Other Books by Letty M. Russell

Household of Freedom: Authority in Feminist Theology

Growth in Partnership

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Christian Education in Mission

Edited by Letty M. Russell

The Church With AIDS: Renewal in the Midst of Crisis

Inheriting Our Mothers' Gardens: Feminist Theology in Third World Perspective (with Kwok Pui-lan, Ada María Isasi-Díaz, and Katie Geneva Cannon)

Feminist Interpretation of the Bible

Church in the Round

Feminist Interpretation of the Church

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will lead members of the churches to search for just and responsible relationships in community. Bellah calls this the difference between community and life style. "Whereas a community attempts to be an inclusive whole, celebrating the interdependence of public and private life and of the different callings of all, life style is fundamentally segmental and celebrates the narcissism of similarity."[47] In an earlier time Paul called this search for just relationships "being political." Thus he urges the Philippians to be part of the *polis* and discharge their obligation as citizens in a manner that is worthy of Christ.[48]

Imaginative and constructive repentance leads us toward a desire for social transformation, beginning with the church. But this is very difficult and requires a willingness to risk the suffering that comes to those who try to change the status quo of any society. Adrienne Rich has pointed out that she was greatly helped in making a decision to risk in her own life by a quotation from James Baldwin: "Any real change implies the breakup of the world as one has always known it, the loss of all that gave one an identity, the end of safety."[49]

The world as we know it *is* unjust, and to share with God in the building of a community of justice is to call for a breakup of the world as we know it and for a New Creation! Three possible clues as to what it would take for such imaginative and constructive repentance of double sin are conversion, transformation, and liberation.

The first clue, that *conversion is necessary*, indicates why it is so difficult to help churches see and reject the patriarchal understanding of reality that allows justice and salvation to be split off at the root. As we saw in chapter 1, patriarchy is the designation for a variety of social systems of domination and subordination in which women's realities are defined by the status (race, class, country, religion) of the men to whom they belong as daughter, wife, mother. But patriarchy is also to be understood as an interpretive framework or paradigm of that social system in which authority as domination is understood as a description of social reality that justifies the domination of subordinate groups by those who are dominant. In order for the churches to see the need for repentance they must be converted to seeing and understanding that God's justice springs from a vision of mended creation in which reality is based on responsibility for just relationships with our neighbors, whoever and wherever they may be. Until the paradigm of partnership and justice makes more sense than that of domination and injustice, the churches and their members have not begun to repent of the sin of being *of* the world.

The second clue is that *the goal of conversion and new life is social transformation.* As we noted, the churches often move toward social outreach and social action and thus recognize a need to be in the world, but they are not about to take up Baldwin's call by transforming the patriarchal world of oppression. Social outreach and works of compassion are important for

those they assist, as well as for the possibility of new insight and conversion on the part of those who reach out beyond their own enclave. However, it is not truly a move to be *in* the world, unless the churches and their members begin to recognize and move to oppose the root causes of the social, economic, and political problems that deny persons the power and material resources to solve their own problems.

In 1992, at a Hartford Theological Seminary consultation on Women-Church, Marie Augusta Neal noted that the power and possibility of social transformation is both spiritual and political. Prayer, liturgy, study, and care for neighbor, as well as demonstrations, political campaigns, and similar actions, can all be part of the work for justice *or* part of the support for the status quo. The issue is not in what way one works for justice, but whether one's work is on behalf of transformation of the society so that God's justice is done on earth.[50]

The third clue is that *justice involves a liberation journey.* The church shares in the journey of salvation as it takes part in the story of God's love affair with the world. This is a liberation journey that is shared with all of God's creation as it struggles for the power and possibility of being put right. It is a journey with God, ourselves, and others and for God, ourselves, and others. The church seeks to live out the great commandment: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself" (Luke 10:27; Deut. 6:4). But it can only do so as it comes to understand the needs of the neighbor for just relationships, and for wholeness in community, and takes action in solidarity with the neighbor in need. The journey of liberation takes the church in many new paths, but it can only be part of the repentance of double sin if the churches and their many members begin to show by their actions that they live *in* the world, with responsibility for that world.

These clues are themselves not so unexpected, for they are similar to church teachings about the process or order of salvation as justification, regeneration, and sanctification. The ordering of the clues is not important, for they are all part of the response to God's gracious reaching out to us, to the church, and to the world to put things right. They are all part of what Calvin calls "double grace" as he describes the process of justification and sanctification. God has set us free in Jesus Christ and granted the power of the Spirit to restore our humanity and enable us to do God's will as we share in the mending of creation.[51]

Sign of Christ's Presence

When the church does seek to become a sign of Christ's liberating presence in creation we are often surprised to find a great reversal of things as usual. In ways reminiscent of Matthew 25, we often find it is the outcasts

and the persons who are marginal to the life of the church who provide insights needed in a specific time and place. This was certainly true of Ron Russell-Coons and the Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches. The UFMCC's application for membership in the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. has been rejected because of its ministry to the lesbian, gay, and bisexual community. Yet it has continued to send delegates as observers and participants wherever this is possible. Ron was the delegate to the Faith and Order Commission, sent to our group by his church to help us in our study of how the imagination of AIDS brings new insight into the meaning of church from the perspective of those on the margin.

The very churches that have been rejected by the NCC because of their openly gay, lesbian, and bisexual ministry have not abandoned the churches of the NCC in their homophobia. Instead, they have continued to provide a much-needed ministry to the wider church, urging it to re-examine its own understanding of sexuality and of the meaning of salvation so that it can come to make sense to persons whose faith is challenged at the breaking points of their lives. Even though he was frequently too sick to work on the book our group was writing about AIDS and the church, Ron continued to provide a ministry of contacts, experience, energy, and love to all those who had become partners with him in creating the book.

What happened in Ron's three years of partnership in our group was that many persons had to discover that God also works through the witness of gay and lesbian Christians. In fact, his presence in the group and his continuing courage in the midst of diminishing strength was, for many, more of a sign of Christ's presence than the traditional signs. In carrying out his ministry with our group, Ron helped us to see what it would mean to "hunger and thirst for justice" and to become a partner in the mending of creation.

Household of God

The story of this mending begins at the other end of history with the fulfillment of God's justice in the New Creation (Isa. 65:17–25; Rev. 21:1–4).[52] The Gospel accounts portray Jesus as both the witness to the coming of God's reign and the one in whom that reign is taking place. In coming to know the story of the one who is called Jesus (Yeshua, the one who saves), we look for Christ's presence among us as a sign of this New Creation or household of God.

The life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ are a witness to the world, and not just to the church, that God loves the world and intends to reverse the structures of domination and sin that rule that world. His death and resurrection witness both to the power of injustice to cause suffering in the world and to the power of God's just love in overcoming that

injustice. This action of God in Christ is the firstfruits of the coming New Creation which is offered on behalf of all creation (Rom. 8:28–39).

In Jesus Christ, God has elected all of creation to be made new. Not all of creation acknowledges that election, yet different persons of different faiths and ideologies witness to a divine desire for love and justice in many and various ways. As we shall see in chapter 5, God's choice of the whole world indicates God's desire that all will be saved and become part of the mended creation, but it does not indicate that everyone must be a Christian in order to be welcome in God's creation or loved by God. According to Karl Barth, God has elected or chosen Jesus Christ on behalf of all people.[53] Jesus is elected both to witness to and embody the New Creation, and it is the risen Christ's presence among us that continues to convey the justice and peace of that new reality.

As a way of expressing that new reality without using the patriarchal language of kingship, domination, and subordination, I have come to speak of the kingdom of God as the household of God. As I noted in my book *Household of Freedom: Authority in Feminist Perspective*, a metaphor often used in the parables to convey the message of God's hospitality is the household, or *oikos*. Domestic images of the kingdom abound in the Gospels, especially the images of table fellowship that were described in chapter 1. And the word "household" is sometimes used interchangeably with "kingdom" to indicate the place where God's will is done. Thus Mark 3:24–25 says: "If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. And if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand."

In this eschatological sense of God's householding activity in and beyond this world, "household of God" does not refer to the church, as it does in later Greek Testament books such as 1 Peter, but rather to God's New Creation.[54] The church as a household of faith is called to be a sign of God's power at work among all the nations of the *oikoumene*, but there are other signs that point toward God's mended world house. Those who "fall in faith with Christ," and desire to share the faith and struggle of Christ's community, witness to Christ as the way to the New Creation. They affirm with Paul: "So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!"

But Christ is not the only way to discover God's will for mending creation, nor has the coming of Christ completed the New Creation that has happened, happens even now among us, and will happen in the future. As Rosemary Radford Ruether has said, "We must see christology, not only as proleptic, but also as paradigmatic."[55]

The work of Christ is proleptic or anticipatory of the completion of the mending of creation. For those who accept God's love through Christ, his work is a full revelation of that love and purpose, but for Jews and for persons of other faiths there is still more to come. Christ's work is also

paradigmatic in that it shows Christians clearly what God's love and justice are all about, but that work does not negate the possibility of God's love and justice working through other religions and other social structures.

Discerning God's preferential option for the poor and marginalized can become a baseline for dialogue with other groups when we acknowledge the possibility of the signs of God's work in all creation. In feminist theologies, according to Marjorie Suchocki, justice becomes a fundamental criterion of value and focus of dialogue among different religions as we seek out common ways of living together in a very diverse and complex world.[56]

When we universalize the Christian story of God in Jesus Christ as the only message of salvation for all people, we deny the power of God to work through all the poor and through all creation. To universalize our very concrete and particular faith is a form of imperialism over people of other faiths and ideologies.[57] In humility we can witness to the faith that God has indeed begun the New Creation in Christ, and that for us this is the message of salvation, but still look forward to God's fulfillment of the promise of salvation and liberation for all.

Honoring its humble role as part of God's concern for creation, the church becomes a witness to the presence of Christ. It is that presence that creates the church and not the other way around. And it is that presence that is the power and possibility of life now in anticipation of the household of God. If the church can only find itself where Christ is present, it needs to be very careful to look for the places where Christ has promised to come.

Jürgen Moltmann points out that there are three different groups of assurances of Christ's presence in the Greek Testament.[58]

The first set of promises is related to Jesus' promise to be present in the witness to the gospel, in word and sacrament, and in the gathered community. For instance, Matthew 28:18–20 declares the promise of Christ's presence in witness, baptism, and teaching. In fact the traditional signs of Christ's presence in the church are all anticipated in this text as it speaks of baptism in the *one* name, *holiness* through the continuing presence of the Spirit, *catholicity* as an invitation to all the nations, and *apostolicity* through faithful preaching. First Corinthians 11:23–26 declares the gift of presence in the Lord's Supper, and Matthew 18:20 declares, "Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."

The second set of promises is related to the presence of Christ among the poor and marginalized. This promise has already been discussed, but it is good to remind ourselves of the importance of Matthew 25:31–46 in making this promise and its word of judgment clear. According to Matthew, Jesus seems to be telling his own story of identification with the poor and outcast so that, together with the Messiah, all who hunger and thirst, all who are naked, sick, or in prison, become the real presence of God's mending work.[59] In solidarity with the least of Jesus' brothers and sisters, we find

a social biography of struggle that continues Jesus' own story. Just as the Christians of faith and struggle call out *"¡Presente!"* when the lists of the martyrs in Central America are read at the eucharist, Christians everywhere can call out *"¡Presente!"* and know that Jesus lives through the continuing actions of solidarity with the poor and oppressed.

The third set of promises, related to Christ's future coming and the fulfillment of the household of God, is also linked to the parable of the last judgment in Matthew 25. Jesus promises to be present wherever God's will is done until the time comes when that will for justice and peace is done on earth as in heaven (Matt. 6:10). Moltmann underlines this justice connection, saying that

> the one who is to come is then already present in an anticipatory sense in history in the Spirit and the word, and in the miserable and helpless. His future ends the world's history of suffering and completes the fragments and anticipations of his kingdom which are called the church.[60]

Signs of the church

The church has no nature of its own because its existence is derived from Christ's presence. Yet over the centuries it has claimed that the presence of Christ is manifest in particular signs that make it possible to identify where the true church is located. These are also signs that are understood to be derived from Christ's presence in the church, but they need to be tested from the perspective of the three different assurances of Christ that are described in the Greek Testament to see if they actually do make clear the mandate of the church to be present where Christ is present and to share in God's work of New Creation.

As Robert Schreiter has pointed out, the defining characteristics of the church that are clearly evident for all to see are usually drawn from "the addition made to the Nicene Creed by the Council of Constantinople in 381: 'and in one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church'"[61] Discussion begins here with a common creed recognized by Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Protestant traditions, but it moves to other signs as well, and it becomes controversial as one confessional body considers the marks of another invalid. Thus, at the time of the Protestant Reformation the discussion of whether the Protestant Church or the Roman Catholic Church had the true marks and was truly church was very much part of the persecution and the religious wars of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in Europe. Unity among churches, based on mutual recognition of one another as communities of faith in Jesus Christ, still involves us in the question of the identity of the church of Christ.

The question of identity is a continuing issue because churches must always be looking to find where Christ is present in a particular time and place. In times of change a new process of traditioning is particularly

important as we seek to understand the identity of the church in a new situation. Our National Council of Churches group studying how the crisis of AIDS confronts the church with the need to understand what it means to be the body of Christ, sharing in suffering and in the ministry of Christ in today's world, is but one small example of the many Christians who are searching out the identity of the church in the midst of social, political, and economic upheaval.

As we begin to explore the self-understanding of the church, we find that historical descriptions are helpful for locating ourselves within the Christian tradition and discerning indicators of faithfulness, even though they are clearly *not* helpful as rules used to exclude others. We also find that these traditional signs are not nearly as self-evident as they were once considered to be, for they themselves require considerable explanation and verification even among churches who continue to accept the four signs spelled out in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed. For instance, the World Council of Churches Faith and Order Commission has been studying the creed for ten years as part of its program on "Towards a Common Expression of the Apostolic Faith Today." It has taken many consultations and volumes to try to establish that the creed is, in fact, a common basis for "confessing one faith."[62]

The understanding of the church shifts when we interpret one, holy, catholic, and apostolic from the point of view of those at the periphery of life, society, and the church. As with the other identifying marks, what is of most importance is not the presence of certain characteristics but their use and practice. According to Hans Küng, "Unity, holiness, catholicity and apostolicity are therefore not only gifts, granted to the Church by God's grace, but at the same time tasks which it is vital for the Church to fulfill in a responsible way."[63] The signs themselves cannot make the presence of Christ clear if they do not show that presence forth among the poor and as signs of a mended creation, as well as in the witness, liturgy, and gathering of the community.

In our study group on Unity and Renewal of the Church we tried to discern the ways in which the marks of the church are traditioned from the perspective of those engaged in ministry with those living with AIDS. Moving to the margins of most official church bodies, we shared stories, sermons, liturgies, and case studies like those of Ron Russell-Coons that enabled us to catch a glimpse of what the signs of the church would look like at "breaking points of life." The clues that we discerned and tested out together are described by Robert Schreiter in his article "Marks of the Church in Times of Transformation."[64]

The *unity* of the church is a gift of the Spirit or presence of Christ. The church is one because all who call on Christ's name discover Christ in their midst. As God in Christ and the Spirit are one, the many parts of the church are gathered together through one divine action as the sign of

the coming household of God (Eph. 4:4–6). The unity of God with humankind brought about by God's reconciling action in Jesus Christ is imaged by the unity of the church across barriers of diversity.

In actuality, churches live out their unity in Christ neither with one another nor with the world. In the face of the differences caused by confessional splits and the deep differences caused by racism, heterosexism, and other forms of oppression, it is perhaps best to emphasize the need for diversity, rather than unity, for it is at this point that the churches are unable to live out their calling to unity. As we will see in regard to racism in chapter 5, a clue important to communities of faith and struggle is that the church cannot be a sign of unity if it achieves unity by marginalizing those who do not fit. Unity at the expense of the weak is not a sign of Christ's hospitality welcoming all into God's household. As Mary Tanner has put it, "A united Church in which ecclesial divisions were overcome but in which divisions based upon race, class, sex, or wealth remained would not be a church truly united. The church must be renewed into unity."[65] In the view of the working group on AIDS, the test of how well the church lives out its witness to unity in Christ is *how well it breaks down barriers* at points where people are being excluded.

The *holiness* of the church is also derived from Christ's presence and from the power of the Spirit to transform the church so that it can live in a relationship of righteousness and justice with God. In biblical tradition, holiness is a fulfillment of covenant relationship with God. The community of faith lives out what Paul Hanson calls a "triad of justice and mercy and faith."[66] In the Sermon on the Mount the directive to be perfect as God is perfect is a way of expressing this need to respond to God's putting things right, by living that way ourselves (Matt. 5:48). This intention of holiness extends far beyond the church itself, for, in the words of Marjorie Suchocki, it is part of God's purpose in mending creation by "weaving creation together in a bond of love."[67]

Again, as we look at the actions of local, national, and international church bodies, we are struck by dualism in the interpretation of the signs of holiness. The church is to be holy by being apart from the world, persons are to be holy by being apart from their bodily selves, and holiness is an individual practice of Christian virtue apart from a community that shares in the suffering of those who oppose injustice. As we shall see in chapter 6, a clue to the gift of holiness in the church is that it leads to a spirituality of connection to our whole selves, to a community of faith and justice, and to those on the margin of society. In our working group on the church with AIDS, a test of the presence of Christ's holiness in the church is how well it announces justice and denounces forces that hinder the appearance of God's righteousness in the mending of creation.

Christ's gift of *catholicity* in the church refers both to the universality of Christ's presence in all the world and to the orthodoxy of the church as

it witnesses to the story and teachings of Jesus Christ. If God has acted in Jesus Christ to renew the whole earth, then the presence of Christ in the midst of all creation is important for the church's self-understanding. In this sense, to be catholic is to be connected to all of creation in all its groaning parts and to take responsibility for the needs of the many different churches and peoples of the world. In sharing the one story of God's liberating love in Jesus Christ, the church is also catholic as it witnesses to that story, in ways that are faithful to the biblical and church traditions yet works continually to reinterpret and retradition these traditions in new contexts.

This tradition of catholicity has often been honored in ways that have denied the true universality of God's message of love and replaced it with an assertion that one particularity includes all of what God's message might be about. In a traditional patriarchal paradigm of domination, universality is understood as a mandate for the church to dominate all religions and all people and require them to live according to its teachings. In the same way, the patriarchal paradigm of orthodoxy has led to the idea that right doctrine is to be defined by those who rule over a particular community and is more important than orthopraxy, the right practice of communities of faith and struggle as they seek to be connected to the world around them. A clue to catholicity is expressed in the responsibility of churches for one another as well as for their neighbors in all parts of the world, living out a story of faith that witnesses to God's love for that world. A test of how well the church lives out the sign of Christ's universal presence in the world that was formulated by our working group on AIDS was the quality of connectedness in solidarity with those on the periphery of church and society.

The *apostolicity* of the church is a sign of Christ's presence in the life of the church as the true witness to Christ's own story. By the inspiration of the Spirit of God in Christ, the church continues to share in the witness to that story both in word and action. The continuity of the continuing story of salvation is assured in the view of Roman Catholic, Orthodox, and Anglican churches through the passing on of ordination or commissioning of the apostles through each generation of leadership. For others, the apostolic witness is understood in terms of the quality of life of those who continue to live out the biblical story of the Christ and the apostles in their own time.[68]

As we saw in chapter 2, the patriarchal paradigm of domination has played an important part in the idea of apostolicity as authoritative witness and the guarantee of that authority through chosen male leaders. But it is important to remember that an apostle in the earlier Pauline sense of the word is a witness or missionary, someone sent to tell the good news (Rom. 1:1; 1 Cor. 12:28). In this sense it is possible to invite all the community of faith to become part of the apostolic tradition, not just those who are set apart by clerical ordination. A clue here is that the sign

of Christ's apostolate is the sign of participation in God's Mission, God's sending and liberating action in the world. Our working group on AIDS helped me to see that a test of Christ's witness in the church would be its constancy in participation in God's Mission, and not just its lack of interruption in the connection to the early apostles and their witness.

Justice connection

The latter two promises of Christ, to be with the poor and to come again to establish the reign of God, are often ignored as the church practices the double sin of living of but not in the world. Therefore, the question must be raised of whether there needs to be a fifth sign of *justice.* Surely the church is not Christ's church if it is not a witness to the presence of the one in whom God made things right. Many creeds have been written since the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, and they have responded to the needs of the churches in their own times. In our time there needs to be an added emphasis on the justice connection that would make all the other talk about signs more authentic.

Many contemporary theologians assert that these dimensions of the church need to include the perspective of people on the periphery or margins, who very much need an emphasis on the dimension of prophecy or justice. For instance, a special consultation on one common expression of the apostolic faith from the perspective of black Christians in the United States, held in 1984, placed heavy emphasis on this dimension. In the report, "Toward a Common Expression of Faith: A Black North American Perspective," they affirm "that the One, Holy church cannot exist apart from ministries of justice and liberation."[69]

Adding the sign of justice is nothing new in the history of the signs of the church. There never has been a set number of signs, and a widespread consensus on the four signs was achieved only in the nineteenth century, according to Schreiter.[70] Roman Catholic theologians have proposed as many as one hundred signs, and some favored a fifth sign of "Romanness" in the late nineteenth century. Leonardo Boff points out this variation in his article "Theological Characteristics of a Grassroots Church," in order to propose fifteen characteristics of a church linked to the subordinated classes.[71] He also makes very clear the way in which interpretation of the signs is related to the place one is related to one's economic, political, and social position in a society. Protestant theologians, already working with the "extra two" of word and sacrament proposed by sixteenth-century Reformers, have strongly suggested adding a third additional mark of participation in God's Mission to stress the life of the church as a participant in Christ's liberating action in the world.[72]

Some theologians, such as Marjorie Suchocki, prefer to make this clear through the reinterpretation of holiness to reconnect it to God's righteousness and justice. Others, like Schreiter and Moltmann, specifically

argue that the reinterpretation is better done within the four creedal signs so that the prophetic dimension is seen throughout.[73] I myself have stressed this dimension in interpreting the signs by lifting up diversity with unity, justice with holiness, connectedness and orthopraxy with catholicity, as well as mission with apostolicity. A shift in perspective to those who are oppressed is crucial, however, and it seems to me that this perspective is very difficult to maintain even if we seek the three aspects of Christ's presence in each of them.

There is so much injustice both within and outside of the church that a clear reminder of Christ's presence calling the church to be one, holy, catholic, apostolic, and *just* is crucial for its identity. This reminder needs to push all churches to constant repentance of their double sin and a constant "hunger and thirst for righteousness [justice]" (Matt. 5:6). Even the churches described in chapter 3 stand in need of this reminder of the justice connection. For example, the historic black churches have been steadfast in their advocacy of racial and economic justice but have often ignored the issues of justice for women and for homosexual persons.[74] The latter issue has contributed to the reluctance of many black churches to be involved in programs addressing needs of persons with AIDS. This picture is beginning to change, especially with increasing numbers of IV drug users, women, and children of color who are HIV positive. More and more black churches are making the justice connection in regard to AIDS as well as to the rights of gay men and lesbians.

The same need for continuing self-criticism in the light of the mark of justice is needed in white feminist theology and in Women-Church. We have seen that Women-Church is an exodus movement of women seeking out communities that express their full humanity and liberation from patriarchy. Small feminist base communities gathered for shared worship seek to live out the mark of justice for all women. Often, however, they neglect the issues of justice for persons of all colors and classes because they are largely white and middle-class. In a similar way, the Metropolitan Community Church of San Francisco has had to struggle to include men of color and women of all colors in its programs.

In traditioning the signs of Christ's presence in the church it is important to recognize that the signs themselves are always changing according to the different cultural, historical, political, and economic contexts of the churches. If the signs are to be helpful in locating the church they need to be descriptive rather than prescriptive, avoiding a patriarchal pattern of dogmatism. Yet it is possible to say that the churches' actions in living out those signs need to be connected to the places where Christ promises to be present. The church finds its own identity as a sign of Christ's work in the bringing of God's household by being a community of faith and witness, a community of struggle for the poor and oppressed, and a community of hope in the fulfillment of God's New Creation.

Word Preached and Celebrated

When the NCC Faith and Order working group on Unity and Renewal finished its work on *The Church with AIDS: Renewal in the Midst of Crisis*, the book was dedicated to Ron Russell-Coons with thanks for the gift of life he shared with us. Ron did not see the final fruit of his ministry with us, but he did see the galley proof, specially bound and sent from Westminster/John Knox Press, and that book went with him to his funeral as a sign of the word he preached and celebrated. Although his failing health had forced him to retire as pastor of a Metropolitan Community Church church in Seattle just before his fortieth birthday, Ron relocated with his partner, Chuck, in San Francisco and continued his ministry through MCC–San Francisco and through the NCC working group of the Faith and Order Commission.[75]

Ron was preaching on the day our commission visited the San Francisco church. He preached on the resurrection that has already begun in Christ and welcomed us to the love feast as a sign of God's welcome table. The church did not serve a regular communion at the service, not because the visitors were afraid to commune with the community living with AIDS but because some of these same visitors represented Roman Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant churches that did not practice intercommunion.[76]

The feast we celebrated was a resurrection feast, and surely the community experienced a word purely preached and celebrated! If that is the case, then what is missing from our understanding of these marks that frames them in such a way that they serve once again to exclude rather than to include all who search for God's love? It would seem that one of the major missing pieces here is again the dimension of justice. For when justice becomes the criterion for sharing in community, then life is shared with those who have been excluded from so many tables and, as we shall see in chapter 5, the question of sharing at Christ's table becomes a question of hospitality rather than of ecclesiastical unity.

Word purely preached

In the Reformation of the sixteenth century and beyond, there was a long period of controversial theology in which Protestant Reformers and their descendants argued against Roman Catholic reformers and their descendants about what made the church *truly church*. The Protestants claimed that the true church was not only recognized by the visible signs (*signa*) of Christ's presence in oneness, holiness, catholicity, and apostolicity but also by what they called the marks (*nota*) or distinguishing characteristics or functions of the church.[77] These marks of the church were claimed to be what obviously constituted it as true church: namely, the word truly preached and the sacraments rightly administered. Thus John Calvin says, "For whenever we find the word of God purely preached

and heard, and the sacraments administered according to the institution of Christ, there, it is not to be doubted, is a Church of God."[78]

The Protestant Reformers did not deny the importance of the Nicaean formula, but they wanted to build their reformation on the scriptures. For this reason they tried to discern in the biblical tradition how the church might be faithful in its preaching and sacramental life. Today it is generally recognized by Roman Catholics that the witness of the scriptures to Jesus Christ is the basis of the life of the church.[79] It is also recognized generally by Protestants that, as Jürgen Moltmann says,

> A church in which the gospel is purely preached and the sacraments are rightly used is the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church. The two Reformation signs of the church really only show from within what the traditional attributes of the church describe from without, so to speak.[80]

The word was understood as pure and the sacraments rightly used if they were administered by the duly ordained male clergy, according to the scriptural promises, and conveyed the gospel to the believers through preaching or signs of bread and water. Ecclesiastical discipline or the fencing of the table became for some a third mark, in that it made sure that God's word was truly preached and celebrated.[81]

From a patriarchal point of view the duly authorized preachers, presiders, and disciplinarians ensured that things be done according to established church order, but it did not free the church or its marks from a denial of the full humanity of women. Through the invention of the printing press, the scriptures were available to laypersons in their practice of prayer and study. Great pains were taken to educate the people in reading and studying the Bible in the vernacular so they could know what was "true." For instance, John Calvin wrote his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* in order to guide the interpretation of scriptures so that students of theology could be prepared for "the reading of the divine word."[82] Yet the interpreters and preachers were all men with clerical privilege, except in left-wing Reformation groups like the Anabaptists and some of their descendants, such as Shakers and Quakers.

As we saw in chapter 2, this increased access to the word of God did not do away with male clerical privilege and power. It also did not do away with what feminist theologians would call "the idolatry of the Father." As long as this personal metaphor for God was used as if "Father" were God's name, the "fathers" of church, family, and state remained as direct representatives of a patriarchal and dominating male God. According to Sallie McFague, "It is not just that 'God the Father' is a frequent appellation for the divine, but that the entire structure of divine-human and human-human relationship is understood in a patriarchal framework."[83]

Women and other subordinated groups could not be trusted to interpret the good news and could not discover themselves as fully human

persons made in the image of God.[84] But unless God is imaged as both female and male in speaking and enacting God's word and in the metaphors for God's self-revelation, this word of welcome to women is not clear.[85] Unless God is imaged in verbal metaphors such as "creator, liberator, and advocate," as well as in personal metaphors, this word of justice in the household of God is also lost.

Then as now, true interpretation of the Bible was a difficult task, and we cannot be surprised that the leaders of the Magisterial Reformation conformed to the world view of their own social and political context. They did at least make it clear that the interpretation and understanding of the word were the work of the entire congregation. In every time and place we have to seek out again what is the true gospel message for our time. The Gospels witness to the story of a man who proclaimed God's reign and welcomed people, all people, as children of God. Jesus proclaimed the good news that outsiders were welcome and promised to be present when the church shares in proclaiming that story.

Whatever else the true preaching of the word would need to include, it at least would have to be a word that speaks from the perspective of those who have been crushed and marginalized in our society. It would need to be a word of solidarity, healing, and love in situations of brokenness and despair and a disturbing and troubling word of justice to those who wish to protect their privilege by exclusion. It is a word that often is not fully heard by women in search of their full humanity, nor by those with disabilities in search of an accessible community that celebrates their otherness, nor by other marginal groups such as lesbians and gay men. Yet it is marginalized persons like Ron Russell-Coons who are often the first to reach out to others with AIDS and to other churches in ecumenical coalitions of caring. The scriptures have very little to say about homosexuality, but they have a great deal to say on the necessity of hospitality and of justice for the oppressed (Luke 4:18–19).[86] As we listen to the scriptures as good news to the poor and suffering, and listen to the poor explaining the meaning of Jesus' welcome to us, we may more truly understand the gospel message of God's love.

Struggle!

Sacraments rightly administered

The sacraments were understood by the Reformers as instituted and administered according to the teaching of the scriptures. Protesting against the abuses of the sacraments in the sixteenth-century church, they emphasized baptism and the Lord's Supper as the only two sacraments instituted by Christ's words and actions. They made sure that the preparation for the sacraments included instruction in their biblical meaning and practiced "fencing of the table" by allowing only members in good standing to receive the elements of bread and wine. There also continues to be much discussion over the meaning of baptism and eucharist, although

there is much that churches can say together about their institution and meaning. For instance, the Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry document of Faith and Order says that Christian baptism is rooted in the ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth (Matt. 28:18–20). "It is incorporation into Christ, who is the crucified and risen Lord; it is entry into the New Covenant between God and God's people."[87] Eucharist is interpreted through the words of 1 Cor. 11:23–25 and is "a sacramental meal which by visible signs communicates to us God's love in Jesus Christ."[88]

When we seek to understand what it would mean to administer the sacraments *rightly*, consideration needs to be given once again to what the biblical meaning of "rightly" would be. Certainly that meaning would go beyond proper preparation, administration, and celebration of the words and actions of Jesus. In fact, the word "rightly" probably would include the need for the community of celebration to live out a life of righteousness or justice.

In regard to baptism, this would mean that a great deal more attention needs to be paid to what this sacrament conveys from the perspective of feminist ecclesiology. As Marjorie Procter-Smith says, "What women need to know from the sacraments of baptism and eucharist is that Christ is present in our struggle to live out our baptismal equality and dignity, and that God has not forgotten us."[89]

Much work has already been accomplished by feminist theologians on the question of the meaning and interpretation of the sacraments, both in biblical and church tradition and in liturgical tradition. Some of the work of Elisabeth Fiorenza and Rosemary Ruether on interpretation from the perspective of women-church has already been cited in earlier chapters.[90] And the already abundant feminist literature on ministry, preaching, and liturgy has received the very helpful additions of Ruth Duck's *Gender and the Name for God* and Marjorie Procter-Smith's *In Her Own Rite: Constructing Feminist Liturgical Tradition.*[91]

From this literature I would like to highlight two problems that relate to the continuing traditioning process of baptism as a sacrament of new life in Christ. The first is that baptism is understood as a cleansing of our sins. These sins are inherited by birth from our mother, who conceived us through sexual intercourse with a man and conveys to us both our mundane and bodily existence and our mortal and sinful existence. Baptism is often administered quickly, to give the child a "better start" and a "new family." In church tradition this service happened without the mother, who was required to remain away from the church immediately after baptism because she was "polluted" by blood in giving birth as well as in menstruation. The new life the baby receives as God's child conveys the message that the life of salvation comes through the males who administer and control the rite, not through the mother's gift of life.

There are many other ways to symbolize baptism, by lifting up such actions as the use of water as a reference to the life-giving waters of the

mother's womb, and as naming as an incorporation into the life story of Jesus who was baptized by John. The new United Church of Christ baptismal liturgy helps in this with a long memorial of biblical images of water in creation, exodus, and in the gospel accounts.[92] Many feminist and liberation theologians also argue that the important symbolism of conversion and exodus into freedom in Christ is better served through the practice of adult baptism. This also helps to make clear that, although the gift of grace in baptism is based on God's free choice in Christ to welcome all God's children into the household of God and is administered only once, baptism is a response to that gift through a lifelong process of struggle for life in covenant relationship with God and our neighbors.

A second problem in relation to baptism is that of the trinitarian baptismal formula, "In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." This formula represents years of development in church tradition, especially in the period of the early church creeds when the relationship of Christ to God and of the three persons of the Trinity was being hammered out. As Ruth Duck notes, the triadic formula is found only in Matthew 28:19. The wording is from Matthew, although it is presented as part of Jesus' great commission, and it appears that in early times baptism in the name of Christ or of Jesus was a more frequent formula.[93]

In contemporary settings, when these words are heard as the formula for entrance into life in Christ, the exclusive meaning of the male language makes this formula particularly inappropriate. There is no easy answer to how to find a way of expressing the truths of the Trinity through common metaphors that would be acceptable in all Christian churches. Some have gone the route of Riverside Church in New York City and amended the formula to read, "I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, One God, Mother of us all."[94]

But this and similar formulations retain an emphasis on parental relationships that are most certainly not the only type of metaphor available. Ruth Duck proposes the use of a declarative statement that is an adaptation of Elisabeth Fiorenza's translation of Galatians 3:26–28:

> You have been baptized into Jesus Christ;
> you are now a child/children of God;
> you have put on Christ.
> There is no longer Jew nor Greek,
> there is no longer slave nor free,
> there is no male and female,
> for we are all one.[95]

I myself have also urged the regular use of 2 Corinthians 13:13, both as an inclusive benediction and as the basis for an inclusive baptismal statement: "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you."

In any case, we can rejoice that behind the sacrament of baptism is the promise of Christ to make us new so that already we can begin to live beyond the former barriers that denied the full humanity of those who were of the "wrong religion, class, race, or gender." The ancient baptismal formula quoted by Paul in Galatians 3:27–28 reminds us that the divisions of old creation have been overcome, and old forms of domination no longer belong to life in Christ. Just as the original division of male and female in Genesis was overcome, that of Jew and Gentile, slave and free were understood to be overcome in the context of the early house churches. Some would argue that today the list needs to be much longer, to include heterosexual and homosexual, able-bodied and disabled, rich and poor, capitalist and socialist.[96] It is the overcoming of these divisions, and the new life of freedom, that is the sign of Christ's presence. As we shall see in chapter 5, however, the question of sacraments rightly administered remains when we discover that the divisions and the old life are alive and well in the institutions that claim to partake of this gift of God's grace.

The sacrament of holy communion partakes of this same ambiguity. Although it is administered frequently in the community as a continuing gift of God's forgiveness and empowerment for life, it is also frequently administered in a setting that contradicts Jesus' promise to be present as we show forth his death until he comes (1 Cor. 11:26). The church has been careful to say that it is God in Christ who makes the sacraments efficacious, and not the ones administering the sacrament or the community in which they happen. But at the same time it has fenced the table by requiring that only those ordained and authorized in a particular pattern officiate. As we have seen earlier, the requirement for right administration has become not a commitment to justice, and doing what is right, but a commitment to the "right" religious institution in which salvation is located. Women, especially, discover communion as a sacrament of *disunion* as they begin to analyze the way they have often been denied access to the eucharist itself, because of ritual impurity, and denied the privilege of sharing in serving the meal.[97]

There are so many different versions of the words of institution in the Gospels in addition to 1 Corinthians, so the exact words used in the liturgy have not been in as much dispute as their meaning. Building on the seven Greek Testament motifs of eucharist as "joyful thanksgiving, *anamnesis* [remembrance], *koinonia* [community, partnership], sacrifice, the presence of Christ, the action of the Holy Spirit, and the eschatological banquet," the various confessions have traditioned the meanings most appropriate for their own contexts of origin and continuing life.[98]

In an area where there have been so many problems, and in which there is so much written, it is difficult to characterize the problems of unjust administration of the meal. Here I want only to mention two additional problems as examples of the continuing struggle to be present

where Christ promises to be present. The first is one that will be developed further in the discussion of spirituality in chapter 6: It concerns the connection of the eucharistic tradition with other exclusive rituals that are used to guarantee male privilege in patriarchal societies. Studies in social science and religion by feminist scholars have shown that the usual pattern of blood sacrifice is that it takes place as an exclusive male ritual in which the pattern is one of taking life and shedding blood, in contrast to the women's role of shedding blood to *give* life.

In her article "Sacrifice as Remedy for Having Been Born of Woman," Nancy Jay details gender-related features of sacrifice in various cultures in order to show that blood sacrifice is practiced in many parts of the world and shares cross-cultural features that are gender-related, "such as an opposition between sacrificial purity and the pollution of childbirth, and a rule that only males may perform sacrificial ritual."[99] This gender relationship appears to have been what has attracted leaders in the men's liberation movement like Robert Bly to adopt secret male initiation ceremonies to provide a second "birth from men." These rituals of bonding between old and younger men who are searching for maturity are modern versions of tribal blood rituals of initiation.[100]

According to Nancy Jay, there is an affinity between blood sacrificial religion and patrilineal social systems that make the relation between father and son the basis of social order and continuity. This lineage is maintained by sacrificial worship, not by giving birth, and often provides an eternal inheritance that overcomes the mortality of being born of a woman.[101] The sacrificial system can be a symbolic means of maintaining the social continuity, such as that of the blood sacrifice in the eucharist, but it is linked to the same patrilineal social structures and privileges. Thus, Jay says,

> The Eucharist as "blood sacrifice," the Christian clergy as a specific sacrificing priesthood, and the unilineal organization of that priesthood as exclusive inheritors of apostolic authority, all came into being together and developed together; and the rejection of one entailed the simultaneous rejection of the others.[102]

An example of this was the Protestant Reformation, in which the mass as sacrifice was rejected along with apostolic succession. However, patriarchal imagery of sacrifice continued in the Christology, and the patriarchal social context ensured that the claim to exclusive male privilege of ordination would continue.

The sacrificial aspect of the eucharist, like the second birth of baptism, needs to be carefully retraditioned from a feminist perspective. It is possible to celebrate at table in memory of the sacrifice made necessary by the injustice of the religious and political authorities of Jesus' day and the victory of God's justice and love over injustice. In this way the table

could be administered rightly as a place where such sacrifice is no longer necessary, and each and every person is welcomed to share in Christ's presence through the power of the Spirit. A second problem concerning the right administration of the Lord's Supper is that of unwillingness to tradition the meal in such a way that people in different circumstances and cultures have full access to its administration, its offer of abundance, and its meaning for those who are struggling for life.

In situations where bread and wine are not the staff of life, it might well be that some other food, like rice and tea, cola and chips, or bananas and oranges, might be the most appropriate food at a particular moment, even though the historical elements are important to keep the story alive. In the Aladura churches in Nigeria, for instance, the fellowship of thanksgiving comes through a communal meal in which the Spirit is celebrated in testimony and gifts of produce from the farms are offered up. In most cases this eucharistic or thanksgiving offering is made up of bananas, oranges, mangoes, groundnuts, and pineapples. This is the food available to the churches, and it too can be a sacrament of Christ's presence.[103]

In many situations the presence of Christ is in no way correlated with the restrictions of clerical administration. For instance, on July 3, 1986, a funeral mass was held in New York City for Sister Marjorie Tuite, national coordinator of the Women's Coalition to Stop U.S. Intervention in Central America and the Caribbean and staff member of Church Women United.[104] The mass was a celebration of her life and what she had stood for, in spite of the fact that the priest in charge tried to prevent non–Roman Catholics from approaching the table. Both women and men from the peace and human rights movements began to stand up and give homilies and testimonies. The mass itself was transformed by the spontaneous participation of the whole group in consecration and commemoration, and the linking of her life and struggle and that of the people of Nicaragua continued. And that mass continued beyond the church walls in people's lives and hearts as her ashes were taken to Nicaragua for burial among the heroes and martyrs of the revolution. Christ *¡Presente!* Marjorie, *¡Presente! Presente* whether or not authorized by the church.

And then there are the children of South Africa and so many other places that are being sacrificed needlessly on the altars of racism, nationalism, and international capitalism. Are these children taken up into Christ's sacrifice? How are they to take part in this meal of solidarity in suffering when many churches do not recognize their place at the table? On January 14, 1990, a Third World travel seminar I conducted for students at Yale Divinity School visited Roman Catholic, United Methodist, and Anglican church services in Soweto in South Africa. Even worshiping in different languages did not conceal from us the powerful presence of Christ's Spirit among the people of those churches.

In the Anglican church I attended, the service ended with a

tremendous hymn sing by the congregation during which all the children of the parish filed by the congregation and received a blessing from the priests. The congregation had begun to include this blessing procession around the church when the schoolchildren became involved in the struggles against apartheid and began to be massacred, detained, and tortured by the police. From the children's point of view, every day might be their last. They needed a sign of Christ's solidarity and presence with them every moment, not just when they were old enough to understand! Surely this, as well as the testimonies for Marjorie and the bananas and oranges, is a sacramental sign, to be shared among the household of faith every bit as much as other forms of table fellowship.

Table fenced with justice

The sacraments are about God reaching out on the cross, to make things right, and about God's continuing action on behalf of groaning creation. Here we find the gift of righteousness and justice and are called to right administration of those gifts, together with others in need of God's justice within and beyond the rubrics of our particular traditions. The fencing of the table at the Lord's Supper refers to the need to be properly prepared to receive God's gifts of love and grace, but from a feminist perspective this preparation consists of a discipline of living justly in solidarity with those who are marginal to church or society.

Perhaps the place to begin a discussion of those who are welcome to bring their gifts to the table is with one of Paul's many difficult and ambiguous quotes. In 1 Corinthians 11:17–22, Paul reprimands the church, and particularly the women prophets in the church, for divisions and refusal to share at the Lord's Supper and clarifies the meaning of the meal with what we know today as "the words of institution." Then in verses 27–29 he says:

> Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be answerable for the body and blood of the Lord. Examine yourselves, and only then eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For all who eat and drink without discerning the body, eat and drink judgment against themselves.

According to Antionette Wire, Paul's words are directed at the women prophets, "Chloe's people," who see the meal as an eschatological feast of resurrection in which they are already set free from the domination of their husbands to be partners in Christ and to eat and drink together rather than at home (1 Cor. 1:11; 11:22).[105] In a manner not unexpected, if Nancy Jay is correct, Paul does not think they take the meal seriously as a memorial of Christ's death. In his view they are too busy already living their new life in Christ's Spirit. His words about misuse of the meal are one of the origins of the tradition of fencing the table; making

sure that no one who is unworthy or "unorthodox" may partake. Yet they seem to indicate that God, not the church, is responsible for the table and the salvation situation of all who participate. The church is responsible for making clear the meaning of the presence of Christ in the sacrament, and this meaning—which was in dispute between Paul and the women—still is a source of division today among many different churches.

If we look carefully at the text we are reminded of Judas, the first disciple to eat and drink the meal and not discern the love of God present therein. Even Judas was welcomed to the table by the one whom he would betray, but his actions brought God's judgment. It would seem that we are unworthy to partake of the table, and cannot discern Christ's body and blood and what it signifies, when we contradict the meaning of Christ's sacrifice and thus join Judas as betrayers.[106]

When the church tries to limit the size and shape of the table and who will serve the meal, it needs to be careful that it is not betraying the work of the one who is called Just (Luke 23:47; Acts 3:13–15).[107] Whether or not we agree that Paul had a right to claim God's judgment on those who disputed his patriarchal authority, or that he was correct in saying the judgment is visited physically, the intention of this difficult text seems to claim that it is *God* who fences the table. Those who partake are called to come with repentance and sharing of new life in Christ, but the welcome table belongs to God.

In responding to Christ's invitation to come to the table, we bring many gifts, including those of gender, race, class, sexual orientation, and physical ability. As persons seeking to be whole, we bring all our gifts as an offering to God. But in making that offering we are also asked if we have been serving our neighbor with our whole heart, mind, and self. In what way have we made it more difficult for others to know of God's love and acceptance and prevented them from sharing the many gifts that God intends for all persons and creatures?

Matthew 5:23–24 reminds us that one of the ways to discern Christ's presence is by risking the difficult action of reconciliation with those whom we have harmed. Seeking the forgiveness of our neighbor includes a lot more than conformity to the old patriarchal fencing of the table by excluding those who are not members in good standing. It means the action of *removing the fences* so that all may bring their gifts to the table and seek to discern the presence of Christ in their midst. Fencing the table with justice is crucial to the way we approach the Lord's Supper. The fenced table becomes what in the black church tradition is called the welcome table.[108] As we will see in the Introduction to Part Three, this welcome table is the communion table and every other church table gathering that symbolizes that those who have been denied access to the table of the white, rich masters are welcome at God's table and offered a foretaste of that final moment of full partnership with God.

In one of her early stories entitled "The Welcome Table," Alice Walker tells of this powerful message of God's welcome by sharing the story of an old black woman who, upon being thrown out of the white church where she has tried to rest and pray, meets up with Jesus on the hot dusty road and walks and talks with him. How long she talks no one knows, but at least long enough to find her way home to God's table. They find her body alongside the road the next day.[109]

The sacraments are the foretaste of God's future. The table rightly prepared is a table that belongs to God, where all things are clean (Acts 10:15; Rom. 14:20). Coming to the table we discern Christ's body not only in the broken bread but also in the broken people of the world. And if we welcome them with us we may receive the gift of a renewed church, a church that makes outsiders welcome as they sing, "We're gonna sit at the welcome table one of these days!" It is no accident that this is the table spread at Metropolitan Community and other churches carrying out an extensive AIDS ministry. At the love feast the Faith and Order Commission attended in San Francisco everyone was welcome, and even those with AIDS who had to be carried by others were greeted and encircled with love at a table rightly administered in the name of God's justice and love. The sharing of the agape meal without eucharist was in itself a way of making everyone welcome. No one was excluded by being of a communion that fenced another out because of a lack of apostolic orders or apostolic life style.

When we look at the Reformers' marks of the church from the perspective of how well they connect the church to those on the margin of society, we notice that the marks themselves involve us in actions of justice and love that prepare the table. From a feminist and liberation perspective it seems that the word truly preached and sacraments rightly administered may need to be found in communities of faith and struggle. For the church's identity is derived from the story of Jesus' own word and action on the cross in solidarity with the oppressed. This is our word and action as well, as we struggle for justice and life itself together with our sisters and brothers caught in the patriarchal structures of domination, subordination, and exclusion.

The search for identity in the church and the discussion of descriptive marks have caused a great deal of suffering and mutual condemnation over the centuries. Yet that search could also become the basis for making the justice connection. A church in the round follows the one who is working still to call us all to take part in the work of mending the creation and putting it right (John 5:17). What our NCC working group learned through reflection on shared ministry with persons with AIDS is that love with justice is at the heart of what the church is about. For the church continues to be a community baptized in the troubling waters of the Spirit and called out by God to participate in the New Creation.

A lot of questions about feminist interpretation of the church remain, because the life of a community of faith and struggle includes more than its self-description. For instance, in chapter 5 the need to share God's hospitality leads us to question the way the church claims the privilege of God's special election for itself. And in chapter 6 the need for a spirituality of connection that nurtures feminist ecclesiology leads us to ask how God's Spirit connects us more deeply to ourselves, to those on the margin, and to the traditions of our faith communities.

This chapter raises a question about tables, for here we have Christ's table administered with justice as a traditional mark of the church. Does that mean that church in the round really has a *fourth* table, along with the round table, the kitchen table, and the welcome table? Indeed, there is no limit to the number of tables that are part of church in the round, just as there is no limit to the signs of Christ's presence. Christ's table is central to the gathered life of Christians as a symbol connected to the other three tables. But Christ's table and the others are all metaphors for the one table of God, the eschatological table of New Creation, where there is justice and peace, and there are no longer any tears, hunger, or thirst (Isa. 25:6–10).

At home, in church, and wherever people gather, each and every table draws its meaning from its connection to the present and coming reality of New Creation. And each and every discussion of the signs of the church ultimately is tested by how well those signs convey the good news of God's Jubilee of liberation and justice that was at the heart of Jesus' Spirit-filled ministry. In the words of Luke 4:18–19:

> "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
> because [God] has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.
> [God] has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
> and recovery of sight to the blind . . .
> to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

Part Three
Welcome Table Partnership

In his book *Fire in the Belly: On Being a Man,* Sam Keen speaks of a world which is largely run by sedentary males. "The symbol of power is the chair," and those who occupy these chairs "make the most money."[1] Perhaps this is why the furnishings for church in the round tend to run to tables, many of which, including those of Jesus' time, are low to the floor so that persons can recline or sit on cushions (Matt. 26:20). Of course, having no chairs does not eliminate preferred seating. The welcome table, on the other hand, changes the seating pattern no matter what the style of the gathering, for its intention is to make very welcome those who feel least welcome. Insofar as there is preferred seating at all, the honor goes to those who have been the least of our brothers and sisters (Luke 14:7–11). Lathrop's poem reminds us:

> Roundtabling means
> no preferred seating,
> no first and last,
> no better, and no corners
> for "the least of these."[2]

The welcome table is part of the black church tradition. It symbolizes the communion table and every other gathering at table. At God's welcome table those who have been denied access to the table of the rich white masters are welcomed and may welcome others as a foretaste of the final moment of full partnership with God. Voices are lifted in singing:

> We're gonna sit at the welcome table!
> We're gonna sit at the welcome table one of these days; Alleluia![3]

This table of hospitality is just the opposite of the household codes or lists of cultural norms adopted as the duties of the Christian patriarchal household in the Pastoral Epistles to keep everyone in their place (Eph. 5:21–6:9; Col. 3:18–4:1).[4] At this table there is a great reversal of "things as they are" so that they may become part of God's reality of love and justice.