WHENEVER YOU EAT:
EXPLORING THE DYNAMICS OF CONNECTION AND DISRUPTION IN THE EUCHARISTIC MEAL

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Contents

Dedicated to…

Lauren, whose presence is a constant reminder to me that every table can become a sacrament of communion.

Leah, Asher, and Baden whose eagerness to break bread evokes a hunger for the abundance of life with God.

Mom and Dad, whose devotion to fill our table (and lives) with good things was matched only by a devotion to welcome new friends to the table.

Mr. (Fred) Rogers, who helped teach me that life is a meal at which all are welcome.

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The United Church of Christ Pension Boards developed the adaptive container called the Next Generation Leadership Initiative at just the right time and gifted me an incredible group of colleagues at the very beginning of my ministry. This group, along with the leadership of the Rev. Krista Betz, fed my imagination about "The Church of the Future."

The group of participants in this study not only took the risk of joining in the work, but showed incredible candor and vulnerability throughout the interviews and Breakfast Church experiences.

My Point Place United Church of Christ family has been experimenting and experiencing disruptions of all kinds with me for over thirteen years—many of them pastor-inflicted. The grace with which you endure through these disruptions with a fierce commitment to one another is one of the many hidden gospel gems that will never be appreciated on budget reports or in theoretical conversations about "The Church." It is a gift to be your pastor, and I hope that our little Breakfast Church experiments will help to stimulate new imaginations of how the Community of Jesus can live lives even more worthy of our Host.

Chapter 1

What if, in this liminal season of the American Church as it lurches out of Christendom, Christian leaders were mining tradition, new scientific insights, and Spiritual imagination to design communal rhythms and liturgies around practices that are most likely to catalyze spiritual transformation and growth? Too often, the liturgies and other ministry practices of churches function more to cater to human instincts for stability, coping, and self-protection than to cultivate the primary ingredients of spiritual growth which arise from Divine encounter: connection and disruption. As the outside world rightly demands of Christians evidence of a faith that "works"—one that makes people more loving, compassionate, wise, and creative—churches must construct containers that can hold these paradoxical ingredients of transformation. But the urgency comes not only because fewer and fewer people outside churches consider churches worthwhile arenas for meaning and growth. The gospel at its core is an invitation to an adaptive journey: to repent, be transformed, be made new, embody a new kind of humanity. These images position the church as an adaptive movement of individuals and communities that embrace their own processes of transformation and adaptation *and* embody an adaptive presence in the world which can flourish in and speak meaningfully to the world's diverse and changing needs, places, and cultures. The American Church's present experience of a wider cultural shift out of the Christendom era is an invitation to recover this adaptive essence. To do so, churches must develop adaptive containers: practices and environments that can hold both connection and disruption, both of which are byproducts of Divine and interpersonal encounter. This paper aims to explore one of those adaptive containers, the Eucharist, and how its origin and potential might fit these design criteria.

How might a recovery of the practice of Eucharist as a shared meal create a container for both connection and disruption, enabling churches to develop more compassionate and creative conversation partners? As this project explores the adaptive potential of the Eucharistic Meal,[1] we will zero in on one measure of spiritual growth and transformation of particular urgency in American society at this moment: the capacity to engage in difficult, disruptive, and potentially divisive conversations in a manner that reflects the compassion and creativity of Jesus. Having pastored a small, mainline congregation for over thirteen years, I have come to believe that shared meals must fuel any effort to reenergize the fruitfulness and witness of American churches, as they did in the Church's beginning. As I shepherd my congregation and add my voice to the broader discussion of the "church of the future," this project unpacks my own suspicion that there is more to the Eucharist than most churches have unlocked through the various liturgical traditions that have developed from Jesus' Last Supper.

The Challenge Facing the American Mainline Church

To begin exploring some of the threads that make up the context of this project, we begin with a wide-angle lens. Point Place United Church of Christ is a historically congregational church that joined the United Church of Christ soon after the denomination's founding in 1957. It is almost unnecessary to cite from the multitude of studies that show the decline of Mainline Christian denominations in the United States, and likewise the vast body of literature both lamenting this fact and desperately trying to

[1] I will expand on this term below. It is my term for this event which reconnects the ritual of Eucharist with the practice of a communal meal.

slow, if not reverse these trends. Indeed, these trends and worries range across the denominational spectrum of Christianity in the United States.[2]

Declining attendance, membership, and giving are only symptoms of deeper and broader issues American churches face. These issues form a complex web of challenges within congregations, in Christian institutions, and in the surrounding culture. One of these broader cultural factors is that Americans' trust in institutions has plummeted over the past half-century, and the Church has not been immune to those trends, seeing public trust drop by half from 1973-2023.[3] Additionally, overall sense of social connection and participation in social organizations has trended downwards over that time. Summarizing several studies of different measures of social connection, a 2023 publication by the U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services concludes, "Changes in key indicators, including individual social participation, demographics, community involvement, and use of technology over time, suggest both overall societal declines in social connection and that, currently, a significant portion of Americans lack adequate social connection."[4] From the experiences of "people in the pews" to denominational structures to broader social trends in the United States, people's sense of connection—broadly speaking—seems to be unraveling. These trends were well-established prior to the outbreak of COVID-19 in 2020—that unexpected moment when social isolation was actually encouraged, even

[2] The UCC Center for Analytics, Research and Development, and Data, "A Statistical Profile with Reflection/Discussion Questions for Church Leaders," www.ucc.org (United Church of Christ, 2023), https://www.ucc.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/2023statisticalreport.web_.pdf.
[3] Gallup, "Confidence in Institutions," Gallup.com (Gallup, June 22, 2007), https://news.gallup.com/poll/1597/confidence-institutions.aspx.
[4] U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, "Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation," www.hhs.gov (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2023), https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-social-connection-advisory.pdf.

mandated. While church attendance has been remarkably resilient,[5] time will tell whether the pandemic experiences of churches might catalyze a greater creativity and intentionality about actively fostering connection, or if churches will revert to entrusting the connectional work of community to people showing up and being in the same space at worship services and church programs.

There are other angles that help to reveal what is happening behind the curtain of American Church decline. One worth examining is churches' historical and current role in polarization and segregation in American society. Political scientist James Q. Wilson plainly asserts, "Religion may be one of the most important sources of polarization in American politics."[6] Journalist Bill Bishop has shown how Americans generally have rapidly segregated themselves around ideological—including religious—lines.[7] Not only are churches not immune to these trends of polarization and segregation, but these lines of division have often cut through the heart of the church itself. Martin Luther King, Jr. famously observed that Sunday morning is the most racially segregated time in the United States. That segregation likewise apples to partisanship. Only a small handful of denominations reflects a partisan parity lower than the American public as a whole, reflecting a strong partisanship in churches. Yet, it is not as though the American Church has developed a clear and unified political voice. In my own denomination, the United

[5] Reem Nadeem, "How the Pandemic Has Affected Attendance at U.S. Religious Services," Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project, March 28, 2023, https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2023/03/28/how-the-pandemic-has-affected-attendance-at-u-s-religious-services/#:~:text=This%20longitudinal%20analysis%20finds%20a.

[6] James Q. Wilson, "Lecture II: Religion and Polarization" (Tanner Lecture, November 3, 2005), https://ethics.harvard.edu/event/lecture-ii-religion-and-polarization. Wilson gave this lecture in 2005 and indicated that such has been the case throughout American history. He goes on to say that this means that oftentimes religious motivations have energized both desirable and harmful movements.

[7] Bill Bishop, *The Big Sort: Why the Clustering of Like-Minded America Is Tearing Us* Apart (Boston, Ma: Mariner Books, 2009), 12.

Church of Christ, Democrats outpace Republicans by 27 percentage points, while in the Southern Baptist Convention, Republicans make up more of the denomination than Democrats by 38 percentage points.[8] Furthermore, churches are not doing much to bridge this divide. Two Barna studies show the sad dilemma that while most Christians think of themselves as open-minded, they are not, on the whole, proficient at having open conversations about difficult topics.[9] These statistics not only offer one reason why the "Nones" (those who mark "no religious affiliation" on surveys) are rising in the American religious landscape,[10] but it also indicates that the important spiritual and communal practice of dialogue among people with diverse opinions is an important adaptive challenge American churches have yet to effectively address.

More can and has been said about the struggles of churches in America, and the Mainline Church in particular. But as we prepare to zoom into the congregational context of this project, it is important to keep in mind the complex interplay of internal and external forces that coalesce in the statistical, spiritual, and emotional challenges facing individual church communities.

Congregational Context

While making a serious dent in major trends like those enumerated in the previous section are beyond the scope of any particular church and this project, these big picture

[8] Michael Lipka, "U.S. Religious Groups and Their Political Leanings," Pew Research Center, February 16, 2016, https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2016/02/23/u-s-religious-groups-and-their-political-leanings.
[9] "Generally, U.S. adults today have a pretty rosy perspective on their ability to talk across differences. This runs counter, however, to past Barna research that suggests there are certain divides that are difficult to bridge in conversation. U.S. adults' own responses today also present friction and indicate an entrenchment of beliefs is on the rise." Barna Group, "New Data Shed Light on Polarization in America," Barna Group, July 20, 2022, https://www.barna.com/research/polarization-2015-2022/.
[10] "Why America's 'Nones' Don't Identify with a Religion," Pew Research Center, August 8, 2018, https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2018/08/08/why-americas-nones-dont-identify-with-a-religion/.

snapshots can help to zero in on the kind of work local churches can be doing to face these new realities. It is to that local church context we now turn. Point Place United Church of Christ (UCC), founded as a congregational church in 1917, is a small mainline congregation in a northern neighborhood of Toledo, Ohio. Having served the church as a solo pastor for thirteen years, I am only the sixth settled pastor in the past century. The membership and participation of the church swelled as the Point Place neighborhood evolved from orchards and farms into a suburb and humble "resort town," peaking around 1980, while the general population of the zip code peaked a decade later, according to census data.[11] Since then, as the population of Point Place declined, so has membership and participation in the church. The current average attendance is around 35-40 on a Sunday morning, with a membership hovering around 65. The congregation has been hit by many of the larger trends cited earlier and has been struggling to adapt as the weight of decline has become heavier.

As in many churches, the COVID-19 pandemic both revealed cracks that were already present in the Point Place UCC congregational system and presented opportunities for adaptation. Developments in lay leadership and efforts in reimagining the church were stalled prior to the COVID-19 pandemic due to a spate of key losses in leadership. With a minimalist leadership structure, the congregation weathered the storms of 2020-2021 with adaptability and a deepened commitment to connection. The following two years, however, have seen fatigue set in. Along with the loss and aging of some beloved and devoted older members, both attendance and income have resumed the trend of decline and forced the church into major conversations about viability and decisions

[11] United States Census Bureau, "Explore Census Data," data.census.gov, 2022, https://data.census.gov/profile/ZCTA5_43611?g=860XX00US43611.

concerning the future. These trends align with data surrounding American churches and Mainline congregations.[12]

Politically, Point Place UCC is a "purple" congregation. While the United Church of Christ as a whole skews to the more progressive end of the political and theological spectrum, the neighborhood of Point Place is a blue collar, union community that has undergone demographic and partisan shifts in the past few decades. Simply looking at presidential election data, Point Place more closely resembles conservative-leaning Southeastern Michigan (which borders Point Place on the north) than the predominantly Democratic city of Toledo. The zip code itself split fairly evenly in the 2016 election and became more "red" in the 2020 election. The church itself is a "moderate purple," characterized by a general preference to avoid political discourse, rather than being a combination of extremes. This is important when it comes to this project's aim of cultivating creative and compassionate conversation partners. It will also become clear that the racial makeup of the congregation is decidedly White, with a couple members who are of Miami and Cherokee nation descent. In 2020, an involved biracial (African American and White) family departed amicably from the church, naming a desire to raise children in a more diverse congregation.

The congregation skews older, but not strongly so. There are a handful of faithfully attending families with children between age 0-12. In a small congregation, this makes up a significant portion of attendance on a given week. Programmatically, the COVID-19 pandemic, along with relocations of key children's ministry leaders, has left

[12] Pew Research Center, "In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace," Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project (Pew Research Center, October 17, 2019), https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2019/10/17/in-u-s-decline-of-christianity-continues-at-rapid-pace/.

the church without ministries specifically for children beyond ecumenical "Vacation Bible School" events in the summer and at Christmas. Instead, all ages are integrated in the worship experience. The congregation is uncluttered when it comes to programs generally. A twice-monthly feeding ministry that involves sit-down meals as well as to-go meals delivered to unhoused persons in downtown Toledo and homebound members and friends of the church takes up the majority of the missional time and energy of the congregation. Bible studies and small groups are seasonal and mostly led by the pastor. In some ways, this is a function of being a small church; in others, it is a strategic effort to maintain healthy rhythms of ministry to avoid burnout or overstretching. The primary venue for creativity is in the weekly worship gathering, though seasonal or one-time growth and mission opportunities are not uncommon.

Liturgical Context

Within this congregational context, it will be important to focus in on two pandemic-era moments within the life of the congregation in order to set up the project at the heart of this paper. In March 2020, churches around the country scrambled to ensure streaming access to weekly worship services for congregants in lockdown and isolation. For the first several weeks of the pandemic, it felt important to me as a pastor to present a recorded worship service as similar as possible to the in-person worship experiences to which people were accustomed. Early videos were recorded in the sanctuary chancel with myself and our music director on keyboard, familiar songs were recorded and put to lyric video, and a pre-recorded video was posted by Sunday morning, along with other options for those without streaming access. I wore a suit and tie, and did my best to create a sense of stability and familiarity in the midst of major disruptions in the society at-large and in

the form of church life. Within these weeks, I felt a growing sense of discomfort at how smoothly the traditional worship service translated to a pre-recorded format (other than the technological challenges!). It seemed to me that even though we were used to gathering in-person, the *gathering* part—the personalness of coming together—was only incidental to the overall design of the worship experience. The pandemic had changed the format of viewing and delivery, but the liturgy was able to remain almost unchanged. While some might see this as a strength of the liturgy,[13] my impression was that this phenomenon was less a function of a transcendent liturgy and more an avoidance of interpersonal encounter, a divergence from the very purpose of communal gatherings. After these initial weeks, we took steps to vary recorded worship services, meet outdoors when weather permitted, and eventually moved to Zoom[14] for Sunday morning worship with a liturgical format that maximized engagement. Even as our hiatus from traditional indoor gatherings lasted for just over one year, the connectedness of the congregation grew deeper because we were not relying on Sunday morning gatherings to provide a sense of connection that they were not even crafted to provide. Instead of just assuming that getting people in the same place at the same time was achieving connectional goals, we were now prioritizing encounter and connection.

The second (and connected) moment came as the local pandemic numbers waned and the church was able to gather without face coverings or distancing protocols. Leaning into the broad sense of disconnection people had felt throughout the pandemic, we decided that it was time to implement a worship experience that had been in conversation even before the pandemic hit: Breakfast Church. Drawing on the Rev. Emily Scott's

[13] The strength being that the liturgy manages to transcend various contextual shifts.
[14] Zoom is a communication platform popular for meetings, webinars, and other online group gatherings.

Dinner Church ministry at St. Lydia's in Manhattan,[15] along with the inspiration of other dinner church advocates and practitioners,[16] we started shifting one Sunday morning worship gathering per month to our fellowship hall, and worshipping around tables over a meal. These services were not merely a shift in location, but were designed to maximize encounter by promoting conversation, engaging with the Scriptures and sermon in more dialogical formats, and intergenerational participation in activities and spiritual practices. This shift went something like this:

> *On that first morning, the voice of Alicia, our song leader, beautifully rang out, "Come to the Table…," harmonizing with clanging forks and voices old and young mingling in light conversation. "Come to the banquet…" I looked around and quietly thanked God for Clif and Cindy, Donna and Dale, and others who had arrived early to set tables, light candles, mix Krusteaz pancake mix with water, and guide a small flock of kids as they slopped the batter onto griddles and filled plates with sausage and eggs. I circled around the center table over and over as we talked about Jesus' table ministry and the salvation that filled the places and people with whom he ate, making sure there was eye contact with each table placed in a rough circle around the "altar." I then approached that center table where a plate and cup had patiently awaited this moment throughout the service. One of our volunteers ran up to me and whispered anxiously: "Do you need a pancake or something for Communion?" I shook my head and grinned as I began to talk about the night on which Jesus was betrayed and how he had taken the*

[15] Scott tells the story of St. Lydia's in: Emily M.D. Scott, *For All Who Hunger: Searching for Communion in a Shattered World* (New York: Convergent, 2020).
[16] We had engaged with Fresh Expressions, a parachurch organization that advocates for experimentality in conceiving of Christian community. https://freshexpressions.com/

bread…but when I unwrapped the napkin, there was no bread. And how he had then given thanks as he took the cup…but as I raised the cup and turned it upside-down, not even a drop came out. "We have eaten. We have drunk. We have remembered Jesus together and told the Story. We have already shared Holy Communion, and recognized the Body of Christ at the Table with one another." Silence. Then, recognition and understanding spread across the faces around the old wood-paneled hall. We had gratefully—Eucharistically—received and shared; the meal we had shared was certainly the Lord's; we had Communed, and it had been Holy.

Since that first Breakfast Church in the fall of 2021, the practice has become as faithfully attended (or more) as our more traditional services in the sanctuary. As will be seen in the interviews for this project, it is beloved first for the sense of connection, fellowship, and siblinghood it fosters far beyond our more traditional worship gatherings. Breakfast Church has become a container for connection. Connection, however, is only one of the basic ingredients of spiritual transformation and adaptation. This project enters into the Breakfast Church context just described, and observes what happens when the other ingredient of spiritual transformation is introduced into the container of Breakfast Church: disruption.[17]

[17] It is worth noting that during the pandemic, we moved from many years (perhaps the whole history of the congregation) celebrating Holy Communion on the first Sunday of the month to celebrating it nearly every week. While we had already increased in frequency for "special occasions" in the previous few years, the move was motivated by the pandemic isolation and distancing. Pastorally, I felt that employing physical experiences and expressions of spirituality was a necessary antidote to the "virtuality" and isolation. The form of the Eucharist shifted liberally. At first, I encouraged congregants to set up their own Communion Tables to share during pre-recorded and Zoom worship services. During outdoor worship gatherings, people would bring various forms of food and drink with individual packets available for anyone who needed them. In some ways, I believe this emphasis on the communal and symbolic dimensions of the Eucharist rather than the details of the elements themselves prepared the congregation to be more receptive to understanding Breakfast Church as Eucharist. This will be explored more in later chapters.

The Adaptive Challenge

At Point Place UCC, we are not the first congregation to shift the form of worship to a meal. This project aims to observe something more than simply what happens when a church changes how it worships. In reading other literature on meal-based worship gatherings (usually called Dinner Church), there are various reasons given for this shift. In some cases, it is simply a matter of obedience to return to the "regulative" patterns of the early church.[18] In other cases, it is primarily an ideal form for mission and welcoming outsiders and the marginalized into a less "churchy" context.[19] Emily M.D. Scott founded St. Lydia's in the context of a deep sense of disconnection among the transience of New York City, as part of "searching for Communion in a shattered world."[20] These all get at important dimensions of meal-based church communities. What I wish to explore in this project is *why* the meal took center-place in the early church, and what makes it an ideal container for the internal and organizational adaptive work that faces American churches in a particularly disorienting moment in their histories.

To unpack the adaptive potential of the Eucharistic Meal in the context of Point Place UCC, it will be necessary to develop further language to describe the adaptive challenge the church faces. In a previous section, broad trends were named and cited that are obvious to most pastors and other leaders in parish ministry, especially in Mainline churches. While the numbers convey one level of truth, decline and disconnection are

[18] The "regulative principle" suggests that worship should be practiced only as "regulated" or described in the Scriptures, without addition or innovation.
[19] Verlon Foster does an excellent and concise job tracing the history of meal-based worship. He also sees Dinner Church as multi-dimensional, citing traits of the meal like "immanence" and "abundance," but his emphasis rests on the qualities of "liminality" (by which he refers to people on the margins of religious and social life) and "natural evangelism." For Foster, the potential of Dinner Church is primarily as a missional strategy, as indicated in his subtitle. Verlon Fosner, *The Dinner Church Handbook: A Step-By-Step Recipe for Reaching Neighborhoods* (Franklin, Tennessee: Seedbed Publishing, 2017).
[20] Scott, *For All Who Hunger.* Title Page.

also realities that congregants feel and sense as they experience church life. As they feel decline and disconnection, they ask questions and tell stories.

> *Why don't people come to church anymore?*
> *We used to have a full sanctuary and kids running all around this place.*
> *How can we get young people in the doors?*
> *Young people just want a show like the megachurches.*
> *How can we get people to give more?*
> *People today are just too materialistic. They're not interested in spiritual things.*

As a pastor, I find the questions and stories that arise through the experiences of decline and disconnection even more instructive than the data itself. Putting these questions on a set of spectrums illuminates some of the deeper challenges pastors and church leaders face in this moment. The following spectrums are not intended to be scales of "bad" to "good." Rather, they are intended to examine the assumptions beneath the questions and stories that are being vocalized in congregations around the Mainline and put the deeper issues they express within a framework that this project will attempt to address through the Eucharistic Meal.

Technical and Adaptive. Using Heifitz and Linsky's categories of "technical problem" and "adaptive challenge," it becomes clear that many of the questions surrounding decline and disconnection carry a presumption that churches are facing technical problems that can be fixed. Key to this distinction is that adaptive challenges, according to Heifitz and Linsky, require an "adaptive leap necessary to thrive in the *new environment."*[21] There is a formulaic method of analysis in the congregational questions above that takes statistics of decline and disconnection and assumes, "We need to go back to what we were doing when there were more people." Not only are correlation and

[21] Ronald A Heifitz and Marty Linsky, *Leadership on the Line*. (Boston, Massachusetts: Harvard Business Review Press, 2017), 13. Emphasis mine.

causation confused, but this way of reasoning fails to grapple with the "new environment" of post-Christendom and settles for the comforting assessment that their problems are technical ones. This is comforting inasmuch as Heifitz and Linsky describe technical problems as "problems for which they do, in fact, have the necessary know-how and procedures."[22] The pervasiveness of disconnection and decline, however, indicate that there is more going on than could be "solved" by a recovery or innovation of a specific theological perspective, organizational model, or improved production quality. There is a "new environment." It is important to note that technical approaches can take both traditionalist and innovative forms. Innovation and adaptation are not synonymous on this spectrum. Starting a more modern worship service, instituting a new program, or proclaiming a new theological idea can all be innovative technical solutions if they are seen as a "fix" to trends of decline, and do not grapple with the complex historical and systemic realities of the church.[23] Adaptation, on the other hand, recognizes that the goal is "to thrive in the *new environment*."[24] Churches are not facing a decline merely because they have not kept up with changing preferences or trends. Rather, they find themselves within a new environment, or ecosystem, that requires moving beyond questions of reacting and marketing, to deeper questions about essence and vocation: adaptation.[25]

Simple and Systemic. The questions and stories above tend to operate from the binary distinctions of churched and unchurched people, the ones who serve and the ones

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[22] Ibid.
[23] "Church" here could refer to the greater Church tradition or any given local church. The complex histories of either and both are relevant to true adaptation.
[24] Heifitz, *Leadership* 13, emphasis mine.
[25] This is not intended as a direct critique of any particular *form* of church, but rather seeks to parse the nature of technical questions and processes that might manifest in a variety of forms. From megachurch to small church to house church, communities must distinguish the technical and adaptive nature of the realities they are facing and to which they are responding.

who need to be served, the ones who are in and those "we" need to get in. In this framework, the church and its concerns exist at the center. There is a simple directionality: the church may move outward to serve, bless, or evangelize, while the external world (people, money, power) should be drawn into the church, manifested, of course, in worship attendance in a designated building and offerings in the "plate." Historically, this simplistic us-them directionality can be symptomatic of a colonial mentality and behavior.[26] This approach easily leads to harm because it ultimately does not square with the way organisms, ecosystems, and organizational systems actually function. Part of the "new environment" in which churches seek to thrive is a growing awareness of interconnection, what C. Otto Scharmer describes as a "shifting consciousness from **ego**-system to **eco**-system awareness."[27] From a systems standpoint, change occurs when one part of the system becomes aware of its function within the anxious forces of a system and accesses the resources available to move toward a higher level of "self-differentiation," or "the capacity to be an 'I' while remaining connected."[28] Edwin Friedman looks at the basic "family system" in terms of the flow of anxiety, and suggests that growth "includes the capacity to maintain a (relatively) nonanxious presence in the midst of anxious systems, to take maximum responsibility for one's own

[26] Willie James Jennings speaks of "a history in which the Christian theological imagination was woven into processes of colonial dominance. Other peoples and their ways of life had to adapt, become fluid, even morph into the colonial order of things…Adaptability, fluidity, formation, and reformation of being were heavily weighted on the side of indigenes as their requirement for survival." This reverses the claim below that Christianity is inherently an adaptive movement. By simplifying the world into an "us-them" dualism, Christians also made "us" the static standard and "them" the ones who needed to adapt, burdening "them" with the complexity of adaptive change. This is how simplifying impulses end up doing harm in a complex world. See Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of* Race (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 8.
[27] C. Otto Scharmer, *Theory U: Leading from the Future as It Emerges: The Social Technology of Presencing* (San Francisco, Ca: Berrett-Koehler, 2016), 3. Emphasis original.
[28] Edwin H Friedman, *Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue* (New York: Guilford Press, 2011), 27.

destiny and emotional being."[29] The two-directional questions and stories above (going out to and drawing in from the outside world) are simplistic because they are anxious questions and stories, which do not dare to acknowledge the overwhelming newness and complexity of the ecosystem. The work of the church becomes merely reaction to internal and external anxieties rather than a work of self-definition and discernment of call.

The question of this paper, in part, arises from an interest in pastoring people within the church as they sense and experience the statistical realities of church decline and social disconnection. Pastoral leadership involves orienting disciples in the "new environment," applying a gospel-lens in order to view what faces the church, in Scharmer's words, as a "moment of profound possibility and disruption,"[30] and shifting from technical questions that expect answers and guarantees toward adaptive questions that might open up more adaptive possibilities. The pastoral work of orientation aims to reduce survival anxiety so that individual disciples and church communities are freer to redefine their essential identity and vocation within God's broader movements and purposes. The Breakfast Church experiments in this project, then, should not be seen through a technical lens: a strategy to reverse church decline, nor merely to comfort disconnected people. This project seeks to ask more adaptive questions concerning the practices and rhythms of Christian communities which can help disciples orient within the "disruption" and adaptively explore the "possibility."

A Path to Getting Unstuck

So far, I have traced my own journey through the haunting sense that Point Place UCC, like American churches broadly, was not only struggling to deal with a changing

[29] Ibid.
[30] Scharmer, *Theory U,* 3.

social landscape, but that we were actually *designed* in a way that was counterproductive to facing adaptive challenges. This brings us to another pastoral experience that grounds this project: a sense of stuckness, both in relation to the church organizationally and disciples individually. From a personal standpoint, being married to a mental health therapist, I began to sense a contrast between the experiences of healing and growth my partner was facilitating among her clients and the inertia and systemic cycles I was witnessing in the lives of congregants and congregation alike. How could we save, let alone revitalize a church if people were mired in their own anxieties, griefs, and complications? Beyond that, if we were—hypothetically—to see an influx of new people, would those new people be entering a community of healing, growth, liberation, and spiritual transformation…or merely a system soaking in survival anxiety? There seemed to be an underlying assumption in the church community that bringing more people or money into the congregation *was* the solution, or at least would make other solutions possible. In Family Systems Theory, however, Friedman teaches, "The possibilities of change are maximized…when we concentrate on modifying *our own* way of functioning, our own input, into the family."[31] While this may initially sound like an individualistic way of thinking, it requires a deep trust in the multi-point interconnectedness of the system. For churches, the implication is that to shift the disinterest, distrust, or hostility that keeps people away from churches, the first step is to consider "*our own* way of functioning" and the relative health of *our own* system.[32]

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[31] Friedman, *Generation,* 18.

[32] In the "church growth" world, Christian Schwarz's research through Natural Church Development emphasizes a similar principle. For Schwarz, the best kind of growth does not happen through "technocratic thinking" (methods and formulas). He concludes, "We should not attempt to 'manufacture' church growth, but rather to release the biotic potential which God has put into every church." See Christian A Schwarz, *The ABC's of Natural Church Development* (Carol Stream, Il: Churchsmart Resources, 1998), 12. In other words, the biotic principles and what is blocking them are all within the organism itself.

Thankfully, proximity to the world of psychology didn't just highlight a problem, but opened up another lens that helped me to assess the underlying reasons for the stuckness of the church: trauma research. While much of my own ministry training was built on what might be classified as Cognitive-Behavioral assumptions,[33] trauma theory indicates that true and lasting change will require a much deeper and more holistic approach. Even if the language is different, trauma theory's understanding of the depth and complexity of the human problem rings far more harmoniously with the Scriptures than a mere diagnosis of misguided thoughts and behaviors. As leading trauma researcher Bessel van der Kolk summarizes, trauma "changes not only how we think and what we think about, but also our very capacity to think."[34] A cognitive-behavioral method of feeding people different thoughts when the root problem is not the content of the thoughts but the very mode of thinking seems doomed to fail.[35]

Just as Family Systems Theory diagnoses the source of systemic problems in the often-unaware forces of anxiety at work in the system, trauma theory points to "a fundamental reorganization of the way mind and brain manage perceptions"; namely, it is

[33] I am here applying a therapeutic approach in psychology to a ministerial approach to worship and church life. At the risk of oversimplifying (which I have just warned against), Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy (CBT) targets unhelpful thoughts and beliefs and seeks to replace those with more true or helpful thoughts and beliefs. In theory, these replacements should trickle down into behavior and overall experience. Under the assumptions of CBT, changes in thoughts will lead to lasting behavioral and experiential changes. This overlaps with an approach to ministry that targets beliefs and behaviors, with little attention paid to the underlying or even unconscious roots beneath a person's thoughts and behaviors. In my ministerial training, emphasis was placed on the content of preaching (a cognitive emphasis on giving people better/truer beliefs), establishment of programs (organizational behavior), and various leadership and administrative strategies. Very rarely did this training focus on the systemic and unconscious extra-rational forces that gave rise to what people think, believe, and do as individuals and organizations.

[34] Bessel van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma* (London: Penguin Books, 2014), 21.

[35] Van der Kolk could be talking about many churches when he writes, "Despite the well-documented effects of anger, fear, and anxiety on the ability to reason, many programs continue to ignore the need to engage the safety system of the brain before trying to promote new ways of thinking." (Van der Kolk, *Body,* 88.) Recall also Scharmer's shift from "ego-system" to "eco-system."

reorganized around fear. If the proliferation of the command "Fear not" is any indication, the Bible is on the same page. The twist is that in the biblical narrative, this reassurance is very frequently given to people not because of the dangers of the outside world, but because they have encountered God. Just as Adam and Eve hide from God in Genesis 3, both Hebrew Scriptures and New Testament convey encounters with God as terrifying, an experience Rudolf Otto explores and expresses as "the note of self-abasement into nothingness before an overpowering, absolute might of some kind."[36] Drawing on Otto, C.G. Jung will describe a certain (common) kind of religion as a "substitute" which "has the obvious purpose of replacing immediate experience by a choice of suitable symbols tricked out with an organized dogma and ritual."[37] This is essentially describing how religion can take the role of what trauma studies would call a "coping mechanism." Coping mechanisms can be useful, even life-saving. Over time, however, because they function to mitigate vulnerability, coping mechanisms limit one's capacity to have a "numinous" encounter as Otto describes.[38] People get "stuck" in cycles of avoiding the very types of encounter that can free, heal, and fulfill them.

These insights I was gaining from the realm of psychology were guiding me to reassess the design and function of church life and practice. There is one more experience

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[36] Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-Rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and Its Relation to the Rational* (Pantianos Classics, 1917), chap. 3, par. 6, Kindle.
[37] C.G. Jung, *Collected Works of C.G. Jung, Volume 11* (Princeton University Press, 2024), 43. It should be noted that Jung is not completely cynical about this protecting function of religion. In fact, he himself goes on to say that he prescribes sacramental practice or other religious practices as a "mental hygiene" "to protect [the client] from immediate experience, which might easily prove too much for him."
[38] There is a newer term for this in the religious realm, which has gained recent popularity: "spiritual bypassing." This term was coined by John Welwood. "In his classic book, *Toward a Psychology of Awakening*…he defined spiritual bypassing as using 'spiritual ideas and practices to sidestep personal, emotional 'unfinished business,' to shore up a shaky sense of self, or to belittle basic needs, feelings, and developmental tasks.'" See Diana Raab, "What Is Spiritual Bypassing?" *Psychology Today*, January 19, 2019, https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-empowerment-diary/201901/what-is-spiritual-bypassing.

I will add to the journey that led up to this project. Racial disruption in recent years brought to the surface for me important conversations not only about the experience of Black Americans, but an exploration of Whiteness. Willie James Jennings has tracked the intermingling of Euro-American Christianity and the ideology of Whiteness, and come to some conclusions about White Christianity that complement Jung's observations above. Jennings summarizes the ideological values of Whiteness as "[masculine] self-sufficiency defined by possession, control, and mastery."[39] These impulses are large-scale coping mechanisms—substitutes for vulnerability—and they have both shaped and been shaped by an invasive brand of Christianity familiar to American Christians and pervasive throughout the world via the Western colonial project.[40] White Christianity, then, is a kind of caricature of the religion Jung describes: it is a project of vulnerability-avoidance, which stunts its potential for Divine encounter, prophetic correction, or capacity to function as a "(relatively) non-anxious presence in the midst of anxious systems."[41] Such a system struggles to ask adaptive questions because adaptation is inherently disorienting and disruptive of the familiar and certain, whereas the goal of White Christianity (as an ideology) is to avoid disruption, disorientation, and discomfort.

These insights from the fields of psychology, trauma, and race raise at least three related questions about the ecclesial and liturgical design in a White Mainline church like Point Place UCC: 1) In what ways might our church be designed around the avoidance of Divine encounter and encounter with the "other" more broadly? 2) What might it look

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[39] Willie James Jennings, *After Whiteness: An Education in Belonging* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2020), 15, Kindle.
[40] "Inside the modern racial consciousness there is a Christian architecture, and also there is a racial architecture inside of modern Christian existence." See Willie James Jennings, "Whiteness Rooted in Place," The Christian Century, November 3, 2021, https://www.christiancentury.org/article/interview/whiteness-rooted-place.
[41] Friedman, *Generations,* 27.

like if these understandings of the human condition informed the design of the church's liturgies, community life, and ministry? 3) Do Christian theology and tradition not only have conceptual space for these findings, but also contain wisdom and spiritual technologies to make churches more effective in the work of healing and transformation? These are questions I began to ask after years of ministry with genuine people, earnest about their faith and filled with love, but also—in many ways—stuck.

Adaptive Containers

Disillusionment with the insufficiency of cognitive-behavioral approaches to ministry—stoked by experience, research, and the Scriptures/Christian tradition—convinced me that my ministry focus would need to shift from producing and distributing content to creating containers that can hold the ingredients of growth and transformation.[42] This also shifts the risk of leadership. Heifitz and Linsky soberly observe, "In the face of adaptive pressures, people don't want questions; they want answers. They don't want to be told that they will have to sustain losses; rather, they want to know how you're going to protect them from the pains of change."[43] If this is true in businesses and other various kinds of organizations, it may be even more true in churches. The desire to feel safe and be protected from the pains of change is one reason people actually seek to join a church.[44] "Comfort in times of trouble/sorrow" (one of the main reasons for church-going in the study cited in note 43) is certainly something that

[42] Friedman speaks of "Defocusing Content" and the advantage when there is a "capacity of clergy to spot content issues for the red herrings they really are" or even as "symptomatic of a continuing malignant process." See Friedman, *Generations,* 207.
[43] Heifitz, *Leadership,* 15.
[44] Pew Research Center, "Why Americans Go (and Don't Go) to Religious Services," Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project, August 1, 2018, https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2018/08/01/why-americans-go-to-religious-services/#:~:text=Smaller%20majorities%20in%20most%20Christian.

Christian faith can offer, and there is nothing wrong with seeking it. In our discussion on trauma, we will discuss the importance of "settling." But as trauma specialist Resmaa Menakem puts it, "Settling is not the same as healing."[45] A church that emphasizes settling or comfort to the neglect of healing and cultivating adaptive growth is enacting only a portion of Jesus' ministry. People are not nearly as likely to seek out deep healing and adaptive transformation because they correctly sense that it will involve loss, work, and pain—all truths core to the Eucharistic patterns of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection.

So what makes for an adaptive container? What environment, event, or set of characteristics enables people to take on an adaptive challenge, ask hard questions, and be willing to "sustain losses" for the sake of transformation? First of all, I contend that in reading the Scriptures through their original contexts of exodus, exile, and occupation, we are given pictures of what it looks like to participate with God in adaptive transformation. If we consider Jesus to be the embodiment of the biblical story of Israel and of humanity itself— and if we understand Eucharist as a communal engagement with the person and story of Jesus, the Church has at its core the resources and vocation to witness to the adaptive challenge of human life in community. This will require not only an integration of theology and adaptive leadership, but also an adaptive sacramentality[46]—a way of approaching the church's practice of sacraments and overall engagement with material reality that considers not only their internal logic via the

[45] Resmaa Menakem, *My Grandmother's Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending Our Hearts and Bodies* (Las Vegas, NV: Central Recovery Press, 2017), 164.
[46] I will expand on this idea of "adaptive sacramentality" throughout the paper. At this point, I will emphasize that there are two dimensions to each of the words in the phrase. "Adaptive" refers both to the capacity of the sacrament to shift and re-form *and* that the purpose of this shifting and re-formation should function to increase a community's capacity to engage in the adaptive work of faith. "Sacramentality" refers both to the traditional ecclesial practices known as "sacraments" in various Christian traditions *and* a more general approach to the potential of material creation for encounter with God and as instruments of transformation.

tradition, but also their transformative potential in broader conversation with fields that study how humans actually grow, change, and face life's adaptive challenges. The challenge, explored in this project, is to take the wisdom and technology of the Christian tradition and reframe it from the self-protective religiosity Jung observes towards adaptive containers for the kind of spiritual encounters that can truly bring transformation and growth.

In this project, we will apply this adaptive sacramentality to the Eucharist, delving into its ancient origins as a communal meal and gathering more modern insights into human development in order to craft an adaptive container. The project will build on Point Place UCC's practice of Breakfast Church, adding the transformative ingredient of disruption to the container which had previously been aimed at developing the transformative ingredient of connection. We will explore why the Eucharistic Meal was such a central element in the early church as well as how adaptive leadership principles can help in designing a more adaptive container for spiritual formation.

The Question

These experiences and broad questions now converge on the question at hand for this project: **How might a recovery of the practice of Eucharist as a shared meal create a container for both connection and disruption, enabling churches to develop more compassionate and creative conversation partners?** Following is a breakdown of the parts of this question and how they connect to what has been discussed above:

"How might a recovery of the practice of Eucharist as a shared meal…" The adaptive container that will be the focus for this study is the Eucharist.[47] This paper will

[47] In the congregational tradition of Point Place UCC, "Eucharist" is not generally the preferred terminology. Congregants were more likely to gravitate toward "Holy Communion" or the "Lord's Supper."

explore practically and theologically the proposition that the Eucharist was not originally nor is now ideally a ritual in which token elements are distributed individually to communicants. Rather, it was a full, ritualized, communal meal, and its potency remains linked to the ecosystem of the meal. The word "recovery" is used because my research shows that there is a contrast between how the Eucharist was commonly conceived and practiced in the early centuries of the Christian movement and how it is practiced—at least officially—through the vast majority of Christian traditions in the world today. In other words, the Eucharist originally was a meal.

"…Create a container for both connection and disruption…" This is the adaptive container introduced above. As I will explore, the Scriptures, trauma research, and other social sciences attest to two "ingredients" of transformation or spiritual formation at the most basic level: 1) connection and 2) disruption. Other experiences related to *connection* are safety, belonging, trust, and acceptance; other experiences related to *disruption* are risk, adventure, instability, and the unknown.[48] Theologically, these categories fit with concepts like incarnation or presence (connection) and cross or absence (disruption), though this breakdown is admittedly simplistic. The idea of this project is that the Eucharistic Meal is an adaptive container that is designed to hold and capable of holding both connection and disruption.

"…enabling churches to develop more compassionate and creative conversation partners?" The concepts of transformation, spiritual growth, etc. are too broad to be measured adequately through the scope of this project. Thus, the focus will be on one

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For the purposes of the main question, I use the term "Eucharist" because I think it emphasizes the contrast in formality among the two events I am proposing be reconnected.

[48] "Challenge is the basic context of health and survival, of a person, of the family, of a religious organization, or even (in the course of evolution) of an entire species." See Friedman, *Generations,* 50.

dimension of spiritual growth: the capacity to engage in difficult conversations in a more compassionate and creative manner. Based on the studies of isolation and the widespread experiences of cultural division and hostility,[49] this is not a random category for spiritual growth. Rather, it is both a foundational spiritual capacity and a key component in building trust and repairing Christian witness. The characteristics of the Point Place UCC community lend themselves to embodying such a witness.

Posed in this way, I am aware that the theological and sacramental claims of this question are provocative and will require far more conversation, study, and complexity than can be accomplished by one voice, let alone in this limited project. I hope this conversation does occur. In this project, however, what I hope to do is observe how this theological theory plays out in the practice of one congregation, during a limited series of Breakfast Church experiments, in which disruptive elements are added into the Breakfast Church container, which already holds the element of connection. Beyond these observations, I believe that there is enough of a contextual overlap between the struggles, gifts, needs, circumstances, fears, and hopes of Point Place UCC and other church systems that the ideas and practices described here might be built upon in other communities and spiritual ecosystems.

"*Our Own* Way of Functioning"[50]: The Leadership Context

Given all that has been written above concerning the importance of self-examination and awareness of one's place within a system, it would be disingenuous not

[49] Pew Research Center, "As Partisan Hostility Grows, Signs of Frustration with the Two-Party System," Pew Research Center - U.S. Politics & Policy, August 9, 2022, https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2022/08/09/as-partisan-hostility-grows-signs-of-frustration-with-the-two-party-system/.
[50] Friedman, *Generations,* 18.

to take up a second context for observation in this project: myself as pastor and leader. I have served as the solo pastor of Point Place UCC since receiving my first call in September, 2010, giving me over thirteen years of relationship with the congregation. Due to the stability of this long-term relationship between pastor and congregation, the longevity of this pastor-congregation relationship is integral to the "connection" or "trust" ingredient of the project.[51]

The COVID-19 pandemic hit in my tenth year as pastor. Early on, I made a conscious shift in my approach to ministry. As someone who tends to preach in a way that provokes (disrupts) into new ways of thinking about faith and church, I sensed it was a time to lean into whatever pastoral skills I could muster considering the massive destabilization and uncertainty that people were experiencing with the lockdown. It was a time to "comfort the afflicted." As the pandemic went on, I found myself feeling safer in leaning into the "connectional" work of ministry. From conversations with congregants, I heard consistently that the church was central to maintaining or even enhancing a sense of connection during the pandemic. Additionally, in my time as pastor, I had never received so much positive feedback related to my ministry. All of this was both eye-opening and tempting. On one hand, it was an encouragement to continue to stretch into the pastoral dimensions of leadership; on the other, I knew Heifitz and Linsky's insight that "adaptive work creates risk, conflict, and instability…leadership requires disturbing people—but at a rate they can absorb"[52] and that conflict in the long-term often stems

[51] This is not a claim to personal ministry success, but systemic relationship. Heifitz and Linsky advise, "Distinguish role from self." Whether the response is positive or negative, "the people in your setting will be reacting to you, not primarily as a person, but as the role you take in their lives." Heifitz, *Leadership,* 188.
[52] Heifitz, *Leadership,* 20.

from the choice to avoid confrontation in the short-term.[53] Foregoing confrontation and disruptive conversations would not only catch up to me from the standpoint of leadership integrity, but also from the precariousness of the church's organizational viability. In some ways, the COVID-19 pandemic had put on hold the difficult conversations about budget deficits, long-term membership and participation decline, and vision for renewal. These conversations were looming, and whatever pastoral/leadership capital I had accumulated through the pandemic crisis would quickly leak away if I did not shift leadership gears promptly. This pandemic and post-pandemic season for many pastors, including myself, has been one of continuous recalibration of the way leadership is exercised within the congregational system. Breakfast Church was a part of that connection-building that the church appreciated coming out of the pandemic. But now as a leader, it was time to find a way to reintegrate the connectional work I had emphasized during the pandemic and the disruptive work that was required both for the future of the church and for faithfulness to an adaptive gospel. And Breakfast Church was a container that I believed could hold both of those adaptive ingredients.

The reason I have been tracking my own leadership story is that adaptive containers require adaptive leadership; and adaptive leadership requires a different level of attention both to external processes and ecosystems and to internal patterns and tendencies. Even though the pastor is not taking the central role of "expert" in the Eucharistic Meal—whether as the preacher of the word or the administrator of the sacrament—the pastor remains an important part of the ecosystem. Thus, the observations I make about my own functioning in both designing and facilitating the Breakfast Church

[53] Asa Lee, "'Confrontation and Conflict,'" (Lecture, Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, Charleston, SC, January 24, 2023).

experiments will contribute to this conversation about adaptive leadership and sacramentality in the church. Some of these observations will likely resonate with other leaders and some will simply help to fill out a range of experiences and roles within the Eucharistic Meal and adaptive containers more broadly.

There are three main sets of voices in adaptive leadership that I will apply to these reflections about the leadership context of this project, and I have already introduced two of them. First, Heifitz and Linsky's work will be influential in thinking about my role as an adaptive leader in "orchestrating conflict" (adding disruption), "controlling the temperature" (tending to the connective threads of the community and discerning the "rate [of disruption] they can handle"), and "giving the work back" to the community rather than donning the expert's mantle. Second, Edwin Friedman and other schools of thought around Family Systems Theory will guide me to consider the ways I am participating in or differentiating from the congregational system as the disruptive conversation feeds the system's anxiety and throws it out of equilibrium. This also draws on the time I have spent understanding my own functioning tendencies from my own family systems and how that relates to my place in the congregational system. Third, Brené Brown's concept of "rumbling with vulnerability" will provide grounding language and insights as I facilitate the connectional and disruptive encounters between God, the congregation, and the leader. The resistance often displayed to adaptive work comes from the work's essential vulnerability that demands leaders and communities to turn from "armored" approaches to life together and embrace a more "daring" vulnerability.[54] All

[54] Brené Brown lists sixteen contrasts between "Armored Leadership" and "Daring Leadership" in section three of *Dare to Lead.* Brené Brown, *Dare to Lead: Brave Work. Tough Conversations. Whole Hearts.* (New York: Random House, 2018), 71-117.

three of these voices relate to the external and internal work of the adaptive leader who is seeking to lead a community into engagement with an adaptive challenge. They will inform my personal and leadership observations throughout the Breakfast Church experiments.

Outline

Having briefly explored some of the factors of the congregational, societal, personal, and conceptual contexts of the project, following is what the reader can expect in the ensuing chapters.

In chapter two, I will engage with the theological, historical, and psychosocial ideas behind the adaptive container of the Eucharistic Meal. The first purpose is to root the practice in the Christian tradition—not to justify it on its historical or biblical grounds alone, but to attempt to excavate the deeper logic of what Jesus and the early Christians were doing when they gathered around the Meal, and consider what has been lost as the ritual has evolved. From this, I will draw in conversation partners to offer insights from racial studies, trauma, sacramental theology, and sociological research into the benefits and long-term impacts of family meals. These will help to encourage adaptive sacramentality by showing what the communal meal brings to the Eucharistic tradition. The chapter will then introduce the Breakfast Church experiments and how the project will go about observing how the Breakfast Church container holds both connection and disruption and what contributions the meal can make to the experiences and efficacy of the Eucharist.

Chapter three will dig into the ethnographic and qualitative findings of the Breakfast Church experiments. After outlining the series of three Breakfast Church

experiences, the chapter will bring together interviews with congregant participants, observations from the experiences themselves, and my own insights into the process of designing and facilitating these experiments. This data will help to assess the capacity of the Eucharistic Meal, known as Breakfast Church at Point Place UCC, to leverage connection and disruption toward adaptive change.

Chapter four will consider the main takeaways from the Breakfast Church experiments as well as plot out some directions for further conversation and practice. This will help to bridge the proposed Eucharistic theology with practices that can be explored further in churches of different sizes and traditions. The chapter will close by asking how Eucharistic Meals might be one part of a larger adaptive sacramentality that can facilitate deeper spiritual encounter and transformation within churches and claim a new witness for the American Church in this moment of "profound possibility and disruption."

Chapter 2

Imagination #1: Let's imagine we had never read the New Testament before, but at least give ourselves the advantage of familiarity with the Hebrew Scriptures. We have never heard about Jesus or a "gospel presentation" or "Judeo-Christian values." We have no images in our heads of heaven and hell, a Communion Table, or Christian buildings, neither Orthodox cathedrals nor Quaker meetinghouses. We now read through the New Testament, slowly and attentively, prayerfully and curiously. And now we have to sum up the message of the Gospels and the New Testament as a whole. Not only that, but we must build from scratch a community around what we read and observe. Would the summary or the community involve shared meals around a table?

Imagination #2: Let's imagine a conversation with Jesus himself about each of our church's practice of the Eucharist. What questions would Jesus ask us about our gatherings, about our ways of remembering with gratitude (Eucharist), connecting (Holy Communion), reenacting his meal practices and especially the Last Supper (The Lord's Supper/Table)? What would be most important to Jesus? What would Jesus think makes our practices faithful, honoring, and purposeful? How would Jesus measure "success" when it comes to the ways his instruction to "do this in remembrance of me" has been handed down over the centuries?

Technical solutions to technical problems rely on tried-and-true methods, protocols, and skills. Adaptive challenges require imagination. By nature, adaptive challenges require ways of thinking and living outside what is known and assumed. This is a "new environment," after all. Engaging with sacraments in an adaptive way will require Christians to employ an imagination that faces both past and future. The kinds of Eucharistic practices with which most Christians are familiar are disconnected from both the most ancient of Eucharistic practice *and* from more recent discoveries about formation and how people change. An adaptive approach to sacraments will benefit from both ancient and modern catalysts that can serve to loosen the grip of the familiar and assumed. This chapter will invite both ancient and modern voices to the table as we practice an adaptive sacramentality with the Eucharistic Meal.

Most Christian traditions agree that at the very least, the practices of Baptism and Eucharist should play some role in the liturgical life of the church. Church leaders throughout the traditions would likely offer an array of reasons why these sacraments[55] are valuable and what functions they play in the liturgical and spiritual lives of their churches. Painting with a broad brush, I find much of the conversation about the Eucharist[56] to be limited in two ways: 1) By practice. When the Eucharist is discussed, there is a certain assumed form of practice. Even between "high church" and "low church," the Eucharist is assumed to refer to the vocalization of certain words, the partaking of individuals in token elements of bread and cup, nestled into a particular section of a worship experience. As we will see, an adaptive sacramentality emerges from a willingness to imagine the Eucharist outside of these familiar forms. 2) By context. Much of the logic surrounding Eucharistic practices has been developed in the broad historical and cultural period known as Christendom.[57] Both the failures of Christendom and radical shifts in the world should be enough to encourage churches to consider whether the sacramental logic developed in Christendom might be worth review and

[55] Even though traditions may differ in terminology, I will refer to them as "sacraments," in part for the sake of simplicity; in part because I believe that term conveys something of what makes these practices so important: that they are a meeting place of two realms, outward/visible and inward/invisible, heaven and earth, physical and spiritual. In addition, I find the label "ordinance" to imply a kind of logic to these practices that is the opposite of what I am doing here. Yes, these practices are "ordained," but we are looking for richer answers to the "Why?" of Eucharist than "Because Jesus said so."

[56] I am now narrowing my focus from sacraments generally to the Eucharist, because it is the focus of this project.

[57] By Christendom, I am referring to the historical periods and parts of the world where institutional Christian churches held the dominant political, social, religious, and cultural demographic.I do not intend to pick apart the impacts of Christendom on Christian faith here, but there are at least two aspects of this era that would justify an effort to reimagine the Eucharist. 1) This era included the Church's participation (if not leadership) in the Crusades, colonialism, the transatlantic slave trade, and multiple world wars among "Christian" nations. The Church in Christendom cannot be reduced to these tragedies, but they are at least part of the story, and ought to inspire some deeper examination. 2) We have already seen that globalization, rapid technological advance, climate change, and the statistics on religious decline and social disconnection all present radically different challenges for the church in this Post-Christendom era.

imagination. Whatever ways the Eucharist as practiced in Christendom might have served the aims of gospel and Church in that time period, conversations about Eucharistic practice need to consider the new environment American churches find themselves in and what new (or ancient) ways the sacraments can be imagined to serve the changing needs of churches and their mission.

This is why this chapter began with two imaginative scenarios. The content of this chapter will address these imaginative questions indirectly as a practice of adaptive sacramentality. Each of the movements of this chapter will seek to build a biblical, theological, and anthropological case not only for reimagining the Eucharist, but exploring the potential that reconnecting Eucharistic ritual and communal meal can have for supporting churches in the adaptive work in front of them. Through the Gospel of Luke and research into ancient Greco-Roman customs and early Christian gatherings (with a brief trip to 1 Corinthians 11), the chapter will explore the biblical and historical roots of the Eucharistic practices and will reveal traditions very different from those in modern churches. From there, the chapter will converse with voices from the disciplines of Sacramental Theology, Materiality and Trauma (both engaging the body's role in faith and transformation), and Sociology in order to get beyond the "internal logic" that has developed around the Eucharist and explore its adaptive potential more broadly. Finally, I will introduce the Breakfast Church experiments and accompanying interviews intended to explore the questions raised through the research in a congregational context. To be forthright: this is a lot to cover. As such, my hope is that the voices and ideas that I engage hastily in this chapter will be sufficient both to form a coherent and intriguing framework that builds a blueprint for the project and to stimulate further conceptual and

practical engagement as churches explore Christian discipleship, worship, and ecclesiology within the ruins of the Christendom project.

Gleaning from Liturgical Meals in the Hebrew Scriptures

This study is primarily focused on the Gospel of Luke and the earliest expressions of early Christian worship. But Jesus' ministry and the gatherings of the early Church arose neither out of a vacuum nor solely out of the Greco-Roman banquet practices which will be discussed below.[58] The Jewish cycles of Sabbaths and feasts would have been at the center both of Jesus' own religious formation and the system of meaning of the Last Supper Jesus shared with his disciples during Passover. These influences highlight the connection of meals and spirituality, and add urgency to the question of *why* meals are so central to religious life for ancient Israel and how they function relative to the social needs and challenges faced by these communities.

The Torah (Leviticus 23, particularly) outlines six sacred festivals that are to be celebrated annually in addition to the weekly Sabbath.[59] Not only were meals a part of the celebration, but several of them are based explicitly on food and agricultural rhythms: unleavened bread and the harvest festivals of Weeks and Sukkot. Others arrive at the table via sacrifice. In Christians circles, teaching on the Jewish sacrificial system has often focused on the mechanics of how the act of sacrifice impacts the relationship of individuals or the community with God. But Norman Wirzba notes, "It is worth recalling

[58] These festivals arose out of Jewish tradition even as it will be shown that there was a basic form of community meal that was practiced nearly across the cultural spectrum, including by Jews in the time of Jesus. "It will appear that, in many respects, the gatherings of Christians followed the format of the Graeco-Roman banquets, such as those held by pagan as well as Jewish individuals, voluntary associations and cult societies." See Valeriy A. Alikin, *The Earliest History of the Christian Gathering: Origin, Development and Content of the Christian Gathering in the First to Third Centuries* (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2010), 17. He offers a longer form of this discussion on p. 37.

[59] Of course, these are not the only feasts or fasts on the Jewish calendar. Hanukkah and Purim, for instance, arise from sources outside of the Torah.

that Jewish sacrifices often ended with a festive meal in which thanksgiving to God was expressed."[60] The connection of cultic rhythms and meals is not unique to the Jewish calendar—ancient and modern cultures alike connect holidays to different types of meals—but the integral place of meals to these systems can get lost in the shuffle of theological meaning-making. Indeed, it *has* gotten lost in the history of Christian theology as the movement departed from the rhythms of the Jewish calendar that Jesus would have observed.

The feast most connected with the Eucharist is the Passover feast. While there is debate over certain aspects of this connection,[61] the Gospel writers are clearly tying several threads from the Passover narrative and its implications to the Passion story of Jesus.[62] Although it will be shown that the *form* of the Last Supper and Eucharistic Meals

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[60] Norman Wirzba, *Food and Faith: A Theology of Eating* (New York: Cambridge University Press, Cop, 2011), 186.

[61] There is debate surrounding 1) if the Last Supper was actually a Passover feast based on its timing (Many scholars have noted the discrepancy between the Synoptic Gospels and John when it comes to the actual night of the Last Supper.), and 2) whether it resembled what is now practiced as a "Seder" meal in the Jewish community. To the first question, without needing to delve into the Synoptics-John discrepancy, it seems there are simply too many threads in the Gospels tying the Last Supper to the Passover and Exodus events for the reader to dismiss the theological connections being made between these events. As far as the second question about the Seder meal, it seems likely that the Haggadah which set the tone for the "modern" Seder tradition were developed after the time of Jesus and the destruction of the Temple in 70C.E. Joshua Kulp refers to "a near consensus among scholars that the Passover seder as described in rabbinic literature did not yet exist during the Second Temple period." See Joshua Kulp, "The Origins of the Seder and Haggadah," *Currents in Biblical Research* 4, no. 1 (October 2005): 109–34, https://doi.org/10.1177/1476993x05055642, 109. This fact, however, is not overly important for the purposes of this paper, because regardless of the liturgical form, the Torah itself frames the Passover as a sacrifice, meal, and storytelling event. See Baruch A. Levine, "Biblical Festivals and Fast Days," in *The Jewish Study Bible* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2014), 2029. The Jewish Seder and the Christian Eucharist are most likely *both* ritualized meals that grew out of the fertile theological soil of the ancient Passover Feast. Practically, for Christians to assimilate the later Jewish Seder Haggadah into their imagination and practice of Jesus' Last Supper is probably anachronistic and does *not* reflect the design and practice of the Eucharistic Meal in early Christian communities. What the Seder and the Eucharistic Meal do hold in common is that they are meals designed with layers of theological meaning and stories inspired by the Exodus patterns of Divine liberation and deliverance.

[62] While his Roman Catholic Eucharistic theology fits in the "ritualist" perspective I critique below, Brant Pitre does a thorough job of tracing numerous lines of connection between the Last Supper and the Passover event and the ways Jesus inserts himself into these stories and symbols. See Brant James Pitre, *Jesus and the Jewish Roots of the Eucharist: Unlocking the Secrets of the Last Supper* (New York Image, 2016), 49, specifically. Similarly, Matthew Myer Boulton writes, "Contemporary Christian construals of

overlaps significantly with Greco-Roman association meals, Israelite narratives of Passover, Exodus, and sacrifice provide the primary *flavor* to the Last Supper and, in many ways, the Gospel narratives that shape Christian understandings of the person and ministry of Jesus. I will briefly outline four ways in which the Jewish Passover and festival traditions flavored the Last Supper and formation of the Eucharist.

Patterning. Citing Jewish scholar Michael Fishbane extensively, Matthew Boulton shows how the Exodus event gives shape and theme to the whole narrative of the Hebrew Scripture: "as the Hebrew scriptural canon took shape, the exodus from Egypt emerged as a theological-literary motif, 'a lens of historical perception and anticipation.'"[63] These Scriptures train the Jewish people to look for their redemption in the patterns of the Exodus. This fits the hermeneutics and symbolics of the Last Supper, which present the death and resurrection of Jesus as eschatologically redemptive[64] by connecting Jesus' Passion to the Exodus in the setting of the Passover festival.

Prayerfulness. Veleriy Alikin concedes that one of the few Jewish contributions to the liturgy of the early Christian gatherings was the "introductory prayers…The practice of 'saying grace' before a meal was a typically and, as it seems, exclusively Jewish custom."[65] In part, this prayerful engagement with the meal may link to the heightened

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the Eucharist, both in doctrine and in practice, generally tend to subordinate, de-emphasise or omit theological reference to the Jewish Passover meal. And yet the key New Testament texts in which the Eucharist's institution is variously narrated - the very texts and institution allegedly 'remembered' in eucharistic rites - are virtually unintelligible apart from Passover." See Matthew Myer Boulton, "Supersession or Subsession? Exodus Typology, the Christian Eucharist and the Jewish Passover Meal," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 66, no. 1 (January 15, 2013): 18–29, https://doi.org/10.1.017/s0036930612000300, 18.

[63] Boulton, "Supercession*,"* 23.

[64] The "New Covenant in my blood" is but one clear allusion to this redemptive significance the gospels place on Jesus' death and resurrection. See Luke 22:20 and 1 Corinthians 11:25. Unless noted, scripture quotations are taken from the *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition* (Washington DC: National Council of Churches of Christ in the United States of America, 2021).

[65] Alikin, *Earliest History,* 37.

place the food and drink themselves had in both the Jewish festival and Christian Eucharistic meals, as the following two "flavors" indicate. Unlike other gatherings shaped by the Greco-Roman banquet tradition, Jewish and early Christian gatherings were not merely gatherings of tradesmen, but mystical experiences of communion with the God who delivers. Thus, prayer was a necessary component.[66]

Purposing of Food. Even apart from the later Seder Haggadah, the Passover Feast (unlike the Association Banquets below), infused the food eaten at the meals with meaning derived from the story: unleavened bread, bitter herbs, and lamb. Jonathan Brumberg-Kraus explores the parallel development of the Eucharist and Seder, suggesting that the "table talk" of each ritualized meal connects food to story: "Ingesting the foods 'inscribed' with the words of God is a ritualization of scriptural metaphors, a palpable sensual experience of internalizing the rabbinic or Christian myths, which transforms the rituals' participants respectively into 'embodied Torah,' or 'the Body of Christ' incarnate."[67] In the words of Volf and Croasmun, "bread is more than mere bread,"[68] and especially so in ritualized meals like the Passover and the Eucharist.[69]

Participation. The fourth Jewish flavor that distinguishes the Eucharistic Meal from the broader cultural banquet institution arises from the following observation from

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[66] The Didache shows this prayerful element to early churches' communal meal practices, focusing more on the prayers spoken throughout movements of the meal without giving any clear liturgical structure. (Didache 9-10.)

[67] Jonathan Brumberg-Kraus, "'Not by Bread Alone ...': The Ritualization of Food and Table Talk in the Passover Seder and in the Last Supper," *Semeia* 86 (1999): 165–91, 165. Brumberg-Kraus also connects both the Seder and Eucharistic Meal to the form of the Greco-Roman Symposium.

[68] Matthew Croasmun and Miroslav Volf, *The Hunger for Home* (Baylor University Press, 2022), 15.

[69] For nuance, however, see Witherington: "There is nothing in the gospels or the rest of the New Testament to suggest that when Jesus prayed, this act consecrated the elements of the meal." His point is that the bread and wine themselves are not what need to be consecrated, but the people gathered around them. This is more of a metaphysical point, however, and does not necessarily disagree with the ways communities layer meaning onto the food and drink in these meals. See Ben Witherington, *Making a Meal of It: Rethinking the Theology of the Lord's Supper* (Waco, Tex.: Baylor University Press, 2007), 138, Kindle.

Pitre: "the ancient rabbis saw each annual celebration of the Passover as a way of participating in the first exodus."[70] One can already hear echoes of the Apostle Paul: "The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a sharing [participation] in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a sharing [participation] in the body of Christ?"[71] These meals were not merely for community-building, vocational solidarity, or an intellectual remembrance. In both Jewish and early Christian meals, there is a deep sense that participation in the meal itself is at least part of how a community participates in the liberative presence and work of God.

These few gleanings from the meal practices of the Israelite people will serve to set the scene first for the meal practices of Jesus in the Gospel of Luke and eventually for the early Church's practice of the Eucharist.

Jesus at the Table in Luke

Anyone who reads the Gospel of Luke (not to mention Acts) from cover-to-cover will notice what Robert Karris has stated so memorably: "In Luke's Gospel Jesus is either going to a meal, at a meal, or coming from a meal."[72] Linguistically, by repeating the verbs, "took…blessed…broke…gave," the Gospel underlines three "Eucharistic texts": the feeding of the 5,000 in Luke 9:10-17, the Last Supper in Luke 22:14-38, and the Journey to Emmaus in Luke 24:13-35.[73] But this device only begins to draw the reader's attention to the meal stories and encounters that are peppered throughout the Gospel. Karris backs up his statement above with a list of no less than sixty stories, allusions, or

[70] Pitre, *Jesus,* 64.
[71] 1 Corinthians 10:16
[72] Robert J Karris, *Eating Your Way through Luke's Gospel* (Liturgical Press, 2006), 97.
[73] Moloney adds to his list of "Eucharistic texts" the Upper Room resurrection appearance in Luke 24:35-42 as it includes the eating of fish. See Francis J. Moloney, "Reading Eucharistic Texts in Luke," *Proceedings of the Irish Biblical Association* 14 (1991): 25-45, 25.

images of food and drink in Luke's gospel alone,[74] and the text explicitly puts Jesus at twelve meals.[75] These numbers paint a clear meal theme in Luke's Gospel; thus, I am certainly not the first to take Luke's Gospel as an observation point for Jesus' meal practices.[76] My purpose in looking to Jesus' meal practices in Luke, however, is not merely to acknowledge that they were central to Jesus' ministry. It is to unpack why.

Luke's Gospel is particularly instructive for this study not only in its unequivocal (almost heavy-handed) demonstration of meals' centrality in Jesus' ministry, but also for illustrating the kinds of encounters that occur at both the historical and hypothetical meals that Luke and Jesus present. Having introduced the two basic ingredients of transformation in chapter 1—connection and disruption—it should come as no surprise that both elements are present in the meals of Luke's Gospel. As Jesus begins an adaptive movement in which a "new environment"—called "the Kingdom of God"—is breaking in, the meal acts as an adaptive container, a place of inbreaking encounter, both building new and surprising connections and significantly disrupting individual lives and ingrained systems.

Connection. Even for those who have grown up at relatively dysfunctional meal tables or none at all, it is not hard to imagine the connectional potential of the meal. The Jesus of Luke leans into this potential head on. Volf and Croasmun begin their study with the Parable of the Lost Son from Luke 15 as they connect the practice of the meal to the

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[74] Karris, *Eating,* 16-20.

[75] This is conservative as one might easily imagine far more of the teaching encounters throughout the Gospel occurring at meals in the manner of the event at Simon's house in Luke 7 or in Luke 14. The number also does not include the countless meals in the background of Jesus' ministry, like those alluded to in the grumblings of the religious leaders in Luke 15:2, for instance.

[76] In addition to Karris' work, I have benefitted from Miroslav Volf and Matthew Croasmun's gloss of Luke, in which they conclude, "As Luke presents him, Jesus is the herald of the home of God, made known in his invitation to the table" See Volf and Croasmun, *Hunger,* 3. Their work will return below.

human hunger for "home," belonging, connection. Commenting on the moment in the story when the younger son declares, "How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger!"[77] Croasmun and Volf note that the younger son's "return is driven by a literal *hunger for home,*" and that "The return home is sealed in a *meal:* in the tastes, smells, physical touch, companionship, and relations with all those who belong to this home."[78] The story ends in sadness, which is marked by the older brother's refusal to join the feast despite his father's pleading.[79] Jesus tells the story in response to the Pharisees' and scribes' criticism of Jesus' eating habits.[80] The parable operates on multiple levels. The older brother's refusal to join the feast reflects Jesus' opponents' general attitude of resentment at the connections Jesus is forming with unsavory religious outsiders. But it is *literally* these opponents' refusal to join in the meals Jesus shares with "tax collectors and sinners" that manifests their general inability to adapt to the inclusivity of God's Kingdom. Jesus affirms this truth with a twist in Luke 5, when he is interrogated about eating with tax collectors, to which he replies with a clear statement of his mission: "I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance."[81] Essentially, Jesus is saying that he is intentionally drawing near and building connections with sinners. The means Jesus uses to do this? Sharing a table and eating with them. Sharing meals was a mark of connection, not only personally but

[77] Luke 15:17
[78] Croasmun and Volf, *Hunger,* 2. Emphasis original.
[79] Luke 15:28-30
[80] Luke 15:1-2: "Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, 'This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.'"
[81] Luke 5:32

socially and politically as well.[82] The table is a container for connection, even when the nature of those connections also disrupts social and political norms.

Disruption. At this point, we arrive at a feature of Luke's Gospel that has been observed, but is less often preached or purposefully put into practice in church communities. To a meal, the table in Luke is a place of disruption, confrontation, and disorientation. Robert Karris supplements the earlier statement about the pervasiveness of meals in Luke's Gospel with a second about the impact of those meals: "In Luke's Gospel Jesus got himself killed because of the way he ate."[83] Because this project is moving towards an attempt to apply the meal practices of Jesus and the early church to the ways churches practice Eucharist today, it is important to parse out how the ingredient of disruption gets added into Jesus' meal containers. I will point out three different types of disruptions in the general meals depicted in Luke before looking more closely at the more explicit "Eucharistic texts."[84]

Disruption 1: Jesus disrupts the social status quo by the company he keeps at meals. In Luke 7:36-50, Luke puts names and faces to the persistent soundtrack of grumbling at Jesus' meals throughout the Gospel. We have already seen the ways the presence of "tax collectors and sinners" at the table with Jesus stirs discomfort among the "righteous," but here, the disruptive guest enters directly into the meal container at the home of one of these "righteous" men, Simon the Pharisee. The subtle grumblings are

[82] Matthias Klinghart notes, "The most important social function of meals is defining the group's limits: Affiliation to a group is represented by participating in its meal." See Matthias Klinghart, "Meals in the Gospel of Luke," in *T & T Clark Handbook to Early Christian Meals in the Greco-Roman World* (London: T & T Clark, 2019), 109.
[83] Karris, *Eating,* 97. He also puts it this way: "Eating is a serious and dangerous business."
[84] I continue to use this phrase from Moloney purely to delineate the linguistically-connected meals in Luke 9, 22, and 24, with the caveat that part of this paper's purpose is to show that the line between "official" Eucharistic Meals and other meals in the presence of Jesus need not be so neatly drawn.

amplified into a full-scale disruptive dialogue. For Simon, not only does this woman not belong, but Jesus' passive welcome of her calls into question Jesus' own authority and righteousness, as Simon concludes, "If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him, that she is a sinner."[85] Jesus, for his part, does not shy away from this disruption, but takes the opportunity to teach—in the most personal way—the principles of the Kingdom which is now "at hand." In the encounter between the sinful woman, Jesus, and Simon, we have a concrete confrontation between the Kingdom of God and the "kingdoms of the world," a confrontation foretold in Mary's Magnificat, taught in Jesus' Sermon on the Plain, and alluded to when Jesus eschews the notion that he is a prophet of any comfortable or simplistic peace.[86] Not only does Jesus keep disruptive meal company, but he actually prescribes it as a mark of the "new environment" he is inaugurating.[87]

Zooming out from the narrative itself for a moment, it is important to ask why Luke highlights these stories and how they function in his intent for the Gospel. The challenge of who is present at Kingdom meals is not merely descriptive of Jesus' ministry, but speaks into the adaptive challenge of creating an interethnic community faced by Luke's readers in the early Church.[88] The resistance Jesus faces through his

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[85] Luke 7:39b

[86] Luke 4:5: "The devil led him up to a high place and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world." Luke 1:51-52: "God has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. He has brought down rulers from their thrones, but has lifted up the humble." Luke 6:17-26 contrasts the blessings of God's Kingdom with the ultimate emptiness of worldly pleasure and success. Luke 12:51: "Do you think I came to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, but division."

[87] Luke 14:12-14: "Then Jesus said to his host, "When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or sisters, your relatives, or your rich neighbors; if you do, they may invite you back and so you will be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous."

[88] "The challenge which Jesus issues through the sharing of meals and his questioning of the status quo within the context of these meals is important for Luke. He is looking to the 'then' of the life of Jesus to question the 'now' of current Christian practice." See Moloney, "Reading," 29.

inclusive meal company mirrors one of the central adaptive challenges in the background of the New Testament: creating an interethnic community of Jew and Gentile.

Disruption 2: Jesus disrupts the systemic and interpersonal anxieties revealed at meals with the values of the eschatological banquet. In both Greco-Roman and Jewish conceptions of meals in Jesus' world, there is an eschatological dimension to the structures and rituals of the gathering.[89] Inasmuch as Jesus has an eschatological message and purpose, then, meals are a perfect venue for his teaching.[90] The meal becomes a place where eschatological ideals encounter and interact with real-world social and family behaviors. At the table of Mary and Martha in Luke 10:38-42, interpretation often leans towards evaluations of Mary's eager studying at the feet of Jesus and Martha's bitterness at playing host. What gets lost in this simplistic duality—in part because of our cultural distance from the table norms of the Gospels' culture—is how Jesus capitalizes on the complex social dynamics, relational strains, and emotions that arise within the meal container. Jesus connects with Martha by listening as she projects her frustration onto Jesus ("Lord, do you not care…?!") and triangulates Jesus ("Tell her, then, to help me!"[91]). He then "controls the temperature" of this container not by placating or minimizing, but by leaning into the anxiety that has already been stirred up and named by choosing to confront Martha's assumptions and bringing to light the values of God's

[89] "Within the context of Hellenistic Judaism and early Christianity the utopian character of meals is almost exclusively employed in eschatological expectation, that is, the so-called Messianic or eschatological meal." See Klinghart, "Meals," 109.
[90] Karris: "Disciples who follow the Jesus of Luke's Gospel do not look forward to the beatific vision in heaven, but to full participation at the delights of the heavenly banquet." (101). Volf and Croasmun: "The focal expression of that eschatological home is a *feast"* (5) and "So, like the disciples, we feast. We share meals that are meant to be partial enactments of the eschatological banquet" (29). Thus, in what is surely understatement, Karris states, "At each table Jesus has a word to say to the host or to those who recline with him at table." See Karris, *Eating,* 87.
[91] Luke 10:40

Kingdom when he affirms Mary's posture of discipleship.[92] Jesus never seems bothered by the presence of disruption at meals, knowing that the table is a place where interpersonal and social disruption arises. He embodies a challenging, but "(relatively) non-anxious presence"[93] in this mostly healthy confrontation among friends.

Luke 14, on the other hand, is devoted almost entirely to the lessons that arise as Jesus observes the behavior within the socially-loaded structures of a meal involving guests with a range of attitudes toward Jesus, many of them not-so-friendly. In this chapter, Jesus shines an uncomfortable spotlight on the guests' seating decisions in v. 7 ("When he noticed how the guests chose the places of honor, he told them a parable."), the host's guest list in v. 12 ("He said also to the one who had invited him, 'When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers and sisters or your relatives or rich neighbors…'"), and an ill-timed comment of a guest in v. 15. That last comment—"Blessed is anyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!"—may well have been an effort to "cool the temperature" of the meal container through avoidance.[94] Alas, it sets Jesus up for an incendiary parable about a banquet where the expected guests (property owners and newlyweds) get replaced by "the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame."[95] In each of these teaching movements, Jesus is contrasting the present meal practices (which reflect larger patterns of social and religious structures and attitudes) with the values of the Kingdom he is proclaiming and embodying. This sequence of encounters in Luke 14, as Matthias Klinghart points out, "is based on the familiar values

[92] Luke 10:41-42: "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things, but few things are needed—indeed only one. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her."
[93] Friedman, *Generation,* 27.
[94] "The remark probably is designed to remove some of the tension Jesus' remarks and actions have created." See Darrell L Bock, *Luke: The NIV Application Commentary from Biblical Text to Contemporary Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Pub. House, 1996), 394.
[95] Luke 14:23

connected with the meal but utilizes them to go beyond these to an eschatological perspective."[96] Because meals are places of encounter, which reveal family and social systems both in their design and in the particular interpersonal dynamics that arise within them, Luke (with Jesus) sees them as the perfect setting to highlight the encounter between "heaven and earth." While one can imagine most of these points of friction merely festering in the grumblings of those involved,[97] Jesus, in the words of Heifitz and Linsky, "orchestrates the conflict," amplifying the disruptive encounter as a part of his mission to bring about an adaptive receptivity to the inbreaking Kingdom of God.

Disruption 3: Meals provide a setting for Jesus' disruptive teaching. It is not as though Jesus just happens to respond to uncomfortable situations that arise at meals. Rather, as we will see below, most meals Jesus attends were *designed* for times of teaching and dialogue.[98] In Luke 11, Jesus is invited to the house of a Pharisee, whom we are told "was amazed to see that he did not first wash before dinner."[99] Without any other incident, Jesus launches into a series of "Woes," interrupted only by a law expert's sheepish-sounding protestation of offense: "Teacher, when you say these things, you insult us, too."[100] The confrontational series of banquet parables in Luke 14 we explored above began when Jesus healed a man's hand on the Sabbath, an act he surely knew would agitate his host and other guests. Ultimately though, it is not a matter of blaming either the hosts or Jesus for these disruptions. As we will see in the next section, Symposium Meals (which are probably the setting for most of Jesus' meals in Luke) were

[96] Klinghart, "Meals," 111.
[97] As they often do today!
[98] As Barbara Reid "Jesus was no stranger to such conflicts at meals. In fact, in some of the gospel scenes he seems to provoke it!" See Barbara E. Reid, "A Biblical Way of Feasting," *The Bible Today* 57, no. 6 (November 2019): 374–80, 375.
[99] Luke 11:38
[100] Luke 11:46

set up for periods of teaching, dialogue, and construction of identity and social values. As a prophet of the inbreaking Kingdom of God, Jesus' participation in these Symposia would naturally be disruptive. Croasmun and Volf express this natural disruption that Jesus' table presence would have catalyzed: "Luke's point is not that Jesus' critics are getting caught up in trivialities but rather that controversies about Jesus' habits of table fellowship reveal central aspects of Jesus' identity and mission."[101] Just as meals naturally reveal systemic and interpersonal dynamics, so they provided a venue for Jesus' prophetically disruptive presence to be heard and seen.[102]

Finally, I offer a few observations from Luke's "Eucharistic texts."

Eucharistic Text 1: The Feeding of the 5,000. While it is easy to take an uplifting message from the feeding story in Luke 9:10-17, it also presents a case study in systems and adaptive leadership. Much could be said about this impromptu meal, but we will stick to what can be gained from reading through the lenses of Family Systems Theory and adaptive leadership. Jesus, confronted with the anxiety of his disciples in search of a technical solution ("Send the crowd away so they can…find food and lodging."[103]), resists the temptation to overfunction and invites participation (a theme we will come back to later) in the meal preparations through well-differentiated leadership ("You give

[101] Volf and Croasmun, *Hunger,* 45.
[102] As we discuss Jesus' encounters with Jewish religious leaders, it is important to step back and remember that the Gospels are not pure or comprehensive historical accounts. Barbara Reid reminds readers, "It is important to distinguish between Luke's literary depiction of the Pharisees and the actual religious leaders of Jesus' day." The meals of Luke's Gospel are not there "to fuel vilification of Jews of all times and places." (See Reid, "Feasting," 379.) Rather, Luke's primary concern is to reveal who Jesus is and to give shape to the young community of disciples. While it was undoubtedly core to Jesus' historical ministry, the meal is also Luke's favorite context to highlight the person of Jesus, the nature of Jesus' Kingdom, and the challenge of living in their light for the Christian community.
[103] Luke 9:12

them something to eat"[104]). However the story is read,[105] it manages to reveal both the identity "of Jesus as the provider of the food of life"[106] and the way of his Kingdom as a participatory table—much like the provision and collection of Manna in Exodus 16. These insights into both Jesus and the Kingdom require new ways of thinking and functioning. Heifitz and Linsky could be talking about Jesus when they describe what is required of adaptive leadership: "You have to counteract [the people's] exaggerated dependency and promote their resourcefulness."[107] Even outside of the historical and cultural challenges facing American Mainline churches as outlined in chapter one, this *paradigm shift into the Kingdom of God* is essentially the perennial task of Christian discipleship. Following the Way of Jesus is always, at its core, an adaptive journey.

Beyond this, one must not miss that as "Eucharistic" as the language and gestures of the feeding story may be, this meal is spontaneous and outside the official liturgies and authorizations of the religious order. As with John's wilderness ministry, Jesus' manger birth, and his persistent presence at sinners' tables, François Bovon remarks, "The setting of the episode in the wilderness reminds Israel of their origins as a lost and wandering people, and of God's protection."[108] "Lost and wandering" is a good description of how

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[104] Luke 9:13. Friedman connects leadership overfunctioning with burnout, but emphasizes that the focus here is not the individual leader but "the overloading system." (See Friedman, *Generation,* 217.) In Luke 9, Jesus is actively pursuing rest and distance from the demands of ministry when he is inundated by the crowds, which then gives rise to the anxiety about food. It is in this moment that Jesus resists the "overloading system" by delegating the work to his disciples and pooling the (sparse) resources of the group.

[105] At least two ways of explaining the "miracle" have been offered: 1) a miracle in which Jesus physically multiplies the bread and fish, 2) a social miracle by which Jesus shifts the focus from anxious not-enough to a Kingdom picture of mutual care and generosity.

[106] Karris, *Eating,* 51. Volf and Croasmun also read this story in its context between Herod's confusion about Jesus' identity and Simon Peter's declaration of Jesus' Messiahship. "What has happened between these two rehearsals of the popular confusion about the identity of Jesus? A meal. Jesus has been made known in the breaking of the bread." See Volf and Croasmun, *Hunger,* 20.

[107] Heifitz, *Leadership,* 15.

[108] François Bovon, quoted in Volf and Croasmun, *Hunger,* 22.

adaptive challenges feel and look, and indeed the wilderness wanderings of the Hebrew people in Exodus through Deuteronomy make the core narrative of the Hebrew Scriptures a story of adaptive challenge. For all that the mass meal in Luke 9 reveals about Jesus and the nature of discipleship, the very location of the meal is a systemically disruptive event, and should be put in a category with all the other "wrong tables" at which Jesus is spotted. The location of the meal—and that Luke applies Eucharistic language to it—continues to present a disruptive word to institutional approaches to the Eucharist specifically and sacramental spirituality more generally. As Bovon indicated, Jesus is drawing on the origins of Israelite spirituality prior to its centralization in the Jerusalem Temple, even prior to the priesthood and sacrificial systems, reminding the people of their adaptive DNA.[109]

Eucharistic Text 2: The Last Supper. Again, vats of ink have been spilled over this story. The purpose here is to recognize that the Last Supper is not only an important time of communion between Jesus and his disciples, but a container that also holds severe disruption at just the moment they are being thrust into a "new environment," a new phase not only in their time with Jesus, but perhaps the greatest adaptive challenge in human history—the transition from Creation to New Creation.[110] Evidence of disruption can be found in the argument about greatness (Luke 22:24), which, Volf and Croasmun

[109] One also thinks of God's response through the prophet Nathan to David's unsolicited proposal to build God a fixed Temple in Jerusalem in 2 Samuel 7:5-7 "Are you the one to build me a house to live in? I have not lived in a house since the day I brought up the people of Israel from Egypt to this day, but I have been moving about in a tent and a tabernacle. Wherever I have moved about among all the people of Israel, did I ever speak a word with any of the tribal leaders of Israel, whom I commanded to shepherd my people Israel, saying, 'Why have you not built me a house of cedar?'" God is affirming that the Divine presence is, in some sense, naturally and comfortably adaptive. God is "at home" in a mobile tent.

[110] Charles Campbell speaks of the Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 11 what could be extended more broadly to the early Christian movement: "Theologically, he wrestles with the tensions between the old-age structures and the new-creation community that collide in the liminal space at the turn of the ages." See Charles Campbell, *1 Corinthians* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2018), 175.

posit, "may have been occasioned by the crisis of status brought on by the need to occupy particular positions at the table."[111] This suspicion is fed by part of Jesus' response in vv. 29-30: "I confer on you, just as my Father has conferred on me, a kingdom, so that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom." Disruption comes to the fore again as Jesus speaks openly about the instability of the present community, including Judas' betrayal and Simon Peter's denial along with the trials that they will all have to endure. Imagine the disruption when Jesus cryptically discloses, "But see, the one who betrays me is with me, and his hand is on the table"[112] and "Simon, Simon, listen! Satan has demanded to sift all of you like wheat… I tell you, Peter, the cock will not crow this day until you have denied three times that you know me."[113]

Of course, there is also the object lesson of Jesus' own impending suffering and death represented by bread and cup: "Then he took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks he broke it and gave it to them, saying, 'This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.' And he did the same with the cup after supper, saying, 'This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood."[114] This all takes place at the Last Supper, the meal most directly alluded to in the Eucharist, the event which Christians remember and reenact in the center of their worship liturgies. It is hard to imagine a festal ancestor with more disruption, confrontation, and raw encounter. These disruptive features of the Last Supper are central to the hypothesis of this project that not only are *meals* natural places for formation, but that *Eucharistic Meals*—meals

[111] Volf and Croasmun, *Hunger,* 80.
[112] Luke 22:21
[113] Luke 22:31, 34
[114] Luke 22:19-20

centered on the death and resurrection of Jesus—have an abundance of capacity to hold the levels of disruption necessary to adaptation by anchoring them in the gospel story.

Eucharistic Text 3: The Emmaus Road. A resurrection encounter with Jesus: what could be more joyful? And yet, in a close reading of the series of stories in Luke 24, it is not joy that dominates, but something like bewilderment bordering on terror.[115] In Luke's Easter chapter, the words and phrases that describe the disciples' reactions to resurrection are as follows: perplexed, terrified, disbelief, amazed,[116] astounded, "our hearts were burning," startled, terrified, joy, disbelief, wondering,[117] worship, great joy.[118] What might seem to Christians familiar with the Easter story after 2,000 years to be a text about reunion and connection is actually a text of utter disruption and disorientation in this new resurrection environment. As Serene Jones points out, as painful and traumatic as death can be, "We know how to live in a world where death has the final word; it is the only 'absolute' we can be sure of. We know how to order our lives and go about our business. What happens when life has the final word? To admit to what this text claims—that there is 'resurrection'—is *traumatic!"*[119] Without exploring the idea of trauma right now, resurrection encounter is at least "disruptive" in the manner of an adaptive challenge. A world that includes resurrection is a decidedly "new environment" one must navigate.

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[115] Is there a phrase more honoring to the range of faith experience than Lk. 24:41: "Yet for all their joy they were still disbelieving and wondering," or a more laughably earthy response than Jesus gives, "Have you anything here to eat?"

[116] The Greek verb here in Luke 24:12, θαυμάζω (thaumazō), does not necessarily hold the same positive connotations as the English "amazed." It is often used of Jesus' opponents when Jesus confounds them either in word or deed. Perhaps a better English phrase would be "taken aback." It tends to include elements of confusion, surprise, and inability to process some sort of logical or experiential disruption.

[117] See previous note on θαυμάζω.

[118] As translated in NRSVUE.

[119] Serene Jones, *Trauma and Grace: Theology in a Ruptured World* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 95-96. She goes on to quote Tom Troeger along these lines: "Then the comfort of knowing that life is a fixed and closed system is called into question. If death is overcome, if the one indestructible certitude that marks existence is shattered, then reality is wide open!"

The disciples on the Emmaus Road seem to be processing their disappointment and trauma in relatively healthy ways—they are coping. But at the table, in the breaking of the bread, "their eyes were opened, and they recognized him, and he vanished from their sight."[120] Certainly, there are comforting implications of the resurrection story and promise. But this meal is a disruption of the highest order: a dead man is alive again, a new creation has begun, eyes are now opened. The issue is no longer coping with a death (or deaths of various kinds), but now they are adapting to an entirely "new environment" where death has given way to resurrection. The creative possibilities are frighteningly boundless, paralyzing even.[121] Even at resurrection's most positive—in its joy, Brené Brown reminds us, "When we feel joy, it is a place of incredible vulnerability—it's beauty and fragility and deep gratitude and impermanence all wrapped up in one experience."[122] Resurrection is disruptive, and the Risen Christ breaks this disruptive news to grief-stricken disciples…at the table.

This venture into the Gospel of Luke has not only reiterated the centrality of meals to Jesus' ministry, but also examined why they are central: In the presence of Jesus, meals are adaptive containers in their capacity to hold the ingredients of transformation: connection and disruption. One of the reasons these containers were so important to Jesus is that he was an adaptive leader, training disciples to function in healthy and transformative ways in a "new environment": the Kingdom of God. And they were places of encounter and confrontation as the alternative Kingdom of God or New Creation was

[120] Luke 24:31
[121] If the Gospel according to Mark did indeed end with 16:18 ("Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid."), this image of paralysis is particularly highlighted there.
[122] Brown, *Dare,* 81.

emerging amidst the world's anxiety-fueled systems. In the light of the Resurrection and commissioned by Pentecost, the apostles did not merely carry on the kerygmatic content of Jesus' message. They also carried on his value for the meal container as a core feature of their movement.

The Table in the Early Church

When American churches consider the central containers of their communities, they tend to think about "worship." Through all of the "worship wars" from the Reformation onward about musical style, sacramental meaning and frequency, attractional or missional goals, pastors in robes, suits, or ripped skinny jeans, only a small portion of American churches have actually endeavored to shift the basic worship container to more closely resemble that of Jesus and the first Christians. If we zoom out, the same essential structures exist in both a Catholic Mass and a megachurch praise gathering (with Mainline churches generally hovering somewhere in between). There are experts in preaching, music, ritual, etc. in front and the gathered community which is tasked with listening, singing, partaking, and—ideally—applying the content of the service. Of course, there are other programs more on the periphery of the church's life, which give laypersons the opportunity to learn, lead, and serve. The question I am asking is whether these structures and rhythms are modeling adaptive forms of Christian faith and building individual and communal capacity for engaging adaptively with the world's challenges and the vocation of God's Kingdom. This is not to deny that there are good things churches are doing in the world, that sacraments are providing meaning and spiritual sustenance, or that the message of Jesus is being preached and taught. But given the internal and external struggles churches are facing, it is worth questioning the

systemic processes and containers that have become so normalized. Recalling the distinction of innovation and adaptivity in chapter one, truly adaptive approaches to worship and sacraments have been slow to find a voice in the many conversations (and conflicts) surrounding the worship containers of our churches.

In the meantime, a recent influx of research has presented a stark juxtaposition of modern worship gatherings and those of the early Church.[123] In my own quest for more adaptive spiritual and sacramental containers, this research signaled that these containers may not require wholesale innovation. We will see that the meal-based worship practices of the early Church resourced the early Christians with adaptive containers in a time of major adaptive challenge. Not only does this research relate to the early Church, but to the ways the Gospels themselves present the meals Jesus attends.[124] Essentially, the research places several New Testament depictions of meals and the meal practices of the early Church against the backdrop of the Greco-Roman Symposium Meal or Banquet. This was not just a "Gentile" cultural form. Rather, as Soham Al-Suadi and Petr Ben-Smit contend, "throughout the Mediterranean world, a coherent meal culture can be found, with meals that were structured in a similar way."[125] Scholars like Dennis Smith, Matthias Klinghart, and Hal Taussig have been able to persuasively map the language of the New Testament and other early Christian texts onto the basic structures of the Symposium meal.[126] This section will interweave three implications of this research: 1)

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[123] "In the past approximately 20 years, research about the evolving Christian identity and the basic communal practices of the first Christian communities has been renewed fundamentally by studying these in relation to Greco-Roman meals." See Peter-Ben Smit and Soham Al-Suadi, "Introduction to T&T Clark Handbook to Early Christian Meals in the Greco-Roman World," *VU Research Portal (Elsevier),* January 1, 2019, https://doi.org/10.5040/9780567666420.0004, 1.

[124] I have alluded to this research several times already in the section on Luke's Gospel and elsewhere.

[125] Ben-Smit and Al-Suadi, "Introduction," 1.

[126] Most clearly, Dennis Smith maps the structure of the symposium meal onto the language of 1 Corinthians 11:23-25. See "The Greco-Roman Banquet as a Social Institution" in Dennis E. Smith and Hal

Early Christian worship was almost certainly meal-based; 2) This not only gives insight into the general practice of Christian worship gatherings, but helps to frame what is happening in the Eucharist from the Last Supper onward; 3) Attempts at more adaptive approaches to sacramentality and worship have a rich tradition from which to draw.

Embedding the Eucharist and early Christian worship within the context of the Symposium meal has both clarifying and disruptive effects. First, it shows that meal-centeredness was not unique to Christian gatherings.[127] So to be clear, the argument of this paper is *not* a regulative one, as if to say, "How the early Church did it is how it must be done in all times and places." The Symposium meal was a cultural form, as significant and widespread as it was. At the same time, it should give modern Christians pause to recognize that modern liturgical forms need not be static and fixed. The way modern churches "do church/worship" does *not* reflect the earliest Christian liturgical containers, but have evolved (or devolved) over time. This freedom might open up space for a curiosity as to why Jesus and the early Christians chose meals as the basic setting for their communal life and how those meals served the adaptive purposes of the Christian movement. Additionally, acknowledging the overlap between the forms of Christian and non-Christian gatherings, one can gain more clarity on what made the early Christian gatherings distinct from those of their contemporary religious and secular associations.[128]

Taussig, *Meals in the Early Christian World: Social Formation, Experimentation, and Conflict at the Table* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 24.

[127] "The central event in the many associations coming into being in early Hellenism, as well as in the early Principate, was the communal banquet meal." See Matthias Klinghart, "A Typology of the Communal Meal" in Smith and Taussig, *Meals,* 10. Cf. "Many religious groups at this time claimed these meals as their primary moment together" in Hal Taussig, *In the Beginning Was the Meal: Social Experimentation & Early Christian Identity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, Cop, 2009), 3.

[128] We have already seen how the Jewish Passover added their own "flavor" to the form of the Symposium.

Perhaps most provocative for the purposes of this paper is the assertion that Matthias Klinghart has made clearly and concisely concerning early Christian gatherings: "They were not 'sacramental meals' in token form but real meals. Citations of 'bread' and 'wine' refer to the two main parts of any communal meal rather than to the sacramental aspects of a token meal, which first appears during the third century CE."[129] In other words, the Eucharist was not merely its own ritual within a larger liturgy, but a ritualized meal with a "twofold structure": the meal (Greek δεῖπνον, deipnon) which was mostly about eating together, and the symposium (Greek συμπόσιον, symposion)[130] which often, along with the sharing of wine, included conversation, performances, entertainment, and more depending on the association and purpose of the gathering. While certainly not all early Christian communities would have had access to such spaces, many symposia were held in a room specifically designed for this meal (the triclinium), where guests reclined on three sides of a square "so that the diners all faced inward,"[131] where the symposiarch facilitated the pouring of the libation and brought order to the symposium entertainment, conversation, or activities. The movements from deipnon to symposium included fairly structured liturgies and prayers, including dedications to gods, the emperors, and founders of the association. The symposium itself was highly participatory and community-oriented.[132] Hal Taussig describes the ritualization of the meals: "There was indeed a cultural form and norm for what one did at meals. However, within the general form, there was generous room for improvisation."[133] As Smith notes, these "banquets"

[129] Klinghart, "Typology," 10. cf. "The Lord's Supper was clearly a real meal; it was meant to satisfy the participants' hunger." See Alikin, *Earliest History,* 104.
[130] Klinghart, "Typology," 10.
[131] Smith, "Institution," 26-27.
[132] Klinghart, "Typology," 13.
[133] Taussig, *Beginning,* 6.

were not mere forms. They had their own ideological traditions and conversations. Among these are elements of connection (ex. "social bonding," "festive joy," etc.) and disruption (ex. "the uneasy tension" between "social stratification and social equality"),[134] along with the sense that the communal meal has an "ability to provide utopian perfection" through elements like abundance and inclusivity.[135] Above, we traced the eschatological dimensions of both the Jewish Passover meal and the ways Jesus amplified the contrasts between the meals he was attending with the values of the Kingdom of God (a present eschatological reality). The research on the Symposium meal indicates that there was an even broader social sense that the meal container had potential to do work that would bridge current reality with eschatological or utopian aspiration. Understanding more about the lofty expectations with which meal-based gatherings were endowed in the social context of Jesus and the early Church leads to a conversation about how the early Christians leveraged these adaptive containers to the adaptive purposes of the Kingdom of God and how that might translate to modern Christian communities.

Perhaps one of the most stimulating explorations of these questions is Hal Taussig's work, *In the Beginning Was the Meal*. In this book, Taussig provocatively suggests that rather than try to explain Christian origins by pinpointing core beliefs, historical events, founders, or social codes, it might be more "generative" to mine and "map" the logic of "one of the primary social practices during Christianity's emergence: the meals they shared."[136] Taussig does not pull punches on the ways deeper critical study of the world of the New Testament challenge modern ecclesial beliefs, forms, and

[134] Smith, "Institution," 28-31.
[135] Klinghart, "Typology," 17.
[136] Taussig, *Beginning,* IX.

practices…including the Eucharist: "The ancient meanings and practices of baptism and communion/eucharist appeared increasingly to be different than those of the twentieth century."[137] Taussig quotes Karen King's redirection of modern churches' understanding of- and approach to- the early Church: "What if the beginning was a time of grappling and experimentation? What if the meaning of the gospel was not clear and Christians struggled to understand who Jesus was…?"[138] What these observations and questions do is reframe the development of the Christian movement as an adaptive challenge rather than a technical solution to the world's problem(s). As the title, *In the Beginning was the Meal*, indicates, Taussig believes that the meal was the key container for this work.

The major categories Taussig offers for what happened in those Christian symposia are "social experimentation and identity formation,"[139] both clear examples of adaptive work.[140] Some have (fairly) criticized Taussig for over-skepticism concerning what is and can be known about the early Christian movement as well as over-speculation when it comes to the content and production of these gatherings.[141] Even if his theories are overcorrections, however, Taussig's stated goal comes through: to break free from a simplistic and anachronistic "Master Narrative" about the origins of Christianity to which the modern church must aspire and aim to recover. Instead of holding up a speculative ideal, Taussig inspires readers to ask functional questions about ritual, meal, and

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[137] Taussig, *Beginning,* 12.
[138] Karen L King, *The Gospel of Mary of Magdala: Jesus and the First Woman Apostle* (Santa Rosa, Ca: Polebridge Press, 2003)*,* 158. As quoted in Taussig, *Beginning,* 14.
[139] Taussig, *Beginning,* subtitle.
[140] "The meals became a laboratory in which a range of expressive vocabularies explored alternative social visions." See Taussig, *Beginning,* 20.
[141] Blomberg is representative and mostly fair, including his remarks on how the circle of symposium researchers has, at times, diminished the influence of the Passover meal and tradition. See Craig L. Blomberg, "Review of Taussig, Hal in the Beginning Was the Meal," *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 72, no. 4 (October 2010): 843–44.

formation. He is like the child persistently asking, "Why?" to adults who have forgotten the deeper reasons and purposes beneath habits overdue for re-examination. This is the benefit of his exploration of ritual theory, where he concludes that ritual provides communities with a way of exploring intimidating real-life challenges in a safer container that runs parallel to reality without quite so much "heat."[142] In ritual, Taussig finds the elements of transformation we are exploring in this paper: a safe, connective container where disruptive realities can be engaged.

Although Taussig's work (and others mentioned in this section) presents the early Christian meal as a common form in the Greco-Roman world, he also shows how and why this particular container was effective in forming the emerging Christian community as one of experimentation in values of social equity,[143] generosity, and even "resistance to Roman imperial power."[144] The Eucharistic nature of these gatherings centered the symposium conversations on the presence and stories of Jesus. So for instance, the cup to initiate the symposium portion of the gathering would be dedicated to Jesus as Lord and Savior as a subversion of the expected practice of honoring the Emperor at this point in the gathering; the stories of Jesus on which the communities meditated together[145] would

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[142] Taussig, *Beginning,* 66.

[143] Taussig helpfully remarks on the radical adaptive challenge that Christians faced in bringing Jews and Gentiles together at the table. The practice of the meal was both the technical barrier and the adaptive container for experimentation where these tensions were explored and lived out. See Taussig, *Beginning,* 164.

[144] Taussig, *Beginning,* 115. Cf. "The behavior that generated both the early Christian resistance and the occasional imperial accusations was simply the meal gatherings by early Christians. For the early Christians, the experience of an alternative societal model, the bonding in community, and the many evocations of Jesus' resistance on the cross at the meals made clear to them that they belonged to a counterimperial entity." See Taussig, *Beginning,* 140.

[145] Taussig writes that the symposia are a likely context in which the Gospels and Epistles of the New Testament were compiled and produced. See Taussig, *Beginning,* 112-113. Just how much this was a process of "creation" (distanced from the historical memories of Jesus' actual words and actions) or of constructing and stylizing shared memory (Taussig would lean more towards the former and I the latter) should not distract from the point that the composition of early Christian texts, including those in the New Testament, may well have been a communal process engaged in the flow of the meal.

have directly challenged the guest list and seating arrangements of the gathering as we saw in Luke 14; the association of deipnon/bread and symposium/cup with the broken and poured out body and blood of Christ offers theological and sacramental grounding for instruction such as Paul gives in Romans 14:15: "If your brother or sister is distressed by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love. Do not let what you eat cause the ruin of one for whom Christ died."[146] Each of these leverages familiar aspects of the Symposium toward an encounter with Lord Jesus and the Kingdom of God.

Taussig has taken an investigative posture toward early Christian gatherings and the types of adaptive work that were engaged within the container of the Eucharistic Symposium Meal. The main takeaway for this project is that these meals had the capacity to hold the adaptive ingredients of connection and disruption. He summarizes like this:

> The meal's relatively stable form…did provide a safe space in which the contradictions, pressures, and possibilities of identity could be held. Its openness to disagreement, social experimentation, and expressiveness invited provisional reworkings of identity…The meal housed volatility of change and clashes of cultures comfortably within its established and flexible rhythms.[147]

Before moving on to build on Taussig's work on the ancient Eucharistic containers of the early Christian movement, we will take a moment to engage with a text that has had a major impact on the understanding of the Eucharist in the Christian traditions: 1 Corinthians 11. This text provides a primary account of the Symposium Meal Taussig et al. have outlined, but it needs to be reread in light of the technical/adaptive distinctions we have already explored.

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[146] This text also resurfaces the reality that in the early Church the meal was both content and context. The Eucharistic Meal context reinforces Paul's content about the ways the Christian community should be living out their faith. The Jew-Gentile integrated meal was a manifestation of the adaptive challenge and also the container in which Eucharistic values were infused for the sake of transformation.
[147] Taussig, *Beginning,* 183.

Excursus: 1 Corinthians 11

Although the main Scriptural focus of this paper is on Luke's Gospel, 1 Corinthians 11 must be addressed as—potentially—the oldest witness to the Symposium and Eucharistic practices of the Christian movement.[148] There are at least two takeaways from this text for the purposes of this paper. The first is basic but easily overlooked: when the Corinthians gathered for worship, they gathered for a meal. It is easy to overlook because it went without saying for Paul and his readers.[149] In 1 Corinthians, Paul is "controlling the temperature" of these meal gatherings. Managing this "heat" was typically the job of the "symposiarch," who, according to Soham Al-Suadi, "was responsible for the tone of the meal, which was always in danger of disturbance by guests who were not happy with his decisions, uninvited guests and interactions between guests."[150] In the fashion of systems thinking, Paul attends to the context, processes, and ritualizations of the meal by "naming Jesus the *kurios* [Lord] as the symposiarch of the meal."[151] Even as this move is "a communal and social critique,"[152] Paul is, in a sense, doubling down on the meal-based gatherings of the Corinthian Christians, appointing an "Over-symposiarch" to hold the community accountable to the values of New Creation meals. He is entrusting the meal to hold both his own confrontation of the Corinthian

[148] Thomas Esposito, "The Last Supper and the Lord's Supper: Paul and the Eucharist in 1 Corinthians 11," The Bible Today 57, no. 6 (2019): 359–65, 362.
[149] "The meal was as much a part of religion as a part of the activity of daily life." See Soham Al-Suadi, "The Meal in 1 Corinthians 11," *T&T Clark Handbook to Early Christian Meals in the Greco-Roman World,* January 1, 2019, https://doi.org/10.5040/9780567666420.0025, 229.
[150] Al-Suadi, *1 Corinthians,* 234.
[151] Ibid. Al-Suadi is referring to 1 Corinthians 11:20: "When you come together, it is not really to eat the Lord's supper."
[152] Ibid.

community and the confrontation of "the Lord's supper [deipnon]" with the Corinthians' unlaudable practice of the meal which he calls "your own supper [deipnon]."[153]

The second takeaway is more of a historical suspicion that Paul's correction of the specific corruptions of the Corinthian meal practice has had an outsized influence on subsequent Eucharistic practices, leading to the separation of Eucharistic ritual and communal meal.[154] As an antibiotic can be helpful for curing an acute infection, but becomes dangerous when taken as an ongoing practice, so it is that Paul's corrections to the corruptions of Corinthian Christian gatherings may have become too central to the Church's ongoing practice of the Eucharist. Let us take a moment and look at the logic of 1 Corinthians 11.

Charles Campbell posits that the idea of "remembrance" (11:24-25) that only Paul and Luke include in their presentations of the Last Supper "is an *anamnesis,* through which the community actually embodies again the self-giving meal practice of Jesus."[155] It is the dissonance of this anamnesis of Jesus' table practice and what is actually being embodied in Corinth's Christian community that triggers Paul's correction that some should just "eat at home" if they cannot wait for the whole of the community to gather (11:34). There is already a gap—even an opposition—between the memory invoked by Jesus' words and the meals being enacted by the community, which reinforced "the

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[153] 1 Corinthians 11:20-21.

[154] This movement is not historically immediate, but 1 Corinthians 11 could be seen to provide justification for the divorce of meal and ritual that appears to have coincided with the major shift in the 4th c. in Christianity's status within the Roman Empire. Ben Witherington ties these two shifts "when worship moved from the house to the basilica, when the Lord's Supper ceased to be set in the context of a meal and seen as part of the Christian agape…It cannot be accidental that at the same time the social character of early Christianity was changing in dramatic ways, the theology of the Lord's Supper increasingly changed as well, moving from the concept of a meal to the concept of a sacrifice of the Mass." See Witherington, *Meal,* 113.

[155] Campbell, *1 Corinthians,* 190.

culture's divisive, oppressive hierarchies of strong and weak, honored and shamed."[156] The Corinthians' Eucharistic performances are thus counterproductive not only in that they are reinforcing corrupt cultural norms, but also because they numb the community to the subversive nature of "the supper of the Lord." Campbell puts it powerfully: "The church cannot proclaim this radically disruptive, apocalyptic message by continuing to accommodate to the hierarchical meal practices of the old age."[157] By accommodating society's status norms, the Corinthian community has chosen a kind of social "safety" for the meal that makes it a place where gospel disruption, eschatological imagination, and faithful risk-taking are unwelcome and where deeper communion with God and among classes is precluded. As such, Campbell paraphrases Paul's adaptive thinking: "When the meal becomes a comfortable ritual that does not interrupt or disturb the hierarchical arrangements of the old age…the church must ask if it is truly proclaiming the foolishness and weakness of the cross or is it practicing a 'ritual lie.'"[158] To interrupt this lie, Paul calls for a shift towards community-mindedness, and if that fails, a type of "fast" from the divisive way food and drink were being consumed.[159] I might paraphrase Paul's logic like this: "If the food and drink are such a temptation that they would cause division, you can fill your bellies at home! Don't let the food part of the meal distract you from encountering the Body of Christ in the faces of one another."[160] Paul is practicing an

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[156] Ibid.
[157] Campbell, *1 Corinthians,* 191.
[158] Campbell, *1 Corinthians*, 193.
[159] 1 Corinthians 11:33-34: "So then, my brothers and sisters, when you come together to eat, wait for one another. If you are hungry, eat at home, so that when you come together, it will not be for your condemnation. About the other things I will give instructions when I come." This verse both implies that the Corinthians will continue to come together for meals *and* makes a concession to mitigate the weakness of those who just cannot seem to help themselves from parading their status or prosperity in the communal meals.
[160] This quote is my own summary, based on Campbell's assertion: "For the body Paul calls the Corinthians to discern is not Christ's body somehow mysteriously present in the bread but the body that is enacted when the church gathers at the meal." See Campbell, *1 Corinthians,* 191.

adaptive sacramentality. He does not include the short picture of the Last Supper and Jesus' so-called "words of institution" to enforce some proper ritual script. He is asking questions about how the practice of the community is (mis)shaping the community, and he is willing to adjust the practice if it is, in this particular context, producing maladaptive results. Taken out of their specific corrective context, Paul's words might seem to justify the separation of the Eucharistic ritual from the communal meal ("eat at home"). But it is very much the opposite that is happening. Paul is *not* commanding either a recitation of Jesus' words nor emphasizing the "elements" in and of themselves, but is employing the meal practice of Jesus in the Last Supper to reorient the meal practices of Corinthian churches, making them spaces for adaptive activities like "discernment, imagination, and perception."[161]

There will be times, in any context in which social experimentation and identity formation are attempted, when drastic correction of process and adjustments to the container are required. This was the case in Corinth. It may also be the case in modern churches when it comes to our practices of the Eucharist. I agree with Campbell that in many churches, our practice of Eucharist enables us to miss "the fact that Paul used these words [of institution] *precisely* to challenge cultural, social, and economic hierarchies."[162] We have so turned down the heat of our own Eucharistic practices that it is time to reread Paul's subversive words and recover the adaptive container of the Eucharistic Meal where deep connection and prophetic disruption can actually subvert, transform, and inspire the New Creation imaginations of our church communities.

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[161] Campbell, *1 Corinthians,* 192. (Please, by all means, just read Campbell's entire treatment of 1 Corinthians 11:17-34.)
[162] Campbell, *1 Corinthians,* 193.

Having seen the adaptive potential of meals in Jesus' ministry and the early Church as well as witnessed Paul in the trenches of adaptive sacramentality, we will continue by welcoming a widening circle of voices into the conversation on meals and transformation. These voices offer wisdom as we seek to apply an adaptive sacramentality to the church today, designing a new iteration of Eucharistic Meal as an adaptive container.

A Conversation with Sacramental Theology[163]

This brief conversation with a selection of sacramental theologians will make two contributions to this paper: 1) It will show how sacramental theology has served to build a sacramental imagination outside the institutional boundaries of ritual and thus influenced my own approach to the Eucharist, 2) It will bring us to the current boundaries of sacramental thinking that I hope to expand by reconnecting the Eucharist and meal. Sacramental Theologians like Leonardo Boff and Alexander Schmemann draw on a rich tradition of Christian sacramentality that does not immediately reduce to the Roman Catholic Church's official list of seven rituals or the shorter lists in the Protestant tradition.[164] In this view of sacrament alone, they contribute to this paper's conversation

[163] The purview of "Sacramental Theology" may refer to different lines of study. It may be approached as theological reflection on the official sacraments of a tradition or, in the words of Leonardo Boff as a "sacramental attitude" that explores material forms more broadly "as an interplay between human beings, the world, and God. See Leonardo Boff, *Sacraments of Life: Life of the Sacraments* (Washington, Dc: Pastoral Press, 1987), 2. I am interested in both, though one of the core convictions of this project of "adaptive sacramentality" is to commend a reconvergence of the two perspectives: reframing churches' traditional sacramental practices in light of a broader imagination about the intersection of material and spiritual and the possibilities of that interaction for spiritual formation. This conviction arises from a formational and missional concern about the possibility that people can "become blind and deaf to symbols and sacramental rites that are now stiff and anachronistic." See Boff, *Sacraments,* 2. As such, the official sacraments of the church can actually be counterproductive in forming a "sacramental imagination" or in honoring that imagination in others. The term "sacramental imagination" is from David Brown, "A Sacramental World: Why It Matters, 603-615 in Hans Boersma, *The Oxford Handbook of Sacramental Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 608, Kindle.

[164] This "sacramentality of the world" approach has seen a revival more recently—likely as a reaction against reductive materialism and secularization, but as David Brown notes, "So far from being an

about adaptive sacramentality. Sacrament and ritual are not different ways of describing the same Christian practices. Rather, sacramental theologians open up the Christian's imagination to a creation infused with Spirit and ready to facilitate an encounter with the Kingdom of God, just as we saw when Jesus and the disciples fed the 5,000 in the wilderness from a meager sample of bread and fish. This form of sacramental theology breaks spirituality free from rituals controlled by the institutional church and tied to the "proper" technical performance by "experts." This is the first reason we have invited sacramental theology into the conversation.

More specific to the topic, though, sacramental theologians from nearly every corner of the field draw similar conclusions about food, drink, and the meal: that they have an inherent sacramental potential.[165] These conclusions are summed up by Orthodox theologian Alexander Schmemann, "A meal is still a rite—the last 'natural sacrament' of family and friendship, of life that is more than 'eating' and 'drinking.'"[166] This idea of the meal as "natural sacrament" pairs nicely with the way Croasmun and Volf introduce a theme that will run throughout their work, "We misunderstand human life if we reduce it

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innovation as some allege, it can be seen as a return to the wider sense of sacramentality that dominated the first millennium of the Christian church before the narrowing of the High Middle Ages, which came to confine talk of sacraments to the seven adopted by the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215." See Brown, *Sacramental World,* 605.

[165] In *Life of the Sacraments: Sacraments of Life,* two of the first three sacramental examples given by Roman Catholic liberation theologian Leonardo Boff related to eating and drinking: drinking from a family mug and homemade bread. See Boff, *Sacraments,* 9 and 21. Norman Wirzba says catchily, "Food is God's love made nutritious and delicious, given for the good of each other" and claims, "When it is done in the name of God, eating is the earthly realization of God's eternal communion-building love" See Wirzba, *Food,* xii-xiv. Episcopal priest Robert Farrar Capon's book, *The Supper of the Lamb*, gloriously exudes the sacramentality of cooking and eating—though Capon strips any sanguine notions from sacramental theology: "The world exists, not for what it means but for what it is. The purpose of mushrooms is to be mushrooms; wine is in order to wine: Things are precious before they are contributory. It is a false piety that walks through creation looking only for lessons which can be applied somewhere else. To be sure, God remains the greatest good, but, for all that, the world is still good in itself. Indeed, since He does not need it, its whole reason for being must lie in its own goodness; He has no use for it; only delight." See Robert F. Capon, *The Supper of the Lamb* (Macmillan, 1989), 86, Kindle.

[166] Alexander Schmemann, *For the Life of the World: Sacraments and Orthodoxy* (Yonkers, N.Y.: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2018), 22.

to just bread. But we also misunderstand *bread* if we reduce it to just bread…A loaf of bread is the most ordinary and most miraculous of things."[167] These theologians give voice to a ubiquitous human experience: there is something more going on when we eat and drink together than merely the physical nourishment of our bodies.

Each of these theologians affirm the sacramentality of eating, drinking, and meals. Yet, for the most part, these theologians—especially those in the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox traditions, who tend to have the "highest" view of the Eucharist—seem constrained by the official sacramental systems they inhabit. Schmemann is the best example of this. Throughout the first chapter of *For the Life of the World,* Schmemann introduces terms like "eucharistic life" and explicitly seeks "to free the terms 'sacramental' and 'eucharistic' from the connotations they have acquired in the long history of technical theology."[168] And yet, when it comes to chapter two, "The Eucharist," the brilliant theologian who has just called the meal "the last 'natural sacrament'" now expounds primarily on the script of the Orthodox Eucharistic liturgy (the ritual). The internal logic of Schmemann's explication of the liturgy is both sound and inspiring. At the same time, it does not seem to consider that "The Eucharist" and "the last 'natural sacrament'" of the meal might possibly combine forces to transformational ends.

Wirzba, likewise, expounds theologically on food and meals. He comments, "The ministries of Christ demonstrate that the path to full or abundant life is not a magical path. It is a practical journey that begins with eating,"[169] with which the author of this paper would heartily agree. He even goes further: "In the sharing of food with each other,

[167] Volf and Croasmun, *Hunger,* 14.
[168] Schmemann, *Life,* 25.
[169] Wirzba, *Food,* 198.

the sacrificial altar is transformed into a table and the kitchen table into an altar."[170] At times, he comes incredibly close to the "recovery of the practice of Eucharist as a shared meal," even warning the reader, "The ritualized character of the Eucharist sometimes causes people to forget that the supper was a *meal."*[171] Still, when Wirzba quotes Roman Catholic scholar Matthew Levering, who speaks of the Eucharist as a "'school' of charity"[172] and people being "trained at the Eucharistic table,"[173] it appears that the two are referring to the Eucharistic ritual as it has developed in most churches: individually—if simultaneously—receiving tokens of bread and cup. It seems a very small step to move from the ways sacramental theologians like Schmemann and Wirzba speak of meals and the Eucharist—both in meaning and function—towards bringing them, finally, back together. [174]

The contributions of sacramental theologians like Schmemann and Wirzba are essential for expanding the Church's "sacramental imagination" and are influential to the connections I am making between meal and Eucharist. My one critique here is that their work still resists making that step from the *internal logic* that has developed around the ritual of the Eucharist toward considering the greater *formational and adaptive logic* of

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[170] Wirzba, *Food,* 177.
[171] Wirzba, *Food,* 200. Emphasis original.
[172] Matthew Levering, *Sacrifice and Community* (John Wiley & Sons, 2008), 199. As quoted in Wirzba, *Food,* 176.
[173] Wirzba, *Food,* 209.
[174] Another concise example of these imaginative limitations is found in Nicholas Perrin's assessment of the "breaking of the bread" in Acts 2: "Closely associated with other early Christian practices, the 'breaking of the bread' is almost certainly a technical term for eucharistic practice…Its presence at the earliest stage of Luke's history speaks not only to its primitiveness (or at least Luke's interest in describing it as primitive) but also to its foundational significance within the church. That eucharistic practice is also in view in Acts 6:1 is possible but nonetheless questionable." He is not wrong, per se, but this way of framing the practice only reinforces anachronistic ways of thinking about what the first Christians were doing relative to rituals and meals. Without clarification about the meal context, the reader is likely to read their own experience of the Eucharistic ritual into the "breaking of bread" in Acts. See Nicholas Perrin, "Sacraments and Sacramentality in the New Testament," 52-67. In Boersma, *Handbook,* 54.

the whole meal Jesus and the early Church practiced when they gathered. It is an important sacramental step to say that the Eucharistic ritual can bring meaning and purpose to all the other tables at which humans eat. It is another step—one which I am proposing—to make this connection more explicit by practicing the Eucharist as a shared meal, to actually practice the rhythms of transformative, Christ-centered meals when Christians are gathered together rather than hoping the sacramental logic makes the leap from ritual to kitchen table.

A Conversation about the Body, Materiality, and Trauma

One of the limits characteristic of modern practices of the Eucharist—which in turn limits sacramental imagination—is that they only minimally engage the body, fumbling one of the most powerful features of sacrament! These practices rely on an internal logic of symbol and story that, for all of their theological richness and liturgical beauty, gets lost on the typical participant. Adaptive sacramentality encourages church leaders to ask what forms and features will help the practice of sacrament more fully serve its ends: helping people to embody the presence and purposes of Christ in the world…transformation. Today, we have access to an expansive scientific knowledge of the body's role in growth (and stagnancy) that was not available to ancient people.[175] This knowledge can contribute to the project of designing adaptive containers and communities that are receptive and conducive to growth.

[175] The church's history with the role of the body in spirituality is extremely complicated and cannot be rehearsed here. My own summary would be that the biblical texts (and other ancient spiritual documents) often appreciated the integration of spirituality and the body, while struggling with some significant gaps in knowledge (i.e. a general lack of category for mental illness). In Western society today, even with our superior physiological and neurological knowledge, a hyper-rationalism (along with other factors) has often reinforced dualist perspectives on body vs. soul and slowed a reintegration of the body and brain (the physical brain, not the "mind") into Christian spirituality.

David Morgan has helped with this reintegration of body and spirituality in his work on religion and materiality. Morgan wisely challenges typical ways of defining and describing Christian faith—for instance, around cognitive or dogmatic "belief," or even around the "practices of belief."[176] He proposes, instead, that "an utterance of belief properly regarded is but the visible tip of an entire iceberg," stemming from "The acting, feeling, intuiting, and imagining absorbed and practiced over time."[177] Instead of thinking of personal faith or Christian Faith as the sum total of explicit and articulated beliefs about God, the self, and the world, Morgan would want to ask more holistic questions like, "What does Christian faith smell like, taste like, feel like, sound like, look like, and evoke from a person?"[178] The vignette in chapter one from Point Place UCC's first Breakfast Church had very different answers to these holistic questions than what most Christians experience in typical word-based gatherings for worship or faith formation. Here also recall that one of the marks of the Greco-Roman Symposium that drew out its "utopian" or "eschatological" enactments was their generosity and abundance.[179] It seems obvious to say that even in strictest ritual form, the Eucharist adds a more multi-sensory dimension to Christian worship, beyond word-based acts like preaching, prayer, even singing. At the same time, much of the Eucharistic logic and even the ritual itself remains word-based, continuing the tendency toward cognitive-behavioral methodologies to

[176] David Morgan, *Religion and Material Culture: The Matter of Belief* (London: Routledge, 2010), 3-4.
[177] Morgan, *Religion,* 5.
[178] These are my words, not Morgan's.
[179] Klinghart, "Typology," 17. Jesus' meal practices seem to have been abundant enough for Jesus to be slurred as a "glutton and drunkard" (Luke 7:34). As Karris concludes, "Jesus loves life and enjoys eating and drinking with men and women, be they sinners or not." See Karris, *Eating,* 30. This observation, however, should be tempered for a modern American audience. Karris starts out his book by warning the reader not to "imagine or read into Luke's Gospel our contemporary notions and practices of food and drink and fail to try to imagine what it was really like back then." See Karris, *Eating,* 3. Mainly, food was far less abundant and more restricted (especially for Jews). The feasting of Jesus was certainly humbler than the array of cuisines available to the average American on a daily basis.

address the human problems of sin, fear, and despair, with only a brief moment where tokens of bread and drink are *experienced*. Adaptive leaders must consider what these liturgies and sacramental forms communicate not only in word, but in the whole embodied experience of the gathering, because that is where faith is truly formed.[180]

The idea that belief and practice are formed in the body is confirmed by another more recent field of study: trauma. Trauma theory is one of the clearest counterpoints to the cognitive-behavioral assumptions that underlie much of modern Christian ministry.[181] These assumptions consider people to be essentially the sum of their conscious and free decisions of belief, formulated in the rational regions of their brains. Such an anthropology is foreign both to most ancient worldviews in their attunement to forces beyond the empirical and rational *and* to more recent developments in fields like trauma studies that tend to resist reductionist explanations of human behavior in favor of "thick descriptions"[182] that understand human behavior at the intersection of genetic, experiential, cultural, neurological, psychological, and other influencing factors outside of rational or volitional choice.[183] As pioneer trauma researcher Bessel van der Kolk describes the shift, "Our search to understand trauma has led us to think differently not

[180] "Belief is a broad orientation that emerges from the habits absorbed in childhood or at other times in life such as conversionary periods when, like learning a new language, the mind is powerfully opened under conditions of duress or crisis to absorbing fundamental new patterns. Belief…is much more than assent of conviction if we understand it as a disposition that engages diverse aspects of a human being." See Morgan, *Religion,* 7.

[181] Trauma theory has been similarly disruptive in its own hometown of psychology for doing the same: exposing the limits of the healing potential of Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy.

[182] To borrow Clifford Geertz' term from the field of ethnography.

[183] I am not suggesting that ancient and contemporary scientific worldviews are the same, only that the inclination of Western society to assume that human behavior arises primarily from conscious and free choices (and thus, apply intellectual treatments to correct them) is anomalous in the historical quest to understand why people and societies act in the ways they do. This assumption of conscious and free rationality sits in contrast to both ancient perceptions of human behavior relative to spiritual forces and modern scientific perceptions of human behavior relative to genetic, systemic, and unconscious psychological influences, among others.

only about the structure of the mind but also about the processes by which it heals."[184] According to trauma theory, these extra-rational parts of the person are both the source of psychological slavery and stuckness *and* a place of deep experience and valuable knowledge.[185] Thus, anyone hoping to design an adaptive container with any hope of holding disruption or facilitating transformation must consider not only the logical flow of words and practices, but the whole embodied experience of participants and what makes people more or less receptive to encounters with new people, ideas, and practices. Following are two insights from trauma studies to aid in the design of adaptive containers.

First, trauma research (specifically, Polyvagal Theory) emphasizes the importance of connectional safety. As Bessel van der Kolk asserts, "Being able to feel safe with other people is probably the single most important aspect of mental health; safe connections are fundamental to meaningful and satisfying lives."[186] This connectional safety is not just about the absence of threat or the physical presence of other people, but about the positive relational feedback of "*reciprocity:* being truly heard and seen by the people around us, feeling that we are held in someone else's mind and heart."[187] Even as churches present themselves as communities of deep connection and relationship, the core gathering of most churches typically involves "participants" facing the same direction instead of toward one another, except perhaps in a "passing of the peace" or

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[184] Bessel van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind and Body in the Healing of Trauma* (New York: Penguin Books, 2014), 21. It is clear that van der Kolk does not *reject* scientific methods, research, or knowledge. His observations from that research indicate a larger shift towards complexity and appreciation for the magnitude of sway held by the unconscious.
[185] "Our bodies have a form of knowledge that is different from our cognitive brains." See Resmaa Menakem, *My Grandmother's Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending Our Hearts and Bodies* (Las Vegas, Nv: Central Recovery Press, 2017), 5.
[186] Van der Kolk, *Body,* 81.
[187] Ibid.

related moment in the liturgy. Churches do make varying degrees of effort to supplement these gatherings with connectional opportunities. Small group ministries are likely the most effective in this. But often "fellowship" ends up separated from Eucharist or from any spiritual framework at all. We will see in chapter three that face-to-face contact is one of the most distinct and important features of the Eucharistic Meal to participants in this project and that the connection between these interpersonal encounters and the Eucharistic encounter gets absorbed through the entirety of the experience.

Shelly Rambo has helpfully explored how the Christian tradition contains resources for connectional encounter. Defining trauma as "the suffering that doesn't go away,"[188] she reimagines the concept of "witnessing" as it relates to the complex dimensions of the Gospel stories and the ways Christian communities bear witness to one another's stories. In other words, the gospel of Jesus roots itself right at the intersection of life and death,[189] perhaps nowhere more clearly than at the Eucharist, where the church witnesses a broken body and poured out blood while also encountering the real presence of the Risen Christ. The key, though, is to tie these stories together. Common practices of Eucharist involve people who are in the same place, performing the same actions, and even eating of the same loaf; but they are not necessarily bearing witness to one another's stories, seeing and being seen, helping one another discover the intersections and overlaps of their stories with the Story of Jesus. The container of the Eucharistic Meal,

[188] Shelly Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 15, Kindle.
[189] "In the aftermath of trauma, death and life no longer stand in opposition. Instead, death haunts life." See Rambo, *Spirit,* 3.

combined with the Christian tradition of "witnessing" or "testimony" provides churches with valuable (if latent) resources to participate in these healing processes.[190]

Second, it is this practice of reciprocal witnessing that develops a container that can both foster connection and safety where healing and growth can occur *and* hold the disruptive elements of Christian faith. Serene Jones explores how "the central trauma of Christianity, the tortured death of God," becomes not merely a disruptive element, but a place where we see "that in the throes of this traumatic event, God uniquely meets humanity in the fullness of love and offers to us the grace of life abundant."[191] Notice the similar merging of connectional and disruptive factors as trauma therapist Resmaa Menakem describes the work of healing from trauma: "We need to slow ourselves down and learn to lean into uncertainty, rather than away from it. We need to ground ourselves, touch the pain or discomfort inside our trauma, and explore it—gently."[192] Both Jones and Menakem emphasize that healing does not come from a "safety" that avoids disruption and suffering, but from a context of love and gentleness where disruption and suffering can be "touched" without further threat. Jones refers to "Crucified Imaginings" that reposition the Cross from a clear point within a line of redemptive logic to something that "makes sense in ways that do not make sense…We both know it and don't know it."[193] She is tapping into the extra-rational materiality of both trauma and faith. Both trauma and faith are formed in the in-between of body and spirit and shape human

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[190] Two caveats: 1) This is not meant to suggest that Christian churches can or should try to replace the work done by trained therapists, 2) "Witness" and "testimony" must indeed be reimagined as Rambo does to fit this context. In many churches, these activities are primarily aimed at "converting" people to Christian faith or telling triumphalist and simplistic stories of personal conversion. Rambo is advocating a practice that bears witness to one other's struggles, fears, and complexities.
[191] Serene Jones, *Trauma and Grace: Theology in a Ruptured World* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 69 and 72.
[192] Menakem, *Grandmother,* 13-14.
[193] Jones, *Trauma,* 73.

experience from those spaces. Working in that space is an adaptive challenge in and of itself—there is not one formula or approach to access and fix. If the hope is deep healing and transformation, it is part of the work of designing adaptive containers to take the spiritual and psychological knowledge we have and facilitate encounters that touch the whole person.

The Eucharist aims to mystically and transformatively touch these extra-rational parts of the person. Some might say that trying to re-engineer the Eucharistic form is itself hyper-rational, or that such talk of designing Eucharistic containers reveals a lack of faith or human-centeredness. To these critiques, I would respond 1) that the Eucharist has already been re-engineered away from the meal, and 2) that there is plenty of mystery and mysticism that remains for the Eucharist if we are seeking to encounter the Other in the meal encounters we share with other people. If "faith" is not merely defined as "that which we do not understand," but might instead refer to the courageous risk of bearing witness to complicated overlaps of death and life in our lives, others' lives, and the very life of God in Christ Jesus, Eucharistic Meals will require plenty of faith; such a faith is not aimed merely at getting out of struggle and suffering, but compels us to step fully into these disruptions with the Crucified God, trusting that we are not alone even in the valley of the shadow of death.[194]

Beyond merely describing PTSD or other diagnosable forms of trauma, trauma research has helped to unveil how the human brain works, why people exhibit resistance to new and different people and ideas, and how much of human personality and culture is

[194] "I heard and saw with increasing clarity that trauma was not something outside of faith, something foreign and distant that the Christian message of grace had to struggle to address. I saw instead that parts of our rich faith traditions were born in the midst of unspeakable terrors and that grace had long been unfurling its warmth and succor therein." See Jones, *Trauma,* 10.

shaped from these unconscious fears and self-protective habits. It has also given insights into how lasting healing and increased openness can be stimulated in human beings who carry in their bodies various levels and kinds of trauma. We have explored two in this section. These elements of needing our selves and stories to be seen and witnessed (connection) and the importance of engaging suffering and difficulty in the context of love (disruption) both inform efforts to design adaptive containers and tie into the potential of the Eucharistic Meal container.

A Conversation about the Social Impact of Meals

Finally, we invite sociology into the conversation to further explore the potential impact of the meal container by looking at its most basic form: the family meal. Research has often linked family meal frequency to various measures of development and formation, from healthy eating habits to rates of substance abuse and other psychosocial outcomes.[195] Skeer et al. go beyond just looking at the frequency of family meals to examine the mechanics of these developmental containers, and study elements like structure (rules and rituals), the spectrum of emotional experience, and the ways technology impacts the meal experience. Because this study focuses on the nature of conversations at Eucharistic Meals, particular attention should be given to the variety of functions of conversation that arise at the table based on Skeer's work:

> Mealtime conversations were used to discuss everyday topics, such as the events of the day and family logistics; however they were also seen as opportunities to have more challenging discussions, such as conflict resolution between siblings, or questions that children find difficult to bring up to their parents otherwise.

[195] Megan E Harrison et al., "Systematic Review of the Effects of Family Meal Frequency on Psychosocial Outcomes in Youth," *Canadian Family Physician Medecin de Famille Canadien* 61, no. 2 (2015): e96-106, https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4325878/#:~:text=A%20recent%20review%20by%20Skeer. Essentially, results of this research indicate a positive correlation between frequency of family meals and increased health in these areas.

> Parents also considered meals as a time where they tried to impart family values to their children.[196]

Children raising difficult questions, parents imparting family values, and even navigating conflict are all instances of Taussig's categories of identity formation and social experimentation, which he associated with the early Christian Symposium Meals. We can also see the elements of 1) Connection: as families discuss their lives and as studies show that the family meal container provides "protective effects," particularly for adolescent females,[197] and 2) Disruption: as conflicts arise and hard questions are addressed. All of these elements are not present at all family meals. But this research indicates the potential for meals to hold the ingredients of transformation and do adaptive and developmental work. Because far more attention is given to the design of the Eucharistic Meal than most families give to the design of their daily meals, the results of the family meal research can be applied to the larger congregational system with hopes of even more significant results.

The result of qualitative sociological study by Daloz et al., *Common Fire* explores what adaptive leadership looks like in the "new commons," the changing set of spaces where people in a society naturally come into contact with one another.[198] The relevance to this project is its demonstration that one of the key contexts in which adaptive leaders are formed is the family meal. While the study is almost thirty years old, it traces patterns

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[196] Margie R. Skeer et al., "Going beyond Frequency: A Qualitative Study to Explore New Dimensions for the Measurement of Family Meals," *Journal of Child and Family Studies* 27, no. 4 (November 28, 2017): 1075–87, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10826-017-0967-2, 1085.
[197] Harrison et al., "Effects."
[198] Laurent A. Parks Daloz et al., *Common Fire* (Beacon Press (MA), 1996). In this text, the "commons" refers to the "common" spaces where people in a society interact. Their study indicates that more traditional "commons" are disappearing, requiring the formation of "new commons." "New commons" could be seen as a corollary to the "new environment" to which we have alluded from Heifitz and Linsky, in that they both require a shift of adaptive leadership.

that have only intensified over time. One of these patterns is the struggle of meaning-making in a society with *increasing* exposure to a "diversity of viewpoints and…complex contemporary conditions"[199] and a simultaneous *decrease* in common spaces in which people can process these realities in community. It is no wonder polarization is on the rise and capacity for creative and compassionate conversations is diminishing. In laying out several adaptive "habits of mind" harvested from their interviews with adaptive leaders, Daloz et al. include "the habit of *dialogue*, grounded in the understanding that meaning is constructed through an ongoing interaction between oneself and others."[200] One of the primary containers they observed for the development of this habit is the family meal.[201]

This section is not intended to draw a simplistic 1:1 causation of family meals and adaptive leadership. Nor do I wish to ignore the layers of privilege and circumstance that make family meals a more accessible possibility for some families. The purpose of this section is to highlight very briefly the socializing and formative potential that exists in the simplest container of the family meal, to locate where in the meal that potential rests, and to consider from a different angle the ways the meal might aid in the formation of "more compassionate and creative conversation partners."

It sounds almost silly to make this observation, but family meals do not generally derive their formative potential from a conscious logic of symbols and rituals built around the acts of eating (though these do arise, often unconsciously) or in the foods themselves (though the physical nourishment is important). Rather, this power of the

[199] Daloz, *Common Fire,* 107.
[200] Daloz, *Common Fire,* 108.
[201] "Over three quarters of them reported that when they were growing up, their families regularly ate dinner together. Some recalled lively conversations around the table." See Daloz, *Common Fire,* 110.

meal emerges from the full event of eating together, "lively conversation,"[202] and showing up for one another however it might be needed on a given day, not to mention shared acts of preparation and serving one another. Wirzba describes this well:

> [Eating] can be the training ground where people learn to articulate their fears and worries but also name the many sources of nurture and help that are evident at the table. With the help of each other we can practice the skills of conversation, reflection, and gratitude that contribute to a more completely human life.[203]

As will be seen in the next chapter's interviews, not all meals are rich experiences of love, but the potential is always there at the table.

The Breakfast Church Experiments: A Methodology

We have thus far spent this chapter setting the table, inviting a variety of guests for a conversation about the power of meals and the Eucharist. The project itself seeks to put this into practice. The goal is not merely to mimic the ancient cultural form of the Greco-Roman banquet while adding Christian content. The argument presented in this chapter is not merely that Jesus and the early Christians *did* gather for meals, but *why* the meal may have been chosen by Jesus and by the earliest disciples as a place for "identity formation and social experimentation."[204] The adaptive challenges of the church will not be addressed with a technical solution like mimicking an ancient meal pattern. That said, the principal movements of the Symposium meal offer an example of an adaptive container in which the basic aims of Jesus' good news and the adaptive work facing American Mainline churches can be undertaken. Ultimately, the Greco-Roman Symposium is not a comprehensively detailed model for gatherings. Nor is it foolproof—

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[202] For "lively conversations," see previous note.
[203] Wirzba, *Food,* 69. (There is much more worth reading in this little section.)
[204] As discussed in n. 61 above, there is a connection in the function of the Eucharistic Meal and the Jewish Passover Seder. These meals are different containers, inspired by the Exodus event, aimed at forming identity and exploring social boundaries.

a social technology that operates and produces on its own. What gives the meal its relevance and potential to translate to modern contexts is its own adaptability that can help today's churches recover and reimagine meal practices that center communities in the compassion and creativity of Jesus' own ministry.[205]

In the first chapter, I introduced Breakfast Church, a meal-centered worship gathering that has taken place nearly monthly since the fall of 2021 in the Point Place UCC community. Beyond the leanings I was developing in favor of a meal-based model of worship gathering prior to the pandemic, the precipitating opportunity out of which Breakfast Church was born stemmed from the long-awaited return to in-person gathering: the feelings of isolation and the appetite to connect face-to-face. In some ways, Breakfast Church was a risk in that it eschewed the stability and safety of people's desire to go "back to normal" in favor of disrupting familiar liturgies in order to foster connection. In that moment, Breakfast Church was a liturgically disruptive container that we believed could hold connectional activity. Besides the novelty of the first Breakfast Church, early gatherings were less attended than services held in the sanctuary.[206] Over time, however, the risk proved worth the reward. The response of the congregation ranged from absolute approval and preference from some to more moderate appreciation from others, but almost no major opposition. People experienced Breakfast Church as an oasis of connection in contrast to the disruptive forces of their "outside" lives.

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[205] Recall Taussig's characterization of the meal having "a common cultural form and norm for what one did at meals. However, within the general form, there was generous room for improvisation." See Taussig, B*eginning,* 6.

[206] To clarify, Breakfast Church was never a second Sunday option. It is the only Sunday morning gathering opportunity on those weeks.

At least five elements made these gatherings more connectional than familiar worship gatherings. 1) Spatial Design: beyond the obvious need for tables instead of rows of pews, the tables were set up "in the round," so that people were not only able to face the people at their table, but also see the faces of people at other tables. 2) Loosely-guided Conversation: after a welcome and opening prayer, congregants were invited to make their plates and engage in conversation with others at their table while they ate. There were suggested questions which tables sometimes engaged and other times went their own directions. 3) Conversational Message: the sermon was less monologue, more dialogue. I taught or preached texts briefly, encouraged open feedback in the large group, and planted conversation starters for discussion at tables. 4) Casual Atmosphere: congregants were given permission to get second helpings, fill drinks, and move around throughout the service. Tables were covered with paper and set with crayons so that kids (and adults) were free to doodle, draw, or make notes. 5) Activity: most Breakfast Church gatherings involved some sort of group activity that could be completed and/or shared together. Shifts in these elements were key contributors to the increased sense of connection people experienced in this new worship environment.

The question posed for this paper is clear that Eucharistic Meals, in order to be faithful to both the meal practices of Jesus and the qualities of adaptive containers, must be able to hold not only connection, but disruption as well. This is the heart of this project's Breakfast Church experiments. What could be observed when the transformative ingredient of disruption was added to the connection within the Eucharistic container? I will frame the methodology of these experiments around some of the questions asked in its design.

How will disruption be added? The basic form of Breakfast Church was not disrupted for two reasons: 1) Its disruptive impact had only recently worn off, 2) The fact that the form of the container was stable and established at this point was part of the "safety" that would allow for a different disruptive challenge. In considering the types of spiritual transformation the project could highlight, becoming a "more creative and compassionate conversation partner" seemed to hit a core social need[207] while also leveraging a potential strength of the congregation: its trust of one another and diverse political affiliations. Thus, adding a disruptive, potentially-divisive topic for discussion was chosen for the form of disruption. This also seemed to hit the sweet spot of the form of Breakfast Church, as it is a container designed specifically for conversation, in line with the "identity formation and social experimentation" that was a key target of the early Church.

What disruptive conversation topic will be introduced? There were three main guidelines for a topic: 1) It should not come "out of nowhere"—both in the sense that some groundwork had been previously laid (due to the time constraints of the project) and that it should be relevant to the life and future of the congregation. 2) It should not be disruptive in asking people to be overly-vulnerable with personal pain or traumatic experiences. 3) It should be genuinely disruptive—a topic that does raise the temperature of the gathering and, to modify an adaptive leadership principle, "disrupts people at a rate they can handle."[208]

[207] As explored in chapter one.
[208] Heifitz and Linsky famously posit, "exercising leadership might be understood as disappointing people at a rate they can absorb." See Heifitz, *Leadership,* 142.

With these guidelines, the chosen topic of conversation centered on naming, unmasking, and exposing the idolatry of White Christian Nationalism.[209] Obviously, this could not be a comprehensive discussion, but it did relate to bigger conversations that had already been introduced in various contexts regarding race and faith, ongoing discussions of the relevance of national holidays to the church calendar, as well as the future of the church. It would not have been sufficiently disruptive for me to simply talk about racial injustice or even Black Lives Matter, as these are already topics that have been addressed and potentially allow white congregants to externalize the "issue" as a problem that affects only people of color. Discussing Whiteness and American nationalism, however, gets uncomfortably close to home. And while I had laid groundwork theologically and directly explored some of these ideas in individual conversations and small group Bible studies, this would be a clear and disruptive step forward: discussing it directly and adaptively in terms of Christian identity, not just a social issue to be fixed.

What is the goal of the experiments and what will be evaluated? As I would have to remind myself and the congregation, the goal could not be to persuade the congregation to think a certain way about the topic of race or take on a certain identity. Such intentions would put me in the place of technical expert and frame the topic as a technical problem to be solved. It would also undermine the adaptive processes of identity formation and social experimentation discussed above. The ultimate goal became *to increase the congregation's capacity to engage in disruptive conversations in compassionate and creative ways.* This goal holds not only social value, but spiritual

[209] "Naming…Unmasking…Engaging" are the movements of Walter Wink's theological trilogy on the "Powers," or spiritual forces. See Walter Wink, *Naming the Powers: The Language of Power in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984).

value as it enables followers of Jesus to be more open to Divine and prophetic encounter, which often—if not always—involve disruptive dimensions. Evaluation would focus on the anxiety level of participants throughout each of three Breakfast Church gatherings, the overall experience of the participants, confidence levels regarding engagement in topics of race and identity in the "outside world," and willingness to explore other disruptive topics within worship containers.

How would the experiments be structured in light of the goals? I crafted a series of three Breakfast Church gatherings around the topic of White Christian Nationalism and the alternative basis for identity offered through the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The thematic flow of the experiences began with 1) Idolatry: introducing White Christian Nationalism as a counter-gospel narrative and source of identity, 2) Identity: exploring how "Whiteness" and "American Nationalism" shape our identities in ways counter to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, 3) Engaging: discerning a call to "lean into the uncertainty" of what it would look like to further engage questions of race, nationalism, and faith.[210]

The experiences each involved the elements of Breakfast Church described above, but with added emphasis in certain areas: 1) Structure: I took cues from the Symposium meals, with ritualized prayers and actions surrounding the bread before the meal and the cup at the transition into the more structured "disruptive dialogue." The connection of the meal to the Eucharist and presence of Christ among the gathered had, in some previous Breakfast Church gatherings, not been sufficiently highlighted. In this case, I wanted to center Jesus in the role Taussig describes: "the figure of Christ Jesus was…a source of

[210] See n. 200 above.

identity that helped negotiate…major differences and tensions,"[211] an adaptive companion amidst the disruptive dialogue. 2) Connectional Elements: I drew on the work of Resmaa Menakem in *My Grandmother's Hands.* Menakem is a trauma specialist and has explored racial issues (or "white-body supremacy") in terms of embodied trauma in each of white bodies, black bodies, and police bodies. The book includes several "Body Practices," giving practical meditative processes to readers, in light of his findings that in racialized dialogue, "Few skills are more essential than the ability to settle your body."[212] Menakem's Body Practices inspired liturgical calming elements in the Breakfast Church experiences, but also my approach to the conversations as a whole. 3) Participation: While this is common to the established Breakfast Church form, I made sure to include participatory readings, times for individual, table, and large group discussion, and lighthearted group activities. Because, in Menakem's words, "white-body supremacy doesn't live in our thinking brains. It lives and breathes in our bodies"[213] and trauma is the body's experience of "too much, too fast, too soon,"[214] these participatory elements gave people opportunities to settle and process the new ideas and perspectives they were being asked to consider.

More details on the liturgies, content, and flow of the experiences can be found in the Appendix.

How would data be gathered? The first source of data was collected through interviews with seven volunteer participants, chosen based on a combination of their own

[211] Taussig, *Beginning,* 183-184. Taussig is talking about who Jesus was to Paul. The "differences" to which he is referring were the variety of social conditions that comprised the early Christian community. This context is no less relevant to Christians today, except for the expansion of the church "marketplace" and ability of American Christians to self-segregate.
[212] Menakem, *Grandmother,* 151.
[213] Menakem, *Grandmother,* 5.
[214] Menakem, *Grandmother,* 7.

expressed interest, the invitation of the researcher, and the group's representation of important demographic cross-sections of the congregation, including age, gender, and time of involvement with the congregation. Participants agreed to a series of interviews: 1) A pre-interview focused on ethnographic inquiry related to their own experience of meals, views on the Eucharist, perspectives on Breakfast Church, and approach to difficult conversations. 2) Before each of the three Breakfast Church experiments, participants were given a brief written survey to note their mood, anxiety levels, and prior knowledge of the topic for the day. 3) A post-interview that focused on their experiences in the Breakfast Church experiments and sense of further engagement on the topic. Data was also collected through my own observation of the Breakfast Church experiments and of my internal experiences as pastor and leader. Data was collected through transcripted audio recordings and sorted according to both the common themes that emerged *and* the different dimensions each participant experienced. These differences were a reminder that the form of the meal leads to a less controlled liturgy, more diverse roles that participants can take, and a greater potential range of experience.

Chapter 3

The Breakfast Church experiments included three Eucharistic Meal experiences that were spaced every other week during August and September 2023. They took the Breakfast Church container, which had been established for two years, and facilitated an encounter with a disruptive conversation about White Christian Nationalism. The hope was that the connectional ingredient, which had been activated over that two-year period would be able to balance the disruptive addition, and take steps toward equipping the people of the church to be more compassionate and creative conversation partners. Being able to hold both connection and disruption, leveraging them toward transformation, is the characteristic of an adaptive container. Because the experimental Breakfast Church gatherings also acted as the weekly Sunday gathering for the congregation, they were open to all. But seven congregants volunteered to engage in an ethnographic pre-interview, pre-worship written surveys, and a final interview. These interviews will serve as the primary data set alongside my own personal observations and leadership reflections.

Based on feedback from the participants and my own observations, I see the Breakfast Church experiments as an encouraging window into the adaptive potential of Eucharistic Meals. Participants cited relatively low anxiety levels—especially as the experiments progressed—and primarily attributed these to a confidence in the bonds of the church "family" and sense of trust. Participants also highlighted the dialogical and participatory dimensions of Breakfast Church as contributors to enjoyment, learning, and willingness to engage the topic outside of the church setting. Ethnographic data brought up key distinctions between people's experiences of Eucharistic rituals and Breakfast

Church Eucharistic Meals. These distinctions stem from the added elements of the shared meal. While participants' family history with meals did impact the nature of their experience with the Breakfast Church experiments, all participants reported positive experiences with Breakfast Church and openness to an ongoing engagement with disruptive conversations within the context of the Eucharistic Meal. The experiments also highlighted the different demands placed on leaders of Eucharistic Meals compared to more "traditional" liturgies. These differences were consistent with adaptive leadership principles and informed by some of the insights explored in chapter 2.

Project Overview

The Breakfast Church experiments were designed to observe just how adaptive of a container the Eucharistic Meal might be. An adaptive container must be able to hold both connection and disruption. These are not opposite forces in the recipe for transformation (cooling and heating). While the disruptive conversation may be seen as "heat," the connectional properties of the congregation are not "cooling" elements, per se. Perhaps a bread analogy will help. If disruption is the "heat" of the baking process, connection is the "gluten" that allows the bread to rise and come into its fullness rather than collapse. There were also "cooling" elements employed, which will be explored below. The Breakfast Church experiments aimed to demonstrate whether a disruptive conversation topic like White Christian Nationalism would activate the connectional elements already built into the congregation towards creativity and compassion, or whether it would overflow into conflict or collapse into avoidance.

Over three Breakfast Church experiences, the topic of White Christian Nationalism was named, unmasked, and engaged through a mixture of teaching, table-

sized and large-group conversation, and group activities. All of this was done in a "Eucharistic" context. Not only were Eucharistic elements literally at the center table of the gathering space, but the Eucharistic images of connection ("one body, one cup") and disruption ("broken and poured out") provided a center-point as we progressed through the conversations.

There were a couple of main influences guiding my design of the conversations and experiences as a whole. The work of David Swanson and Willie James Jennings helped me to tether the discussion of White Christian Nationalism to the realms of both discipleship (Swanson[215]) and theology (Jennings[216]). Especially with the politically "purple" makeup of Point Place UCC, it was important to keep the conversation away from partisan talking points, even though it was a conversation with political implications.[217] Trauma specialist Resmaa Menakem was another key influence in how I approached the design and flow of the experiences.[218] Even as his insights and practices can be applied to a wide array of topics, his emphasis on racial trauma was a perfect fit for this particular disruptive topic. The lens of trauma helped me to maintain a compassionate approach to my own leadership and helped me to define the experiments' goals and expectations.

Swanson, Jennings, and Menakem all contributed to the process of defining and narrowing the scope of the experiments. The experiments were not about criticizing or promoting any particular policies or partisan platforms. Rather, the conversation was

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[215] David W Swanson, *Rediscipling the White Church* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2020).
[216] Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*.
[217] The distinction between "partisan" and "political" is one I have named many times over my years as pastor in the church. I have tried to redefine "political" as "how we collectively order our shared human life," thus making it fit within the purview of faith and spirituality. This approach has been received with varying levels of acceptance, since "political" is often used interchangeably with "partisan."
[218] Menakem, *Grandmother.*

focused more internally on how Whiteness and American Nationalism have been influential ideological forces that have shaped how Americans think about (and practice) the Christian faith.[219] This helped me to take the Family Systems approach of focusing on the processes and the interpersonal dynamics and skills within the experiments. Attending to the process and community in this way allowed me to focus on the outcome of "producing more creative and compassionate conversation partners." Addressing White Christian Nationalism is important, in its own right. But the broader adaptive goal of Breakfast Church is to shift the church's sense of mission and witness from "being on the right side" to "being able to interact with others in a more Christ-like way." This is an alternative way of engagement in a society when public dialogue "thrives" on externalizing problems and capitalizing on people's unexamined fears. Churches have the resources to remind people that "it is out of the abundance of the heart that the mouth speaks."[220] So the true target of these gatherings was not in the topic itself, but in the place of encounter between this disruptive topic and people's homeostatic impulses. The question is how people could handle the prophetic challenge that within the DNA of the Christian faith most of us have known and around which we have built our identities, are interwoven idolatries like white supremacy and nationalism. As a leader, my job was to focus the conversation like a laser on this uncomfortable point of encounter.

The second narrowing of focus relates to a clear articulation of the goal of the experiments. This became a mantra for me as I prepared the worship experiences and as I

[219] Jennings' "Christian imagination." For Jennings, the insidiousness of race is that it gets beneath the levels of consciousness and infects the entire "imagination," or how people think about faith, community, and the world as a whole. Race, then, is one more component that can be found in the extra-rational places where faith is (de)formed.
[220] Luke 6:45

led them: “My goal is not to persuade you to think like I do—though, of course, part of me wants that. Our goal here is to become more open to the conversation and more curious about what more there is to God and the gospel than what you have previously known.” Considering whether this was a risky enough goal, I remembered Menakem’s sober assessment that it will be “a decade or two” before Americans can have productive, loving racialized conversations among bodies of different colors.[221] Even as multiple participants expressed a desire to have more diversity in the room for these conversations, it seemed to me a reasonable goal to build a greater capacity for encounter with a topic that is so charged with trauma and anxiety.

Project Implementation

Prior to the actual Breakfast Church experiments, a pre-interview was conducted with each of seven participants.[222] These interviews covered four areas: 1) ethnographic questions related to the participant’s family meal practices in both childhood and adulthood, 2) their experiences and beliefs concerning the Eucharist—though most are more comfortable with the language of “Communion,” 3) perspectives on Breakfast Church up until that point, 4) perceptions of their typical approaches to potentially divisive conversations. In the fourth area, participants were asked to plot themselves on a framework called a “Personal Conflict Styles Assessment,”[223] which includes “Passive,” “Evasive,” “Aggressive,” and “Defensive” styles. Each interview lasted between 25-30 minutes.

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[221] Menakem, *Grandmorther,* 182.
[222] For each of the pre- and post-interviews, six interviews were conducted because one of the interviews included a husband and wife pair.
[223] Jim Van Yperen. *Metanoia Ministries Conflict Assessment.* Metanoia Ministries. Found at https://www.restoringthechurch.org/product/personal-conflict-style-assessment-form/, 2017.

The three Breakfast Church experiments were implemented over a five-week span from August 27 to September 24, 2023, with one "traditional" service in between each. Given that the typical frequency of Breakfast Church is about once per month, I felt that breaking them up in this way would provide some more continuity for the conversation without overloading the congregation. Beyond this initial lineup of Breakfast Church experiments, some other additions should be mentioned. 1) The worship services on the "off" weeks held the Breakfast Church experiments in mind. The first middle Sunday was focused on narratives of rest and healing, a contrast to the disruptive nature of the conversations on White Christian Nationalism. The other Sunday expanded on one of the ideas of "idolatry" from the Breakfast Church conversations, connecting it to vulnerability and trauma. One participant remarked that this sermon was one of the most memorable moments from the Breakfast Church experiments, even though it was not technically a part of a Breakfast Church gathering. 2) After the first experiment, one of the predominant feelings that the congregation reported experiencing was "perplexed." Pastorally, I felt it was important to speak to this prior to the next session. This led to a pastoral email and a video teaching on the idea of "perplexity" from the Gospel of Luke. The importance of both of these additions will be discussed below when I discuss the "insufficiency" of the meal alone for transformation.

Before breaking down the particularities of each of the three main experiences, I will enumerate some of the elements common to each. Each experience took on the shape of the Symposium meal, mixed with some Eucharistic liturgical elements. They began with "The Breaking of the Bread," a nod to the "Great Thanksgiving" of certain Eucharistic liturgies. This prayer was participatory in multiple ways. First, three readers

each week volunteered and received a version of the prayer with a different part highlighted. This set the tone for the multi-vocal, conversational design of the experience. Second, the prayer guided the congregation into contemplative breathing and an imaginative connection to the Last Supper. Third, the prayer highlighted the connectional and disruptive elements of both the Last Supper and Breakfast Church. It led into the familiar "Words of Institution" and then to an invitation to fill plates and begin eating together.

Each mealtime (deipnon) was assigned a table conversation starter. These were conceptually related to what would be covered in the main dialogue, but not explicitly so. They were designed to stimulate personal storytelling and begin forming the "gluten"—connectivity—at each table. These conversations gave way to "The Pouring of the Cup," which highlighted God's present grace among us and brought the large group back to a unity of action as we drank together, leading the gathering into the "symposium." The symposium consisted of a dialogical teaching, centering in a biblical text, and interspersed with small group and large group opportunities to discuss and share. Each service had some form of "group activity," though time management cut some of these short. It also included one of Menakem's "settling exercises" as the conversation closed in on its most disruptive moments. These exercises emphasized noticing and normalizing the physical, emotional, and mental feedback that individuals were experiencing. Finally, each experience was closed with a connectional song (i.e. "What a Friend We Have in Jesus," etc.), and an invitation to share in the clean-up process.

Around this basic structure, following is a brief summary of each Breakfast Church experience.

Breakfast Church #1. The thematic emphasis for this gathering was naming the idolatry of White Christian Nationalism. This first required establishing a helpful understanding of idolatry from multiple Scriptures as 1) where we turn (other than God) when we feel vulnerable,[224] 2) responsiveness to forces that shape our lives away from Christ-likeness,[225] 3) subservience to invisible and often subtle powers that shape human systems of power and personal imaginations about the world.[226] This went smoothly and was done with some humor that highlighted our common opposition to idolatry. When it came to naming the idol of White Christian Nationalism, the conversation got murkier. Due to the unfamiliarity of the congregation with the topic, it was difficult to make headway on naming what White Christian Nationalism *is*, without having time to go into too much detail, and while also clarifying what it *is not*. Table conversations were slow to start because there were so many questions in people's minds. I joined a conversation at a table where I expected there was the greatest potential resistance to the conversation, but was soon called over to another table where there was significant confusion about the terminology. Congregants were provided with a "feeling wheel" where they could track their emotional responses. "Perplexed" came up multiple times. This part of the dialogue was wrapped up with a body scan practice and a recasting of the purpose of the conversation: "to plant a seed that we will cultivate over the next few weeks." The scan reframed the focus of the moment from the topic itself to the individual's sense of receptivity and willingness to stay in the conversation and remain curious. This was an effective refocus for both the congregation and myself as we weathered my own

[224] Exodus 32:1-5
[225] Matthew 6:24-25
[226] Ephesians 6:10-12

miscalculations about the level of familiarity people would have with the topic. The disruption of this dialogue stemmed more from the disorientation and confusion surrounding a new idea than from defensiveness or offense that was taken to the topic. Even within this disruption, naming the source of disruption and adapting to it was an opportunity to build the trust within the adaptive container. The experience moved into an activity for each group to share at their tables, which was meant both to teach and to connect. On one hand, it did lead to some laughter and intergenerational teamwork. On the other, I had made this puzzle activity to involve too many pieces for any group to finish. In a way, the activity turned out to be a microcosm of the conversation as a whole in that the preparation just slightly overshot the capacities of the congregation. These were truly experiments, and as such, the first gathering required the leader to tap into a differentiated, non-anxious presence and apply a whole set of adaptive leadership tools and frameworks.

Breakfast Church #2. The second experiment was intended to dive more into the ideologies of "Whiteness" and "American Nationalism" and where they contrasted or undermined the ideals of the Gospel and the Kingdom of God. The morning began, however, with an unexpected disruption. We had visitors: two African-American women whom we had met at a summer community cookout. The sense of anxiety upon noticing these visitors came up as a key moment in multiple post-interviews with participants.[227] Having met them before, I was able to greet them and fill them in a bit on the type of conversation we would be having, welcome them to stay, and give them the chance to opt

[227] To clarify, the anxiety was not merely about having people of color visit the church. We have received many over the years and had members of color. The anxiety arose from having visitors for such a charged and experimental service. The presence of visitors would have been disruptive at all, let alone the fact that they were both African American as a white congregation held a racialized conversation.

in or out of the conversation. They chose to stay and did indeed participate in the conversation. The centering Scripture was the preaching of John the Baptist, conveyed through urging people to imaginatively consider how disruptive his words would have been to the people of his day. The subsequent disruptive conversation was highlighted by two activities: 1) Each table received a folder with two sets of prints. The first set, which we worked through as a large group with my annotations, gave visual examples of American Christian Nationalism. The second set featured several images of a "white" Jesus, followed by a few images of Jesus with different skin tones and cultural features, and finally a screenshot of the Google Image page with the top results for a search of "Jesus art." This, of course, exclusively contained images of a "white" Jesus. 2) Following the initial teaching and print activity on American Christian Nationalism, tables were given 2.5 minutes to articulate reasons why "It is important for a church to have an American flag in their sanctuary," followed by another 2.5 minutes to do the same with the statement: "A church should NOT have an American flag in their sanctuary." This drew on a topic I knew would be disruptive from previous casual and formal conversations concerning the flag. Indeed, when I introduced the "negative" position, one military veteran (and participant in the study) immediately and audibly responded, "No!" This conversation also featured input from some of the younger members of the congregation (pre-teen and late teens). They were some of the most vocal in the large group discussions. As lively and productive as this dialogue was, the whole experience pushed the time expectations of the congregation, which meant having to cut short another activity on "Creating a Slavery-Friendly Christianity."[228] Rather than this

[228] The activity involved imaginatively setting up the tension for a Christian slave-owner, which can be summarized like this: "If we know that owning slaves is incompatible with the Gospel of Jesus, and you are

being a group activity, the time constraints left it to a handout that I had prepared in advance with some of the potential features of a "Slavery-Friendly Christianity."

Breakfast Church #3. The final experiment was about setting a trajectory for continuing to engage in this conversation. To do this, I collected a handful of prophetic quotes from African-American leaders and named the discomfort the group may be feeling as they were read. The majority of the discussion was devoted to small and large group conversations rehashing the physical and emotional experiences that are inherent in transformative (and disruptive) conversation, naming some of the barriers to engaging in these dialogues ("the powers"), and what each person could commit to in regards to Listening, Learning, Imagining, and Working towards growth in the areas discussed throughout the experiments. In retrospect, I could have pushed the disruptive boundaries of the congregation and myself more in this final experience. But I also felt it was important to leave space to name and honor the different ways the community had encountered and endured some of the disruptive elements of the experiences, to set up the congregation for openness in future disruptive conversations.

Following the Breakfast Church experiments, each participant in the study completed a final recorded interview. This interview asked open-ended questions about the participants' experience with the experiments, their thoughts on the role of disruptive conversation topics in the worship space, and their sense of their own capacity and willingness to engage in conversations about race, nationalism, and faith outside of the church.

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a Christian slaveowner, you seem to have three options: 1) Reject Christianity, 2) Reject slavery, 3) Rework Christianity so it can be compatible with slave-owning. What would you have to do to Christianity to rework it for these purposes?"

Project Results

Because there were multiple data sources and sets in this project, I will break down the results in three categories. The "Ethnographic Observations" will summarize data from the pre-interview; the "Experiential Observations" will summarize data from the post-interview; the "Leadership Reflections" will summarize my own observations of the leadership challenges that arose in the Breakfast Church experiments.

Ethnographic Observations

Questions about daily meals in both childhood and adulthood elicited clear and vivid physical and verbal responses. Memories of meal practices were deeply imprinted and provided a direct pathway into the overall family dynamics of the participants. Divorce, substance abuse, senses of belonging and vocation: all of these and more surfaced through discussion about meals. Even as these macro dimensions of family life emerged, the topics of discussion at family meals tended to be far more mundane. When there was conversation, it mostly revolved around catching up on the events of the day and eating the food on the plate. In fact, one of the most enduring mealtime memories for several participants was a perennial contentiousness about how much food was to be eaten. Will[229] explored this contentious dynamic in his family system as he recalled sensing his divorced father's anxiety that his kids get the nourishment he had put time and money into preparing. As it turned out, Will experienced greater connection by temporarily leaving that anxious system and habitually dropping in for dinner at a friend's house, where he received welcome and conversation in their hospitality. This raises questions about the function of the church and Eucharistic meals. There may be a

[229] For the sake of confidentiality, all subjects in the study have been assigned pseudonyms.

sense in which people can find a respite from the anxiety of their family meal experiences, as wrapped up as those experiences may be in the survival anxieties of daily life. Perhaps the Eucharistic meal, in its specific emphasis on the "more" of the meal, can even offer an alternative and transformative community experience of freedom, meaning, and belonging.

Marty also shared a contrast between his meals growing up and his experience of Eucharistic Meals like Breakfast Church. Marty grew up in the 1950s and is a Vietnam veteran. He recalls a rigid atmosphere in which every meal (breakfast, lunch, and dinner) was "required" for the family, children were "seen and not heard," adults were not to be interrupted, discipline was "stern," and mess-making was forbidden. When he shares, "I felt we were left out," it is apparent that those feelings remain deep after several decades. And he believes that these meals conditioned a passivity in him. In his words, "I was kind of an introvert because I think the meals made us that way." He voices very concretely the distinction we have explored between simply gathering together and inclusively participating. He says, "We weren't part of the situation…But it was important that we gathered, that's just the way it was with them." These meal experiences overlap with his experiences of the Roman Catholic Eucharist of his childhood, where he remembers he "had a hard time constantly acting out the ritual." In contrast, speaking of his experiences of Communion in other contexts, including Breakfast Church, he says, "I get a sense of warmness…closeness." In direct contrast to his experiences of meals growing up, his face brightens and he speaks of himself in the second person: "You're part of this, you know, this is for you. Especially when you [the pastor] hand me the bread. Boy, I get to hold it and I think of Jesus all the time." He attributes this shift to more personal approaches to

the Eucharist both as a ritual and in alternative forms like Breakfast Church and a Maundy Thursday Last Supper skit he was tapped to help enact in another church. For Marty, the Eucharistic Meal is now a counter-narrative to both the family meal and Eucharistic ritual experiences of his early life. It also speaks to a question that some readers might have: Is there *any* place for the short-form Eucharistic meal most churches currently practice? For Marty, the Eucharistic Meal experiences appear to enhance the Eucharistic ritual experience. What seems to be happening is that the ritual becomes more grounded in experience rather than theological and symbolic concepts. When he receives the token bread and cup, it conjures up for him the warmth and personal connection he has experienced in the setting of the Eucharistic Meal.

Unlike Marty and Will, James described stimulating childhood meal experiences that involved exposure to other cultures as well as "lively" conversations. He recalled on more than one occasion being asked to retrieve an encyclopedia from a shelf to reinforce the learning potential of those conversations. It was not a surprise, then, that James took on leadership and teaching roles at his table during the Breakfast Church experiments. This fits the data both because of his experience with "lively" meal conversations, but also because he was by far the most informed on the topic, even freely attributing some of his boldness to speak on the issue to his "white male privilege." James and his spouse are also experienced in throwing dinner parties that exhibit high levels of intentionality and experimentality from menu to guest list to guided dinner conversations. Even as his parents underwent a divorce when James was in his teenage years, his family meal experiences certainly impacted him long-term.

In almost half of the participants, a connection arose between diversity in cuisine and general openness to new ideas, cultures, and ways of living. James's family was involved in hosting a foreign exchange student and his father travelled widely. Meals in James's house were an opportunity to explore those other cuisines as well. Will conveyed that branching out in cuisine in less contentious environments than his own dinner table was "the first thing" that "expanded my horizons." It was not surprising that Will voiced the most intentionality of any participant about trying to put himself in the shoes of people with whom he disagrees and trying to expose others to new angles on topics they may never have tasted…or heard before. When asked about her openness and curiosity about different people, Sally connected it to her second marriage to a man of Mexican descent, particularly to the ways it opened her up to new foods. While the Breakfast Church menu has thus far not been particularly adventurous, these insights about culinary openness both confirm the table as a place for experimentation and open up new possibilities for Eucharistic Meals.

While the memories of daily family meals were vivid but mostly mundane, almost all participants lit up when talking about memories of larger meal gatherings, whether that was a weekly Sunday supper or holiday gatherings with extended family. Even in households where daily meals involved TV dinners or confrontations with alcoholism, participants shared about gathering in kitchens and cooking intergenerationally with extended family and vibrant conversations popping up all around the house. "Family" is a common word participants use to describe both their church community generally and the feel of Breakfast Church particularly. When participants use this image of "family," it appears that they are significantly drawing on their experiences in these larger family

meals and holiday gatherings. These special gatherings seem to engender more feelings of connection, joy, and excitement than the daily meals, which were (understandably) more utilitarian and reflective of systemic anxiety. Breakfast Church, like the Symposium meals of the early Church, draws out the characteristics of a "special meal" with less of the tedium or anxiety of physical daily nourishment.

One trend that came out of talking about the participants' approach to potentially divisive conversations was a movement towards passivity and silence. One of the factors might be generational. We have alluded to Marty's learned silence at the dinner table growing up. Cheryl, in her nineties, classifies herself as passive, saying "I don't think most people want to hear when I'm annoyed about something." She recalls that when her husband left her, she never actually told anyone in the church, allowing the news to work its way through the community on its own. In this same vein, during one of the experiments, a congregant in her eighties brought up how different the experiments' conversations were in relation to the old adage not to talk about politics and religion among loved ones. There have been strong cultural norms working against even attempting to engage in difficult and potentially "heated" conversations.

Another factor that came out in some of the younger or middle-aged participants, though, was a building sense of futility about engaging in difficult discussions about political candidates, COVID vaccines, White Christian Nationalism, or others. Mike sees himself as naturally more aggressive, but has found the need to back down more lately. Mike and Molly talked specifically about a neighbor family, with whom they share many meals and whose kids they treat like their own grandkids. But they differ politically. Molly says, "When it comes to politics…we don't bring it up to others." Mike says, "It's

better to…avoid the conflict because, in my opinion, you're not going to win." When they faced differences about COVID vaccines that impacted their sense of safety spending time with the kids, Molly says "I was gentle about how I approached it and I didn't go too deep…I told her, you guys have your opinions, we have ours. We know that. They're different. We just don't talk about it." When Will has the energy, he classifies himself as "defensive into aggressive" when it comes to difficult conversations. But he has noticed that over the last six years or so, he has pulled back from engaging in political conversations with friends and family members. He feels the dialogues have become too volatile and unproductive. And Sally has had to pull back on the religious conversations she has had with her daughter as well as political conversations with her family. She says, "I think we've all learned by now to avoid it because it is just not good for our family to do that." Whether it is a lifetime of conditioning or more recent exhaustion with increasingly polarized and heated political dialogue, many of the participants feel like they are walking on eggshells when it comes to disruptive conversations.

Finally, no matter what the childhood experience of family meals, participants all seemed to view their own adult practices of family meals as an important, if not central, marker of their values. James and Cheryl, who hold predominantly warm and stable associations with their childhood family meals, have intentionally built daily family meals and larger intentional gatherings into their adult family lives. It is a place to reconnect with a spouse and, in Cheryl's case, children, and establish broader rhythms of mutuality in cooking and cleaning. But even in the case of other participants whose childhood experiences were more painful, they saw instituting consistent shared family

meals as a key practice in breaking cycles of family brokenness or distance. When he felt the distancing forces that he experienced as a child begin to impact his relationship with his own kids, Marty moved to make the family dinner table a more open and participatory place for conversation. Molly loves cooking for others and prioritized daily meals with the immediate family and regular extended family meals when she had kids of her own. It was her way of providing a loving atmosphere for her kids because, in her words, "I didn't have it when I was a kid." Sally made sure "somehow, some way, we would get it together" for meals, not in front of the television as she had experienced growing up. For Will, as his kids get older and busier, he and his spouse make a point to clear off whatever is on the dining room table and take the opportunity "to connect and be together." From these conversations, meal practices are not only physical times and places where family brokenness and connection can be felt, but also a kind of bellwether practice that holds a greater symbolic meaning about the underlying reality of the family or community and what they value.

What does this have to say about church meal practices? On one hand, most churches do have traditions of shared meals. The church potluck, gatherings for donuts and coffee, teas and cookouts all represent the very basic impulse of communities to gather around tables. They serve important functions in churches' lives and the connectedness of the communities. Marty put this bluntly: "If we have a regular service [that isn't Breakfast Church], and half a dozen of us go out to breakfast in the morning after that, that's still getting together, that's almost more important than the service…except obviously your sermon." Apart from my sermon being an afterthought, Marty voices the natural connective role meals play in churches. But there is greater

potential for meals that is being "left on the table." The position of this project is both that Marty is correct in attributing liturgical importance to the post-worship communal meal *and* that the Gospels' Eucharistic stories, coupled with the early Church's worship practices have set the church up to infuse the meal container with the adaptive and transformative power that the gospel promises. Not only is more possible for meals, but our study of the Gospels and early Church above suggest there is more *intended* for church meal practices.

Experiential Observations

As we begin to look at the data from participants' experiences in the Breakfast Church experiments themselves, the pre-worship surveys will provide a starting point. The first observation from these written surveys is that the anxiety level about having these disruptive conversations in worship was low, even after hearing the topic of conversation. On a scale of 1-10, with 10 being "extremely anxious," the group average anxiety level about the topic generally was 4.85 and about having this conversation in worship was 3.14. In other words, the participants initially felt less anxious about having a conversation about White Christian Nationalism in the context of Breakfast Church than they did in other contexts outside of the church community. On that second question of having the conversation specifically in the context of worship, five of the seven participants marked anxiety levels between 1-3. The average on this question remained exactly the same (though with a slightly different distribution of scores) prior to the last session. The generally low anxiety levels from beginning to end were a surprise to the researcher. I believe they are best attributed to the confidence of participants in the connectional qualities already present within the community and a trust in the liturgy and

leadership. Surely this connectional infrastructure is indicative of the decades-old system of the congregation. But it also recalls the flexibility and grace exhibited by the congregation throughout COVID-era shifts in worship forms and the accompanying conversations. The low reported anxiety levels appear to show consistency with the cultural ethos of the community coming out of the pandemic. The high level of trust within the community is encouraging, but also an important variable other churches should consider when creating an adaptive container for disruptive conversations.

Final interviews followed up on this survey data about anxiety throughout the Breakfast Church experiments. Even the two participants who reported high levels of anxiety at having conversations about White Christian Nationalism in the church context (8-10) remembered feeling less anxious during the conversations and throughout the process (5-7). Marty reported feeling anxious about others' receptivity to the topic, but believes this shifted as the process went on, saying, "But then, as we were going through it, I found out there's no reason to be anxious. I'm more excited now. People, they were responding very well, I thought…I can't wait to do another one." The other participant who reported higher anxiety was Sally, who concluded, "I wasn't that anxious, but it really led to some conversations and some thoughts." In fact, she went on to say, "I wished we had a more diverse congregation so we could have actually opened it up even more."

Other participants noted movement throughout the three experiments. James, whose prior knowledge on the topic was the highest not only of the participants, but likely of the whole congregation, remarked, "I thought that I saw that within the congregation—on both the second and third Sunday moreso—I thought we saw

progression." He did not just attribute this to increasing knowledge of the topic, but also the fact of "people sitting in patterns." Even though there were some changes in attendance and seating, many of the same people were walking through the conversations together. It did not seem to matter so much whether they knew each other deeply before the experiments, but as the experiments went on, they were learning about one another. Molly and Mike were both surprised to learn about a newer member of the church who grew up in a church in the South. James and Marty recalled conversations at their table among Marty, a Vietnam veteran, and another gentleman who had opposed the war. This led to one example of some interpersonal "heat," as the two butted heads during a conversation on American nationalism and the flag. But in reflecting on the conversation, Marty stated in his post-interview, "When I see the person today, I want to sit down and talk with him a little bit more." When asked if this was a conversation he thinks will happen, Marty replied, "With this person? Yes. And I'm going to spark it one of these days." The progression people felt was not merely a function of increasing information, but deepening relationship even with those who were not previously connected.

This brings us to another theme that came out of the final interviews: the multivocal ethos of the Breakfast Church experiments. In initial interviews, nearly every participant specifically brought up being able see the faces of their fellow congregants or being "face-to-face" as a benefit of Breakfast Church. In the experiments, what came out was the sense of hearing one another's voices. Again, for Molly and Mike, it was another tablemate whose church background in a White Southern church not only brought the main topic home, but also got Molly thinking more about her own interracial heritage (Mexican American) and those of her grandchildren (African American). For Sally, the

pervasive White-ness of Western Christianity was accentuated when one of the African American visitors gasped upon seeing a print of a Black Messiah, and asked to take it home, as though even she had never seen Jesus portrayed as anything but white. Will marveled at the different perspective of the younger girls at his table (including both of our daughters), and it was the blunt and bold voices of those young people who silenced the room with their calls for the church to stop getting stuck on issues of inclusion—of race, sexuality, or gender. Will went on, "It was interesting to hear what other people had said and what they thought, and I felt like that worked well." Not only did Cheryl remark, "I enjoy hearing other people's thoughts too, not just yours [the pastor's]," she found, "that provokes more thoughts within me." James called it a "shared learning process," and noted in both pre- and post-interviews that Breakfast Church flips the feeling of a one-way conversation in a more traditional setting into a two-way dialogue. If anything, there was a desire for more and different voices to be a part of the conversation. The diversification of the Sunday morning soundtrack seemed to be a welcome stimulant to thought and new perspective.

At the intersection of diverse voices and disruptive topics comes the question of trust, something we have seen to be lacking in society-at-large, whether it is trust of religious leaders, large institutions, or simply of the "other side." Linguistic additions like Stephen Colbert's famous "truthiness" or whatever is now meant by "fake news" point to the elusiveness of "truth" in this current cultural moment. This issue of distrust came up among participants as a barrier to having difficult conversations with people who hold different opinions. On the other hand, it was the trust factor that made the disruptive conversations of the Breakfast Church experiments less threatening. There were multiple

elements to this trust: 1) Participants expressed a trust in the safety and connection of the community. Molly emphasized that she felt freer to contribute because she knew she wouldn't be judged. Sally shared that she struggles to have conversations about race with people of color because she is afraid to say the wrong thing. Breakfast Church, as a "family" meal, alleviated these sources of anxiety. 2) A trust in the source of information. Mike contrasted his struggle to trust the media or anything he reads with hearing about the idea of White Christian Nationalism from his pastor and witnessing it from the stories of his church family. Marty mentioned how important it has been to engage conversations on race in the church setting because it leads to ongoing thought and action, but also because it guided them toward "listening to the right people." Participants felt that both relational (nonjudgment) and intellectual (trustworthy sources) trust were key to enhancing their own openness to the disruptive topic and the adaptive potential of the Breakfast Church container.

Not only did the Breakfast Church container appear to hold the anxiety levels of participants within a range that was conducive for conversation, but participants reported several experiences of compassion and creativity during and after the experiments.

- Molly was the most vocal about a new integration of life and faith: "There was always just a separation that you had: church and your beliefs in the church; and then you had everything else: your government, your school and all this stuff. And I never realized how much it was integrated." For Molly, the combination of conversations with her church family, a variety of examples and activities, and the meal setting helped her see connections between her faith and other dimensions of her life that she had not seen before. Whether or not these are directly connected,

Molly's experience of integration reflects the basic intent of Breakfast Church, which is to connect the spiritual "more" of the Eucharist to the ordinary and mundane actions of meal-sharing.

- Above I described the moment when I asked the congregation to come up with reasons why a church should not have an American Flag in the sanctuary. It was Marty who interjected, "No!" Following this visceral resistance, not only did he show an interest in engaging more with his war-protestor counterpart, but he also thought more about his initial resistance to the flag question. In the final interview, he reflected, "Why *do* we have a flag in the church? And I'm thinking more about it." He went on: "Back then I thought…it's God and Country and it should be that way because it's the law of the land, you put the flag on the left, everything else is on the right. Now, I don't know. I don't think it has to be that way." You can tell the conversation stirred Marty to rethink some very deeply engrained beliefs and values, even on a position to which he was instantly resistant. Even if Marty is just asking these questions, this was the goal of the experiments: to create a context where people can encounter "threatening" ideas and increase their capacity to engage instead of reject or avoid.
- Will (and others) indicated he would be more likely to engage the topic outside of the church. He began to reconsider his recent withdrawal from difficult conversation, saying, "It made me think about these things, but it also made me think about how I want to react to things…What kind of person do I want to be? Especially for my kids, you know? And then this conversation made me kind of reevaluate that…I've kind of decided I need to recommit myself to being more

vocal. I guess not in a negative like 'You're wrong' way. In a like, 'Hey, why are you thinking of it that way?'" In other words, Will wants to find a new (creative) way to engage in difficult conversations around difference outside of the passive-to-aggressive spectrum.

- Molly and Mike agreed that we should continue with these Eucharistic meals and disruptive conversations. As Molly said, "It would get us more comfortable with the conversation to where we could take it out of the church and into the community. Because if we get comfortable with it, it's easier to talk about with others." This is an expression of an adaptive form of witness for churches within polarized and hostile patterns of public dialogue.

The participants wholeheartedly agreed that the church should continue to engage in disruptive conversations within the Breakfast Church container. Not only do they see it as a helpful program, but as integral to the discernment process we are in about the church's future. Marty sees it as "good for the future" of the church. Will said "it made me feel good about our church…and the people in it," but is also imagining the endless possibilities for new topics and even daydreaming about seeking out a church of a different culture with whom Point Place UCC could merge. People experienced personal growth and encouragement, and have also seen that the Breakfast Church container and the congregation itself are able to hold the heat of disruptive dialogue. While two participants are open but ambivalent to the ongoing purpose of addressing difficult conversations during worship, the other five were excited about the possibilities and see it not only as an opportunity, but a necessity for the church going forward. Marty states clearly, "It's part of our church."

As much as Breakfast Church demonstrated its potential as an adaptive container, there were a few participant observations that point to the insufficiency of these meals in-and-of-themselves for fuller transformation. One shortcoming is that the Breakfast Church practice itself does not necessarily address the lack of diversity within the congregation. We are caught in Menakem's tension: on one hand, racialized conversations in mixed-race settings present an imbalance of risk at the expense of people of color and can reinforce harmful, trauma-induced patterns of dialogue; on the other, communities need exposure to different perspectives, people, and experiences to expand their imaginations and the possibilities of the dialogue. For white congregations, some of this can be addressed by engaging with diverse sources and even inviting people with different perspectives who have signed up for the inherent risks of that work. Eucharistic Meals may even help the congregation adapt in ways that make it more conducive to diverse conversations. But more intentional efforts must be made to curate healthy and ethical intercultural dialogues, either within Eucharistic Meals or in settings that feel safer to other conversation partners.

We now return to the question of outside and trusted sources. Will, Marty, and James were the most informed about the topic beforehand because they actively engage in outside sources that have introduced them to questions of American Nationalism, White Supremacy and Privilege, etc. They were able to offer helpful, sympathetic, guiding voices throughout the experiments at their respective tables. At the same time, there are many inflammatory voices that are shaping public dialogue in society-at-large. Even a weekly Breakfast Church gathering will struggle to undo the ways those societal forces are "discipling" individuals throughout the week. Pastors and leaders are faced not

only with how they facilitate adaptive conversations within official "church" time, but also what role they have in curating, or leading a flock to the "green pastures" and "still waters"—redemptive and wise voices—in life outside of the gathered church community.

The third insufficiency of Breakfast Church relates to the need for ongoing pastoral follow-up, teaching, and communication. Over the course of the experiments, I added each of these into the congregational system outside of official Breakfast Church gatherings. Even if Eucharistic Meals have a more interpersonal design, they remain a relatively small portion of time, making it impossible for one or two pastors to engage with individual congregants, give space for extended storytelling, engage with deeper trauma work (or refer to other professionals), and generally provide care for personalized and specific needs that a congregant may have to be open to and actualize healing and transformation. This paper does not claim that Eucharistic Meals are the only or sufficient container for transformation, though the experiments indicate that it is an effective central container for the purposes of a church community.

Beyond that, there is less time in the Eucharistic Meal for longer-form teaching and preaching. Engaging the topic of White Christian Nationalism required more teaching and background than I initially anticipated. That will be the case with a variety of conversations depending on the background knowledge of a given congregation. This tradeoff may make room for more communal wisdom and transformative practices, but it will still be the work of a leader or leadership group to find alternative or creative ways to convey important ideas and information. This may be one area where churches can leverage technology. In-person gatherings are not necessarily the ideal or primary places where people learn content. If churches can create and/or promote engagement with

podcasts, YouTube videos, books, and more, congregants can come into a Eucharistic Meal better prepared to participate in the conversation or have resources to follow up with after the gathering. Still, in a culture where calendars are packed and gathering time is at a premium, it is my opinion that churches should consider some of these other routes for content communication in order to maximize the interpersonal benefits of the in-person opportunities as Point Place UCC has tried to do in the Breakfast Church gathering.

Leadership Observations

As explored in chapter 1, the nature of the leader's role shifts when viewed through the lens of adaptive leadership. One of the challenges adaptive leaders face, however, is that just knowing the difference between technical problems and adaptive challenges and their corresponding leadership demands does not automatically change either the organizational or internal expectations of the leader. If the outer work of leadership in Breakfast Church is managing the heat of the disruptive dialogue, holding a Eucharistic experience of Christ's presence at the center of the gathering, and feeding the connectional bonds of the community, there is also an inner work that is captured well by Brené Brown's phrase "rumbling with vulnerability."[230] Breakfast Church is intentionally and inherently *not* an "ex opere operato"[231] kind of technical sacramental container. It is

[230] Brown, *Dare,* 17. Brown defines "vulnerability" as "the emotion that we experience during times of uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure."

[231] "Ex Opere Operato" was a sacramental theory developed as a way of reassuring ordinary Christians that their practice of the sacraments should not be discounted in the event that the minister who administered them was found to be unfaithful or disqualified from ministry in some way. The sacrament is effective in and of itself, not dependent on the minister. This was an important response to an important question as it is today for parishioners of fallen ministers, and just generally how Christians assess God's work in their life that has been facilitated by flawed and sometimes deeply unethical leaders. But the conversation gets off track from the position of this paper when it focuses on whether a sacrament "counts" as opposed to asking how it is forming people in the love of Christ.

not a rite that can be recited or a form that remains constant. Rather, it is an adaptive container. Because it draws power from the communal and spiritual encounter and involves organic and malleable elements like interpersonal connection and emotional disruption, the functioning of the leader dramatically influences the experiences of the community. As such, the four categories of observation I share here will likely have areas of overlap with others who may endeavor to design and lead Eucharistic Meals like Breakfast Church, in part because they overlap with other adaptive leadership principles. But the experiences, temptations, and challenges of other leaders may diverge in several directions from my own. My hope is that this can be an ongoing conversation among Christian leaders who see that the "new environment" American churches face requires a new perspective specifically in sacramental leadership.

The Leader as Host. The scope of leadership in a Eucharistic Meal is very different than what might be required of a pastor in a more traditional Western worship gathering, whether Protestant or Catholic. One of the most important images that I found myself drawing on while preparing the Breakfast Church experiments was that of "Host." This image originally came to me through the work of "The Art of Hosting,"[232] which applies the image from Margaret Wheatley. Wheatley conveys the shift in leadership perspective like this: "We believe that leaders need to change their role from heroes to hosts. Therefore, hosting conversations is an essential leadership practice for these uncertain times."[233] Getting very practical, I found myself taking more deep breaths and leaning away from my laptop more often than usual as I designed the Breakfast Church

[232] https://artofhosting.org/.
[233] Margaret J. Wheatley, *Leadership and the New Science: Discovering Order in a Chaotic World*, Third edition. (San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2006), 197.

experiments. Instead of writing a liturgy with a linear logic to it, I needed to physically retrain my brain to step back and consider the overall experience of Breakfast Church.[234] The Eucharistic Meal does have a basic structure and logic to it, but the primary work of preparation is less technical (developing content) and more systemic and adaptive (imagining how certain disruptions would increase the heat of the Breakfast Church container and what connectional reinforcements would hold anxiety at productive levels, all while preparing for the very adaptive reality of uncertainty, for instance). In the words of one leader, "Ultimately, leadership is the ability to thrive in the ambiguity of paradoxes and opposites."[235] Paradoxes and opposites pop up unexpectedly in conversation and interaction far more than in a typical liturgy. I was reminded that adaptive leadership is not just asking other people to enter into new and uncharted territory. Leadership in that new territory—the territory of interpersonal dialogue and community—carries its own destabilizing demands. The shifting roles of leaders and communities and the multiplying variables of interaction *are* the new territory. These were not only experiments for the congregation, but for the pastor-host as well.

Adjusting the Volume of the Expert. One of the core tenets of adaptive leadership is that the leader should not function as the "expert," but rather should draw on other images and roles like facilitator, guide, or host. The expert impulse, however, is active in my own internal system, as I have learned over the years. Reverting to the expert role (having answers and generally knowing things) is a way of lowering my own internal temperature. Time and again throughout the process, I found myself over-functioning in

[234] This is one example of what Heifitz and Linsky refer to as "getting on the balcony" in order to see the more systemic movements of a group. See Heifitz, *Leadership,* 51.
[235] As Brené Brown quotes Dheeraj Pandey. See Brown, *Dare,* 169.

liturgy-writing: adding new lines of argument, accumulating quotes, and filling the space of the Breakfast Church container with my own words. At times, these spilled over into the Breakfast Church gatherings, especially as they related to time. This undermines the Breakfast Church container, which, as we have seen, derives its power from participation, multi-vocal conversation, and the relaxed rhythms of the shared meal.[236] It is not a lecture.

At the same time, some expertise is appropriate and required. As a gathering of the people of God, there is the expectation of Divine encounter. Most Christian traditions have generally (and wisely) partnered the Eucharist with the proclamation of God's Word. While this proclamation is not essentially a matter of "expertise," it is a craft honed in my personal pastoral ministry more than the hosting role. Having spent hours and years in the Scriptures themselves and significant time bringing my reading of the Scriptures into dialogue with the ideologies and idolatries of American Nationalism and Whiteness, I *did* have a role in the Breakfast Church gatherings to preach and teach. Because there are more variables and ingredients in the adaptive container of Breakfast Church than there are in the more linear containers of traditional liturgies, the pastor is less able to script the gathering. And so, leadership in the adaptive container requires attending to an inner "council" of roles that may be required to raise or lower the heat, bolster connection, reframe a moment or idea theologically, manage group dynamics, and more. As such, the "expert" role that (for me) relates to preaching and teaching could not

[236] This aligns with Heifitz and Linsky's adaptive leadership skill of "Give the work back." They also note that from school days onward, "You gain credibility and authority…by demonstrating your capacity to take other people's problems off their shoulders and give them back solutions…All of this is a virtue, until you find yourself facing adaptive pressures for which you cannot deliver solutions." See Heifitz, *Leadership,* 123.

be rejected or silenced, but attended to among other roles. There were certainly times where my own study of history and race or knowledge of the Scriptures were important ways of conveying the gospel or raising the temperature with a prophetic nudge. There were other times where I had to resist over-functioning in this role and trust the Holy Spirit to move in the midst of the conversations and storytelling of the community.[237]

Defining the mission.[238] For reasons I have just named, the goal of the Breakfast Church experiments was an adaptive challenge for both the congregation and the pastor in different ways. If the congregation's major temptation was to avoid the discomfort of the topic at hand by refusing to examine the impact of White Christian Nationalism on their own faith, the pastor's major temptation was to abandon the process and take a more controlling, expert role in the gatherings. It became my practice throughout the discussions to write into my own scripts a clear statement of what the goal of the gathering was (to grow the congregation's capacity to engage in disruptive conversations with compassion and creativity) and what the goal was not (to persuade them of a certain theological, historical, or political perspective). This explicit definition of mission helped to ground me and the congregation, keeping us in the process, and keeping the heat of the conversation trained on the target. In moments when the heat seemed to be rising too much, defining the mission became a go-to practice to lower the heat without being diverted from the work at hand.

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[237] This concept of the "council" and collection of internal "voices" is something I am here adapting from one extension of classic Family Systems Theory: Internal Family Systems, developed by Richard C. Schwarz.

[238] In *Canoeing the Mountains,* a book on adaptive leadership in the church, Tod Bolsinger asserts, "There is perhaps no greater responsibility and no greater gift that leadership can give a group of people on a mission than to have the clearest, most defined mission possible." See Tod Bolsinger, *Canoeing the Mountains Expanded Edition: Christian Leadership in Uncharted Territory* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2018), 128.

Integrating Lightness and Play. One of the insights that trauma theory reveals is how so many important parts of the body and brain shut down in the presence of perceived threat. As helpful as these threat-responses may be when we are in imminent physical danger (and as motivating as they might be in a political campaign), they cut us off from the very compassion and creativity that are necessary for healthier and more productive dialogue around difficult issues.[239] There were three tools that I found helpful to lighten the sense of threat by reengaging parts of the body and brain that tend to shut down in disruptive encounters. Each of these, in a sense, circumvents the protective barriers that shut down compassion and creativity:

- Rituals function by operating in parallel ways to reality. The acts of eating and drinking serve to reengage the body in the processes of the gathering, much like deep breaths and other settling exercises. We are doing something familiar and simple that is *also* spiritually and symbolically rich. The ritual serves as an entry point into the "more" of the Eucharist. Taussig also showed how ritual allows people to explore new identities and social configurations without the weight of commitment. Even the label "experiment" allowed the group to play with the level of encounter. Ritual allows room to move between reality and symbol, physical and spiritual. As a leader, my sense of the heat of the gathering gave cues about what dimensions of ritual to emphasize and lean into at different times.
- Play and Imagination are some of the first things to go in the face of threat, but they are also some of the most important tools for adaptation. Courtney Goto writes of the power of play as giving permission to act in an "as if" reality, much

[239] "A major criterion for judging the anxiety level of any society is the loss of its capacity to be playful." See Edwin H Friedman, *A Failure of Nerve* (New York, NY: Church Publishing, Inc., 2007), 201.

like in ritual.[240] The rules of Breakfast Church are Eucharistic—grace, welcome, non-judgment; it is a time to live in the world "as if" the Kingdom of God holds sway, distinct from what people might experience in daily life. Tables can collaborate on a puzzle "as if" it is an important project, in the meantime forming actual connection. We can imagine twisting Christianity in knots "as if" we were slave-owners, simultaneously discovering how much our own Christian imaginations have been corrupted in these very ways. We can participate "as if" we are the disciples at the Lord's Table as we experience the interplay of connection and disruption in the presence of Christ. Play and imagination help to cool the temperature of the container, alleviating some of the weight of the work that is actually happening.

- Finally, humor is an effective "cooling" technique, but a tricky one. Humor can often be used to mitigate discomfort by casting the disruption out of the container. It can be a means of avoidance that undermines the vulnerability at the intersection of deep connection and prophetic disruption. During the Breakfast Church experiments, I tried to pick spots for humor that were less to alleviate my own anxiety, and more to cool the temperature of the container while holding the group in the connection and disruption. For instance, a dramatic "Whew, it's getting warm in here" was an effective way of naming the heat of the room without rejecting it. It essentially said, "Yes, this is hard. But look, we're in it together and we're surviving it. This is good work." It also came in handy as

[240] "To play is to experience losing and finding oneself in engaging reality and one another 'as if,' exploring freely a world of possibilities bounded by structure that facilitates relationship." See Courtney T Goto, *The Grace of Playing* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2016), 15, Kindle.

tables struggled to fit their over-complicated puzzles together. Laughing at my own mistakes was a way of sending the message that I was *not* the expert with all the answers, but a co-experimenter in the midst of the adaptive challenge. At the same time, I was a trustworthy guide who was tuned into their experiences of confusion or frustration. Humor can be a compulsive coping mechanism. Laughter can also be a signal of freedom and joy. Discerning when is the time to use this cooling tool is just one more inner dialogue that the adaptive leader must monitor.

I hope that these windows into my "inner council" contribute to the conversation on adaptive leadership in the context of sacramental and liturgical leadership. In my experience, there is a tendency to externalize "adaptive" organizational work as though it is the people of the organization or congregation who must learn to adapt to a "new environment." Leadership gurus like Brené Brown,[241] Ron Heifitz, and Marty Linsky,[242] and Margaret Wheatley[243] keep the focus on the adaptive work of the leader through all of the other organizational needs. The shift of container from traditional worship liturgies to Eucharistic Meals demands a different kind of leadership. Personally, it requires me to resist my own anxious tendency to rely on explanation, facts, and exhortation, stubbornly targeting the rational brain which may have already shut down. Instead, I have to be reminded of the insights from trauma theory, adaptive leadership, family systems theory, and ritual theory/materiality, which all guided me to focus on my role as host in the "new

[241] Ex. "The true underlying obstacle to brave leadership is *how we respond* to our fear. The real barrier to daring leadership is our armor." See Brown, *Dare,* 12.
[242] Ex. "By knowing and valuing yourself, distinct from the roles you play, you gain the freedom to take risks within those roles." See Heifitz, *Leadership,* 198.
[243] Ex. "The leader's task is first to embody these principles, and then to help the organization become the standard it has declared for itself. This work of leaders cannot be reversed, or either step ignored." See Wheatley, *Leadership*, 130.

environment," and attend to the larger process in order to leverage the adaptive resources of the Eucharistic Meal towards greater compassion and creativity.

Summary

The Breakfast Church experiments were an imperfect and incomplete study in the capacity of the Eucharistic Meal to hold the ingredients of adaptation and transformation: connection and disruption. Because they rely less on technical process and more on the many contextual variables within a given system, adaptive containers will always produce a mixture of results that vary by context. Even so, by observing these three experiments and tracking their impact on participants, a picture emerged of the adaptive potential of Eucharistic Meals. Even as they draw on the general characteristics of shared meals, the Breakfast Church experiments effectively stimulated greater compassion and creativity among participants with a variety of background meal experiences. Breakfast Church was able to draw both on the earliest Christian gathering traditions and insights and practices proven to be conducive to transformation in more modern fields of study. Not only did participants exhibit a willingness to engage the topic of White Christian Nationalism, but they expressed an eagerness to engage other disruptive conversations, and see this as integral to the future of the church. In the next chapter, we will recap the main takeaways from this project and consider what new questions this study raises as well as opportunities for further exploration into the adaptive container of the Eucharistic Meal and adaptive sacramentality more broadly.

Chapter 4

From both my perspective and the evaluations of the participants, the Breakfast Church experiments were a successful venture into practicing the Eucharistic Meal as an adaptive container. The three gatherings held the transformative ingredients of connection and disruption, and participants reported growth in their confidence in engaging future disruptive conversations both within and outside of congregational contexts. Further, participants showed evidence of thinking and engaging the disruptive topic of White Christian Nationalism with more compassion and creativity. The results do not indicate perfect design or leadership, nor have they produced an easily replicable model. Rather, in this context, Breakfast Church demonstrated the potential of the Eucharistic Meal to 1) cultivate congregational connection and 2) facilitate real growth as disruption was added to the container.

I am careful not to suggest that these experiments have "proven" the lofty potential of Eucharistic Meals explored in chapter two. Part of the adaptive challenge that has always faced churches is reorienting how success is evaluated relative to how any particular culture measures success. While attendance and giving can tell part of the story about the vitality of a congregation or the impact of a church's ministry, both the gospel itself and systems thinking—in seeing the complex relationship of factors that influence church growth and decline—compel churches to look more deeply when evaluating ministry. In seeking to evaluate the experiments through a gospel lens, this chapter will begin by gleaning the primary takeaways and limits of the Breakfast Church experiments before charting a course for how congregations might build on the work of this project.

Takeaways from the Breakfast Church Experiments

Breakfast Church has created an atmosphere of face-to-face engagement that the people of Point Place UCC have enthusiastically embraced. Most churches have social and connecting activities, often described broadly as "fellowship." Without negating the value of casual social opportunities or relationships generally, Breakfast Church aims to root connection in the Eucharistic story and experience.[244] Even in the less-disruptive Breakfast Church gatherings prior to this project's experiments, intention was directed at integrating spiritual storytelling and the "witnessing" of one another's stories into the meal.[245] The connectivity of Eucharistic Meals, then, is not merely interpersonal, but a multi-layered encounter of self, other, and Other. In retrospect, I believe the initial two years of Breakfast Church gatherings served to develop a capacity for multi-layered encounter in an "under the radar" fashion. Earlier Breakfast Church gatherings were relatively low-risk experiences that slowly built an expectation for something beyond the casual and cyclical conversation patterns of social events, subtly establishing the sense of connection and safety with one another and guided spiritual dialogue. As we heard from trauma theorists in chapter two, connection and safety form a necessary foundation for willingness to engage in more adaptive and disruptive experiences. The early Breakfast Church gatherings leveraged the trust levels that had developed from the long-term pastor-congregation relationship and from navigating the disruptive season of the COVID-19 pandemic together.[246] Congregational connection, spiritual participation, and

[244] The Greek word κοινωνία (koinonia) is usually the source of American churches' use of the word "fellowship," and is used broadly to speak of social events or interpersonal bonds. κοινωνία holds more weight in the New Testament as it is linked with the gospel. See, for instance, the Apostle Paul's phrases "a *partnership* in the gospel" (Philippians 1:5) or "a *participation* in the blood…[and] body of Christ" (1 Corinthians 10:16). Both of the italicized words translate κοινωνία.
[245] Recall Shelley Rambo's contribution of reimagined witnessing in chapter two.
[246] As outlined in chapter one.

community trust are all connectional factors that should be considered when designing an adaptive container. For other leaders and churches who endeavor to practice adaptive sacramentality and take seriously the role of disruption in their contexts, the order of the recipe is important: just as yeast must have time to develop gluten before adding the heat, it is worth the time to develop connectional bonds, engage with settling practices, and habituate spiritual conversation before orchestrating conflict and adding other forms of disruptive heat.

One of the design challenges throughout the experiments was integrating practices aimed at connecting with the extra-rational places where people experience (or resist) faith and disruption. There were times the liturgy was too busy with group activities, settling exercises, teaching, and conversation. This speaks to the ultimate insufficiency of a single weekly gathering—or even three—to shape complex human beings in the image of Christ. But it also speaks to the value of putting the Eucharistic Meal at the center of congregational life. A more consistent practice of the Eucharistic Meal will give more freedom to integrate a variety of connectional and disruptive elements and will provide the adaptive leader with the opportunity to shape and reshape the container over time in response to the movements of the Spirit and needs of the community.

While the Eucharistic Meal is neither the only historical sacrament worth adapting nor the only effective adaptive container within the Christian tradition, we have seen that there are reasons Jesus and the early Church chose the meal as the central container of their lives and ministries. One of these reasons is that even while liturgical elements and conversational topics might vary in relevance and impact, the Meal is still doing its work on another level. It is helping to answer the question, “What does the gospel feel, smell,

taste, sound, look like?" At each gathering, the meal is subconsciously forming people's faith around a gospel that is, for instance, an abundant, nourishing, multivocal, participatory event and encounter with the other (and Other). As the community brings the gospel and scriptures into conversation with other students of human development, healing, and transformation, over time, the Eucharistic Meal can indeed act on multiple levels to become Levering's "school of charity,"[247] which forms the community in love holistically from extra-rational to rational.

Adaptive containers require adaptive leadership. Even as these gatherings distribute participation, power, and responsibility throughout the community, the leader's role—and the leader's understanding of their role—is crucial. It is its own adaptive challenge to shift from the education, expectations, and affirmations directed at the technical expert to the vocation of the adaptive leader. To use one popular image from adaptive leadership literature, Eucharistic Meals are "swampy."[248] Don Schön describes the approach of adaptive leaders who take the leap from the "high ground" of technical problems to the adaptive "swamp" in this way: "They deliberately involve themselves in messy but crucially important problems and, when asked to describe their methods of inquiry, they speak of experience, trial and error, intuition, and muddling through."[249] As much as this project has applied research and analysis from experts in various fields of study, the actual leadership experience of the Eucharistic Meal very much reflects what Schön describes in the "swampy lowlands." The multi-vocal, participatory encounters

[247] Levering, *Sacrifice and Community,* 199; as quoted in Wirzba, *Food,* 176.
[248] Schön uses the contrast of "high ground" and "swampy lowland" as images of technical problems and adaptive challenges: "In the varied topography of professional practice, there is a high, hard ground where practitioners can make effective use of research-based theory and technique, and there is a swampy lowland where situations are confusing 'messes' incapable of technical solution." See Donald A Schön, *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action*. (Basic Books, 1983), 22.
[249] Ibid.

designed to include the extra-rational aspects of human life also happen to usher in the inherent challenges of clashing personalities, varying levels of social skills, unforeseen triggering of painful stories, and other unpredictable symptoms of human and spiritual encounter. As such, the Eucharistic Meal (and other adaptive containers) require leaders willing to descend into the "swamp" and build capacity (not mastery) to guide communities in the "new environments" in which they find themselves.

As discussed in chapter three, clarity of purpose was essential in both defining the leader's role and grounding congregational expectations. Defining the purpose of the gathering and conversation aloud *and* connecting that purpose to the Eucharist gave the community healthy guardrails. It did not do this by limiting acceptable opinions or minimizing the disruption, but by decentering personal opinion and normalizing discomfort. While "acceptable" and "unacceptable" personal opinions often become the standard for judgment in the surrounding culture, the Eucharistic Meal centers the way we share life together with the Incarnate, Crucified, and Risen God. As I interpret the words of the study's participants, this is at least one dimension of their sense of church as "family." There is a covenantal belonging that is deeper and more enduring than differences of opinion (and even differences of conviction) that may arise. The fact that we are at the table having the conversation as siblings in Christ is worth celebrating as gospel fruit, even if the topic of conversation might surface confusion and difference. In Friedman's terms, it is the process we are evaluating more than the content, as important as the content may be.[250] Or, using Schmemann's terms: Are we living the "Eucharistic Life" as a community and how does such a life navigate differences? We have seen that

[250] Friedman, *Generations,* 207.

these are precisely the types of adaptive challenges we find the early Church working out in the New Testament itself. From the beginning, the Church was defined by its commitment to come to the Table, not by a total agreement on a full slate of thoughts, beliefs, and opinions.

For the adaptive leader, a clarity of purpose and commitment to that purpose becomes the focal point and source of authority. We have explored Margaret Wheatley's guiding image of leader as host. But our understanding of early Christian meals has provided another related image: symposiarch. We recall that the Apostle Paul names Jesus as the Symposiarch of the Corinthians' Eucharistic Meals in 1 Corinthians 11:20-27.[251] Just as the Apostle Peter commends Jesus as the "Chief Shepherd" who will judge, reward, and be an example for the pastor/shepherds of local communities,[252] the leader of a Eucharistic Meal, according to Paul, should similarly see themselves as an under-symposiarch, who holds a derived authority from- and specific accountability to- the Lord/Chief Symposiarch. The pastor-symposiarch, then, exercises a "generous authority,"[253] to honor the Eucharistic presence of Christ among the gathered and tend to both the interpersonal and spiritual encounters of participants, always guiding the gathering toward its discerned and stated purpose. At times, this work will involve allowing heat to rise, tangents to be explored, and participants to experiment freely. At other times, this work will involve interrupting meandering conversation, setting

[251] Al-Suadi, *1 Corinthians,* 234.
[252] 1 Peter 5:1b-4: "I exhort the elders among you to tend the flock of God that is in your charge, exercising the oversight, not under compulsion but willingly, as God would have you do it, not for sordid gain but eagerly. Do not lord it over those in your charge, but be examples to the flock. And when the chief shepherd appears, you will win the crown of glory that never fades away."
[253] "A gathering run on generous authority is run with a strong, confident hand, but it is run selflessly, for the sake of the others. Generous authority is imposing in a way that serves your guests." See Priya Parker, *The Art of Gathering* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2018), 81.

boundaries so that all may be heard, and naming behaviors that might fracture the adaptive container. At still other times, it will mean receding to the background as Christ himself—just like the Risen Jesus on the road to Emmaus—steps into his rightful role of Symposiarch to make himself known at the Table in mystical fashion. Hopefully, pastors have known these holy moments of heart-burning, eye-opening encounter and can discern and respond to them in the swamp of the Eucharistic Meal.[254]

We have seen the importance of participation both in the process of transformation and in the experience of Breakfast Church participants. Anecdotally, the idea of "participation" in congregational worship and liturgy has often focused on the laity contributing to the design and/or execution of a liturgy. Perhaps a worship committee develops seasonal themes or series, gathers resources, and even writes prayers; a music team or leader selects and "performs" songs for congregational singing or edification; a liturgist or cantor offers their voice to move the liturgy through its progression and guide congregational recitations of prayers. All of these, in some way, can serve to create a greater sense of liturgical ownership on the part of the lay leaders and even the congregation. Additionally, determined and devout members of the congregation will take the initiative to "get something out of" the worship gathering as they listen, sing, take notes, follow along in their bibles, apply their understandings of sacramental logic to the Eucharistic rite, and more. Adaptive containers, though, will view participation differently. Breakfast Church is *built around* the participation of the community, leaving space for voices not just to join together in a unison song or prayer, but to be heard as personal expressions of the journey of faith. These contributions, in

[254] These images are taken from the disciples' experience with the Risen Christ at the table in Luke 24:31-32.

turn, actually shape the ethos and content of the Eucharistic Meal. The container also shifts the realm of lay participation from design and execution (both of which tend toward technical skillsets) to sharing the spiritual and relational responsibility of the experience.[255] Within this, there are varying levels of risk into which participants can opt: listening to a tablemate, sharing a response to the lower-risk "deipnon" conversation prompts, joining in an activity, sharing in larger-group conversation spaces, etc. The meal is a "sneaky" way of shifting participation and responsibility. Most participants naturally take on these responsibilities because of their familiarity with the mutuality and reciprocity by which meals and table conversations generally operate.

There are three "next steps" of leadership in my own context that emerged from the Breakfast Church experiments, which may be helpful for other practitioners of Eucharistic Meals at any point in their journey.

- The first comes back to what other leadership and congregational practices will be necessary and helpful in supplementing spiritual transformation in a community built around the Eucharistic Meal container. In chapter three, I noted that pastoral care, email and individual communication, and teaching were called for between Breakfast Church gatherings. The disruption of the meals—planned and unplanned—may turn up questions, frustrations, past hurt and trauma, unexplained emotions, or other nuances from different individuals' experiences. A pastor who understands the nature of the container will be more on the alert for

[255] Recall from chapter 1 that redistributing the responsibility more evenly throughout the system is a key component of systems work and differentiation on individual and communal levels. This process is not about pastors and other church leaders "making people take responsibility." It is a generational work of leaders resisting the inner and systemic impulses that they "play the hero" and overfunction. This work of differentiation only redistributes responsibility (and anxiety) in the system because the leader is redefining their own role and responsibility. See Friedman, *Generations,* 220-221.

these individual pastoral care needs while also offering participants a path to reach out and seek guidance in these normal symptoms of disruptive encounter. Charged interpersonal encounters may lead to specific needs for forgiveness and reconciliation or simply provide an opportunity for one-on-one curiosity among participants.[256] If possible, these are opportunities for pastors to coach congregants towards creative and compassionate gospel-shaped navigation of these pivotal relational moments. And finally, there will be communal experiences of tension, confusion, holy encounter, and growth. While there may be times to let these varying disruptions ferment, it will often be important for the pastor to name and frame these phenomena theologically and pastorally. This short list of pastoral supplements to Eucharistic Meals itself testifies to the spiritual and communal potential of these meals. The gathering is no longer an expertly-designed liturgy—well-crafted as it may be—that merely hopes to connect in one way or another with participants in their various seasons and circumstances of life. It is a co-creation of the community, rooted in encounter, that innately draws out people and their lives toward the Body of Christ. As such, it is a more pregnant centerpiece for a Christian community and pastoral leadership that both evokes and tends to situations that are ripe for gospel learning and practice. The role of pastor here reflects Jesus' own ministry rhythms as so much of his teaching addressed and processed the disruptive table-encounters he and his disciples experienced.

[256] We saw this with Marty and the Vietnam War protester in chapter 3.

- The second “next step” is developing the role of pastor as curator. Even the strongest teaching pastors will struggle to compete with the cacophony of “teaching” and “preaching” voices flooding their flocks throughout the week. Couple this with the ways technology has enabled and trained many Americans to seek advice and answers to questions via the internet, and pastors have an adaptive challenge on their hands. During the pandemic, our church leadership posed the question, “What can we do in person that we cannot do apart?” This question was one of the inspirations for the immediate inauguration of Breakfast Church when it was safe. Without minimizing the importance of teaching content, it is one activity that can most naturally be transferred to other contexts.[257] To maximize the encounter of the Eucharistic Meal and to contribute to healthy formation outside of gathering times, pastors like myself will benefit from 1) seeking ways to make their own teaching content available for congregants (and others) to engage outside of the gathering time, 2) curating and promoting reliable and valuable sources of biblical, theological, and spiritual wisdom to help congregants navigate and separate the wheat from the chaff in the digital space, 3) collecting material that will supplement the teaching, topics, and disruptive conversations that are addressed within the Eucharistic Meal.
- The third leadership step that emerged from the Breakfast Church experiments was the possibility of empowering and training table-leaders to help facilitate dialogue throughout the meal. This is a common practice in table-based and other

[257] Teaching will continue to be a part of the pastor’s role in the Eucharistic Meal. The nature and form of that teaching, however, shifts from primarily content-based to process-based, from monologue to communal dialogue.

group discussion settings.[258] On one hand, the secrecy of the disruptive topic prior to the Breakfast Church experiments served to level the playing field. On the other, it was evident that those who had previous knowledge of the topic were able to be present in a less-anxious manner, ask stimulating questions, and offer counterpoints to their tables. While this may happen organically depending on the topic (as it did at some tables in the Breakfast Church experiments), there may be times when training table-leaders would be beneficial. Training may involve introductory teaching on a given topic, but must avoid the implication that the table-leaders are meant to be experts. The primary role of table-leaders would be to exercise "generous authority"—similar to the symposiarch—that brings conversation back to the intersection of Eucharist and the disruptive question at hand, while tending to the process and participation of the conversation.

These "next steps" are personal challenges in light of the Breakfast Church experiments and worthy of consideration from other pastoral leaders currently considering or practicing Eucharistic Meals.

Limits of the Project; Opportunities for Exploration

Almost by definition, adaptive work exposes its own limits. As potentially provocative as the theological, ecclesial, and liturgical positions of this paper may be, the experimental portion of this work can only go so far in drawing conclusions about the practice of the Eucharistic Meal and adaptive sacramentality. Adaptive leadership also takes these limits as opportunities for further exploration and contextual nuance. In this

[258] Surely, many readers have been to retreats, clergy training seminars, and other events in and out of the church world where the table-facilitators have helped focus and guide conversations.

section, I will briefly name three categories of limits of the project and suggest what opportunities these open up for further practice.

First, because Eucharistic Meals are encounter-based, the "results" of any gathering will be largely shaped by the character, gifts, and idiosyncrasies of the given community. I have tried to be candid about some of the demographic, political, and life stage specifics of Point Place UCC and my pastoral role throughout the paper. But in summary, having been the sole pastor of Point Place UCC for over thirteen years, the current community has been significantly shaped by my own leadership. The majority of the people who participated in the Breakfast Church experiments have chosen to remain in the congregation or begin a relationship with the church in light of my leadership. Even though White Christian Nationalism was a disruptively new concept to many, most of the gathered have already heard me speak on race and faith, the complexities of national and Christian identities, and my approach to dialogue across difference. There are others who have decided over the years that my perspectives or approach to leadership and these issues specifically are not for them; they were not present to add their different voices to the conversation. One adaptive challenge for leaders across the board is to consider the levels of trust and security of the organizational bonds between pastor and congregation and gauge the level of disruption those bonds can handle. Simultaneously, each pastor must examine "our *own* way of functioning" to discern our *own* willingness to engage in the "swampy lowlands" of diverse perspectives, opinions, and theologies. This project did not intend to introduce the disruption so pressing for the early Church: the social experimentation of bringing people of radically different social

standing and ethnic background around the same table.[259] This will be a growing edge of disruption for Point Place UCC. As we have seen, this is not a limit of the Eucharistic Meal—quite the opposite. It is an adaptive challenge for the historically segregated landscape of American churches, and will be necessary to the work of churches moving forward. At the same time, in communities where trust-levels may be lower, Eucharistic Meals may still be a means of building that connectional trust, even if they are less prepared for more disruptive additions to the gatherings.

Second, the project was limited by the nature of the disruption it was designed to introduce. With the focus being on the capacity to engage a disruptive conversation topic with more compassion and creativity, the disruption centered around the conversation topic itself. There are many other ways to add disruption into the adaptive container of the Eucharistic Meal. Multiple participants of the study noted a desire to add to the ethnic diversity in the conversation. One of the disruptive elements I had attempted to add to the final experiment was a moderated conversation on White Christian Nationalism with a colleague who holds very different views than I do.[260] Disruption could enter via the menu, unexpected guests, variations to the liturgy, engagement of different senses or spiritual practices, prophetic displays or art, and even the integration of other adaptive sacramentality—for example: foot washing, mindful eating, imaginative prayer or Lectio Divina,[261] seed planting, mutual anointing, etc.[262] These are relatively tame examples, but

[259] Although, recall from chapter 3 that ethnic difference did find us in an unexpected way.
[260] They were unavailable, but not unwilling! This would have also served as a disruptive challenge to me, which will be helpful to model moving forward.
[261] Lectio Divina essentially approaches the Scriptures as sacrament, an image I find helpful for stepping outside intractable debates about inerrancy, source criticism, etc. as important as those conversations may be as we adaptively explore our relationship to the Scriptures.
[262] Sacramental theologians like Leonardo Boff, in cultivating a "sacramental imagination," are extremely helpful in stimulating creativity for the endless possibilities for adaptive sacramentality. As he writes, "Matter is sacramental." See Boff, *Sacraments,* 4. That is a pretty open invitation to experiment!

the point here is that the Eucharistic Meal is a sort of Sacramental Container of sacramental containers. The setting opens the door to many opportunities for creative disruption and holistic formational practices. Similar to the way many churches and pastors share inspiration for lectionary-based sermons or ministry programs, congregations built around the Eucharistic Meal would benefit from sharing stories and ideas of creative disruption in their own Meal practices.

Finally,[263] the project is limited in its capacity to measure the impact of Eucharistic Meals against other liturgical and ministry containers. Another study might seek to measure the differences in participant experience between a Breakfast Church gathering on White Christian Nationalism and a more "traditional" liturgy that addresses the same topic, or perhaps against a book study on race, nationalism, and faith. As a small congregation, there were logistical challenges to doing such a controlled study in the context of Point Place UCC. At the same time, I would offer a few counterpoints to the limit I have just named. First, measuring Breakfast Church against—for instance—a book study did not fit the scope of my question, because my primary interest is in the container that churches plant at the very center of congregational life, which most essentially defines and communicates what the church is about and who is involved. Second, the project did seek to assess the differences in participants' experience of Breakfast Church and "traditional" services through qualitative means, and participants were astute in articulating the difference in their experiences. Third, it is important to remember that the Eucharistic Meal is not an innovation that must prove itself to be included in the Christian tradition. We have seen that the earliest reconstructions of Christian gatherings

[263] Though by no means do I imagine the limits of this project to be exhausted.

present a picture of Eucharistic Meals rather than the liturgical forms most American Christians would think of as "traditional." [264] The Eucharistic Meal has already shown itself to be an adaptive container for followers of Jesus outside the context of Christendom due to many of the features outlined in this paper. With these caveats, I would welcome and look forward to more study about the impact of various containers of spirituality and worship on Christian spiritual formation, including, but not limited to, various iterations of Eucharistic Meal.

Intersection with Larger Adaptive Challenges

As we evaluate the design and findings of the Breakfast Church experiments, it highlights at least one of the adaptive questions facing American Churches: How should churches evaluate ministry when, from a systems standpoint, there are so many factors inside and outside of their control impacting ministry results? Part of the adaptive work American Mainline (but not only Mainline) congregations face is a paradigm shift from universal (or denominational) ecclesial and liturgical forms to what Leonard Sweet calls "artisanal churches."[265] Artisanal churches are communities that embody the Christian gospel as it interacts with the particularities of their people and place. This necessarily shifts the way churches evaluate themselves. Drawing on the work of Brenda Salter McNeil, David Swanson sees one of the earliest departures from God's creational intent found in the Scriptures in the exchange of culture for colonialism or Empire as narrated

[264] I put "traditional" in quotation marks because people's perception of tradition is often subjectively limited to what is familiar in their own experience, congregation, or denomination, not necessarily what is most ancient or original.
[265] Lifeway Research, "Leonard Sweet on the Future of the Church - Lifeway Research," research.lifeway.com, May 8, 2014, https://research.lifeway.com/2014/05/08/leonard-sweet-on-the-future-of-the-church/.

in the Tower of Babel story in Genesis 11.[266] They point out that culture emerges from the particularities of a place. In contrast, an Empire seeks to create one "totalizing narrative,"[267] universalize that narrative, and, via colonialism, transport and attempt to implement that single culture with its narrative into other places without regard for those places' or people's particularities. While Christianity does make certain universal claims, the Way of Jesus takes the warnings of Babel and eschews the posture of colonialism in favor of incarnation: a loving presence mutually shaping and shaped by particular places and peoples. Unfortunately, various Christian traditions have taken the path of imperialism and colonialism. Within these colonial efforts, specific liturgies and sacramental forms have often undergone a similar process. For instance, a community meal with its adaptability and "swampiness" becomes a set ritual that can be reproduced or preserved regardless of the particularities of "new environments." In some cases, this transplanting of ecclesial and sacramental form has been enacted with evangelistic or missionary intent; in other cases, groups have experienced those religious forms as stabilizing elements in times of migration or social upheaval; in other cases, the sacraments have baldly been used as instruments of political and spiritual control. But

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[266] David Swanson synthesizes scholarship from theologians Brenda Salter McNeil, Willie James Jennings, and David Leong in *Rediscipling the White Church,* 134-139. Swanson describes the "toxic mix of warped theology, colonial expansion, and cultural superiority" that shaped the imaginations of American culture and Christianity. A key shift towards this toxicity was that "rather than looking to the creation itself and the peoples it had formed in these 'new' lands, the European explorers themselves became the norm by which everyone and everything were understood." And he concludes with a correction to this shift: "Discipleship cannot happen in detachment from place" (139). Drawing back to the focus of this project, the question is where the sacraments fit into this "toxic mix." How might a strict and static ritualization of the Eucharist have served more imperial and colonial versions of Christianity? An adaptive sacramentality sees the meal as a more "artisanal" and "incarnational" form that can hold a more mutual relationship with places and communities.

[267] "I propose that the question of justice in Israel's imagination is this: Can that totalizing narrative of injustice be interrupted? The gospel, from the outset, is the news that the totalizing system has been, or soon will be interrupted." See Walter Brueggemann, *God, Neighbor, Empire: The Excess of Divine Fidelity and the Command of Common Good* (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2016), 55. In other places, Brueggemann refers to the "totalizing narrative" as a "royal consciousness."

regardless of the intent and function, the transplantation and institutionalization of certain forms run into a similar and overlapping barrier as colonialism: they bypass the necessary work of adaptation in a new environment. The practice of adaptive sacramentality is aimed at shifting from colonial to incarnational or "artisanal" methodologies. Eucharistic Meals will look different in different communities from the menu to topics of disruptive conversations to the general ethos of the gathering. By nature, these adaptive containers resist quantified comparison and fixed standards by which to be measured.

To cultivate an artisanal adaptive container rather than implement a ministry model can feel like a daunting and destabilizing task for churches and leaders alike. In a new environment—whether that new environment is the changing landscape of American society and religion or the transformational Kingdom of God itself—adaptive work is necessary and ultimately beneficial to the community. In the Scriptures, promises of comfort, peace, and stability are almost always *relational* rather than *institutional,* and they tend to focus more on the inner or communal capacity to live creatively and compassionately in the midst of chaos than on finding or manufacturing static and stable external environments.[268] Adaptive sacramentality will focus less on the stabilizing elements of certain liturgical forms and more on facilitating individual and communal encounter with the Other, the Holy One, the Triune God.

While much still remains unclear about the origins of the Christian movement, we would do well to revisit Hal Taussig's proposal about Christian origins. He asks us to

[268] This conceptual contrast is evident in how Christians talk about "heaven." The Scriptures tend to see heaven as a dynamic reality defined by the presence of God. As such, it can move, break through into the world, and be (re)united to earth. This runs counter to the common perception of heaven as a specific and static place to which people go, and where God happens to live too. N.T. Wright, in his many works on the subject, has been influential in shaping this contrast in my mind.

consider that rather than shared beliefs or devotion to apostolic leaders or even an agreed-upon social identity, perhaps the most binding facet of the early Christian movement was *where* they negotiated, navigated, and formed what became Christianity: the Eucharistic Meal.[269] We do this not, as Karen King warns against, "as the ideal to which Christianity should aspire and conform,"[270] but to mine the wisdom of the tradition from those who navigated perhaps the most adaptive era of the Christian movement: its very beginning. Two millennia later, Christian churches appear to have little hope of finding any kind of unity or coherent witness in the world based on a core set of beliefs, leadership, or liturgy. Indeed, such an ideological approach to the sacraments themselves have produced more division than anything else. The fact that the Eucharist is a key point of division among Christian traditions is varying degrees of ironic and lamentable. In the sense that Christian traditions have divided around its form and meaning, the Eucharist has functioned as perhaps one of the least adaptable aspects of Christianity. All of this being the case, the Table—as a place of real encounter and conversation—remains the greatest hope for Christian witness today. Agreement on doctrine or liturgy have proven unsuccessful and they do not leave space for movement and adaptability. But the Table, centered around the core narrative of Christ's life, death, and resurrection and designed around the connectional and disruptive encounter with the other, appears to this pastor to be a source of hope as it patterns the meal practices of Jesus himself.

[269] Taussig, *Beginning,* 18-19.
[270] King, *Gospel,* as quoted in Taussig, *Beginning,* 14.

Conclusion

We will wrap up this discussion by returning to the Imagination exercise that began chapter two.

"Let's imagine a conversation with Jesus himself about each of our churches' practice of The Eucharist."[271] To an outsider—especially, perhaps, a seasoned member of the clergy—Breakfast Church might initially strike an uncomfortable note. It is casual. We do not hand out wafers or pass plates filled with tiny cups. Often the "Words of Institution" are spoken, but not always verbatim, and they are contextualized by the stories of the gathering itself rather than a prescribed liturgical logic. The sermon acts more as a catalyst for conversation than a final word on a subject. Some music is sung congregationally while other hymns might be accompanied by clattering forks and voices that just need to finish their story. An outsider—especially, perhaps, a seasoned member of the clergy—might initially presume that we have a "low view of the Eucharist" or even liturgy itself.

"What questions would Jesus ask us about our gatherings…What would be most important to Jesus? What would Jesus think makes our practices faithful, honoring, and purposeful?" Breakfast Church may fail the tests of institutional faithfulness and familiarity, but this paper has argued that—in both theory and practice—the Eucharistic Meal taps into an adaptive potential that *was* essential to the survival and formation of the early Christian movement and *is* essential to the vitality of churches today. In it, we are reconnecting two potent forces: the rich and multi-faceted meanings and symbols of the Eucharistic ritual and the formational and holistic container of the communal meal. The

[271] Italicized quotes here and below are reprising the italicized "Imagination" paragraphs at the beginning of chapter two.

Eucharistic Meal fosters deeper connection with other disciples, provides natural opportunities for connecting newcomers to the community, and cultivates connection with the Story and Presence of Christ, Crucified and Risen. Through these connections, the Meal is then able to hold disruptions such as polarizing topics of conversation, new theological and philosophical ideas and ways of thinking, unexpected guests, and difficult aspects of the human experience like grief, trauma, confusion, and doubt. All of these are navigated through the constant reminder of Christ's presence made experiential in the bread and cup and in the companionship of the gathered community. This may sound somewhat idealistic…and indeed, the Eucharistic Meal does have eschatological dimensions. At the same time, it is an adaptive container that accommodates the process of transformation that can practically move a community towards that eschatological vision.

The experiences and theories I have drawn together in this project do not attest to a "low view" of the Eucharist. On the contrary, they are adventures in adaptive sacramentality inspired by the often-untapped potential of the Eucharist. They draw on the layers of theological meaning that have been laid over the centuries, but they begin with what is evident in the meal practices of Jesus himself and the earliest expressions of Christian communities. As a relatively seasoned member of the clergy myself, I have felt an internal resistance when practicing the Eucharist in the manner of Breakfast Church: "What if I'm doing this wrong?" There is an internal narrative that sacraments must be "done correctly" that makes adaptive sacramentality feel spiritually and institutionally dangerous. As I have followed the haunting suspicions that 1) there was more to the Eucharist and 2) the Eucharist was always intended to be a meal into both theological and

practical development of the Eucharistic Meal in my own context, it has been the experience of Christ's presence in the meal itself that has allayed my concerns. Instead of the Eucharist being something we must "get right," it now appears to me as a Divine gift brimming with possibility limited mainly by our own imaginations of what God can do when humans risk face-to-face encounter with one another and with The Other, and by our fears of taking those faithful risks.

"Let's imagine…we have to sum up the message of the Gospels and the New Testament as a whole…[and] build from scratch a community around what we read and observe. Would either the summary or the design of the community involve shared meals around a table?" In my experience as a pastor and through my research into the Eucharistic Meal, it has become more and more difficult for me to imagine a way forward for Christian communities in these "swampy" new environments apart from a commitment to the Table at the center of the church's life. Of all the explanations one could cite for church decline, on the whole, people in Western society do not see in churches a rich potential for Divine encounter and spiritual transformation. Having stripped away the obligations and expectations of Christendom, the frustration churches feel with the "new environment" may reflect more of an inward sense those outsiders are right, that we have not, in fact, been cultivating Divine encounter or spiritual transformation. And we are not sure we have the adaptive capacity or imagination to do so. One beauty of the Eucharistic Meal is found in its simplicity, its sustainability, and its scalability. It is not essentially innovative nor does it require a stockpile of material resources. It is, at the heart, re-imagining one of our most basic human practices (the

family meal) as a "natural sacrament,"[272] re-connecting it with the "immeasurable riches"[273] stored up in the good news of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and scaling it to whoever will come to the Table. These are the technical steps. The adaptive challenge, again, is the faithful risk of encounter that has always been the core vocation of any who would follow Jesus and participate in the Kingdom of God.

In the end, this project and paper is an attempt to explore and communicate my own spiritual journey and experience. To me, now, the Kingdom of God smells like steaming pancakes and slightly charred scrambled eggs; the Kingdom of God tastes like a cinnamon roll melting on my tongue and a hearty swig of grape juice; the Kingdom of God sounds like clanging forks harmonizing with a voice that intones, "Come to the Table," the din of conversation peppered with the distinct vocalizations of the Name above all names, "Jesus"; the Kingdom of God looks like wrinkle-creased and young eyes alike lit up with laughter and brows furrowed with the attempt to process something new and crayon doodles of crosses on paper table cloths; the Kingdom of God feels like a hand on the shoulder in prayer, the moment when the bread gives way into brokenness, and the odd impulse to remove my shoes when a church family looks into each other's eyes and collectively senses that this moment is holy and we are communing with the Crucified and Risen Christ, as gratitude wells up in our hearts, and we know that this, once again, is the Supper of the Lord.

[272] This is Schmemann's phrase, cited earlier.
[273] Ephesians 2:7

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Appendix A

Breakfast Church Annotated Liturgies

Breakfast Church Liturgy
August 27, 2023

Welcome

Blessing the Bread
As we gather around these tables, we breathe deeply,
And we are transported.
To a night when you, O Christ, sat around a table with your disciples.
And you spoke of hard things.
Reader A: You spoke of brokenness and betrayal and death.
Reader B: You spoke of being deserted, rejected, and killed.
Reader C: You also spoke of sacred memory, forgiveness, and presence.
As we gather around these tables,
A: We believe that you are near,
B: That you are present in this bread that we break
C: That you are present in the body of Christ gathered.
We look around into the faces of sisters and brothers,
And hope to recognize you, here among your disciples.
As we break bread together,
And speak of hard things,
A: Meet us in our brokenness,
B: Fill us when we feel empty,
C: Appear to us when we feel alone.
For you, O Jesus, are Lord.
You are Immanuel, God-with-Us,
You are the Bread of Life.
Amen.
This is the story that has been passed onto us:
"On the night on which he was betrayed, Jesus took bread and after giving thanks, broke it and gave it to his disciples, saying, 'This is my body which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me."

"Come to the Table"
CCLI#7130008
Come all proud, come all greedy,
Come all liars, come all shamed.
Come all wealthy, come receive it.
To the table, come today

Come all broken, come all needy,
Come all poor, and come all slaves.
Come all rulers, come be seated,

Come all sinners, come all saints.

Come to the table, from near and from far,
Come from the shadows, come out of the dark.
There's room at the table, we saved you a seat,
Come to the banquet, come join in the feast.

Every race, every nation,
Come all rebels, come all gay.
From the fringes, come to Jesus, to a table full of grace.
To the table come and stay.

Come to the table, come eat and drink,
There's no inner circle, come dine with the king.
Recline at the table, come let down your guard,
You're never a stranger, just come as you are.

Come be whole, come be loved,
Come accepted, come now come.

Prepared is the table, we're ready to feast,
The party is waiting, there's more still to feed.
The harvest is ready, go fill every seat,
Go live out the mission as a kingdom of priests.

Table Talk
At your tables, share a story of time you practiced something hard and what resulted.

Pouring of the Cup
As we gather around these tables, we are transported again,
To the table where you took a cup,
gave thanks, and gave it to your disciples,
saying “This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood,
poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.”
As we open your word and share our own stories,
May we bask in the lavishness of your grace, rest in our forgiveness,
and honor your presence among us.
Let us take and drink together. Amen.

Response
“Open the Eyes of My Heart, Lord”
CCLI #2298355
Open the eyes of my heart Lord,
Open the eyes of my heart,
I want to see you; I want to see you.

Disruptive Conversations
“Naming the Powers”

Introduction: Who is for/against idolatry? What is idolatry?

- Exodus (Exodus 32:1-5): Idolatry can be found in where we turn when we feel vulnerable, exposed, anxious, afraid (other than God).
- Jesus (Matthew 6:24-25: Idolatry can be found in what forces we respond to that seek to shape the patterns of our lives in ways other than God.
- Paul (Ephesians 6:10-12): Idolatry can be found in the intertwining of human systems/leaders, spiritual forces that sweep us away in their currents and sap our faith/churches of Spirit's power. (Walter Wink)
- GK Chesterton: "A religion is not the church a man goes to but the cosmos he lives in."

God is not opposed to idolatry just because we get the wrong name for God or religious form. It's about our hearts and lives and desires being tied to pursuits that are ultimately empty, disintegrating, dehumanizing, and powerless to cultivate us up into our collective full humanity. It's drawing us out of a world of scarcity, delusion, and emptiness, and into a cosmos shaped and sustained and saved by the True God, known to us in Jesus. It is easy to be against idols generally, harder when we name them and see specifically how they are hindering our faith, holding us captive.

Settling Exercise[274]

Take a moment to ground yourself in your own body. Notice the outline of your skin and the slight pressure of the air around it. Experience the firmer pressure of the chair or table beneath you-or the ground or floor beneath your feet.

As we gather around these tables, can you sense hope in your body? Where? How does your body experience that hope? Is it a release or expansion? A tightening born of eagerness or anticipation?

What specific hopes accompany these sensations? The chance to heal? To be free of something that has gotten in the way of your faith? To have a richer, more loving God? To live a bigger, deeper life?

As we broach the topic of idolatry, do you experience any fear in your body? If so, where? How does it manifest? As tightness? As a painful radiance? As a dead, hard spot?

What worries accompany the fear? Are you afraid your life will be different in ways you can't predict? Are you afraid of having to rethink something you've always assumed? Are you afraid you might be wrong…or that your pastor might be wrong? Are you afraid that you or the church can't handle disagreement or discomfort? Do you feel the raw, wordless fear-and perhaps, excitement that heralds change? What pictures appear in your mind as you experience that fear?

If your body feels both hopeful AND afraid, congratulations. You're just where you need to be.

What I am about to say, I do not bring in a spirit of condemnation, nor do I bring it in self-righteousness as though I have it all figured out. I bring it to you as I believe the Spirit has laid it on my heart in a desire for greater liberation for you and a deeper experience of God, as well as a more faithful witness of Jesus Christ to the world. And I bring it in the spirit of dialogue, in hopes that the Spirit might bring wisdom and discernment to us as a community, not just through my words.

[274] Adapted from Menakem, *Grandmother,* 24.

Naming the idolatry we are addressing: White Christian Nationalism
-What it is and isn't
What many of us think of when we think of Christianity, Church, or the Gospel are hybrids between biblical language, American ideals, and systems that were designed to uphold or enable racial segregation and white supremacy for centuries.
This is not about blaming you or me for the sins of the past nor condemning any of us for the ways we have been influenced by these forces that are far bigger than us.
It is not necessarily our fault, but it is every Christian's responsibility to discern and grapple with and name the idols and principalities and powers as they show up in their time and place—even (especially) when those idols are in our camp and those powers are influencing our hearts.

Break/Check-In:

- Body scan: what is your body feeling, where are you feeling things, or how is your body reacting (tense/loose, antsy or settled, sweating or cool, breathing?)
- Feeling wheel, 1-minute to look over your feeling wheel and identify a few feelings that you are having as I'm preaching.
    - Angry talking about this in church or questioning something you value
    - Confused about Whiteness or why loving your country might be a problem
    - Curious or interested in learning more
    - Anxious about getting involved in a heated discussion
    - Dismissive, "Here goes Pastor Jon again"
    - Closed: shut down and just endure these conversations
    - Relieved: giving voice to questions you've had but were afraid to talk about
    - Puffed up because you agree and I'm on your team
    - Resistant to coming back in two weeks, and maybe find a church that supports your beliefs.
    - Eager that there might more to God, more freedom in the gospel
    - More…
- Sharing: small group. What are your initial reactions to addressing the topic of White Christian Nationalism?
- Sharing: large group. Same question.

Stating the purpose:

- Today we are planting the seed of this idea that will be cultivated over the series of Breakfast Church experiments.
- The goal of the project is to observe how the congregation engages both the disruption and connection elements of change.

Notice the soil the seed is falling into right now:

- Receptive? Is there space in your faith for conviction, confession, repentance?

- Hopeful? Is there more to God than you might have experienced, more freedom than you've felt, more beauty to the Gospel than you've known?
- Curious? Are you willing to learn and grow, even excited for the things God does like forgive, renew, resurrect?
- The meal that we've had reminds us that God is in this with us, in the trenches, ready to be broken and poured out and completely with us when we're feeling broken and poured out.

Prayer: God, we thank you for the inspiration of Jesus. Grant that we will love you with all our hearts, souls, and minds, and love our neighbors as we love ourselves, even our enemy neighbors. And we ask you, God, in these days of emotional tension, when the problems of the world are gigantic in extent and chaotic in detail, to be with us in our going out and our coming in, in our rising up and in our lying down, in our moments of joy and in our moments of sorrow, until the day when there shall be no sunset and no dawn. Amen.[275]

Activity
Distribute pieces of photos.
Each table must put together their photo.
A different photo appears on each side of the paper
Each table has one piece from another table's photo and is missing one of their own pieces.
The exercise emphasizes the complexity of the topic and the need to go outside of ourselves and draw on the wisdom of others in order to "put the pieces together."

Closing Song
"What a Friend We Have in Jesus"
New Century Hymnal #506
What a friend we have in Jesus, All our sins and griefs to bear!
What a privilege to carry everything to God in prayer!
O what peace we often forfeit, O what needless pain we bear,
All because we do not carry everything to God in prayer!

Have we trials and temptations? Is there trouble anywhere?
We should never be discouraged, Take it to or God in prayer.
Can we find a friend so faithful, Who will all our sorrows share?
Jesus knows our every weakness, Take it to our God in prayer.

Are we weak and heavy-laden, Burdened with a load of care?
Precious Savior, still our refuge—Take it to our God in prayer;
Do your friends despise, forsake you? Take it to our God in prayer;
Jesus' arms will take and shield you, You will find a solace there.

[275] Martin Luther King, Jr.

Benediction

A Benedictine Benediction

May God bless you with a restless discomfort about easy answers, half-truths and superficial relationships, so that you may seek truth boldly and love deep within your heart.

May God bless you with holy anger at injustice, oppression, and exploitation of people, so that you may tirelessly work for justice, freedom, and peace among all people.

May God bless you with the gift of tears to shed with those who suffer from pain, rejection, starvation, or the loss of all that they cherish, so that you may reach out your hand to comfort them and transform their pain into joy.

May God bless you with enough foolishness to believe that you really CAN make a difference in this world, so that you are able, with God's grace, to do what others claim cannot be done.

And the blessing of God the Supreme Majesty and our Creator, Jesus Christ the Incarnate Word who is our brother and Saviour, and the Holy Spirit, our Advocate and Guide, be with you and remain with you, this day and forevermore. Amen.

Breakfast Church Liturgy
September 10, 2023

Welcome

Blessing the Bread
As we gather around these tables, we breathe deeply,
And we are transported.
To a night when you, O Christ, sat around a table with your disciples.
And you spoke of hard things.
Reader A: You spoke of brokenness and betrayal and death.
Reader B: You spoke of being deserted, rejected, and killed.
Reader C: You also spoke of sacred memory, forgiveness, and presence.
As we gather around these tables,
A: We believe that you are near,
B: That you are present in this bread that we break
C: That you are present in the body of Christ gathered.
We look around into the faces of sisters and brothers,
And hope to recognize you, here among your disciples.
As we break bread together,
And speak of hard things,
A: Meet us in our brokenness,
B: Fill us when we feel empty,
C: Appear to us when we feel alone.
For you, O Jesus, are Lord.
You are Immanuel, God-with-Us,
You are the Bread of Life.
Amen.
This is the story that has been passed onto us:
"On the night on which he was betrayed, Jesus took bread and after giving thanks, broke it and gave it to his disciples, saying, 'This is my body which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me."

"Come Ye Sinners"
CCLI #4582588
Come ye sinners poor and needy, Weak and wounded sick and sore,
Jesus ready stands to save you, Full of pity, love and power.

I will arise and go to Jesus; He will embrace me in his arms,
And in the arms of my dear Savior, O there are ten thousand charms.

Come ye thirsty come and welcome, God's free bounty glorify.
True belief and true repentance, And every grace that brings you nigh.

Come ye weary heavy laden, Lost and ruined by the fall,
If you tarry until you're better, You will never come at all.

Table Talk
How does being American relate to being Christian?
How do these two parts of your identity reinforce or challenge each other?

Pouring of the Cup
As we gather around these tables, we are transported again,
To the table where you took a cup,
gave thanks, and gave it to your disciples,
saying "This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood,
poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins."
As we open your word and share our own stories,
May we bask in the lavishness of your grace,
rest in our forgiveness,
and honor your presence among us.
Let us take and drink together. Amen.

Response
"Be Known to Us in Breaking Bread"
CCLI#2698814
Be known to us in breaking bread, But do not then depart;
Saviour abide with us and spread Thy table in our heart.

There sup with us in love divine, Thy body and Thy blood;
That living bread that heavenly wine, Be our immortal food.

We would not live by bread alone, But by Thy word of grace;
In strength of which we travel on to our abiding place.

Disruptive Conversations
"Unmasking the Powers"
Luke 3:7-20
Read Luke 3:7-20
What is your initial response to the text?
Put yourself in the wilderness
Who receives this as good news? Who is discomforted?
Core to the Christian life is a receptivity to prophetic discomfort
There is a life more abundant and free as we die with Christ on the Cross and allow God to renew and refashion our hearts and lives.
Today we will be exploring core elements of our identities, and that may be uncomfortable, but we are trusting that God has more for us through it.

Settling Exercise:[276]

[276] Adapted from Menakem, *Grandmother,* 30.

“Take a few breaths. Turn your head and slowly look around in all directions, especially behind you. Orient yourself in the surrounding space. Notice the height of the ceiling, the height, and color of each wall, any doors or windows, and any other details that stand out. Note what sounds you hear, any smells that fill the air, any warmth or coolness, and any colors that stand out. Notice people around you. When you are done scanning your environment, return your attention to your body. Sense how your feet rest on the ground and how your butt rests on the seat.
Now notice any other sensations in your body: the bend in your knees; your spine, straight or curved; a breeze in your hair; your belly and any tension you hold there; and your chest, expanding and shrinking with each breath.
Notice what your body experiences inside your clothing.
Starting at the top of your head, bring your attention slowly down through your body. Notice each sensation as your attention passes through it: warmth, coolness, relaxation, tightness, softness, pressure, energy, numbness.”
You are safe here. Community where you belong, God whose grace does not depend on your rightness or wrongness, goodness or sinfulness, knowledge or ignorance. You are welcome at this table, you are loved in your brokenness, you are forgiven for all sin. You belong.

Christian Nationalism

- Each table is given a folder of images that each depict American Christian Nationalism in a different setting or might stir up nationalist feelings and relevant accompanying quotes: Pres. Eisenhower dedicating ‘The Interchurch Center,” a person with an American Flag-wrapped cross at a protest, Jon McNaughton’s painting “One Nation under God” with Jesus holding the Constitution, Pres. Obama taking the oath of office with hand upon a bible, Colin Kaepernick and teammates kneeling during National Anthem
- American Christian Nationalism is the view that Christianity needs America to thrive for its own survival or flourishing and/or America needs faithful Christians to survive or prosper. This demands loyalty: We need to preserve/strengthen America for the sake of God’s Kingdom OR the prosperity and power of America is motivating us to live more faithfully to God.
- Questions?

Table Conversation:
2.5 minutes: Come up with reasons at your tables why someone would support the following statement: “It is important for a church to have an American flag in their sanctuary.”
2.5 minutes: Come up with reasons at your tables why someone would support the following statement: “A church should NOT have an American flag in their sanctuary.”

Large Group Conversation to share responses

Reminder of John the Baptist and the day's Scripture: prophetic disruption can feel like an attack even when it is an invitation. Normalizing discomfort.

Exploration of Whiteness:

- What does it mean to be white? How does it impact you?
- If you have not spent much time thinking about this, this is part of Whiteness. Contrast to the experience of people of color in the U.S.
- James Weldon Johnson: "colored people of this country know and understand the white people better than the white people know and understand them."
- Brief History of Whiteness[277]
- "White people have not always been "white," nor will they always be "white." It is a political alliance." Amoja Three Rivers

Jesus Image Activity

- Each table was again given a folder of images: three depicting a "White" Jesus, one depicting a "Black Jesus," one Black Madonna with child, and one Asian depiction of Jesus. Finally a screenshot of a Google Search for "Jesus Art" which brings up almost all "White Jesus" images.
- How did you respond when seeing Jesus images with white complexion? Did anything shift when you saw an image of Jesus as black?
- Example of theology: most theology by people of color and outside of the Western tradition is labeled "Liberation," "Feminist," "Black," etc. Normalization and Centering of Whiteness.

Goal: not guilt, not partisan agenda, not agreement
The goal is to have the conversation.
As with John the Baptist, the goal is not condemnation, but invitation. The invitation is to a bigger gospel, a hope that there is more to God, more to Jesus, more to faith. When race is brought up as an ongoing problem or when what we think of as basic biblical Christianity is questioned, it is not our job to fight or defend, but a space for us to learn and grow.

Activity
Creating a Slavery-Friendly Gospel
Imagine you are a Christian & a (White) Slaveowner in the 1600s-1700s

- Knowing (now) that slavery is incompatible with the Gospel, what options do you have?
- 1) Reject slavery. 2) Reject Christianity. 3) Create a Slavery-Friendly Christianity. What would that look like?
- Discussion at tables and large group.
- Some possibilities:

[277] Menakem, *Grandmother,* 63.

    - Disconnect spiritual from the physical/political—can ignore the pain/suffering we're inflicting because my faith is really about heaven.
    - Separate forgiveness from repentance/confession/ self-examination. A prayer I can pray in a few seconds and anything else is up to me, a bonus.
    - Equate prosperity/power as the rewards for faithfulness, emphasize a victorious Christ over a man crucified at the hands of political/religious powers—his death something for me, not something with me.
    - Make it about something that happened thousands of years ago and after we die rather than an encounter with the Holy One, the Liberator of Hebrew slaves in the present.
    - Read myself unequivocally at the center of the story and on the side of good/right. I can assume the Bible is always a message to ME in MY situation, divorced from Hebrews slave or oppressed Jews. This way, Scriptures written by and for slaves and oppressed peoples don't move me to engage with actual slaves or oppressed peoples.
    - Re-apply and spiritualize the promises/warnings of God. Promises made to poor and enslaved people = Christians; Warnings to wealthy and powerful = non-Christians.
    - Would talk about sin generally rather than specifically, as individual moral choices over collective forces of dehumanization and injustice.
    - Would make it about intellectual belief in historical events, not a whole-life commitment to living in relation to the teachings of the One who told us to take up our cross and follow him.
- If we did all this, not only could we avoid facing the evils of slavery and the heresies of White Supremacy, but we could actually tell slaves that they were lucky we came their way, that we were the blessed channels of their salvation, nevermind their brutal enslavement and dehumanization.
- All of these shift the Christian imagination away from "God's Kingdom come and will be done on earth as it is in heaven."

Scan: Body/Mind/Heart

- Notice: anger, anxiety, confusion, overwhelm, resistance, shut down…
- Why are we doing this? What hope is there?

Reminder of Goal: to be more open to the conversation, both honest about where you are and curious about what wisdom, and liberation God might have for you.

Closing Song

"Beautiful Things"

CCLI#5665521

All this pain, I wonder if I'll ever find my way
I wonder if my life could really change at all.

All this earth, could all that is lost ever be found?
Could a garden come up from this ground at all?

You make beautiful things, You make beautiful things out of the dust.

You make beautiful things, You make beautiful things out of us.

All around Hope is springing up from this old ground,
Out of chaos life is being found in You.

You make me new, You are making me new.

Benediction

A Benedictine Benediction

May God bless you with a restless discomfort about easy answers, half-truths and superficial relationships, so that you may seek truth boldly and love deep within your heart.

May God bless you with holy anger at injustice, oppression, and exploitation of people, so that you may tirelessly work for justice, freedom, and peace among all people.

May God bless you with the gift of tears to shed with those who suffer from pain, rejection, starvation, or the loss of all that they cherish, so that you may reach out your hand to comfort them and transform their pain into joy.

May God bless you with enough foolishness to believe that you really CAN make a difference in this world, so that you are able, with God's grace, to do what others claim cannot be done.

And the blessing of God the Supreme Majesty and our Creator, Jesus Christ the Incarnate Word who is our brother and Saviour, and the Holy Spirit, our Advocate and Guide, be with you and remain with you, this day and forevermore. Amen.

Breakfast Church Liturgy
September 24, 2023

Welcome

Blessing the Bread
As we gather around these tables, we breathe deeply,
And we are transported.
To a night when you, O Christ, sat around a table with your disciples.
And you spoke of hard things.
Reader A: You spoke of brokenness and betrayal and death.
Reader B: You spoke of being deserted, rejected, and killed.
Reader C: You also spoke of sacred memory, forgiveness, and presence.
As we gather around these tables,
A: We believe that you are near,
B: That you are present in this bread that we break
C: That you are present in the body of Christ gathered.
We look around into the faces of sisters and brothers,
And hope to recognize you, here among your disciples.
As we break bread together,
And speak of hard things,
A: Meet us in our brokenness,
B: Fill us when we feel empty,
C: Appear to us when we feel alone.
For you, O Jesus, are Lord.
You are Immanuel, God-with-Us,
You are the Bread of Life.
Amen.
This is the story that has been passed onto us:
"On the night on which he was betrayed, Jesus took bread and after giving thanks, broke it and gave it to his disciples, saying, 'This is my body which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me."

"Holy Spirit"
CCLI#6087919
There is nothing worth more that will ever come close,
Nothing can compare, You're our Living Hope.
Your presence, Lord.

I've tasted and seen of the sweetest of loves,
Where my heart becomes free, And my shame is undone,
Your presence, Lord.

Holy Spirit, You are welcome here.
Come flood this place and fill the atmosphere.
Your glory God, is what our hearts long for,

To be overcome by your Presence, Lord.

Let us become more aware of your presence
Let us experience the glory of your goodness

Table Talk
What's harder: changing your mind about something or changing your habits? Try to share examples.

Pouring of the Cup
As we gather around these tables,
we are transported again,
To the table where you took a cup,
gave thanks, and gave it to your disciples,
saying "This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood,
poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins."
As we open your word and share our own stories,
May we bask in the lavishness of your grace,
rest in our forgiveness,
and honor your presence among us.
Let us take and drink together. Amen.

Response
"Eat This Bread"
†Songs from Taizé copyright (c) Ateliers et Presses de Taizé, 71250 Taizé, France.
Eat this bread, Drink this cup, Come to him and never be hungry.
Eat this bread, Drink this cup, Trust in me and you will not thirst.

Disruptive Conversations
"Engaging the Powers"
Ephesians 6:10-20
What are the powers?
Antiquated naming mental illness?
The voice that tells you to go up and eat one more donut?
What motivates and deludes THOSE people?
(Discuss)
Wink: "One of the most pressing questions facing the world today is, How can we oppose evil without creating new evils and being made evil ourselves?"
Paul: "Battle is not against flesh and blood."
The "powers" are more intertwined with how we relate to one another and how our society is structured than individual, personal forces.
Unhealthy conflict styles[278]: Passive, Evasive, Defensive, Aggressive.
Where do you find yourself?

[278] Van Yperen, *Metanoia.*

These are often ways we end up either not engaging powers or engaging in un-Gospel ways.

How do we go about "Engaging the Powers"?

- Engage history, story (Bryan Stevenson): "I genuinely believe that, despite all of that victimization, the worst part of slavery was this narrative that we created about black people—this idea that black people aren't fully human, that they are three-fifths human, that they are not capable, that they are not evolved. That ideology, which set up white supremacy in America, was the most poisonous and destructive consequence of two centuries of slavery. And I do believe that we never addressed it. I think the North won the Civil War, but the South won the narrative war." (Israel was all about history—slavery.)
- Engage bodies (Resmaa Menakem): "It is part of the operating system and organizing structure of American culture." "White-body supremacy doesn't live in our thinking brains. It lives and breathes in our bodies." (Whiteness diminishes body's role in spirituality, separates spirit/flesh)
- Engage a new imagination (Willie James Jennings): not just replacing one thought with another, one behavior with another, jumping from one team to the Jesus team, but playing the same game by the same rules.
- Engage the Other: My own experience of having marginalized voices open up new dimensions of the Gospel to me.
- All of these engage the principalities/powers in Christlike ways. "You must understand this, my beloved brothers and sisters: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger."
- Contra fight or flight or freeze impulses.

Forms of Christianity that teach us how to operate within the system we've been given, but do not stimulate new imaginations outside of the system.
Where is your Christianity operating? (with Pauses)

- Trying to get a handle on life? Manage?
- Opening you up to totally new ways of seeing and inhabiting the world?
- What do you need to manage? Where do you need to be opened up?

Listen to Martin Luther King, Jr. quotes about the 3 evils of materialism, racism, and militarism and the "White Moderate."
How is he calling us to a new imagination outside of the system?

2 minutes reflection, 2 minutes sharing:

- What do you feel in your body?
- What have you learned or are realizing?
- What are you curious about?
- What makes you anxious or angry?

Centering: reflection on these conversations. Are you safe? Are you anxious? Are you ready to shut down? What's happened in your bodies?

Activity

Listening, Learning, Imagining, Working

Silent Reflection and Table Conversation

- Where do you need to listen?
- What do you want to learn?
- What are you imagining?
- What work are you being called to do?

Closing Song

"Guide Me, O My Great Redeemer"

New Century Hymnal #18

Guide me, O my great Redeemer, Pilgrim through this barren land;
I am weak, but you are mighty; Hold me with your powerful hand.
Bread of heaven, Bread of heaven, Feed me till I want no more,
Feed me till I want no more.

Open now the crystal fountain, Where the healing waters flow,
Let the fire and cloudy pillar, Lead me all my journey through,
Strong deliverer, Strong deliverer, Ever be my strength and shield.
Ever be my strength and shield.

When I reach the River Jordan, Bid my anxious fears subside,
Death of death, And hell's destruction, Land me safe on heaven's side.
Songs of praises, Songs of praises,
I will ever sing to you. I will ever sing to you.

Benediction

A Benedictine Benediction

May God bless you with a restless discomfort about easy answers, half-truths and superficial relationships, so that you may seek truth boldly and love deep within your heart.

May God bless you with holy anger at injustice, oppression, and exploitation of people, so that you may tirelessly work for justice, freedom, and peace among all people.

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