Slow Communion:  
Habitus-changing Formation for Multiethnic Churches

by

Jodie Wu

Date: 4/20/2021

Approved:

Edgardo Colón-Emeric, First Reader

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William Willimon, D.Min. Director

Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Ministry in the Divinity School of Duke University 2021
ABSTRACT

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Multiethnic churches could be places of healing and profound witness to the reconciliation found in Christ. Unfortunately, our habitus, that interior framework that shapes the way we conceive of the world, is not currently sufficient to allow for the flourishing of multiethnic churches. Western cultural habitus has shaped us to see divisions as normal, to place value judgments on people and see them as other, and to prioritize success and efficiency over the slow growth of humans and relationships. The church has largely accepted this habitus, which has resulted in Christians who are unable to imagine and live into the realized reconciliation, communion, that is the hallmark of the new creation in Christ.

Multiethnic churches and their people need a new habitus to enable them to reimagine their gathered life together. Drawing upon Paul’s discussion of the Lord’s Supper and the body of Christ in 1 Corinthians, we find that Spirit-led communion with Christ allows us to reimagine communion with others. Herein, four elements emerge as helpful in forming the new habitus: finding identity and belonging in communion with Christ; discerning the body of Christ; waiting for and receiving one another; and becoming a witness to the crucified and risen Christ, for the sake of the world. These suggest slow, embodied practices that, when led by the Holy Spirit, reshape our vision
of the world and our ways of gathering. Ways of engaging a number of such practices toward the formation of a new habitus, and thus a new communion, will be suggested. 

_Slow communion_ becomes a way of describing both the long journey of reconciliation, and those practices that reshape us for communion on this journey. Our communion is slow because it takes time to form a new habitus, and be formed by it. It is slow because the new vision of life together requires us to engage the brokenness we wrought in our old habitus of division and speed, a reckoning which cannot be skipped over or rushed. And it is slow because it leads toward a realized reconciliation, a communion for lifetimes together, never ending, always seeking to follow close to the leading of the Holy Spirit. By learning to see the life together as a Spirit-shaped, slow communion, multiethnic churches may be able to become bodies of true communion, living and proclaiming the reconciliation of Christ, for the sake of a weary and hopeless world.
Dedication

For Imos, Micah and Aili
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Introduction

The days bring a constant stream of stories of our own brokenness. Before one loss can be grieved, another takes its place. Division and violence follow one after the other, the one amplifying the other in an ever-expanding cycle of pain. Reeling, we draw sturdy lines of separation between us, and the one who stands on the other side becomes to us a stranger, yes, even an enemy.

As they conclude their book, Reconciling All Things: A Christian Vision for Justice, Peace and Healing, Katongole and Rice assert, “The church’s vocation is to be an interruption of the story of division and violence in the world, participating with the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit pointing to the peace of God’s new creation…to be a sign and agent of reconciliation, the church must inspire and embody a deeper vocation of hope in broken places.”¹

The church has a calling to join with the Holy Spirit to interrupt these stories of division. This is the place where the church can reveal that a new creation in Christ is already underway, marked by reconciliation rather than division. This is the place where the church can become a balm of hope for the wounds of despair. But this can only happen if the church lives into that reconciliation, if the church dares to imagine that it can live a different way.

Unfortunately, the church too often has not interrupted this story, but has joined the path of division instead of the steeper, jagged path of reconciliation. It has accepted the story that divisions are normal, and it cannot imagine a way of life without them. Political ideology and racial/ethnic issues form divisions not only in society, but also within the church. If that were not enough, liturgical culture and theological convictions further divide the church.

How might the church turn from division and begin to live the reconciled life? How could the church turn from declaring enemies, and begin to welcome those it once called strangers? How could we turn our broken jars and empty tables of animosity into tables of bounteous communion?

This thesis will first suggest that it is multiethnic congregations that are uniquely poised to interrupt divisions as we know them, both within and outside the church. As God gathers a people that once was not a people, these churches could offer a strong witness to the reconciliation God has prepared in Christ, and should be pursued despite the difficulties.

This is not to say that all churches need to become multiethnic churches; there are many good reasons for some monoethnic churches to continue. At the same time, those churches that have formed along one racial, ethnic, or socio-economic line simply for convenience, comfort or efficiency may need to consider whether they are living into the fullness of Christ’s reconciliation. Even as churches, we continue to see divisions as
necessary, make value judgments on people and see them as other, and value success and efficiency over human growth. None of this is conducive to a reconciled life (let alone a multiethnic church). Churches need to ask themselves whether their existence is creating divisions, or healing them; whether they are creating others or if they are welcoming the stranger and enemy to the table. If churches are creating divisions and deciding who is worthy of coming to that table, then change is not optional. The calling of the church is to witness to the reconciliation.

Admittedly, however, the forming and sustaining of multiethnic churches is very difficult. They rarely form organically or quickly. A painful history of racism, classism, and other divisions continues to be reality, affecting us as individuals and as communities. Learning to sit with the discomfort that is found in border crossing is necessary, but not everyone will want to do it. It takes time and effort to deal with the pain and move toward understanding. Forming a people is slow work, requiring close attention to where the Spirit leads. Many churches find they are not equipped to do this work over the long term.

For this reason, this thesis will secondly suggest that our current ways of thinking about our world are not adequate for us to overcome the problems of divisions; our ways of conceiving of the world don’t offer us the tools to live in these ways of reconciliation. Therefore, our current ways won’t allow multiethnic churches to flourish. This would suggest that we need a different way of forming Christian communities that
can commit to being the church that crosses borderlines for life together in Christ. We need a more encompassing vision of our communion with Christ, and with one another. Indeed, the way of structuring the world we discover in the crucified and risen Christ is, in fact, very different and can help us reimagine our world as one in which communion is possible. Christ has given us all we need, we simply don’t see and remember.

In his first letter to the Corinthians, the Apostle Paul addresses realities of the new church and the difficulties of becoming one people drawn from separated groups. Paul has an expectation that the church will overcome divisions created by society as it learns to be the body of Christ. This thesis will draw particularly upon Paul’s discussion of the Lord’s Supper in 1 Corinthians 11, in which Paul teaches several aspects that are needed for the gathered church to become and live as the body of Christ. Teachings on the body of Christ from 1 Corinthians 12-13 will offer further support for the life together.

This thesis finds that the work of God’s Spirit through communion is formational. As congregations commune with Christ, a new identity and way of being in the world emerges and is taken up. This identity is deeply rooted in our understanding of Christ’s giving of himself for the church, and for its unity. This is particularly useful for the formation and flourishing of multiethnic congregations, which must maintain a delicate balance of unity in diversity. Communion reveals and makes possible ways in which cultural identity can be celebrated even while individuals and communities learn
to live out of their collective identity as the new creation, the people of God, the body of Christ.

Finally, this thesis will argue that the communion described in 1 Corinthians suggests a slow communion – a slow way of being formed into a body that can live as a witness to reconciliation in Christ. As Katongole and Rice remind us, “the journey of reconciliation...is long” as it is nothing less than “[s]haping beloved community between strangers and enemies...The challenge of the long haul is learning to embody God’s different vision of time and transformation—a vision that is strange to a world of speed, of confidence in bringing change without God, of peace without repentance.”

From our experiences of communion, we find other slow practices that can help communion form and grow strong, and the later chapters will offer ways these can be taken into the life of the multiethnic church. These practices aim to change the habitus of Christians, both so that they can imagine a reconciled church together, and so that they can learn to live into such a communion together.

Chapter One will look at the divisions within the church and society, and suggest that multiethnic churches may offer hope in the face of these divisions. But it will also take a realistic look at some of the many challenges that face multiethnic congregations.

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2 Katongole and Rice, 143.
Chapter Two will consider how the church got to the place where division and othering is the norm. Habitus and its role in formation will be discussed. This chapter will also suggest that this habitus can be changed by intentional formation based on a wide vision of communion for the body of Christ.

Chapter Three will look more specifically at 1 Corinthians, particularly Paul’s discussion of the Lord’s Supper and the body of Christ. It finds four elements that can be helpful in creating a new habitus, and explores why a slow communion is so necessary in changing the habitus that can lead to formation in a different way for individuals, communities, and multiethnic churches.

Chapter Four will focus on how a slow communion fosters identity and belonging. In gathering for communion, the church learns who it is, and whose it is. This chapter will explore how identities from various cultures and backgrounds can be united in their identity as the body of Christ, without compromising the distinctives of those cultures. Slow practices will include examen, storytelling, and more.

Chapter Five discusses discerning the body, as Paul admonishes the Corinthians to do consistently. It is about gathering to know one another. It will look at ways we have hurt one another and failed one another by allowing racism and other divisions to flourish, what we can do once we know this, as well as ways we might do things differently. Slow practices will include storytelling and lament, art and creating.
Chapter Six explores the idea of waiting for or receiving one another as communion. It is about gathering for life together, and about cultivating a generosity of spirit toward one another. Slow practices will include eating together, spiritual friendships, advocacy, and placemaking.

Chapter Seven considers the witness of the church. How are we gathering for the sake of the world, and how can a slow communion make this witness more authentic and more compelling? Slow practices for witness will include remembering, compassion and empathy, solidarity and partnering.

Multiethnic churches, though often seen as too difficult to pursue, offer an opportunity for churches to repent of the divisions that define them today, and learn to live a reconciled life. In essence, this thesis suggests that a slow communion is a way of forming a new habitus that can reshape our vision of communion. As we absorb a new habitus, we too are re-formed: a different way of conceiving of the church and the world becomes possible, which allows for the cultivation and fostering of these countercultural, multiethnic congregations. Slow communion offers the idea that there are more formational ways to gather for real communion, ways that build up the body of Christ in all its fullness and enable the church to cross borderlines in positive ways. Slow communion also rejects the values of speed and efficiency prevalent in today’s culture, and suggests that churches must form people and communities that are able to slow themselves enough to discern the body of Christ, and then seek its flourishing.
together. Rather than being idealistic, slow communion takes the time to see and engage the realities of our multiethnic existence so loved by God, but not so loved by the Church. Relying heavily upon the transformative work of the Holy Spirit, it will suggest a different way forward.

I should note that I write from my situation as a white pastor, ministering for the past ten years as part of a multiethnic leadership team in a multiethnic church. I acknowledge the blind spots of privilege as a white American, and therefore will prioritize the insight of a diversity of voices, books written from non-white perspectives, and other conversations. Still, there are sure to be places where I do not notice the myopia of my own habitus, and I acknowledge that any missteps and mistakes are mine.
Chapter 1 Multiethnic Churches: Seeking Communion, Not Division

Division has gotten deep down into the bones of the church. We will divide over anything. We do not mind saying to those we have called brother and sister, “here we divide: we can go no further together.” An outside observer might reasonably think that the church loves to divide, that division is actually what the church is here to do.

In practice, today’s church is devoted to winnowing a group of people until only the ones that are the same remain. Some churches will announce this reality from the outset, claiming to be targeted at millennials or seekers or families. A church may align with a certain tradition, or none, but then may further separate by announcing what narrower beliefs, practices or types of people it can abide with. Other churches may not say how they separate from the outset, but people will soon discover that this is a church for people of a certain style, a certain language or race, a certain socio-economic status. The church says everyone is welcome, but too often, one is only welcome until the church decides whether one is a good fit or not.

Many a church-goer is doing the same thing: looking at churches and the people inside, seeing if there is space to fit in. It is almost as if the churchgoers know what the church is going to do – reduce them, type them – and so look for the church that will do so with the least pain. They look for the place they can be comfortable with people like themselves. It is a pre-emptive winnowing, perhaps to avoid the more painful
winnowing by those one had come to trust, but it results in the same thing: churches are divided, and continue to divide based on like types.\(^1\)

Winnowing, of course, is the separation of grain and chaff by wind. In scripture, winnowing language is usually used to describe judgment God alone enacts. Throughout the Old Testament, God is the wind that drives out the chaff until it disappears.\(^2\) The chaff represents the presence of evil that has mixed in with the good; God separates the evil, and it is no more. The same concept carries into the New Testament.\(^3\) God, as wind, drives off the evil, the chaff, until it is seen no more.

Never in scripture do we see the church called to do the winnowing. Clearly, this kind of judgment is reserved for God. So how can it be that the church, the body of Christ, has come to be a winnowing agent?\(^4\) How has it embraced this role, perhaps more than anything else?

What if the church was actually meant to do the complete opposite? What if, rather than thin the ranks until only one type remained, rather than categorize and limit, the church was meant to throw wide the doors, walk out to the very margins of its known

\(^1\) It should be noted that dividing is not the same as multiplying: although an increased number of churches is the result of both, division is marked by a destructive separation into ever narrower groups.
\(^2\) Psalm 1:4, 35:5, 83:13; Isaiah 17:13, 29:5, 41:2 to name a few.
\(^3\) Matthew 3:12, Luke 3:17
\(^4\) Positioned as a winnowing agent in this metaphor, the church is acting in a kind of final judgment: those who are cast out are declared the evil ones, and they simply disappear. Is this going too far? While most churches that divide usually do not think of those who are not part of their group as evil, are they not saying as much? If not, could they not go forward together? Is the witness not the same: you are not like us, you are not worthy to be with us?
world, and embrace all those at the borders and beyond? What if the church were to let Christ draw the great variety and masses to himself, all at the same time, all together?

Readers of scripture will find that there is something familiar here. In at least some sense, we have known that Christ’s mission was to reconcile humans to God and to one another – and that in this there was true life for all people. We know that the church was part of the new creation drawn from the diverse and the broken, drawn together by God in Christ, and called his very own. We feel a spark of hope, remembering this. But yet, how often have we seen that really happen, anywhere?

It seems that the church has settled for someone else’s vision. This vision God has for the church as a gathered people is indeed very hard for humans to imagine, let alone carry out. Humans have never really been that good at living together. From our earliest stories, we have seen people separating to keep from killing one another. Cain killed his own brother Abel, and went away to keep the violence at bay. Was this in the back of Abraham’s mind when he sent his son Ishmael, along with his mother, into the wilderness so that his other son, his other family, might flourish? These separations were marked by pain, and whether they helped is questionable. Who could count all the separations the years have seen?

But now the church does not even notice that so much of its purpose has been taken up with the work of separating. It can at once say ‘welcome to the family’ and act
in ways that make any welcome or kinship impossible. Why doesn’t the church realize it is making a hypocrisy of its own best potential?

To be fair, most churches, and their leaders and members, do not think that their approaches to church are wrong. They truly want to reach people with the gospel. There is often an urgency to their desire to do so. They want to reach as many people as they can, as fast as possible. There is no time to lose when one is dealing with lost souls facing eternity. They want to see people grow and change. They want to help those who are in trouble and those who are in need. They want to train up children in the faith of their fathers. They want people to come to church, be changed, and keep coming back. They want to form a certain kind of Christian.

Surely, most churches want to be faithful to the gospel, and want to share it with those inside their bounds and those outside. They want to love God and love their neighbor, and they often do. Christian initiatives have brought help to many situations that had been overlooked by others. We could recount numerous places where the poor are cared for, the hungry are fed, the sick are healed. A few churches have even been able to address the root causes of these situations. Likewise, many racial/ethnic churches have helped their members create a sense of identity, worth and belonging that society at large has denied them. In word and deed, churches continue to proclaim the gospel of Jesus.
All of these things can be good and worthy, and the world continues to need churches that do all these things. But at the same time, there is a glaring issue that compromises their witness. The vast majority of American churches remain highly segregated, despite a spattering of statistics that might suggest some movement toward more multiethnic congregations. While some churches and their members may be curious about why many churches are less diverse than their neighborhoods, most appear content to continue in the ways that are efficient or comfortable, or formed along traditional lines of division. Even those churches that would like to embody more of God’s diversity still find assimilation to one culture to be an inevitable norm.

In the United States, at least, diversity within churches has not been a priority. For most, it is not even on the radar, and for others, it has taken a backseat to more seemingly pressing issues such as conversions, church growth and self-sustainability, competing for members with other churches and cultural attractions (sports, shopping, over-working), building maintenance, and emergency assistance. Still other churches exist as places of sanctuary from the hostilities of a racist culture, and as such, may have other priorities and challenges in the forefront of their vision.

Considering all of these divisions – some necessary, some simply for convenience, some malicious – what is the church that hopes in the transformative reconciliation in Christ to do? Can multiethnic churches make a difference in the prevalence and normalization of division, or do they simply add to the pain of the
already intrenched divisions and divisiveness of our society? To find out, let us first look at some of the literature on multiethnic churches written in the past 20 years.

**Studying Multiethnic Congregations**

Emerson and Smith’s book, *Divided by Faith*, published in 2000, opened the conversation around multiethnic churches. This book looked at evangelical practices from a sociological perspective and suggested that the church’s attitudes and failures to see systemic racism helped perpetuate the problems of race in America. While there was little other research on multiracial churches, in particular, at that time, this book seemed to ignite study and commentary for least the next ten years, and continues to some degree today.

In 2003, this same sociologist, Michael Emerson, together with DeYoung, Yancey, and Kim, published *United by Faith*, a kind of response to *Divided by Faith*, which looked more specifically at multiracial churches and suggested that theologically, churches should be multiracial, and that the multiracial church might be “an answer to the problem of race.” Since then, articles and books have been divided on whether the multiracial/multicultural church is a benefit or hindrance to systemic racism and the flourishing of personhood and community for persons of color or those on the margins.

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5 Ganiel, for example, sees this potential also in the South African context, based on her research there, although she does so with caution, perhaps recognizing that with so many variables represented in churches and their communities, results are not always the same.

6 The literature spends a bit of time discussing the preferences and differences between labels like *multicultural, multiracial, or multiethnic* churches. Use is sometimes specific (*multiracial* usually refers to...
Korie Edwards observed, “Interracial churches where whites were a substantial portion of the attendance did not tend to reflect a racially and ethnically egalitarian community. Rather, these churches more closely emulated the worship practices, organizational structure, and cultural style of the white churches.”

This was eye-opening and an important corrective for churches, in that it suggested most multiracial churches were fostering white hegemony and were perhaps not living up to the promise of multiracial churches, theologically or functionally as societal agents. As churches of the past, and even now, have tended to be mono-ethnic/mono-racial, it takes a degree of self-reflection to be able to recognize that for white churches, ‘the way we’ve always done it’ may be a function of white privilege when it is carried out in the multiracial setting. Should those who are not white be expected to join multiracial churches that still function as white churches? How would that promote change to the racialization of the U.S.?

Edwards also invoked the homophily principle, which suggests people prefer to gather with people like themselves. She further suggested that those who are in the churches made up of Black and White members, i.e., thereby denoting racial interaction), but these terms are sometimes interchangeable and sometimes imprecise given the slippery nature of the concepts of race, ethnicity, and even culture. Integrated, mosaic, intercultural and other terms are also seen. For our purposes, we will use multiethnic church throughout; as God created and loves culture (see Acts 2), ethnicity is not something that one has to sacrifice in order to be incorporated into the body of Christ or to take up its identity.


8 Edwards, 5-9. Multiracial/multicultural churches are generally described as churches with less than 80% of the people being from one ethnic/racial group. While this number is seen to indicate statistically that
‘numerical minority’ in a multiracial setting (she implies that the multiracial church will by default be functioning out of white hegemony) will be less satisfied, feel more disconnected, and will leave because of these things.⁹

Building on this, some research has suggested that membership in multiracial/multiethnic organizations comes at a cost to individuals; some research tends to see this as unfair or improper, as this cost is often borne by minorities,¹⁰ while other research looks at what overriding principle might be causing people to maintain such membership despite the cost. Typically, some element of one’s ethnicity, tradition or expectation for worship may have to be given up in multiethnic organizations. As Christerson puts it:

We conclude that the same social dynamics that tend to produce internal homogeneity in volunteer organizations also produce high personal costs of belonging to multiethnic religious organizations…it could be the case that justifications for diversity that are rooted in a transcendent theology are a stronger counterforce to the influences that produce organizational homogeneity than are other justifications for diversity.¹¹

members have a 99% chance of interacting with someone from another race, it does not indicate to what extent this actually happens, nor what degree of depth in relationship is achieved, nor how much self-separating group division is predominantly observed.

⁹ Edwards, 5-9.
¹⁰ Such as Christerson, Edwards. Wright (2005) found, in a mail study, that churches are more likely to respond to inquiries from white-sounding names, which may indicate a bias that plays out in church life as well.
While his suggestion is that a transcendent theology makes a difference in people’s willingness to sacrifice for the greater good, one has to ask how much any group or individual has to sacrifice. Measurements like this are surely subjective, and require leadership and members to be aware of the cost, and count it for themselves and other members, even as they learn to live into what may be a transcendent reality based on the Christian identity. That is, our society is not post-racial, so even as we live into a preferred future, we have to deal with the realities of structural inequality as it now is experienced. A blindness toward white privilege or a desire to preference one’s traditions will not bring about change, but may damage one’s fellow members. As seen in Barron’s ethnography of a Chicago church that made much of its multicultural makeup, using minority members to attract other members or make leadership feel ‘cool’ can be very damaging to those members. They may express doubts about the church’s authenticity, and may ultimately leave.

That being acknowledged, Marti (2008, 2009) comes at the idea of cost differently. He finds that identity is malleable, even ethnicity, and that a considering religion and race/ethnicity to be tightly bound results in less creative analysis. He posits that a primary function of multiethnic churches is to create a new identity that transcends the ethnic:

Ethnic transcendence occurs when members adopt a shared identity based on a uniquely congregational understanding of what it means to be a properly religious person... In short, the distinctive accomplishment of multiracial congregations is the cultivation of an inclusive religious identity that overrides divisive aspects of ethnic identity.\textsuperscript{13}

I do think this is what happens in multiethnic churches, where the Christian identity comes to be seen as more important, without eradicating the ethnic identity. Yet this may be troubling to some, and warrants careful consideration. It also would suggest that it may be difficult if not impossible for first generation immigrants to engage in such churches, in that their identity is formed in another culture, and many do not want to lose or change that, even as they become American. Marti’s description sounds more apt to engage persons of a variety of ethnicities who are not immigrants themselves, and who are more accustomed to moving within cultural boundaries without losing their sense of self. Likewise, I do appreciate Marti’s criticism of ‘assumptions of racial essentialism,’ although I think it will be a difficult concept for many.

Though questions persist, some researchers still suggest that the multicultural church is indeed an important vehicle in changing racialization in the U.S., and may be changing. The most recent research indicates that diversity in churches has been increasing over the past ten years – not only in evangelical, Pentecostal, or Catholic churches, but also in mainline Protestant churches (a group that had previously lagged

behind).\textsuperscript{14} Also, some thought is being given to what happens within such churches regarding how much conformity is required for functioning. Garces-Foley suggests that, “the biblical vision of reconciliation does not require assimilation to the majority culture. Moreover, assimilationism can be an impediment to reconciliation.”\textsuperscript{15} This would indicate that diversity may be maintained even in multiethnic situations, and perhaps has to be if the church is to be a vehicle of reconciliation.

At the same time that diversity in churches is increasing, it should be pointed out that mono-ethnic congregations are also increasing. Dougherty, in his 2018 study, finds that there were “fewer Latinos in multiracial congregations in 2012 than in 1998” and suggests that this is because more Latinos are moving to Latino Protestant churches, and calls it a “troubling picture for further diversification.”\textsuperscript{16} Likewise, Calvillo suggests the possibility of move back toward mono-ethnic congregations, perhaps suggesting that this is a backlash against a trend in which “contemporary ethnic churches are the mirror image of earlier ones with the religious and secular dimensions reversed: the secular sphere embraces the ethnic dimension, and the religious sphere rejects it.”\textsuperscript{17} An increase in mono-ethnic (non-white) churches may be a function of increased immigration from

\textsuperscript{16} Dougherty, 2018.
various places, or it could be a result of multiethnic churches that failed to include minority groups in healthy, inclusive ways.

How do multiethnic churches sufficiently welcome a diverse membership? How do members welcome one another across cultural lines? And how is that welcome or lack of welcome experienced by members of these different cultures and ethnicities? I find that this is actually very difficult to do at a significant level. It can be difficult to create a new identity that overrides the costs members have to bear. How much of a cost members actually experience continues to be an important consideration in the formation of multiethnic congregations.

Major players in the field of sociological research on multiracial/multiethnic churches (Edwards, Christerson, and Emerson 2013) suggest that much of the study in this field has been micro-study, focusing on individual churches. I, too, find this in the sociological literature as well as in the practical theology publications, and consider this to be a valid critique.

To summarize, interest in multiracial/multicultural churches has increased over the past two decades, as has diversity within churches of all kinds. As concerns have been raised about the function and sustainability of such churches, particularly in that (mainly minority) members of multiracial organizations pay a personal cost to belong, the long-term results depend on how churches address issues of inequality such as systemic racism and white privilege, while at the same time overcoming group divisions
that naturally occur between humans. As of now, whether or not individuals are changed by transcendent theology or shared beliefs and identity, and whether society is changed through the existence of these churches, remains to be seen.

**Communion, Not Division**

Perhaps my earlier critique of the average church was a bit harsh. Becoming a multiethnic church that – at least! – does not harm its members is a difficult thing. Clearly, there are better and worse ways of going about life as a multiethnic church. Assimilation is not the answer, nor is simple statistical diversity. A church that asks more of the marginalized or of those voices that have long endured oppression is not in the right. A church that asks people to check their ethnic identities at the door will not do.

Acknowledging difficulties such as those described above, it should also be said that there are good reasons for monoethnic churches, such as Black, Latinx or Asian churches of various types to exist. Often these churches offer a sense of belonging and identity that no other place in society can do. Churches can uphold the image of God in each person, as a counter to cultural influences that would deny that image, based on skin color or ethnicity. By valuing ethnicity, such churches can also maintain and celebrate the cultural distinctives created by God for God’s own pleasure, but much maligned by the dominant culture of assimilation. Similarly, immigrant churches can offer the gospel in their members’ mother tongue, and offer a sense of belonging that
might be limited by language barriers in the society at large. Calling for more, better multiethnic churches does not imply that all churches must be multiethnic.

Still, there are plenty of reasons for many other churches to keep these matters very low on their list of priorities, simply for convenience. And yet, we are faced with the reality that the church is called the very body of Christ, and that is not a body divided. The work of Christ was something different from the way society sorts itself, a new creation. The reconciliation in Christ is to bring about communion among Christ and the many parts that make up that body. So it is not something that the church can choose to abandon because it is too difficult or uncomfortable. But at the same time, it is not something that the church can do with its usual, society-driven mindset, as this can do nothing but simply reinforce hierarchy and inequality.

A new way of conceiving of the church is needed. A renewed way of looking at communion is necessary. Multiethnic churches that are formed in and by this communion may be able to avoid the pitfalls of many churches, and overcome dividing lines drawn by culture. Pain will have to be faced. The ways we have hurt one another will have to be addressed. Discomfort will have to be understood.

McNeil and Richardson describe “[T]wo primary models [that] have been used by great people of faith in America to overcome the racial divisions and inequities of our
society,” the relational/interpersonal model and the institutional change model. The former “seeks to address the isolation and ignorance that feed racism and injustice by encouraging interracial friendships that will dismantle inequality and discrimination over time.” The strength of this model is that it is simple, and easy to begin; the weakness is that the “way...history has led to structural injustice...cannot be changed by the ‘one life at a time’ approach.” The institutional change model “seeks to create justice and equity by redistributing power among groups.” The strength of this model is that it is realistic about those things that “work against reconciliation,” but its weakness is that it “reduces all relationships to relations of power.” McNeil and Richardson suggest than neither is sufficient to bring about real change. They suggest that both structural injustices and “transformation of hearts” need to happen.

It will take a lot for a church to truly engage both the structures that divide, and their consequences, as well as transformation of lives. Clearly, this is not something that can be a low-level priority for a church, something that would be nice to have. It is going to take everything. One might say that engaging with both structural injustices and transformation of hearts and lives is the core of the gospel of Jesus. But when churches consider these things optional, or too hard, what happens to the message of the gospel?

19 McNeil and Richardson, 48
20 McNeil and Richardson, 48.
21 McNeil and Richardson, 49.
Multiethnic congregations, though not without risk, may offer hope to a church and a culture broken by division. But how do we go about communion in the multiethnic church without perpetuating those things that caused the divisions in the first place? The first step is to take a look at how we got here. The next chapter will examine how the church became formed as a place of division, and how it might be formed anew.
**Chapter 2 How Did the Church Get So Divided? Is There Any Other Way?**

In this chapter, we will look at forces that have contributed to today’s divided church. We will consider how churches and their people have been formed, and how else they might be formed in order to foster more diverse, healthy churches. Then we will explore what slow communion is, and why it might be a different way forward.

**How Did We Get Here?**

To many, it seems so natural to gather with people who are alike in views, beliefs, culture or language, and increasingly they seek out neighborhoods, schools and community organizations that are populated with people who are like them. Churches, too, find it is easier and faster to grow when composed of like groups of people. *Why* the church should do things differently does not enter into the conversation. Like society, the church has been formed to do exactly what it is doing, and largely, it cannot imagine another way.

And yet, it seems God has another way. The Apostle Paul imagines another way. Many of his letters encourage diverse groups of new Christians to consider themselves one body, the body of Christ, and to preserve all kinds of diversity within their churches. So how did we get to the place where we take a very narrow view of what constitutes the body of Christ, or how local churches are constituted?

It is likely that there are several underlying, contributing factors. For one, Willie James Jennings suggests we have been socialized to consider the divisions we see going

His intent in telling this story is to explain how expansive efforts of 15th century exploration and conquest out of Europe became tangled with Christianity and its mission efforts. The idea of race was born; the concept of whiteness emerged and posited itself at the top of a hierarchy based on skin color. Colonization efforts carried this racial hierarchy and Christianity at once, and their stories became intertwined, or as Jennings puts it, “the Christian theological imagination was woven into processes of colonial dominance.”

From there, the Christian imagination lost its flexibility, requiring outsiders to adapt if they would be insiders, and saw the world as if from a high place. A kind of distance was created between people that was not original to the reconciliation in Christ, but which persists, and which Jennings suggests explains “why Christians have been so unable to enter fully into this marvelous gift given by God’s Son to the world” (that is, reconciliation, or intimacy). Jennings suggests the Christian imagination is still captive to its colonial (but not original) formation: “Western Christian sensibilities, identities, and habits of mind…continue to channel patterns of colonial dominance.”

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23 Jennings, 8.
24 Jennings, 9. Jennings seems to use ‘intimacy’ to connote a realized reconciliation.
25 Jennings, 8.
The separated life became a norm, an architecture within the mind, even of the Christian. While bringing enormous impact, such structuring often was and is unnoticed in practice. Those things that could have formed the Christian way of imagining the world, and thus constructing it, disappeared behind such architecture. The result brought great detriment not only to the church, but to the cultures it touched:

[Intimacy should by now have given Christians a faith that understands its own deep wisdom and power of joining, mixing, merging, and being changed by multiple ways of life to witness a God who surprises us by love of differences and draws us to new capacities to imagine their reconciliation. Instead, the intimacy that marks Christian history is a painful one, one in which the joining often meant oppression, violence, and death, if not of bodies then most certainly of ways of life, forms of language, and visions of the world.]

Categorizing and grouping became an important element of the Western way of seeing the world and of thinking about oneself in relation to the world. Reconciliation, or intimacy, was replaced in the Christian imagination with the need for grouping things by like type. The church became servant to this Western way of thinking, with its hierarchy and separation, and forgot that it was joined to a God that glories in the differences God has created. In this way, the church forgot its identity. It has not been able to teach a way of life that it does not live, nor form disciples with an identity that allows them to see differently.

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26 Jennings, 9.
While this is probably the greatest influence on the ordering of our society, and the greatest point at which the church in the West has failed, there are a couple of other influences that are related, and which continue to support the separation of churches.

One such influence is individualism, which is a hallmark of life in the West. Jennings suggests this was also an aspect of colonial dominance, “a colonial form of greed aimed to destroy a communal metaphysic.” 27 He explains, “the goal of the colonialist – whether trader, explorer, missionary, merchant, or soldier – was to reduce the many to the one as a point of negotiation, management, conversion and profit…to move people…from any kind of group thinking about their wants and needs to thinking like an individual.” 28 The communal mindset of many cultures was sold off by colonialism; in exchange, the life together was commodified, to fit the desires and purchasing power of the individual. Jennings suggests that after colonialism, we have “imagined community” through the lens of “exchange networks” that are sustained by the idea that we value people and relationships as commodities (how can we get what we want from one another?), and that thus, “we have never really imagined community. This is quintessentially the work of whiteness.” 29

Individual concerns and wants have overcome concern for the group, and ideas of community have been fractured or commodified. The church has not been able to

28 Jennings, 134-135.
29 Jennings, 136. This will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 4.

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distinguish itself from this Western ideal, and as a result, piety has become a private matter, churches compete for members, and individuals shop for churches that they feel fit their needs, often leaving and joining without theological consideration. Despite maintaining the priority of corporate worship, churches have largely formed members in an individualistic way, which only reinforces the idea that church life is individualistic. Similarly, formation that only engages the intellect engenders the idea that my thoughts, rather than the collective body, are what matters.

This individual approach to faith results in personal piety and a church that is optional, in that engagement with others, with the structures of society, and the transformation of these communal things have become viewed as optional. Rich Villodas, a pastor of a highly diverse church in Queens, New York writes in his recent book, The Deeply Formed Life, “When the essence of the gospel is stripped down to the afterlife or to a glorious but strictly individual personal decision of faith, it’s not what Jesus described as the good news about his kingdom.” He indicates that this is one way in which reconciliation with others is pushed to the back of personal or church concerns.

Another influence has been the intertwined culture of speed, efficiency and success. One might say Americans have always been focused on doing things better, smarter, and faster. The swift progress of technology has only accelerated our sense that

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we have to be always moving, always progressing faster and better. Social media has brought immediacy and comparison to the forefront of daily life, particularly of the younger generations. Many cannot bear to even appear to fail, as when they do, a toxic on-line audience attacks.

Churches themselves have bought into these values of success and efficiency. And what way of winnowing for success is more efficient than to start with pieces that are most alike from the start? Churches will look for the best ways to gain converts and members to grow their churches into self-sustaining bodies. While it is important for churches to reach new people with the gospel and help them grow, there are problems with considering churches in terms of success and efficiency. What if the rush to save results in a stunted growth, a perversion of love, or a blinding to a bigger picture that is re-imagining the way things are meant to be for communities of Christians?

Now, churches, too, are designed for efficiency and success. But Christians are called to faithfulness, not success. An emphasis on success often discourages risk taking, but the Christian life requires much risk taking. Crossing a borderline is always a risk. Failure is frequent, but does not have to mean the end. If churches do not recognize this, they risk missing many opportunities for growth. So emphasis on success in the Christian life can lead to shallow growth in the Christian identity. Efficiency, closely related to and also a measure of success, places a value on time, creates a mindset of scarcity, and can make the Christian life transactional.
Within Western culture, speed and success are greatly valued, although many experience the harm of not achieving these ideals. If people enter churches and don’t find anything different from their cultural ideals, if they see speed and success lifted high there, too, then they cannot be faulted for expecting that churches do things like society does. But the church needs to be able to recognize that this emphasis on success and efficiency, like the mindset of colonial dominance\textsuperscript{31} that divides, is an area where the church is captive to a diseased imagination. Recognizing this, a different formation can be pursued, that may lead to a different way of seeing one another and living together.

So how do we talk about hope in the face of these challenges? As the church, how do we cultivate a people who are able to value their cultures and the cultures of their neighbors, and at the same time, realize that they are together called to be a people, a people not defined by this culture of division and enmity?

Before we try to answer that question, let us first consider the ways in which humans in society are formed. Jennings and others have described the concepts that have become formational within Western culture, but how does such formation happen? Then, knowing how formation works, we can begin to consider how a different formation might be possible.

\textsuperscript{31} One could probably argue that the values of speed, efficiency and success are also derived from colonial dominance.
How Does Formation Work?

It can be difficult to even recognize that some of the above influences are at work within the church, and it can be even more challenging to reimagine a different way of being. Sometimes it seems like the way we think is the only way there is to think. Of course, that is not true, but to see how such thinking happens, we will first consider the concept of *habitus*. *Habitus*, a concept posited by Pierre Bourdieu, helps us see that we have all been formed, largely without noticing.

In his three-part Cultural Liturgies series, James K. A. Smith considers how Christians are formed through worship. He suggests “an understanding of human beings as ‘liturgical animals,’ creatures who can’t *not* worship and who are fundamentally formed by worship practices.” He suggests that “liturgies, whether Christian or ‘secular’…shape what we love.” So worship and related Christian practices form humans, not only in their ways of thinking, but also in their actions.

How does this work?

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33 Smith, 4.
34 Tellingly, Smith notes that we are formed by whatever we essentially worship, and by whatever liturgies that thing employs. “Secular liturgies” are prevalent, and largely unnoticed. Thus, he argues for greater intentionality among Christian liturgical practices as counteragent.
To explain how something like worship could be formative, Smith gives an extended discussion of Bourdieu’s concept of habitus. His comments make the idea easy to understand, starting with a definition of habitus:

[H]abitus is shorthand for what [Bourdieu] calls a “system of structured, structuring dispositions,”[which] construct (or constitute) our world in certain ways….But contrary to intellectualism, that constitution happens “in practice” and is oriented toward action (a “practical function”), not mere observation. Habitus, then, is shorthand to refer to those “dispositions” we have to constitute our world in certain ways – the habitual way that we construct our world. And those dispositions and habits are not primarily intellectual or rational; they are certainly not something we “think about.”

Habitus indicates that we have “dispositions” which prompt us to create our world in a certain way. These affect how we act within the world as well. We don’t have to think about these things, as they are more like unseen structures that hold up our interior dwelling, the world as we perceive it.

There are a couple of important aspects to habitus that help us understand formation. First is an institutional element. Habitus is “a communal, collective disposition that gets inscribed in me,…both durable and transposable.” That is, institutions (whether cultural, religious, economic, etc.) have a shared way of constructing the world, which they can and must pass on to those who make up the

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36 Smith, 81.
37 Smith, 81.
institution. This involves a give and take – inhabiting the habitus by both institution and member are required for substantiation:

I will be “at home” in a community of practice just to the extent that the shared *habitus* of the community has become inscribed in me, absorbed into my “individual history.” I learn how to be in community by acquiring from the community and its institution a *habitus*. On the other hand, the habitus inscribed in me “is what enables the institution to attain full realization...”38 I need the community and social body to enable me to perceive the world; however, the social body needs my body to instantiate its vision and practice.”39

Essentially, the habitus of the institution forms our world, and by living into that habitus, we create the reality for the institution to be what it imagines by its habitus.

The second thing to notice about habitus as formation is that the dispositions that make up the habitus are transferred and acquired without conscious attempts to do so:

*Habitus* is that nexus of dispositions by which we constitute our world without rational deliberation or conscious awareness. Indeed, the constitutive operation of habitus can be so seamless and “automatic”...that one could mistakenly think it is natural, some kind of hardwiring accrued through evolutionary adaptation and now rooted not just in our bones but in our genes. But that would be the materialist reduction that fails to recognize that *habitus* is acquired, that it has a history that is both collective and individual.40

One does not have to try to acquire those dispositions. Once having acquired them, one may not notice having them; they are simply the way the world is. One might

38 Here Smith quotes Bourdieu, 57.
39 Smith, 81-82.
40 Smith, 82-83.
say that is the way humans are. Because of this, if one never leaves their native habitus, it is possible that one could continue to believe that their way of life is the only way, is simply the nature of things.

An anecdote might illustrate the invisibility, yet complete functionality, of the habitus, which inclines us to structure our world in certain ways. I spent three years teaching in Japan, where one of my tasks was to teach English speech writing to high school students. In preparation to teach this, we teachers were ourselves instructed in the differences between Japanese and Western writing styles. Japanese writing was illustrated as a spiral, somewhat indirect, circling back around, coming near to its earlier points and adding something. Western writing was illustrated by a line, a linear composition of thoughts, with one point and its supporting points leading to another point. We taught our students about this, and encouraged them not to write their speeches in Japanese and then translate, but rather to begin and end by writing the speech in English, following the linear paradigm. Speeches written in Japanese and translated line-by-line often resulted in nearly incomprehensible English (oh, but many students persisted in doing so anyway).

It turns out, writing style is tightly tied to thinking style, which itself is a highly indicative of the structure of the world as described by a cultural habitus. This emerged in these young students’ writing translations. It is hard to imagine that one’s writing style, or one’s pattern of thought, is simply culturally indicated. From inside the culture,
it seems impossible that the way we write in English does not make sense in another culture. Likewise, at first, as American-trained teachers, it was hard to conceive of this spiral writing style – what would it be like to think that way? How could understanding be transferred? But by bringing these ways of writing and thinking close, it becomes clear that there is a robust habitus that is acquired with a child’s native language learning. It is so strong that it forms a complete world, and, without compelling outside force, it becomes impossible for the child to imagine another way.

Smith draws upon the strength of habitus to show that Christian worship and practice, as part of everyday life, are in fact formational: “Christian worship has long appreciated the magnitude of practices that marshal the mundane – bread, wine, water – to enact and stage ‘kingdom come’ week after week.”41 The repeated bread, wine and water become more than they were, become the structures by which the Christian begins to form a new habitus, which in effect, allows for the creation of a new world. As Smith puts it, “Christian liturgical practices and spiritual disciplines are not just means of personal renewal: they remake the world because they transform the perception of the people of God who not only inhabit the world differently but inhabit a different world, a world constituted as God’s creation.”42 The ability to imagine and live in a remade world is the aim and evidence of formation.

41 Smith, 167.
42 Smith, 167.
So, Western Christianity has been formed by a variety of influences that were not always from God, as discussed above. The result was a habitus that does not reflect the fullness of the reconciliation achieved in Christ, but rather a habitus constructed by social influences. As it stands, the church cannot reimagine itself functioning in the world ushered in by Christ. Its habitus does not allow for it. This is why separating churches has become so normal that we no longer consider it wrong, and we do not prioritize some other, less separated way when forming new churches or renewing established ones. We settle for the idea that people prefer being with people like themselves, or that worshiping communities composed of like types is most expedient. Diversity within a church may be seen as a nice idea, but not a possible one, nor one that should be pursued above other church initiatives.

Left at that, the church is now in a very bad place. It has accepted this habitus, and thus does not have the means to be any different from the culture around. In an increasingly polarized society, marked by division and the inability to sit with those one does not agree with, with racism and white nationalism seemingly on the rise, the church does not appear to have the means to be salt and light to a different way.

And yet, there is still reason for hope. The good news is that habitus can be changed. And the church has always known this, as evidenced by the biblical language of the new creation. The sacraments, received from Jesus, offer imagery and a tactile experience with the idea that an old way must die, as a new one has come. Importantly,
the sacraments and other elements of worship value engaging the whole body, not just the intellect. Smith points out that when it comes to remaking a world, establishing a new habitus, “Christian worship does this on an aesthetic register: the sanctification of perception is a renewal and a restor(y)ing of the imagination, which means that worship is more art than science.”

And so, just as the church lives within the current habitus of colonial domination, efficiency, success, and other socialized realities that have formed its imagination, so also can it be formed anew. It can reimagine its world. It already has the resources and forms to do so, but it will take considerable time to be re-formed after some hundred years in its current mode.

**How Might the Church Be Formed Differently?**

How should we think about a re-imagined church? In his more recent volume, *After Whiteness: An Education in Belonging*, Willie Jennings discusses different ways of imagining theological education, but much of what he talks about can be applied to the ecclesial situation as well. He suggests “theological education, with its vision of formation properly in its sights, can be an answer to [the] question…what is education for?” Likewise, with a vision of formation rightly in sight, we may ask anew, what is *church* for?

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43 Smith, 167.
44 Jennings *After Whiteness*, 19.
To answer his own question, Jennings suggests that theological education should be forming souls for communion. His vision is eloquent, and expansive:

Our educational settings need to be aimed at forming erotic souls\textsuperscript{45} that are being cultivated in an art that joins to the bone and that announces a contrast life aimed at communion. By communion, I mean the deepest sense of God-drenched life attuned to life together, not with people in general but with the people that comprise the place of one’s concrete living and the places (the landscapes, the animals, and the built environments) that constitute the actual conditions of one’s life.\textsuperscript{46}

Thus, the church also has in its essence the task of formation for communion. This formation for communion, as described by Jennings, is remarkable because it allows for a life together marked by place rather than race. It says nothing of being a gathering of like minds, but of all those in a place that make up the life together. It recognizes that it is heralding a different way of life by being ‘communion’ life together. And it recognizes that the formation has to happen for the communion to follow. That is the work of the church, as well as the school.

And again, this formation involves the whole person. Like Jennings, Smith’s Cultural Liturgies series also explores Christian education – particularly in the college setting, but with extension to other schools and churches. School and church are both places of formation, which is perhaps best done when the two are acting in tandem. Both

\textsuperscript{45} Jennings uses ‘erotic’ to indicate a whole-body, or embodied, sense of the soul within its particular physical context.

\textsuperscript{46} Jennings, 19.
writers try to recover a sense of the whole person as a whole body, so formation acts upon the whole body, not just the intellect. Smith writes, in discussing Bourdieu’s habitus, “We need to try to understand practitioners as practitioners, as fundamentally ‘doers’ who are acting in and upon their world, not just ‘thinkers’ who happen to be ‘doing’ stuff.” While considering formation as acting upon the whole body may offer a needful corrective to the academy, it is also needed in many church traditions.

It becomes clear that the church can be re-formed, and that there are those already imagining a different way of life together. Communion is the image that stands out as an all-encompassing way of life, motivated by God’s work in Christ, moved and sustained by the Holy Spirit, and meant to be the work and life of the church. It is a slow, communal consideration of this work.

In his first letter to the Corinthians, we see that Paul was already encouraging a new habitus for the church in Corinth. They were used to a society full of divisions, and they were replicating them in their church. Paul’s words help them to see that in Christ, they are a new creation, and a new way of life has to be learned. By participation in the Lord’s Supper, perhaps, they may see how this new habitus can emerge. Of course, the Lord’s Supper is called Holy Communion in many places, and in its essence, it illustrates the communion that is the desired end of the reconciliation found in Christ. This kind of a

\[47\] Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom*, 80.
reconciled life together is not instantaneous, but is the ongoing result of such formation. It takes time.

In the next chapter, we will look at Paul’s encouragement for the new communion in Christ, and we will see how it is a slow communion.
Chapter 3 Why Slow Communion? A Look at 1 Corinthians

As we saw in the previous chapter, every culture has a *habitus*, a way of structuring its world, that its members often do not even notice. In writing to the Corinthian church, Paul was highlighting for the congregation points at which the new *habitus* in Christ was bumping into their old cultural Corinthian *habitus*. In order to grow in their new identity as Christ followers, the Corinthian church had to notice where the ways of Christ were going to require them to act differently than they had always done. They were going to have to slow down, reflect, check their automatic responses, and begin to live into the new creation they had become in Christ. In 1 Corinthians 11:17-13:13, Paul begins by reminding them that they commune with Christ and with each other when they come together for the Lord’s Supper; as Paul describes it, this is a model for the life together, even as it effects it. This is meant to be formational for the church. To further explain their new ways in Christ, Paul describes the church as a body, a body that is bound by love. Let’s take a closer look at this portion of Paul’s letter, and then we will consider how what this communion brings to the formation of multiethnic congregations.

**An Exegesis of 1 Corinthians 11:17-13:13**

In his first letter to the church at Corinth, Paul responds to concerns of the church, particularly divisions that have arisen within that community. From beginning to end, Paul reminds his people that they are one body, the body of Christ. It is clear that
while the gospel has taken root in this place, the people are still learning about what it is to be the church. Everyday ways of doing things in the Corinthian life come up against ways of doing things as Christ followers. Paul’s aim is to help the people work through these differences so that they might live out the gospel, rather than simply follow cultural divisions.

In this chapter, we will look specifically at 1 Corinthians 11:17 – 13:13. In this section, Paul begins by addressing divisions and offenses committed by some in the church, and then continues to describe ways in which the church can learn to discern the body. In so doing, they will learn how to live as a body.

The church in Corinth is made up of diverse group of people, many of whom would not have previously moved in the same circles. We see that Jew and Greek, male and female, rich and poor are among those who make up the church. Paul insists that all have equal status in Christ, but it seems that divisions that were common in Corinth encroach upon the church. Factions emerge, and inequality quickly follows. While divisions might have been common in Corinthian life, Paul expects that the church would function differently, drawn together as it is by Christ.

1 Corinthians 11:17-34 would suggest that the division between wealthy and poor Christians is the most obvious in this church, particularly seen in the ways they gather together. A typical gathering of the church would have been for a shared meal, which included the bread and wine of the Lord’s Supper. Hays describes how such a
meal would have been hosted in the home of one of the members, certainly one of the wealthier members. Conventionally, those of greater status or wealth would have been given priority seating and better food. Wealthier persons would have been able to arrive at their leisure, while those who worked in service to other households would not have been able to come to the gathering until they finished their work day. This was the regular way in Corinth, and that was the problem.

Paul points out that when the people “come together, it is not really to eat the Lord’s Supper” (v. 20). Instead of waiting for everyone to arrive and to share in the meal, there are those who are going ahead and eating, not sharing their food, and creating a situation in which those who arrive later have to go hungry. Excess consumption is implied, in that while some go hungry, others are drunk. Paul criticizes the church for doing this, particularly in that it humiliates those who have less, those who have nothing, and in so doing, “shows contempt for the church of God” (v. 22). Hays suggests that Paul’s words call out those who are of higher status by Corinthian standards for “disregarding the symbolic implications of their behavior for the community as a whole.” While it is important that the members understand the “symbolic implications” of their ways of being together, the implications are not merely symbolic; the actions of the higher-status members create a real division between

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49 Hays, 196.
themselves and the poorer members of the church that affects the life of each member and of the church as a whole.

After bringing this criticism, Paul returns to that which he “received from the Lord” and “handed on” to the church – the particulars of the Lord’s Supper. Paul has to remind the church of the Lord’s word, and the Lord’s work, because they have not grasped the significance of it. This will be crucial for the church, if it is to overcome the divisions of culture as it lives into its newer reality as the church of Christ.

We are brought back to the night Jesus ate the last supper with his disciples. Jesus took a loaf, gave thanks, and broke it, saying “This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me” (v. 24). Then he took the cup, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me” (v. 25). This is my body that is for you. This cup is the new covenant in my blood. These words remind the church that Jesus died – that he willingly gave his body to be broken and poured out “for you” and for a new covenant. It was not a pointless death in that it brings new life. The remembering is important, and the repeated remembering is essential. “As often as you drink it” implies a repeated remembrance, and suggests that the human bodies that make up the church need embodied ways of understanding again and again. Frequent eating and drinking of the body of Christ together with the body of Christ create understanding that can be lived out – the self-giving of Christ’s own body, his own life, is something we must do as we become the body of Christ.
Verse 26 pushes the eating and drinking beyond remembrance: “For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.”

The eating and drinking by the church is a proclamation. It is a witness. That is, the way the church acts as a body, rightly understood in that all parts of the body are equally worthy and valued, announces to the world what Christ’s sacrificial death was about. The church is to remember Christ’s gift, but in an active way that extends it: the church is to give itself in the same way for the sake of others.

Paul goes on to discuss eating the supper in an unworthy manner. Paul admonishes them to examine themselves and to discern the body. Those who eat and drink without doing so “eat and drink judgment against themselves” (v. 29). At times, churches have interpreted this in an individualistic manner, implying that one has to make sure one is right before God, free of the guilt of sin. Some even avoid partaking of the supper because they are unsure that they are worthy and do not want to bring judgment upon themselves.

Based on Paul’s concern for the church body, however, it seems clear that Paul is asking members of the church to notice the other members of the church and see them as integral and equally important parts of the body of Christ. They are to see how the ways they act when they come together affect the church, the church which is nothing less
than the body of Christ.\textsuperscript{50} This may require making amends where relationships have been broken, or committing to living in countercultural ways, such as not only including those of differing status in the common meal but actually making sure they are well nourished. It may mean working to heal divisions or to know the real needs of every member of the body.

The element of judgment persists, and is a consequence of failing to discern the body. Paul says “for this reason many of you are weak and ill, and some have died” (v. 30). It is possible that the ill health is the judgment brought upon those who fail to discern the body – those of higher status who fail to notice those who are not of the same status. But it is also possible that this verse implies that there are those who have become ill and died because, perhaps they were of lower status, and no one within the body noticed that they were hungry or sick. Either way, there are those individuals in the body who are not well, and further, the entire body, the church, is not well because these division persist. Paul implies that this can be remedied by proper discernment of the body. As Leithart puts it, discerning the body “rightly means living in accord with the unity of the body that Paul emphasizes throughout this letter, and all his others. It

\textsuperscript{50} Hays, 200.
means living in accord with the reality of the eschatological *ekklesia* that assembles and is unified at the table.”

Paul’s stance is always that there is only one Christ and one body of Christ (“Can Christ be divided?” he asks in Chapter 1), and therefore what affects any part of Christ’s body, affects the entire body. Steeped in status-oriented society, the members of the church need to reorient their ways to reflect this reality that they are the one body of Christ, together with those who were formerly not acknowledged as a part of their world.

Paul’s simple advice, then, is this: “When you come together to eat, wait for one another.” Hays discusses the verb *ekdechesthai*, which is here translated “wait.” This verb can be translated “to wait for” or “to receive.” Although most translations favor “wait,” Hays prefers “receive” because “it provides a more satisfying solution” to this problem of one eating while another goes hungry: “Paul is calling the more affluent Corinthians not merely to preserve a public appearance of unity…but actually to break down the barriers of social status and receive the poorer members as guests in their homes.”

Accepting either reading, or indeed both, we understand that Paul wants to slow their automatic, culturally-indicated actions (and maybe underlying judgments), and open

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themselves to sharing their lives with people who are different from them, receiving them as beloved, not stranger.

In Chapter 12, Paul begins to discuss spiritual gifts, but he has not left the theme of discerning the body and seeking its health. In verses 1-11, Paul makes it clear that there are a variety of gifts, but they are all given by the same Spirit, and activated by the same God. Further, the Spirit’s gifts are given “for the common good,” that is, for the building up of the body, and for the shared life. Repetition of “the Spirit” – “the one Spirit,” “the same Spirit” — reinforces the idea that the gifts are not human achievements, not things that should garner one congratulations nor things that can be kept to one’s self as if personal goods, but are given by the Spirit – each and every one of them – for the benefit of the rest of the body. Whether knowledge or faith or gifts of healing, whether working of miracles or prophecy or discernment of spirits, whether tongues or their interpretation, all of these gifts are given by the Spirit for the common good. The Spirit gives these gifts just as the Spirit chooses, and makes them active within in the church so that the body may flourish and lack nothing. Implicit is the idea that all these gifts have to be shared with the entire body, for the good of all. Recognition and use of the gifts is part of the process of discerning the body that Paul began to discuss in Chapter 11.

Immediately, Paul continues with an extended reflection on the metaphor of the body. Paul knows that since divisions are happening in this young church, and that
societal status concerns persist even within the church, the people do not fully understand how it is that they are to live together as the church. The metaphor of the body explicates that which has already been said regarding the body of Christ properly discerned in the Lord’s Supper.

The way Paul draws out the metaphor speaks to the stratified society the Corinthians are used to, and helps to reframe their understanding in an organic way. He begins with the reminder that the body is one and has many members, “and so it is with Christ” (v. 12). By the Spirit, we are all “baptized into one body” – and Paul is explicit in mentioning “Jews or Greeks, slaves or free – and we were all made to drink of one Spirit” (v. 13). A body has many parts, and all of them are part of that body. Christ’s body, the church, is no different.

We may wonder if the church forgets this and functions differently, does it cease to the body? But Paul does not entertain this implausibility: the body is one and it functions so (v. 26). Thus, he gives an extended teaching full of concrete, however personified, examples, which illustrate several important implications for the church life together. The first examples involve one body part thinking it is not part of the body because, perhaps it is not one of the preferred body parts: “If the foot were to say, ‘Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,’ that would not make it any less a part of the body” (v. 15). Every part of the body need not be a hand, or a foot for that matter. In this, Paul speaks to those who may feel like they don’t belong to the body
because society has made them feel like they are less valued. In the body of Christ, like in a human body, this is impossible and clearly untenable.

“If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be?” (v. 17). Eyes and ears are needed, as their function is different and benefits the whole body. So has God arranged it, Paul says. The examples put thusly indicate a mutuality, a need of one body part for the other. The gift language of the earlier part of the chapter find an echo here, in that all is given for the common good.

In the third type of example, Paul shows that none of the body parts are indispensable. “The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I have no need for you,’ nor again the head to the feet, ‘I have no need of you” (v. 21). He continues, saying “on the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those members of the body that we think less honorable we cloth with greater honor” (vv. 22-23). We would not abandon a hand just because an eye thought it was fine on its own. Parts cannot be disregarded by the others or by the whole. Rather, all parts need to be noticed and cared for by the rest of the body. Failure to do so brings suffering to all, but good care allows all the parts to rejoice as one (v. 26). This example also raises the idea that some parts are thought of as more or less honorable, and allows for the assertion that such considerations can be culturally motivated, whether that is recognized or not. Who
is to say if one part is less respectable? And if there is one so considered by society, it is better to offer that one greater respect.

The discussion of how the body works as distinct but integral members, and the discussion of gifts for the body are woven together in Paul’s explanation of the importance of love in Chapter 13. “Love is the only way Paul is able to explain the mystery of the personal character of the charismatic life of the church,” Zizioulas says, describing how love enables the relationships whereby the gifts the Spirit gives are properly used.53

All of the gifts are useless, and sometimes even painful, when they are not used in love: “If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal” (v. 1). Paul iterates what love “is not,” in contrast with what love is. What “love is not” should be a hot arrow to some of the Corinthians, searing them as it makes clear that so many of their current actions within the church – divisions of all kinds – reveal a distinct lack of love. Love is not envious, boastful, arrogant, or rude, it does not insist on its own way, it is not irritable, resentful, or rejoice in wrongdoing (vv. 4-6). Instead, love is patient, kind, bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things – love never ends (vv. 4-8). Paul asks the people to grow up a bit – to start to live out the teachings that he has given them, rather

than just ponder them. He wants them to use the gifts not like children, but in maturity and in love, for the building up of the body. He wants them to discern the body in love, because it is only in love that they will be able to become the church that is one body, many members that know they need each other. Paul would remind the church that this love is the gift of the Holy Spirit, as it is the Holy Spirit who unites them with Christ, and the Holy Spirit who allows them to discern the body.

It is likely that Paul’s letter was written in response to complaints of divisions and factions of various kinds, as well as a host of complaints regarding how people were living as the church. How the common meal was being conducted, how gifts were being used in the church, and the presence of cultural inequalities were some of these concerns, but Paul draws many of them together as he helps the church at Corinth to see that as they have indeed become the church, they are now the one body, the body of Christ. Learning to discern the body is of critical importance for the Corinthians, because culture has not given them the tools or the eyes to see one another in the way Christ desires and allows. They are learning how to live as a reconciled people, but this takes some work. Paul points them to the Lord’s Supper as a place that they might discern the body, even as he helps them reframe what a body is. He encourages them to use the gifts of the Spirit to discern and build up the body, and reminds them that love is the source and sustenance of the body, always through the Spirit. In these ways, the church is
formed into the body of Christ, and indeed proclaims the Lord’s death until he comes again.

The American 21st century church may recognize parallels between itself and the Corinthian church. Both exhibit strong cultural habitus, influences so integrated into the general way of life that they can sometimes go unnoticed. A class-based habitus valuing wealth and status created an unquestioned inequality in Corinthian society. Similarly, a history of some people being valued more than others plays out today via the American legacy of slavery – today’s race-based habitus allows a white hegemony that belies a racism that is perhaps all the more damaging because it is too often unseen and unquestioned.

Given this similarity, there are several points surrounding Paul’s description of discerning the body in the church and in the Lord’s supper that are useful to the multiethnic church. The way the church conceives of itself and how it lives together requires facing and interacting with these underlying societal assumptions. The instruction Paul gives the Corinthians is directly relatable to our American church context, even though our practice of the Lord’s Supper is somewhat different from that found in Corinth.

Paul had to direct the people of Corinth toward discovery of what the church was, and how they were falling short of it. He had to help them reframe what it meant to be the church, and he did this using the image of the body of Christ, so helpfully
rendered in the practice of the Lord’s Supper. Frequent partaking of the Lord’s Supper became formational for the church, helping them to embody Christ’s love even as learned to be the body of Christ by the grace of God’s Spirit. It becomes clear that in order for multietnic churches to flourish in our own context, we too need a reframing of what it means to be the church, and a reframing of what the multietnic life together means within a church. Now, let us turn to the ways that Paul’s understanding translates to the multietnic church context today.

**Slow Communion for the Multietnic Church**

As was established in Chapter 1, today’s multietnic churches rarely become truly multietnic. If they began as predominantly white churches, they tend to continue to be so. People of color find they often have to give up much of their identity, culture or worship preferences if they are to fit into such churches. That cost can be high. People of all ethnicities may find the difficulties to deep relationships with people who are different from them insurmountable. And many churches find it difficult to engage in meaningful ways both systemic injustice and transformation of people, so the diversity remains superficial.

Paul’s discussion of communion in this passage is helpful because it recognizes that there is a certain formation needed to overcome these challenges as the church gathers. Paul’s discussion of communion involves identity and belonging, discerning the body, receiving each other, and witness to the transformational work of Christ. These all
contribute to the kind of communion that draws the body of Christ together. Thus communion is more than just the elements or practice; it is a way of life together in which we learn to be the new creation.

As such, these things work toward a new formation for the church, wherein its old socialized structures are replaced with new ones. Importantly, Paul recognizes that this is going to take some time. It is going to take some time for the people to recognize that these elements are important if what they are to share when they gather is the true communion with Christ. It is going to take some time to take up the new ways. It is going to take some time to deal with the consequences of their old ways. It was true for the Corinthian church filled with division, and it is true for the ever-dividing church of today.

In this way, I assert that Paul is suggesting a slow communion. The church will gather repeatedly in communion to learn who they are, to discern the body, to learn to wait and receive one another, and to be the collective witness to Christ. Who among us learned their cultural habitus in just one day? Everyone who grows up in a culture absorbs it over time – the more time, the more formed they are in that culture. Cultural ways may be baffling to the visiting tourist, but not to the one who belongs.

By the grace of the Holy Spirit, some of these slow practices indicated by Paul may help the church to again see itself as communion. Such individual and communal aspects of our identities are not easily or quickly reimagined or changed, but both are
required for this communion, as we have long been imagining ourselves as our divisions. Jennings puts it this way:

[T]he world nurtured by Western colonialism is a world living in the tormenting innovation of thinking ourselves and thinking our differences as racial, religious or nonreligious, and nationalist beings… [M]any have surrendered their imaginations to working inside the ideas of race, religion, and nation as the most rational way to think collective existence and for peoples to know and announce themselves…the more urgent question is whether we should continue to surrender our imaginations to them.54

How long will it take for the church to stop surrendering its imagination to these identities of division? And can we do so without destroying those things that make us unique, the beauty of our cultures, that is so loved by God?

Indeed, this is a difficult point. The church has taken a small view of communion, in that we have retreated into our defined spaces, we have broken at the points where our cultures cross, and standing at our artificial borderlines, we have forced the change of that which God loves. We have not seen that our collective beauty relies on the diverse beauty of a diverse people, that vast gathering of cultures being called together to be one people worshiping God. We have not imagined ourselves with a big view of communion. We have not imagined a space where such communion could

54 Jennings, After Whiteness, 129.
be. Slow communion aims to form the church as a people, a people that lives to the 
fullness of the life of communion in Christ. It is at once the forming and the formed.

So we see the church today may have to give up on its hopes of a quickly formed 
church, hopes of easy success. What we are called to here in communion is something 
much more than an hour on Sunday morning can achieve. Slow communion is 
something very different than what we have settled for so often, a different 
understanding of what church is and what it is for. It is a call to a full life together, a 
fully embodied life together. Knowing how much hurt humanity has rendered one to 
another, we assert that a slow communion is only possible with a steady leading of the 
Holy Spirit, a continual transformation by God.55 Inspired by the mutuality of the Holy 
Trinity, in which time is never too little, may we be led into deeper communion with 
Christ and with one another.

The following chapters will illustrate how the four aspects of slow communion 
described by Paul are important to communion as multiethnic congregations. Each 
chapter discusses practices that can be employed to live into communion. These 
practices are individual and communal, largely embodied, and are drawn from the

55 Billings writes, “if Christian habits are simply a human practice, apart from a mighty work of the Spirit of 
God in and through the church in the world, then counterformation is a dead end.” Todd J. Billings, 
Remembrance, Communion and Hope: Rediscovering the Gospel at the Lord’s Table, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 
2018), Kindle location 930. It is an important reminder that practices for the life of the church are given by 
the Spirit to work with the Spirit, not to give humans a sense of self-sufficiency.
historic families of the church around the world, as well as from artists and monks, mystics and musicians.
Chapter 4 Identity and Belonging: Gathering to Discover Who We Are and to Whom We Belong

How the church gathers as a communion matters. Slow communion suggests that the church is being formed by and for communion—slowly, over time, being made into the body of Christ. Multiethnic churches reveal something about the communion in Christ that more homogeneous churches may not—namely, that this is a communion of unity, wherein Christ’s love has crossed human divisions and borderlines and now allows for an embrace of the other and the enemy. Because the church belongs to Christ, it finds its identity in this life of border-crossing love.

As we saw in the previous chapter, Paul’s description of the Lord’s Supper in 1 Corinthians offered several ways for the church to learn to be a church that lives unified in its diversity. It takes the Corinthian church time to understand its new identity in Christ. Not everyone anticipated how all-encompassing Christ’s work on the cross would be. Paul offers them the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper together with discussion of the body of Christ in order to reveal that just as they belong to Christ, so also do they belong to one another. This has implications for how they are to see one another, and for how they are to live together.

Today’s church has the same challenge as it comes to understand its identity and sense of belonging. As Smith and Pattison, in their book, *Slow Church*, assert that “the local church is the crucible in which our desires are transformed from the building of
our individual and tribal kingdoms to the seeking of God’s all-encompassing *shalom*.”

Churches have often given up on this, and settled for the things that can be realized more easily and quickly, which has resulted in Christians who have not been formed to live out the difficult life of such transformation. Smith and Pattison continue: “Decades, if not centuries, of taking shortcuts have repelled many people from the faith and diminished the quality of our life together.”

This chapter will go deeper into how slow communion can help the church find its identity and sense of belonging in Christ. It will look also consider problems of identity that often plague multiethnic communcions, particularly that of how unity and diversity are to exist at once. It will suggest that a shared identity is essential for multiethnic congregations to flourish, but that this can and must emerge without negating the unique identities of individuals and communities that make up the congregation. Considering Christian identity in border places will help with this. Finally, we will suggest several slow practices that will help churches learn to take up and live into their new identity as the united but diverse body of Christ.

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57 Smith and Pattison, 116.
Identity and Belonging in Communion

In his book, The Deeply Formed Life, Pastor Rich Villodas tells a story about visiting a monastery, where he noticed everyone was dipping their hand into water and making the sign of the cross on their foreheads:

I asked one of the monks, ‘What are you doing when you place your fingers in that holy water and make the sign of the cross on your forehead?’ His answer, in its simplicity, was beautiful. He said that when you perform this act, the water reminds you of your baptism, and your baptism reminds you that belong to Jesus. I sat there taking in those words. I belong to Jesus.⁵⁸

I belong to Jesus. Here, the church finds the source of its identity: it belongs to Christ. Belonging to Christ is an important starting point for the church because it reveals so much about its identity. In being part of the body of Christ, the church is like Christ in all its ways. Because this way of being is so different from the ways of life most people have been shaped in, Paul points the church toward the Lord’s Supper, a repeated communion with Jesus, in which the church understands itself and becomes able to embody its identity over time.

For Paul, the Lord’s Supper as received from the Lord is a straightforward embodied treatise on identity. Paul expects the church will understand who it is, in that it is joined with Christ and gives itself in the same way that Christ gave himself in order

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that those who were far off might become close. We are who we are because we belong to the one who gave himself for us. Who we are implies, as Paul elaborates later, that we are many members but only one body. As Christ is one, so we are one. Those whom we considered as far off are not so any longer. As we become able to see this, it changes the way we live together.

Paul spoke the words of institution, as we call them now with respect to the sacrament, to the church at Corinth to remind them that what they were doing in the Lord’s Supper was not just a fun dinner with friends, but it was making them who they were to become. They could find love for one another rooted in the love the Lord showed them. This was a love that did not come naturally to them, but that was created by their new life in Christ. Billings describes it like this: “In order for our alienation toward God and neighbor to be overcome, we need to die and find life in Christ. Thus, our path of healing through union with Christ is also deeply threatening.” Billings, Remembrance, Communion and Hope, Kindle location 3177.

That we had to die to our old selves, that something has to die in us, is in a sense, always “threatening.” And yet, as we become comfortable with this threatening thing that ultimately is life, it seems we are able to live into other things that previously were
threatening to us, such as living as one with those who were not previously part of our circles, who were not like us. Threatening as it might have been, we find we are able to love our brothers and sisters.

As Calvin put it, “We cannot love Christ without loving him in the brethren.”60 And as our identity is found in love for Christ, then too, it must find its place in loving the other members of the body. For the Corinthians, this meant loving those of another social status, without requiring them to find a way to change their status first. For multiethnic churches of today, that means learning to love those our culture has told us we cannot love, without making them fit our mold.

But how are we to love? It goes further than simply saying, “I love you.” It means that your concerns are my concerns, your hunger is my hunger, your joy is my joy. It means we offer ourselves for the sake of others. It means we listen to each other. It means we point out the need for justice among us to those who do not notice. It means we work for justice with and for those among us who need justice.

The Lord’s Supper can help form this in us: “Specifically, this self-offering is expressed in a concern for justice and equity….feeding upon Christ at the Supper empowers believers to act in the world by the Spirit – acting with love for the other and advocating justice and equity, even for those who have harmed us.”61 The suffering of

60 Billings, Kindle location 3190.
61 Billings, Kindle location 3203.
our brothers and sisters becomes real to us in ways that it was not before – whether that suffering is from insufficiency, from hatred, from self-loathing or a need for forgiveness, or a host of other things. As Orthodox scholar Zizioulas explains, “the Eucharist intensifies the Church’s struggle with the evil and death present in the world.” In other words, through the Spirit’s work in the sacrament, we become one in a way that opens us to a great depth of love that allows us to sit with the vastness of another’s pain, and endure it with them. It can no longer be simply someone else’s pain, because we belong to each other.

**Identity and Belonging: Unity without Uniformity**

We belong to each other, we belong together. Belonging must become the hermeneutic starting point from which we think the social, the political, the individual, the ecclesial…the educational.

Here, Willie Jennings points to a whole-creatureliness of our belonging to God and to one another, and even to the land, as a creature of a certain place. Too often, perhaps, we leave the understanding of our belonging to intellectual assent. We fail to take it in as a comprehensive belonging of all that we are to all that is Christ. It is something that we must learn, perhaps in multiple ways that engage the whole body.

He suggests, “The cultivation of belonging should be the goal of all education – not just

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63 Jennings, *After Whiteness*, 16.
any kind of belonging, but a profoundly creaturely belonging that performs the returning of the creature to the creator, and a returning to an intimate and erotic energy that drives life together with God.” He seems to invoke at once more of a community-connectedness and a whole-person understanding of the self, community, and God. Belonging cannot be simply an appeal to an individual intellect, as it is something much larger. Indeed, he continues, “The belonging I am envisioning here superintends all other forms of belonging, drawing them to healing light and redeeming life.”

Again, this deep sense of belonging to Jesus is what enables the sense of belonging to the body of Christ, or to the church. Within this space of belonging, the shared identity as the body of Christ begins to become transformative, creating out of brokenness a newness. It is within this transformative, new identity that healing of old wounds and old divisions begins. This healing begins as the broken body of humanity begins to see itself as the new, risen body of the risen Christ. This understanding of belonging, so wide and vast and complete, is foundational for the multiethnic church. Slow communion starts from this place of belonging.

As Villodas reminds us, “[the] gospel has specific purposes for the healing of our world. One of the main purposes is the creation of a new family that transcends racial and ethnic barriers.” We have seen, however, that the church has rarely transcended

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64 Jennings, 17
65 Jennings, 18
66 Villodas, *The Deeply Formed Life*, 59
racial and ethnic barriers in its local manifestations. Local churches (and to some extent, denominations) have most often been monocultural, made up of people with similar values, class, culture, language or other factors that provide a shared source of identity. Healing did not happen here, because broken places were not acknowledged or crossed. The sense of belonging was not vast enough to cross them.

In more recent years, multiethnic churches have attempted to change this trend by seeking to be made up of more diverse people. Unfortunately, such churches have been frequently criticized for effectively requiring assimilation to the dominant culture of the particular church. Unity is not achieved, while uniformity masquerades in its place. Such superficial relationships do not bring healing, but often do greater damage. This comes with a great cost to identity, both personal and communal. As Sweeden describes,

Post-colonial and U.S. Hispanic theologians draw attention to how difference and diversity are understood and covered over in building relationships in the church. Though the church claims unity in Christ, this unity often manifests itself as uniformity achieved at the expense of marginalizing certain perspectives and social locations in the community.\(^{67}\)

Those whose identities are marginalized by the church are the same people who are marginalized by a society based on structures of whiteness. In this, we see that the multiethnic church fails when it follows society, rather than Jesus, in marginalizing members whose identity does not fit the dominant pattern. There is a greater sense of disappointment when this silencing and marginalization comes from the church.

Many churches that desire to exist as multiethnic communions may not have realized that they were requiring the assimilation of all members to whatever cultural identity is most powerful in the congregation. This is because their habitus of church has not allowed them to see that there are other ways of being church; in many such cases, whiteness and Christian are seen as equivalent. This is why it is important for churches to undertake processes and practices that let them learn about those they may consider other, expanding their understanding not only of the identity of the body of Christ, but also of the continued value of cultural identity in oneself and others.

Brenda Salter McNeil, in her *Roadmap to Reconciliation*, indicates that it is imperative that people have a social awareness that allows them to question their own cultural assumptions and traditions, search for new meaning and purpose, and reclaim aspects of their racial and ethnic heritage to nurture that sense of self. In this new community people should embrace their culture, their ethnicity, their personality and their gender as part of what it means for them to be made in the image of God…It’s foundational to experiencing transformation without losing one’s own identity in the process.68

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If this is social awareness is not present, and diverse identities are not valued but are suppressed, problems are likely to emerge that the group may not be able to overcome. Subgroups divided along dividing lines of any kind will become suspicious of the other groups, resort to stereotypes and turn against one another; painful fractures can occur. People will seek safer places and there will be little motivation to stay in the multiethnic church. On the other hand, the church that is able to lean into this social awareness that values diverse cultural identities begins to be able to live out its communal identity. Individuals feeling valued for their personal identity actually leads to greater shared identity.

Christena Cleveland’s book, *Disunity in Christ*, describes many of the typical problems experienced by diverse groups such as multiethnic churches, problems that can perpetuate divisions. She draws on sociological studies and other research to look for ways to overcome these problems. She, too, indicates the importance of being able to create together a common identity:

Research shows that many of the categorizing, self-esteem and cultural threat processes that wreak divisive havoc on the church are reversed when we finally stop thinking of ourselves as *us* versus *them* and begin to think of ourselves as one large ingroup…In fact, many research studies show that a common identity is invaluable in breaking down barriers in crosscultural situations. When *they* become *we*, we’re more open to receiving helpful criticism…when we adopt a common identity, we expand our sense of self to include culturally different people and, in
doing so, are no longer threatened by their achievements, performance or perspective.  

Miroslav Volf illustrates this unity without destruction of personal identity in terms of *embrace*. He describes an embrace: “What holds the bodies together in an embrace is...the arms placed around the other. And if the embrace is not to cancel itself, the arms must open again.” In an embrace, the arms encircle one another, but it is not forever. The two people still remain distinct. Volf continues, “as the final act of embrace, the opening of the arms underlines that, though the other may be inscribed into the self, the alterity of the other may not be neutralized by merging both into an undifferentiated ‘we’. This expression of love may change both, but the embrace does not destroy or reduce the other. The church will do well to be characterized by its embrace of the other, no longer other.

Both Volf and Cleveland speak of the need for repentance and forgiveness as a group attempts to develop a deeper communal identity that can be characterized by embrace. Unequal power structures in society, and often in church, have left us wounded as a people and as individuals. Cleveland states, “high-status group members must acknowledge and repent for any role that they have played in oppressing lower-

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71 Volf, 144.
status groups. But low-status group members also have an important role to play—namely, they must do the difficult work of forgiving.”

Cleveland suggests when groups begin to think of themselves collectively as *we* they begin to be able to do the harder work of repentance and forgiveness. I consider this an on-going, fluid state. Even as the relationship deepens, the need for repentance and forgiveness is repeated, and being given, it again deepens the relationship. Because of this, we will return to the idea of forgiveness in later chapters.

**A Note on Identity and Belonging at the Borders**

Nell Becker Sweeden’s book *Church on the Way* looks at the lives of those who are seeking refuge or who are living migrant lives, giving particular concern to those in borderlands, such as along the U.S. southern border. While Willie Jennings, above, imagined a sense of belonging that is tied to place (as a creature belonging to the place), Sweeden’s work considers those who once had a sense of belonging to a place, but now have lost that place, and with it a part of themselves. Where do they belong now? This question reveals an “in-betweenness of identity” that is created by the existence of borders.

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72 Cleveland, *Disunity in Christ*, 182.
73 Cleveland, 182.
74 Sweeden, *Church on the Way*, 65.
Sweeden speaks of literal borders, and indeed, enforcement of these borders has created a great deal of marginalization of those who cross them. And yet, marginalization has happened at all our borders, literal and figurative. Brokenness has drawn thick lines in the sand at each and every border, daring one to cross at high cost. How does the multiethnic church, knowing it belongs to Christ and to each other, begin to construct its identity in these border places? How does it understand its identity as attending to the borders, to the dividing lines, to the broken places? Reflecting on life in these places, Sweeden suggests:

A new sense of belonging in Christ that contests borders of control and places of privilege may allow for the possibility of a new us. The development of ecclesiology of the people of God journeying together toward the new creation beyond all borders in Christ Jesus offers a radically new way of being human that confronts the classism, ethnocentrism, and racism that divide persons from one another.75

At such borderlines, we find and encounter those we usually think of as other. The border has created the idea of other, and the divided life has reinforced the concept as reality. By accepting a life at these border places, willingly going there as we follow Christ, we are all other to someone, and yet we might there become more to each other. In the same way that Christ is both host at the table and the one given for our sustenance, so also does the church give and receive hospitality; it must be “both guest

75 Sweeden, 71.
and host…on the margins of society.”\textsuperscript{76} Sweeden suggests “the practice of hospitality must directly form and shape Christian identity as it relates to being a perpetual guest in the world. The unique place of the church in the world, then, is most aptly situated at the margins.”\textsuperscript{77}

In these places, borders and margins, we are all from somewhere else. We bring our own identities, we present them, and we understand them within our belonging to the body of Christ. Considering the identity of the church as being at these places, by necessity, rather than at the center of a culture, helps to decentralize one type of experience and open the church to the possibility of unity that can only exist in diversity. Again, Sweeden is helpful here: “the borderlands create an expectation for identity to be continually explored and discovered anew…borderlands are spaces that represent the encounter and coming together of differences, they are spaces where differences can never be collapsed into sameness.”\textsuperscript{78}

\textbf{Slow Practices for Identity and Belonging}

“There is a call embedded in Christianity that moves us to life together. This idea of holistic spiritual formation is nothing new. In fact, it has a long and prominent history within the Christian church. Throughout history, becoming a follower of Jesus has often meant being brought into a community of people who ate together, lived together, share their possessions and their lives…I truly believe that community is where real spiritual formation happens.”\textsuperscript{79}

\textsuperscript{76} Sweeden, 76.
\textsuperscript{77} Sweeden, 76.
\textsuperscript{78} Sweeden, 79.
\textsuperscript{79} Doug Pagitt, \textit{Reimagining Spiritual Formation}, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 27.
Slow communion aims to form the holistic, communal life of the multiethnic church, so that together, it might be able to fully live as the body of Christ. As Doug Pagitt says above, holistic spiritual formation is nothing new. Practices of all kinds have been used by the church throughout the ages to form people into faithful followers of Christ, and we have a wealth of resources to draw upon. At certain times, however, these practices have become compartmentalized and have not been used holistically. In certain traditions or places, practices that engage the intellect, for example, have been prioritized over those that engage the body. At other times, individual practices have held priority over communal practices.

Slow communion practices try to overcomes these divisions so that the church might be better equipped to overcome its divisions. Most of the practices in this chapter and the following are communal, but a few are personal. This chapter’s practices seek to help multiethnic church communions go deeper in their sense of belonging and their shared identity in Christ. They seek to open our eyes to one another, appreciate our differences rather than eliminate them, and help us grow together in shared identity. As Christena Cleveland says, “Quite simply, we must affirm who we really are as the
Identity work, however ongoing, is foundational. Practices suggested throughout these chapters are largely for the life of the gathered church. Some may fit into weekly worship time and some may work in small groups. Likely, congregations will need to spend more time together than simply an hour on Sunday morning; the life and work of communion requires time together.

**Regular Participation in Holy Communion**

Of course, Holy Communion (or the Lord’s Supper or the Eucharist – here used interchangeably) is the basis for this path of formation, so it is not surprising that it is important to participate regularly in this sacrament. Churches vary greatly in their understanding of and use of Holy Communion, so it is worth mentioning again that regular partaking of the supper can be highly formational for individuals and for congregations. In his challenging *Exclusion and Embrace*, Volf discusses how Communion shows us that God has made space for all of us in Christ, who was broken for us. There, brokenness is redeemed, and we too make space for other within us:

> The Eucharist is the ritual time in which we celebrate this divine “making-space-for-us-and-inviting-us-in.” Eating the bread and drinking the wine, we remember the body broken ‘for us’ who were God’s enemies and the blood spilled to establish a ‘new covenant’ with us who have broken the covenant…we would profoundly misunderstand the Eucharist, however, if we thought of it only as a sacrament of God’s embrace of which we are simply fortunate beneficiaries. Inscribed on the

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80 Cleveland, *Disunity in Christ*, 116.
very heart of God’s grace is the rule that we can be its recipients only if we do not resist being made into its agents; what happens to us must be done by us. Having been embraced by God, we must make space for other in ourselves and invite them in—even our enemies. This is what we enact as we celebrate the Eucharist. In receiving Christ’s broken body and spilled blood, we, in a sense, receive all those whom Christ received by suffering.\textsuperscript{81}

Being invited into the life of God, and repeatedly pondering the Christ who would die for our wholeness, we begin to understand a new our own identity. We understand our call to one another, as much as to Christ.

Volf further describes how Zizioulas understands this connectedness: “since in the Eucharist the ‘whole Christ’—the head and the body—is received by each communicant, each is made into an ecclesial person and all are internal to the very being of each...we share not only in the body of the crucified and resurrected Lord, but also in the multi-membered body of the church.\textsuperscript{82} The head and the body are both received, which admonishes us not to leave behind the body—not any part of it—in our worship of Christ. It is an important corrective to the hurried, individualized church.

Multiethnic churches would do well to consider their theology, methods and frequency of Holy Communion. A frequent Communion will be more formational than

\textsuperscript{81} Volf, 129.
\textsuperscript{82} Volf, 129-30.
an occasional one. Likewise, a method of sharing that emphasizes the communal nature of the meal will be more revealing of its meaning.

With words alone, we can miss something that becomes clear when we consume the bread and the wine as the Spirit’s gift. It is a togetherness that has to be experienced, wherein we become a new someone (the body of Christ) without losing who you and I were separately (members of it). Zizioulas again explains this profoundly: “In the Eucharist, humans affirm their personal existence in the context of communion. It offers them the possibility of being fully themselves without being slaves to themselves, and it makes each one fully capable of saying ‘I’, but always in relation to ‘you’ and ‘us’, which is to say, it helps humans to lose themselves as individuals and to become persons.”

Multiethnic churches of today can find great wisdom in this, as we move away from our meager cultural options of assimilation or segregation as ways of living with diversity, and live into the reality of the body of Christ.

**Examen**

Examen is one of few individual, rather than communal, practices suggested for Slow Communion. It, too, could be adapted for group use, particularly group prayers that are followed by times of sharing. This practice could also be modeled in group prayer times, and recommended for use by members at home. Examen “is a

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foundational aspect of the *Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius Loyola (AD 1491 – 1556)."\textsuperscript{84} Ignatius developed the exercise in order that those in his society “would know how to detect the movement of God in their lives.”\textsuperscript{85} The examen encourages one to pay attention to the events of the day, how they reacted and felt, and where one may have felt the God present. Examen helps one “recognize the things that bring us death and life,”\textsuperscript{86} and provide insight into ongoing situations and ways to pray.

There is a component of understanding oneself that is necessary for being able to receive one another. God’s guidance and light is needed in order for us to see our own blind spots, biases, and weakness. Sometimes, God’s light is needed for us to see our positive sides, or “life-giving moments” as well. Without seeing our own selves fairly, it will be difficult to see others as they are, and not though our own lens. Particularly in the multiethnic church, where conflict may be easy to come by at times, and where change and difference can be unsettling, it is helpful to have a way to bring one’s own responses and feelings before God in a reflective way. The practice may help to expose issues where further conversation is needed, or perhaps where repentance or forgiveness is needed. It may also alert one to the places where God is moving in the community, and where one is being invited in. All of these can help to build the self and self-understanding, and thus the communal body as well.

\textsuperscript{85} Calhoun, 59.
\textsuperscript{86} Calhoun, 59.
Practicing examen can be done in a number of ways, but generally involves quieting oneself and reflecting on a series of questions. Calhoun suggests a number of examples such as:

Gather together the threads of your daily encounters and activities. Attending to them one at a time, ask yourself some of the examen questions:
Where did I give or receive love in this activity or interaction? How did I withhold love in this activity or interaction? Which activity gave me the greatest high? Which one made me feel low?87

A variety of other questions can be asked, all of which will help one to reflect, to sit with those things that might been difficult, and to bring those things before God for guidance. Being that this practice has been around for hundreds of years, a wide variety of resources are available to help as one begins practicing the examen.

**Storytelling**

*Stories are people, people are their stories, and stories are alive. Traditionally, Native American stories are never fully explained. The power and influence of the story does not lie in the exact correctness of its telling, but in the life of the ‘teller’ and in the ‘telling’.88*

Storytelling is an excellent way to begin to understand a local church’s communal identity, while maintaining the importance of individual’s personal history

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87 Calhoun, 59.

and heritage. Sharing stories helps the church learn to see and hear others, both as individuals and essential parts of the group. McNeil asserts, “Two vital components...are embracing the stories of others and building empathy. Both are crucial for changing perceptions and deobjectifying one another. Someone who was once alien to you must be seen and heard in new ways.”

As Twiss suggests above, following the Native American tradition of storytelling, there is no exact way to tell one’s story. The important part is that someone is sharing something of their own, which is often a very vulnerable thing. The story, often having a life of its own, is a gift. At the same time, those who share their stories often appreciate guidelines or a series of open-ended questions to help them make sense of their own stories and how to share them. This should be culturally sensitive as well; it is not necessary to have all stories follow the same pattern or paradigm. Guidelines can bring the speaker a certain amount of comfort, help with specificity, and encourage them to speak authentically.

Likewise, listeners benefit from some training. Too often, we listen only to have something of our own to say. Too often (and often because of implicit bias or unconscious stereotypes), we don’t listen for the message the storyteller really wanted.

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90 McNeil, Roadmap to Reconciliation, 73
us to hear. But listening, too, is a gift, and we want to do justice to the storyteller’s vulnerability by listening well.

Rich Villodas describes a three-part ‘incarnational listening’ as a way “we can minister by listening to one another”:

1. *Leave your world.* Let go of the familiar, take the risk, and step out (especially with regard to race and culture).
2. *Enter into someone else’s world.* Practice active, humble, and curious listening.
3. *Allow yourself to be formed by others.* Open up to their worldviews while holding on to yourself.90

Listeners prepared to leave their own world and enter into someone else’s world will be better listeners than those who are expecting, say, an opportunity to debate or be argumentative. In this way, storytelling has a real chance at letting us form one another.

Storytelling will play a big part in Slow Communion; we will see it again in the next chapter. There are so many things we don’t know about one another until we take the time to share and hear stories. Anyone would be welcome to share their own story. Some people will be open about doing so, while others may need encouragement and scaffolding. Others may not be ready to share, or may never want to share, their own stories, and this should be respected. I suggest that, in the stage of identity formation for the multiethnic church, which might be early in a church’s life, or as a church begins to transition toward a multiethnic identity, it may be a good idea to share faith stories.

90 Villodas, *The Deeply Formed Life*, 75-76.
Because it is the belonging to Christ, and thus to the body of Christ that is foundational, faith stories in particular may help people to see one another in Christ. Points both of similarity and difference in faith experience may help to deepen the bond between diverse members. It may help to build a trust that allows for potentially more painful stories to be shared and received.
Chapter 5 Discerning the Body: Gathering to See Each Other

The very first redemptive work of a Black church has always been to say to anyone who walks through the door: I see you. 91

This chapter goes deeper into Paul’s admonition to discern the body. As the church gathers, it is to really see all of its members, not just the ones in particular groups. And in seeing, it is to consider the welfare and wholeness of all those who gather. It is to notice places where the body has been injured, and to consider how it has injured its own. Further, in discerning the body, the church is to consider the healing of those wounds.

A slow communion recognizes that when it comes to multiethnic life together, there is much that has not been noticed, many who have not been seen. Some churches, like the Black churches Jennings speaks of, above, have made really seeing one another a hallmark of their communion. But in many places, the church has not discerned the body well, and so it will take time to learn to do so. It will take time to see where we have hurt and hated each other, and in some cases, even longer to acknowledge that we have done damage to and been damaged by the church. Slow communion offers practices that help bring to light the damage done by racism, classism, and the dominant

91 Willie Jennings speaking on race on “Conversing with Mark Labberton” Podcast, 00.31.48 https://fullerstudio.fuller.edu/willie-jennings-race/ accessed 03/02/2021.
(and damaging) social structures that the church has too often embraced. In overcoming that damage, it will also look to follow the Spirit in its work of healing; herein the new habitus will be forming.

**Discerning the Body**

As the church is learning to live into its new communal identity in Christ, we see that Paul wants the people of the church to be able to discern the body – he wants them to be able to see the body of Christ composed of all those who call on the name of Jesus. Paul relies on the Spirit to give gifts to believers, gifts which are given to build up the body, and therein, to *discern the body* effectively. It is an on-going process of discerning and building up, directed by the Spirit.

As we have seen in Paul’s discussion of the common meal, he criticizes the church for their lack of discernment of the body, despite their reception of gifts. At the gathering, there are those who eat gluttonously, while others have none. Though there may have been enough, as the body is not discerned though the eyes of Christ, there are members of the church who are not really seen and not fed. Not offering them food is the equivalent of not seeing them. Not seeing them equates to not valuing them, and this is what Paul critiques. His criticism is pointed at those with more status and power – they are the ones creating this particular division, and they need to change. It is completely within their means to discern the body and act like a body.
Ultimately, Paul is showing those of privilege that they need to look beyond what society values in order to actually be the body that is Christ’s. Action in keeping with Christ is necessary. The Corinthians primarily had to overcome attitudes and practices designed to maintain the privilege of a stratified social system that drew lines between rich and poor; today’s church also has to overcome a complexly stratified societal system to become the body of Christ. Billings reminds that, “properly ‘discerning’ the body of Christ in the church involves discerning that in Christ, we should not use ethnicity, race, or gender as grounds for excluding membership in the covenant people.” Billings, Remembrance, Communion, Hope, Kindle location 3363. Further, the church has to notice that any harm it does to those who make up the body is harm to Christ himself. Hays puts it more strongly: “By mistreating other members of the church, the Corinthians repeat the sort of sin that made the death of Christ necessary.”

Discerning can be somewhat complicated within American churches that are predominantly white or multiracial, in that while difference is easily seen, what happens within that exchange is not regularly acknowledged. Some churches may say that they are “colorblind” or “don’t see race.” In these situations, as mentioned in the last chapter, what can happen is that the dominant culture functioning within the church, usually white culture, requires that those from outside that culture assimilate in order to

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92 Billings, Remembrance, Communion, Hope, Kindle location 3363.
93 Hays, First Corinthians, 201.
continue to co-exist in that context. Diversity is denied, often unconsciously, and the body is not only not discerned, it is harmed.

Similarly, sociologists tell us that implicit bias allows us to make split-second assessments of people, largely based in racialized stereotype; these actions and their effects can go unnoticed by us. As a result, we see differences and we make judgments, but we do not notice that we have made judgments. Then, we act in big and small ways to keep people within the confines of those judgments, even though we may not notice we are doing so. Those who are the victims of this bias are injured. This is to say, the body is not discerned when we function under implicit bias.

Similarly, Jemar Tisby describes the idea of racialized society:

Racialization functions differently from straightforward racism…discrimination in a racialized society is increasingly covert, embedded in the normal operations of institutions, and it avoids direct racial terminology, making it invisible to most white people. The relative invisibility of these racialized structures to white Christians often leads them to unknowingly compromise with racism. 

Further, Tisby notes that living in this racialized society allows “Christians [to] wrongly assume that racism only includes overt acts…but history reveals that Christian complicity with racism does not always require specific acts of bigotry.”

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94 Jemar Tisby, *The Color of Compromise: The Truth about the American Church’s Complicity in Racism*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2019), 174. Tisby refers to Michael O. Emerson and Christian Smith’s use of “racialized society” in *Divided by Faith* (2000); they described it as “a society that allocates differential economic, political, social and even psychological rewards to groups along racial lines; lines are socially constructed.”
95 Tisby, 183
that many incidents of racism are seen by those who are experiencing them, but totally unrecognized by others, and thus, “black and white Christians…talk past each other.”

The harm caused by implicit bias within a racialized society can come as a surprise to churches that may think they are discerning the body, when in fact they are harming it. Discerning the body in today’s context will require particularly those who are in places of privilege to commit to examining their attitudes and acting to overcome them, just as the Corinthians had to do. This entails a varied process of openness and conversation, but begins with the willingness to acknowledge that the effects of our actions are often different than we intended. Discerning the body may ask more of us than we expected.

The Lord’s Supper is a place where we can learn to see each other by a reshaping of our perceptions of the body. As Calvin puts it, “we shall benefit very much from the Sacrament if this thought is impressed and engraved upon our minds: that one of the brethren can be injured, despised, rejected, abused, or in any way offended by us without at the same time, injuring despising, and abusing Christ by the wrongs that we do.” Of course, these words from centuries ago can still scathe with a hot fire when we consider that some of our efforts at unity or inclusion actually function to reject and despise when they are superficial or when they promote uniformity in place of diversity.

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96 Tisby, 184
97 Calvin, Institutes 4.17.38
Yet, the recognition that we are despising Christ by despising others is important and pushes us to change.

Unacknowledged white hegemony and racism are a particular problem for many churches in discerning the body, however they are not the only challenges multiethnic churches face in this discernment. Those who have been marginalized by racism within our culture also have to discern the body, sometimes in different ways. We imagine those Corinthians who were shamed during the common meal, when they were not even considered worthy to receive food and share at the same table as those who were considered of higher status. With this type of activity persisting even within the church, where people knew they were to be acting as Christ acted, what would happen? How would those who went without perceive those who ate everything? Would there be love? Would hate grow? Would they become enemies?

It is not difficult to imagine that those who were harmed may come to despise those who harmed them. And yet, Christ came to reconcile those broken relationships as well. It is a different challenge for those who have been the victims of racism to discern the body.

Those of higher social status in Corinth apparently did not want to eat with those of lower social-standing, but the opposite may also have been true. Who wants to stay with those who disregard and disparage them? Yet, Christ has called them all into the one body. The Lord’s Supper can also be a place where we sit with what it means that
Christ is calling us to love our enemies. As Billings puts it, when we come to the table, “the Host invites people we would rather not see there. For we are not masters or owners of this table; it is ‘the Lord’s table’.” It may not be possible for those of us who are currently being injured by those with us in the church to love those doing the injuring, but discerning the body calls us to move in that direction.

The multiethnic church that is gathered around the table of our Lord may be a place where both kind of conversations can begin. Partaking of the Lord’s body, broken for us, can be an embodied way for us to see the broken body of Christ around us, as the Spirit alerts us to ways in which we ourselves are breaking it. Those in positions of privilege and power who are doing the breaking, will be encouraged to engage repentance and forgiveness as they discern the body. Going forward together relies on it.

**Repentance and Forgiveness – A Hard Teaching**

Christena Cleveland reminds us that, “the metaphor of the body of Christ, which preaches mutual crosscultural interdependence, was designed to rescue us from homogeneity and remind us of our truest identity—as diverse people united in Christ,” but she says that often we don’t notice how we give preferential place to our ethnic/racial identity rather than our “common identity as members of the body of...”

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* Billings, *Remembrance, Communion, Hope*, Kindle location 3190

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Christ." This can be a difficult problem to overcome in discerning the body. On the one hand, it may be that some among us have not noticed that they were giving preference to their racial/ethnic identity; the functional ubiquity of whiteness and its values in the West creates this situation for some (which is how some can confuse an identity of whiteness with a Christian identity). But on the other hand, there are those whose racial/ethnic identity has been cultivated and strengthened as a safe place because of injury done by other racial/ethnic groups. This may have been caused by an incident of genocide, war, or underlying racist-structured society. What to do when the body of Christ is composed of both, enemies, the innocent and guilty, and ethnic/racial identity is central? How is the body discerned then, and how does the body move forward?

Edgardo Colón-Emeric suggests the church engage the concept of *mestizaje*, a term that originally referred to “biological and cultural mixing” that occurred during Spanish conquest of Latin American lands and peoples. *Mestizaje* is not a word that sits easily, but Colón-Emeric suggests that other terms:

are too abstract. They draw our attention to mixing, but not to the painful history that led to the mixing. *Mestizaje* evokes an unfinished tale of violence, rejection and alienation in need of reconciliation. It points to both the problem and the solution…The ethnic hostilities that led to and from *mestizaje* can only be reconciled by *mestizaje* with Christ in the church.

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99 Cleveland, *Disunity in Christ*, 111.
101 Colón-Emeric, 12.
Discerning the body cannot be rightly done without taking account of the pain that histories of conquest have wrought. Discerning the body requires looking into the places where we have not seen the image of God in one another, and seeking to see each person anew, as God sees. It is kind of redeemed mixing: our communion with Christ makes this new communion possible. The church is the place where this can happen.

Similarly, Miroslav Volf’s *Exclusion and Embrace* discusses discerning the body in places of pain in great detail. A native of what is now Croatia, Volf describes the book as product of his own struggle or ‘spiritual journey.’ After seeing the destruction caused by violent ethnic conflict in his homeland, as well as in so many other places around the globe, he struggled to make sense of a God who cared for both the innocent and the guilty. He struggled to understand how to live as the body of such a Christ of the cross.

Because of Volf’s personal experience with ethnic violence, in which one would be entirely justified in hating those responsible as life-long enemies, his own reckoning with the body of Christ being composed of those who were once enemies, those who did violence and those who received it, is highly compelling. He can say things that might be refused if said by those thinking only abstractly about violence,

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forgiveness and the body of Christ. And through the anguish, difficult truth about repentance and forgiveness emerges, and it is a hard teaching.

Perhaps expectedly, Volf insists that those who have acted as oppressors or who have done violence to others, “the vice-grip of the dominant values and practices must be broken...in the hearts of the privileged; they certainly need to repent.” 103 But he also insists those who have been victims also have a need to repent. How can that be? Volf is looking at the many ways the heart is damaged by violence, both in the oppressor and in the victim, and finds repentance to be necessary to its healing:

“To repent means to resist the seductiveness of the sinful values and practices and to let the new order of God’s reign be established in one’s heart. For a victim to repent means not to allow the oppressors to determine the terms under which social conflict is carried out, the values around which the conflict is raging, and the means by which it is fought. Repentance thus empowers victims and disempowers the oppressors...Far from being a sign of acquiescence to the dominant order, repentance creates a haven of God’s new world in the midst of the old and so make the transformation of the old possible. 104

Repentance, then, is a way of resisting the violent formation of the victim into the patterns of the oppressor. It is a way of reclaiming the heart from the oppressor, so that the one who was victim may live again in a new way. Volf explains, “the need for the victim’s repentance has to do with the creation of the kind of social agents that are

103 Volf, 117.
104 Volf, 116.
shaped by the values of God’s kingdom and therefore capable of participating in the project of authentic social transformation.”

Of course, these paths of repentance are different, but they all lead to the cross of Christ for their new life. They lead toward forgiveness, given and received, received and given again. Volf discusses the importance of forgiveness in terms of the cross, saying, “the passion of Christ is the agony of a tortured soul and wrecked body offered as a prayer for the forgiveness of the torturers…when I forgive I have not only suffered a violation but also suppressed the rightful claims of strict restitutive justice.”

Repentance is not easy, nor is forgiveness. It is costly. And yet it is full of life. The cross and resurrection provide the model for this difficult teaching.

In discerning the body, the multiethnic church will need to engage confession, repentance, and forgiveness. It will be the ongoing work of the church, not necessarily linear, but essential at various times in the life of the church. This may be resisted because it involves a lot of pain, and therefore requires a certain amount of trust to have been built. Discerning the body to this degree requires an identity firmly rooted in Christ, and it will help to strengthen that identity at the same time. It is a step toward reconciliation, a step toward a life of communion together. It is a beginning, not an end;

105 Volf, 118.
106 Volf, 125.
it is not, ‘I forgive you, goodbye’ but ‘I forgive you, let’s begin to journey together.’ Volf puts this very eloquently:

But a parting of the ways is clearly not yet peace. Much more than just the absence of hostility sustained by the absence of contact, peace is communion between former enemies. Beyond offering forgiveness, Christ’s passion aims at restoring such communion—even with the enemies who persistently refused to be reconciled…Forgiveness is therefore not the culmination of Christ’s relation to the offending other; it is a passage leading to embrace. The arms of the crucified are open—a sign of a space in God’s self and invitation for the enemy to come in.107

**Slow Practices for Discerning the Body**

The following practices offer ways for multiethnic churches to be formed as they discern the body together.

**Storytelling**

“Connection is everything. Relationship to God and to each other is life itself.”108

In *Breathing Space*, Heidi Neumark described her years as a pastor of a multiethnic church in the Bronx. Her work was difficult and often heartbreaking, and yet within that, she found life alongside the work of the Spirit in that place. She was able to assert, as in the above quotation, that the relationships that were formed in the diversity of life in the Bronx were what gave her life in that work.

107 Volf, 126.
Today we find so many of our interactions are difficult, particularly with people who think differently from us, that we are more likely to retreat from such interactions that seek them out. But discerning the body relies on interaction with those in the body who have different experiences. How can we learn to really see the body when so much of our daily life has taught us to shut out other stories, even if seemingly for our own protection? How can we get to a place where, like Neumark, we can forge relationships that are life-giving?

Storytelling appeared as a slow practice in Chapter 4, and it is here again. Each person has a wealth of stories, so any community can share stories again and again and not run out. In the last chapter, the sharing of faith stories was suggested for building identity and sense of belonging to the body of Christ. That could continue in service to discerning the body, but adding a wider range of stories can be highly beneficial as well.

In discerning the body, we see that there are many voices, many stories that have not been heard by the entire church. Some people have been silenced; others were invisible. Some stories could be told in certain parts of the church, but would not be heard or acknowledged in others. Intentional sharing of stories gives a place for these stories to be heard. Stories of growing up in different places, stories of learning new languages or cultures, stories of family, stories of being on the move – all of these help us see each other more. Stories of experiences of racism, classism, discrimination, loneliness and loss are also stories that we need to hear from one another.
There can be something liberating in sharing one’s own stories and experiences. It is better, when the stories are received by another. Especially when telling our more difficult stories, the ones where we have been hurt, betrayed, or wherein we lost our hope, it can be demoralizing to have someone say, “that’s not what happened—you got it wrong.” Many people of color have acknowledged experiencing receiving this type of response when talking with white people, in particular. Again, this is an instance when unnoticed white dominant structures have brought an end to our conversations in the church, often before they can go deep enough to matter. This can cause us to give up on this difficult task of sharing ourselves through story. So, perhaps as important as learning to tell our stories, it is critical to learn to listen differently. Congregations may find it beneficial to enter into cultural competency trainings, study together books on cross-cultural communication, or use other media or outside consultants who can help them get ready to hear everyone’s stories in helpful ways.

Storytelling generates conversations. Jemar Tisby suggests such conversations in the church can go to deeper places, where structures and their damages can be seen: “conversations about injustice should include an examination of the circumstances of each incident, but Christians should also analyze the larger patterns—ones that can operate independent of malicious intent—to see the historic and systemic picture and
advocate for more effective solutions.”¹⁰⁹ This is probably not going to be the first step for any congregation, but in a series of storytelling events, participants (especially if given the tools to listen well) can become more open the give and take of speaking and listening that leads to deeper understanding. Indeed, they have to, in order to continue on the journey together as a body. Healing the body of Christ, particularly in places it has been broken by the church, will not happen without attending to these deeper wounds.

**Lament**

*I have learned that grace cleaves to the depths, attends the losses and there slowly works her defiant transfiguration.*¹¹⁰

After a long absence from many churches, lament has been experiencing a revival of late. In other places, lament has always been an important part of church experience. Lament is a slow practice with biblical roots, seen frequently in the Psalms (about 40 percent of them are lament),¹¹¹ as well as other books. Rah suggests lament can take many forms, and can “be an act of protest” or “provide space and time to mourn”; further, it can “remind us that grief that emerges from a very real and painful history must be acknowledged.”¹¹² Smith and Pattison describe the experience:

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¹¹⁰ Neumark, *Breathing Space*, Kindle location 77.
¹¹² Rah, 44-47.
“To lament is to come alongside those who grieve, to sit with them (literally or figuratively) in the silence and to recognize there that in God’s interconnected creation, their pain is our pain…Lament is the time for the hard work of searching our own souls, looking for the sorts of rebellion and violence that if untended could burst out in violence toward other.”¹¹³

Lament is an expression of grief, but not grief without direction. It has God as its focus; it cries out to God, and often asks for help. It helps grief become shareable, and moves pain from a destructive impulse to a more creative place. Villodas adds, “the act of lamenting often results in prophetic vision to deeply name the powers that work against reconciliation. To lament is not simply to cry out but also to discern God’s direction through the tears.”¹¹⁴

Lament is appropriate as we discern the body, as lament can lead us to repentance, and having hurt each other for so long, we have much for which to repent. We have to ask ourselves how much our Lord’s sacrifice cost, and how much we are willing to give. Billings asks, “Do we really desire to enter into the new life of a sacrifice of praise that calls us to repent of our injustice and alienation, moving in love toward those who appear unlovable?”¹¹⁵ If this is what the life of reconciliation is, then this is what we must do.

¹¹³ Smith and Pattison, Slow Church, 114.
¹¹⁴ Villodas, The Deeply Formed Life, 78.
In this way, it becomes clear that lament is a practice in which the multiethnic church could find seeds of growth. It is a slow practice, as grief cannot be hurried; in lament, one sits with pain and others in pain, rather than rushing to fix or deny, as the case may be. Multiethnic churches that have begun to share their stories may find that lament is a natural progression. Much pain of racism and other division has been borne in silence. The church needs to learn to sit not only the pain that it feels, but also with the pain that it has caused in others. Members of different ethnic/racial backgrounds will have different experiences in this process, but lament’s focus of bringing these things before God may help them to come together around places of pain.

Smith and Pattison describe their own church experiences with lament, “As we are slowed by lament, we come to see not only how deeply broken we, and all creation, are but also that in Christ we have been given a way out of this huge mess.” They found that through lament, confession and forgiveness became possible, whereas before the isolation of pain may have led to revenge or further division between people.

Congregations that are not familiar with lament may do well to start with the Psalms. Since many of the Psalms are psalms of lament, they let us see ways to engage God and each other when pain is experienced. Reading these psalms slowly and repeatedly, both in small and large groups, can help to slow us and be present to these

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places of pain, rather than rushing over them. Prayers may flow out of these psalms, which can help us to see each other better as well.

**Art and Creating**

Some things are difficult to put into words. Although many traditions include storytelling and lament with words, there are those in the congregation who may want to find other ways of expressing their stories, and even their pain. Churches would do well to engage the arts in their worship and shared communal life. In multiethnic churches especially, where there can be language barriers or cultural barriers, opportunities to engage with art and to create may deepen the meaning of the stories that are shared. What could not be communicated verbally alone can be deeply understood in creative ways.

Engaging with art and creating new art is also highly formational within the context of faith. Whether it be song, dance, poetry, or visual art, the arts can open one to a sense of the divine. While art and faith have been yet another division seen over the past century, in fact they can be closely tied. Rather than being another line of division, the arts can be a way of seeing one another more closely, a way of discerning the body more completely.

Many writers, artists and scholars speak of our current situation as being composed of fragments. What if the multiethnic church was seen as a place of putting together the fragments? Many of the arts take fragments and mix them in new ways to
create something different, something not seen before. Discerning the body, and then living as the body of Christ united in its diversity is not something that has gone so well for the church in the past; here too, we have more fragment than whole. The arts are well suited to collecting these fragments and envisioning something new. Engaging the arts in the multiethnic church may result in a new imagination, a reimagining of what the body of church looks like, and new ways of going about its flourishing.

Neumark reflects on this creative process of picking up the broken, recognizing what was and looking to what could be. She writes, “Isaiah tells us that the song will come. He too searched through wreckage and lifted up dismembered pieces, letter by letter, phrase by phrase, recovering an alphabet that scattered like acres of rubble…” 117 While she was engaging Isaiah while reflecting on the effects of 9/11’s violence on her community in New York, she also spoke to the larger need in all of our lives for creating wholeness by facing the past and its brokenness, rather than turning away from it as if it never happened.

Artists in the multiethnic community may lead the way on these creative endeavors, but all members can be encouraged to participate. Many people feel they are “not creative” and will hesitate to take up an unfamiliar art form, but there is formation

117 Neumark, Breathing Space, Kindle location 102.
and healing for them as well. Placing value on the process of creating, rather than simply on the product, help make this a slow practice that can be truly formational.

Art can also expose ways we have placed value judgments on our fellow humans, and the ways we have made them “other.” Makoto Fujimura, an artist-theologian, discusses how art can help us overcome the tendency to consider things or people valuable only when they are useful. He writes in *Culture Care*: “We are too prone to see a human being or human endeavor as worthwhile only as it is useful to the whole, whether that be a company, family, community, or even a church. The corollary is that individuals who do not meet this standard are ‘other,’ an attitude that results effectively in their exile…”118 Noticing these things in the context of making art (perhaps asking, what is the purpose of making art? Usefulness? Play? Beauty?), we may discern where we have done this to one another.

**Prayers of Confession, Prayers of Intercession**

Sharing stories, lament, and revisioning through the arts can bring the multiethnic church to a place where it can recognize its need for both repentance and forgiveness. But how are we to face our complicity in division, the trauma received at the hands of other Christians and the church as a whole, and our preference for our own

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rather than for all God’s children? Communal prayers can be helpful in moving these congregations from feeling to action, from frustration to understanding.

Prayers of confession are common in some traditions, and totally absent in others. While members of multiethnic churches may have very different things to confess, by considering them communally, we can gain insight into one another’s lives and experiences. And, by bringing these things before God, we acknowledge rightly that we need God’s Spirit to take us through these places of pain. Since communal prayers of confession are usually followed by words of assurance that rely on forgiveness in Jesus, they can also help us engage forgiveness of one another more fruitfully.

Prayers of intercession – praying for one another, praying on behalf of another – is perhaps the more common type of prayer we see in most churches. However, when the prayer asks the pray-er to seek the wellbeing of someone who was previously considered other or even enemy, the act of interceding can allow for formation not found in any other place. In praying for someone, for someone’s particular need, we are forced to truly see that person. Discerning the body of Christ in prayer is essential.
Chapter 6 Receiving Each Other: Gathering for Life Together

Waiting and Receiving Each Other

In examining Paul’s advice to the church at Corinth, we again notice that Paul tries to slow the people into an open receptivity, so that they can actually see each other and their needs. *Wait for each other. Receive each other*, he says. At first glance, this command is so small that we could almost miss it. But it is an important part of what Paul is telling the church at Corinth to do, and it is an essential step, closely related to discerning the body.

Waiting implies a slowing. A wait can be short or long, but it is always slower than one originally intended to go. Receiving someone, especially as a guest, is also slowing. One cannot go about one’s day, briskly, with no concern but for oneself, when one has guests. The slowing turns one in a direction, toward another, and waits to discern their pleasure, to hear them tell of their needs. And so, it is a slowing that Paul advocates as they interact with the others, as they begin to discern the body.

Although Paul does not elaborate on them within the section discussed in this paper, slow practices are something Paul understands. In 1 Corinthians 3, he describes his work in terms of a number of slow processes of growth and building: raising children from infancy, planting fields, and constructing buildings. These are not things done in a day. They take time, continued effort, collaboration, and quite often rely on
God for the results. By the use of these metaphors, Paul shows that he understands growth to be a slow process full of change. Undoubtedly, he himself was changed by this work and by envisioning the work in these terms. Paul knows what it means to wait. He understands the receiving inherent in his work that relies so much on the Spirit for its fruit.

Indeed, slow practices are an essential step in helping reframe a human tendency to see from an essentially self-centered position of scarcity and privilege into one that sees the other as equally important. Our minds quickly go to our own needs and wants. We have to slow ourselves to be able to see others before we see ourselves. Privilege is not always apparent to the privileged. Scarcity is not an idea limited to the privileged – everyone can experience the feeling that there will not be enough for me – but oddly, privilege does not remove the fear of scarcity. It takes slowing processes to be able to see this and to adapt attitudes that can change these things.

Waiting and receiving the other in the context of the common meal was formational for the church at Corinth. It helped them to continue to be able to see each other—together with discerning the body, it asserts the inherent value of each member. As we practice the Lord’s Supper in multiethnic churches today, we find that often we are in a much more formalized setting, that does not always include a full meal. There is not much chance of anyone getting full or going hungry on the morsels that are offered
at the Lord’s table. So, is there anything for us in this sacrament that helps us to slow and to receive each other?

The repetition of the liturgy, with its tangible (however tiny) elements that invoke all our senses, is in fact a slowing process capable of reforming our attitudes and our abilities to see one another. Neuroscientists suggest, “affections and habits are much more basic in forming human identity than our conscious thinking,”[^119] which is to say, what we do shapes who we are and who we are becoming. This is an important point for churches that practice the Lord’s Supper only on the rare day. Multiethnic churches aware of the need to be formed by the sacrament would do well to practice it as often as possible. While transformation is not always seen, regular, intentional engagement with worship and sacraments is likely to be more formational than not, especially if we understand why we do what we do.

James K. A. Smith describes how “cultural liturgies” shape our desires, often without our notice – these cultural liturgies tell us what to love and want. Unfortunately, “these ‘secular’ liturgies shape our affections – and thus our habits, decisions, and practices – in a way that sharply contrasts with the vision of Christ’s kingdom.”[^120] As Billings reflects on Smith’s concept, “Christian worship, then, can and should function as a counterliturgy to the secular liturgies for Christians, reorienting Christians toward the

[^120]: Billings, Kindle location 808.
loves, habits and practices of disciples of Christ.” The Lord’s Supper is one of these practices that can reorient our loves, particularly toward God and the people God loves.

The liturgy of the Lord’s Supper is a slow practice because of its needful repetition, and it is in the repetition of the partaking that we come to find the ways we think and the ways we act are changed. The continual nourishment by the Lord’s sacrifice opens us to the idea that we might have enough. Scarcity is replaced by care for the other as we replicate what the Lord has done for us in our interactions with others. Misplaced privilege and needless marginalization comes before our eyes as we understand with our senses that the Lord gave up his rights to the heavenly place in order to restore our relationships. Slowly, we are changed and become able to seek for other bodies what we would want for our own.

Often, that means we are opened to journeying together toward justice and fuller communion. Considering the life together as a journey helps rushed, success-driven churches to place value in relationships, not just in productivity and accomplishment. Journey also helps multiethnic churches to receive one another, in that the life together is seen as inclusive and on-going, a series of ups and downs, progress and push-back. This builds resiliency, which is crucial when working together toward justice and toward reconciliation. Seeking justice and working toward social change can be exhausting,

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121 Billings, Kindle location 810.
frustrating and even dangerous. It is better to know one walks this path together with the Spirit and with spiritual friends.

**Receiving Each Other and Reconciliation**

In its true form, reconciliation possesses the impossible power of the lion lying down with the lamb; the transformative power of turning swords into plowshares. But instead of pushing for relationships that are deep, transformative, and just—instead of allowing these efforts to alter our worldview, deepen our sense of connectedness, and inspire us toward a generosity that seeks to make all things right—we have allowed reconciliation to become synonymous with contentedly hanging out together... Many... have stopped using the term altogether, because it has been so watered down from its original potency.122

Austin Channing Brown describes a difficulty multiethnic churches (any churches, really) may experience. Reconciliation, however beautiful and hopeful, may seem like an ideal, an idea without feet. Because true reconciliation among diverse groups of people has been seen so rarely, churches may not know what it looks like, or how to go about seeking it. Just managing to be in the same room with those who are not alike may seem like an accomplishment. But this is a mistake. Brown continues, “when they’re not paired with greater change, diversity efforts can have the opposite of their intended effect. They keep the church feeling good, innocent, maybe even progressive, all the while preserving the roots of injustice.”123

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123 Brown, 167.
Indeed, this is how the term reconciliation has become maligned. Like Brown, Villodas says, “Reconciliation...is often watered down to mean ‘surface diversity’.”\textsuperscript{124} Like Bonhoeffer’s ‘cheap grace’, the church has leaned toward a ‘cheap reconciliation’. Entirely connected to the cross of Christ, both concepts illustrate shallow understandings of Christ’s redemptive work on the cross. They fail to accept the transformative aspect of the cross for all aspects of life. They fail to notice that as the cross came at a cost to Jesus, so too will this transformation cost his followers.

Reconciling all things is much more than getting a simple diversity in the room. It will take a whole life.

Multiethnic churches will begin to realize that reconciliation as action will cost them their whole lives—it will have to become their life’s work. This can be too high a cost for some, too frightening and too painful. For some, there will be disappointment that the church is not different from society, and that betrayal persists. But for others, the pain will be in looking at oneself and being uncomfortable with what is found. Brown suggests,

“when white people stop short of reconciliation, it’s often because they are motivated by a deep need to believe in their own goodness, and for that goodness to be affirmed...But reconciliation is not about white feelings. It’s about diverting power and attention to the oppressed, toward the powerless.”\textsuperscript{125}

\textsuperscript{124} Villodas, The Deeply Formed Life, 61.
\textsuperscript{125} Brown, I’m Still Here, 170-71.
These churches will have to ask themselves, with Smith and Pattison, “Which do we prefer, the homogeneity of our congregations or God’s reconciliation of all things?”

This is a question that gets to the root of things, and really, it is much more than a preference. It is a question of whether a church is willing to follow Jesus in his work of love.

There may be a temptation for churches who talked reconciliation to stop before getting to the level of justice, but for multiethnic churches, this is not an option. Reconciliation of the real sins and deep hurts we have committed against the diverse body of Christ cannot happen without justice. As Villodas puts it:

“There can be no true reconciliation without justice. For relationships to be fully restored, things have to be made right. Justice...[is] characterized by undoing power abuses and redressing sins against oppressed people. Many who sincerely yearn for reconciliation can want to merely name the sins of the past, wash one another’s feet, and then just move on without further thought or action toward justice. While these gestures may be beautifully moving, the larger systemic social injustices continue unhindered, creating fragmented relationships and ruined lives.”

It is hard and some churches will go no further. But other churches will see the possibility of embrace with the other, the enemy—that is, following Christ deep into reconciliation—as the best way to spend a life. As churches become secure in their

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126 Smith and Pattison, *Slow Church*, 110.
shared identity in Christ, and as they become better at discerning the body and receiving one another, real reconciliation becomes more of a concrete possibility. Now members are seeing one another more accurately, they are hearing a diversity of personal stories, and their hearts are being remade in love for one another. At this point, churches need to be able to move to actions of love, so that reconciliation can be realized. For these churches, seeking justice, changing structures that maintain oppression, and advocating for those without voice will be next steps in reconciling relationships.

**Slow Practices for Receiving One Another**

The following slow practices range in intensity, but all will help churches to learn to receive one another so that they can journey toward reconciliation together. These practices help church members be formed into those slow communions who can follow Christ into places of injustice with an eye to a different way, and hands held so that no one is lost along the way.

**Eating Together**

Giving Holy Communion a prominent place in the life of the multiethnic church will naturally extend some of the same symbolism and meaning to other meals shared together. Then, conversations over shared meals can become extensions of that same communion. Nourishment is offered to the body of Christ in many ways, as the body, mind and spirit are at once fed by the life together in Christ. Shared meals can become a way of receiving one another, just as it did in Corinth. Eating together regularly is an
excellent slow communion practice, and is already an important part of many church traditions.

While we are all accustomed to eating meals, eating together in the multiethnic church may take some intentionality for best practice. It is easy for like-types to gather around a table for meals. There is certainly some good in this, but if an exclusivity is created, then new boundary lines start to emerge. Multiethnic churches may want to set certain meals, or certain portions of every mealtime, for mixing with people who are not from one’s ingroup. This can help to break down barriers that arise, as well as encourage greater sharing between people who don’t know each other (or how to go about knowing each other). In Smith and Pattison’s ‘slow churches’, such mealtimes “create a space where the conversational life of the church community can flourish. If our meals are intended to be expressions of the Eucharist, our dinner table conversations take on new dimensions of meaning.”128 In addition to intentionally mixing the groups, it may be necessary to provide thought-provoking topics of conversations from time to time. Hopefully this will make easier the enjoyment of further, spontaneous conversations.

Some churches will have meals together and call it enough. It can be difficult to get people to mix in multiethnic churches that have not worked through their common identity and purpose, and so in these settings, any conversations that happen are

128 Smith and Pattison, Slow Church, 215.
considered to be as close to reconciliation as one can get. But it is not enough.

Conversations help people see one another and know one another, but their purpose is to let us go further together. Brown finds listening often does not lead to action, and instead is considered an end in itself:

A great many people believe that reconciliation boils down to dialogue…but dialogue is productive toward reconciliation only when it leads to action—when it inverts power and pursues justice for those who are most marginalized…In too many churches and organizations, listening to the hurt and pain of people of color is the end of the road, rather than the beginning.”

This is another disappointing outcome for those who suffer under oppression, and those who hope for real reconciliation. Brown’s criticism cuts even more sharply, “Too often dialogue functions as a stall tactic, allowing white people to believe they’ve done something heroic when the real work is yet to come.”

Eating meals together, with their shared conversations, is not an end, but part of the process of life together. They may not be enough to bring about reconciliation, but they can lead to deeper ways of receiving one another. Knowing each other better is foundational to being able to reveal more of oneself. When multiethnic churches want to deal with their more problematic and painful histories, this is essential. Caring for one another at meals can translate to caring for more needs, and seeking justice as required.

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129 Brown, I’m Still Here, 168.
130 Brown, 170.
Speaking of the early church that emerged after Pentecost in Acts, Yoder states, “Only because [the breaking of bread] was at the center of their life together could it extend into the formation of economic community…the “common purse” of the Jerusalem church was not a purse: it was a common table…the sharing was the…organic extension from table fellowship.”[131] Seeking economic justice was an extension of table fellowship. Conversation moves toward acts of justice; hearing one another moves to acting on behalf of one another.

**Gardening and Placemaking**

Because we often live lives separated from the earth and from a firm sense of place, it may seem odd to think of gardening and placemaking as a practice a church might take up, but that is why these can actually be important correctives. In many cases, being separate from any kind of land is an injustice, and this has left many people and their communities worse off. Gardening is an easy way for people to begin to reconnect with the land, while placemaking is a more holistic way of thinking about our connection to place. The one can build upon the other.

Gardening, while still a popular hobby, was once a necessity, as it allowed families to grow the food they needed. Digging into the earth, gardeners would bury seeds and small plants, tend them, and harvest their crops. The process would help

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gardeners be attuned to the quality of the soil itself, patterns of rainfall and seasons, patience, and the ever-changing stages of growth. Eating the fresh produce, or preserving them for use all winter, gardeners would appreciate the earth for its nutrients, and give thanks to God for providing the growth.

To return to this process, and to increase the availability of healthy produce, many communities, both urban and suburban, have begun community gardens where people can be allotted a bit of earth in which to grow things. Churchyard gardens have done the same thing—making space for gardening by people who might not be able to get their hands into the dirt and grow their own food. Some food pantries are enriched with fresh produce by the productiveness of such gardens, and the generosity of their neighborhood gardeners.

Multiethnic churches can also take up the slow practice of gardening. Perhaps they could set up churchyard gardens, or partner with a neighborhood organization to begin a garden somewhere else in the community. The process of getting started with gardening does not have to be complicated. But how does this relate multiethnic community and to receiving the other, and further how does it contribute to reconciliation?

Firstly, gardening is truly a slow practice. Few seeds grow to maturity overnight. Actually doing the work of gardening begins to reset the parts of our lives that want quick answers and easy solutions. While we can do things to improve the growth of the
plants, we cannot hasten the growth of the plants unreasonably. They grow in their own
time.

Secondly, we can come to understand the need for the earth itself to be healthy
enough to grow food that we can eat. We can overlook this truth when we get all our
food from a store, but when we watch plants grow, we can see the difference good soil
makes, the importance of water availability, and the relationship between that bit of
earth and our own lives. This encourages creation justice, which is a multiethnic church
concern for a couple of reasons. First, overcoming our divisions by finding our
communal identity in Christ will have opened our eyes to the reconciliation of all things,
and to this we add the earth we share. And then too, we notice that those most adversely
affected by harm to the earth are the same ones who have been harmed by social
injustice—this time, the injustice is in terms of being able to acquire healthy foods and to
be able to connect to the land in this type of way.

And finally, gardening can help people begin to feel a connection to place, and
the need to feel connected to not only a piece of land but the community that is present
at that place. This can lead to a desire for other kinds of justice. Economic justice, that all
in the community might have enough, is one that becomes apparent. Racial justice
begins to be seen as an injustice not only against individuals, but also to the entire
multiethnic community, in that it has fractured the community of a given place and
created greater disconnect. Gardening also feeds the desire for placemaking.
What is placemaking? Placemaking is a holistic way of looking at one’s community and considering all the moving parts that contribute to a flourishing future for the community located there. Many communities use placemaking to make plans for how to improve their communities in the next few years. Placemaking looks at what assets a community has, what needs it has, and where it wants to be heading as a group of people. It considers physical, social, spiritual, and intellectual concerns, as well as health, economic, educational and creative concerns and assets. It is the act of seeing one’s community and seeing what can be done to help it flourish.

One weakness in community placemaking is that it can still operate under the habitus and structures of the dominant culture. Gentrification is sometimes seen as part of a community’s placemaking (planned or not), when economic concerns are focused on bringing income for a certain few rather than considering the economic welfare of all who already live in that community. In this way, some kinds of placemaking can serve to push out those who may no longer fit with the vision of the community leaders (or business power brokers, as the case may be).

In contrast, when the multiethnic church engages in placemaking, a biblical vision of flourishing can lead to communities of increasing justice and decreasing division. Placemaking is a slow practice because it does take a lot of time, and further, it requires consideration to a span of years in the future; it is not quickly finished, but employs a vision for community in the future.
A few churches have undertaking placemaking plans, but many may feel intimidated about stepping beyond the bounds of typical ‘church’ things. Yet the local church has long be positioned to be a community placemaker, given its typically long commitment to a single community paired with its Christian concern for its neighbors. Multiethnic churches, knowing the communities more broadly (being, as it is, made up of a broad spectrum of community members) can speak more wisely about the needs of all community members as well as the land and the created aspects of the place. Placemaking can become a long-term work of justice as it seeks to right wrongs and bring about greater flourishing of all parts of the community, particularly those voices and concerns that are typically marginalized in such discussions.

When Heidi Neumark describes the revitalization of her congregation in the Bronx, she speaks of the building of increased multiethnic relationships, the process of learning to see one another, and also a commitment to the people gathered in that neighborhood. Although she didn’t use these words, the church began to engage in placemaking by seeking greater wholeness for their neighbors. She calls it, “the story of a people refusing to submit to the ruins at their feet and reclaiming their land to build new homes and a new future, the story of entering a church about to fold and rebuilding it with new people and a new wing.”

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132 Neumark, Breathing Space, Kindle location 129.
Some communities in which multiethnic churches can form may feel like they are in ruins at the feet, because of long divisions and a history of structural injustice. It takes a Spirit-led vision to be able to see the possibilities of a community that sees all and serves all. Multiethnic churches who engage in placemaking will have a lot of work, so it is good to be sure that it is in fact the Spirit that leads the vision, and not some other motivation. There may not be much glory, and instead it may be that the church is called into a series of difficult places that need redemption and reconciliation. And yet, if it Spirit-led, it will be life-giving for the congregation and the community. Neumark refers to the thought of St. Teresa, saying, “Ecstasy, then, is not just interior communion with God but communion with our neighbor. The passion implied is the exciting power of relationships, one by one, creating a new community, a new city, a new world.”

There is joy with the struggle, with the hard work.

**Spiritual Friendships & Advocacy**

Advocacy is the lending of one’s support to a particular cause. Some people seem well-suited to advocacy, but others will quail at the idea of speaking out, whether it is speaking on behalf of themselves or someone else. ‘Advocacy’ can sometimes privilege one voice over another, and can sometimes reinforce the fact that there are differences in power and social capital. This is the weakness of the term, which has to be

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133 Neumark, 31.
Acknowledged. And yet seeking structural changes that lead to justice often requires advocacy. This is why slow communion pairs advocacy with the idea of spiritual friendship. The one can balance the other, and grow deeper relationships instead of more unequal relationships.

To illustrate the idea, let’s look to one last story from Heidi Neumark’s *Breathing Space*. Neumark shares a story from her youth, from a time when she had an elderly friend who she would often visit; it was a spiritual friendship, as the elder was a wise advisor. Neumark tells how she built a bridge across a small stream, which was to provide a shortcut for the friend to use when she went to visit another friend. But Neumark was surprised to find that her friend didn’t want a shortcut, because then she would miss meeting all the other friends she kept up with along the way. “‘Child,’ she said..., ‘can’t take shortcuts if you want friends in this world. Shortcuts don’t mix with love.’”\(^{134}\)

Neumark’s story, here, is packed with insights, but for our purposes, we see the importance of spiritual friendship. It overcomes assumptions, and shows another way. It speaks up, and it gently offers its insight. Here, we see the friendship teaches the benefit of taking the slow way, taking the longer path, in order to spread love across a wider arc. The spiritual friendship contrasts with more superficial relationships in that it can

\(^{134}\text{Neumark, 17-18.}\)
speak the truth in love, and it intends continue the journey together. It knows it won’t be broken by its truth because love is its bond.

Advocacy is another way of seeking to redress wrongs and change structural injustice. It is a way of giving voice to those who have been marginalized or silenced by society, by advocating for them, or by lending one’s voice to amplify the one that was silenced. Multiethnic churches may naturally desire to undertake this work as they learn to live together, but it is often difficult. When the multiethnic church begins to approach advocacy as one of its slow practices, it is good to go together, to have spiritual friendships that will walk the path together. Both require listening as well as speaking, and reconciliation is pursued through both the friendship and the action.

Spiritual friendships paired with advocacy can also right misguided power dynamics that could emerge in advocacy work. Advocacy joins voices together, so that the ones that have been marginalized might be heard. But it risks the more powerful voice keeping power, being louder with its own message (which might not be the accurate message) and once again keeping the other voice marginalized. If not grounded in love, it can be a place of conflicting voices looking for prominence. Spiritual friendships can point out when these things are happening, and over time the growth of the friendship may allow individuals to have a more communal sense of voice.

On the introduction to his podcast, Pass the Mic, Tyler Burns writes, “we’ve seen a surge of Black leaders and congregants in predominantly white or multiethnic
churches and Christian spaces decide that it is time for them to go. We bear witness to the hurt, harm and frustration that our siblings have experienced.” In the March 8, 2021 episode, Jemar Tisby describes the process that led him to leave the PCA and other white or multiethnic evangelical organizations. Many incidents involved white leaders who did not stand up to incidents of racism and white supremacy, but rather found ways to excuse those who committed them. He felt the organizations did not value the image of God in him, as a Black man, and ultimately had to leave. This is not an isolated incident. How different might the outcome of such incidents have been if spiritual friendship and advocacy had been routinely paired in these organizations?

The world is full of places where the church can engage as an advocate, but the church cannot take on all things at once. It makes sense to narrow down the many types of advocacy, and find the few that make most sense to the particular multiethnic church. What matters in one community may not be a problem in another. Then it is important to have all members, or a group of members who will work on a particular issue together, to have a joint vision. And those members will want to develop a spiritual friendship.

In this way, communion will be formed even as justice is sought together by the group. Brenda Salter McNeil speaks to having a joint vision or ‘shared mission’:

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136 See note 132 above.
Fellowship springs from shared mission….it’s not enough to just be friends. It’s not enough to hear someone’s story and feel genuine compassion…[those] are not enough to sustain a group over the long haul and bring about systemic change on a larger scale. Instead we must focus first on a mission to which our group can be committed together.\textsuperscript{137}

Spiritual friendship paired with a shared mission can help multiethnic churches live into their calling to be communions of reconciliation and redemption. Shared discernment of places of brokenness, sought in love, can solidify the communion and form the congregation into a people that is not going to be returning to the ways of division and enmity. Instead, they will be empowered to follow the way of the cross, the paths of love through deep pain, for the sake of another. The communion is formed and formational as it becomes an agent of change in its community; the new habitus emerges.

The next chapter will look at how the multiethnic communion, so formed, might be a witness to Christ and the body of Christ.

\textsuperscript{137} McNeil, \textit{Roadmap to Reconciliation}, 76.
Chapter 7 Witness: Gathering for the Sake of the World

In this chapter, we will consider the element of slow communion that is the witness of the multiethnic church in the world. As it lives in unity as the body of Christ, the church proclaims the work of God in the cross, reconciling all things. Having entered into the work of justice in keeping with its identity forged in reconciliation, the church now gathers for the sake of the world. In the face of much brokenness, it suggests there is another way, and that God has done it. Slow practices in this section continue naturally from the last chapter, suggesting compassion and empathy, and partnership and solidarity.

Witness

Finally, Paul reminds the people of the church that it is in eating and drinking in the Lord’s Supper together that they proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes again. That is, as they live in unity as the body of Christ, they witness to the reconciliation that has been done by Christ’s death and resurrection, and to the hope they have for complete reconciliation at the time of Christ’s return.

In this last turn, we see that Paul wants the people to know that they are not just living for themselves, but collectively, as a body they are living as a witness to Christ, to what Christ has done. They are living for those beyond their borders. There is continued warning against division, as it is quite impossible to witness to reconciliation when the body does not live as reconciled. Indeed, when divisions persist, it is impossible to
witness to unity so vast and complete that it could only be possible through Spirit-driven, Christ-given reconciliation.

These are words not only for the Corinthians, but for every Christian body that ever shall follow. How these words sear us now, as our divisions seem never-ending. What witness do we bring to the world now? Is it a witness to reconciliation? If not, how can we call ourselves the body of Christ? Does the multiethnic church today have any chance to live in Christ-like unity, when much more homogenous groups have found unity untenable, a lesser good, a lower priority?

These questions are perhaps a call to continued lament, an unexpected side to the formation wrought by the practice of the Lord’s Supper. We experience the brokenness of the body of Christ in a different way when we are the body broken, or the body doing the breaking. The repeated partaking of the broken body, that was broken for reconciliation, we understand the depths of the alienation of humanity, not only from God, but from one another. Our compassion extends to those ever farther off.

Reconciliation may be easy enough to talk about, but we have already seen that talking about it is not enough, particularly when the church’s actions do not match those words. There needs to be an outward turning with actions that are for the benefit of those outside the church. Smith asserts, “only when Christians go forth in love to fulfill their calling as Christians, only then does their love become a ‘real’ expression of and a ‘true’ witness to what they have celebrated in Eucharistic worship, namely, ‘God is love.”
Jesus Christ is Lord.” The real witness is living lives that have been reconciled, and reconciliation is seen in unity.

In American society, where racism runs deep and sly, reconciliation is still a far, far easier thing to talk about than to live. Previous chapters have examined the ways in which multiethnic churches have to do the hard work that is required before reconciliation can even become part of the conversation. Likely, this path will look different in each local church, but each church, as part of the larger body formed by the Spirit, does have the resources to continue along this path. The sharing of the bread and wine bring us to the place where we can have hard conversations, particularly as we have discerned the body and found our identity in it, and joined in shared mission. Much of this process will have already brought witness before the community, and will evoke a more solid commitment to seeing the effects of unity extend further.

At the same time, we also remain mindful that in all things, it is by God’s Spirit that we are made one. It is a gift, in the end, because God desires it. “Pentecost is the natural atmosphere of the Eucharist” Zizioulas posits, and he is right. God’s Spirit descending, making the many understand each other without losing what made them who they were, was a right start to reconciliation. It was so different from the culture, that everyone who experienced it knew it was from God. And so too, when we are

139 Zizioulas, The Eucharistic Communion and the World, Kindle location 383.
allowed, again by God’s Spirit, to experience new relationships with those who had been separated from us, we understand the Lord’s death in a new way. It was making us, and the Spirit continues making us, into one.

Indeed, Pentecost showed God’s persistent love for all cultures, and God’s willingness that reconciliation be for all of them, without reducing any of them. As Volf claims, “the miracle of Pentecost consists in universal intelligibility and unhindered agency in the midst of social and cultural heterogeneity,” which reduced the sense in which one group was insider, while the rest were other. The multiethnic church finds its motivation here, in that this was God’s work, God’s desire for a reconciled communion drawn from many places. Internalizing this, we cannot help but find our habitus changing.

As much as reconciliation changes our lives, individually and as the body of Christ, it is not for us alone. The witness we offer as a church is not for us, but for the world. In this sense, unity which may or may not feel good is not simply for us, but for the world. That the spirit has been at work in bringing reconciliation into our human relationships, however unexpected and countercultural they may be, is something the world needs to see. As we, who would never have eaten together, eat and drink together as one, the world can come to see that what Christ claims to have done is really being

\[Volf, \textit{Exclusion and Embrace}, 229.\]
done. It’s our prophetic work: “The church is not the savior, but in feeding upon Christ at the Supper and bearing witness to him in the world, the church acts as John the Baptist, prophetically crying out in the wilderness that there is one who is making all things new: Jesus Christ.”  

**Slow Practices for Witness**

The following slow practices build upon those slow, habitus-changing practices learned in the previous chapters, and may allow for the church’s practices to flow into the community life outside the church. While they continue to form church members in shared communion, they also witness to communities about the new creation the Holy Spirit has been fostering within local multiethnic churches. The possibility for a kind of communion with those of other or no faith emerges.

**Solidarity and Partnership**

*We are a people called to live in a way that answers fitly to such divine generosity; we too are to live sacrificially, not pursuing our own interests and pleasures but giving ourselves for others in remembrance of the one who gave himself for us.*

Acts of solidarity are perhaps an extension of advocacy, as described in the previous chapter. Both slow practices have a conviction the cross of Christ sends the church outward, to stand with those who have been injured and overlooked in society.

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142 Hays, *First Corinthians*, 205.
Solidarity implies an identification with those who seeking justice, and a willingness to stand with them. It is more comprehensive than advocacy, because it does not just amplify voices, but rather places its future hopes alongside another’s. Unity in the church provokes the ability to stand in unity with those whose concerns may not have been ours, and to now see them as our concerns as well.

Brenda McNeil Salter discusses how reconciliation within the church will create a desire to see similar reconciliation within the larger world. She writes, “Reconciliation is not just for us. It is God’s movement to transform the world so that all people on the earth can flourish. Reconciliation cannot be done in isolation. Instead it must be done in solidarity with people whose concerns, problems and issue have become our own.”¹⁴³ A partnering is required.

Being formed in the multiethnic church that has already grappled with justice issues and reconciliation allows the church to bring a different way of thinking to community relationships. Although those outside the church may not think the same way as those within the church, they may notice that something is different, and hopefully it is something that works for a different kind of results than usual.

Members of the multiethnic church may have changed their ways of thinking, some of which will be clear, while others may be less so. McNeil asserts that “what

¹⁴³ McNeil, Roadmap to Reconciliation, 96.
[people] fail to realize is that relational connections cannot be sustained without structural intentionality...the old...practices that have worked in the past no longer fit with the new ideas and experiences that come with pursuing reconciliation and intercultural integrity.”

They have probably begun experiencing such differences within the church, for example, in that patterns of whiteness will have lost some of their invisibility, will have been replaced with more equitable patterns. When entering into acts of solidarity with the community, the church will not want to resume typical patterns of society, but rather extend their new patterns.

One of the patterns that the multiethnic church that has worked through many issues will have is relationships that are based on Christ’s forgiveness, relationships that are sometimes called covenantal. These relationships see people differently. Covenantal relationships are seen in contrast with contracts. Contracts are the typical type of relationship seen in society, and indicate a limited give and take. Volf describes contracts as “performance oriented...marked by limited commitment...strictly reciprocal.” They have a purpose, and when they are done, the relationship is basically finished; this type of relationship is widely accepted in society. Volf ponders, “But will ‘contract’ do as the master metaphor for social life as a whole?...the three salient features of contracts are three important ways of misconstruing human life.” He insists that

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144 McNeil, 83.
145 Volf, 148.
146 Volf, 149.
contractual relationships are not enough for life, because they do not really honor innate human value, value based on being made in the image of God. Rather, contractual relationships consider other humans as means to an end. They are not rooted in love, but simply in the desire to get something.

Another way of getting at this is to consider the idea of transaction versus transformation. Contracts result in interactions that might be called transactions. They give what is due, and then then end. Little is required of either person engaging in a transaction. Transformation is something much different. McNeil suggests the process toward reconciliation, “involves a transition from transactions to genuine transformation...It’s no longer only about completing short-term measurable transactions but about long-term sustainability and the ability to truly thrive.”

Multiethnic churches that have engaged processes of reconciliation will have discovered this. When engaging with community concerns in acts of solidarity, there will be less of a beginning and end of an interaction, and more of a sense of sustainability. The questions they ask will be wider, more holistic. What does it take to support this relationship? How can I continue to hear the other person? How can I stand with her more authentically? Where am I bringing damage, and how could that change? And what would bring transformation to these concerns?

Transformational covenant relationships are something that multiethnic churches can bring to work of solidarity in the community. The difference in the way people are treated, not as a means to an end, but in having worth in themselves, in itself will be a witness to the work of transformation that is going on in the church. It will reveal people that have been changed within, and who can have this new kind of relationships with people who are not necessarily from their own sociocultural groups.

Letty Russell reminds us, “In the practice of hospitality, partnership and power go together, and we need to be constantly aware of the possibility/potential of misusing hospitality to demean those with less power and wealth and to make ourselves feel superior.”¹⁴⁸ This is a reminder for everyone who engages in partnership, but particularly for those who are accustomed to having power accorded them within society (and who, perhaps, may be oblivious to it). Being aware that true partnerships will share power equally, churches and individuals will have to continually assess ways of power sharing that allow all voices to be heard equally and build up the community in new ways. If the body of Christ has become accustomed to doing so within the body, they will be able to bring life to community partnerships in the same way.

**Compassion and Empathy**

*After Jesus washed his followers’ feet, you’d expect him to turn around and ask at least one of them to wash his feet...But Jesus surprised his followers by telling*

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them to go wash other people’s feet…Essentially, he said, “I pursued you in humility and love. Now go pursue others in humility and love”….Not only is Jesus serious about crossing boundaries to pursue us, but he’s also equally serious about our crossing boundaries to pursue others. He has shown us how to do it.\textsuperscript{149}

Most churches engage in acts of compassion in some way or another. Acts of compassion become formational slow practices when they move from transaction to the seeking of transformation. Acts of compassion motivated by experiences of reconciliation will move away from only being for emergencies—emergencies being things such as collecting food for the hungry, sending relief money after a hurricane, or finding a place for an abused wife to stay.

Of course the church needs to respond to emergencies like these, and they will continue to do so. But increasingly, the church will begin to work on the underlying issues that are creating these emergencies. They may work for structural change to alleviate child poverty, seek policy change for climate issues causing more hurricanes, or seek to find the roots of domestic abuse. Rather than being simply motivated by a good political speech, for the church, an eye for reconciliation underlies these actions.

Letty Russell writes, “hospitality begins when we seek to welcome one another in Christ by taking very seriously the social situations of our lives and those of other persons…if we hear a person crying out in fear, hospitality includes addressing the

\textsuperscript{149} Cleveland, \textit{Disunity in Christ}, 191.
issues of fear, not just offering comfort.” Multiethnic congregations that have learned to put on a new habitus within their churches, that have become accustomed to listening, will have become better able to hear the words under such cries. Their compassion will tend toward empathy, and they will be able to stand with the one who cries as they seek resolution to these underlying issues.

Elizabeth Segal, in her book *Social Empathy*, describes the difference between interpersonal empathy and social empathy. Interpersonal empathy is, “the expression of empathy between individuals or in small group settings” and allows one to understand the feelings or perspectives of another; we commonly experience this kind of empathy. Social empathy involves the “broader application of empathy…the ability to understand people and other social groups by perceiving and experiencing their life situations,” which requires understanding of background or historical information and context. She uses the metaphor of a camera to describe the difference: “looking at the world through the close-up lens is interpersonal empathy, while looking at the world through the wide-angle lens is social empathy.” Life together within multiethnic churches, particularly as a new habitus is taken up, will engage members in both types of empathy within a diverse body of Christ.

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150 Russell, 105.
152 Segal, 4.
153 Segal, 177.
Further, Segal cites research that suggests these two types of empathy are linked: the higher one’s interpersonal empathy, the higher one’s social empathy. This would suggest that multiethnic congregations that have engaged the process of changing their habitus will not only have improved their interpersonal empathetic abilities, but also their social empathy, in and out of the church context. This matters when considering how to engage empathetically with a diverse community outside the church itself. Segal indicates it is the “socially empathetic view of people’s experiences [that] can create the type of insight that makes us want to change social conditions, to move us toward building a better world.” A change in habitus that increases empathy may allow for a more authentic engagement with social conditions that affect communities, without requiring community members to first become a part of the church or adhere to its standards, as sometimes happens. The church becomes able to see the goodness of their neighbors for who they are, and from that place, they may be able to engage with the social issues that affect them in helpful and just ways.

Even with increased social empathy, we may not always be able to find ways to resolve issues. Some systemic issues are big, and churches may feel small. Yet, Russell assures, “We know that what we do is inadequate, but we include God in the relationship, confident that the mending can be brought about by God, despite our

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154 Segal, 174-75.
155 Segal, 5.
limited efforts of hospitality.” While positive change is hoped for, it is not the only result. Relationships that emerge as churches engage in compassion and empathy with their community members, people who they had once seen as stranger and other, may be as important as the work that they do together and for one another. By God’s grace, these may become places of reconciliation as well.

The new habitus of the body of Christ will serve well, particularly as the Holy Spirit guides churches into such spaces. As Cleveland stated in the epigraph to this section, Christ has shown us the way to love. Borders and barriers can be crossed in this love, along with great humility. Any acts of compassion, partnership or solidarity will have to be rooted in love and humility if they are to witness to the one who taught us to love by his own sacrifice. This humble love is manifest in respect and care for others who may think differently or believe differently or act differently from us. This means it does not require the differences to be eliminated in order to offer care. Rather, the image of God is seen in a host of differences – good as they are, so loved by God.

156 Russell, 117.
Conclusion

The film, *Of Gods and Men*, tells the story of a small group of French Trappist monks living in a monastery in Algeria, inspired by an incident in 1996, in which seven of these monks were kidnapped and killed by extremists.\(^{157}\) The early scenes of the film show the monks’ everyday life among their Muslim neighbors, tilling the land, gathering honey, going to market, sharing stories of pain with those neighbors, praying. One is a doctor, and sees many people every day seeking medical care, despite the fact that he himself is aging and ill. It is clear that each cares for the wellbeing of the other, whether monk or local community member.

As terrorists take hold of the area and begin killing foreigners and those who do not follow their ways, the monks must decide if they will stay in this community, or leave for safer places. Giving it time and prayer, and struggling deeply, slowly and over time, they come to the consensus that they will stay. The realize their lives are entwined with the people of this place. They have committed themselves to God and to this place, and so they stay, fully acknowledging the risk. Some outsiders and viewers will surely criticize this decision as foolishness, but for the monks, it is a decision of peace.

Two scenes illustrate the life of both struggle and communion. After the monks have decided to stay, there is a scene in which they receive the host in communion.

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\(^{157}\) *Of Gods and Men*, directed by Xavier Beauvois, (2011; Sony Pictures), film.
Immediately, the scene moves from sanctuary table to dinner table. Here, the monks are celebrating a meal, music plays, and wine is poured. The faces of the monks are unusually bright, smiling with enjoyment, perhaps looking forward to sharing this cup together. But this cup soon becomes the cup of Christ, shared so often joyously, but now also in suffering. The faces change with the levity of the moment, as they realize the depth of their communion with Christ and with each other. It is as if they experience Christ’s suffering in love and pain, as their own, for the first time. And yet, this is not the end. Their faces again change, as they recall the peace of Christ, the peace of their decisions to live with Christ, as Christ, for communion. Revealed is the complexity of communion, encompassing struggle and suffering and peace and joy.

In the final scene, the monks have been kidnapped, and are being marched in a line through snowy darkness to their execution. The desolation of this scene is reminiscent of Jesus’ walk to Golgotha, carrying his cross. The men stumble through the snow, prodded on by their armed captors. In place of a cross, one monk carries another, holding up his brother as he slips through the snow. Snow gathers, and the line of monks and terrorists together march silently into the distance until they are seen no more; death is implied.

As that last scene unfolds, there is voice-over of one monk’s last words, a thank you letter to those he leaves behind:

Should it ever befall me, and it could happen today, to be a victim of the terrorism swallowing up all foreigners here, I would like my community, my
church, my family, to remember that my life was given to God and to this
country. That the Unique Master of all life was no stranger to this brutal
departure. And that my death is the same as so many other violent ones,
consigned to the apathy of oblivion. I’ve lived enough to know, I am complicit in
the evil that, alas, prevails over the world and the evil that will smite me blindly.
I could never desire such a death. I could never feel gladdened that these people
I love be accused randomly of my murder. I know the contempt felt for people
here, indiscriminately. And I know how Islam is distorted by certain Islamism.
This country, and Islam, for me are something different. They’re a body and a
soul...This thank you which encompasses my entire life includes you, of course,
friends of yesterday and today, and you too, friend of the last minute, who knew
not what you were doing. Yes, to you as well I address this thank you and this
farewell which you envisaged. May we meet again, happy thieves in Paradise, if
it pleases God the Father of us both. Amen. Insha’Allah.158

In this lived communion, this monk reveals that he has been remade
in the ways of
reconciliation. The life together—with Christ, with brothers, with neighbors—has
enabled him to sense the image of God in the other, even in his captors and executors.
He can imagine a future together, even with these who did not value his life. He can
pray for a table of communion of the future, together with these literal enemies.

Although there is death, this is a story of a flourishing communion. It is a story of
a group of Christ-followers who have been formed by a different habitus: no longer is it
a story of dividing lines, of us-against-them. It is a story of solidarity. It is a story of life
that grows out of identification with Christ, committed to the common life together, and
seeking toward reconciliation in even the hardest situations.

158 Beauvoir, Of Gods and Men.
In a slow communion, congregations may find that they are able to grow into these ways of Christ, as they become the new creation together. While multiethnic churches are not monasteries, they share something of the goal of a common life where new creation can unfurl and flourish, where one can learn to discern the image of God in each person. This film shows both the joys and the pain of such a life.

Many multiethnic churches have not been able to sustain life together long enough to realize communion. It may be true that people like the idea of multiethnic churches more than reality of them. It may be true that some attempts at multiethnic church have resulted in little more than superficial diversity. It may also be true that many who had joined multiethnic congregations in hopes of living into reconciliation were disappointed by what they experienced. And it is certainly true that people of color have borne this pain disproportionately. But this does not have to be the end of the story.

Multiethnic churches are difficult to form and sustain. Many people find they prefer to feel at home at church, with people like themselves in culture, language or style. Many church leaders choose these paths because they seem to form faster or more easily. But one of the big reasons multiethnic churches don’t flourish is because they fail to reckon with issues of justice that are at work to keep divisions alive in our society. They refuse to see systemic racism and a host of structural injustices as injustices against the body of Christ. They do not discern the work of the Holy Spirit already in these
places, and therefore, they fail to see the work of dismantling these structures as the work of the church, alongside the Spirit.

Slow communion seeks to help form communions of people who are willing to join God’s Spirit in the work of reconciliation that takes up just these issues. Based on Paul’s admonitions in 1 Corinthians 11-13, particularly his discussions around the Lord’s Supper, slow communion looks for ways to change our current church habitus into one which more closely matches that of Jesus Christ, crucified and given as a sacrifice for the lives of the diverse many that would make up the body of Christ. As part of the new habitus, slow communion looks to build a common identity in Christ while celebrating diversity within the body, discern the body of Christ, learn to receive one another, and be a witness to the death and resurrection of Christ. In other words, it seeks to give multiethnic congregations ways to gather as a communion – to learn who it is and who it belongs to, to learn to see each other, to learn how to live together, and to learn how to be for its community. And it offers slow practices that help these things form deeply within the communion, so that it can work for justice and to reconciliation.

This is not an easy church, the multiethnic church. But we follow Christ, and him crucified, so we already know easy is probably not the way we need to go as we follow. It is a long journey. Yet becoming a multiethnic church that seeks deep reconciliation by following the Spirit into issues of justice can be a place of great hope and joy. Katongole and Rice remind us that it was “for the joy set before him” that Jesus endured the
cross.¹⁵⁹ And therefore, “for us to live as if reconciliation is God’s work, the long haul must eventually become marked by the pursuit of joy, not merely dogged discipline and duty.”¹⁶⁰ The world needs churches that have been able to find this joy and this hope. The world is falling on the divisions of its own making, breaking apart on its sharp edges, and in great pain. It needs a church that is so closely aligned with Christ that it will follow the Spirit through the pain of every broken relationship to a new place, a reconciled new creation in Christ Jesus. By the grace of God, may we enter into slow communions, in joy and in hope, for the sake of the world.

¹⁵⁹ Katongole and Rice, 144.
¹⁶⁰ Katongole and Rice, 144.
Bibliography


Biography

Jodie Wu was born in Grand Rapids, Michigan and grew up on a farm in West Michigan. She received a BA in English from Hope College in 1998, and an MDiv. from Fuller Theological Seminary in 2005. She is an ordained Minister of Word and Sacrament in the Reformed Church in America. For the past eleven years, Jodie has been co-pastor (together with her husband) of Bogart Memorial Reformed Church, a small, multiethnic congregation. She lives in northern New Jersey with her husband and two children.