



Lesley-Ann Hix Tommey
 Candidate for Ordination
 Personal Reflection
 College Park Baptist Church & First Baptist Church
 Greensboro, NC

SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

I have a calling that will not let me go. Mother Teresa names it when she said, “If we have no peace, it is because we have forgotten that we belong to each other.” I cannot forget who I belong to. I belong to the vulnerable, the imaginative, the wounded, the marginalized, the generous, the hopeful. I belong to communities listening for God and following Jesus. This shared vulnerability and recognition of sacred story—even, and especially, a common story—pulls me into ministry.

My growing up years are full of macaroni and cheese, Spanish and organ music. Like most of my friends, I took ballet lessons, had regular sleepovers with my best friends and spent my free time exploring and imagining around our neighborhood. But, unlike most of my friends, I grew up chasing my mom’s coattails behind the scenes of Baptist churches. I danced through the pews as she practiced her organ pieces for Sunday mornings. I hung out with the choir, turning her pages, during their rehearsals. I spent my sick days on the couch in the parlor and strapped on rollerblades, racing through the halls, when I got bored. With all that formative time wrapped up exploring the church, learning how to be a real, broken, grace-extending person from the church community surrounding me, I was never going to discover any other path but chasing God’s wild Spirit into vocational ministry.

A ministry calling running in the family makes a lot of sense. I know of many folks who are in ministry and whose parents are also ministers, like they inherited the family business. I had never seen my own situation that way because my mom never hesitated to dissuade me from a journey toward vocational ministry. She carries scars from her years as a minister, so I listened to her struggles and tried to avoid becoming a minister myself. But she is also the one who taught me how to see. With a parent minister—whose job it is to call-out injustices, celebrate community and recognize God’s handiwork everywhere—children grow up learning how to see a world that is flooded with God. They inherit these ministry lenses that are really hard to ever take off.

I was in kindergarten when I remember first recognizing a difference between my white-skinned self and my black-skinned classmates. We were playing in our classroom. I was following one of my friends around. I thought she was the prettiest girl in the class. I liked her freckles. Her birthday was coming up (so was mine), and she was going from desk to desk, writing down our friends’ names to invite to her party. I started to do the same. She skipped all the boys. I skipped the boys too. She skipped our friend Crystal.

“Wait,” I told her. “You forgot Crystal.”

“Oh, no,” she said. “I’m not inviting her. She’s chocolate.”

I was confused. She explained to me how Crystal had different colored skin, so she didn’t want to invite her. When you’re four and white, you’re not yet quite privy to the deep, oppressive dynamics of race relations. So I didn’t argue, and when I got in the car with my mom that afternoon, I told her I wasn’t going to invite the “chocolate” girls to my birthday party. Mom immediately stopped the car. She turned around in her seat to face me and look me in the eyes.

“Lesley-Ann Hix,” she said. “That’s not okay. It is never okay to leave anyone out because of the color of their skin.” She explained how beautiful and good my black kindergarten friends are. She explained how we are all God’s children. She explained how we are made to be friends, and she asked me what I liked about my black friends.

Truthfully, I loved my black friends. They were my first friends in kindergarten. On my first day of school, I was scared. The teachers were only speaking Spanish, and I had no idea what they were saying. A fellow kindergartner—one of the black students—named Geneva noticed how scared I was. She checked on me. She gave me a hug and told me to stay close to her, that we would make it through together.

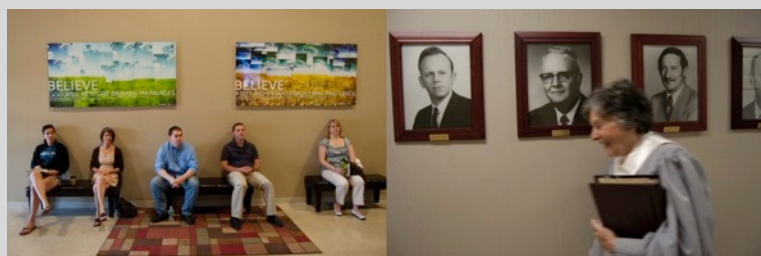
At Jones, ironically, the white students were the minority. Mom and Dad drove me across town to school in a subsidized housing neighborhood, where I could learn another language. Every day I was learning how to cross boundaries and how to have a wide perspective. I learned beside students who had very different stories from mine, and I learned from immigrant teachers with very different stories from mine. This culture-crossing taught me how abundant God is and how diversely colorful God’s kingdom is. This elementary school experience laid the foundational perspective for my sense of call and for my understanding of God as one who tears down walls.



Sandra, Alex and Evi. Shot in Tuzser, Hungary, while on mission trip in 2005

With a mother minister, I took for granted women’s access to leadership roles in the church. I knew that the pulpit shouldn’t be limited, that even children should lead. Having spent most of my growing up years in a church that was accessible to me, a female and a child, I stood in the pulpit whenever I could. I participated in every choir possible, and I went on as many youth trips as I could. After my first mission trip in sixth grade, I came home and told my dad that I wanted to be a missionary. As an MK himself, he laughed and told me to find something else to do. The feeling persisted, though. Before my senior year of high school, the College Park youth traveled to Hungary to work with Ralph and Tammy Stocks. The Roma showed us incredible hospitality that week, despite our cultural and language barriers. Connecting with the Roma children on that trip helped me step outside of myself and

break through the hindering boundaries of a comfort zone. Discovering God in other cultures kept igniting me, so again I came home and articulated a calling to missions.



Big Fish, Little Fish documentary photojournalism project, shot spring 2010. The original caption of this diptych: “Church-goers sit outside the Summit Church worship center. The Summit is a contemporary church in Durham, NC, with more than 4,000 people in total attendance on any given Sunday, or Saturday, and is growing very quickly. The church has flat-screen TVs all around where people can watch the service from outside the worship area.”

A choir member walks by portraits of the former pastors of Ridge Road Baptist Church. Ridge Road is a traditional church in Raleigh that has fewer than 50 people in attendance on any given Sunday.”

I followed my love of photography, story-telling and learning to journalism school, though. During my last year of undergrad, I began to discover a broader sense of call. Because of my love of the church, I suppose, my documentary photojournalism project developed into a diptych exploration and comparison of two churches in the Triangle area. I spent months at these two churches—one, a huge contemporary church in Durham, and the other, a traditional neighborhood church in Raleigh. I went into the project with a full bias toward the neighborhood church—that was the kind of church I felt comfortable in, the way of “doing church” I thought was right. By the end of my time in both churches, I had new, huge appreciation for the big church and the contemporary worship style. I wasn’t even trying to be open-minded about the project and the experience, but God showed up in both places, regardless. That made everything shift. I had been visiting churches, and if I caught a glimpse of a screen in the

sanctuary, I never gave the church a second chance. Now, I saw possibility and value in experiencing a different worship style.

Simultaneously, I finally faced my calling to ministry head-on. The First Baptist youth group traveled to visit Ralph and Tammy in Hungary too. I found out my mom, dad and Reid were making a stop in the village where I had spent my whole week, four years earlier. I printed off pictures I took of the girls there, and I sent them with the youth group in case they found Alex, Evi, Nikki, Juli or Andi. They did, and the girls cried. Back in the states, I cried too. Not only because of the sentimental reunion, but also because of the experiences the group was having all week, I desperately wanted to be there with them. I wanted to be learning and discovering God alongside them. Suddenly, a weight overwhelmed me, wrapped all around me. I could barely breathe. In hindsight, this event sounds like a panic attack. In the moment, though, I thought God was pushing me to accept my calling because as soon as I broke down and said out loud, “Okay, I will go to seminary,” the physical pressure disappeared.

After a year of working at First Christian Church in Greensboro, where I began to feel more congruent, I headed to McAfee School



My brother, Reid, with Alex in Hungary in 2010

of Theology in Atlanta. At McAfee, my studies and the community were steadily affirming of the journey I was on, and I discovered a greater sense of personal congruency. During seminary, I followed God into the peculiar and vibrant work of mission and community development. Through my Global Christianity coursework, I learned how to listen to a community, identify gaps and look for assets. Part of my work led me to Grant Park, worshiping and working with the folks at Park Avenue Baptist Church (even though they used a screen in worship). I dug my hands into the work of Trey and Jen Lyon, ministering alongside them in their newly created after-school program at the church. As I built relationships with the students, I found Jesus among them—a more authentic, radically-loving, unapologetic Jesus than I had seen before.

One week, I was having trouble with my apartment leasing office. I couldn't convince them I had paid my rent on time, so they were charging me a big late fee, making me call one person after another to try and prove them wrong. During after-school tutoring, I went outside to call them and talk it out. One of the guys, who calls himself Big Chris Flex, was outside. I told him that I had to call my leasing office because they were being frustrating, that he was welcome to stay there, but he couldn't distract me. He stood next to me and asked me questions.

"They can't do that to you," he whispered.



Matthew and Chris during After School 2012

The next week he asked how it was going with them. Knowing that Chris struggles to simply survive everyday, that he has had to live homeless, that he has had to pull his mother out of the street in her drug-induced coma, I brushed off my problem. It was nothing compared to his experiences. But I had already learned that I needed to be open and honest with them. So I told him I had all but given up. I guess I was going to pay them the whole bundle of money; I didn't know where it was going to come from.

Without blinking, he said, "We will help you."

Again, I didn't take him seriously. I laughed him off. "Chris, I'm not taking your money. That's crazy."

He was serious, though. "That's what we're doing here," he told me. "We look out for each other. We help each other when we can't help ourselves."

And before I could call him down, he had gathered the group of boys together and told them that they needed to figure out a way to get me out of the bind I was in. He knew that I was worried about it, and that was enough for it to be a big deal to him. I needed Chris, and I still do. I need

him for his humor and his kindness and his reminder of how a Christ-driven community acts. The light in him is so brilliant, and I am more with him. By committing my strength and ministry to Matthew, Darius, Randall, Chris, Tion, Zedrick and their community, I learned about the struggles they carry with them every day. As they allowed me to walk with them, they also walked with me along my journey. They taught me true dependence on one another and introduced me to the salvation that comes only in that kinship.

My coursework led me to Arica, Chile, too. As part of my contextual ministry placement, I lived and worked in Chile for two months. While I was there, I was in charge of starting a young women's Bible study. Bekah Hart, one of the missionaries I was working alongside, was one of the leaders of the young adult group at the church. She had noticed that she was usually the only female present when they got together. So when I got there, I went around with one of the moms, knocking on doors and inviting women to join us the next Friday for our first meeting. At the last house of the evening, I met Noemí. After talking with her family for a minute, we headed out the door to go back home. In good Latin American fashion, she kissed me on the face, and as she was giving me a long hug she said, "I am so glad you are here and are doing this for us. There are so many things I want to talk about, but I never feel like I can since the group at the church is all men."



Noemi and Adrian during a young adult gathering on the beach in Arica, during my last week in Chile

For six weeks I journeyed with this group of women, all with stories like Noemi's. I uncovered a deeper layer of oppression they were experiencing every week. So by the end of the summer, after I had been adamant about not wanting to preach while I was there, and after the pastor hit me with stinging *machismo* accusations of these women, I collapsed, stunned and grieving, unsure of anything I could say. It took me only a few seconds, though, to know where God was moving. I prayed for the right words, but it didn't really matter what I said. Because when I followed God to the pulpit, it was in the act of preaching itself that I hoped to open the door for these women who never thought a woman could preach. My experience in Chile further affirmed the joys of journeying with a marginalized people. In Chile, I discovered how loud and obvious God seems to me in an unfamiliar context.

I went to seminary unsure where I wanted to be at the end of the degree, and thinking I was called to mission work abroad. Through my class work, my time with the family at Park Avenue Baptist Church, and my internship placement at a church in Chile, I began to understand my calling as bigger than a specific position. I discovered a broad sense of call to cross-cultural

ministry, in whatever shape it might take—working, ministering and learning alongside folks who don’t look, think or live like me, those who don’t share my story. Because of the necessary commitment to each other along the shared walk, especially when it comes to racial reconciliation, I began to recognize the value in the partnership and devoted shared life of intentional Christian community.



QCFamilyTree community members, “radishes,” during the 2014-2015 year

For my first year out of seminary, I joined in the work of community organizers Greg and Helms Jarrell at QCFamilyTree in Charlotte. As a 26-year-old with a master’s degree, living with ten other people, sharing everything and not having much space of my own was a lesson in humility. Being rooted in that neighborhood, though, seemed to level the playing field. We learned from our neighbors in our poor neighborhood and found responses to injustices together. I learned about being an outsider in the neighborhood, and, despite the privilege I carried and had to deal with every day, I experienced a vast hospitality, acceptance and love from the community. They showed me a God that is even more welcoming and embracing than I knew before. Crossing those society-imposed race and class barriers to work together in community transformed me.

In Charlotte, at QCFamilyTree and among the neighbors there, I saw the desperate need for holistic lifestyle. In intentional community, we worked for justice, and we gardened. We spent as much time as possible listening to our neighbors’ stories, and we made art. Our dinner table (and for that matter, our breakfast, lunch, snack, dessert table) was always open and filled with enough food for everyone who wanted to come. I began to see, along with my fellow community members, that there really is enough space, food, love for everyone in the world. So our lifestyle of being kind to the earth was just as important as the political rallies we went to. Reconciliation, I have learned, is huge and immensely difficult. So the daily practice and commitment to prayer, listening, gardening, cooking, cleaning helped us go about it carefully. Among the family there, the world lit up with God. Jesus was everywhere, and miracles were happening every day. In *Reconciling All Things*, Katongole and Rice write, “A Christian vision insists that reconciliation is ultimately about the transformation of the everyday—a quiet revolution that occurs over time in everyday people, everyday congregations, everyday communities, amid the most broken places on God’s earth.”¹

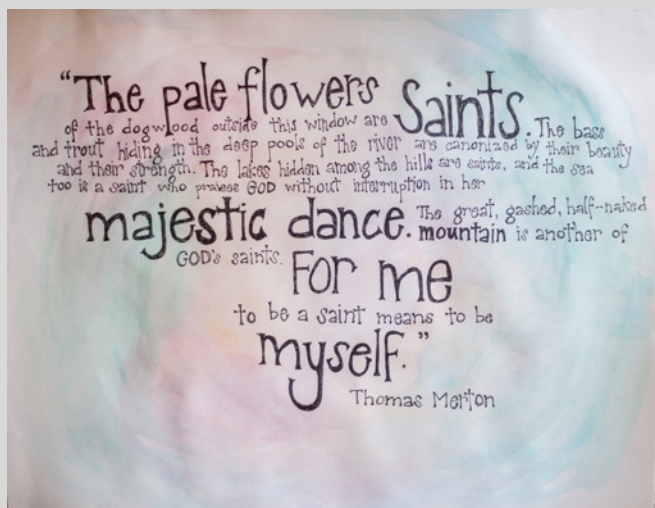
¹ Emmanuel Katongole and Chris Rice, *Reconciling All Things: A Christian Vision for Justice, Peace and Healing* (Downers Grove: IVP Books, 2008), 45.

Over and over again, I have found Jesus in the poor places. I discover brilliant light in the communities of the marginalized. And I am grateful that my journey to ministry is covered in experiences of diversity. The wide diversity in God's family continues to save my life every day. God reveals God's abundant identity through numerous diversities of culture, socio-economic status, gender, sexual orientation, theology and race. I am learning to never expect to find an end to God's expansiveness. No matter how open and inclusive we are, God is always more open and inclusive than we have yet to discover. So I have learned to be a perpetual learner. Situating ourselves in a posture of continuous learning is imperative to our spiritual growth and salvation. Because God is in and through everything and everyone, our salvation is ultimately bound up in those around us. When Mother Teresa reminds us that we belong to each other, she speaks deep, existential and resurrective truth. This theological mindset is what compels me to minister alongside communities following Jesus and seeking to realize the counter-cultural kingdom.

THEOLOGY

In the beginning, out of profound grace and boundless love, God created. But it didn't stop there. God breathed creative life breath, רוח, into all of creation.² God filled everything up with God's spirit, and God continues to fill everything and everyone up with God's one spirit. Creation continues, and God keeps making. Because of God's limitless saturation, redeemer God pulls us

all, everything, to God's self, reconciling all of creation. This creative life breath connects us all, so we begin to recognize God all around us. Like Saint Francis, we see God's panentheism—God not just in each other but in everything, the trees and the animals too. Thomas Merton claims that even the lakes and mountains are God's saints. By connecting us all to God's self, God fashioned a world that inherently held its own salvation. When we actually recognize and understand the gravity of this universal connectedness, we experience the great love and grace with which God created us. God is continually creating and saving all of creation—not just humanity.



Christ was in the beginning too and extends even to the edges of creation. Christ is the shape of the universe, filling all of creation with light. Jesus is both the cosmic Christ and human. He is the Word incarnate, the ultimate indicator of God. Jesus' life and work was a tangible expression of the Word that has been active since the beginning. The incarnation in Jesus expounds on the work of God as creator and redeemer, making it absolutely clear who God is and what redemption looks like. Because of Jesus, we know redemption is a reality that we can join in.

² Genesis 1:2, 6:3, 6:17.

Jesus' humble human nature points to the boundless, revolutionary work of God. Jesus' poverty, suffering and constant companionship reveals a holiness that is especially in the ordinary and mundane. In Luke, he gives a grittier version of the Beatitudes:

Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.

Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you shall be satisfied.

Blessed are you who weep now, for you shall laugh.³

Poverty, hunger, mourning are signs of a raw humanity, a humanity that has failed each other. They are signs of a world marred by systematic oppression. We, as humanity marked by both brokenness and promise, receive incredibly good news through Jesus' revelation, through Jesus' participation in that broken, oppressive system and consequential suffering. Jesus entered into our human system and challenged it by living in poverty, preaching the least as the greatest and showing a radically-inclusive kingdom. It is because of his challenge to the status quo and authority that Jesus was killed. Jesus' work and life reveals an apocalyptic hope, an assurance for the marginalized, a social reversal. In Jesus' resurrection, Jesus the human became Jesus the Christ. The resurrected Christ set God's spirit loose in the world and proclaimed forevermore that death and suffering never have the final word. Through the resurrection, Jesus continues to walk compassionately with us, bringing back to life what has fallen to death. Made in God's image, we are bearers of God's love and creativity and Christ's light and compassion, so it is through the resurrection that we become agents of redemption, plotting goodness and wholeness throughout our world.

In the wake of Jesus' death and resurrection, the Holy Spirit joined humanity as the ever-present God with us and ahead of us. The Holy Spirit is the wild expression of God, at loose in the world, pulling us forward and to each other. The Spirit is boundless, inspiring us, impassioning us and helping us get onto what God is doing. Through the Spirit's beckoning, we are able to recognize Jesus among us and identify injustices. The work of the Church, then, is to chase the Holy Spirit, responding to those injustices, confessing our brokenness, creating space for truth-telling and daring to bring forth impassioned wholeness in our world. The Church is a co-conspirer with the Holy Spirit and can never be afraid to take a stand and protect the vulnerable. We are called to always be asking where the Spirit is leading, what God is already up to and how Jesus might be showing up. And we are called to be ever-ready and courageous to chase the wild Spirit of God anywhere.

As I began my time in seminary, I stayed curious about God's work in other cultures. I wanted to know how the specific communities I had met—the Roma in Hungary or the orphan children in Colombia—experience God and how they play into the bigger narrative of the Church. I learned how the general course of Church history reveals a broadening Church, expanding over time to become accessible to laity with Martin Luther, and further expanded to be interpretable communally with the Second Vatican Council. The West's ownership of the Church is slowly slipping away; we are slowly moving beyond the Enlightenment, and the geographical center of Christianity is shifting to the southern hemisphere. This broadening of the Church brings

³ Luke 6:20-21, English Standard Version. Liberation theologians use this version of the Beatitudes as a foundation for their theology. When Jesus says, "Blessed are the poor," instead of, "Blessed are the poor in spirit," he is proclaiming something more tangible, more real. The poor, then, hold a life-giving truth that is only made known in their poverty.

communities, like the Roma and Latinos, beautifully and finally, into the conversation that weren't invited before.

The momentous event of the Second Vatican Council struck me and has stayed inspirationally with me throughout my studies and in my ministry since graduation. Vatican II's acknowledgment of the holiness of the common human experience, particularly of the suffering and oppressed, gives powerful voice to the voiceless and offers validity to their experience of God. Over and over again, I meet God in the socially forsaken places, and Liberation Theology—inspired by the revelation of Vatican II—provides a pastoral and prophetic framework for honoring and embodying that truth.

Liberation Theology grows out of the theology of the incarnation, which speaks directly to the holy authenticity of the earth and humanity. Because God became contextualized to our experience, so we too localize our faith. We take real, earthy bread and wine as ever-enduring symbols of worship and faith. We dance, write poetry, sing, paint, draw, garden as expressions of worship and faith. We offer radical hospitality, reaching across society-imposed barriers to offer embrace. God's greatest Word of all took on flesh, lived and breathed in a very specific context. As we see the incarnation as God's cultural Word, we begin to recognize Jesus through lenses that preference a Christology from below. Jesus is one of us, so the power of redemption flows from his human experience, his blurring of the line between human and divine.

From this Christological approach, communities experience a rehumanization of themselves. The doctrine of *Imago Dei* plays a prominent role in uncovering God among us. As we make this perspective shift, we begin to see God's face all around us. So we see ourselves, in community with one another, as the practical body of Christ. Jesus walks with us, taking on our sufferings as his own. Instead of understanding the Church as top down, Liberation Theology imagined the church as a grassroots movement, from the bottom up, led by the people of God. Gustavo Gutiérrez along with other Latin American bishops met at Medellín in the wake of Vatican II and, drawing from Marxist ideology, sought to restore the voices of the poor, those traditionally absent from history, to the expression of faith.⁴ They listened to their context and found the motivating story that permeated Latin America: a cry of oppression. So this theology connects the story of the oppressed with God's preferential option for the marginalized and poor, clear throughout the biblical narrative.

Because this theology takes shape around the witness of persecuted people, there is a unification of foundational, base groups—"base communities"—as places where doctrine and ecclesiology are authentically and contextually reimaged. As the Medellín conference defined, the base communities are the foundation of the church, taking on the responsibility of deepening and expanding the faith. It is the base community, then, that becomes "the initial cell of the ecclesiastical structures and the focus of evangelization, and it currently serves as the most important source of human advancement and development."⁵ Even more empowering and

⁴ Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, rev. ed., trans. Sister Caridad Inda and John Eagleson (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1988), xxi.

⁵ Leonardo Boff, "The Nature of Local Churches" in *The Christian Theology Reader*, 4th ed., ed. Alister E. McGrath (Chichester, West Sussex: John Wiley & Sons Ltd., 2011), 445-446.

liberating about these church structures is the recognition that anyone can lead them—deacons or laity, women or men.



The young women's group in Arica, Chile

During my work in Chile, we drew our inspiration for the women's group from Liberation Theology's base community model. Because of the women's desire for a sacred space and community of their own, we served as mobilizers to bring them together. The only plan we ever made for any gathering was to read some Bible passages. We read the Bible together, and then we started asking questions together. We realized it was okay to ask questions, we made discoveries about the text, we made discoveries about God, we made discoveries about ourselves as women. We cooked, danced, drew, prayed and passed newborn babies around. Just in six weeks, I witnessed an exponential growth in their (and my own) sense of self, confidence and

permeating faith. We had started that six-week journey with them seeing me as the expert, looking to me for the answers, and we slowly developed to recognizing and honoring their own expertise. I saw vividly how peculiar the work of ministry is: we work hard to stand with and grow alongside the folks with whom we minister, and all along the way our goal is to not be needed. We work alongside them so that they might flourish into their own potential and discover their own awareness and connection to the sacred. Ultimately, though, we stumble upon the holy together; we offer and receive companionship, recognition, solidarity.

Embodied in ministry, Liberation Theology is solidarity. Solidarity is the embrace of another's story, pain, suffering, hope, journey as one's own. It is a commitment to the relationship and journey together. Especially among the oppressed, this stance is the fulfillment of the promise of the gospel. Henri Nouwen champions this relational posture, saying, "So much of our suffering arises not just out of our painful condition, but from our feeling of isolation in the midst of our pain. Many people who suffer immensely...find their first real relief when they can share their pain with others and discover that they are truly heard."⁶ Truly being heard requires an atmosphere of reciprocity, brought on by the listener's ability to authentically enter into the storyteller's experience.

Because of the incarnation, the truth of our faith is uncovered by our ability to suffer with another, not by our ability to stand out. So when we try to move away from the unrelenting, white savior missiology that plagues the activity of our faith, we are hoping to let go of a notion of *otherness*. Solidarity opens us up, allowing us to become vulnerable. Our shared stories and

⁶ Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Here and Now: Living in the Spirit* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1995), 41.

commitment to the journey together dissipates the damaging perspective of *otherness*. Through the embrace of the *Imago Dei*, Liberation Theology actualizes in journeys of solidarity, where we can finally recognize that “the rewards of compassion are not things to wait for. They are hidden in compassion itself.”⁷

During my Forgiveness and Reconciliation pastoral care class in seminary, I learned that solidarity is an imperative pastoral posture. It is the greatest gift we can give those with whom we minister—an affirmation of their experience and a commitment to journeying with them, even when the truth-telling gets hard. During the class, we entered into the impossibly difficult conversations of racial truth-telling. The first step along the reconciliation path is truth-telling. Without a safe space, and without the unwavering commitment to stay in the conversation and on the journey together, reconciliation is impossible. Simplified, this commitment is the formation of intentional community. Intentional community should frame our ministry and ecclesiology, no matter our context. As Luther Smith defines them, intentional communities are fellowships where the members “are the architects of communal life and mission” and where “community membership is characterized by an intense commitment to sustaining, on a daily basis, a



QCFamilyTree youth during weekly devos

Christian fellowship where members share time, resources, and labors to further the community’s mission.”⁸ When we enter into this kind of spiritual covenant with another person, it does not solely affect the other person. As ministers, we become part of the community as well. When this kind of shared life covenant is realized in the life of a church, a congregation creates reciprocal relationships with each other, and their work and worship and fellowship becomes authentic. Solidarity offers a dynamic pastoral care that responds most holistically to the questions whole communities are asking.

As we begin to recognize that our own identities lie in those surrounding us, we reach outside ourselves to learn their

stories. Quickly, we uncover brokenness, and the discouragement weighs heavy. It feels easier to walk away than recognize that the exchange itself changes us. In sharing stories, your story becomes mine, and mine becomes yours. Now, the brokenness is a journey we work to reconcile together. In the midst of the pilgrimage, particularly that of racial justice, it is important to remember that the vision of reconciling is beyond our imaginations; it is God’s story. Emmanuel Katongole and Chris Rice expound on this idea in their book, explaining that reconciliation is

⁷ Ibid., 108.

⁸ Luther E. Smith, Jr., *Intimacy and Mission: Intentional Community as Crucible for Radical Discipleship* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1994), 31.

“an account that is grounded in a vision of the beyond and also confronts the real brokenness of the world.”⁹ In the middle of the work, communities have to recognize the value in their diverse voices. Without unique perspectives shared, one person cannot hope to grow personally, nor can the community together hope to have a response to the injustices that surround them. Communal life allows people the potential for recognizing a bigger and greater God than they could witness alone. This imagination consequently births new possibilities, a recognition of God’s promises in our midst—even within our own capacity as a community.

Throughout my life, folks have wholly changed me by extending hospitality and trust to me and by inviting me into their sacred stories. The high school boys in Atlanta, young women in Chile, whole neighborhood in West Charlotte all taught me that mutuality, deep roots and committed relationship are keys to miraculous transformation. Only when relationships are vulnerable enough and committed enough can we realize a rehumanization of ourselves together. Then, every voice matters. Then, we flourish—not because we are better ourselves, but because we are strong together. In seminary I learned that this mutual relationship of communal solidarity is what the early monastics worked to achieve. I began recognizing a compelling relevancy of the New Monasticism movement too. Recently, new monastics are working to embody the same communal pastoral response. Responding to the consumerism culture, racial injustice, socio-economic division of the West, they enter into the pain of the world, listening to the broken, vowing to stay and live with the marginalized and privileging the oppressed voice. This stance of enduring solidarity and commitment to difficult, gritty kingdom work is what pulled me to intentional community in Charlotte. There, they work to level the playing field by listening to and advocating for their neighbors. They fill their houses with as many people as possible, offering a place to stay for anyone experiencing homelessness. They live the fears alongside their neighbors—listening to gun shots ring out at night—and they live the hopes alongside their neighbors—reclaiming the abandoned spaces of their neighborhood. Shane Claiborne lived and worked with Mother Teresa for a year. He tells of discovering the gospel with new eyes while he lived in a leper colony:

I remember praying in the leper colony each morning with the brothers, “Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” And perhaps for the first time, those were no longer empty words that I hoped would come true someday. They became words we are not only to expect to come true but also to enact. Such an idea was foreign to me in the materialism of my land, but it was so close to what I saw in the early church: a people on the margins giving birth to another way of living, a new community marked by interdependence and sacrificial love.

They had not chosen to live in “intentional community.” Their survival demanded community. Community was their life. The gospel was their language. No wonder Jesus said, “Blessed are the poor, for theirs is the kingdom of God.”¹⁰

The movement does not encapsulate a shared theology. Instead, New Monastic communities are marked by a common practice of faith. Theology follows.

⁹ Katongole and Rice, *Reconciling All Things*, 40.

¹⁰ Shane Claiborne, *The Irresistible Revolution: Living as an Ordinary Radical* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 87.

The New Monastic movement can help us reframe our vision of faith experience. If applied to missiology or ecclesiology, we no longer enter into a context with some doctrine we hope will build a church. Instead, we enter and listen. We create intentionality in relationship, which extends to a practice of solidarity, and consequently our church follows. This way, the church that forms is not captive to our opinions. It becomes a creation of incarnation itself.

As always, our world is plagued by violence, greed and otherness. We see too many people acting out of fear, too many people killed innocently, too many people scapegoated. Reconciliation, especially racial reconciliation, should be at the forefront of our work as ministers and as a church. We have too much to learn from each other to continue to carry this fear of the *other* around with us daily. We desperately need the perspective of *Imago Dei* and a posture of solidarity.

As a minister, I hope to inspire folks to reach out to each other, to be about the work of reconciliation and to join God in tearing down walls. In ministry, though, I am mostly honored just to share life with folks. God fills up our world, courses through our veins and is in the ordinary moments. In *This Odd and Wondrous Calling*, Lillian Daniel explains the holy “eavesdropping” that pulls me most into ministry:

Where else can you be invited into the living rooms of new mothers and into the hospice rooms of the dying, and find hope in both places? I do love being a minister. I love the agility it calls forth, and the chaos that only Jesus could organize into a calling. But mostly I love observing God’s presence in the lives of people of faith. Mostly I love those moments when, from the position of paying holy attention to my own community of faith, I notice the power and presence of God.¹¹

Walking with folks and identifying God together is an incredible privilege. I do not claim to be the best follower of Jesus. I am broken, and I am always going to be learning. And I believe, as my good Baptist roots have taught me, that all folks are called to be ministers of the gospel. But I have lenses on that I can’t take off, and I can’t help but be seeking out God everywhere. I am called to ministry, to plot resurrection, to share stories of faith, to tear down walls, to point to God, to respond creatively to injustices. My calling is broad. I want to preach, and I want to follow God to another country. I want to learn people’s stories, and I want to respond to gaps. I want to create art, meet people at the communion table and extend radical hospitality and grace. No matter my context, I know that God works powerfully through shared life. I know that we were made for each other and that we are all connected by the same stunning divine light that fills us up.

¹¹ Lillian Daniel and Martin B. Copenhagen, *This Odd and Wondrous Calling: The Public and Private Lives of Two Ministers* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 2.