stone has rolled away / I have risen from the earth.” Many texts allude to the stone which Mary found rolled away from Jesus’s tomb, but Oosterhuis sings about an early dawn when *he* will rise from *his* own tomb. From this unusual vantage point, we follow him in wonder as he “walks without stumbling” and discovers “I speak and understand myself”—the false self finally free of its own delusions. Not only has the self been reconciled to itself, other people approach who seem like strangers and “find that we know each other” as one true self greets another without fear.

The second verse looks on trees bordering fields of abundant, golden grain after the morning mist burns away. Beyond, dazzling like crystal, is “the sea that gave back her dead”—a striking image for the Dutch people who have prospered and perished at sea and an apt metaphor for the abyss of loss. Then the text looks toward an inward miracle: “We pass the night in each other’s shadow / We are awakened by the light of dawn / As if someone has called us by our *true*

²⁰ Huub Oosterhuis, *Open Your Hearts* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1972), 108. (emphasis added)

²¹ Trijntje Oosterhuis—Dan Zal Ik Leven (Live @ Carré) https://youtu.be/_UzrAZUIrWY (accessed 29 Nov. 2023).

name."²² Finally, after two verses and a bridge, Oosterhuis repeats the poem's title as a concluding refrain: "Then shall I live / Then shall I live."

When Oosterhuis's daughter finished singing "Dan Zal Ik Leven" for her father's birthday, she asked the audience to stand and join in singing the refrain but with a small change to the words: "Then **he** shall live." As the audience stood to sing, Oosterhuis's grandchildren came to the front row where he sat and leaned down to embrace him and offer single roses. Over and over the audience sang "Then he shall live"—a truth so great that it "must [be] sung along with others."²³ Like the ancient baptismal rituals, it was essentially a funeral with hundreds of voices singing on his birthday shedding only tears of joy.

Then Shall I Live

It will be at the breaking dawn, as then. The stone is rolled away.
I have risen from the earth.
My eyes can endure the day-light. I walk and do not stumble.
I speak, and understand myself.
People are approaching me, we find that we know each other.
It will be at the breaking dawn, as then. The morning mist dissolves.
A barren plain I thought I would see.
Full sheaves I see, tall with sturdy stalk, rich in golden grain,
trees that border the farm-land,
hillsides wave to the distant sky, sweep upwards and soar to the cloud-line.
Beyond this, as crystal dazzling and blinding, the sea that gave back her dead.
We pass the night in each other's shadow. We are awakened by the light of dawn.
As if someone has called us by our true name.
Then shall I live.²⁴

²² Huub Oosterhuis, "Then Shall I Live," trans. Tony Barr and Bernard Huijbers © 1980 (Gooi & Sticht bv, 1979). (used by permission; emphasis added)

²³ Oosterhuis, *Open Your Hearts*, 108.

²⁴ Oosterhuis, "Then Shall I Live," trans. Barr and Huijbers © 1980.

CHAPTER 5

WHY ARE YOU SINGING?

The inquiry into place, time, and identity presented in earlier chapters now leads to a specific question of intention and purpose for the church situated in late modernity: “Why are you singing?” Singing has been an enduring aspect of public worship in the Jewish tradition and later shared by Christians for millennia, binding one generation to the next through a shared congregational song of faith across time. Each generation has expressed the song of faith in diverse cultures with an endless variety of music shaped by custom, language, cultic practice, and experience. Abundant scholarship has addressed the multidimensional nature of music in worship and the associated theological tension as voices metaphorically added new verses to the old song and bore faithful witness to the living God in their own place and time. Numerous liturgical reforms, musical prohibitions, and bitter disagreements impacted the church’s sung worship long before the Second Vatican Council or the infamous “worship wars” of North American Protestants in recent decades. Yet, throughout historical and recent liturgical reorientations, the collective voice of the body gathered for worship could be reliably (or at least theoretically) expected to sing. However, the digital age’s values, combined with indiscriminate liturgical appropriation of technology in worship, has subtly undermined the congregation’s role as described in 2017 by Andy Crouch:

Our worship bands are more technically proficient than ever, and louder than ever. The people holding microphones are singing, often expertly and almost always passionately. It’s just **the rest of us** who, like the crowd at a ballgame, are mostly swaying along, maybe echoing a few of the phrases or words.¹

¹ Andy Crouch, *The Tech-Wise Family* (Ada, MI: Baker Books, 2017), 184–85. (emphasis added)

By speaking for the congregation—“the rest of us” gathered for worship—Crouch conversely reframes the question at hand: “Why are you *not* singing?” His description requires no nuanced interpretation. Congregational singing in this context is welcome but essentially inconsequential since the volume, skill, and passion of those leading worship does not risk dependency on “the rest of us.” Rather, this highly produced environment relegates the congregation to the same passive role as a crowd of sporting spectators “maybe echoing a few of the phrases or words.”² This *reversal effect* as noted by evangelical worship leader and author Jay Kim (and articulated in Marshall McLuhan’s Four Laws of Media³) explains why the rock concert atmosphere of his Silicon Valley church and Andy Crouch’s experience of passivity produce results opposite to the intended outcome. The longing for engagement ends in apathy. In both cases, this *reversal effect* has to do with the liturgical culture, music, and theological expressions commonly associated with contemporary or modern worship. The *reversal effect*, however, is not to be misunderstood as a shortcoming unique to these expressions. Churches whose liturgical culture, music, and theological expressions reflect a more traditional sensibility are equally vulnerable to the deadening effects of passivity when “the rest of us” are allowed to sing politely while mostly admiring the degreed professionals’ craft in worship. The *reversal effect* knows no denominational or cultural boundaries as the church grapples for identity in a secular age.

Most of these unintended results stem from well-intentioned attempts at dynamic stabilization in the face of disequilibrium but lack the necessary depth of understanding to avoid divisiveness and predictable *reversal effects*. Frank Burch Brown has succinctly articulated the

² Crouch, *The Tech-Wise Family*, 185.

³ For a detailed explanation, see Chapter 1, p. 10.

dilemmas that constitute the landscape of aesthetic theology and liturgical aesthetics—an intersection that seems increasingly charged with blame as churches respond anxiously to the crisis of numerical decline. In the urgent quest for greater inclusivity as a means of attraction, we have not accounted for the impact on “the rest of us” who find themselves without a compelling reason to sing. Without discernment, the church cannot distinguish between the “virtues and vices” as Brown articulates them:

1. Empty aestheticism contrasted with aesthetic spirituality.
2. Philistinism with devotion.
3. Aesthetic intolerance with hospitality.
4. Indiscriminate taste with discerning appreciation.

The misapplication of aesthetic standards divorced from pastoral sensibilities (such as skillful *improvisation*) lies at the heart of these potential conflicts which are classic examples of the *reversal effect*. Acknowledgment of such liturgical failings, especially when seen from the perspective of what influences one to passively observe or actively participate in musical aspects of worship, is critically important.⁴ These four dynamics must be held in “*creative tension* with an accompanying need to become more discerning and—in the best sense—discriminating in selecting and cultivating the arts for worship.”⁵

Superficially, “cultivating the arts for worship” seems primarily concerned with outward, aesthetic choices but in practice has far-reaching implications for the individual’s interior life and *alterity* of identity as part of the worshipping body. The creative tension that Brown finds necessary to redeem his four “virtue/vice” dilemmas corresponds to Harmut Rosa’s insight:

⁴ David McNutt, reviewing Brown’s book in *Cultural Encounters* 7, no. 2 (2011): 102–103, notes that people are drawn to the Kingdom of God not because of their different relationship to the arts, “but because of the reconciling and redeeming action of God in the person and work of Jesus Christ. Such an orientation can provide even deeper insights into worship and the place of the arts within it.” This orientation points to the God who is Wholly Other and graciously invites our participation in his Kingdom’s work but in no way depends on our efforts.

⁵ Frank Burch Brown, *Inclusive Yet Discerning* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 7. (emphasis added)

without the reciprocal exchange of *af←fection* and *e→motion*, there is no possibility of *coproduction* and *resonance*.⁶ Rigid aestheticism and indiscriminate populism are equally damaging—both serve abstract notions unconcerned with sustainable relational dynamics and communal health. Andy Crouch’s description of “the rest of us who, like the crowd at a ballgame, are mostly swaying along [in worship]” illustrates the resulting liturgical hollowness when Brown’s *creative tension* and Rosa’s *resonance* have been neglected. Despite the crowd, the occasion, and the music, there is no reason to sing in the absence of relationship and responsibility.

An Ethical Imperative

By asking, “Why are you singing?” in the context of a body gathered for worship, the response must necessarily embrace both individual and collective dynamics in order to consider their influence on each other. Ethnomusicologist and church music professor Nathan Myrick demonstrates that this interplay is more consequential than simply encouraging participation in worship as churches struggle to attract members in the digital age. He contends that singing with an awareness of the other is a matter of “care, justice, and relational ethics in Christian music”⁷ as his book’s subtitle elaborates.⁸ As noted in earlier examples, lived human experiences and subsequent relational group dynamics are commonly ignored in service of some loftier ideal often resulting in a predictable *reversal effect*. Examples can be easily found at the local church

⁶ For a detailed explanation, see Chapter 1, p. 7.

⁷ Nathan Myrick, *Music for Others: Care, Justice, and Relational Ethics in Christian Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021).

⁸ These ethical consequences are not limited to music in the church; community and professional music ensembles bear equal responsibility to their participants but do so with a different vocabulary in a secular context.

level or even recognized as omissions in scholarship, according to Myrick. He takes issue with numerous distinguished writers who explored issues relating to what sorts of music are fitting for Christian ritual at considerable length without first considering the “effects of music’s way of being in the world.”⁹ This term is applied in Heidegger’s phenomenological sense—not to suggest that music is a “self-sustaining or moral agent, but [music’s] effects are remembered bodily such that it is always a **relational something**.”¹⁰

Music’s essential way of being in the world is characterized by its ability to connect people and build community, however “music is *not* a universal *language*, serving a different purpose and utilizing different conventions—despite sharing a common physical dimension.”¹¹ Myrick’s ethnographic research revealed a longstanding source of disagreement surrounding the purpose of music in worship as can be seen in the contrasting perspectives of church leaders and congregation members: “Church leaders speak primarily. . . of didacticism and meaning-making, [while] congregants overwhelmingly emphasized music’s affective properties as primary.”¹² In this example, these differences of understanding and function explain why people so strongly value collective music making in Christian worship yet often find it difficult to agree on a universal purpose. Such unresolved ambiguities become sources of ethical conflict and hold potential for grave relational harm and institutional abuse unless pastoral leadership cultivates the necessary *creative tension* to avoid polarization as cautioned by Brown.¹³ When these

⁹ Myric, *Music for Others*, 2.

¹⁰ Myric, *Music for Others*, 127. (emphasis added)

¹¹ Myrick, *Music for Others*, 28. (emphasis original)

¹² Myrick, *Music for Others*, 10.

¹³ Frank Burch Brown, *Inclusive Yet Discerning* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 7.

dynamics remain in appropriate tension, we can more deeply appreciate how “music gives meaning to emotion and feeling to reason”¹⁴ while resisting fragmentation.

A second example of relational ethics comes from Myrick’s field work which asked pastors and music leaders whether music in worship contexts made people feel responsible for others. They almost always answered in the affirmative, but then found it difficult to support their position with a convincing narrative. About a third of the respondents indicated it did not make them feel responsible for others, such as Reggie who said: “I really don’t worry about the other people. No. I mean when I’m singing, I’m in the spirit.” Kim replied: “I don’t think it does because of boundaries. You know? Like, you’re responsible for yourself.” A middle-aged pastor named Dave reflected: “It should. I don’t know that it *does*.”¹⁵ There are numerous values of the digital age which might explain this sense of ethical detachment such as the individualization of musical worship in North American Protestantism—an “abrogation of the social” as put by Martyn Percy, the former dean of Christ Church Cathedral, Oxford.¹⁶ Likewise, Jeff Warren, professor of Music and Humanities at Quest University in Squamish, British Columbia, believes the commodification of music by the entertainment-culture industry obscures ethical responsibilities that once arose from relationships of shared music making.¹⁷

A hesitancy to accept responsibility for the other suggests that the essence of music as a *relational something* is threatened by *Zeitkrankheit* (“time sickness”) and the *accelerated* experience of life in high modernity. The phenomenological evidence of individualization and commodification relating to music suggests a hidden relational dimension of enormous ethical

¹⁴ Myric, *Music for Others*, 70.

¹⁵ Myrick, *Music for Others*, 98. (emphasis original)

¹⁶ Myric, *Music for Others*, 99. Quoting from Percy’s *Words, Wonders and Power* (London: S.P.C.K., 1996).

¹⁷ Myric, *Music for Others*, 99. Quoting from Warren’s *Music and Ethical Responsibility* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

importance that language struggles to capture. Rather than surrendering to the inadequacies of language, New Zealand-born ethnomusicologist Christopher Small coined a word that comes closer to the experiential totality: *musicking*. His new word derives meaning from what music *is not*. According to Small:

There is no such thing as music. Music is not a thing at all but an activity, something that people do. The apparent thing “music” is a figment, an abstraction of the action, whose reality vanishes as soon as we examine it at all closely. *Musicking* is to take part in any capacity in a musical performance by performing, listening, rehearsing, composing, or dancing.¹⁸

This wholistic perspective affirms the ethical implications articulated by Myrick as pastoral leaders and individuals engage in various expressions and occasions of sacred *musicking*. It also emphasizes music’s relational *way of being* in the world—the undeniable yet neglected existential reality which enlivens the human experience and points toward the divine. Simply put, “congregational music is unethical when it is uncaring.”¹⁹ Tending a culture of care then becomes a matter of pastoral and ethical responsibility for the other as theorized by the French philosopher of Jewish ancestry Emmanuel Levinas: “When human existence interrupts and goes beyond its efforts to *be*. . . there is a vocation of existing-for-the-other *stronger than the threat of death*.”²⁰ Such a vocation that reorients the person from individual survival to community wellbeing is both a sociological phenomenon and the fulfillment of ancient baptismal rituals—a community formed by those no longer afraid of Caesar’s persecutions and bound to each other in Christ. As M. Craig Barnes says: “You can’t scare dead people.”²¹

¹⁸ Christopher Small, *Musicking: The Meanings of Performing and Listening* (Middletown CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1998), 2, 9.

¹⁹ Myrick, *Music for Others*, 106.

²⁰ Myrick, *Music for Others*, 106. (emphasis added)

²¹ See Chapter 3, page 11.

Improvised Pastoral Musicking

Chaplain Bishop selected several new pieces of music for the Voices of Hope in February of 2023 and was excited to begin rehearsal with the women on a cold Thursday morning. Her assistants had arranged chairs, set up the sound system, taken attendance, and passed out folders to each singer so no time would be wasted. With everyone seated in their places, Chap began with her customary greeting, followed by a few moments set aside for joys and concerns as a prelude to prayer with the women. But before the first woman could speak, everyone's attention turned to a single inmate who had quietly made her way down the hall and was now waiting motionlessly at the threshold of the choir room door. A knit cap was pulled down snugly below her ears; the state issued windbreaker she wore was clearly no match for the chilly, north Georgia morning.

Any late arrival on this carefully planned day would have drawn unwanted attention. The solitary figure at the door, whose appearance had interrupted prayer concerns, was more than just a tardy nuisance; her presence sent a ripple of whispers through the choir before the room fell into a heavy silence. Chaplain Bishop paused for a moment, looked around the room, then called Crystal²² by name while gesturing for her to claim a seat on the front row. All eyes followed her as she walked stiffly across the room and sat in the plastic chair while another a folder of music was found for her.

With the latecomer now situated, Chaplain Bishop returned to the joys and concerns of the community before launching into the new music. She graciously welcomed Crystal who had belonged to Voices of Hope in the past, but had not been seen in rehearsal for more than six months—an extended absence which explained the choir's surprise at her unexpected return. Crystal had spent many of those months in lockdown because of behavior issues and was still struggling with substance abuse and outbursts of anger. Despite this, Chaplain Bishop had kept Crystal on the scheduling track which allowed her to leave her dormitory and join the choir for rehearsal as a hopeful incentive and promise of welcome.

Chaplain Bishop and the women recognized the importance of this rehearsal as a fresh start for Crystal, but were also intimately acquainted with her story and history of making bad choices at Arrendale. She had been sentenced to life at the age of 17 in 2013—she is now 28 with decades of time still stretching ahead before any possibility of parole.²³ The particulars of her crime and length of sentence are not sensational in this context since many Voice of Hope singers share similar circumstances. However, Crystal does stand apart for beginning her life sentence at such a young age. This, along with her involvement in gangs and struggle with substance abuse, has marked her decade of incarceration with cycles of violence and emotional turmoil.

With this knowledge, Chaplain Bishop and the Voices of Hope welcomed Crystal into the community that had gathered to pray before singing. Chap took a seat with the sopranos on the opposite front row and asked Crystal how she had been doing. She

²² A pseudonym for the inmate.

²³ A Georgia law that took effect on July 1, 2006, mandates that anyone receiving a life sentence after this date must serve a minimum of thirty years before being considered for parole.

shifted awkwardly in her chair as the assembled women listened intently to her reply: “I got tired of getting beat up by people and mistreated by the officers, so I figured it’s better to just act up and land in lockdown. At least they bring you food in there and you don’t have to fight or get things stolen from you.” As she spoke, the other women exchanged sharp glances and raised eyebrows indicating their disappointment in Crystal’s response. After she finished, Chap acknowledged Crystal’s difficult circumstances but gently reminded her that using bad behavior as a ticket to lockdown is not a healthy or sustainable way of coping with the realities of life. Crystal was now the center of attention and nodded in tacit agreement, but then rebutted all of Chaplain Bishop’s helpful advice with various examples of abuse or misfortune that justified her behavior. This exchange went back and forth several times as Crystal realized that her self-destructive behavior would not be overlooked despite her personal challenges.

After several minutes of this stalemate between Crystal and the chaplain, one of the women raised her hand asking permission to speak. Chaplain Bishop recognized her and she stood to address Crystal in front of the choir. Her words echoed the chaplain’s in substance, but she spoke from the lived experience of an incarcerated person—a voice filled equally with solidarity in suffering and responsibility for behavior. Even this powerful testimony was not enough to silence Crystal. In desperation, she pleaded: “Don’t y’all remember me? I was the baby that came in here!” hoping for more sympathetic treatment from the choir. Without asking permission, one of the older women quickly responded: “You ain’t the baby no more. I’ve seen what you’ve been doing out on the yard.”

One after another, the women spoke calmly but with tremendous conviction to Crystal as Chaplain Bishop skillfully managed the commentary if emotions ran too high. Each voice added a personal dimension to the reality of incarceration and concluded with an embodied testimony that claimed God’s willingness to heal the brokenhearted and break the power of despair even in a culture of violence and uncertainty. These comments continued until Chaplain Bishop realized that the time set aside for this important rehearsal was almost over and only a few minutes remained before the inmates would be dismissed from the school building for lunch.

Although Crystal had remained argumentative at the beginning of the hour, the words of encouragement and calls for personal responsibility from more than a dozen women had clearly touched her. She now sat with rounded shoulders and tearful eyes directed toward the floor as she realized the Voices of Hope rehearsal had been entirely repurposed for the sake of her individual wellbeing. Crystal had no way of knowing that Chaplain Bishop had high pedagogical expectations for the day; she only knew that she had been received as the prodigal daughter in the name of Christ. In the final minutes, Chaplain Bishop asked if she wanted the choir to pray for her. Crystal nodded a “yes,” and her chair was taken from the front row and moved to the center of the room. The choir members stood and gathered around, laying hands on each other’s shoulders as the chaplain and her community prayed through tears and cracking voices for their sister’s restoration.

The rehearsal ended. The women turned in their music folders, put away the sound equipment, and dispersed to their dormitories. The keyboard and guitar remained untouched; not one note had been sung, but the room had been filled with *resonance*. Time lengthened. The Voices of Hope had gathered in its customary way, but *improvised in coproduction* with their pastoral leader as equals in shared ministry—a ministry validated by “the authority of compassion” as Henri Nouwen called it:

We usually think of people with great authority as higher up, far away, hard to reach. But spiritual authority comes from compassion and emerges from deep inner solidarity with those who are “subject” to authority. **The one who is fully like us, who deeply understands our joys and pains or hopes and desires, and who is willing and able to walk with us, that is the one to whom we gladly give authority and whose “subjects” we are willing to be.**²⁴

The Voices of Hope had exercised their spiritual authority in a context of shared *music*—an unusual occasion that benefitted from the choir’s culture of responsibility to pause didactically in order to more fully engage the relational ethics of music for the sake of human flourishing. In that unexpected pause from singing, Chaplain Bishop modelled and encouraged the discipline of *improvisation* in response to Crystal’s *elusive* appearance at rehearsal. Improvising is not pretending or making things up. Rather, it is an encounter with the unpredictable that remains tethered to a depth of experience and mastery of content. It is a discipline of acute awareness that allows us to truly comprehend what is unfolding before us and respond to it *as it is*, not as we might wish for it to be. This memorable rehearsal was a clear example of “musical activity as a space where ethics happens,” as claimed by Marcel Corbussen and Nanette Nielsen.²⁵ Myrick uses their work to suggest an:

²⁴ Henri Nouwen, *Bread for the Journey* (New York: Harper Collins, 1997), 74.

²⁵ Nathan Myrick, *Music for Others*, 78 (quoting from Corbussen and Nielsen’s *Music and Ethics*, 2012).

experience of *musicking* that is attentive to other performers. Using the metaphor of **improvisation** to describe how this hospitality goes beyond listening yet inextricably requires it. This experience begins and ends with listening in hospitality.²⁶

Not only did the improvisational pastoral *musicking* receive Crystal with hospitality that cold morning, it simultaneously empowered the women who spoke so sincerely to her about matters of life and death. The centrality of relationship was unmistakable and proved Myrick's assertion that "musicking can at once [be] care for the other and care for the self."²⁷

The singing God of joy

Reformed theologian Jürgen Moltmann (b. 1926) is widely known for his 1972 book, *The Crucified God*—an exploration of God's solidarity with humanity in its darkest moments. His devastating experience of serving in the German Air Force auxiliary at age sixteen in World War II and subsequent years as a POW in Belgium and Scotland informed his theology of abandonment, guilt, and the plight of prisoners. However, this earlier book and his harrowing experiences as a boy do not preclude his pursuit of God's joyful attributes as seen in an essay entitled *Christianity: A Religion of Joy*. He asks, "How is our life *resonating* the immense joy of God?"²⁸ Despite fun masquerading as joy and endless banalities robbing life of meaning, Moltmann is confident that the whole of creation will receive God joyfully at the day of judgement. His hope rests on images from the Psalms and prophets of Israel such as: "You have turned my mourning into dancing and clothed me with joy." (Ps 30:11) "Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones which you have crushed rejoice." (Ps 51:8) "They shall obtain joy and

²⁶ Nathan Myric, *Music for Others*, 78. (emphasis added)

²⁷ Nathan Myric, *Music for Others*, 107.

²⁸ Miroslav Volf and Justin E. Crisp, eds. *Joy and Human Flourishing* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014), 3. (emphasis added)

gladness; sorrow and sighing shall flee away.” (Isa 35:10) “God himself will renew you with his love; he will exult over you with loud singing.” (Zeph 3:17)²⁹ Supported by these scriptures,

Moltmann proclaims:

With these [words] we see a great and wonderful harmony: the *joyous and singing God*, the joy of the earth, and the joy of the redeemed people.³⁰

Even as we wait expectantly for the consummation of this eschatological vision, one can hear voices in unexpected places that have already begun the song of “wonderful harmony.”

Janice³¹ has been incarcerated for thirty-eight years and repeatedly denied parole. She has sung with Voices of Hope since 1992 and has a clear soprano voice that makes the high notes seem effortless. During a hot Sunday morning worship service in the gym, she was called upon by Chaplain Bishop to offer a solo. She stepped up to the microphone and told a brief story about her initial reluctance to sing in public because she kept forgetting the words. This changed one day when another inmate “gave” her a song that she could remember. With that, Chaplain Bishop slowly rolled a few soulful, minor chords on the keyboard as Janice’s voice wandered mournfully up and down the scale until—BANG! The drummer suddenly kicked the tempo into a frenzy, and a choir member began playing a tambourine with all her might. Janice’s face radiated as she loudly sang: “I get joy when I think about what he’s done for me / I get happy when I think about what he’s done for me / He saved me, he changed me, he healed me, he filled me / I get joy when I think about what he’s done for me!” The Voices of Hope answered each line from Janice with increasing intensity, and the assembled congregation clapped and swayed with abandon until the song finally ended with thunderous applause and shouts of “Thank you Lord! Praise God! Yes, Lord! Jesus!” from the bleachers.

Despite many reasons not to sing and the heavy burdens of thirty-eight years behind the walls, Janice’s voice joined the singing God and lifted the inmates in a “wonderful harmony” that will one day fill the earth. Once again, *musicking* had opened a “space where ethics happen” and realized Oosterhuis’s dream:

²⁹ New Revised Standard Version adapted slightly by Moltmann in his essay.

³⁰ Volf and Crisp, ed. *Joy and Human Flourishing*, 4. (emphasis added)

³¹ A pseudonym for the inmate.

To sing as a way of communicating; to treat people in such a way that you lead them back to what is simple and fundamental in themselves. To sing with others; to cast off your embarrassment and cynicism, to become a little exposed and unashamed, one with another; every voice good enough, no human being too small to join in. Could I hope to win you with a song? I'd be content that I was born. I would think and work and write it late at night and early morn. To win people to each other, with songs.³²

³² Huub Oosterhuis, *At Times I See* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1974), 109–110.

CHAPTER 6 DREAMS, SIGNS, AND WONDERS

And we accept bread at his table,
Broken and shared a living sign:
Here in this world, dying and living,
We are each other's bread and wine.
This is the place where we can receive what we need to increase:
God's justice and God's peace.¹

It has been seven months since the Voices of Hope and Chaplain Bishop responded to Crystal's unexpected appearance in rehearsal with pastoral improvisation and relational hospitality. A day carefully planned to accomplish musical goals was laid aside for the sake of an individual and became "a space where ethics happens."² The inmates and Chap accepted responsibility for their sister in distress by speaking from the depths of their own struggles and sharing wise counsel in the face of soul-crushing burdens. Didactic goals were laid aside for the sake of human flourishing as the choir physically and spiritually encircled their returning member to pray for her needs before God's throne of grace. A glimpse of the holy had been witnessed in the elusive, commonplace gathering of a choir rehearsal; the Voices of Hope had embodied the very hope they sing about as they wait for freedom.

Crystal has not returned.

During these intervening months, the choir has met for rehearsal and led Sunday morning worship but Crystal has not been present even though the members live in the same correctional institution and, in some cases, share dormitory space.

¹ "What Is This Place?", stanza 3; Huub Oosterhuis, 1968; trans. David Smith, 1970. © 1967 Gooi En Sticht, Bv, Baarn, The Netherlands.

² Nathan Myric, *Music for Others: Care, Justice, and Relational Ethics in Christian Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 78 (Quoting from Corbussen and Nielsen's *Music and Ethics*, 2012).

Chaplain Bishop has also continued her weekly routines with the choir, responding to emergencies, and making plans to hold worship services in the chapel that has been unused since before the pandemic. These tasks are now her singular responsibility since the assistant chaplain left the Department of Corrections in the spring of 2023 to pursue work in the private sector. Unexpected strains, such as Arrendale receiving a group of violent inmates who had been transferred from another prison for provoking a riot, are commonplace, increasing emotional tension among the population and officers. Chap's daily concerns are now overshadowed by the repurposing of Arrendale from a maximum-security institution housing over a thousand inmates to a Transitional Center with only a few hundred. The state will transfer most of the inmates that Chaplain Bishop has pastored for decades to a recently purchased facility in McRae, Georgia—a three-hour drive from her home that will severely limit even informal visits. Her concern for these inmates' long-term relationships and the potential dissolution of the Voices of Hope has led her to look for metaphorical "baskets and bulrushes" at Arrendale so that trusted orderlies might find refuge with permanent jobs in the Transitional Center and preserve their stability. The massive transfer from Arrendale to McRae is at least three or four months away. While walking across the compound one afternoon and discussing some of the women she has known for thirty years, she gazed across the fences and said, "How am I supposed to say goodbye just like that?" as she snapped a finger.

No jobs have yet been found for them.

Signal flags

On an August Sunday in 2023, Chaplain Bishop stood before the gymnasium bleachers and called the assembled women together for worship by observing a time of silence with their heads bowed. The only sound for several minutes was the noisy industrial fan mounted on the roofline which made little difference on the 95-degree afternoon. Then—with no introduction or accompaniment—a single voice began singing: “I must tell Jesus all of my trials / I cannot bear these burdens alone / In my distress he kindly will help me / He ever loves and cares for his own.” The gymnasium remained hushed as the simple melody rose higher and higher with conviction: “I must tell Jesus / I must tell Jesus / Jesus can help me, Jesus alone.”³ The clear voice that sang the old gospel hymn was Chaplain Bishop’s and the assembly listened intently as she then asked everyone to recite Psalm 23 with her from memory. A few awkward stumbles here and there made no difference; the community filled in the missing words as needed and Chap acknowledged the difficulty of memorization with a twinkle in her eye as they finished and took their seats again. Her willingness to sing for the assembly and recite Psalm 23 with them modeled Nouwen’s vision of pastoral leadership:

I am deeply convinced that the Christian leader of the future is called to be completely irrelevant and to stand in this world with nothing to offer but his or her vulnerable self. . . to enter into a deeper solidarity with the anguish underlying all the glitter of success and bring the light of Jesus there.⁴

This personal engagement followed by congregational participation resonated throughout the liturgy as other prayers and songs from the Voices of Hope lifted the inmates’ spirits. Toward the end of worship, two inmates who sing with the choir left the risers and returned with a pair of

³ Elisha Hoffman (1839–1929), “I Must Tell Jesus” in *Favorite Gospel Songs* (Jersey City, NJ: J.N. Davis, 1894). <https://www.hymnologyarchive.com/i-must-tell-jesus> (accessed 29 Nov. 2023).

⁴ Henri Nouwen, *In the Name of Jesus: Reflections on Christian Leadership* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1992), 33.

flags fashioned from solid, dark green fabric with swaths of metallic trim as might be used with a marching band. They took their places in the middle of the gymnasium as the instrumentalists began playing “Oceans,” a popular contemporary worship song.⁵ As the title suggests, “Oceans” uses imagery of walking on the waters of uncertainty and keeping one’s eyes above the waves to reach a place where “trust is without borders.” These words, which are well known at Arrendale, were set in motion by the two women who were now sitting on their knees with the flags spread out on the bare floor in front of them. Initially, they rose and waved the flags in perfect synchronization for a verse before one woman moved closer to the congregation while the other drew back. The duo alternated in this way, each demonstrating an individual response to the music’s ebb and flow and moving around the room gracefully as the flags billowed out with waves that at times seemed placid before suddenly turning fierce.⁶ Toward the end of the song, the women again moved their flags in unison as the assembly encouraged them with applause and shouts of affirmation. In other circumstances, such a dance with flags performed by middle-aged women might have drawn ridicule as an amateur cliché of questionable aesthetic merit. The Arrendale community, however, made no such judgement. The duo’s flag performance was an expression of improbable joy that mingled childlike exuberance with the intensity of an adult desperately signaling for assistance from anyone willing to offer help. What could explain the mingled expression of joy in this harsh circumstance? Between them, they have already served more than sixty years behind the walls. What would motivate these women to wave flags before God and the community in worship? A similar testimony comes from the book of Philippians—

⁵ Joel Houston, Matt Crocker, Salomon Lighthelm, “Oceans” © BMG Rights Management, Capitol Christian Music.

⁶ Christopher Small in his definition of *musicking* (see Chapter Four, page 7) includes “performing, listening, rehearsing, composing, or **dancing**.” This was a powerful experience of dance fully engaging the community.

often described as Paul’s “Epistle of Joy.” In 106 verses, he uses the words “joy” and “rejoice” no less than sixteen times as he wrote from jail. According to Richard Beck:

Joy comes to us eccentrically, from the outside, from beyond our present, dismal circumstances. The facts don’t matter to Paul. Joy remains constant, transcending the facts, present no matter the situation. Sitting in prison, Paul finds himself in the Valley of Dry Bones. Experiencing the *euclastrophe*, Paul shouts, “Rejoice!”⁷

The living, joyful witnesses who waved the flags “transcended the facts” of their immediate situation while also powerfully contributing to the ritual of worship on behalf of others—another hallmark of *resonance* and the fully realized ethical implications of *musicking* in sacred spaces.

As pastoral counselor David Hogue notes, “Rituals provide a time and place where the norms of everyday living are temporarily suspended—a liminal space.”⁸ Worship rituals improvised in a prison gymnasium epitomize the suspension of the “norms of everyday living.” These adaptations are barely imaginable for most people in open society yet have an underlying commonality that is often overlooked, namely, Hogue’s belief that: “When we worship well, our stories and God’s story converge.”⁹ Hogue’s pastoral counseling experience and scholarship is informed by his adjacent interest in brain science and cognition. With this breadth of understanding, he suggests: “Our souls exist at the intersection of our memories and our imaginations, on the ever-moving point between past and present.”¹⁰ Presumably, when ritual is unconcerned with the convergence of our lived stories and God’s story, the probability of a *numinous*¹¹ encounter with the God who is Wholly Other becomes increasingly unlikely. The liturgy at Arrendale intentionally welcomes the storytelling of self-expression through

⁷ Richard Beck, *Hunting Magic Eels* (Minneapolis: Broadleaf Books, 2021), 101–102.

⁸ David A. Hogue, *Remembering the Future, Imagining the Past* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2003), 10.

⁹ Hogue, *Remembering the Future, Imagining the Past*, 181.

¹⁰ Hogue, *Remembering the Future, Imagining the Past*, 5.

¹¹ A word associated with the phenomenology of Rudolf Otto (1869–1937) as elaborated in his book, *The Idea of the Holy* (1917).

improvised *musicking* and in the process recovers a glimpse of that holy “ever moving point” where the soul is found between past and present. Whether exhausted by the alienation and time famine of *acceleration* in modern society or mired in the time vortex of incarceration, recovery of soul depends on experiences and rituals that recognize the social nature of the human brain and its inclination for connection with others.¹² Repeated experiences of such *numinous* encounters that reconnect the soul with the community and the Creator allow the brain to form new memories. The act of remembering is a physiological self-reconstruction inside the brain—every time a memory is recalled and reassembled from across its various regions, it becomes a new memory and physical reality. Considering this extraordinary process, Harvard psychologist David Schacter refers to memory as a “fragile power.”¹³ Awareness of this fragility implicates those with pastoral authority to patiently tend those whose emotional capacity has been diminished by memories of overwhelming anxiety, depression, or trauma. While this fragility can debilitate the brain, it also has the capacity to envision a better world. “The imagination is the arena in which hope plays out its welcoming invitations.”¹⁴ Claiming this vulnerable place in the imagination as the locus where enduring change and spiritual renewal are discovered necessitates a similarly vulnerable leadership posture rooted in the *authority of compassion*.¹⁵

Remembering the song

The eminent theologian Jürgen Moltmann asks: “Is there really such a thing as freedom in the midst of slavery, joy in the midst of suffering, and praise of God in the groaning of his

¹² Hogue, *Remembering the Future, Imagining the Past*, 77.

¹³ Daniel Schacter, *Searching for Memory* (New York: Basic Books, 1997), 133.

¹⁴ Hogue, *Remembering the Future, Imagining the Past*, 49.

¹⁵ Henri Nouwen, *Bread for the Journey* (New York: Harper Collins, 1997), 74.

creatures?”¹⁶ Yes. The women at Arrendale who wrote “Locked Up Free” already taste the freedom they long for inside the walls and confidently sing their original music:

“Locked Up Free—A Prisoner’s Song”

The days turned to weeks, the weeks to years, Lord knows people I have shed some tears.
Turned my pain into souvenirs. No longer afraid, I’ve faced my fears.
It’s 2023 and I’ve served my time, I’m headed out the door, twenty-four behind.
I see life’s highway stretched before me—before me
I’m locked up free, it’s a state of mind. I bend my knee to the Father of Time.
I’m singing freedom’s song and nobody can see,
*One day these bars are gonna be behind me.*¹⁷

This song is realistic and hopeful in equal measure: although twenty-four years of incarceration is a painful journey that cannot be forgotten, there is a state of mind that overcomes fear and transmutes pain into tokens of remembrance that no longer hold power over the future. Another song written by the women entitled “Will You Meet Me Here?” captures the prayerful trust of Psalm 30:5 while waiting in the reality of uncertainty: “You say your joy comes in the morning / So I will have no fear / I just ask, will you meet me here?”¹⁸ The reality of waiting for joy is not denied, but the singer believes the walls of Arrendale and even time itself cannot prevent the spirit of Christ from giving her consolation and strength in the here and now of incarceration. Both songs speak from the experience of inmates who have experienced the “turn” of heart and perspective that claims an interior freedom *with or without* physical freedom. A second characteristic of this “turn” in an individual is seen as the fruit they bear becomes life-giving for others in the community. These signs and wonders of hope only come after radical resignation. Such a “turn” is a harrowing, irregular experience of slowly dying to the past and accepting what is, not some imagined promised land or even recovery of a previous life. It is choosing to pass

¹⁶ Miroslav Volf and Justin Crisp, ed., *Joy and Human Flourishing* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015), 2.

¹⁷ “Locked Up Free” was collaboratively written by the Voices of Hope in the summer of 2023. (used by permission)

¹⁸ “Will You Meet Me Here,” Voices of Hope, 2023. (used by permission)

through death and walking the path of resurrection now, in this moment, in this place—a new life even in the Valley of Dry Bones.

Choosing the path of resurrection is an individual process of following Christ through the shadow of death, but also a phenomenon in the experience of a community or institution. When confronted with the crisis of numerical decline, the institutional church often polarizes around religion (metaphorically represented by the Pharisee) or results (the fiery Zealot) to quell the unpleasant symptoms of *disequilibrium*. Jesus responded to the inclinations of the Pharisees and Zealots with an entirely different approach by modeling the “third way” of suffering, death, and resurrection. His way remains the path of *alterity* for the sake of the world and the sake of the church. The wisdom and resolve necessary to follow the way of resurrection runs contrary to our lesser animal instincts for power and avoidance of suffering. Singing together (*musicking*) sustains an *improvisational* perspective that resists polarization and breathes life into the “third way” with words you can only make true if “you venture to sing [them] along with others” as Oosterhuis believes.¹⁹

Singing together can be understood theologically as a sacrament of solidarity when the community gathers in the presence of God who is Wholly Other, welcomed by the risen Christ, and filled with the breath of the Spirit. Or as the third stanza of “What Is This Place?” states: “Here in this world / dying and living / we are each other’s bread and wine.”²⁰ From a sociological and physiological perspective, the brain’s embodied activity of *musicking* holds potential for mindfully observing that elusive “ever moving point between past and present” where our souls exist at the “intersection of memory and imagination.”²¹ When fully engaged

¹⁹ Huub Oosterhuis, *Open Your Hearts* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1972), 108.

²⁰ Huub Oosterhuis, 1968; trans. David Smith, 1970. © 1967 Gooi En Sticht, Bv, Baarn, The Netherlands.

²¹ David A. Hogue, *Remembering the Future, Imagining the Past*, 5.

with others during an instance of *musicking*, there is an implicit agreement that we will remain in a particular place with each other for a fixed amount of time until the hymn, symphony, liturgy, or song has concluded. At least for the time framed by *musicking*, painful recollections of the past and fearful imaginations of the future are largely drawn together into the present as the mind focuses on text, melody, rhythm, and harmony—a different kind of “ever moving point” that engages cognition without emotional distress. As Andrew Root says, “In *resonance*, we rest in the good of the present.”²² These are moments when the soul is reoriented and recovers its place in time (*chronos*) and anticipates the fullness of eschatological completion (*kairos*). Whether distorted by *acceleration* in the digital age or *alienated* by the time vortex of incarceration, time defines the boundaries of our finitude as creatures and tests the “fragile power”²³ of the human brain. Yet, it is a mistake to regard human finitude and fragility as flaws; they, too, are simply aspects of the *imago Dei* revealed in each person whose “social brain”²⁴ longs to know and be known in community with others.

A tiny seed

Musicking with and for others before God in the face of decline or despair is an invitation for ridicule from those attached to religion or results. Throughout these chapters, improbable examples of joy and faith flourishing in Arrendale prison have demonstrated that such signs do exist and point to a “third way” of being beyond the imminent circumstances at hand. These signs of *resonance* are often found in hidden places and contexts of persecution and injustice. However, even when a hopeful sign is found here and there, God’s apparent absence from a

²² Andrew Root, *The Congregation in a Secular Age* (Grand Rapids MI: Baker Academic, 2021), 196.

²³ Daniel Schacter, *Searching for Memory* (New York: Basic Books, 1997), 133.

²⁴ Hogue, *Remembering the Future, Imagining the Past*, 77.

world ravaged by evil suggests any hope is ultimately delusional. Shortly before his execution at the Nazi concentration camp in Flossenbürg, Dietrich Bonhoeffer addressed this question of the absent God in a letter to Eberhard Bethge:

The God who is with us is the God who forsakes us (Mark 15:34). The God who lets us live in the world without the working hypothesis of God is the God before whom we stand continually. Before God and with God we live without God. God lets himself be pushed out of the world on to the cross. He is weak and powerless in the world, and that is precisely the way, the only way, in which he is with us and helps us. Matthew 8:17 makes it quite clear that Christ helps us, not by virtue of his omnipotence, but by virtue of his weakness and suffering.²⁵

Is this absent, crucified God that Bonhoeffer embraced as he awaited his own death the God of Sunday morning worship in affluent North American churches? Does the church follow such a God of weakness and suffering for the sake of the world or has it forsaken Christ on the cross as too shameful and inefficient for modern sensibilities? At Jesus's crucifixion, the crowd reached a logical conclusion: "He trusts in God. Let God rescue him now if he wants him, for he said, 'I am the Son of God.'" (Matthew 27:43, NIV) The church worships a crucified God, but avoids the necessary crucifixion of humility and constantly "administrates"²⁶ to rescue its own reputation and quiet the crowd's logical skepticism as an apology for God's apparent impotence and absence from daily life.

After years of ministry that embodies the "third way" of suffering, death, and resurrection, Chaplain Bishop and the Voices of Hope continue to stand apart for their impact on Arrendale and their wider influence on elected officials, churches, theology students, and family members outside the walls.²⁷ Routines of rehearsal and worship that formed inmates and brought

²⁵ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (United Kingdom: SCM Press, 2017), 134.

²⁶ Andrew Root and Blair Bertrand, *When Church Stops Working* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2023), 10.

²⁷ It is a mistake to regard the stories of inmates as curiosities or understand them as people without power or agency. Those whose lives have "turned" inside prison and model the "third way" have already yielded an abundant harvest and are empowered by the Holy Spirit as God's beloved daughters.

meaning to otherwise bleak years of incarceration could soon vanish as the inmates leave familiar spaces and disperse to south Georgia. The time vortex that seemed inescapable is suddenly collapsing. After a recent choir rehearsal, an inmate named Tammy²⁸ pointed over Chaplain Bishop's shoulder toward her office window and said, "You see that muscadine vine out there, Mr. Black?" Looking outside, the square space of earth open to the sky between classrooms appeared much like a monastery cloister surrounded by four buildings. Inmates and volunteers have tended the little garden over the years and added colorful ornaments such as planters and bird feeders more common to a residential back yard. One side of the square has been completely overtaken by the enormous muscadine with dark green leaves and purple grapes twisting upwards to the sun. "I raised it from a seed," Tammy said. After admiring it for a moment, she added with a sigh: "I wonder what will happen to it." Her question hung in the air without answer. What becomes of plants, places, and people in such times of unavoidable disruption? Will the effort of cultivating a thriving vine from a tiny seed be remembered? Will the Voices of Hope's ministry be forgotten? Can any reasonable person find hope in the *acceleration* of endless technical fixes that makes us *time sick* and leave us *alienated* from each other and God? Henri Nouwen gave a talk entitled "The Roots of Christian Conscience" in 1986 which honestly acknowledged our longings for significance and meaning beyond certainty in this life:

We want to see some cures. We want to see some changes. We want to see some products. We want to see something new happening because of us. But Jesus never asked us to be productive. Jesus asked us to be fruitful. And fruit comes out of a broken ground. When we become vulnerable, broken, naked, disarmed, we can trust that fruit will be born. Even when you or I won't see it or know anything about it. Even when you or I might say my life is a failure. When we live our lives in love, we can trust that it will bear fruit in our lives or later. And those people whom we still remember as signs of hope like

²⁸ A pseudonym for the inmate.

Saint Francis, Dorothy Day or Óscar Romero—they were weak people who were in love, and trusted that their life would bear fruit.²⁹

Nouwen points to three leaders whose lives continue to bear fruit because they embodied a spirit of gentleness and love—“weak” lives that powerfully influenced others for God’s kingdom by their relational solidarity with others. St. Francis, Dorothy Day, and Bishop Romero were *in love* with their people and their vocation which demonstrates the “mode of relationship”³⁰ Hartmut Rosa claims as essential for the experience of *resonance* to be possible. Years before Rosa’s sociological work, the resonant connections between “weak people who were in love” and the transformational capacity of ritual *musicking* were eloquently expressed by the French philosopher Joseph de Maistre (1753–1821): “Reason can only speak; it is love which sings; therefore we sing our symbols, for faith is only a belief through love.”³¹

Never finished, already complete

Cultivating the pastoral habits that embody *musicking* as a “mode of relationship” require *improvisational* agility with eyes and ears attuned to commonplace miracles. Frederick Buechner, the beloved Presbyterian author whose books addressed the thirst for meaning in the vicissitudes of life, was once asked in an interview what kind of advice he would give to someone trying to find God. Rather than a lengthy theological response, he loudly repeated two words: “Pay attention. Pay attention!”³² His simple imperative embraces the messy jumble of

²⁹ Henri Nouwen, *The Roots of Christian Conscience* (1986).

<https://youtu.be/VO69nSZYfdA?si=sZwr4YcnmlwCLscs> (accessed 29 Nov., 2023).

³⁰ Hartmut Rosa, *Resonance: A Sociology of Our Relationship to the World* (Medford, MA: Polity, 2019), chap. 5, sec. 3.

³¹ Joseph de Maistre, *Essay on the Generative Principle of Political Constitutions* (Boston: Little and Brown, 1847), 56.

³² Rob Collins, dir. *Buechner* (New Life Films, 2003), DVD. <https://vimeopro.com/rcp/buechner/video/352722495> (quotation at 49:30, accessed 29 Nov. 2023).

everyday life that reveals glimpses of the holy as his books eloquently recount. Without this discipline of noticing and feeling the contours of experience as sacred revelations, those entrusted to us in pastoral care become neglected in pursuit of meaningless goals while the “mode of relationship” is replaced by coercive manipulation. Paying attention with the heart also leads to a deeper understanding of symbolic action. The act of worship strikes some as a naïve gesture lacking meaning especially in secular modernity, however the liturgy:

speaks measuredly and melodiously; it is clothed in colors and garments foreign to everyday life; it is in the highest sense the life of a child, in which everything is picture, **melody**, and **song**. Such is the wonderful fact which the liturgy demonstrates: it unites act and reality in a supernatural childhood before God.³³

Finding meaning in the “broken ground”³⁴ of vulnerability and nakedness that is the human condition suggests a “mode of relationship” illustrated by the trust of childhood that sings and plays without any agenda other than the pursuit of delight. Our adult brain’s propensity to believe Nouwen’s “Three Great Lies”³⁵ (1. I am what I do; 2. I am what others say about me; 3. I am what I have) betrays a loss of identity as the beloved children of God. In 1966, Thomas Merton shared advice in a letter to Jim Forest who had become deeply disillusioned by the Vietnam War:

Do not depend on the hope of results. You may have to face the fact that your work will be apparently worthless and even achieve no result at all, if not perhaps results opposite to what you expect. As you get used to this idea, you start more and more to concentrate not on the results, but on the value, the rightness, the truth of the work itself. You gradually struggle less and less for an idea and more and more for specific people. In the end, it is the reality of **personal relationship** that saves everything. The logic of worldly success rests on a fallacy: the strange error that our perfection depends on the thoughts and opinions and applause of other men! A weird life it is, indeed, to be living always in

³³ Romano Guardini, *The Church and the Catholic, and the Spirit of the Liturgy* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1950), 180–181, (emphasis added). Although Guardini’s description of the liturgy as “foreign to everyday life” may suggest pre-Vatican II sensibilities, his concern for *alterity* remains valid in light of the *reversal effect* when liturgy becomes indistinguishable from pop culture entertainment. See Chapter 1, page 10.

³⁴ Nouwen, *The Roots of Christian Conscience*.

³⁵ See Chapter 2, page three for detailed explanation.

somebody else's imagination, as if that were the only place in which one could at last become real!³⁶

The same futility of Merton's "weird life" that seeks personal validation from the imagination of others has also become the church's preoccupation as it attempts to follow the crucified God while desperately desiring institutional success and approval in the eyes of the world at any cost.

Rather than being adrift in the illusory pursuit of a "weird life," Marva Dawn followed Eugene Peterson's pastoral mandate:

We will learn better to feast together as a community [realizing] each and every church "no matter how small, how deficient in piety, how lacking in works" is truly "a miraculous and precious gift, an instance, no matter how obscure or flawed, of the kingdom of God, and must, for that reason, be lifted up in thanks." The great delight of our work as faith leaders is to escort the people into deeper gratitude and to accompany them in expressing it.³⁷

The "great delight" is discovered when eccentric courage articulates deep gratitude for precious gifts even in circumstances of flawed obscurity amidst persistent problems. Since this is an irrational response, it cannot be articulated by words alone but must be sung together in relational, pastoral *musicking* if they are to become true as Huub Oosterhuis believed.³⁸ He died in 2023 on Easter Sunday at the age of 89—an appropriate juxtaposition for a poet who wrestled with the "already / not yet" of faith in the risen Christ and gave those seeking faith a place for questions and unfinished dreams. Meinrad Walther, a musicologist and theologian with the Archdiocese of Freiburg, Germany, was asked about his legacy and the "unwieldy" character of his songs—they are always about the promise of Easter, but somehow seen from the perspective of Good Friday. Walther responded:

³⁶ Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, & Jovanovich), 1993. <https://jimandnancyforest.com/2014/10/mertons-letter-to-a-young-activist/> (accessed 29 Nov. 2023; emphasis added).

³⁷ Marva Dawn, *The Sense of the Call* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2006), 215. (quoting from Eugene Peterson's *Five Smooth Stones*) Dawn's image of "escort[ing] the people into deeper gratitude" reflects Rosa's *mode of relationship* necessary for sustainable experiences of *resonance* in *acceleration*.

³⁸ Huub Oosterhuis, *Open Your Hearts* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1972), 108.

He is less concerned with presenting clear theses than with opening up a space for associations with symbols. He refuses the clarity that characterizes, for example, the songs of praise in which everything is a success from the start. He has a feeling for the overtones of impotence, of lamentation, of the unfinished, that the singers then have to think through to the end, bearing a resemblance to the Psalms.³⁹

Oosterhuis's willingness to open a space for "associations with symbols" is an *improvisatory* posture that *musicks* with the unpredictable overtones of life. Following his example, attending mindfully to **resonant experiences** as a spiritual practice in an **accelerating, secular age** reclaims the **alterity** of purpose at the heart of **pastoral musicking** bringing hope through **improvisation** to those **alienated** in the **time famine** of modernity.

SINGING PASSES DOWN THE DREAM of man as he was meant to be. Passes down the lament: Man, now where are you, when will you be man at last? Passes down the hope: There is a door standing open which no one can close; someone has said, "I am the door." (It is a stage door painted on a blind wall, you think, at least once in every song.)

A song is, itself, a door standing open; usually just ajar, sometimes open wide. In the midst of quiet drudgery and despairing protest, I try singing to keep my conscience open to the vision of a different order: weapons melted down, people who no longer train for battle.

Slaves shall dream dreams; prisoners shall have visions.⁴⁰

³⁹ Felix Neumann, *Deep Existential Truth: What Remains of Huub Oosterhuis* (Via katholisch.de, The News Portal of the Catholic Church in Germany) <https://katholisch.de/artikel/44543-huub-oosterhuis> (accessed 29 Nov. 2023; emphasis added).

⁴⁰ Huub Oosterhuis, *At Times I See* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1974), 117.

EPILOGUE

My summary of ideas in the final chapter concluded with two related imperatives: first, to notice and cultivate occasions of relational *resonance* and *improvise* courageously with life's overtones of impotence and lamentation. And, secondly, to do so without attachment to visible results and the "thoughts and opinions and applause of other men" in Merton's words. If such a mindset has been convincingly presented over six chapters, it seems that an epilogue is unnecessary and might even risk contradiction if it were to include some triumphant personal accomplishment that might persuade the reader to "spend thyself nor count the cost" in the words of Geoffery Kennedy's stalwart hymn. While I sincerely hope that the reader will find convincing reasons to pursue their own pastoral and lay vocations, there are no transcendent visions for me to share as proof. Rather, this is an opportunity to acknowledge the unfinished circumstances and surprising joys that brought me to this topic and animated my desire to respond at a deeper level.

Much of this thesis has considered the church's response to changing social dynamics and technology over the past sixty years—essentially reflecting my own lifetime as a child growing up in the 1970s. That scene now seems very distant: undivided congregations worshipping together around a common liturgy holding hymnals and singing with one voice across the generations. I bring this to mind not to romanticize a past that was admittedly flawed in many other aspects, but simply to note that the contemporary/traditional binary which has partitioned the American church is a recent phenomenon, not a long-held normative practice. This partition has also served to largely segregate generations into demographic subcategories—a loss of alterity with profound theological and sociological consequences.

In this sense, remembering is not idle nostalgia but a recovery of depth according to the political philosopher Hannah Arendt (1906–1975) who claimed in an essay from 1957 that “memory and depth are the same, or rather, depth cannot be reached by man except through remembrance.” Pursuing recovery of depth free from nostalgic tendencies and ideological browbeating is the hard work of discernment and pastoral sensitivity—a task that will occupy the rest of my life.

Evidence of the changes that began in the early 1960s became apparent during my undergraduate studies in the 1980s. As a freshman, I was one of twelve organ students in my teacher’s studio; at graduation, I was one of two. I had followed the same educational path as my musical mentors hoping one day to serve like them, only to find myself mired in the “worship wars” of the 1990s and 2000s after graduation. The sudden decline in organ majors accurately correlated with congregations which turned away from a continuum of sacred music in favor of an emerging CCM repertoire led by worship bands.

However, congregations whose worship drew from the cannon of sacred choral and instrumental music did not altogether disappear during these decades. I was grateful to share in the ministry of several United Methodist churches for twenty-three years that nurtured me as I served them. This long relationship abruptly ended in 2017. The disruption, while painful, opened my family to an astonishing outpouring of care and provision that eventually allowed me to serve as Director of Music and Organist at North Avenue Presbyterian Church for five grace-filled years. This thesis is the direct result of that congregation’s generosity and Pastor Scott Weimer’s insistence that I pursue a doctorate. It was also during this time that I advocated for replacing North Avenue’s older Presbyterian hymnals with the newer *Glory to God*. Because this was a new hymnal to me and to the congregation, I intentionally incorporated familiar hymns along with unknown selections from *Glory to God*. One of these new hymns by Huub Oosterhuis

(“What Is This Place?”) spoke deeply to me and became a central framework for this thesis—another hidden gift found only in disruption.

In October of 2023, I completed my first year as Music Director and Organist at St. James Episcopal Church in Marietta, Georgia. (I have now served with five different pastors and changed denominations twice in six years—nothing at all like the previous two decades of relative stability within the United Methodist Church.) During my first year at St. James, I also grieved the loss of Fr. Matt Torpey, OCSO. Fr. Matt, who is referenced in this thesis, was my spiritual director for twenty-three years before his death at the age of 96. From him I learned the practice of centering prayer and discovered, like many Protestants, that my spiritual formation had been largely neglected mostly out of ignorance. In our many conversations over the years, he disclosed that his arrival at the Monastery of the Holy Spirit in 1967 came as the result of conflict. Fr. Matt entered the Cistercian order in 1950 and was one of Thomas Merton’s students at the Abby of Gethsemani in Kentucky. Since Gethsemani was overflowing with monks at that time, Fr. Matt was sent with a group to the new monastery in Vina, California where he served as a priest for the community and worked in the prune orchard. Matt’s “failure” in the Vina monastery unwillingly brought him to Conyers, Georgia—the place where I stumbled into a weekend retreat that introduced me to him and wordlessly reoriented my heart to God’s voice of love.

Above all, the unfinished circumstances at Arrendale State Prison still cast a long shadow over the 1,200 incarcerated women there and Chaplain Bishop’s ministry among them. I continue to volunteer with the Voices of Hope; their predicament rests heavily on my mind and heart as the holidays approach. No firm date for the move to McRae, Georgia has been announced, but this extended period of delay has proven fruitful for “Chap.” After almost seven years of disuse,

a worship service was finally held on October 20, 2023, in the prison chapel at Arrendale. Untold hours of volunteer effort and generous contributions from local congregations allowed the walls and floor to be freshly painted. The Voices of Hope happily brought back the sound equipment from the gymnasium and attended to the details that Chaplain Bishop required. Closets and back hallways were still dusty and crammed with surplus books and furniture, but the once-abandoned building was more ready than not.

This joyful return to the chapel coincided with a visit that day from Theodicy Jazz Collective (<https://theodicyjazz.com/>) and Bishop Robert Wright from the Episcopal Diocese of Atlanta. The Voices of Hope were invited to collaborate with Theodicy and prepared in advance by listening to recordings. On the morning of the service, there was an intensive joint rehearsal before the congregation of general population inmates arrived in the afternoon. By service time, the choir and the players had become fast friends, and the chapel overflowed with heartfelt gospel and jazz that could be heard on a beautiful fall day across the compound. Bishop Wright, however, was prevented from coming at the last moment which posed an immediate problem since he was to deliver the sermon. True to form, Chaplain Bishop responded to this minor crisis with improvisational mastery and pastoral skill by calling on “Serena,” one of her trusted inmates. Serena confidently went to the microphone and read the story of the prophet Nehemiah seeking King Artaxerxes’ permission to rebuild the broken walls of Jerusalem. She gave thanks that the prison chapel had been restored and called to mind the work of Nehemiah to restore God’s glory. She concluded her reflection by thanking everyone for being there and reminded them that, “Like this building, we are all still unfinished people.”

Chaplain Bishop could have delivered the sermon, but she gave the task to an inmate. Bishop Wright was missed, but Serena’s message was in no way lacking. I drove home thinking

about the glory of an unfinished building full of unfinished people and the abundance of God's grace in hidden places. I wonder what will become of Serena and her community and how Chaplain Bishop will respond. I wonder what will become of that muscadine vine on the other side of the prison that Tammy raised from a tiny seed. I wonder what lies ahead for my family and for my work as a pastoral musician. These are things I cannot know, but I know that God has planted the seeds of hope and will never forsake us.

Turn now, O God of hosts, look down from heaven;
behold and tend this vine; preserve what your right hand has planted.
(Psalm 80:14)

APPENDIX

The Voices of Hope in performance: <https://youtu.be/7k1IaaAlVPc?si=q-6siBN61wdzeka1>
(accessed 15 November 2023).



Chaplain Susan Bishop

THE VOICES OF HOPE



Director
Chaplain Susan F. Bishop

Guest Artist
Emily Saliers

Voices of Hope CD cover featuring Emily Saliers of The Indigo Girls.



The chapel at Lee Arrendale State Prison,
Alto, Georgia



Chaplain Susan Bishop at the opening of a Habitat for Humanity house dedicated in her honor. Unlike most houses given to owners, this one will be used as a transitional home for ex-offenders at the City of Refuge in Atlanta, Georgia.

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