Becoming an Intercultural Church

Companionship in a Wounded World

Hyuk Cho

World Council of Churches

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Hyuk Cho
Vancouver, on the unceded ancestral territory of the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam)
The first day of the Season of Creation, 2026

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Introduction

Perhaps you find yourself not at an ending but living within an in-between. You are leading amid changing landscapes—of land and memory, culture and belonging, faith and responsibility—where familiar certainties no longer guide as they once did, yet new paths have not fully emerged. You sense a summons without clarity. You notice beauty and fragility held together. You feel hope and grief sharing the same space. If this sounds familiar, this book welcomes you—not with answers to master but with companionship to practise.

This book begins with a shared ecclesial experience, one that many churches—particularly in North America and Europe—are living through today. Across congregations and neighbourhoods, patterns that once felt dependable are loosening. Attendance declines, assumptions shift, and practices long held with confidence are revealed to be more fragile than previously imagined. For many, this season brings genuine grief: mourning the loss of a time when the church felt secure, centred, and confident of its place in the world. These losses are not abstract. They are felt in empty pews, ageing leadership, anxious meetings, and the quiet fatigue carried by clergy and lay leaders alike. Rather than rushing past this grief or managing it away, this book stays with it, asking what faithfulness might look like when inherited assurances no longer apply—and who we become when we refuse to face such losses alone.

I write to suggest a claim that is simple to state but demanding to receive: what is often named as decline may also be a site of formation. This does not deny loss, nor does it romanticize diminishment. It resists the assumption that what is "unravelling" must either be restored or replaced as quickly as possible. Like the reworking of a worn sweater, the loosening of old wool can become a necessary preparation for something new—something warmer, more truthful, and better suited to the season now unfolding. The yarn is not discarded; it is reclaimed. What appears as loss may in fact be a threshold through which transformation becomes possible—if we remain with one another through the process.

Not everything in ecclesial life is equally subject to reworking. For many Christian traditions—particularly Orthodox and Catholic—the church's apostolic faith, sacramental order, and core Tradition are received gifts, not cultural constructions available for negotiation. What this book names as unravelling refers primarily to the cultural forms, institutional practices, and social arrangements through which churches have lived out their faith in particular times and places—especially those shaped by Christendom's alliance with colonial power. The question, then, is not whether to abandon the faith once delivered but how to distinguish its enduring substance from the cultural garments that have sometimes concealed or distorted it. Companionship, as this book understands it, is one way of making that distinction visible in practice.

A word about the word intercultural. It is often used interchangeably with multicultural, but the two describe different things. Multicultural names a demographic fact: many cultures present in one place, coexisting, each retaining its own life. It is a description of who is in the room. Intercultural names a relation. It asks what happens between cultures when they actually meet—whose language sets the terms, whose assumptions go unquestioned, who is expected to adapt. A multicultural church can be diverse in its pews and unchanged in its centre. An intercultural church is one in which the centre itself is altered by the encounter. That is a costlier proposition, and it is the one this book describes.

We are living in a liminal time, caught between a form of Christendom that has largely passed and a form of Christian witness that has not yet fully emerged.[1] Some mourn Christendom's passing as the loss of coherence and moral authority; others see it as a long-overdue reckoning with power wrongly held. This book does not attempt to resolve that tension. Instead, it invites the church to remain within it—to grieve what must be grieved, to release what must be released, and to stay open to what is not yet visible. In such moments, the temptation is strong either to rush toward clear strategies or to cling defensively to what once worked. This book resists both impulses, receiving the in-between not as failure but as a space of formation sustained through shared presence.

This in-between terrain is rarely comfortable. Yet scripture is filled with it: wilderness journeys, exiles, thresholds, crossings, and long waits. These moments are not interruptions to God's work; they are often where it becomes most visible—if one learns how to stay rather than grasp. Formation, in the biblical imagination, is slow, relational, and sustained through accompaniment rather than resolution.

The claim that decline may be a site of formation rests on a second one, central to this work: companionship in a wounded world. Christian faith is being reshaped by encounters that exceed what agreement, inclusion, or dialogue can contain. Those categories—though valuable—often assume symmetry, control, and eventual closure. They imagine relation as something the church enters, manages, and concludes on its own terms. By contrast, companionship names a way of being with others that does not presume equality of power, shared readiness, or mutual comfort.

It also names a departure from an older and more deeply held category. The church has long understood its posture toward others as servanthood—a

1. Liminality names a condition of being in-between—neither fully inside nor outside established categories, borders, or identities. Liminality is not simply a temporary phase on the way to stability but an increasingly common condition in a world marked by migration, globalization, collapsing binaries, and shifting identities. Liminal subjects, spaces, and experiences resist clear definition and therefore unsettle systems built on categorization, hierarchy, and exclusion. See Başak Tanulku and Simone Pekelsma, eds., *Liminality, Transgression and Space Across the World: Being, Living and Becoming(s) Against, Across and with Borders and Boundaries* (London: Routledge, 2024), 1–6.

stance that appears humble while quietly preserving the position of the one with resources, truth, and agency to give. Companionship refuses that arrangement: not acting *for* others from a position of sufficiency, but staying with them in relationships where no one is whole. This shift, worked out across the chapters that follow, is the reorientation the book asks of the church.

This book is not a manual for managing diversity. Becoming an intercultural church is not about technique or representation; it is about formation—learning how to live faithfully with others within wounded histories, to feel differently about power and belonging, and to participate in God's mission without reclaiming control.

The turn toward intercultural ministry cannot function as a survival strategy for shrinking denominations. We do not turn toward the global South or toward migrant communities in our midst to refill empty pews or revive exhausted institutions. To receive the wisdom of the margins merely as a resource for sustaining a fragile centre is colonialism by another name. The Other is not summoned to tend the church's decline. Companionship is not a rescue project for the institution but a movement of the Spirit that calls the church beyond possession, control, and self-preservation. Even if pews were full and budgets secure, the call to decentred, accountable companionship would remain just as urgent.

The asymmetry that companionship presumes is not only unequal power. Drawing on Emmanuel Levinas, it names a more unsettling condition: the Other addresses us with a claim we did not choose and cannot manage—obligating before clarifying, summoning before we are ready. Chapter 3 develops this insight alongside Raimon Panikkar's cosmotheandric vision, showing how ethical summons and ontological grounding together sustain companionship across difference. Such companionship arises not from shared understanding but from proximity to wounded histories, contested lands, racialized bodies, and ecological limits that cannot be smoothed away.

Companionship, as this book understands it, obligates before it reassures. It does not expand the church's influence; it exposes the church to transformation. Faithfulness here is measured not by growth or coherence but by the willingness to remain present, accountable, and responsive within relationships that resist closure. The chapters that follow trace the Christian liturgical cycle—Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Easter, and Pentecost—not as ornamentation but as theological pedagogy: a disciplined way of forming the church in practices of shared life over time.

The liturgical calendar is not merely a sequence of commemorations; it is a spiritual discipline shaped by centuries of communal discernment. It teaches the church how to live with time rather than control it—how to wait rather

than rush, how to receive rather than seize, how to be shaped rather than simply informed. Its rhythm—cycles of waiting, vulnerability, revelation, restraint, rising, and sending—mirrors the very dynamics of formation this book seeks to name. A thematic structure might offer conceptual clarity, but clarity is not what the church most needs in this season. What it needs is patience, repetition, and practices capable of forming communities over time. The liturgical year does not primarily explain; it accompanies. It forms the church in practices of companionship: staying with loss, attending to promise, and learning to remain faithful within unfinished histories rather than resolving them prematurely.

Visual art enters this book at Epiphany and remains through Easter and Pentecost—a Korean woodcut, a van Gogh, and an Emily Carr—offered alongside scripture, theological reflection, and lived ecclesial practice, not as illustration but as a theological site in its own right. That it arrives with Epiphany is fitting: like the light the Magi followed, these works come from outside the church's own speech, each offering a distinct way of dwelling at the boundary between suffering and hope. By attending to art, the church is formed to linger where meaning is not immediately visible—to learn how to stay with what wounds rather than turning away too quickly.

It was within the season of loss and reworking that my own pastoral journey unfolded. On a cold February morning in 2018, in Acton, Ontario, I scanned the Vacancy List of The United Church of Canada, searching for a place where intercultural ministry was explicitly named as a calling. Among nearly two hundred communities, only one was seeking clergy for intercultural ministry. I applied. Within months, I found myself beginning a ministry shaped by experimentation, uncertainty, and hope.

During that tenure, we tried—often imperfectly—to become an intercultural church: attentive to racial justice, committed to reconciliation with Indigenous peoples, and affirming of diverse sexualities and identities. Our work was not about achieving harmony or consensus. It was about learning how to remain with one another amid difference and historical wounds. Over time, the congregation became a genuinely intercultural, affirming community—not because tensions disappeared, but because we learned to practise companionship without requiring resolution. That experience forms the lived soil from which this book grows.

Through that ministry, I learned that policies were not enough. We needed a theology capable of holding the emotional, embodied, and often pre-reflective dimensions of faith. This book enters the conversation on affective theology not as an academic exercise but as a necessity for shared life. Affect here is not treated as private interiority but as something held in common—grief, fear, hope, and woundedness borne unevenly within communities shaped by power and history.

Companionship begins precisely here: in learning how to remain accountable to what is felt before it can be resolved.

Two words carry this affective register through these pages, neither of them English. *Hüzün*, a Turkish word for a sorrow belonging not to individuals but to a whole community, names where the book begins; *sallim*, a Korean word for the daily labour of sustaining life, names where it ends.

As an immigrant to Canada, I have learned what it means to live between worlds—carrying the memory of a Korean village where kinship sustained life while navigating the secular, colonial, and multicultural realities of the West. I have come to trust that perspectives formed at the margins often illuminate what the centre cannot see.

I am not Indigenous. I write as a Korean immigrant and a settler of colour on lands now called Canada, learning to listen to voices long ignored by the church I serve. References to the Two Row *Wampum*, Musqueam land, and Inuit kayak design are offered not as possessions but as gifts received—teachings that have reshaped my understanding of covenant, companionship, and life together. I remain accountable to the relationships through which they were shared and welcome correction where I have erred.

Chapter 1 begins in Advent, where waiting without assurance becomes a theological posture and *hüzün* names the church's capacity to remain within loss. Chapter 2 turns to Christmas and to racism as a wound in the church's own body, contrasting a theology of crumbs—inclusion without shared power—with the banquet to which the gospel points. Chapter 3 follows Epiphany's displacement of truth from the centre, arguing that intercultural theology is not the management of diversity but a response to the relational structure of reality itself. Chapter 4 reads mission through Lent, tracing *missio Dei* from Karl Barth and Willingen to *Together towards Life* and asking what restrains a church tempted to align God's purposes with national destiny. Chapter 5 takes up Easter and reconciliation in a secular world, proposing companionship as a way of remaining present where closure is neither possible nor just. Chapter 6 ends at Pentecost, where listening, shared power, and the cry of the earth mark a church formed by the Spirit rather than by mastery.

How to use this book. Each chapter ends with questions for reflection. They are not comprehension checks but invitations to bring the chapter into a room where people can disagree in front of one another. The book was written to be read this way: slowly, in company, over six sessions or six months. Read alone, it will make an argument. Read together, it may do something more—which is, after all, what it claims about formation.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, when sanctuaries stood empty and community life scattered across screens, I began building a kayak in the church

hall—a West Greenland design refined over generations for navigating cold, unpredictable waters. Month by month, I shared the slow progress with the congregation. From that shared practice, a simple refrain emerged: *Let's paddle together*. Formation takes time. Direction is sustained not by force but by attentiveness, balance, and trust learned through shared labour.

The waters around us are still changing. The maps we inherited no longer reflect the landscape ahead. But we are not alone. We are being called—sometimes gently, sometimes insistently—to remain in the in-between, to listen to long-ignored voices, and to journey together. This book is written for those willing to trust that God is already at work there, patiently weaving something new through the practice of companionship in a wounded world.

1

Waiting Without Assurance:

Advent, Shared Woundedness, and Intercultural Becoming

Advent

In late November and early December, evenings arrive early. Darkness falls before day's end. In North American culture, this darkness is quickly brightened. Christmas lights go up as soon as Daylight Saving Time ends. Seasonal music fills shopping centres, television programmes, and online advertising. The glow of celebration leaves little room for waiting, silence, or doubt. Everything moves quickly toward Christmas.

The church calendar refuses to rush. By placing Advent before Christmas at the beginning of the liturgical year, it teaches the church to dwell in the uneasy space between what is and what could be. Advent makes room for longing, yearning, and a hope still in the making. For many churches today—especially in the global North—this is not only a liturgical season but a lived condition: caught between familiar patterns that no longer hold and futures that have not yet taken shape.

I learned this not only as a concept but as a lived experience. In 2000, I was serving in a growing Korean congregation in downtown Toronto. When my contract ended and the call was not extended, I entered the settlement process of The United Church of Canada. I could have been sent anywhere in Canada—from Atlantic harbour coasts to the southern Yukon, across landscapes I had never imagined calling home. For nearly ten months, my future remained uncertain. During that time, I was unemployed, completing my master's degree at Emmanuel College in Toronto in preparation for ministry in the denomination, and supporting a family with two young children. We faced uncertainty on every front—financial, vocational, emotional, and existential.

Waiting through that season was tough—anxious and deeply draining. We had no idea where we would live, what kind of community might accept us as a visible minority, or whether the ministry itself would restart. I was preparing for ministry in a denomination whose congregations, and whose image of a minister, were overwhelmingly white—and the ground beneath us felt unstable.

One morning, while studying in the Emmanuel College library, I heard music drifting through the building—a melody so familiar that it gradually

pulled me away from my reading. Unable to focus, I closed my books and followed the sound to the chapel. The space was nearly empty, except for a music professor practising alone, playing "O Come, O Come Emmanuel." The hymn filled the room and unexpectedly stirred something deep within me. As I stood listening, tears began to well in my eyes. Its plaintive notes mirrored my own longing—a yearning for a new beginning. The hymn carried desire without demanding answers, offering not certainty but a quiet plea for presence. In that moment, reassurance did not come as clarity; it arrived as a gentle awareness that God was already there, dwelling with me in the midst of uncertainty.

During that preparation period, I began attending weekly community worship at Emmanuel—something I had rarely done before, when congregational responsibilities kept me busy. Now, without a job, I was free to join those services. Surrounded by others also living in uncertainty, I realized I was not alone. We were a community caught between calling and placement, between preparation and sending, between what had been and what was not yet clear.

That was Advent. I didn't know where we would be sent or what kind of ministry awaited us. Yet during that season, I was being formed. Waiting did not paralyse us; it moulded us. Looking back now, I see that the uncertainty itself became a place of grace. The future did not arrive all at once. It emerged gradually, through trust, through community, even through detours, and through the quiet assurance that we were not abandoned.

Eventually, the call came—not where we initially thought but where we were needed. We accepted it, carrying with us the formation that only waiting had made possible.

We begin this book with Advent because many churches today find themselves in a similar moment of tension and anticipation. Across diverse contexts, familiar patterns of faith, authority, and belonging are loosening. Long-standing assumptions no longer hold, cultural authority has shifted, and communities are changing faster than inherited structures can adapt. Church leaders often feel pulled between preserving what has shaped them and responding faithfully to realities that are still coming into view. This moment is frequently described as decline or loss. Advent invites a different reading: not the denial of loss but the recognition that the church is being formed within a season of waiting marked by uncertainty, vulnerability, and unfinished histories.

Advent reminds us that disorientation is not the absence of God but is often the very place where God's work becomes most visible. The church's changing landscape is therefore not merely a problem to be solved but a theological condition to be inhabited. This chapter does not seek to resolve that condition or explain it away. Instead, it receives the present moment as a site of formation.

Advent teaches churches shaped by Christendom how to wait without control, to remain present without retreat, and to trust that what feels like unravelling may be necessary ground for intercultural becoming. What appears as loss within the institutional church is not experienced in the same way everywhere; many communities at the margins are not unravelling but are sustaining life amid conditions long marked by precarity.

To name this condition, I draw on the language of "changing landscapes," a framework shaped significantly by the World Council of Churches' affirmation *Together towards Life: Mission and Evangelism in Changing Landscapes*, which identifies the profound shifts reshaping Christian witness today.[1] I will return to this framework in greater depth in chapter 4, where changing landscapes become the context for reimagining mission not as the church's programme to implement but as God's movement already at work in the world—a movement the church learns to discern and deliberately joins.

A crucial distinction within this framework is between *land* and *landscape*. Land refers to physical territory—soil, property, and space—often imagined as neutral or ownable. Landscape, by contrast, names land as lived and interpreted: shaped by memory, naming, power, and theological imagination. Landscape is never neutral. It carries material histories of ownership, displacement, and resistance. Colonization was not only about the seizure of land; it was about the imposition of a landscape—one that normalized displacement and rendered certain lives invisible. As these landscapes now shift, the church experiences both disorientation and exposure. What feels like loss may also be an unveiling, revealing assumptions that can no longer remain unexamined.

Advent offers a spiritual framework for living with this uncertainty rather than escaping it. It resists the lure of quick fixes and invites the church into practices of patience, attentiveness, and a hope that is deliberately unfinished. Through personal narratives, historical reflection, and local case studies, this chapter explores how Advent waiting forms communities capable of inhabiting change without grasping for premature resolution.

Changing landscapes are not experienced first as ideas or strategies but as felt realities—weariness carried by leaders, hesitancy in communal life, and a pervasive sense of longing that precedes articulation. To attend to this shared affective atmosphere, the chapter turns to the concept of *hüzün*, a form of collective melancholy associated with Istanbul's cultural memory. *Hüzün* names a way of dwelling with loss that neither collapses into despair nor clings to nostalgia. Read alongside Advent, it offers a theological posture for remaining present within unfinished histories without forcing closure or reclaiming control. In this way, *hüzün* prepares the ground for what follows: a theology

1. World Council of Churches, *Together towards Life: Mission and Evangelism in Changing Landscapes* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2013).

of shared woundedness and a vision of intercultural becoming shaped not by mastery but by companionship, humility, and hope.

Received in this light, the church's present condition can be understood as an Advent threshold—a liminal space marked by shifting landscapes and the decentring of inherited authority. Such a moment calls for more than strategic adaptation. It calls for a disciplined practice of waiting, one capable of holding shared woundedness with patience while remaining open to transformation that is already taking shape. Woundedness is unevenly borne—a relational condition where differently harmed histories are held together without denial or false equivalence. Asymmetry is not a problem to be solved but a reality to be acknowledged: the recognition that some have carried wounds the church itself has inflicted, while others have long been sheltered from that harm.

1. Landscapes of Memory: Land, Belonging, and Colonial Displacement

My first pastoral assignment in an English-speaking congregation was in the Oxford Presbytery, a rural area in southwestern Ontario where Oxford, Middlesex, Elgin, and Norfolk counties meet. We lived in a church manse surrounded by mature maple trees on land that felt deeply connected to the congregation—an almost one-acre lot beside the church. But this sense of rootedness was not neutral; it carried history and power. In more than a century of the church's history, we were the first racially marginalized family to live in that house.

What did it feel like to inhabit that space? At first, I noticed only what was welcoming: the congregation's kindness, the beauty of the property, the stillness of rural Ontario evenings. But over time, I began to sense what lay beneath the surface. Neighbours for whom a Korean family was unfamiliar. Parishioners who assumed my English would be broken. The quiet surprise when I led worship competently. These were not hostile encounters—most were gentle, even well-meaning—but they revealed the unspoken scripts that shaped the landscape.

These subtle encounters of surprise reveal what Miroslav Volf identifies as the quiet mechanisms of exclusion. Volf has observed that exclusion often operates not through overt rejection but through inherited patterns of belonging that quietly mark who is presumed to fit in.[2] I was inhabiting a place where belonging had been carefully constructed over generations, and my presence quietly unsettled those constructions. The land itself was more than property; it was a theological space, layered with stories of belonging and exclusion. Living there meant inhabiting a landscape shaped by historical narratives where questions of home, welcome, and justice became inseparable from the gospel we shared.

2. Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 57–98.

The nearest city was London, about thirty minutes from home. Our children loved exploring parks along the Thames River. When people asked where I was from and I said, "near London," they often assumed I meant London, England. Of course, I was referring to southwestern Ontario, Canada. The confusion revealed something important: the land still carries the memory of English settlement. Towns, rivers, streets, and institutions were named to recreate familiarity, inscribing a distant homeland onto a place that was not originally theirs.

This pattern extended across the country. French settlers named vast regions of Eastern Canada "*New France*," bringing language, religion, and cultural imagination from elsewhere. Early colonial writings often described life here as marginal—far from centres of meaning and authority, surrounded by what settlers perceived as emptiness. Indigenous peoples were frequently portrayed as lacking God, law, or religion, narratives that justified the imposition of European systems as if nothing of value already existed.[3]

Northrop Frye named this sensibility the "garrison mentality": the assumption that meaning, order, and even God resided inside the fort—or back in Europe—while the land beyond was hostile or vacant.[4] Margaret Atwood, who had studied under Frye at Victoria College, extended the insight in *Survival*, arguing that early settler stories framed Canada as a place defined by endurance on the edge rather than flourishing or belonging.[5] Within this imagination, Indigenous presence was rendered invisible or reduced to an extension of harsh nature, and settler Christianity came to understand itself as the guardian of faith, order, and civilization within a supposedly empty landscape.

While serving in that congregation, I began to see how deeply this inherited imagination shaped the church's sense of belonging. What felt stable and familiar to some had been made possible through the displacement of others. The landscape was not neutral; it carried memory—often unspoken and

3. *New France* encompassed parts of present-day eastern Quebec and the Maritime provinces. One early settler was Marc Lescarbot (c. 1570–1641), often cited as the first European to publish poetry written in what is now Canada (1606). In a farewell poem addressed to French settlers returning from Port Royal (now Annapolis Royal, Nova Scotia) to France, Lescarbot contrasts the cultural familiarity of the homeland with what he perceived as isolation and lack in the colony. His language—referring to Indigenous peoples as "savages" and claiming the land had "no God, no laws and no religion"—reflects common colonial assumptions of the period rather than Indigenous realities. The poem reveals both a sense of displacement from the cultural centre of France and a theological imagination that justified settlement as a civilizing and converting mission. As Northrop Frye observes, for settlers "the homeland is the source of authority, and the first duty of a colonial culture is to respond to it." Northrop Frye, *Divisions on a Ground: Essays on Canadian Culture*, ed. James Polk (Toronto: Anansi, 1982), 21.

4. Northrop Frye, "Conclusion to a Literary History of Canada" (1965), reprinted in *The Bush Garden: Essays on the Canadian Imagination* (Toronto: Anansi, 1971), 225–31.

5. Margaret Atwood, *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (Toronto: House of Anansi, 1972).

unexamined—embedded in property, practices, and assumptions about who belonged and who did not.

This matters because landscapes are not merely contextual; they are formative. They shape theological imagination by influencing how communities understand belonging, authority, and truth itself.[6] When such landscapes begin to shift, as they are now, churches often experience confusion, grief, and resistance. What is felt as loss can also be a moment of revelation, exposing assumptions that once allowed the church to imagine itself as neutral or uncontested. Read theologically, this exposure marks an Advent moment—an unsettled time in which familiar certainties are stripped away, creating space for new forms of attentiveness and hope.

Before asking how the church might become intercultural, we must recognize that it has always lived within contested environments. The novelty of the present moment is not diversity itself but the unravelling of a once-stable theological worldview that long concealed its own histories of naming, claiming, and displacement. What is being unsettled is therefore not only structure or theology, but also the emotional and spiritual foundations of ecclesial life. Changing landscapes are experienced before they are named and felt before they are fully understood.

2. Living in the In-Between: Unravelling, Creativity, and Becoming

The evolving landscapes confronting contemporary Christianity are not only institutional or demographic. They reveal a deeper theological condition in which the church no longer resides at a stable cultural centre, nor can it rely on inherited assumptions about belonging, authority, or continuity.[7] The present moment is best understood as a threshold: familiar forms no longer dominate, yet new patterns have not fully emerged.[8]

The church today inhabits what may be called an *in-between time*, stretched between memory and promise, between what has been received and what has not yet come into being. As proclaimed in the Memorial Acclamation at holy communion, the church confesses, "Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again." Christian life unfolds neither at the point of origin nor at the point of fulfilment but within this unsettled middle. This liminal condition is not an anomaly in the life of faith but its ordinary terrain—a place where trust is learned, hope is practised, and God's presence is discerned amid uncertainty.

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6. Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 6–11.

7. Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 171–76.

8. Tanulku and Pekelsma, *Liminality, Transgression and Space Across the World*, 1–6.

What is distinctive today is not liminality itself but the scale, visibility, and historical weight of the losses through which it is now being lived.

To name the present moment in this way is not to concede defeat or to romanticize uncertainty. It is to recognize that faith is shaped not only by final destinations but by how communities inhabit unfinished histories. Living faithfully in this condition calls the church to active hope—hope that resists both despair over what has been lost and passive attachment to inherited forms. It requires attentiveness to the ongoing work of God, who meets the church not only in anticipated futures but in present relationships, daily practices, and fragile forms of community.[9]

This season is also one of creativity. Creation does not occur only at moments of origin; it continues whenever what already exists is patiently gathered, loosened, and reworked toward life under new conditions. In this sense, the church is not merely waiting for God's future but learning to participate in it.[10] Eschatology here is not deferred to a distant horizon; it names a reality into which communities are already being drawn, one stitch at a time, through faithful attention and shared labour.

What appeared in the Introduction as the image of knitting—first felt as loss or disorientation—can now be received more fully as a theological condition. When I was a child, I often watched women knitting in my village. During the winter, my mother would unravel a sweater that had grown too small and knit another in its place. She did not discard the old garment; she loosened its yarn, wound it into balls, and began again. This process was never immediate. Unravelling often revealed what the tight weave had hidden. She would pause to untangle knots hardened over time, mend frayed sections, or wash stains that had to be cleansed before the yarn could be used again. Each new sweater bore a different pattern, shaped by need, time, and imagination. Sitting on the warm floor with neighbours or family, she knitted sweaters, scarves, and mitts throughout the season. Her work was slow, communal, and attentive—and it kept us warm through the harsh Korean winter.

By unravelling, I do not mean a passive drifting into decline or the quiet acceptance of institutional diminishment. Unravelling names an active and disciplined labour: the intentional loosening of threads that have bound Christian faith to colonial power, cultural dominance, and practices of control. It involves choosing to undo what has been tightly woven—often at great cost—in order to disentangle the gospel from forms of life that distort it. This work requires more than patience; it requires divestment, refusal, and the willingness to relinquish inherited privileges. Like careful knitting, unravelling is slow,

9. Rowan Williams, *Faith in the Public Square* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012), 113–25.

10. Marcus J. Borg, *Jesus: Uncovering the Life, Teachings, and Relevance of a Religious Revolutionary* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006), 259–60.

embodied, and deliberate. It is undertaken not to preserve the old pattern but to make possible a different way of being church, shaped by humility, shared vulnerability, and companionship rather than mastery.

Remembering this practice helps me imagine the church's present condition differently. What has grown thin or no longer fits must sometimes be unravelled so that something more fitting can be made. Like knitters working with both old and new yarn, Christian communities draw on inherited traditions while allowing them to be reworked in response to new cultural, social, and spiritual conditions. What emerges will not replicate what came before. As each of my mother's sweaters took on a new pattern, so, too, are faith communities continually being reknit into forms shaped by this moment, this place, and the shared hopes and wounds that now define common life.

This calls the church into creative faithfulness. God invites communities not merely to preserve what has been but to help shape what is still becoming. We are not simply maintaining inherited forms; we are learning to weave new possibilities in response to changing landscapes.

In the first quarter of the new millennium, as participation in church life declines across much of the global North compared with previous generations, communities of faith face the challenge of reimagining how they gather and live out their vocation.[11] Many scholars describe this period as post-Christendom—a time in which inherited patterns of church life no longer align with societies shaped by mobility, digital technologies, multiculturalism, secularization, and economic pressure. As articulated by Stuart Murray, post-Christendom names not simply the loss of cultural dominance but a theological invitation for the church to rediscover its vocation without privilege, as a minority community shaped by witness rather than control.[12] Within this context, the church is called to discern how to participate in God's mission alongside neighbours who hold different beliefs, practices, and worldviews.

Living faithfully under these conditions requires attentiveness to what God is already doing beyond the walls of the church. It calls the church to listen deeply to neighbours who do not share its histories, assumptions, or beliefs. It also demands new ways of being community—not as a fortress shaped by a garrison mentality but as a table oriented toward welcome, shared presence, and

11. On the demographic shift of Christianity toward the global South and East, see Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

12. See Stuart Murray, *Post-Christendom: Church and Mission in a Strange New World* (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster, 2004), where Murray argues that the church is called to relinquish attempts to recover its former privilege and instead rediscover its vocation as a minority community, bearing prophetic witness within a pluralistic society.

mutual transformation.[13] These practices will be explored more fully in chapters 2, 5, and 6.

At the same time, this condition is emotionally and spiritually demanding. The unravelling of familiar patterns brings loss alongside possibility, grief alongside hope. Remaining present without rushing toward premature resolution requires an affective and theological capacity to dwell with ambiguity, memory, and shared woundedness. The task before the church is not to escape this condition but to live within it faithfully, trusting that God continues to draw new life from what remains unfinished.

This vision of creative unravelling—of new life emerging from what appears depleted—finds scriptural resonance in Isaiah's image of the stump and the shoot. Formed within the experience of exile (Is. 11:1–9), this prophetic image offers a way of speaking about hope that does not depend on restoration of what has been lost but on the possibility of new life taking shape under altered conditions.

Interlude:

A Shoot from the Stump

The year we moved into our first house in Acton, Ontario, we planted two small shrubs in our backyard: a serviceberry and a pagoda dogwood. The dogwood flourished, but for reasons we never fully understood, the serviceberry did not grow at all. That winter, deep snow covered the garden. While the earth slept, an animal—probably a rabbit—worked its way around the serviceberry and gnawed it down to the snowline. By the time the drifts receded, every branch was gone. What remained was a stump the width of a finger, standing a few inches above the soil. By spring, there was still no sign of life, and I began to wonder what might replace it.

Then, later in the season, something unexpected happened. Tiny shoots pushed up from the base of that stump. They did not restore the shrub we had planted; they were not the branches we had lost. They were new growth rising from a root that had never stopped holding on. What appeared dead was not finished. What looked cut off was still capable of beginning again.

This image echoes the prophetic imagination of Isaiah: "A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots" (Is. 11:1). A stump is what remains after loss—after destruction,

13. Hyuk Cho, *Relation without Relation: Intercultural Theology as Decolonizing Mission Practice* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2025), 127–28.

exile, and failure. In Judah's history, the royal line rooted in David had been reduced to such a stump through war, displacement, and generations without stability. The monarchy had been cut down by empire and exile; to outward eyes, the line appeared finished. Yet Isaiah insists that God's future does not arrive by returning to a former glory but by bringing forth renewal from what appeared beyond recovery.

The vision is unsettling. The hoped-for kin-dom[14] does not arise as a return to David's strength but as a fragile shoot—vulnerable, easily damaged, and dependent on care. This is an odd image for a Messiah. A shoot can be destroyed by neglect or excess, by wind or pest, by the smallest misjudgement. Yet Isaiah claims that this vulnerability is not a failure of God's promise but its very form.

This vision carries into the Christian imagination of Advent. Jesus does not come as a conquering ruler but as a defenceless child. Judgement in this new kin-dom does not follow familiar patterns of power or control. Instead, righteousness bends toward the poor, and justice is shaped around the meek of the earth (Is. 11:3–4). Faithfulness, not force, becomes the measure of authority.

Isaiah's hope reaches beyond human society to the whole of creation. Enmity gives way to coexistence; predator and prey dwell together, led not by domination but by a child. This is not sentimentality but a claim about God's intention for the cosmos: peace formed through vulnerability rather than mastery.

Advent, then, does not bypass brokenness but inhabits it. New life begins not despite the stump but from it. Where continuity seems impossible, God's promise quietly takes root. This interlude invites us to linger with that image: God's kin-dom begins in fragile shoots, entrusted to care. To recognize vulnerability—our own and others'—is already to stand where God's future is taking shape.

3. Crossing Difference: Encounter, Asymmetry, and Shared Life

Advent's in-between time does not unfold in private spirituality alone; it is enacted in encounters across difference, where hope is tested, received, and transformed. The meeting between Mary and Elizabeth (Luke 1:39–45) offers a biblical image for how God's work advances amid difference without erasing it.

14. I use "kin-dom" here, following the usage of *mujerista* theologian Ada María Isasi-Díaz, to emphasize the relational and familial character of God's reign rather than hierarchical dominion. Ada María Isasi-Díaz, *Mujerista Theology: A Theology for the Twenty First Century* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1996), 89 and 103 fn. 8.

While connected through kinship and faith, the two women live in quite different social and cultural worlds. Mary is young, poor, and from Galilee—a region often seen with suspicion and marginality—whereas Elizabeth is older, socially secure, and connected to Judea's religious establishment as the wife of a priest. Their differences in age, class, geography, and social standing are real and significant; they are not hidden by shared faith and kinship or reduced to sameness. God's promise meets them across these differences rather than in spite of them. Mary crosses boundaries of region and status, and Elizabeth offers her home and voice in trust. Through this crossing, difference becomes the very foundation for mutual blessing.

I have witnessed such crossings in my own ministry, though rarely without friction. In one congregation I served, a retired schoolteacher—white, a lifelong member, fluent in the congregation's unspoken codes—found herself sharing a committee with a young Chinese Canadian who had joined only recently. Their first meetings were awkward: different assumptions about how decisions should be made, different rhythms of speech and silence, different senses of what "respect" required. The older woman later confessed she had nearly withdrawn. But she stayed. Over months, something shifted. She began to hear the younger woman's perspective not as a challenge but as a gift. The younger woman, in turn, learned to read the congregation's history with more patience. Neither erased their difference; both were changed by it. This is what crossing looks like in ordinary church life—not dramatic reconciliation but the slow, often uncomfortable work of remaining present across asymmetry.

This biblical moment—and the contemporary echo just described—provides a theological framework for understanding the church's evolving landscape. Today, congregations and communities are shaped by asymmetrical relationships—between generations, cultures, histories, and forms of power—where one party has historically held more authority, voice, or safety than another. These imbalances are often marked by fear, misunderstanding, or withdrawal. Intercultural theology openly acknowledges this reality, emphasizing that faithful community life does not require uniformity or the dominance of one story over another. Instead, it advocates for practices of encounter that hold difference and connection in tension, allowing vulnerability to become a space for transformation. Just as Elizabeth's blessing enables Mary to find her voice and, in the tradition of Miriam and Hannah, sing hope into a disrupted world (Luke 1:46–55), the church is called, amid its own unsettled terrain, to become a space where crossings are possible, differences are honoured, and new forms of belonging can emerge.

The encounter between Mary and Elizabeth reminds us that living in the in-between is never merely a matter of ideas or beliefs. It is experienced through bodies and relationships, shaped by memory, vulnerability, and difference.

Advent is not lived only in moments of encounter but in the shared mood through which communities carry loss, endurance, and fragile hope together. To understand the church today, then, we must attend not only to its structures and practices but to its collective affect—the emotional field in which difference and loss are borne over time. Before naming that dimension, I turn to a city where difference and loss have long been held together in the texture of everyday life: Istanbul, Türkiye—historic Constantinople—a city marked by long histories of coexistence, decline, and unfinished belonging.

In 2025, Christian communities around the world commemorated the 1700th anniversary of the Nicene Creed. During that year, I visited Istanbul (Constantinople in the Orthodox tradition). As a member of the central committee of the World Council of Churches, I regularly work alongside Orthodox Church leaders, even though my own theological formation has been largely shaped within Western traditions. I felt the need to learn more deeply from Eastern Christianity—its liturgical aspect, its theological rhythms, and its long history of interreligious proximity.

My visit to Istanbul was therefore not undertaken simply as a tourist but as a pilgrim. I was seeking a deeper understanding of history and theology, particularly Eastern Christianity's vision of resurrection and its practices of living alongside religious others. My itinerary included the Chora Church (now the Kariye Mosque), renowned for its iconography of cosmic and universal resurrection,[15] and Hagia Sophia, so often cited as a symbol of *convivencia*—shared life amid enduring difference.

To understand why Istanbul is sometimes described as a site of relative tolerance and hospitality, one must look back to 1453, when the Ottoman Empire conquered Constantinople. The conquest did not aim at the eradication of Christian life but at its reconfiguration within an Islamic imperial framework. Through this arrangement—what would only much later be systematized as the *millet* structure—Armenian (*Ermeni*) and Jewish (*Musevi*) communities, and the Greek Orthodox (*Rum*) Church, were subordinated yet preserved.

Mehmed II installed Gennadios II Scholarios as patriarch and granted him the Church of the Holy Apostles as his seat. Within two years that church was given up, and the patriarchate moved to the Pammakaristos, where it remained until 1587, when that building too was converted into a mosque. Two further relocations followed before the seat settled in 1601 at St George in the

15. See John Dominic Crossan and Sarah Sexton Crossan, *Resurrecting Easter: How the West Lost and the East Kept the Original Easter Vision* (New York: Harper One, 2018), where resurrection is interpreted as a communal and transformative reality rather than a narrowly physical event.

Phanar, where it remains.[16] Recognition as the communal and spiritual leader of Orthodox Christians was therefore real, but the ground beneath it was not secure. This was a form of negotiated survival: ecclesial continuity maintained through regulation and constraint rather than through forced elimination—and maintained, in the most literal sense, by moving.

This pattern extended to the Armenian community as well. The Armenian Patriarchate of Constantinople traces its establishment to 1461, following the Ottoman conquest. Surp Asdvadzadzin in Kumkapı has served as its patriarchal cathedral since 1641. When the complex burned in 1826, its rebuilding required an imperial edict from Mahmud II, issued on 2 February 1828. A second display at the same site gives the Patriarchate's own account of its origins, tracing the office to Mehmed II, who is said to have founded it in 1461 in order to govern both the spiritual and the earthly affairs of Armenians residing in the Ottoman state.[17] Whatever its precise origins, the Patriarchate functioned both as an ecclesial body and as an administrative intermediary between the Armenian community and imperial authority. Religious difference was thus governed rather than resolved—managed and contained, but never settled into equality or mutual integration, and never guaranteed. This should not be mistaken for tolerance. The arrangement secured survival at the cost of structural subordination, and it offered no protection when the late Ottoman state turned to the destruction of the Armenian community itself.[18]

The contrast with Western Christendom during the same period is striking. In 1492, following the Christian reconquest of Granada, the Spanish crown issued the Alhambra Decree, requiring Jews to convert to Christianity or leave the kingdom within a matter of months. Muslims soon faced similar pressures, culminating in forced conversions, expulsions, and surveillance in the early 16th century. In this context, religious difference increasingly came to be framed as

16. On the successive patriarchal seats after 1453, see Steven Runciman, *The Great Church in Captivity: A Study of the Patriarchate of Constantinople from the Eve of the Turkish Conquest to the Greek War of Independence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), 165–205.

17. Two informational displays at the Armenian Patriarchate complex, Kumkapı, Istanbul; text as displayed in English, photographed by the author, 18 July 2025. The displays are the source for the details given here, including the 1461 foundation date, which is the Patriarchate's own. The early history of the office is contested among historians of the Armenian church, some of whom place the consolidation of its jurisdictional standing considerably later. See Kevork B. Bardakjian, "The Rise of the Armenian Patriarchate of Constantinople," in *Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Empire: The Functioning of a Plural Society,* vol. 1, ed. Benjamin Braude and Bernard Lewis (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1982), 89–100.

18. On the conventional account of the *millet* system and the problems with it, see Benjamin Braude, "Foundation Myths of the *Millet* System," in Braude and Lewis, *Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Empire*, vol. 1, 69–88. The Armenian Genocide is not a separate history from these arrangements: the deportations and massacres of 1915–16 were carried out by the Ottoman government under the Committee of Union and Progress. See Ronald Grigor Suny, *"They Can Live in the Desert but Nowhere Else": A History of the Armenian Genocide* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).

a threat to political unity—something to be eliminated in pursuit of a purified Christian order. This impulse would later be extended globally through the Doctrine of Discovery and colonial expansion, bringing an end to the fragile practices of *convivencia* that had characterized parts of Islamic Spain.[19]

By contrast, when Sephardic Jews were expelled from Spain after 1492, many found refuge within the Ottoman Empire. In Istanbul, they were permitted to settle, worship, trade, and participate in urban life—albeit within the constraints of imperial rule. Ottoman authorities appear to have understood this reception not only as an act of mercy, but also as a pragmatic recognition that religious plurality could contribute to the social and economic life of the empire.[20]

This history, however, must not be romanticized. Hierarchies were real, and inequalities were systematically embedded. Christians and Jews occupied a legally subordinated position within the Ottoman system, subject to enduring economic, social, and juridical constraint. Against the backdrop of European expulsions, forced conversions, and colonial conquest, Istanbul did preserve a form of proximity across religious difference, but this proximity was fragile, coerced, and unevenly borne. Any reference to a "historical possibility" must therefore be held with restraint: coexistence without equality, proximity without assimilation, survival without security.

In this limited sense, the city recalls earlier patterns of *convivencia* in Islamic Spain prior to the Reconquista—not as an ideal to be recovered but as a reminder that difference has at times been managed without immediate eradication, even while structured by domination. Istanbul gestures toward a theological imagination in which difference was neither denied nor erased but endured and negotiated within an unequal and unstable civic life.

4. *Hüzün*: A Theology of Shared Woundedness

During my visit, I became attentive to Istanbul's layered history. The city unfolded like a palimpsest—emperors rising and falling, devotion carved in stone, longing carried in the air. Its past reflects not only imperial decline but also the fragile beauty of coexistence: traditions layered rather than resolved, histories held together without synthesis.

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19. Cho, *Relation without Relation*, 177.

20. Following the Alhambra Decree of 1492, large numbers of Sephardic Jews expelled from Spain found refuge in the Ottoman Empire, where they were encouraged to settle in cities such as Istanbul, Salonica, and Izmir, contributing significantly to commercial, intellectual, and urban life. See Stanford J. Shaw, *The Jews of the Ottoman Empire and the Turkish Republic* (New York: New York University Press, 1991), 26–32. For Salonica (Thessaloniki) as a central hub of Ottoman enlightenment—where Jews constituted a majority of the city's population from the early 16th century until the early 20th century, shaping its economic, cultural, and intellectual life—see Melih Çoban, "Ottoman Jews in Salonica: A Community at the Heart of Ottoman Enlightenment," *Turkish Review of Balkan Studies* 11 (2007): 69–84.

Walking between Hagia Sophia, the Blue Mosque, the Armenian Patriarchate, and the Ecumenical Patriarchate, I encountered a concept capable of naming the emotional life of communities shaped by loss, endurance, and unfinished hope. In these spaces, where minaret and dome, chant and call to prayer, ecclesial memory and civic presence remained distinct yet closely entangled, I sensed an affective grammar formed not by resolution but by proximity—by lives carried alongside one another amid histories that could be neither forgotten nor reconciled. The Turkish word for this is *hüzün*.

Orhan Pamuk, a recipient of the Nobel Prize in Literature, writes as someone who receives the city without attempting to resolve it. In *Istanbul: Memories and the City*, he allows the city's melancholy to remain unresolved, resisting both nostalgia and redemptive closure.[21] *Hüzün*, as he describes it, is a sorrow belonging not to individuals but to a whole city, arising in the distance between imperial splendour and present ruin: a collective melancholy rooted in the experience of imperial decline.[22] Unlike Western notions of sadness as a private psychological state, *hüzün* is shared. It holds dignity in decline, beauty in fragility, and continuity amid change.

Pamuk's *hüzün* is deeply place-bound—tied to Istanbul's ruins, its faded grandeur, its particular light. The church's condition is not identical; its losses are carried in bodies and relationships rather than architecture. Yet both name something English lacks: the dignity of communities that persist within decline without pretending it away. I borrow *hüzün*, then, not as a direct application but as a conceptual gift—a word for collective sorrow held without surrender.

And yet the concept must be handled with care. The sorrow that clings to Istanbul emerges from a history that is not merely melancholic but deeply traumatic. For Armenian, Greek, and Syriac Christian communities in particular, these landscapes are not poetic symbols of loss but sites marked by catastrophic violence, displacement, and near erasure. The proximity the empire preserved was structured by hierarchies that did not prevent, and finally gave way to, genocide, forced migration, and the silencing of an ancient communal presence. If *hüzün* is to serve theology, it must name not only the melancholy of a lost imperial grandeur but the grief of those the empire itself destroyed. I write here as one formed outside these histories, aware that naming such proximity risks mishearing for those whose faith was carried through trauma rather than memory alone.

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21. Orhan Pamuk, *Istanbul: Memories and the City*, trans. Maureen Freely (New York: Knopf, 2005), chap. 10, where Pamuk develops *hüzün* as a shared public melancholy shaped by loss, memory, and collective identity rather than private despair.

22. *Hüzün* (pronounced hew-ZOON) is a Turkish term for melancholy with roots in Arabic (*ḥuzn*), where it denotes sorrow and loss.

To speak of "dignified sorrow," then, is not to indulge nostalgia for an imperial past, nor is it moral neutrality. It is to keep vigil with the ghosts of history—to acknowledge that shared woundedness includes wounds inflicted by power upon the most vulnerable. Ruins cannot be aestheticized without attending to those severed from them, and the church cannot aestheticize its own complicity or find consolation in decline. The dignity *hüzün* names neither redeems the harm that produced it nor justifies the hierarchies that endured beneath it. True interculturality demands mourning not only a city's lost grandeur but the loss of its neighbours—the lives, languages, liturgies, and memories that once animated its streets. Justice demands this staying—not as passivity but as the refusal of easier paths: denial, defensiveness, or premature closure.

At its core, *hüzün* names a shared emotional capacity: the ability to dwell with loss without collapsing into despair or rushing toward resolution. Practised ecclesially, this capacity becomes a posture of attentiveness. Theologically, it grounds a discipline of remaining present within wounded histories long enough for truthful response to become possible.

But *hüzün* is not lament. Biblical lament is covenantal—a protest addressed to God, expecting response. Its horizon, even when deferred, bends toward resolution. *Hüzün* makes no such demand. It names a way of living with loss that does not presuppose redemptive closure. This may be precisely the posture the church needs when inherited frameworks of divine responsiveness feel strained, when the old assurances no longer hold and new ones have not yet emerged.

What does *hüzün* look like in a congregation? It appears as the quiet grief that surfaces when a long-time member looks around on Sunday morning and realizes how few remain. It is the ache beneath the planning meeting, the fatigue carried in a clergy voice, the hesitation before singing a hymn that once felt full and now feels thin. It is the unspoken question—*Will we survive?*—that lingers in hallways after worship but is rarely named aloud.

But *hüzün* also holds heavier recognitions: the discomfort when a congregation realizes the land it occupies was never ceded or an archive reveals how long certain voices were excluded from leadership. *Hüzün* does not demand that these recognitions be resolved or defended against. It grants permission to bear them together, without shame, as histories that must be carried before they can be addressed.

The losses named here are not merely institutional. They are entangled with longer histories of colonization, racism, displacement, and silenced voices now re-emerging. To name *hüzün* is not to romanticize decline but to acknowledge that faithful discernment often passes through sorrow. It makes space for histories that must be borne before they can be repaired.

In this sense, *hüzün* serves as the emotional ground for the World Council of Churches' call in *Together towards Life* to discern God's life-giving work amid uncertainty.[23] It creates room for listening—especially to voices at the margins—without demanding premature clarity. The movement of the Spirit, after all, is often recognized only by those who have learned to stay. *Hüzün* is training in staying.

Perhaps *hüzün* is the emotional atmosphere in which knitting becomes possible. My mother did not unravel her old sweaters with haste or anxiety; she did so with patient attention, accepting that the yarn was knotted and stained before it could be made new. She stayed with the work. *Hüzün* names this same capacity at a communal level: the ability to remain present with what is tangled or worn, neither forcing the yarn into a shape it cannot hold nor discarding it as beyond use. Knitting requires both hands and heart—technical skill and emotional endurance. So, too, does the church's work of unravelling and re-forming. Without *hüzün*, the temptation is to rush: to cut rather than untangle, to buy new yarn rather than cleanse the old. But Advent patience, sustained by shared sorrow, creates the conditions in which inherited threads can be gathered, tended, and rewoven into something capable of warmth.

This section presents *hüzün* as a theological posture for intercultural witness: not passive endurance but the emotional capacity required to remain present within wounded histories until truthful action becomes possible. It does not replace resistance or justice-seeking; it sustains them. Shaping a theology of shared woundedness, *hüzün* names a practice of staying in the room with loss while remaining open to transformation and repair.

Having named the emotional atmosphere the church inhabits, the chapter now turns toward the historical and demographic forces that have helped produce it.

5. Foundations and Flux: Colonial Legacy, Migration, and Local Change

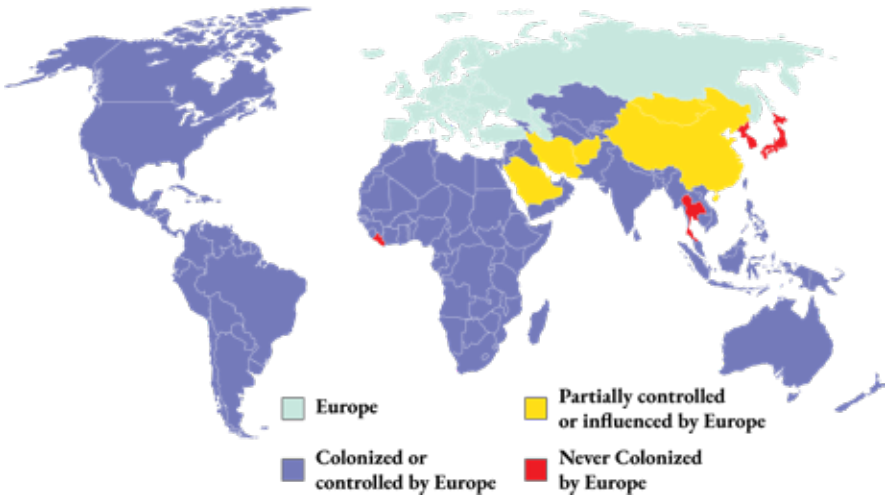
The global expansion of European empires from the late 15th to the early 20th centuries did not unfold in a religious vacuum. From the outset, colonization was accompanied—and often justified—by Christian ideas that legitimized conquest, ownership, and conversion. Central to these was what has become known as the Doctrine of Discovery, which will be examined more fully in chapter 5. By the early 20th century, when most of the world's territory was under direct or indirect European control, missionary activity was deeply embedded within

23. WCC, *Together towards Life, paras*. 15, 24–25, 36–39.

imperial systems.[24] Churches often acted as intermediaries between colonial authorities and local populations, translating political dominance into moral and spiritual terms.

The legacy of this global colonization continues to be felt through long and painful ongoing processes of decolonization marked by what might be called a shared woundedness. In this woundedness, communities bear the scars of empire on land, bodies, memory, and spiritual life, learning to live with loss, responsibility, and hope without rushing toward closure or forgetting. In this context, Truth and Reconciliation processes are not merely juridical or institutional exercises but theological practices that create space for naming harm, bearing shared woundedness, and learning how to live truthfully with histories of loss and responsibility without demanding premature healing.

Figure 1.1 Countries colonized by Europe since 1450



The evolving landscape confronting Christianity today cannot be understood through a single lens. It is simultaneously global and local, demographic and emotional, sociological and deeply theological. What many churches in the global North experience as decline or loss is part of a much larger transformation: the shifting demographic centre of Christianity, the rise of a secular age in which faith is no longer assumed, and the reshaping of local communities through migration, pluralism, and generational change. Together, these shifts challenge long-standing assumptions about belonging, legitimacy, and continuity, pushing the church into new and unfamiliar terrain.

24. See *World History Era 7* (UCLA History Department), overview of European dominance, noting that by 1914, Europeans dominated over 84 percent of the world's land surface: https://phi.history.ucla.edu/nchs/world-history-content-standards/world-history-era-7.

Migration and the Reshaping of the Christian Landscape

Like many others, my own theological journey has been shaped by migration. I came to Canada from Korea not only with luggage and professional credentials but also with memories, faith practices, theological instincts, and ways of belonging formed in my homeland. Migration does not merely move bodies from one place to another; it transports cultures, languages, histories, and religions across borders. Being replanted in a new place is, in many ways, like becoming a child again. I had to learn Canadian culture and history from scratch and to acquire English as a survival skill rather than a choice. To belong, I had to set aside many familiar ways of being while learning new ones, even attempting to soften my accent to be accepted within a white-dominant cultural environment.

Against this personal horizon, contemporary migration emerges as a decisive force reshaping Christianity in the global North. People arrive in Europe and North America seeking safety, education, or economic stability, but they also carry with them forms of religious life shaped by colonial histories, marginalization, and collective memories of loss and hope. As a result, churches in the global North increasingly encounter global Christianity not primarily through overseas mission but through neighbours, congregants, and leaders whose faith has been formed outside Western Christendom. Migration thus functions not only as demographic change but as a lived threshold through which theology itself is translated and reconfigured.

Jehu Hanciles clearly describes this reality in his book *Migration and the Making of Global Christianity*, arguing that migration has played a central role in the historical spread and transformation of Christianity.[25] What is unique about the current moment is not migration itself but its direction and theological significance. Christianity is no longer primarily transmitted from the West to other regions; it is being introduced into post-Christendom societies by migrants whose faith has been shaped at the margins rather than at the centre of power. Consequently, Western Christianity is evolving from within, not by restoring cultural dominance but through intercultural encounters, unequal relationships, and shared woundedness.

These dynamics also redraw the broader religious and secular landscapes of the global North. The growing presence of Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism, and other traditions—alongside those who identify with no religious tradition at all—complicates inherited assumptions that Western societies are

25. Jehu J. Hanciles, *Migration and the Making of Global Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2021), 356–420.

either implicitly Christian or straightforwardly secular.[26] Religious diversity and non-religion now coexist in close proximity, unsettling familiar models of social cohesion, public theology, and church identity. Churches can no longer presume moral consensus or cultural centrality; they are increasingly one tradition among many, learning to inhabit a plural public space shaped by contestation, indifference, and uneven power. This situation exposes the fragility of Christendom's legacy while raising fresh theological questions about witness and hospitality.

Two additional trends deepen this missiological shift. The first is the concentration of diaspora populations in major urban centres, transforming global cities into dense hubs of religious activity and encounter.[27] Cities such as Toronto, London, and New York have become transnational nodes where the vibrancy of global Christianity is locally evident. In these urban contact zones, migrant churches often serve as anchors of belonging, fostering social networks and spiritual resilience amid secular settings. The city, therefore, is no longer inherently secular but a layered landscape of overlapping spiritual worlds, requiring established churches to engage with pluralism not as an abstract concept but as an immediate neighbourly reality.

The second trend is the global dispersal of migrant labourers—perhaps most notably Filipino workers—whose movement gives rise to a distinctive form of what might be called *mission from below*.[28] Unlike colonial missionaries who travelled with institutional backing and cultural authority, these Christians inhabit the fragile circuits of the global labour market as caregivers, domestic workers, seafarers, and nurses. Their faith enters spaces largely inaccessible to traditional clergy: private homes, hospital wards, and the intimate routines of daily care. In such settings, Christian witness is not proclaimed from pulpits

26. According to Statistics Canada (2022), minority religious communities—particularly Muslim, Hindu, and Sikh—have experienced significant growth, with several more than doubling in size over the past two decades. At the same time, the population reporting no religious affiliation has increased sharply: in the 2021 Census, approximately 12.6 million Canadians—about 34.6 percent of the population—identified as having no religion, a figure that has more than doubled since 2001. This diversification is most visible in major urban centres such as Toronto, Vancouver, and Montreal, pointing to broader cultural and social transformations in which both religious and non-religious identities actively shape community formation, public life, and patterns of belonging. Statistics Canada, "The Canadian Census: A Rich Portrait of the Country's Religious and Ethnocultural Diversity," *The Daily*, October 26, 2022, https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/221026/dq221026b-eng.htm.

27. For an overview of diaspora missiology, see Enoch Wan, *Diaspora Missiology: Theory, Methodology, and Practice* (Portland, OR: Institute of Diaspora Studies, Western Seminary, 2011). Wan frames diaspora as a missiological locus shaped by migration, hybridity, and transnational networks, challenging territorially bounded and centre–periphery models of mission.

28. For theological reflection specifically on Filipino diaspora experience, see Gemma Tulud Cruz, ed., *Catholicism in Migration and Diaspora: Cross-Border Filipino Perspectives* (London: Routledge, 2022), and Sadiri Joy Tira and Tetsunao Yamamori, eds., *Scattered and Gathered: A Global Compendium of Diaspora Missiology* (Carlisle, UK: Langham Global Library, 2020).

or sustained by programmes but enacted through presence, endurance, and relational attentiveness.

This is a form of mission shaped by *diakonia* not as charity or benevolence but as companionship—faith carried in vulnerable bodies and sustained through practices of care that bear the weight of both economic precarity and spiritual responsibility.[29] By sustaining life amid hardship, these workers offer a glimpse of a theology of presence and vulnerability, bearing witness to God's grace less through institutional forms than through the relational labour of everyday life.

Viewed in this light, migration unsettles inherited assumptions about who teaches and who receives, where theological authority resides, and how Christian identity is formed. The emerging Christian landscape cannot be reduced to narratives of decline in the North and growth in the South. It is shaped instead by movement, border-crossing, and circulation—by faith carried in fragile bodies and unfinished histories. Migration thus names not only a sociological condition but a theological space: a threshold where belonging is renegotiated, responsibility is shared, and the church is called into deeper forms of relational accountability amid our shared woundedness.

Local Landscapes

These global and cultural shifts manifest concretely in local congregations. In Vancouver, the experience of one church demonstrates how changing landscapes are felt on the ground. Located in a neighbourhood historically shaped by Euro-Canadian norms, the congregation now finds itself part of a richly diverse community. According to the City of Vancouver's "Social Indicators Profile" (2020), nearly 39 percent of residents in Dunbar–Southlands identify as part of a visible minority group—a proportion that has steadily increased since 2001.[30] Linguistic diversity is equally notable: about 36 percent of residents speak a non-English mother tongue, and 21 percent regularly use a language other than English at home, with Mandarin and Cantonese being most common. Nearly 40 percent of the population consists of immigrants or non-permanent residents.

These shifts are not only cultural but also deeply social and political. Racialized communities in Dunbar–Southlands tend to be younger and more family-oriented, suggesting a sustained future presence. However, they are also more likely to face poverty and labour instability despite the neighbourhood's overall wealth. The Indigenous presence—especially within the Musqueam community—places these changes within longer histories of land, displacement, and contested belonging, which I will explore in chapter 5.

29. Hyuk Cho and JungHee Park, *Decolonizing Diakonia: From Servanthood to Companionship* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2025), 135–48.

30. City of Vancouver, "Dunbar–Southlands: Neighbourhood Social Indicators Profile 2020" (2020), https://vancouver.ca/files/cov/social-indicators-profile-dunbar-southlands.pdf.

These realities unsettle long-held assumptions about linguistic norms, racial uniformity, and cultural stability. For churches in such neighbourhoods, the landscape is no longer monocultural but deeply intercultural: questions of language, leadership, worship, and authority have moved from the margins to the centre. Faith communities are therefore called to re-examine how they inhabit place, exercise power, and practise responsibility amid diversity. In this context, changing landscapes do more than demand adaptation; they invite the church to discern what it means to become truly intercultural—shaped not by dominance but by mutuality, shared belonging, and companionship.

Conclusion: Waiting as Theological Ground

What emerges across these shifting landscapes—global, cultural, and local—is that the church's challenge is not only institutional or strategic but affective and theological. Loss, weariness, and uncertainty shape ecclesial life as deeply as doctrine or structure. When these realities remain unspoken, churches often oscillate between nostalgia for a past imagined as recoverable and a hurried push toward renewal that bypasses mourning altogether. Advent interrupts both impulses, teaching the church how to wait without denial and to hope without seizing control.

This chapter has received the present moment as an Advent condition—a time in which familiar forms no longer hold and what lies ahead remains unfinished. What is being exposed is not simply institutional decline but a formative threshold. The church is being invited to learn how to live faithfully without guarantees.

Within this condition, *hüzün* gives voice to the emotional texture of Advent waiting. It allows loss and hope to be held together without collapse or haste, creating space for shared woundedness to be acknowledged rather than managed away. Such attentiveness does not suspend action; it forms the kind of presence from which truthful action can emerge.

Waiting, in this sense, is not passive. Like reknitting a sweater, unravelling becomes part of making something capable of sustaining life in a different season. As the church seeks reconciliation, reimagines mission, and practises intercultural life, it must learn to remain present within wounded histories—without domination, denial, or haste. Advent patience, sustained by *hüzün*, fosters the moral attentiveness such work requires.

Yet dwelling with loss does not by itself resolve how responsibility is borne within it. Woundedness may be shared, but it is not evenly distributed. Some bodies carry histories of exclusion and harm, while others have been sheltered—often by the very structures now experienced as fragile. Chapter 2 turns directly to this asymmetry, asking what it means to inhabit this Advent time ethically, as

communities learn to live together truthfully, responsibly, and transformatively within unequal histories.

Questions for Reflection

1. Reframing Uncertainty as Advent: The chapter suggests that the uncertainty and decline facing the church today should not be seen only as loss but as an "Advent moment"—a time of waiting between what was and what is not yet. How does naming our current situation as "Advent" change the way we feel about the changes happening in our congregation? Does it bring anxiety or hope—or perhaps both?
2. The Practice of *Hüzün* (Shared Sorrow): The author introduces the Turkish concept of *hüzün*—a way of dwelling with loss and melancholy without rushing to fix it or falling into despair. In our church culture, do we allow space for grief and "unfinished business," or do we feel pressured to immediately be optimistic and solve problems? What would it look like to sit with our collective loss for a season?
3. Landscapes of Memory: The chapter argues that land is never neutral; it carries memories of who belongs and who was displaced (e.g., colonial names vs. Indigenous presence). When you look at our specific church building and neighbourhood, whose stories are remembered in the architecture and names, and whose stories might be missing or invisible?
4. The Knitting Metaphor (Unravelling to Create): Using the story of his mother unravelling an old sweater to knit a new one, the author argues that unravelling is a necessary part of creation, not just destruction. What specific programme, tradition, or habit in our church might need to be "unravelled" right now so that something new and warmer can be created for the current season?
5. Crossing Difference (Mary and Elizabeth): The meeting of Mary and Elizabeth is presented as a model for the "in-between" time—two women from different generations, social classes, and regions who help each other recognize God's work. Who are the "Elizabeths" or "Marys" in our context—people significantly different from us (in age, culture, or status)—whom we need to seek out and visit to truly hear what God is doing? In such encounters, who holds more structural power, and how might that shape what each person is able to offer or receive?

2

Crumbs or Banquet?

Christmas, Racism, and the Scandal of Incarnation

Christmas

If Advent names the church's present condition as one of waiting and shared woundedness, Christmas presses more deeply into the nature of that wound. The incarnation does not arrive as reassurance from a safe distance but as divine entry into histories shaped by violence, exclusion, and racialized vulnerability. This chapter turns to racism not as a secondary ethical concern or social malfunction but as a theological distortion that contradicts the very meaning of God-with-us.

Racism is the landscape colonization created, shaping not just who owns land but who belongs on it. It is tempting to view the management of racial and cultural diversity as a distinctly modern phenomenon. However, Jesus was born into a world already characterized by significant diversity and political unrest. The Roman Empire unified various peoples into a single order through laws, commerce, and public rituals, managing these differences via hierarchy and force. Winter festivals—extravagant occasions of feasting, theatre, and devotion—were not merely social events; they combined religious significance with political loyalty to Caesar.[1] Difference was visible and unavoidable, yet it was carefully managed within imperial power structures to ensure stability.

The titles proclaimed by the angels—Saviour, Messiah, Lord (Luke 2:11)—were not neutral religious claims but political titles already claimed by the emperor.[2] To announce a saviour born in poverty was, therefore, a counter-imperial statement. Christmas reveals a clash of loyalties: the empire manages differences through domination and fear, while the gospel reveals God's presence through vulnerability and exposure.

Matthew's Gospel expands on this uncomfortable truth. Emmanuel—God-with-us—does not represent a divine endorsement of violence, hierarchy, or exclusion but instead embodies God's presence in our midst. Jesus is born without any protective barrier—exposed to political violence, pursued by a king, and forced to flee as a refugee (Matt. 2:13–18). God enters not at the safe centre but at the wounded and exposed edges of the world. This is why racism

1. Richard A. Horsley, "Who Is Your Savior," *The Other Side* 39, no. 6 (November–December 2003): 22.

2. Richard A. Horsley, *The Liberation of Christmas: The Infancy Narratives in Social Context* (New York: Crossroad, 1989), 25–33.

must be recognized not only as a social failure but as a theological crisis. Racism reintroduces imperial logic into the life of the church, shaping community around fear, control, and homogeneity rather than trust, mutuality, and shared dignity. If left unchallenged, it quietly turns spaces intended for communion into places of exclusion, and practices meant to nourish life into tools of domination.

The Christmas story places God within histories of danger, displacement, and racialized vulnerability. To celebrate Christmas, therefore, cannot mean masking suffering beneath a layer of sentimentality.[3] It means attending to the ways the Nativity locates God among those exposed to violence, forced movement, and managed difference. To celebrate the incarnation while ignoring racialized bodies, refugee journeys, and the systems that regulate belonging is to domesticate its meaning and blunt its ethical and political force. Confronting racism, then, is not a marginal concern at the edges of church life; it belongs to the heart of the gospel itself.

This chapter, thus, explores racism as a theological wound that must be acknowledged and named if the church is to move from the logic of imperial control toward genuine intercultural communion and from practices of exclusion toward the shared healing table of God's banquet. The argument unfolds in four movements. First, I name racism as a theological wound, drawing on personal encounter and ecclesial reflection. Second, I examine hate crimes not as isolated incidents but as signs of deeper structural fractures. Third, I develop a biblical-theological critique through the contrast between "crumbs theology"—symbolic inclusion without shared power—and "banquet theology," which envisions genuine transformation. Finally, I turn to formation: What practices can shape an anti-racist church capable of embodying God's abundance? Throughout, *hüzün* names the church's capacity to remain with racialized suffering without rushing toward innocence, symbolic inclusion, or reconciliation language that leaves power intact.

1. Racism as Theological Wound

Before the church can speak meaningfully about healing, justice, or reconciliation, it must learn where and how it has been wounded. The language of racism is often approached defensively, as accusation or abstraction, or deferred as a problem belonging primarily to society rather than to the church's own life. This chapter takes a different path. It approaches racism not first as a policy failure or moral shortcoming but as a theological wound—one that shapes the church's imagination, distorts its practices, and forms bodies and relationships over time.

To name racism in this way is not to isolate it as a discrete issue but to recognize how deeply it touches the church's understanding of incarnation,

3. Horsley, *The Liberation of Christmas*, 39–52.

communion, authority, and belonging. What follows begins not with theory but with contact. Like Thomas invited to place his hand in Christ's side, the church is asked to draw near rather than look away, to attend carefully to what has been normalized, endured, or silenced (John 20:27). Only by touching the wound, without denial or haste, can the church begin to discern the difference between avoidance and healing and to imagine what faithfulness might require in a body marked by unequal suffering and shared responsibility.

Touching the Wounds

My journey into anti-racism did not begin in a classroom or through abstract reflection but through encounters that forced me to confront wounds within the church's own life. In 2003, during my ministry, the Presbytery's Pastoral Relations Committee advised me to prepare to leave the congregation after less than two years of settling in. The issue was not theology, misconduct, or pastoral skills. Instead, tension arose when a long-standing and influential family resisted my efforts to promote shared leadership. Rather than guiding the community through collective discernment, the church court, Presbytery, chose what appeared to be the least disruptive option: removing the recently appointed clergy whose differences had unsettled the existing order.

What followed disrupted this logic. When the congregation learned of the decision, every member—except those of the complainant family—petitioned for it to be rescinded, claiming their collective responsibility for God's mission in their community. What appeared at the institutional level as a routine personnel matter was received by the congregation as an ecclesial decision bearing directly on its shared vocation. For me, however, the episode exposed something more troubling: the subtle ways racialized assumptions, institutional anxiety, and unequal power can shape ecclesial judgement, often without explicit intent or acknowledgement, even within churches that publicly commit themselves to justice. The wound was not only personal; it was ecclesial and theological. Nor was it merely endured. Over time, such wounds are reproduced through formative practices that train bodies, desires, and authority. What begins as injury becomes formative when it is normalized, ritualized, and rehearsed within communal life.

That same year, I took part in an intensive anti-racism programme at the Francis Sandy Theological Centre, an Indigenous theological school near Paris, Ontario, located on land marked by colonial dispossession and Indigenous resilience. I expected to gain analytical tools; instead, I entered a space of embodied truth-telling. Indigenous participants spoke of children taken from families and languages erased. Black participants described the exhaustion of constant surveillance. Asian immigrants shared experiences of being treated as perpetual foreigners, regardless of citizenship or contribution.

As these stories accumulated, racism ceased to be an abstraction. It was felt as a wound carried in bodies, memories, and histories. As an Asian participant, I reached a clear and unsettling realization. My experience did not reflect the extreme violence faced by Indigenous peoples or the constant fear caused by anti-Black racism. Yet it was undeniably shaped by racialization. Asian racialization often occurs through ambiguity: proximity to whiteness without full inclusion, acceptance that remains conditional, and an ongoing sense of foreignness. This in-between position complicates Asian Christian leadership, subtly fostering gratitude, restraint, and accommodation rather than prophetic witness.

The wound here was quieter, yet it exerted a profound influence on how faith, identity, and community were formed. As this process unfolded, I became aware that these same dynamics were already shaping my children's lives. Their names, food, and appearance marked them as "other," quietly but persistently teaching them that belonging was conditional and often demanded assimilation. What emerged was not only parental concern but a theological insight: a world in which God's gift of community is reorganized through hierarchy and managed difference stands in fundamental tension with the gospel.

This parental instinct to protect my children resonates with a Korean tradition I carry from my homeland: *geumjul* (금줄). When a child is born, a straw rope woven with charcoal or red peppers is stretched across the gate, symbolizing a boundary of protection. The practice reflects a profound moral wisdom: a communal recognition that the world is fraught with danger and that fragile new life must be shielded. Yet as I watched my children navigate a racialized world, I realized that no *geumjul* could protect them from the subtle violence of exclusion—the quiet sorting of bodies into those who belong and those who remain perpetual guests.

And here is the scandal of the incarnation: Christ was born without *geumjul*. No protective rope marked the threshold of the stable. No boundary separated the holy child from the dangers of empire, displacement, or racialized violence. God entered the world not behind protective barriers at the safe centre but at the wounded and exposed edges—as a refugee child, fleeing political violence, born into a people under occupation. The incarnation refuses the logic of guarded thresholds. It reveals a God who chooses solidarity over safety, vulnerability over control.

The church that follows this God cannot retreat behind its own ropes of protection; it must learn to be present where vulnerability is greatest. This is the difference between crumbs and banquet: the *geumjul* instinct, however loving, still decides who is inside and who remains outside the gate. It operates from a position of power, determining who merits protection and who must wait beyond the boundary. But the banquet reflects the way of Christ, who was born

without such protection and therefore tears down every rope that divides. The banquet does not guard the table; it extends it to include those left outside.

This encounter marked a turning point. Racism was no longer something to be opposed from afar, but a wound that demanded to be touched—felt in bodies, relationships, and church structures. What became clear was that racism operates not only through overt acts or hostile attitudes but also as a shaping force that distorts the church's theology, its witness, and its moral imagination. To touch this wound is neither to sensationalize pain nor to seek quick fixes but to refuse denial and superficial healing. Anti-racism, I came to see, is not peripheral to the church's life but central to its faithfulness.

What I encountered was not simply personal pain but a shared woundedness carried unevenly within the church's life. Like Advent waiting, touching this wound did not offer clarity or resolution but demanded presence without denial. Only within such patience can the church begin to distinguish healing from avoidance. From this moment of honest contact, the chapter now turns to a vital theological task: naming racism truthfully as a wound within the church so that an intercultural community of healing, justice, and shared responsibility might begin to take shape.

Naming the Wound

This personal encounter with institutional racism points to a broader pattern that demands theological recognition. To understand it not merely as personal pain but as a theological wound, we must first distinguish racism from individual prejudice. Prejudice refers to attitudes, stereotypes, or assumptions that individuals may hold. Racism, by contrast, is prejudice reinforced and sustained by systemic power.[4] It establishes and maintains hierarchy within social, political, economic, educational, and religious structures, generating enduring privilege for some while inflicting ongoing harm on others. For the church, this distinction is not only sociological but also theological. Christian theology presents sin not only as personal wrongdoing but as a force that distorts relationships, corrupts community, and wounds creation.[5] Racism follows this pattern by deforming communal life, normalizing inequality, and obscuring the divine image as a relational vocation in those marked as "other."

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4. Joan Olsson, "Detour-Spotting for White Anti-Racists," *Women's Concerns,* The United Church of Canada, Spring 2000, 8. Olsson defines racism with the following formulation: "Racism=Racial Prejudice (white people and people of colour have this) + Systemic, Institutional Power (white people have this)." This formulation is very helpful to my understanding.

5. Christian theology has long understood sin not only as individual transgression but as a formative power that distorts relationships, deforms communal life, and entangles creation itself—an insight developed across traditions by theologians such as Augustine, Niebuhr, Cone, Gutiérrez, and, more recently, Willie James Jennings and Kwok Pui-lan.

Christian communities have recognized this reality with increasing clarity. Both The United Church of Canada (UCC) and the World Council of Churches (WCC) have affirmed that racism is a sin—not just a social prejudice but a theological violation that opposes the gospel itself. The UCC's landmark statement *That All May Be One* (2000) describes racism as a "denial of the gospel" and a violation of the unity God desires for humanity.[6] Similarly, the WCC explicitly recognizes racism as sin and urges churches to address not only individual prejudice but also the systemic and theological structures that support racial injustice.[7] These affirmations frame anti-racism not as a social issue adjacent to the church's mission but as a vital dimension of ecclesial faithfulness.

To name racism as a theological wound, then, is not to rush toward judgement but to refuse silence where harm has shaped faith itself. Such naming belongs to the work of discernment rather than condemnation—an Advent practice of waiting and attentiveness that resists denial and premature repair. True to the incarnation, it prepares space for God-with-us to dwell amid woundedness even before the work of healing is clear or complete.

Racism as Theological Distortion

Such distortions rarely announce themselves as falsehoods. They settle quietly into habit, liturgy, and expectation, shaping the church over time. Like Advent waiting, uncovering them requires patience with discomfort and attentiveness to what has long been treated as normal.

At its heart, racism functions like idolatry. It shifts loyalty from the living God to racial hierarchy—particularly modern constructions of whiteness—as a source of meaning, security, and authority. Christian faith, in contrast, is rooted in the incarnation. In Jesus Christ, God unites divine life with human flesh (John 1:14), rejecting hierarchies among bodies and revealing communion as God's fundamental way of being. Racism directly opposes this belief. While incarnation affirms God's presence in every body, racism ranks bodies. Where incarnation brings difference into communion, racism turns difference into domination.

In this context, racism functions as a counter-sacrament—an anti-communion.[8] Where sacrament discloses God's grace as a gift that binds, the

6. The United Church of Canada, *That All May Be One: A Report on Racism* (Toronto: United Church Publishing House, 2000).

7. World Council of Churches, *World Council of Churches' Statements and Actions on Racism, 1948–1979* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1980).

8. This language is used metaphorically rather than in a literal sacramental way, in a technical sense. By "counter-sacrament," I refer to a patterned, embodied practice that builds communities in ways that oppose the logic of communion established in Christian sacraments rather than a formal sacramental rite.

counter-sacrament works to conceal it, fracturing communion and distorting how grace is recognized and shared. While sacraments foster communities through embodied practices of belonging, racism trains communities in practices of exclusion, determining which bodies are regarded as trustworthy, authoritative, or welcome. To identify racism as sin, therefore, is to recognize that Christian discipleship itself is at risk because racism undermines the very practices through which faith is lived and transmitted.

The theological importance of racism becomes clearer when examined through the doctrine of the *imago Dei* (Gen. 1:26–28).[9] Genesis emphasizes that humanity is created in God's image not as isolated individuals but as relational beings called to shared life. The image of God is not something owned based on ability, rationality, or cultural similarity; it is a call to communion, responsibility, and mutual dignity. Racism fundamentally distorts this view. It disrupts the relational unity of the *imago Dei* by turning differences into hierarchy and relationships into means of possession and control. Humanity is no longer understood as a shared calling into relational life but reorganized as a ranking of worth. Certain bodies are treated as normative and universal, while others are rendered deficient, contextual, or suspect. Whiteness emerges as an unmarked standard for full humanity, while racialized bodies are perceived as partial or problematic.

As Willie James Jennings has argued, this distortion is not accidental but is the theological legacy of colonial Christianity, in which salvation was severed from place, land, and kinship and fused instead with civilization, possession, and domination.[10] The result is a Christian imagination formed to recognize mastery rather than mutuality, control rather than communion. Such an anthropology redefines Christian formation. Authority is tied to mastery, belonging to conformity, and leadership to control. The church may claim unity while practising exclusion or celebrate incarnation while unevenly disciplining bodies. Racism thus wounds not only those it marginalizes but also the church's understanding of humanity before God.

The Oldest Wound

Any honest reckoning with racism as a theological wound must also name what is perhaps Christianity's oldest and most persistent form of theological othering: *antisemitism*. The church's complicity in anti-Jewish teaching did not begin at the margins of Christian history; it was woven into the fabric of theological formation from an early stage. The *adversus Judaeos* tradition—a genre of Christian writing "against the Jews" that emerged in the 2nd century—taught

9. See Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* III/1 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1958), §41.2; and Jürgen Moltmann, *God in Creation* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), 215–25.

10. Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, 65–116.

generations of Christians to view Judaism as superseded, Jews as spiritually blind, and the covenant with Israel as revoked and transferred to the church.[11] This was not merely rhetorical. It formed Christian imagination, liturgy, and law, producing a theological architecture within which Jewish suffering could be ignored, justified, or even sanctified.

The consequences are not safely confined to the past. The Shoah (הַשּׁוֹאָה) or Holocaust did not emerge from a theological vacuum. While the Nazi genocide was driven by racial ideology distinct from traditional Christian teaching, it unfolded within a European culture shaped by centuries of Christian anti-Judaism—a culture in which Jews had been cast as rejected, dangerous, and outside divine care.[12] Churches were not merely passive witnesses; many actively supported or failed to resist the destruction of Jewish life.

To name racism as sin while remaining silent about antisemitism would be selective confession—a refusal to touch the wound closest to the church's own heart. Yet this silence is pervasive, even in spaces deeply committed to justice. Antisemitism is frequently overlooked, miscategorized, folded into the background of political critique or dismissed under the assumption that proximity to whiteness negates vulnerability—a deeply flawed assumption. But this omission is dangerous because antisemitism represents the template through which Christian theology first learned to construct the "other" as theologically deficient. Supersessionism claims that the church has replaced Israel, that the "old" covenant is obsolete, and that Jewish particularity is a problem to be overcome. These patterns shaped how Christians subsequently encountered other religions, cultures, and peoples.[13] Colonial Christianity's imagination of Indigenous peoples as "heathens" awaiting conversion drew in part on practices of theological exclusion first practised against Jews.[14]

Confronting this wound requires more than historical acknowledgement. It demands ongoing theological reformation: the rejection of supersessionism, the recovery of Jesus' Jewishness as constitutive rather than incidental to Christian faith, and the recognition that God's covenant with Israel has not been revoked (Rom. 11:29). The church cannot credibly confess racism as sin while leaving antisemitism unnamed, nor can it pursue intercultural communion while imagining itself as Israel's replacement rather than its grafted branch.

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11. Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Faith and Fratricide: The Theological Roots of Anti-Semitism* (New York: Seabury Press, 1974), 117–23.

12. Susannah Heschel, *The Aryan Jesus: Christian Theologians and the Bible in Nazi Germany* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).

13. The United Church of Canada, *Bearing Faithful Witness: United Church–Jewish Relations Today* (The United Church of Canada: 2003), 18.

14. Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, 140.

This acknowledgement does not compete with attention to anti-Black racism, anti-Indigenous violence, or anti-Asian hatred. Rather, it deepens understanding of how such othering operates. The same logic that constructed "the Jew" as the paradigmatic outsider has been extended across colonial and racial histories. To confront racism fully, the church must confront the theological practices that made such othering possible—practices that began with the denial of ongoing Jewish covenantal life. This theological commitment to reject antisemitism must also be held alongside the church's call to justice for all who suffer—a tension felt acutely in the Israel–Palestine conflict.

In the work of justice, the boundary between antisemitism and legitimate claims for justice in Israel–Palestine is often treated as either self-evident or impossibly blurred. In practice, it is neither. Critiques of Israeli state policies—particularly those naming realities such as occupation or settler colonialism—can be necessary and ethically urgent. Yet they become destructive when they collapse into narratives that ascribe collective guilt to Jewish people or draw upon antisemitic tropes and conspiratorial logics.

Conversely, invoking the charge of antisemitism to foreclose all critique of Israeli policies also distorts justice by silencing the lived suffering and political claims of Palestinians. A disciplined ethical posture requires "a clear distinction between our Jewish siblings in faith and the acts of the Israeli government."[15] Such a distinction is not merely a rhetorical strategy but a moral responsibility. It protects Jewish communities from being held accountable for state actions they neither author nor control while preserving the church's obligation to speak truthfully about structures of settler-colonial domination and dispossession. Holding this tension is difficult work, but it is precisely here—where solidarity is careful and language is accountable—that justice becomes more than a slogan and begins to take ethical form.

From Domination to Formation

If racism is sin and a theological distortion, it also manifests as a form of power. It endures not only through blatant hostility but also through norms that seem neutral or natural. Churches often mirror these norms by viewing white cultural practices as universal while other cultural expressions are seen as optional, contextual, or supplementary. What appears neutral thus functions as a silent form of exclusion.

As Kwok Pui-lan has shown, racism's potency is intensified through its entanglement with class, gender, colonial history, and migration, operating

15. World Council of Churches, *Report of the Programme Committee*, Central Committee Meeting, Johannesburg, South Africa, 18–24 June 2025, Document No. PRO 09 rev., 10.

across multiple axes of power rather than as a single isolated force.[16] It adapts to shifting contexts, often concealing itself behind neutral institutional language, and becomes embedded within systems that otherwise claim commitments to care, diversity, and inclusion. Symbolic gestures that leave underlying power relations untouched ultimately function to manage racism rather than dismantle it.

At its core, racism functions as domination—an alternative way of organizing society that demands loyalty.[17] It teaches communities to hoard belonging, voice, and authority as scarce resources rather than sharing them freely. To challenge racism, therefore, is to engage in a spiritual struggle: revealing false gospels that sanctify control, unlearning inherited practices of exclusion, and embodying alternative ways of connection.

Since racism is both systemic and theological, confronting it requires intentional formation. Christian discipleship has always involved being shaped and reshaped into the way of Christ. In the context of racism, this formation must include deliberate unlearning: confessing complicity, examining proximity to power, and listening attentively to voices that have long been silenced or marginalized. Such formation inevitably disrupts institutional comfort, yet it remains essential. Without it, anti-racism risks becoming rhetorical rather than transformative. Genuine formation challenges patterns of domination and fosters practices of vulnerability, accountability, and solidarity. Only through such formation can the church embody a gospel that is not merely proclaimed but lived—marked more by incarnation than idolatry, more by communion than hierarchy.

2. Hate Crimes as Signs of a Deeper Wound

As discussed earlier, racism operates not only through isolated acts of hostility but also through systems that influence belonging, vulnerability, and power. Hate crimes are the most visible expressions of these underlying dynamics. Public attention often focuses on their most obvious forms—racial slurs, assaults, or acts of vandalism—because they shock the conscience and call for immediate action. However, hate crimes should not be mistaken for the entire scope of racism. They are symptoms, not the root problem itself. Racism exists before and beyond these acts, taking hold in social, legal, and ecclesial structures that decide whose lives are protected, whose suffering is acknowledged, and whose safety is always in question.

16. Kwok Pui-lan, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 87.

17. Charles W. Mills, *The Racial Contract*, 25th anniversary ed. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2022), esp. chaps. 1 and 3.

Across many countries worldwide, reported hate crimes have risen in recent years.[18] In Canada, police-reported hate crimes have grown significantly, disproportionately impacting Indigenous, Black, Jewish, Muslim, and Asian populations.[19] These figures do not fully capture the extent of racism; instead, they serve as signs of deeper social, political, and cultural divisions. During the COVID-19 pandemic, these fractures became especially visible in Asian Canadian communities. Ordinary activities—such as riding public transit, walking through neighbourhoods, or working in public spaces—suddenly carried heightened risk.

I experienced these realities firsthand while serving in an intercultural ministry in Vancouver, British Columbia, within a mainly white congregation that included a Mandarin-speaking community. When the pandemic started, members who once moved freely around the city became afraid of buses and trains. Families faced verbal attacks, being told to "go back to China" or hearing phrases like "China virus." The accumulation of these encounters created not only fear but also deep, ongoing trauma.

Yet within this experience of exclusion, practices of resilience and faith also appeared. One congregation member, Andrea Su Xu, expressed both grief and hope through poetry:

I Know[20]

2020 has been an extraordinarily difficult year
I know

18. The United Nations has warned of a "disturbing groundswell of xenophobia, racism and intolerance" worldwide, amplified by digital communication; see United Nations, *Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech* (New York: United Nations, 2019). National monitoring bodies record the same pattern within their own jurisdictions. In the United States, the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) tabulated 9,354 antisemitic incidents in 2024, a 5 percent rise over 2023 and the highest annual total in the 46 years it has kept records; see ADL, *Audit of Antisemitic Incidents 2024* (New York: Anti-Defamation League, 2025). In the United Kingdom, the Community Security Trust recorded 3,528 incidents in 2024, an 18 percent decline from the record set in 2023 yet still the second-highest figure it has ever reported; see CST, *Antisemitic Incidents Report 2024* (London: Community Security Trust, 2025). Taken together, these counts indicate not a single year's spike but a sustained elevation since October 2023.

19. Statistics Canada, "Police-Reported Hate Crime in Canada, 2024," *The Daily*, March 30, 2026, https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/260330/dq260330a-eng.htm. Police services reported 4,882 hate crimes in 2024, a 1 percent rise over 2023 and the sixth consecutive annual increase; the total has more than doubled since 2018. The near-flat 2024 result followed a 34 percent jump between 2022 and 2023 and masks variation by motivation: incidents targeting race or ethnicity rose 8 percent, to 2,377. These counts reflect only incidents reported to and classified by police, and so understate the underlying incidence.

20. Andrea Su Xu, "*I Know*," poem cited in Hyuk Cho, "We Can't Breathe Until," sermon preached at West Point Grey United Church (Vancouver, BC, 7 June 2020), used by permission.

The world is in turmoil
Many people have lost their jobs, even their lives
I know

When you attack an Asian woman or an elderly person
I know
You are filled with fear
I know

Jesus said "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34)
I know
Better to light a candle than to curse the darkness
I know

Only love is eternal; only faith is indestructible
I know
For every person of every race is a child of God
You know.

I sat with these words for a long time after Andrea shared them. They resist easy resolution. They hold sorrow and faith together, acknowledging harm without losing dignity. The repeated refrain "I know" carries both lament and defiance: a refusal to be erased, a quiet insistence on being seen. And the final turn, "You know," extends recognition even to those who have caused harm, calling them back to a shared humanity they have betrayed. This is not cheap grace. It is the costly witness of those who suffer yet refuse to abandon the gospel's vision of belonging.

Hate crimes aim not only to hurt individuals but to frighten entire communities—to remind them that their sense of belonging is fragile. At the same time, such testimonies demonstrate resilience rooted in the gospel, upholding humanity where it faces danger. Hate crimes, however, are only the most visible expression of racism. Many incidents go unreported due to fear, mistrust of authorities, or exhaustion from repeated harm. Furthermore, acts of violence are supported by broader systems: racialized media narratives, exclusionary policies, and long histories of colonialism and slavery. Because

of this, hate crimes are often called "message crimes"—acts meant to mark boundaries, send warnings, and reinforce exclusion.[21]

This reality exposes the limits of Canada's official multiculturalism—a theme I will develop more fully in chapter 3. Since its introduction in 1971, multiculturalism has shaped a national identity centred on inclusion and diversity. Yet critics have long noted that it often remains superficial—celebrating food, festivals, and cultural visibility while leaving deeper inequalities intact.[22] Indigenous scholars point out that multiculturalism operates within a settler-colonial framework that obscures ongoing dispossession.[23] Black Canadian scholars similarly argue that anti-Black racism is frequently absorbed into a general narrative of diversity, rendering its specific histories and harms less visible.[24]

Where multiculturalism prioritizes integration without justice, it becomes fragile, promoting diversity while pressuring minorities to conform to dominant norms and leaving existing power relations unchanged. As I have argued elsewhere, when Canada's model of integrative multiculturalism persists without addressing systemic inequities, "it may actually promote further cultural and religious conflict."[25]

This reflects what I call *crumbs theology*: inclusion that affirms difference without redistributing power, making belonging conditional rather than shared. Policy initiatives like heritage festivals or commemorative months may increase visibility, but without structural reforms in law, education, the economy, and governance, these measures risk becoming merely symbolic. As the prophet Amos reminds us, God takes no pleasure in festivals disconnected from justice: "Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream" (Amos 5:24). The rise in hate crimes illustrates how easily multicultural

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21. American Psychological Association, *Hate Crimes Today: An Age-Old Foe in Modern Dress*, Psychology Examines the Issues (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 1998).

22. Cho, *Relation without Relation,* 23–38.

23. Glen Sean Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 1–24, 59–78; Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, *As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom through Radical Resistance* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 39–54.

24. Robyn Maynard argues that Canadian multicultural and diversity narratives often mask the specific histories and ongoing harms of anti-Black racism, rendering these realities invisible within broader talks of diversity and inclusion; see Robyn Maynard, *Policing Black Lives: State Violence in Canada from Slavery to the Present* (Halifax: Fernwood Publishing, 2017). Desmond Cole similarly documents the limits of Canadian diversity discourse in capturing the depth of anti-Black racism; see *The Skin We're In: A Year of Black Resistance and Power* (Toronto: Doubleday Canada, 2020).

25. Hyuk Cho, "*Sharing Concern for Justice: Becoming an Intercultural Church as a Postcolonial Mission Practice in the Canadian Context of Integrative Multiculturalism*" (ThD diss., University of Toronto, 2017), 23.

celebrations can conceal injustice instead of addressing it—and how urgently the church must move beyond symbols toward real change. To understand what such change requires, we turn now to scripture's own critique of partial inclusion.

3. From Crumbs to the Banquet: A Biblical-Theological Critique

To imagine how the church might move beyond tokenism, scripture offers a sustained theological imagination shaped by food and shared meals as signs of God's reign. From manna in the wilderness to Isaiah's vision of a rich feast, from Jesus' table fellowship with those pushed to the margins to the eucharist itself, the biblical witness depicts God's hospitality as abundant, inclusive, and life-giving. When this vision is taken seriously, practices that offer only crumbs—symbolic inclusion without shared authority or structural change—are exposed not as partial expressions of the gospel but as distortions of it.

The encounter between Jesus and the Syrophoenician woman (Mark 7:24–30; Matt. 15:21–28) provides a decisive lens for this critique. When a Gentile mother seeks healing for her daughter, Jesus' initial response draws a boundary between insiders and outsiders, echoing long-standing ethnic hierarchies: "Let the children be fed first ..." (Mark 7:27). The woman refuses both silence and resignation. "Even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs" (Mark 7:28). Her reply neither denies injustice nor accepts it quietly; instead, it exposes the scarcity logic that sustains exclusion.[26] Jesus responds with healing. What begins as boundary-keeping is transformed as the imagined limits of the table are unsettled and grace extends beyond guarded lines.

This story unsettles Christian communities because it mirrors familiar patterns of partial inclusion—patterns that are often inherited rather than consciously chosen. Communities learn how to make room for difference without reworking the structures that organize belonging. Marginalized groups may be welcomed through recognition without authority, hospitality without voice, presence without shared power, while the table itself remains intact. Practices such as "multicultural Sundays" reveal this tension: racialized members contribute food, music, or language on designated occasions, even as theological norms and decision-making processes remain centred elsewhere. Such gestures may signal openness, yet they also disclose how inclusion can occur without transformation.

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26. Isaiah 66:18–21 reflects an intra-Jewish struggle to imagine Gentile inclusion without dissolving Israel's covenantal particularity. The nations are gathered to witness Yahweh's glory and participate in worship, yet Jerusalem and Israel's liturgical framework remain central. Jesus' engagement with the Syrophoenician woman should therefore be read as participating in—and intensifying—these Second Temple Jewish debates rather than rejecting them. See Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 40–66* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 258–59.

Theologically, crumbs name more than individual shortcomings; they reveal an imagination shaped by scarcity and control. Crumbs assume that grace is limited—something to be managed, portioned, and distributed by those already seated at the table. In this sense, a "crumbs theology" echoes imperial logics long at work in social life: difference is acknowledged, even celebrated, while the structures governing belonging remain unchanged. The issue, then, is not simply who holds power but how power itself has been learned, normalized, and preserved.

Scripture, by contrast, consistently testifies to divine abundance: manna without distinction (Ex. 16), wine flowing freely at Cana (John 2:1–11), baskets overflowing after the feeding of the crowds (Mark 6:30–44). God's economy is not shaped by fear of scarcity but by generosity that exceeds calculation. To settle for crumbs is therefore to misrepresent the character of God as the giver of fullness and life.

The Syrophoenician story also carries Christological weight. The woman is not a passive recipient of grace but an active agent of revelation whose words interrupt Jesus' ministry and broaden its horizon. Jesus is portrayed not as dispensing grace from a closed system but as listening and allowing encounter to reshape his mission. This does not suggest moral deficiency in Jesus; rather, it discloses the depth of incarnation as relational openness rather than static authority. As Paul writes, Christ's self-emptying (*kenosis*) is enacted through vulnerability and openness (Phil. 2:6–8). Here, *kenosis* unfolds within a concrete, transforming relationship.

This Christological pattern carries ecclesial implications. If the church participates in Christ's self-giving life, it, too, must remain open to interruption, learning, and change through encounter. Such reorientation is neither automatic nor guaranteed. In some communities, however, practices that begin as symbolic hospitality can become sites of deeper transformation. I have witnessed this in my own ministry. In one congregation, a yearly Lunar New Year celebration was marked by genuine joy: Mandarin-speaking members shared food, wore traditional clothing, and told stories shaped by their cultural histories. Initially, the celebration functioned as a momentary enrichment. Over time, as it was held alongside other communal practices, it began to reshape the church's shared life more deeply. Cultural heritage was no longer received only as a gift offered on special occasions; it gradually influenced how the community understood itself, discerned leadership, and exercised authority. Slowly and quietly, the tables were turning at the banquet.

When churches tolerate racism, they enact crumbs theology: presence without power, celebration without structural change, belonging offered on set terms. An intercultural church must move instead toward a reimagined table marked by shared authority, epistemic justice, and mutual responsibility. The

difference between crumbs and banquet is not cosmetic but paradigmatic. It marks two fundamentally different ecclesial imaginations—one that adds diversity to an unchanged structure, and another that allows encounter to transform the structure itself. This contrast can be summarized diagnostically.

Table 2.1 Diagnosing the Table: Crumbs vs. Banquet Theology

Feature	The Theology of Crumbs	The Theology of the Banquet
Biblical Paradigm	"Send her away" (Disciples, Matt. 15:23)	"Even the dogs ..." (Syrophoenician woman, Mark 7:28)
Authority	Centred, guarded, monocultural	Shared, distributed (round table)
Diversity	Decorative (food, music, symbols)	Structural (liturgy, leadership, norms)
Inclusion	Conditional ("You are welcome if ...")	Constitutive ("We are not complete without you.")
God's Economy	Scarcity (hoarding power)	Abundance (*kenosis* / self-giving)

This diagnostic table clarifies the underlying logic at work. Crumbs theology operates by *addition*: introducing diverse people, symbols, or roles while leaving foundational structures intact. Banquet theology operates by *transformation*: reimagining authority, redistributing power, and reconceiving belonging. The difference is not merely cosmetic. In crumbs theology, the Syrophoenician woman might be invited to the table but would not shape the menu, set the liturgy, or determine who else belongs. In banquet theology, her cry becomes a prophetic interruption that transforms the gathering itself.

This distinction helps explain why so many well-intentioned diversity initiatives falter. The problem is not lack of effort but lack of depth. Crumbs theology assumes the table is fundamentally sound and merely requires more diverse guests. Churches celebrate heritage months, showcase diverse testimonies, and recruit people of colour for committees, while leaving unasked the deeper questions: Whose theology shapes our preaching? Whose history structures our calendar? Whose cultural expressions are treated as normative, and whose as exceptional? Whose pain is centred, and whose is deferred? When these questions remain untouched, diversity becomes performance rather than transformation. The move from crumbs to banquet is therefore not incremental

but paradigmatic.[27] Banquet theology recognizes that God is the host, the table is God's gift, and those who imagined themselves hosts discover that they, too, are guests.

Letty M. Russell articulates this ecclesial vision through her metaphor of the round table.[28] For Russell, the church is not organized around fixed seats of authority but gathered in a circle, where power is shared and leadership is exercised communally rather than through domination. Because no place is privileged and no voice is structurally silenced, the round table embodies God's hospitality in concrete form.

Vine Deloria Jr. presses the circle wider. Describing religion as the pursuit of right relations rather than domination, he understands kinship as extending beyond human community to animals, land, and the natural world.[29] Read alongside Russell, this is not simply agreement but enlargement: a table drawn around persons alone remains narrower than the relations Deloria names. The church that redistributes authority among its members may still be seated on land it has never learned to regard as kin.

The banquet requires us to abandon the safety of the host who controls the guest list. As Jennings reminds us, the work of the Spirit is the work of gathering—bringing together fragments that do not naturally fit. A "crumbs theology" seeks to manage these fragments to maintain the illusion of wholeness; a "banquet theology" learns, as Jennings puts it, to "glory in the crowd"—accepting a reconciliation it cannot control, where self-sufficiency is undone by the presence of the other.[30]

Banquet theology also reshapes the meaning of the eucharist. Communion is not a guarded ritual but the active enactment of God's generous and reconciling hospitality. As Orthodox theologian Alexander Schmemann describes it, the eucharist is the *sacrament of the kingdom*: in the liturgy, the church offers the

27. This critique does not reject all incremental or pedagogical approaches to change. In many contexts, gradualism rightly recognizes the time required for formation and unlearning. The concern here is not with small steps as such but with their being treated as sufficient. Incremental practices become crumbs theology when they substitute symbols for structural change, justify delay as patience, or align the pace of justice with the comfort of those least affected. Banquet theology names the horizon that prevents gradualism from settling into permanence.

28. Letty M. Russell, *Church in the Round: Feminist Interpretation of the Church* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1993), esp. chaps. 5 and 6.

29. Vine Deloria Jr., *God Is Red: A Native View of Religion*, 3rd ed. (Golden: Fulcrum Publishing, 2003), 77–94.

30. Willie James Jennings, *After Whiteness: An Education in Belonging* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2020), 13–14, where this formation is oriented toward communion rather than mastery or self-sufficiency.

whole world back to God in thanksgiving.[31] A monocultural or exclusionary table is therefore not simply inhospitable; it is a liturgical contradiction, withholding the fullness of creation from the offering. To reduce the feast of the kingdom to crumbs—whether through exclusionary practices or enforced uniformity—is to betray its meaning.

Moving from crumbs to banquet requires courage: the unlearning of privilege, the endurance of discomfort, and the willingness to be changed. Yet it also yields joy. The Syrophoenician woman's cry—"Even the dogs eat the crumbs"—exposes the poverty of scarcity-shaped faith and summons the church toward God's feast. Jesus' willingness to be interrupted models the posture required of disciples today. In a world where racism continues to distribute dignity and opportunity unevenly, the church is called to embody a different economy: not crumbs for some and fullness for others but a shared table where every culture offers its gifts, every voice participates in discernment, and every person is fed.

Interlude:

Between Mary and the Syrophoenician Woman

If the church is to move from crumbs to banquet, it must learn this economy not only through its practices at the table but by listening to the voices in scripture that refuse silence and reshape God's hospitality from within the story itself.

Mary and the Syrophoenician woman are differently situated within the biblical narrative. Mary, a Jewish peasant under Roman occupation, is drawn into God's redemptive work through divine initiative. The Syrophoenician woman, an unnamed Gentile outsider, forces her way into the story by confronting Jesus at the margins of his ministry. Yet when these two figures are read in dialogue, a shared theological pattern emerges that is crucial for an anti-racist reading of scripture. Both women speak where silence is expected, challenge the boundaries of authority and belonging, and participate in expanding the imagination of God's hospitality beyond inherited limits.

Mary's Magnificat (Luke 1:46–55) is not a quiet hymn of personal devotion but a public proclamation of reversal. It declares the downfall of the powerful and the rise of the lowly, the filling of the hungry and the emptying of the rich. Rooted in Israel's covenantal story, the Magnificat affirms God's faithfulness to the oppressed and warns

31. Alexander Schmemann, *The Eucharist: Sacrament of the Kingdom*, trans. Paul Kachur (Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1988), 27–48.

against the church's tendency to equate comfort with faithfulness. Through Mary's voice, abundance is heralded as promise, and justice is described as the mark of God's reign.

The Syrophoenician woman offers no song but a protest: "Even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." Speaking outside Israel's covenantal narrative, she directly challenges exclusion and rejects a theology of scarcity. Her intervention demonstrates that transformation often occurs at boundaries, where inherited assumptions are questioned, and even Jesus is seen as responsive to challenge. In this encounter, she embodies the agency of the marginalized in revealing the truth about God's grace.

Together, Mary and the Syrophoenician woman represent a vital tension within the church. Mary proclaims abundance from within; the Syrophoenician woman demands it from without. One proclaims God's justice as a promise; the other presses for its realization. Interculturally, their voices challenge a single, dominant interpretive centre and affirm that God's reign is revealed through multiple locations, experiences, and ways of speaking.

This paired reading raises thought-provoking questions for churches and their leaders. Are we willing to sing Mary's song—the voices of those marginalized within our own traditions—without softening or distorting it? Are we ready to listen to the challenges of outsiders who expose the boundaries we have accepted as normal? Where do we still offer crumbs instead of sharing the fullness of the table?

Between Mary's proclamation and the persistence of the Syrophoenician woman, a spirituality of solidarity emerges: a form of responsibility across differences rooted in the irreducible dignity of others. But what does such solidarity look like in practice? It looks like churches that do not merely tolerate marginalized voices but actively amplify them, inviting those voices to shape liturgy, theology, and governance rather than simply offering testimony on designated occasions. It looks like congregations that redistribute authority, asking not "How can we include you?" but "How must we change?" It looks like communities dedicated to reparative justice—acknowledging that past harm requires present action and that reconciliation without repair is merely another form of crumbs. Inspired by the Spirit, this solidarity is not a programme to implement but a posture to inhabit: attentive, humble, and willing to be transformed by those the church has too often ignored. This interlude, therefore, is not a pause in the argument but a hermeneutical invitation: to read scripture interculturally, to reject crumbs theology, and to embody the banquet of God's reign.

4. Living the Banquet Now: Formation for an Anti-Racist Church

This emphasis on formation directly addresses what earlier sections have described as the church's theological wound. If racism corrupts the church's memory, practices, and imagination, it cannot be remedied by reactive responses alone but requires ongoing processes of healing and re-formation.

Too often, churches respond to racism mainly during moments of crisis. When a hate crime occurs, a vigil is organized; when a racist comment is made, leaders issue a statement; and when a public controversy arises, the church struggles to articulate its stance. Such responses are often genuine and sometimes necessary. However, they remain largely reactive, viewing racism as an episodic disruption rather than a systemic reality that influences community life.

Racism must be recognized not just as a series of isolated incidents but as a systemic and spiritual reality deeply embedded in institutions, practices, and social imaginaries. Therefore, the church's calling is not merely to respond after damage has been done but to develop communal practices that embody justice, dignity, and communion—values expected in God's reign before that reign is fully realized.

What might this kind of formation look like in practice? If the church learns the economy of God's hospitality by listening to voices in scripture that refuse silence, it must also learn to listen to such voices in its own life together. In one congregation I served, we began what we called learning together—monthly gatherings in which racialized members were invited to share their experiences of church life: not as testimony offered for others to affirm but as insight the whole community was asked to receive and reflect upon.

The early sessions were often awkward. White members heard, sometimes for the first time, how well-intentioned comments had caused harm: the assumption that a Korean member would "naturally" organize the potluck, the surprise when a Black member quoted Jürgen Moltmann, the repeated mispronunciation of names. These moments were not framed as accusations to be defended against but as interruptions that exposed how the church's everyday practices quietly sorted people into insiders and outsiders.

Over time, learning together began to reshape the congregation's common life. Before selecting hymns, we asked which musical traditions were being included—or excluded. Before scheduling events, we considered whose work patterns, caregiving responsibilities, and cultural rhythms were being centred. The process was slow and imperfect, but it marked a shift from reaction to formation: from managing moments of harm after the fact toward cultivating a community increasingly attentive to the voices it had learned, for too long, not to hear.

Such formation becomes apparent through worship that names injustice instead of spiritualizing it, in education that uncovers distorted histories, in mission shaped by voices from marginalized communities, and in public witness centred on equity and justice. In this way, the church challenges a theology of crumbs—symbolic inclusion without shared power—and instead embodies the banquet of God's abundance as a continuous discipline.

This approach to formation is not preventive from a managerial or risk-reduction perspective; it is fundamentally eschatological. It challenges the normalization of exclusion by embodying alternative patterns of life in the present. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer insisted in 1933, the church's responsibility is not only to bind up those crushed beneath the wheel of injustice but to "put a spoke in the wheel itself."[32] Faithful discipleship, therefore, refuses to accept racism as inevitable and strives to live now in ways that anticipate God's reconciling future.

Understanding racism as a systemic issue reshapes the church's responsibilities. The central question shifts from *How can individuals be kinder?* to *How must institutions—including our own—be transformed?* The church is thus called to ongoing formation, public advocacy, and structural change, asking whether its practices reinforce scarcity or reflect God's economy of abundance.

This shift also transforms the church's perspective on mission. Traditionally, mission has often moved from centres of power to those perceived as needing help, reinforcing colonial hierarchies and depicting marginalized communities as recipients rather than companions. Mission rooted in the margins reverses this trend. It affirms that those pushed to society's edges are subjects of God's liberating work, whose experiences and spiritual wisdom are vital to renewing the entire church.[33] From the margins, the gospel is frequently seen as a means of survival amid oppression, a call for justice, and a promise of belonging where exclusion prevails.

Such formation depends on a strong pneumatology. The Spirit creates spaces of communion where hostility once existed. At Pentecost (Acts 2:1–21), difference is not erased but affirmed: many languages are spoken, and all are drawn into shared life. Diversity becomes not an obstacle to the gospel but the very means through which it is heard. Attentiveness to the Spirit requires

32. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "The Church and the Jewish Question," in *Berlin: 1932–1933*, ed. Larry L. Rasmussen, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works 12 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), 365. Bonhoeffer names three responsibilities of the church toward an unjust state: to question the legitimacy of its actions, to aid its victims whether or not they belong to the Christian community, and, when required, to act against the machinery of injustice itself.

33. Rejecting colonial models of mission, WCC's *Together towards Life* insists that marginalized communities are not objects of mission but primary witnesses to God's life-giving work. From the margins, mission becomes a struggle for justice, dignity, and inclusion that challenges the whole church to conversion and renewal.

allowing church structures to be reshaped before they become rigid instruments of exclusion and listening seriously to the Spirit's unsettling promptings, often voiced from the margins. Chapter 6 will return to Pentecost more fully, exploring how the Spirit's work forms communities capable of listening across difference. For now, it is enough to note that anti-racist formation is not merely a human effort at institutional improvement; it is participation in the Spirit's ongoing work of creating communion from division.

Formation for an anti-racist church is therefore both profoundly theological and highly practical. It involves partnering with God's active grace by acting before harm becomes commonplace and by creating conditions conducive to communal flourishing. The church does not passively wait for the reign of God; rather, it anticipates that reign by practising the banquet now—redistributing voice, sharing authority, and refusing crumbs. In a Canadian context where multicultural symbols often conceal structural inequality, such formation is not optional. It is a theological imperative.

Conclusion: Confronting the Wound, Pursuing Healing

This chapter has argued that racism is not a peripheral concern in intercultural theology but a theological wound that distorts the church's understanding of God, humanity, and community. Racism is not simply a social problem or an individual moral failure. It is a structural, spiritual, and ecclesial reality that reshapes belonging, authority, and mission. When left unnamed, it infiltrates worship, formation, leadership, and public witness, turning practices meant to sustain communion into mechanisms of hierarchy and exclusion. To confront this wound is therefore a necessary act of theological truth-telling.

Naming racism truthfully is a step toward healing, though neither quick nor painless. As sin, racism functions idolatrously: it replaces the incarnate God with racial hierarchy, substitutes control for communion, and organizes love around scarcity instead of abundance. As a distortion of the *imago Dei*, it wounds not only those it marginalizes but also the church's capacity to recognize the divine image in every person. Healing cannot begin until these distortions are confronted openly.

The contrast between crumbs and banquet has guided this chapter's argument. Crumbs theology offers welcome without shared authority, celebrates diversity without structural transformation, and extends hospitality without redistributing power. Banquet theology insists that belonging must be constitutive rather than conditional, that difference should reshape the entire community rather than decorate its margins, and that leadership, worship, and mission must be reordered accordingly. The gospel does not ask the marginalized to accept crumbs; it calls the church to expand the table.

This shift signals a decisive change in the church's responsibility. Responding to hate crimes and moments of crisis remains necessary, but such responses alone cannot heal the deeper wound. Racism must be addressed through ongoing formation, intentional education, and institutional transformation that dismantles exclusion before it becomes normalized. This work is eschatological: it anticipates God's future by practising justice and generosity in the present.

What remains is a further theological task. Anti-racism names what must be resisted, but it is not sufficient on its own. The church requires a theological framework capable of holding difference without hierarchy, maintaining plurality without fragmentation, and imagining communion without erasure. Chapter 3 turns to this task by exploring intercultural theology as a way of doing theology shaped by encounter, asymmetry, and mutual transformation, in which difference is not a problem to be managed but a gift through which communion is given. Anti-racism, therefore, is not a corrective moment but a lifelong ecclesial formation in the way of incarnation.

Questions for Reflection

1. Reframing the Problem: The chapter argues that racism is not just a social injustice or individual moral failure but a *theological wound* that distorts our understanding of God and the *imago Dei*. How does viewing racism as a spiritual and theological problem change the way our church approaches confession and healing compared to viewing it simply as a social issue?
2. Diagnosing "Crumbs Theology": The author describes crumbs theology as symbolic inclusion without shared power—celebrating culture (food, music) while keeping authority guarded. Looking at our own community (worship, leadership, or decision-making), can you identify areas where we might be offering "crumbs" rather than full participation at the table? If we were to move from crumbs to banquet, what would it cost us? What resistance might we encounter—from within ourselves or from others? What might we have to give up?
3. Biblical Voices: The chapter contrasts Mary (who proclaims God's justice from *within* the tradition) with the Syrophoenician woman (who challenges exclusion from the *margins*). In our church context, whose voices are currently playing the role of the Syrophoenician woman—challenging our boundaries or being resisted? Are we listening to them as agents of revelation?
4. From Reaction to Formation: Many churches only address racism reactively—after a hate crime or public controversy occurs. What would it look like for our community to shift toward *formation*—treating anti-racism as an ongoing spiritual discipline that shapes us before a crisis happens?
5. Practising the Banquet: The chapter concludes with a call to "practise the banquet now" by redistributing authority and reimagining belonging. What is one concrete step we could take right now to move from conditional welcome ("You are welcome if…") to constitutive belonging ("We are not complete without you")?

3

Light from Elsewhere:

Epiphany and the Displacement of Truth

Epiphany

The previous chapter identified a wound. This chapter asks how we encounter the truth that heals. Epiphany unsettles a common assumption: that light, wisdom, or authority can be possessed by the centre or secured through agreement. It reveals truth as something that arrives from elsewhere: through the stranger, across difference, within relationships that resist control. The wisdom of Epiphany is that such truth cannot be generated from within the wounded centre itself. Healing requires what the centre cannot produce on its own—insight that arrives from elsewhere, carried by strangers, mediated through difference, appearing where the powerful do not expect.

This is why the church turns to Epiphany not as a minor feast on the liturgical calendar but as a theological pattern that names how God chooses to be known. What is at stake here is not only ecclesial practice but theology itself. If God's self-disclosure arrives in this way, then ways of knowing shaped by mastery, neutrality, or possession are no longer sufficient.

In many Western congregations, Christmas is an event that is intensively prepared, briefly celebrated, and quickly packed away. By the time Epiphany appears on the calendar, attention has already shifted elsewhere. In the Orthodox tradition, however, the season tells a different story. Epiphany—or Theophany, the feast of the Jordan—is not an appendix to Christmas but its culmination. Within this liturgical practice, the incarnation reaches theological clarity not at birth alone but in how and where Christ is revealed.

This contrast discloses a deeper theological claim. Epiphany disrupts the assumption that God's self-disclosure unfolds according to dominant rhythms or singular cultural timelines. The light of Christ does not belong to one people, one tradition, or one location of authority. It appears when and where it wills—often later than expected, often beyond the centre, and often carried by those the centre did not anticipate. To follow the light after Christmas is therefore to accept displacement as a condition of faithfulness—to trust that God's presence is made known where certainty gives way to humility and where vulnerability becomes a site of unlearning.

The gospel narrative reinforces this logic. The journey of the Magi (Matt. 2:1–12) unsettles the expectation that God will be found where religious authority and political power already reside.[1] Drawn by a light that originates beyond familiar boundaries, the Magi pass through Jerusalem—the presumed centre of meaning—only to find that the centre is unaware of what is happening. They are redirected toward Bethlehem, an unremarkable and vulnerable place. Revelation, in this telling, does not occur through proximity to power but through movement, correction, and risk. The Magi encounter God not as an achievement secured but as a gift received through displacement.

Such displacement is rarely neutral or painless. The loss of epistemic centrality—the assumption that one's own perspective provides the measure of truth—is often accompanied by grief. The Turkish concept of *hüzün* helps name this dimension: the sorrow that arises when illumination also involves the collapse of inherited certainties. Epiphany thus marks not only the manifestation of Christ but a reorientation of the church's posture toward truth. The church does not own the light; it receives it, often through the witness of the stranger.

This insight transforms theology itself. If God is encountered through difference, theology cannot stay the same. Intercultural theology is not simply a way to handle diversity or a supplement to stable tradition. It is a response to how God chooses to be known. It presumes that revelation is relational, that truth emerges through encounter, and that no single community or tradition can claim exclusive access to the light.[2]

Such a claim demands discipline rather than naïveté. The church celebrates Epiphany within histories marked by colonialism, racism, and theological practices that have too often equated unity with sameness. This chapter therefore approaches intercultural theology not as an abstract ideal but as a practice shaped by wounded histories and unsettled identities. Like Epiphany itself, it disrupts premature closure, disciplines the church in attentive listening, and forms a community capable of receiving light that does not originate from its own centre.

What follows is an exploration of intercultural theology as a way of doing theology after Epiphany. In contrast to multicultural models that manage difference and dialogical approaches that presume symmetry, this chapter argues

1. Horsley, *The Liberation of Christmas*, 53–60.

2. This claim requires careful handling. Some traditions—particularly within Orthodox Christianity—understand themselves as the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church, entrusted with the fullness of the apostolic faith. This book does not seek to adjudicate such ecclesiological claims. Rather, it suggests that even communities confident in the fullness of what they have received may still encounter God's light refracted through the witness of others—not as a remedy for deficient faith but as an enlargement of vision within the mystery they already inhabit. The Magi, after all, were not empty-handed; they brought gifts. Encounter does not require theological poverty, only theological humility.

for an intercultural epistemology grounded in encounter, vulnerability, and sustained presence. Ultimately, it suggests that this way of knowing is rooted in a cosmotheandric vision of reality—a conviction that God, humanity, and the world are already bound together, making intercultural life not merely an ethical option but a response to the grain of reality itself.

1. Why Intercultural Theology Is Necessary: The Limits of Multicultural Imagination

Chapter 2 concluded by naming racism as a wound that distorts the church's life and witness. This wound is not only social or moral but theological; it shapes how the church imagines belonging, authority, and truth itself. If anti-racism names what must be resisted, and Epiphany names the light we seek, we must ask: How is a church capable of such encounter actually formed? How can the church hold difference without hierarchy, maintain plurality without fragmentation, and imagine communion without erasure? These questions cannot be answered by a change of approach alone. They require a re-examination of the theological assumptions that have shaped ecclesial life. This chapter begins that work by examining why intercultural theology is necessary and distinguishing it from the multicultural approaches many churches have already embraced.

Diversity After Christendom

The contemporary church finds itself in an in-between time. Long-standing certainties about culture, authority, and belonging—many inherited from Christendom—have loosened or collapsed. At the same time, new forms of diversity, migration, and pluralism continue to reshape congregational life with increasing speed. In many contexts, Christianity no longer occupies a culturally dominant position. It exists alongside other faiths, worldviews, and ways of life, often within the same neighbourhood or even the same congregation. These shifts are not merely sociological developments requiring managerial adaptation; they raise theological questions that go to the heart of what the church understands itself to be.

In response, many churches have turned to multicultural frameworks. In countries such as Canada, Australia, and Sweden, multiculturalism has been institutionalized as public policy, emphasizing the preservation of cultural identities rather than assimilation. This context has quietly but profoundly shaped ecclesial responses. Within congregations, multiculturalism often appears through visible practices: multilingual worship, intercultural celebrations, and public statements of welcome.

These practices matter. They have brought visibility, dignity, and joy to communities long rendered invisible. They have challenged older assumptions that implicitly linked Christian faith to particular dominant cultures, helping to

disrupt assimilationist models that equated belonging with conformity.[3] In this sense, multiculturalism has functioned as an important corrective, creating space where difference can be *seen*. Yet Epiphany invites a more searching question: *What happens when difference is welcomed, but the centre itself does not move?*

The Limits of Multiculturalism

When multiculturalism becomes the church's primary theological imagination, its limits become increasingly apparent.[4] Multiculturalism tends to address diversity descriptively rather than transformationally. It names difference, accommodates it, and often celebrates it, but it does so without fundamentally reworking how power, authority, and belonging are organized. As a result, diversity is often treated as an addition to an existing stable core rather than as a force capable of reshaping that core itself. Differences may be welcomed, but the deeper structures that govern ecclesial life remain intact.

Beneath familiar practices of inclusion lie differing theological imaginations of reality itself. Table 3.1 contrasts multiculturalism and interculturality as two distinct ways of understanding difference, relation, and transformation within the life of the church. These contrasts reveal not merely different strategies but different accounts of how power is shared, how culture is understood, and how the centre of ecclesial life is formed, setting the stage for the three critiques that follow.

Table 3.1 Social Imaginations of Difference

Feature	Multicultural Approach	Intercultural Approach
Primary Orientation	Display	Transformation
Difference	Difference is made visible and recognized	Difference is relational and transformative
Relational Ethic	Tolerance	Mutual change
Posture	Difference is managed through non-interference	Difference is engaged through vulnerability and learning
Cultural Practice	Cultural showcase	Shared power

3. Hyuk Cho, "'We Are Not Alone': Historical Journey of The United Church of Canada's Response to Become an Intercultural Church," *International Review of Mission* 100, no. 1 (2011): 48–61.

4. For a critical analysis of Canadian multiculturalism, see Cho, *Relation without Relation*, 23–38.

Diversity	Diversity is symbolic and sequential	Diversity reshapes structures and norms
Social Imagination	Mosaic / Salad bowl	Communion-in-difference
Communal Outcome	Coexistence without structural change	Shared life shaped by responsibility and accountability

First, multiculturalism manages difference without transforming power. Within multicultural frameworks, difference is typically understood as something to be incorporated into existing structures rather than as something that questions how those structures were formed. Congregations may become ethnically or culturally diverse while leadership norms, theological assumptions, and decision-making processes remain unchanged. Worship may include multiple languages, yet the criteria for theological legitimacy continue to reflect dominant traditions. Difference is accommodated, but authority remains concentrated. Inclusion becomes additive rather than structural. Power is redistributed symbolically but not substantively. This allows churches to appear diverse while preserving the very patterns of power that originally marginalized difference.

Second, multiculturalism treats culture as possession rather than relation. Culture is often imagined as something individuals or communities *have*—a set of practices, expressions, or symbols that can be displayed, shared, or preserved. Food, music, dress, and language become markers of identity offered to the collective. While such expressions are meaningful, this framework risks reducing culture to a static representation. It obscures the ways culture is formed through ongoing relationships, shaped by history, power, and encounter. When culture is treated as possession, theology remains insulated from being changed by lived relations across difference—and from the epistemic claims those relations make.

Third, multiculturalism stabilizes the centre by celebrating the margins. In ecclesial practice, the centre often remains unnamed and unexamined—frequently white, Western, and norm-setting—while difference is curated at the edges. Marginalized communities become visible, but primarily as contributors whose difference enriches the whole without redefining it. Celebration replaces accountability. Recognition substitutes for shared authority. The centre appears generous without becoming vulnerable. As a result, difference is acknowledged without being allowed to reconfigure the imagination of the whole.

Intercultural theology responds to these limits by transforming multiculturalism's underlying assumptions. Where multiculturalism manages difference without transforming power, intercultural theology insists on structural redistribution: leadership, decision-making, and theological authority must be reshaped by those previously marginalized, not merely opened to their participation. Where multiculturalism treats culture as possession—something

to display—intercultural theology understands culture as relation, formed and contested through ongoing encounter. Theology becomes accountable to lived experience across difference—shaped and challenged by it—not merely informed about it. And where multiculturalism stabilizes the centre by celebrating the margins, intercultural theology names a harder truth: there is no stable centre. The centre itself is displaced through encounter with those it once excluded. This is not diversity management but ecclesial transformation—a community becoming capable of communion-in-difference, where authority is shared and transformation happens to all. This transformation is not imposed from outside but arises from the church's own theological convictions about how God acts in the world.

Difference as a Theological Site

Intercultural theology does not start with the practical question of how cultures can coexist peacefully. Instead, it begins with a more demanding theological claim: that difference itself is a site of God's activity, a gift through which the church is continually called into mutual transformation.[5] Christian faith has always been shaped through encounter—often unsettling, asymmetrical, and transformative. From Abraham's call outward to bless the nations, to Jonah's reluctant discovery of God's universal mercy, to Jesus' boundary-crossing ministry, to Pentecost's many tongues, the biblical witness depicts faith as formed in movement, translation, and relation. Like the Magi, the church discovers that faithfulness does not lie in remaining at the centre but in allowing itself to be led—sometimes away from inherited centres of authority and toward places where God was never expected to appear.

Scripture presents this call with straightforward clarity. To Adam and Eve hiding in fear, God asks, "Where are you?" (Gen. 3:9). To Cain after Abel's murder, God asks, "Where is your brother?" (Gen. 4:9). These are not questions meant to gather information but calls to restore the relationship. They show that faithfulness is always relational—toward God and neighbour. When exclusion, racism, or indifference damage these relationships, God's question continues to echo, urging communities back to justice and compassion.

In this sense, intercultural theology is not an optional supplement to Christian faith nor a response required only in especially diverse settings. It names a dimension of discipleship that has always existed and is now encountered more directly in a post-Christendom world. To receive vulnerability as a site of truth requires more than moral sympathy; it requires a different understanding of what it means to be a person—one whose identity is formed through relation rather than autonomy.

5. Cho, *Relation without Relation*, 39–42.

Relational Personhood Beyond the Autonomous Self

This relational understanding of difference—where identity is formed through encounter rather than autonomy—is not unique to Christian theology. Parallel visions of personhood and community appear in African and East Asian moral traditions, where relationality is not an ethical add-on but the very structure of human life.

Ubuntu and *uri* name parallel moral and anthropological visions, each challenging the idea that personhood is purely individual or self-contained. As Desmond Tutu explains, *ubuntu* rejects the statement "I think, therefore I am" in favour of the belief that "a person is a person through other persons."[6] Human identity is not self-created or owned but received through belonging, participation, and shared life. One's humanity is always interconnected with the humanity of others; what harms another ultimately harms the entire community. Therefore, ethics, justice, and reconciliation cannot be reduced to private moral choices.

A similar logic shapes *uri* (Korean: 우리 *we-ness*), an East Asian concept of personhood rooted in belonging to a shared "we" rather than claiming an independent self. Originating from Confucian and wider Asian relational traditions, *uri* views community not as a voluntary choice but as a moral reality in which individuals are integrated, maintained through loyalty, responsibility, and mutual faithfulness.[7] Solidarity is more important than sentiment: members may differ, disagree, or even oppose one another, yet they remain connected through their shared responsibility for the collective common good. Together, *ubuntu* and *uri* challenge individualism and domination by emphasizing dignity, accountability, and belonging based on interdependence, communal loyalty, and shared responsibility.

Vulnerability as a Way of Learning

These processes of reorientation require more than sociological adaptation. They demand a deep theological shift—a transformation in how truth is discerned, moral authority is located, and learning itself takes place. This shift is already evident in Jesus' teaching, which repeatedly unsettles inherited boundaries of belonging, legitimacy, and power. The parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37) offers a decisive illustration.

For Jesus' original audience, Samaritans symbolized religious deviation and social hostility rather than moral virtue. Yet the deeper challenge of the parable

6. Desmond Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness* (New York: Doubleday, 1999), 31–32.

7. Heup Young Kim and David Ng, "The Central Issue of Community: An Example of Asian North American Theology on the Way," in *People on the Way: Asian North Americans Discovering Christ, Culture, and Community*, ed. David Ng (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1996), 25–41.

lies not primarily in the Samaritan's compassion but in the stark presence of the wounded stranger. It is this wounded body that shifts moral authority away from social status or religious legitimacy and anchors it instead in the disruptive claim of vulnerable life. Without the injured person lying by the ditch, there is no ethical summons and no possibility of transformation. Vulnerability, rather than authority, thus emerges as the site from which responsibility is disclosed—a theme to which we will return in chapter 5.

Viewed from this perspective—seeing from the ditch rather than the road—the wounded person becomes central rather than incidental. She is no longer merely a means of assessing individual virtue but is the focal point around which the moral vision of the story is realigned. Her vulnerability exposes how social systems often privilege order, ritual coherence, and self-preservation over responsiveness to suffering. Moral insight, the parable suggests, does not arise from strict adherence to established norms, but from interruption—when suffering refuses to be ignored or contained. The primary site of theological reflection is therefore not the protected centre but the wounded margins.

This shift carries direct implications for intercultural theology. The "half-dead" of the contemporary world—particularly Indigenous peoples shaped by the afterlives of colonization, along with communities marginalized within mission histories, voices emerging from World Christianity, and religious others encountered across difference—are not peripheral to Christian identity but integral to its ongoing formation. Their lives are not merely problems awaiting solutions; they are places where theological truth comes into view. Learning to attend to vulnerability—how we listen, discern, and interpret—thus becomes a defining posture for intercultural theology.

Such attentiveness transforms theological practice itself. Rather than speaking *about* marginalized communities, intercultural theology learns *from* voices shaped by vulnerability, displacement, and resistance. These communities are not passive recipients of care but active sources of insight and wisdom. Theology remains unfinished wherever such voices are excluded.

Beyond Integration: Communion-in-Difference

These theological challenges become more evident when compared with secular approaches to intercultural competence, which often promise integration without requiring profound change. Such models can provide valuable insights for describing personal growth, but as visions for Christian community, they

have notable limitations.[8] The goal of "integration" can easily become a subtle form of control, where difference is seen as something to be mastered rather than respected. Power differences shaped by history, race, and colonialism can be overlooked. What appears to be integration often functions as assimilation in disguise, quietly pressuring marginalized people to conform to dominant expectations.[9]

Intercultural theology points in a different direction. Communion-in-difference is not something an individual achieves. It is a gift of the Spirit that arises within communities committed to justice, accountability, and reconciliation. Where integration aims to resolve difference within a single, flexible self, communion-in-difference seeks to hold difference together within a transformed community. The other—whether a neighbour shaped by a different culture, a community wounded by historical injustice, or a person of another faith—remains genuinely other. Responsibility is not fulfilled by assimilating difference into one's own perspective but by staying open to the other's claim. The space between cultures—the in-between—is neither blending nor separation. It is a challenging and creative space where new ways of living together can emerge.

8. One of the most widely used is Milton J. Bennett's Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS), often accessed through the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI). This model outlines a progression from culturally closed attitudes to more open ones, culminating in "integration," understood as the ability to move comfortably across different cultural settings. See Milton J. Bennett, "Becoming Interculturally Competent," in *Towards Multiculturalism: A Reader in Multicultural Education*, 2nd ed., ed. James S. Wurzel (Newton, MA: Intercultural Resource Corporation, 2004), 62–77; and Milton J. Bennett, "Paradigmatic Assumptions and a Developmental Approach to Intercultural Learning," in *Student Learning Abroad*, ed. Michael Vande Berg, R. Michael Paige, and Kris Hemming Lou (New York: Routledge, 2012), 90–114.

9. For a fuller critique of integration as an intercultural telos in church discourse—especially its tendency to recast difference as something to be managed while overlooking historical asymmetries and power relations—see Cho, "*Sharing Concern for Justice*," 9–10.

Interlude:

At the River, Not the Centre

Before Jesus speaks, teaches, or heals, he goes to the river. This decision is not incidental; it is theological. In a society where forgiveness, purity, and restoration were mediated through the temple—regulated by sacrifice, status, and access—Jesus chooses a different site. He joins the line. He stands among ordinary people waiting at the edge of the Jordan, far from the centre where authority is managed and grace is controlled. Though tradition might have exempted him—sinless, beloved, unblemished—Jesus refuses exemption. He does not stand above the people; he enters the water with them (Luke 3:21–22).

Jesus does more than affirm this movement; he submits himself to it. In doing so, he binds his vocation to a people shaped by longing, repentance, and hope. As he rises from the water, the heavens open—not to reward achievement, but to name belonging: "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased" (Luke 3:22). This naming comes before ministry, before success or failure, before recognition or rejection. Jesus is claimed not for what he will do, but for who he is.

Here, identity is revealed as a gift rather than an accomplishment. The world is full of voices that measure worth through comparison, performance, and approval. Baptism interrupts this logic by speaking a different word—one that cannot be earned or revoked. Belovedness precedes performance.

This moment discloses the ground on which encounter becomes possible. Only those who know they are claimed can risk displacement. Only those rooted in belonging can remain open to vulnerability. Intercultural life does not begin with competence or strategy, but with this prior naming—spoken over Jesus and echoed over all who follow him: *You are my beloved.*

From this baptismal assurance flows a different way of meeting others. If identity is not secured by power, purity, or success, then difference no longer threatens it. The river teaches what the centre cannot: that grace is given before it is organized and that truth emerges not from control but from solidarity. Yet such a posture does not sustain itself automatically; it must be learned, practised, and disciplined over time.

It is from this baptismal ground—where identity is received as gift rather than secured by achievement—that the discipline of encounter becomes possible. The question that follows is not whether the church affirms difference but how it learns to remain present to it without

mastery or retreat. The next section explores encounter as precisely this kind of spiritual discipline.

2. How Encounter Becomes Possible: Dialogue, Vulnerability, and the In-Between

The call to encounter comes from the roadside (Luke 10:25–37), from the vulnerable person who interrupts our journey. Yet the work of encounter is not only with the one in the ditch; it also involves those on the road—those who must learn to stop, see differently, and allow themselves to be changed. Encounter is not comfortable. It asks something of everyone involved. To become a formative way of life rather than an occasional moral response, encounter requires theological resources that take difference, vulnerability, and transformation seriously.

The life and thought of Raimon Panikkar offer a valuable resource. While my previous work examined intercultural theology through the lens of Western philosophers like Levinas and Jacques Derrida, this book seeks a different kind of grounding.[10] It turns to Panikkar, whose insights stem not from observing the borderlands between traditions but from a lifetime of faithfully inhabiting them. Panikkar, born in Spain to an Indian Hindu father and a Spanish Catholic mother, spent his life living within the tension of multiple traditions. He did not try to resolve or escape this tension; rather, he learned to live with it. His work arises not from the Western philosophical academy analysing difference from outside but from a life genuinely lived in-between, making him an essential guide for a church seeking to move beyond superficial inclusion toward true mutual transformation.

This section builds on Panikkar's dialogical dialogue, read alongside Levinas and Homi Bhabha, to explore encounter as an ethical, relational, and contested practice. Collectively, they frame encounter not as agreement or assimilation but as a practice that requires humility, ethical risk-taking, and a willingness to remain in tension. For church leaders, this means prioritizing openness, responsibility, and shared transformation over certainty or control.

Encounter from Within

Panikkar did not treat religious differences as problems to be solved. He lived them as a constitutive part of his own identity. His well-known autobiographical reflection names an ongoing journey rather than a settled conclusion: "I 'left' as a christian, I 'found' myself a hindu, and I 'return' a buddhist, without having

10. Cho, *Relation without Relation*, 45–80.

ceased to be a christian."[11] This is not a statement of conversion in stages but a description of a life shaped by sustained encounter with religious plurality.

This journey reveals a crucial insight about genuine encounter. Encounter is not only a matter of learning about others from the outside; it also entails transformation from within. Epiphany reminds us that revelation does not occur through mastery of the other but through being addressed by the other itself. Before the language of "multiple religious belonging"[12] had entered Christian theological discourse as a named category, Panikkar was already posing questions that unsettled rigid either/or thinking: "Do I belong to my father or to my mother? Is my Hindu karma not also a Christian one? Does the Gospel not call me to honour my dharma?"[13] These questions do not seek resolution through synthesis or choice. Instead, they exemplify a relational way of thinking that resists fixed boundaries and receives complexity as a site of theological truth.[14]

To describe this inner work, Panikkar spoke of "intra-religious dialogue." This is not a private blending of traditions or an attempt to smooth out contradictions. Instead, it is a disciplined openness to being unsettled and transformed through encounter.[15] Intra-religious dialogue serves as the foundation for genuine interreligious and intercultural engagement by reshaping how truth, identity, and faithfulness are understood.[16] Dialogue is no longer aimed at persuasion, consensus, or mastery but at cultivating shared

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11. Raimon Panikkar, *The Intra-Religious Dialogue,* rev. ed. (New York: Paulist Press, 1999), 42. Panikkar intentionally uses lowercase letters when referring to religions.

12. Catherine Cornille, ed., *Many Mansions? Multiple Religious Belonging and Christian Identity* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2002); and Peter C. Phan, "Multiple Religious Belonging: Opportunities and Challenges for Theology and Church," *Theological Studies* 64 (2003): 495–519.

13. Raimon Panikkar, "Foreword: The Ongoing Dialogue," in *Hindu-Christian Dialogue: Perspectives and Encounters*, ed. Harold Coward (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1989), xi; italics in the original.

14. His questions do not reflect Western dialectical thought (either/or), but Asian holistic thinking (both/and). For "both/and" thinking, see Jung Young Lee, *Marginality: The Key to Multicultural Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 66–73.

15. Raimon Panikkar, *Cultural Disarmament: The Way to Peace* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995), esp. chapter 4.

16. While this chapter employs the term "intercultural" to emphasize the dynamics of encounter, vulnerability, and transformation across differences of culture, history, and power, it does so with the understanding that in a religiously plural world, cultural and religious differences are often deeply intertwined. The thought of Raimon Panikkar, which moves fluidly between Hindu, Buddhist, and Christian horizons, exemplifies this inseparability. For the purposes of this study, intercultural theology is therefore understood to include interreligious engagement as one of its essential dimensions, particularly when such engagement occurs within shared social spaces and histories of unequal power. A focused exploration of the distinct challenges and possibilities of Christian interreligious dialogue will be taken up in chapter 6.

vulnerability and ethical responsiveness.[17] The other is no longer approached as an object to be interpreted or managed but as a genuine source of insight through whom one's own faith may be questioned and deepened.

For the church, this insight is crucial. Engagement with religious or cultural difference cannot begin as a superficial strategy while internal conflicts remain unexamined. Christian communities must first confront the diversity, tension, and unresolved histories within their own traditions—colonial legacies, theological exclusions, and contested identities. Encounter begins not with confidence or control but with humility and self-awareness from within. Faithful dialogue therefore requires a willingness to be questioned—and, at times, transformed—by voices that reveal the limits of the church's own self-understanding. In this sense, the believing subject itself becomes a site of encounter.

The Other as Thou: Beyond Reduction

Panikkar's understanding of encounter not only shapes ecclesial practice; it also directly challenges common Western practices of control and categorization. He criticizes approaches that treat the other as an idea, a category, or a problem to be managed rather than as a living subject.[18] Such reduction, he warns, often carries a quiet colonial logic: it allows one group to define, explain, or manage another from a position of assumed authority.

At the core of this critique lies a simple yet challenging insight. The other person does not see themselves as the other. They see themselves as "I," just as I do. Their fears, hopes, memories, faith, and struggles are as real and complex to them as mine are to me. When this fact is forgotten, people are no longer regarded as neighbours but as mere abstractions. For Panikkar, this mistake—confusing a living, speaking person with a concept—is one of the most serious

17. For an influential account of vulnerability as relational courage and resistance to shame, see Brené Brown, *Daring Greatly: How the Courage to Be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead* (New York: Gotham Books, 2012). While drawing on this recovery of vulnerability, the present work resituates it theologically—not as a therapeutic practice of mutuality but as an ethical summons arising within histories of asymmetrical power, collective woundedness, and relationships that resist closure.

18. Panikkar's understanding of the other bears an affinity to Levinas's account of the Other, yet the two are not identical. Levinas frames the encounter explicitly in terms of asymmetrical ethical responsibility, whereas Panikkar does not treat alterity primarily as an ethical category but as a dialogical and relational horizon. In this book, I use "Other" (capitalized) to name the irreducible ethical claim that Levinas associates with encounter, and "other" (lower case) to refer more broadly to alterity as it remains open to dialogical engagement and mutual transformation.

errors in modern thought.[19] It substitutes the analytic eye, which sees an "It" to be managed, for the relational eye, which beholds a Thou to be met. Once it occurs, justifying distance and control becomes easier because we are responding not to a person but to an idea. In contrast, intercultural encounter begins with the disciplined act of remembering that the individual before us always stands at the centre of their own life, not at the edges of ours.

Consider a colleague whose cultural background differs from your own. You may learn her language, study her tradition, and share years of ministry together—yet something in her experience of the world remains beyond your full comprehension. She meets you as a Thou, one who speaks and can be addressed. But her interiority opens onto something that is not addressed at all: what Panikkar, following the Advaitic tradition, names *brahman*—the apophatic ground in which "I" and "Thou" alike arise.[20] Reverence is owed not only because she is a subject who speaks, but because what she is grounded in cannot be spoken to at all. The person before you is therefore not a project, a symbol of diversity, or a problem to be solved, but a subject who speaks, perceives, and knows from the centre of her own life—and whose depth exceeds even that centre.

This insight holds important implications for the church. If the person in front of me has an inner life as genuine and complex as mine, then she cannot simply be seen as someone to assist, include, or oversee. Consequently, the church must relinquish the posture of the benevolent overseer. It is called not to manage the other from a position of assumed stability but to encounter a reality that it did not create and cannot control.

Ethical Asymmetry: Levinas and Liberation Theology

This insistence on irreducible interiority places Panikkar in close, though not identical, conversation with Levinas. Like Levinas, he emphasizes that the Other resists being reduced to an object. The presence of the Other interrupts my sense of independence and makes a claim on me. Levinas illustrates this through the image of the "face of the Other," which calls me to responsibility before I can explain, justify, or choose.[21]

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19. Panikkar warns against "treat[ing] the other as otherness instead of an *alius*," calling this confusion "one of the greatest errors the human being can fall into." Raimon Panikkar, "The Myth of Pluralism," in *The Intercultural Challenge of Raimon Panikkar*, ed. Joseph Prabhu (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1996), 218. Such reduction—especially characteristic of Western philosophical traditions—abstracts the Other into a general category, obscuring concrete religious and cultural difference and enabling relations of explanation, control, and domination.

20. Raimon Panikkar, *A Dwelling Place for Wisdom*, trans. Annemarie S. Kidder (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1993), 49, 53, 59–61.

21. Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 187–204.

Panikkar shares this ethical concern, but he presses the question of relationship into a different register. For Levinas, the encounter with the Other is structured by asymmetrical responsibility: I am summoned before I can respond; claimed before I can choose. This is not a denial of relationship but a particular account of its structure—one in which ethical obligation precedes and exceeds mutuality.[22] Levinas deliberately brackets the question of what I might learn from the Other, because for him the ethical claim is prior to dialogue. Panikkar does not reject this priority, but he extends the encounter beyond it. The other is not only the one who summons my responsibility; the other is also the one from whom I can learn. The other bears insight, wisdom, and truth that I do not possess. Where Levinas holds the encounter within the register of ethical demand, Panikkar opens it into a dialogical register—one in which mutual transformation, though never symmetrical, becomes possible.[23]

Together, Panikkar and Levinas clarify what a faithful encounter requires. From Levinas, the church learns that the Other must never be absorbed into my world or reduced to my categories; the ethical claim of the Other precedes every attempt at understanding. From Panikkar, the church learns that this claim, once received, opens into a relationship where genuine learning across difference becomes possible. Encounter holds both registers together: ethical responsibility and dialogical openness, asymmetry and mutual—though never equal—transformation.

Asymmetry, in this book, carries a double sense. It names, first, the sociological condition that shapes every intercultural encounter: the unequal distribution of power, safety, and historical harm produced by colonialism, racism, and structural violence. But asymmetry also names something else—the ethical priority of the Other, who addresses me with a claim I did not choose and cannot refuse. In this Levinasian sense, asymmetry is not a disorder to be corrected but a summons to be received. For Levinas, this asymmetry is structural and universal: any Other addresses any self with an ethical claim that precedes reciprocity.

When this insight is brought into contact with histories of colonialism, racism, and dispossession, a further claim emerges—one that draws not only on Levinas but on liberation theology's insistence that God is encountered preferentially among the poor and the wounded. These two traditions of asymmetry converge in this book. Those rendered "below" by history often

22. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 197.

23. Panikkar, "¿Mística comparada?" in *VVAA La mística en el siglo XXI* (Madrid, 2002), https://raimon-panikkar.org/?page_id=2329. See also Panikkar, "The Invisible Harmony," 141–42. Panikkar writes: "[Dialogical dialogue] is the joint search for the shared and the different. It is the mutual fecundation of what each one contributes... . It is the implicit and explicit recognition that we are not self-sufficient... . God is the one who makes it possible for dialogue to be more than the mere sterile crossing of two monologues."

stand "above" in ethical authority, their vulnerability commanding response before calculation or consent. The wounded body by the roadside is diminished in social power yet central in moral gravity—and it is this body that reorders the scene.

The fusion is deliberate: Levinasian ethics provides the philosophical structure of the claim, while liberation theology provides its historical and material urgency. Together, they name the wounded body by the roadside as the irreducible Thou—a term that here draws both Levinas's ethical register, in which the Other commands responsibility, and Panikkar's dialogical register, in which the Thou invites encounter, into a single image. Against both absorption and unreachability, Panikkar insists that genuine encounter includes learning from the Other without mastering or neutralizing difference.[24] Yet ethical and dialogical possibility together still leave a practical question: How?

If encounter is structured by both ethical obligation and dialogical possibility—if it holds Levinas's asymmetry and Panikkar's mutuality together—then how does such encounter actually unfold? What practices sustain it over time without collapsing into either domination or disengagement? Panikkar offers the discipline of dialogical dialogue: a way of remaining present to the Other that honours both ethical claim and mutual transformation.

The Practice of Dialogical Dialogue

Building on this understanding of the human person as an irreducible Thou, Panikkar introduces the practice of dialogical dialogue.[25] At its core lies a simple yet demanding insight: because each person perceives reality from their own vantage point, ordinary modes of arguing, debating, or persuading are often inadequate when profound differences are at stake. For Panikkar, dialogue is not about winning an argument or reaching a final conclusion but is about mutual transformation—knowing oneself and the other anew.

When conversation becomes a contest—where one position must prevail, or all differences are pressed into a single framework—genuine encounter is lost. Yet dialogue also fails when it settles for polite coexistence, leaving differences

24. Martin Buber's I–Thou is an important precursor to later relational philosophies, particularly in its insistence that the other must never be reduced to an object (It) of use, knowledge, or control. However, Buber's dialogical framework tends toward mutuality and reciprocity in ways that Levinas explicitly resists. For Levinas, the ethical claim of the Other precedes dialogue and symmetry; responsibility arises asymmetrically, prior to choice or relation. Panikkar stands closer to Levinas in affirming the irreducible alterity of the Other, yet he diverges by refusing an absolute separation that would render encounter merely unilateral. See Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Scribner, 1970).

25. Panikkar, *The Intra-Religious Dialogue*, 23–40.

untouched and participants unchanged. Simply placing diversity side by side may avoid conflict, but it also evades responsibility.[26]

Dialogical dialogue offers an alternative. It is a shared pursuit of truth that requires vulnerability from everyone involved. Panikkar describes it as a search that does not aim for complete agreement or comfortable harmony. Instead, it remains open to difference, tension, and imperfection. Dialogue stays unfinished because reality itself cannot be contained within a single perspective or worldview.

This approach addresses a pressing question for the contemporary church: How can we learn from people whose experiences, cultures, or faiths do not fit within our familiar world?[27] Traditional models of dialogue often assume that sustained conversation will eventually lead to mutual understanding or convergence. Panikkar is more realistic. In many intercultural and interreligious encounters, perspectives do not fully align. They may clash, overlap, or remain unresolved. Dialogical dialogue begins by accepting this condition—not as a failure but as the very reason dialogue matters.

To welcome the other as a genuine partner in dialogue is therefore to take a risk. It requires exposing our deepest assumptions—what Panikkar calls our *myth*—to questioning and challenge.[28] These assumptions shape how we perceive God, ourselves, and the world, yet they usually remain invisible to us. We come to recognize them only when we are seen, named, or interpreted differently by another.

As Panikkar suggests, crossing cultural boundaries without acknowledging that others may perceive reality in radically different ways is no longer defensible. We are often blind to the assumptions that shape us, like fish unaware of the water in which they swim. It is the other who reveals this water to us—our practices of thought, our unspoken beliefs, our silences. Dialogical dialogue, therefore, requires a willingness to be seen, interpreted, and unsettled by those we encounter. Such an encounter does not presume equal power or shared risk; it unfolds within asymmetrical histories that shape who speaks, who listens, and

26. This understanding stands in contrast to classical models of dialectical dialogue, which approach difference through opposition and aim at resolution or synthesis. In the modern philosophical tradition, dialectical dialogue is most fully developed by G. W. F. Hegel, who understands historical development as a process of *Aufhebung*, in which contradictions are negated, preserved, and transformed toward higher unity, as exemplified in the master–slave dialectic. See G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 111–19.

27. This question echoes Panikkar's own: "How can we understand something that does not belong to our circle?" See Raimon Panikkar, "What is Comparative Philosophy Comparing?" in *Interpreting Across Boundaries*, ed. G. J. Larson and E. Deutsch (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 130.

28. Panikkar, *The Intra-Religious Dialogue*, 37–38; Raimon Panikkar, *Myth, Faith and Hermeneutics* (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), 243.

who bears the cost. For the church, this means that dialogue cannot be reduced to a strategy of inclusion or the management of diversity; it is a discipline of formation that places communities and leaders under the obligation to be questioned and changed.

Dialogue calls the church to risk being transformed, to listen without seeking control, and to remain open to what has not yet been resolved. Vulnerability is not a weakness in this process; it is the very method of dialogical dialogue—and the condition for truthful encounter. Sustained over time, dialogical dialogue does not aim at agreement but at a shared space of becoming.

The In-Between as Ecclesial Space

This space—what Homi K. Bhabha calls the "in-between" or "third space"—emerges when people shaped by different cultures, histories, and traditions enter into sustained relation.[29] It is not a compromise or a comfortable middle ground. Rather, it is a site where meaning is fashioned collectively—often slowly, awkwardly, and through tension.

Bhabha develops this concept to challenge binary ways of thinking: colonizer versus colonized, insider versus outsider, tradition versus modernity. When cultures meet, he argues, something genuinely new comes into being. People do not simply exchange ideas, nor do they wholly adopt one another's ways. Instead, meanings are translated, reshaped, and reworked. New forms of identity and understanding arise that do not fully belong to either side, often creating a sense of dislocation for both.[30]

It is precisely here that Panikkar's theology becomes decisive. Panikkar's life unfolded within such an in-between space, yet he does more than describe it socioculturally. Through his practice of dialogical dialogue, he gives the in-between ethical and theological depth. Where Bhabha identifies the third space as the site where meaning is negotiated and hybridity takes shape, Panikkar asks how this space can be inhabited *faithfully*—without reverting either to domination or to disengagement. Dialogical dialogue becomes the discipline through which the in-between is sustained as a space of responsibility rather than control.

In this sense, Panikkar provides a theological grammar for Bhabha's insight. The in-between is not merely where hybridity appears; it is where persons learn to remain in relation without resolving difference into unity or freezing it into distance. The task is neither assimilation nor polite coexistence

29. Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 1–56.

30. Bhabha develops this argument through his concept of the "Third Space," where cultural meaning is produced through translation, negotiation, and hybridity rather than simple opposition or assimilation. See Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 53–56.

but communion-in-difference—a way of living together that accepts tension, incompleteness, and vulnerability as enduring conditions of shared life. Through dialogical dialogue, the in-between becomes not a temporary negotiation zone but a lived, ethical space in which faith, identity, and community are continually re-formed.

For the church, this carries significant implications. Faithful intercultural life does not mean creating a seamless or conflict-free community. It requires learning to remain present when difference unsettles comfort and certainty, allowing authority and interpretation themselves to be reshaped. These negotiations are demanding, yet generative. New expressions of Christian life emerge precisely because the community refuses to retreat into sameness or control.

Encounter is not a transitional stage on the way to unity; it is the heart of intercultural church life. It is the road the Magi travelled—neither fully at home nor yet at the destination, but the only place where the star can be followed. This heart does not exist for its own sake but to sustain the life of the whole community through shared concern and responsibility. The in-between is not a corridor we pass through in search of stability; it is the space the church is called to inhabit faithfully—a place where God continues to shape communal life through difference, dialogue, and shared responsibility.

Yet this raises a pressing question: What makes such dwelling possible? Why should the church trust that remaining in this vulnerable, unresolved space will be generative rather than destructive? If encounter is to be more than a fragile human achievement—if it is to be sustained through conflict, exhaustion, and historical wounds—it must rest on something deeper than method or goodwill. It must be grounded in a vision of reality itself.

Encounter as Sacramental Reality

Dialogical practice sustained in the in-between requires an ontological ground—a conviction about the nature of reality itself that renders such encounter not merely possible but necessary. In Panikkar's work, this ground is articulated through a sacramental imagination.

Sacramentality, in this sense, does not refer primarily to ritual practice (like bread and wine) but to a way of perceiving reality itself. It names the conviction that God's presence is mediated through the material, relational, and cultural dimensions of life.[31] The world is not divided into sacred and secular realms; rather, the finite is capable of bearing the infinite. Human relationships, cultural difference, and lived histories become sites where divine presence is

31. Raimon Panikkar, *The Rhythm of Being: The Gifford Lectures* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2010), 263–318.

disclosed—not despite their particularity but through it. Encounter, therefore, is never merely sociological or ethical; it is sacramental, because it is a place where God is already at work, awaiting recognition.

This sacramental vision is why Panikkar insists the other must be received as Thou—not as an object of knowledge or control but as a presence through whom reality is disclosed. If reality itself is relational, then truth cannot be possessed apart from relationship. Theological understanding emerges through participation, vulnerability, and shared attentiveness, not mastery. Difference becomes revelatory rather than threatening because it mediates dimensions of reality that cannot be accessed otherwise. Sacramentality provides the ground for dialogical dialogue. Encounter becomes a site of grace. Learning happens not by resolving difference but by dwelling faithfully within it.

This sacramental vision transforms encounter from a risky practice into a mode of participation in reality itself. The church does not create communion through dialogical dialogue; it discovers a communion already woven into the fabric of existence. The discipline of remaining present to the Other, of dwelling in the in-between without mastery or retreat, is therefore not an ethical achievement but a form of theological attentiveness—learning to see and live according to the grain of reality. This sacramental imagination will be recalled and developed further in chapter 6, where creation itself is received as a sacramental horizon for intercultural and Pentecostal life. But if reality is indeed sacramental—if God, humanity, and world are bound together in ways that resist our attempts at separation—then encounter is not merely an interpersonal practice. It names the very structure of existence itself.

3. The Ontology of Encounter: Cosmotheandric Reality

If multiculturalism treats the table as neutral furniture—where different plates are placed side by side without disturbing one another—the cosmotheandric vision reveals that the table, the food, and the guests are already bound together in a single life. The table is not merely a meeting place; it is a web of interdependence in which what is shared shapes all who gather.

Up to this point, encounter has been described as a vulnerable practice unfolding in the in-between. The question now presses more deeply: What kind of world makes such a way of living not only possible but necessary? Intercultural theology cannot rest solely on good methods or ethical intentions. Beneath our practices lies a more fundamental claim about reality itself. If the church is called to live with difference without domination, then reality itself must be capable of sustaining such a way of life.

Cosmotheandric Reality: Difference as the Grain of Being

Panikkar offers a way of naming this deeper truth. He describes reality as cosmotheandric—a term expressing the insight that God, humanity, and the earth are inseparably interconnected.[32] They cannot be understood in isolation from one another. For Panikkar, reality is not divided into separate realms—God here, human beings there, nature elsewhere. Instead, he argues: "There is no God without Man, no Man without World, no World without God. The three are all one when we speak existentially and in correspondence with reality. All that is real is related to God, to Man, and to Kosmos."[33]

This vision challenges practices of thought that separate the sacred from the secular or place humans at the centre while treating the natural world as something to be exploited. Yet importantly, Panikkar refuses to dissolve difference into a vague unity. God, humanity, and creation remain distinct, but their distinction is sustained through relationship rather than isolation or hierarchy.

From this perspective, intercultural theology is not merely a response to demographic change. It arises from the conviction that reality itself is relational. Difference is not an error to be corrected or a threat to be managed; it is integral to how life is constituted. This exposes the theological limits of multicultural inclusion, which often leaves the dominant group in control of how difference is welcomed. Panikkar's vision reveals a more radical truth: there is no independent centre. The calling of the church is not to manage diversity from a position of neutrality but to participate faithfully in the shared reality God has already woven into creation. To suppress or instrumentalize difference is to live against the grain of reality itself.

Re-Membering: From Inclusion to Ontological Repair

Yet this vision, precisely because it is ontological rather than aspirational, confronts the church with a question it cannot evade. If reality is fundamentally and undeniably interconnected, why is the "wound" of separation—the racism and colonial violence explored in chapters 1 and 2—so persistent and powerful?

The answer lies in the violence required to sustain the illusion of separation. The wound exists precisely because our political and social structures are at war with our ontological reality. Ontological unity is the ground we stand on, but historical woundedness is the debris we must clear. The cosmotheandric vision does not erase the wound; it shapes the work of healing. Because we are

32. Raimon Panikkar, *The Cosmotheandric Experience* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1993), 54–77.

33. Panikkar, *A Dwelling Place for Wisdom*, 72. The quotation preserves Panikkar's original wording. While his use of "Man" reflects the conventions of his time and writing context, it is intended to be inclusive of all humanity and is retained here for textual fidelity.

ontologically one, our political strategy cannot be merely inclusion (which assumes we are separate entities joining together); it must be re-membering—the painful structural work of putting back together a body that has been violently dismembered by colonial history.

Here, *dialogical dialogue* is no longer merely a conversation or a shift in perception. It names the demanding labour of realigning a fractured history with a unity that already exists. We do not simply *realize* that we are one; we must patiently and deliberately dismantle the structures that continue to organize the world as if we are not. Intercultural theology, then, becomes the discipline of bringing political and ecclesial practices into alignment with this ontological truth. This is the deepest implication of the cosmotheandric vision: the church's task is not to reconcile fundamentally separate peoples but to undo the structures that deny a unity already given. The ancient Christian language of *perichoresis* (περιχώρησις) offers a way of naming what such restored life might look like.

Perichoresis and Communion-in-Difference

To describe this deep interconnectedness, Panikkar draws on the ancient Christian term perichoresis, traditionally used to describe the life of the Trinity—the way Father, Son, and Spirit live with and within one another without confusion, competition, or hierarchy. Each person is distinct, yet none exists in isolation.[34] Their life is shared, relational, and dynamic. Later theologians, including Jürgen Moltmann, have used this image to highlight mutuality and reciprocity within God's triune life.[35]

Panikkar extends this insight beyond intra-divine relations. He proposes that this pattern of shared life reflects the fundamental structure of reality itself. God, human beings, and the world do not merely interact from the outside; they indwell one another. None can be fully understood apart from the others. Importantly, this shared life does not eliminate difference. Each remains unique yet profoundly connected.[36]

This vision supports the idea of communion-in-difference introduced earlier in the chapter. Instead of blending difference into a single, adaptable identity, *perichoresis* points to a different aim: learning how to live together

34. Panikkar, "The Myth of Pluralism," 217; Panikkar, *A Dwelling Place for Wisdom*, 97.

35. Jürgen Moltmann develops a relational doctrine of the Trinity in which the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit dwell in and communicate life to one another in a perichoretic unity, highlighting mutual indwelling and reciprocal relation rather than hierarchy. See Jürgen Moltmann, "*Perichoresis*: An Old Magic Word for a New Trinitarian Theology," in *Trinity, Community and Power: Mapping Trajectories in Wesleyan Theology*, ed. M. Douglas Meeks (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 2000), 111–25.

36. Panikkar, *The Rhythm of Being*, 38–50.

without losing our distinct identities. Communion is the very condition of life—a shared reality we are called to inhabit faithfully. We do not attain it by erasing difference; we discover it by embracing difference.

Panikkar often describes this reality as dynamic rather than fixed. Life flows through relationships, exchange, and mutual influence—like a dance in which no single partner always takes the lead. No dimension stands above the others. Each becomes a source of insight for the others through ongoing interaction.

This relational vision also resonates with Hartmut Rosa's account of "resonance." Rosa describes resonance not as harmony or control but as a mode of relationship in which subjects are genuinely addressed, respond, and are changed—without domination or predictability.[37] Resonant relationships, he argues, cannot be engineered or possessed; they arise only where openness, vulnerability, and mutual responsiveness are sustained. Read alongside Panikkar, resonance offers a social principle for *perichoresis*: a way of naming how communion-in-difference becomes audible and tangible within the fragile in-between spaces of shared life.

Rosa illustrates resonance through the experience of music. We do not control a piece of music that moves us, nor can we force such an encounter to occur. We can only remain open—and when resonance happens, we are genuinely changed by it. The same is true of intercultural encounter.

For the church, this vision is vital. It offers a way to hold unity and diversity together without collapsing one into the other. It resists both rigid hierarchy and vague solidarity. It names precisely the tension the intercultural church is called to inhabit: many voices, one shared life; deep difference, genuine communion.

Rice Is Heaven: Cosmotheandric Reality as Lived Interdependence

This cosmotheandric vision of reality is not confined to theological abstraction; it is embodied in everyday practices that reveal interdependence as the texture of life itself. In many Asian contexts, this reality is lived and named through ordinary acts of sharing food. A striking example appears in the poem "Rice Is Heaven" by the poet Kim Ji-ha, which speaks a simple yet profound truth: what sustains life cannot be privately possessed but must be shared.

> Rice is heaven,
> Because heaven cannot be possessed by one
> Rice must be shared with each other.
> Rice is heaven.

37. Hartmut Rosa, *Democracy Needs Religion*, trans. Valentine A. Pakis (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2024).

Just as together we view the stars in Heaven,
Rice must be shared by all.
When rice is eaten
heaven enters the body.
Rice is heaven.
Ah-ah! Rice must be shared![38]

The poem gestures toward a worldview in which heaven, earth, and human life are inseparable. Rice exists only through the cooperation of sun and rain, soil and seed, human labour and communal care. It is never the product of one will or one hand. To receive rice is therefore to acknowledge dependence—on the earth that yields it, on the labour that prepares it, and on the community that shares it. Life itself is given in a form that resists private ownership.

Figure 3.1 Lee Chul-soo, *Rice Is Heaven* (1984), woodcut, © 이철수. Used by permission. www.mokpan.com

This interdependence is given visual form in the woodcut by Lee Chul-soo (1954–; Figure 3.1). The image depicts a simple bowl of rice that opens into a vast inner landscape. Within the bowl appear clouds, lightning, rain, stars, the moon, and swirling patterns, suggesting weather, time, and cosmic movement. The everyday vessel of nourishment becomes a container of the universe itself. The bowl does not merely hold food; it holds sky, seasons, and the forces that sustain life.

38. Kim Ji-ha, "Rice Is Heaven," cited in Suh Nam-dong, *Han (恨): The Meeting of Theology, Literature and Art*, illus. Lee Chul-soo (Seoul: Bundo, 1984), 66.

Lee's rough, deliberate lines emphasize materiality and restraint, avoiding decoration in favour of symbolic clarity. The contrast between the humble bowl and the expansive interior challenges any separation between the ordinary and the sacred. What is eaten daily is shown to be inseparable from wind, rain, light, and darkness. The artwork invites the viewer to see nourishment not as consumption alone but as participation in a living, interdependent order. Rice here gathers earth and sky into a single, shared reality.

Read through Panikkar's cosmotheandric vision, this interdependence becomes more than a cultural symbol. It discloses a theological truth: God, humanity, and the earth are always already entangled in relations of gift and responsibility. To hoard what sustains life, or to eat without regard for others, is not only socially unjust but theologically incoherent—it denies the relational structure through which life is sustained.

To say *"rice is heaven"* is therefore not to sentimentalize scarcity or ignore the realities of hunger and inequality. It is to expose them. Within a cosmotheandric vision of reality—where God, humanity, and the earth exist only in and through one another—systems that organize life through accumulation, extraction, or racial hierarchy are revealed as fundamentally disordered. They mistake possession for abundance and control for stability, denying the interdependence through which life is actually sustained. What appears as economic success or social order is, from this perspective, a distortion of reality itself. Life flourishes not where heaven is hoarded but where it is received together.

This insight resonates deeply with the logic of Epiphany. Just as the light of Christ is not possessed by the centre but received through encounter and displacement, so heaven is not grasped but shared. Truth, like rice, is mediated through relationship. It emerges not from control or surplus but from participation in a shared life where difference is held together without domination.

In this sense, *rice is heaven* names in ordinary language what intercultural theology seeks to articulate theologically: communion is not sameness, abundance is not accumulation, and life flourishes only where responsibility is shared. What appears humble and everyday becomes revelatory. Heaven is not elsewhere. It is tasted where life is received together.

The Uncounted: Learning to See from the Margins

This pattern recurs in the feeding of the five thousand (Luke 9:10–17). The disciples view the hungry crowd not as neighbours but as a logistical issue. "Send them away," they urge Jesus, "so that they may go into the villages and countryside to find food" (Luke 9:12). Their response follows a familiar logic of

scarcity and distance: responsibility is shifted, need is ignored, and the vulnerable are asked to manage on their own.

Jesus rejects this logic, saying: "You give them something to eat" (Luke 9:13). With this command, Jesus places responsibility squarely upon the community. Reading Luke's account alongside John's version, we learn that the five barley loaves and two fish came from an unnamed boy (John 6:9). What follows begins not with institutional resources or strategic planning but with a small offering from someone easily overlooked.

The text does not tell us who prepared or packed the food. Yet as an African woman interpreter once suggested, we may imagine an unseen presence behind the boy's offering—perhaps a mother or another caregiver whose quiet labour made the gift possible. This imaginative reading brings into view the hidden labour that often sustains acts of generosity and becomes, in God's economy, a source of abundance.[39]

Seen in this light, the loaves of bread resonate beyond their immediate setting. They call to mind the unseen labour that sustains life in many cultures, like the daily bowl of rice, prepared, shared, and received as a gift. Both bread and rice disclose the same reality: abundance made possible through hidden care, relational trust, and ordinary acts of love.

In my own Korean tradition, this hidden, life-sustaining labour is named *sallim* (살림)—a theology of life-giving.[40] Derived from the verb *sallida*—meaning "to save" or "to make alive"—*sallim* refers to the daily, often domestic work of cooking, nurturing, and tending that keeps a household alive and flourishing. While imperial or patriarchal systems often dismiss such labour as trivial or invisible women's work, *sallim* reveals it as the essential infrastructure of life itself. The unseen mother in the gospel was not merely performing a chore; she was enacting *sallim*. Her quiet preparation provided the material ground for the miracle that followed. In her act, as in the shared bowl of rice, we see the cosmotheandric truth that divine abundance is not summoned from a void but is mediated through the tangible, interdependent labour of giving and sustaining life.

When the crowd is counted—five thousand men—a troubling silence remains. Where are the women? Where are the children? Are they included in the miracle but left out of the count? Like the boy's mother, are they present but unseen, supporting life without recognition? Read this way, the miracle is not

39. I learned this insight during the 11th Assembly of the World Council of Churches, held in Karlsruhe, Germany, in 2022, during a pre-assembly Bible study led by African women. I regret that I am unable to identify the woman who offered it and acknowledge this as a limitation of my own account.

40. Hyuk Cho, "Have You Eaten? Decolonizing Theology in the Contexts of the Philippines and Korea," *International Journal of Asian Christianity* 7, no. 2 (2024): 208–209.

only about multiplication. It is about revelation. It reveals what and whom we are formed not to see. Divine abundance begins not with control or surplus but with shared responsibility and awareness of gifts that come from the margins.

This story provides a valuable lesson for intercultural theology. Theological learning often comes most profoundly from those whose lives quietly support the community, not just from those who control resources or set agendas. Ignoring them is unjust and causes us to miss where God's abundance is already at work.

Conclusion: Living with the Grain of Reality

This chapter has argued that intercultural theology is not primarily a strategy for managing diversity but a response to the relational structure of reality itself. Encounter, vulnerability, and communion-in-difference are not optional virtues added to Christian life; they arise from a cosmotheandric vision in which God, humanity, and the earth are already bound together in mutual dependence. As Kim Ji-ha reminds us, heaven cannot belong to one person. To resist difference, dominate others, or hoard life is therefore not only ethically unjust but theologically incoherent—it is to live against the grain of reality.

If chapter 2 asked what kind of theology can seek healing without reproducing domination, this chapter has offered an answer. Intercultural theology names a way of holding difference without hierarchy because it recognizes that reality itself is relational. This is the form of relation beyond relation: connection that does not depend on agreement, sameness, or resolution but on faithfulness within irreducible difference. The church does not generate communion; it learns to participate in a communion already woven into existence. Anti-racism alone—though indispensable—is not sufficient. Resistance identifies what must be dismantled; intercultural theology discloses what the church is being drawn into: a way of life attuned to the deepest truth of God, humanity, and creation.

Truth, then, is not a possession safeguarded by the powerful but a relational practice sustained through shared attentiveness. Like the star that led the Magi away from the familiar, truth is found not at the abstract centre but out in the open—refracted through difference, tasted in a shared bowl of rice. Communion is not sameness but is the Spirit's work of holding difference together without erasure. The church's faithfulness is measured not by its capacity to control outcomes but by its willingness to dwell vulnerably in the in-between spaces where encounter transforms all who remain present.

This chapter has moved through three steps: exposing the limits of multicultural inclusion, exploring encounter as a dialogical practice rooted in irreducible otherness, and grounding such encounter in a cosmotheandric vision of reality. If this is the world we inhabit—where every person and every

meal is a site of divine interconnection—a further question presses: How does the church move within such a world? What does it mean to be sent when God is already present in the land, among peoples, and within histories not of the church's making? Chapter 4 takes up this question by turning from theological vision to missional orientation, exploring how Christian mission is reimagined not as conquest or delivery but as participatory presence within God's ongoing work.

Questions for Reflection

1. Epiphany and the Displacement of Truth: The chapter argues that Epiphany disrupts our expectation that truth resides at the "centre" (Jerusalem/institutional authority). Instead, the light often arrives from "elsewhere" (the Magi/margins). Can you name a time when our church learned a vital truth about God from a source we didn't expect—perhaps from outside our tradition or from someone usually on the margins?
2. Multicultural vs. Intercultural: The author distinguishes between multiculturalism (celebrating diversity while keeping the core unchanged, like an international potluck) and interculturality (allowing the presence of others to transform the structure). Look at our own community: Do we tend to invite people to join our table as it is, or are we willing to let the table itself be reshaped by those who arrive?
3. Unseen Labour (The Boy's Lunch): In the story of the feeding of the five thousand, the text highlights the "unseen labour" behind the miracle—likely the mother who packed the boy's lunch. Who are the "unseen mothers" in our community? Whose quiet labour and faithfulness sustain our life together but rarely get recognized or counted in our "official" stories?
4. Rice Is Heaven (Interdependence): The poem "Rice Is Heaven" suggests that because life (food/rice) is a collaborative work of God, earth, and neighbour, it cannot be owned privately; it must be shared. How does this view of reality challenge our modern practices of "private faith" or "individual ownership"? If we truly believed we are all interconnected parts of one reality, how would that change the way we eat, spend, or make decisions together?
5. Resistance and Vulnerability: The chapter describes encounter as requiring vulnerability and the willingness to be "unsettled." Where do you notice resistance in yourself—or in your community—to being genuinely changed by those who are different? What would it cost to lower that resistance? What might be lost, and what might be gained?

4

The Discipline of Wilderness:

Lent, Discernment, and the *Missio Dei*

Lent

Chapter 3 established that intercultural theology arises from the relational structure of reality itself—a cosmotheandric vision in which God, humanity, and earth are bound together in mutual dependence. The question that follows is practical: How does the church move faithfully within such a world? What does mission mean when God is already present beyond ecclesial boundaries, when truth arrives from elsewhere, and when the centre itself has been displaced?

If Epiphany teaches us that light comes from elsewhere, Lent forms the church to walk toward that light through the wilderness, relinquishing the illusion that it is the source of illumination. Lent does not prepare the church to regain mastery; it forms the church to live without it. This season places the church under restraint—not to paralyse action but to examine the practices that shape its mission. After Epiphany's recognition that truth arrives from elsewhere, Lent forms the community to discern when not to act, when to listen before speaking, and how to trust that God is already at work beyond ecclesial design. Within this Lenten frame, *missio Dei* (mission of God) appears not as a strategy the church deploys but as a formative posture—reorienting participation toward God's work already unfolding in the world.

Lent thus names a season of restraint rather than initiative. It interrupts practices shaped by mastery, effectiveness, or expansion, drawing the church into listening, discernment, and trust. The assumption that the church must initiate, direct, or complete God's work is brought into question. In response, this chapter approaches *missio Dei* not as a programme for renewal but as a discipline of humility—one that loosens the church's grip on control. Three questions organize what follows. *How is mission justified? Where does God work? How do we participate?* Each has been answered differently across a century of ecumenical reflection, and the movement between those answers is this chapter's subject.

The word *Lent* originates from an Old English term associated with spring. It evokes crocuses emerging through thawing ground and the gradual greening of the human spirit. Lent signals preparation rather than productivity—cultivating soil, choosing seeds, and relearning how growth actually occurs. Nothing is forced. Life emerges slowly, under conditions that cannot be controlled. The

practices traditionally associated with Lent—repentance, fasting, prayer, and attentiveness—are not acts of self-punishment but ways of softening hardened ground so that life may take root again. Lent is not primarily about giving up but about opening space: space for truth-telling, for unlearning practices of control, and for receiving God's life-giving grace without conditions. It cultivates receptivity—a willingness to be shaped rather than to manage outcomes.

If spring names the tempo of Lent, wilderness names its terrain. Lent is inseparable from biblical imagery of the wilderness: a place rarely chosen and almost never comfortable yet repeatedly presented as a site of exposure and transformation. Jesus does not wander into the wilderness by accident; he is led there by the Spirit (Luke 4:1). He enters filled with divine presence yet stripped of familiar supports, remaining long enough for hunger, vulnerability, and temptation to surface. Wilderness reveals what cannot be sustained by control. It exposes deeper questions of desire, dependence, and vocation. The Spirit works here not by resolution but by reorientation.

This pattern is not only personal; it is ecclesial. Churches, too, pass through wilderness seasons—times when inherited certainties weaken and familiar maps no longer guide with confidence. Many global North churches now inhabit such a season: declining participation, diminished cultural authority, and the temptation to grasp for relevance by aligning with political power. As explored in chapter 3, intercultural theology is not grounded in method or goodwill but in the displacement of the centre. It requires a willingness to encounter God in vulnerability and in communion-in-difference. If Epiphany taught the church to follow light into unfamiliar territory, Lent prepares it to remain where that light unsettles established claims rather than rushing toward resolution.

In contexts shaped by colonial history, racial hierarchy, religious plurality, and nationalist Christianity, mission can easily become another attempt to reclaim the centre—whether ecclesial or political. A Lenten posture is therefore not incidental to intercultural ecclesiology but one of its necessary disciplines. *Missio Dei* is not merely a missiological concept but a formative practice—one that restrains control, resists urgency, and regrounds the church in patient participation in God's work already unfolding in the world.

This chapter dwells on mission through this Lenten lens. It suggests that *missio Dei* does not arise from ecclesial initiative but from attentive listening to the Spirit's movement beyond the church's borders. Like Lent itself, mission begins with relinquishment: letting go of conquest, certainty, and dominance. Tracing the ecumenical reimagining of *missio Dei* through key reports of the World Council of Churches, this chapter follows a movement from a sending church toward a participating community, from assimilation toward communion, and from domination toward shared responsibility. *Missio Dei* thus emerges not as a strategy for expansion but as a Lenten practice—preparing

the ground so that God's reconciling work may take root within an unfinished pluralistic world.

1. The Crisis of Mission: Christian Nationalism and Theological Justification

To understand mission as participation in God's movement, the question of justification must first be faced.[1] If mission is no longer expansion or conquest, what renders it theologically legitimate? This question becomes unavoidable in times of political anxiety and cultural upheaval, when theology itself must learn restraint. It confronted the church in the 1930s, and it confronts the church again today.

In recent years, particularly within certain expressions of Christian nationalism in North America, mission has once again become entangled with national identity. Here, Christianity functions less as a confession of faith than as a cultural and political framework—one that fuses religious symbols with the preservation of power. Under slogans of cultural restoration, border protection, and national greatness, Christian language is mobilized to align divine blessing with a nation's security and dominance. In this configuration, the church risks trading the *missio Dei* for *missio imperii* (the mission of empire), driven by the impulse for mastery rather than participation in God's movement.[2]

Christian nationalism operates in these contexts much as natural theology functioned in an earlier era: it presumes a continuity between God's will and national interest, between ecclesial vocation and political project.[3] When mission becomes indistinguishable from the defence of borders, the assertion of cultural supremacy, or the recovery of a mythologized past, the church risks theological captivity—not to the gospel but to empire clothed in Christian language. This is not a new temptation. The modern articulation of *missio Dei* did not emerge from confidence or consensus but from a moment when theology was forced to refuse precisely this alignment of God's name with nation, culture, or historical destiny. It is at this point that Barth's intervention becomes decisive—not only for historical understanding but for the present crisis.

1. Karl Barth, "Die Theologie und die Mission in der Gegenwart (1932)," in *Theologische Fragen und Antworten: Gesammelte Vorträge*, Bd. 3 (Zollikon: Evangelischer Verlag, 1957), 114–15.

2. The term *missio imperii* is used here to describe the co-opting of Christian mission by imperial or nationalistic agendas, standing in direct contrast to *missio Dei*. For a comprehensive theological analysis of this entanglement, see Joerg Rieger, *Christ and Empire: From Paul to Postcolonial Times* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 269–303, on postcolonial empire; and David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 298–313, on the entanglement of mission and colonialism.

3. The general understanding of natural theology is that it claims to be based on the natural gifts of the human mind and the general revelation granted to all, rather than on a special revelation in Scripture or in Jesus Christ. See Justo L. González, *Essential Theological Terms* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), s.v. "Natural Theology."

Barth's reflections emerged amid a profound crisis: economic collapse, political extremism, and a church increasingly tempted to identify God's purposes with national destiny in Germany of the late 1920s and early 1930s. Under such conditions, theology could no longer assume continuity between God's action and human projects without risking theological captivity. The parallels to our own moment are not incidental; they are structural. Whenever the church is tempted to secure its relevance by aligning with political power, the same theological danger recurs.

Barth discerned that the growing power of political extremism was sustained by natural theology—the claim that God could be known and aligned with cultural identity, national vocation, or historical progress. Such theology, he feared, rendered the church vulnerable to ideological captivity by positing a point of contact (*Anknüpfungspunkt*) between divine revelation and human reason, history, or political order. Where God could be identified with what appeared strong, rational, or inevitable, the church lost its capacity for resistance. Today, a similar logic operates when divine favour is read through economic success, military strength, or electoral victory—when "blessing" becomes indistinguishable from national power.

Against this logic, Barth insisted on a deliberate discontinuity between God and humanity. As he argued, "The relationship between God and human beings—the subject of church and mission—is a discontinuous one: grace ... is a miracle ... and must be proclaimed as such, not something natural."[4] God could not be derived from human systems, however enlightened; God could be known only where God freely chose to reveal Godself—in Jesus Christ.[5] This discontinuity is not withdrawal from the world; it is the ground of prophetic freedom. Only a church that refuses to identify God's purposes with any nation's destiny can speak truthfully to power.

Read through this chapter's Lenten lens, Barth's insistence on discontinuity functions as disciplined resistance to the temptation to control. By refusing to ground theology in cultural plausibility or political necessity, Barth sought to preserve the church's freedom for obedience. Lent teaches a similar restraint: the refusal to act before discerning, to claim before listening, to align before examining whose interests are served.

It was within this context that Barth questioned the justification of mission itself. In his 1932 lecture "Theology and Mission in the Present," he argued that both theology and mission must be understood as "attempts of ecclesiastical

4. Barth, "Die Theologie und die Mission in der Gegenwart," 125.

5. Timothy Yates, *Christian Mission in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 49–50.

obedience."[6] Mission, Barth insisted, was justified only when it was identical with the will of the divine Lord of the church—a will that refuses conformity to any human system, even those articulated in Christian language.[7] This criterion remains urgent. When mission serves national interest, it has ceased to be *missio Dei*; it has become *missio imperii*.

Barth pressed the question further by recalling that *missio* was originally a trinitarian term. In the ancient church, it named the divine sending of the Son and the Holy Spirit into the world.[8] Mission, therefore, does not originate in ecclesial strategy or national purpose but in the self-sending life of God. On this basis, Barth rejected all rival missions—including political or civilizational ones—as theological distortions. As David Bosch later observed, Barth stands among the first theologians to articulate mission as the activity of God's own self.[9]

Barth provided the theological foundation, but the term itself required formal articulation. Karl Hartenstein, building on Barth's insight, gave the concept its name. In 1934, he argued that mission must constantly examine itself before God to discern whether it is truly *missio Dei*—the sending of God rather than a human undertaking.[10] In this framing, the plural missions are fundamentally removed from the sphere of purely human activity.[11] Thus, the singular concept of *missio Dei* was developed to emphasize that mission is an activity of the self-sending God, and it can be justified only by God.

This criterion of discernment remains essential. Churches today must ask: Whose mission are we serving? When mission aligns too seamlessly with political platforms—whether of the left or the right—Hartenstein's question reasserts itself. Is this *missio Dei*, or is it a human project dressed in theological language? The answer cannot be determined by intention alone; it requires attention to effects. Mission that secures borders rather than crossing them, that defends power rather than accompanying the vulnerable, that blesses the strong rather than lifting the marginalized—such mission has strayed from its trinitarian ground.

The original concept of *missio Dei* thus marked a decisive theological shift. Mission was no longer justified by culture, church, or nation but only by God's

6. Barth, "Die Theologie und die Mission in der Gegenwart," 104.

7. Barth, "Die Theologie und die Mission in der Gegenwart," 114–15.

8. Barth, "Die Theologie und die Mission in der Gegenwart," 115.

9. Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 389.

10. Karl Hartenstein, "Wozu nötigt die Finanzlage der Mission?" *Evangelisches Missions-Magazin* 79 (1934): 217.

11. Karl Hartenstein, "Die trinitarische Verkündigung in der Welt der Religionen," in *Die Deutsche Evangelische Heidenmission: Jahrbuch 1939*, ed. Karl Hartenstein (Hamburg: Selbstverlag der Missionskonferenz, 1939), 21–34.

self-sending action. This reorientation did not resolve the church's anxiety; it disciplined it. Mission, in this sense, becomes an act of participation rather than possession—obedience rather than execution—awaiting God's movement rather than presuming to direct it.

For churches in North America today—particularly those tempted by or troubled by Christian nationalism—Barth's intervention offers more than historical perspective. It offers a theological criterion: mission that cannot be distinguished from national interest is not *missio Dei*. The God who sends is the God who crossed every border in the incarnation (Phil. 2:6–8), who identified with the refugee and the stranger (Matt. 2:13–15), and who was executed by the empire rather than blessed by it (Mark 15:15–39). To participate in this, God's mission, is to refuse the alignment of gospel and flag—and to trust that God's work continues, often in precisely the places national projects overlook or oppose.

This Lenten restraint—the refusal to ground theology in cultural plausibility or align God's purposes with national destiny—became the theological foundation for what would emerge two decades later as the ecumenical concept of *missio Dei*. At the 1952 meeting of the International Missionary Council in Willingen, Germany, a generation marked by war, genocide, and theological crisis gathered to reimagine mission itself.

2. Origin of *Missio Dei*: The Willingen Conference

Having established this theological foundation, the ecumenical movement faced the task of institutionalizing it—a process that proved contested and incomplete. While Barth and Hartenstein had relocated mission's justification from human initiative to divine sending, the question of *where* God's mission unfolds—and *through whom*—remained unresolved. Over the following decades, the church would struggle to hold Barth's insight without domesticating it. That struggle continues today, wherever churches treat mission as their own programme rather than God's prior movement in the world.

Early ecumenical discussions reflected this tension as churches sought new patterns of cooperation after the collapse of overtly colonial mission models.[12] Yet historical upheaval soon forced more radical questioning. The closure of mission fields in China after 1949, together with rising independence movements across former colonies, compelled churches to confront whether mission could still be justified apart from cultural dominance or political power.

12. Early IMC discussions at Tambaram (1938) and Whitby (1947) addressed the emergence of "younger churches" and articulated the language of "partnership in obedience." While these meetings marked an important departure from explicitly colonial mission models, they did not fundamentally resolve the theological tension between divine initiative and ecclesial control.

It was against this background that the International Missionary Council met at Willingen, Germany, in 1952. The conference affirmed a trinitarian grounding of mission, declaring that mission originates in the sending life of the triune God rather than in the church's own initiative. In this sense, Willingen remained faithful to Barth's core theological insight: mission belongs first to God.[13]

At the same time, the conference revealed the limits of this reorientation. Although some voices argued that God's mission must be discerned beyond the church[14]—in political, social, and historical processes—the final formulation retained the church as the primary agent of God's work. Mission was understood predominantly as God's action *through* the church, rather than God's action in which the church participates alongside others.[15]

It is precisely here that Johannes C. Hoekendijk's critique becomes decisive. Hoekendijk rejected church-centred mission as a theological distortion, insisting that God's mission is directed toward the realization of God's shalom in the world, into which the church is invited as a participant rather than positioned as the centre.

He warned that when mission revolves around the church itself, it "revolves around an illegitimate centre."[16] The phrase is sharp and precise: to place the church at the centre of mission is not merely a strategic error but a theological one—it creates a false centre that displaces God's actual work in the world.

The Willingen delegates, however, declined this critique. While affirming that mission is God's work, they retained an ecclesiocentric framework in which God relates primarily to the church and only secondarily to the world through it. The resulting logic—God–church–world—preserved the church as agent, instrument, and mediator of mission.[17]

This framing proved influential yet ethically troubling. As later critics observed, a church-centred *missio Dei* risks reproducing hierarchical relationships by positioning the church as the bearer of meaning, direction, and legitimacy for others.[18] Mission, in this mode, easily becomes an exercise in guidance *over* others rather than discernment *with* them.

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13. Norman Goodall, ed., *Missions Under the Cross: Addresses Delivered at the Enlarged Meeting of the Committee of the International Missionary Council at Willingen, in Germany, 1952; with Statements Issued by the Meeting* (London: Edinburgh House Press, 1953), 189.

14. J. C. Hoekendijk, "The Church in Missionary Thinking," *International Review of Mission* 41, no. 163 (July 1952): 332.

15. Goodall, *Missions Under the Cross*, 188–92.

16. Hoekendijk, "The Church in Missionary Thinking," 332.

17. Goodall, *Missions Under the Cross*, 190.

18. John G. Flett, "A Theology of missio Dei," *Theology in Scotland* 21, no. 1 (2014): 71.

The same logic persists in contemporary forms. When churches position themselves as guardians of cultural identity—defining who belongs to the nation, who deserves welcome, and whose values should govern public life—they replicate the Willingen error in new dress. The church becomes the centre through which God's blessing flows to a chosen people rather than a participant in God's boundary-crossing work. Christian nationalism represents one such form: the church not as companion in *missio Dei* but as chaplain to *missio imperii*, blessing national projects rather than subjecting them to prophetic scrutiny.

The theological problem here is not merely conceptual but spiritual. A church-centred account of *missio Dei* often reflects ecclesial anxiety—an impulse to secure outcomes, manage growth, and provide governing structures for God's work in the world. Such impulses betray a preference for control over trust, productivity over patience, and visibility over vulnerability. In contexts of institutional decline, this anxiety intensifies. Churches grasping for relevance may be tempted to align with political power, imagining that cultural influence can substitute for faithfulness.

Such alignment, however, only deepens the captivity Barth warned against. To relinquish this logic requires more than structural adjustment. It requires a different posture toward time itself—not the urgency of expansion but the discipline of waiting; not the seizing of outcomes but the slow work of "tending." Read through the Lenten frame of this chapter, the unresolved tension at Willingen signals not merely a historical limitation but a church still learning the vulnerability required to follow a God who sends without assurances. That learning would not remain theoretical for long.

3. A Paradigm Shift in the Understanding of *Missio Dei*

Willingen had affirmed that mission originates in God yet retained the church as its centre. The 1960s forced a reckoning with this contradiction. The period tested whether the church could embrace patient cultivation or return to the familiar logic of control. It was a time of profound theological ferment as liberal Protestant thinkers searched for frameworks adequate to modern life. The legacy of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, with his provocative notion of "religionless Christianity," had already unsettled inherited assumptions about the church's

place in an increasingly secular world.[19] The question Bonhoeffer raised—whether the church could exist for others rather than for itself—remains urgent today, particularly where churches have become instruments of cultural defence rather than witnesses to a God who cannot be contained by national or ecclesial boundaries.

A wave of influential works followed. Wilfred Cantwell Smith's *The Meaning and End of Religion* (1962) challenged the assumption that "religion" names a stable universal category. John A. T. Robinson's *Honest to God* (1963) questioned traditional theism. Harvey Cox's *The Secular City* (1965) interpreted urbanization and secularization not as threats to faith but as sites of divine activity. Together, these works reopened questions that Willingen had largely bracketed: Where is God at work? And must that work be mediated through the church?

During this same period, the Roman Catholic Church began preparations for the Second Vatican Council (1962–65), initiating a renewed engagement with a secularizing world. In parallel, the International Missionary Council was incorporated into the World Council of Churches in 1961, guided by the conviction that church and mission cannot be separated. This institutional integration gave rise to a study entitled The Missionary Structure of the Congregation (1961–66), which sought to reassess the church's mission in light of changing historical conditions.

The project's final reports, published as *The Church for Others and the Church for the World* (1967, hereafter *The Church for Others*), were prepared by Western European and North American working groups.[20] Each study began by examining the inherited structure in which God's primary relationship was assumed to be with the church. Within this sequence—God–church–world—God's concern moved from the "inside" of the church toward the "outsiders" in the world.[21] *The Church for Others* affirmed instead that God is already active

19. Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906–45) wrote the following from Tegel military prison in 1944: "God would have us know that we must live as [people] who manage our lives without him. The God who is with us is the God who forsakes us (Mark 15:34). The God who lets us live in the world without the working hypothesis of God is the God before whom we stand continually. Before God and with God we live without God. God lets himself be pushed out of the world onto the cross. He is weak and powerless in the world, and that is precisely the way, the only way, in which he is with us and helps us." Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, ed. Eberhard Bethge (New York: Touchstone, 1997 [1953]), 360.

20. World Council of Churches, *The Church for Others: And, the Church for the World: A Quest for Structures for Missionary Congregations: Final Report of the Western European Working Group and North American Working Group of the Department on Studies in Evangelism* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1967).

21. WCC, *The Church for Others*, 17. The title is reminiscent of Bonhoeffer's letters from prison: "The church is the church only when it exists for others." Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 382.

in the world through people of goodwill, wherever they may be, and that the church is called to participate in that activity. The sequence of mission was thus rearticulated as God–world–church.

This reordering carries profound implications for the present. If God's primary relationship is with the world—not first with the church—then the church cannot claim to be the exclusive channel of divine activity. Movements for justice, ecological restoration, and human dignity that arise outside ecclesial structures may themselves be signs of *missio Dei*. The church's task is not to initiate God's work but to discern it, joining what the Spirit is already doing. This stands in sharp contrast to forms of Christian nationalism that position the church as guardian of a nation's identity, the arbiter of belonging, or the source of moral legitimacy for political projects. Where the church claims to mediate God's blessing to the nation, it has reversed the God–world–church sequence and returned to the ecclesiocentrism Hoekendijk diagnosed.

Hoekendijk's challenge to church-centred mission had begun in the 1950s and continued into the 1960s. He argued that the very order of God's primary relationship required rethinking:

> Our God is not a temple dweller. In the strict sense of the word he is not even a church god. He advances through time; ever again he lets the new conquer the old ... The issue at stake now is that we remain in the open sphere, which is the arena of divine acts. We must maintain the right order in our thinking and speaking about the church. That order is God–world–church, not God–church–world. Only in this way will things find their proper place and will we perhaps be delivered from our fright for all that is "worldly."[22]

Hoekendijk's missiology, refined over 15 years, finds expression in this provocative claim. God is understood as moving through a changing world to make all things new. The church does not exist in itself or for itself, just as the Messiah did not exist in and for himself. The church lives for the world, and its vocation is participation in the *missio Dei*.

Hoekendijk's phrase "Our God is not a temple dweller" speaks directly to contemporary forms of religious nationalism. When the church treats its own boundaries as the limits of God's work or imagines national borders as the perimeter of divine blessing, *missio Dei* has been replaced by a tribal deity. The God who "advances through time" cannot be confined to one nation's destiny or enlisted in one civilization's project. To be "delivered from our fright for all that is 'worldly'" is therefore also to be delivered from fear of the stranger—the immigrant, the displaced, and the religiously other—precisely those whom

22. J. C. Hoekendijk, *The Church Inside Out* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1966), 70–71.

nationalist Christianity too often treats as threats rather than as sites where God may already be at work.

Hoekendijk's influence is clearly discernible in the final reports of both working groups. *The Church for Others* confirmed his central insight that God's mission extends beyond the churches. What had been resisted at Willingen now emerged as a defining theme:

> The *missio Dei* is at work beyond the churches (and various missions). It embraces both church and world. The churches serve the *missio Dei* in the world when, on the basis of revelation, they point to God at work in world history.
>
> Our focus on mission-as-God's mission leads us to understand history as God's "affair" with man, as the divine invitation to man to share the world with God. God sends his messengers, his Messiah, his Spirit to release man from his self-imposed or self-chosen fixations and to open the future for him.[23]

The Church for Others thus moved beyond an ecclesiocentric framework toward a theocentric one—a shift David Bosch later characterized as redirecting attention from church activities toward "God's work in the secular world."[24] The church was no longer presumed to be the exclusive site of divine activity; God was already at work in history, politics, and social movements beyond ecclesial control.

Letty M. Russell, a member of the North American working group, interpreted the implications of this shift with particular clarity. "The church," she wrote, "becomes more modest in its claims to be the medium of God's action and instead sees itself as a sign or instrument of that action, which is taking place in and through all parts of the groaning universe." Elsewhere, Russell emphasized that in a postcolonial world, God's mission is a gift of welcome that invites all to participate in God's work. God creates spaces of liberation by making all things new (Is. 43:18–21; Rev. 21:5).[25]

This reorientation reaches deeper than strategy or institutional adjustment. It rests on a renewed understanding of the Trinity itself—a shift that redefines not only mission's method but mission's very ground. The implications are

23. WCC, *The Church for Others*, 14, 94.

24. David Bosch, *Witness to the World: The Christian Mission in Theological Perspective* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1980), 190.

25. Letty M. Russell, "God, Gold, Glory and Gender: A Postcolonial View of Mission," *International Review of Mission* 93, no. 368 (January 2004): 45. While the 1960s celebrated the secular as a site of freedom from religious control, we now recognize (chapter 5) that the secular world is itself shaped by colonial powers that require discernment.

profound: if God is known as Father, Son, and Spirit in *perichoretic* communion, then mission cannot be conceived as unilateral sending but must be received as participation in the mutual outpouring of love that constitutes divine life.

Earlier formulations of *missio Dei* implied a hierarchical movement: the Father sends the Son, the Son sends the Spirit, the Spirit sends the church. The emerging vision, by contrast, draws on the concept of *perichoresis*—a mutual indwelling in which no divine person dominates another. Correspondingly, the church's role shifts from governance over others to witnessing and working for the common good *with* others. Jacques Matthey identifies this reconfiguration, emerging from *The Church for Others* and the WCC assembly in Uppsala (1968), as the "ecumenical" understanding of *missio Dei*.[26]

The trinitarian logic of *perichoresis* offers a counter-imagination to the hierarchies that shape nationalist Christianity. Where *missio imperii* operates through domination—imposing one nation over others, one culture as normative, one people as chosen—the triune God offers a different pattern: mutual indwelling without subordination, distinction without hierarchy, unity without erasure. A church formed by this vision cannot position itself above the world it serves. It cannot claim to speak for God while silencing those whom God is already addressing through other traditions, other movements, other histories. *Perichoresis* is not merely a doctrine; it is a discipline of power—a refusal of the domination that empire requires.

This trinitarian reimagining, however, demands more than theological assent. A vision of mission practised alongside rather than over others stands as a direct challenge to the "us versus them" logic that animates nationalist Christianity. The Lenten discipline of this chapter names what this refusal requires: the surrender of control, the refusal of mastery, and the trust that God is already at work in the world, often beyond the church's authorship or approval.

Interlude:

Tending and Listening

Before the church can practise discernment rather than governance, a prior question emerges: What posture does such reorientation require? Two images—one drawn from parable, one from language—offer a response.

26. Jacques Matthey, "Missiology in the World Council of Churches: Update," *International Review of Mission* 90, no. 359 (2001): 429. The "classical" concept of *missio Dei* can be defined as a church-centred mission.

The parable of the barren fig tree (Luke 13:6–9) unsettles the logic of productivity that often governs ecclesial self-understanding. Within Israel's theological imagination, the fig tree signifies blessing and hope, stretching from Eden to prophetic visions of restored life. Yet in the parable, the tree bears no fruit. Judged by past performance, it has failed, and the owner's verdict is swift: "Cut it down." Value is assessed by measurable results; life must prove its worth through output.

The parable turns, however, on the gardener's intervention. Rather than endorsing judgement, the gardener asks for time: "let it alone for one more year" (Luke 13:8). He proposes cultivation instead of removal—digging around the roots, altering the conditions, trusting that life may yet emerge. Significantly, the gardener is not the owner. He risks himself for a future he cannot secure, shifting attention from past success to future possibility. Hope, rather than productivity, becomes the measure that guides his care.

The gardener's labour—digging, tending, waiting—enacts what chapter 3 named *sallim*: the patient work of sustaining life that refuses the logic of productivity and judgement. Read through the lens of *missio Dei*, the parable resists a vision of mission driven by efficiency or visible success, bearing witness instead to God's patient refusal to abandon a world that appears unfruitful.

Yet tending alone is not sufficient. The gardener must also learn to listen—to attend to what the soil, the roots, and the season are saying. Here, the words for listening in Japanese and Chinese offer a complementary image.

The Japanese verb *kiku* (聴く) exceeds the English "listen." Japanese distinguishes it from 聞く, which names hearing as reception of sound; 聴く names listening with presence, intention, and the whole self—not registering a voice but receiving another's word.

A comparable understanding is embedded in the traditional Chinese character for listening (聽), whose components include the ear (耳), the eye (目), and the heart-mind (心). To listen, in this conception, is to attend with full presence—receiving the Other not as an object of intervention but as a subject who addresses and claims attention.

Read theologically, the gardener and the listener name the same reorientation from different angles. The gardener refuses the owner's demand for immediate productivity; the listener refuses the impulse to speak before receiving. Both resist control. Both require time. Both trust that what is needed will emerge not from initiative but from attentiveness.

The question facing the church, then, is less about the adequacy of its actions than about its capacity for receptivity. Tending and listening become not preliminary stages of mission but constitutive disciplines of participation in the *missio Dei*—practices of shared concern grounded in attentiveness to what God is already doing beyond the church's authorship.

Lent creates precisely this space: not a season of moral accounting but of reorientation—loosening hardened soil, quieting the impulse to act, and cultivating the attentiveness through which God's life-giving work may be discerned. The postures named here—tending and listening—will reappear throughout this book as companionship (chapters 5 and 6), shared power (chapter 6), and Spirit-led practice (chapter 6): each a way of inhabiting God's patience in a world that appears unfruitful.

4. Practising *Missio Dei* in Changing Landscapes

Yet the postures of tending and listening were not universally embraced. The emergence of a God-centred (God–world–church) understanding of mission generated significant tension within global Christianity. By the late 1960s, critics warned that emphasizing God's activity in the world risked marginalizing proclamation and weakening the church's evangelistic responsibility (God–church–world). Mission, they argued, could lose clarity if it became detached from the church's distinctive calling. These debates exposed a deep divide between approaches that emphasized God's freedom beyond ecclesial boundaries and those that insisted on the church's central role in God's redemptive work.[27]

The early 1970s thus became a testing period marked not only by disagreement but also by emerging efforts toward bridge-building. Alongside critique, voices increasingly called for unity, mutual recognition, and pastoral responsibility across theological divides.[28] Mission began to be understood less as a matter of doctrinal alignment alone and more as a relational practice requiring patience, attentive listening, and shared discernment.

Convergence: Mission and Evangelism (1982)

During this period, evangelical movements clarified their missiological identity while engaging seriously with the language of *missio Dei*. Evangelism remained central, yet it was increasingly articulated in holistic terms that included social responsibility and justice. Over time, positions that once appeared irreconcilable

27. David Bosch, "'Ecumenicals' and 'Evangelicals': A Growing Relationship?" *Ecumenical Review* 40, nos 3–4 (1988): 463–70.

28. "Lausanne Covenant," Sec. 6, https://lausanne.org/content/covenant/lausanne-covenant#cov.

began to converge. Evangelicals increasingly affirmed social engagement as integral to mission, while ecumenical thinkers reaffirmed the centrality of Christ and proclamation. By the late 20th century, the earlier polarity between God-centred and church-centred approaches had softened, yielding a more complex and shared—though still contested—understanding of how God works in the world through and beyond the church.[29]

Against this backdrop, the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism (CWME) faced a delicate task: how to affirm *missio Dei* while addressing evangelical concerns that the church's distinctive role had been diminished. The result was the Commission's first official statement, *Mission and Evangelism: An Ecumenical Affirmation* (1982). The document explicitly sought common ground with evangelicals, opening with the declaration that "this evangelistic calling has a new urgency today."[30] While taking ecclesiocentric concerns seriously, it grounded its theology firmly in *missio Dei*: "The Church is sent into the world to call people and nations to repentance, to announce forgiveness of sin and a new beginning in relations with God and with neighbours through Jesus Christ" (preface).

In both tone and substance, *Mission and Evangelism* stands close to the Lausanne Covenant, reaffirming the church's role within a Christ-centred account of mission. It functioned as a charter for mission within the ecumenical movement, concluding with the assurance that the same Lord who sends the church across all frontiers also promises abiding presence: "I am with you always, to the close of the age" (Matt. 28:20 RSV, quoted in *Mission and Evangelism*, para. 47).

Reorientation: Together towards Life (2013)

Yet this renewed emphasis on church and Christ did not resolve the missiological questions at stake. As global, cultural, and ecclesial landscapes continued to shift, further discernment became necessary. Three decades later, these changes found expression in the CWME's second major policy statement, *Together towards Life: Mission and Evangelism in Changing Landscapes*.[31] Rather than offering a historical survey or a systematic theological account, the document reflects a renewed interpretation of *missio Dei* shaped by contemporary conditions.

Together towards Life opens with trinitarian confession: God as creator, redeemer, and sustainer; Christ as the one who came that all might have life in fullness; the Spirit as Life-giver who renews creation. "A denial of life,"

29. Bosch, "'Ecumenicals' and 'Evangelicals,'" 465.

30. World Council of Churches, "Mission and Evangelism: An Ecumenical Affirmation," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 7, no. 2 (1983): 65.

31. World Council of Churches, *Together towards Life: Mission and Evangelism in Changing Landscapes* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2013).

the document states, "is a rejection of the God of life" (para. 1). Only after establishing this theological foundation does it turn confession into question, asking the global church: "How and where do we discern God's life-giving work that enables us to participate in God's mission today?" The question is not rhetorical. It invites churches into discernment rather than presumption—asking not whether God is at work but where, and how, we might join what God is already doing. From this question emerge three interconnected implications for the practice of *missio Dei*.

Three Implications for Practice

Mission from the Margins: *Together towards Life* reorients the location of mission. *Missio Dei* is articulated as a holistic "mission from the margins" (paras. 36–54). Western forms of Christianity are no longer treated as normative (para. 98), since "the majority of Christians either are living or have their origins in the global South and East" (para. 5). This demographic reality carries theological significance: "People at the margins are claiming their key role as agents of mission and affirming mission as transformation." The document names this reorientation "a shift of the mission concept from 'mission to the margins' to 'mission from the margins'" (para. 6).

Mission from the margins challenges assumptions that mission flows only from the powerful to the powerless or from the centre to the periphery. Instead, it affirms that those who live at the edges often perceive realities obscured from positions of privilege: "People on the margins have agency, and can often see what, from the centre, is out of view" (para. 38).

This emphasis resonates with the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37). The wounded body in the ditch exposes what the centre prefers to overlook: without it, the deeper realities of the road remain unseen. But the parable's agent is also a marginal figure. The priest and the Levite, occupying the centre of religious life, pass by; it is the Samaritan—despised, outside the boundaries of acceptable identity—who sees and acts. Jesus then turns the parable back on the lawyer: "Go and do likewise" (Luke 10:37). Those at the margins become witnesses in both senses—bearing evidence of what the centre has done, and bearing testimony to what it must become. Read through this chapter's Lenten lens, the invitation to listen to the margins constitutes a discipline of restraint—learning when the powerful must hold their tongues so the Spirit's work among the vulnerable can be heard.

At the same time, *Together towards Life* expands mission's scope beyond human communities alone. It calls for a cosmic understanding of *missio Dei*, affirming all life—the whole *oikoumene*—as interconnected within God's web of life (para. 4). Mission, in this sense, becomes participation in God's ongoing

work of creation and reconciliation, responding to "the outpouring of the love of God" (para. 18).

Mission in the Spirit: If mission from the margins reorients the location of mission, mission in the Spirit reshapes its posture. *Missio Dei* is presented as a Spirit-centred movement rooted in the "Trinity's communion of love" (para. 29). While a theocentric account clarifies what mission is in a pluralistic world, *Together towards Life* presses further by asking how mission is to be lived. Acknowledging that "the church lives in a multi-religious and multi-cultural context" (para. 9), the document underscores the necessity of interfaith dialogue and cross-cultural engagement as integral to faithful witness.

Within this framework, *Together towards Life* affirms that "by the Spirit we participate in the mission of love that is at the heart of the life of the Trinity ... All who respond to the outpouring of the love of God are invited to join in with the Spirit in the mission of God" (para. 18). The repeated emphasis on "mission spirituality" (paras. 3, 30, 104) signals a shift in emphasis from control or mastery toward transformation, openness, and attentiveness to the Spirit's movement.

This vision draws on the classical theological concept of *perichoresis*, which names the mutual indwelling of the divine persons.[32] As a missional image, *perichoresis* resists hierarchy and domination, portraying mission as dynamic movement in relationship—distinct participants held together without collapse or coercion.

In this context, John V. Taylor's portrayal of the Holy Spirit as the "go-between God" is especially illuminating. He describes the Spirit as an "anonymous third party" who "makes the introduction, acts as a go-between, makes two beings aware of each other, and sets up a current of communication between them."[33] The Spirit does not merely stand between persons but activates each from within, opening pathways of mutual recognition.

Together towards Life extends this insight to interreligious engagement, affirming that "the Holy Spirit works in mysterious ways and we do not fully understand the workings of the Spirit in other faith traditions" (para. 93).

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32. Jürgen Moltmann, "Perichoresis: An Old Magic Word for a New Trinitarian Theology," in *Trinity, Community, and Power: Mapping Trajectories in Wesleyan Theology*, ed. M. Douglas Meeks (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 2000), 114. An early and influential formulation appears in the eighth-century theologian John of Damascus, who used περιχώρησις to name the mutual indwelling of the divine persons: the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit "are made one not so as to commingle, but so as to cleave to each other, and they have their being in each other without any coalescence or commingling." John of Damascus, *An Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*, book 1, chap. 8, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 2nd ser., vol. 9, trans. S. D. F. Salmond (New York: Christian Literature Company, 1899).

33. John V. Taylor, *The Go-Between God: The Holy Spirit and Christian Mission* (London: SCM Press, 1972), 17.

The Spirit is at work in the in-between spaces, generating communication that honours difference without enforcing sameness. By the Spirit, the church is drawn into an ever-widening circle of concern, participating in the mission of love that lies at the heart of the triune life (para. 18).

Companionship in Mission: The third implication reframes the partners of mission. *Together towards Life* describes *missio Dei* as unfolding through expanding circles of "[sharing] a common concern" (para. 65)—language that points toward what this book names "companionship." Mission is no longer defined by who initiates or controls it but by what is borne together. Influenced in part by Orthodox theological contributions, this vision grounds mission pneumatologically: in God's life-giving work of creation, liberation, healing, reconciliation, and restoration (para. 24).[34] Mission emerges not from institutional self-assertion but from attentiveness to where the Spirit is already sustaining life.

Together towards Life names this widening horizon through renewed collaboration across denominational and ecumenical boundaries, including growing engagement with evangelicals. What is at stake is not the erasure of difference, but the recognition of a shared calling: "that the whole church should witness to the whole gospel in the whole world" (para. 65). Shared concern thus functions as a theological discipline, holding together confession and cooperation without collapsing one into the other.

This language of "shared concern" has been emerging in ecumenical discourse for decades, though not always under the same name. The United Church of Canada's 1966 statement *World Mission* anticipated later developments, arguing that when engagement is shaped not by prior doctrinal agreement but by attention to what truly matters in the world, space opens for honest dialogue across difference.[35] In such contexts, boundaries—denominational, ecumenical, or religious—remain real but are relativized for the sake of common witness and mutual responsibility.

More recently, *Called to Transformation: Ecumenical Diakonia* (2022), presented by the WCC and ACT Alliance at Karlsruhe, articulated this vision through the practice of *diakonia*.[36] The document describes churches practising *missio Dei* alongside humanitarian, environmental, and justice

34. Kirsteen Kim, "Responding to the Changed Landscape of the 21st Century: The Process and Content of Together towards Life," in *Ecumenical Missiology: Changing Landscapes and New Conceptions of Mission*, ed. Kenneth R. Ross, Jooseop Keum, Kyriaki Avtzi, and Roderick R. Hewitt (Oxford: Regnum Books International; Geneva: WCC Publications, 2016), 382.

35. United Church of Canada, *World Mission: Report of the Commission on World Mission* (Toronto: United Church of Canada, 1966), 54.

36. World Council of Churches and ACT Alliance, *Called to Transformation: Ecumenical Diakonia* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2022).

organizations—partners who may not share confessional commitments but do share concern for life threatened and dignity denied. Here, *diakonia* names not hierarchical service but a go-between presence in the world: shared responsibility shaped by Christ's reconciling love rather than institutional control.

Companionship gives this vision ecclesial form. When companionship becomes the frame of interpretation, shared concern reshapes how mission is lived. Companionship names a disciplined practice of walking alongside others without presuming symmetry, control, or moral priority. Within *missio Dei*, companionship arises where shared concern draws communities into sustained proximity to one another and to sites of vulnerability—where responsibility is neither delegated upward nor displaced onto the most affected but carried together in unequal yet accountable ways. Mission unfolds not as problem solving on behalf of others but as shared exposure to what is at stake, allowing relationships themselves to become the space in which God's reconciling work is discerned and enacted.

The historical development of *missio Dei* is often narrated through dense theological debates and institutional shifts that are difficult to hold together at once. Table 4.1 therefore serves as an interpretive guide, highlighting key moments without resolving tensions or implying linear progress. Instead, it illuminates a gradual reorientation—from church-centred justification toward participatory presence within God's ongoing, unfinished work in the world.

Table 4.1 Theological Shifts in *Missio Dei*

Phase	Key Voice/ Moment	Core Insight	Missional Reorientation
God as Source	Karl Barth (1930s)	Mission originates in the triune God, not human initiative or church expansion.	From human projects to God's self-sending life
Church as Agent	Willingen (1952)	Mission flows from God through the church into the world.	From colonial mission to God→church→world
World as Site	Hoekendijk/ Church for Others (1967)	God is already active in the world; the church must discern rather than control.	From church-centred to God→world→church
Margins and Companionship	*Together towards Life* (2013); *Called to Transformation* (2022)	Mission arises from the margins and is practised as companionship, not intervention.	From centre to margins; companionship in God's ongoing mission

For churches tempted by decline anxiety or political alignment, *Together towards Life* offers both a challenge and a gift: the freedom to relinquish control and the invitation to join a mission already underway—from the margins, in the Spirit, and through shared concern for a wounded world. Yet this raises a further question for global North churches: How might we actually practise what the document envisions? It names mission from the margins as gift, but global North churches often struggle to receive without appropriating, to listen without controlling. This is where Lent's discipline becomes most demanding.

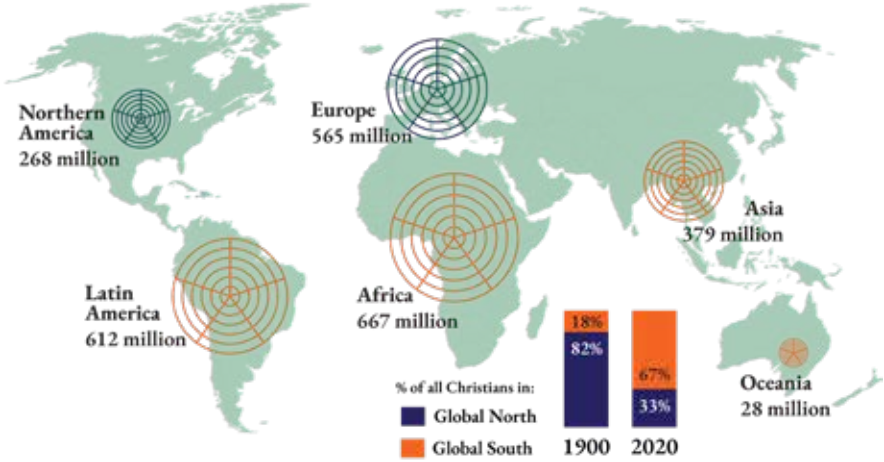
5. Cultivating Receptivity: The Global North's Lenten Call

This book is written from and for a particular context: global North churches experiencing decline, institutional uncertainty, and the loss of cultural authority that once appeared unassailable. The previous sections traced how *missio Dei* evolved: from church-centred sending to participatory presence in God's work. Yet there is a tension this chapter must name honestly before it concludes.

Together towards Life announces not merely a shift in theological imagination but a reconfiguration of the church's geographical centre of gravity. As the majority of Christians now live in the global South and East, vitality, growth, and theological creativity have moved beyond Europe and North America. Figure 4.1 gives the scale of the shift: in 1900, 82 percent of the world's Christians lived in the global North; by 2020 that share had fallen to 33 percent. This is not a passing phase to be managed; it is the altered landscape within which mission must now be discerned.

For churches shaped within the global North, this raises a more unsettling question: What does it mean to be addressed, unsettled, and re-formed by mission that they did not initiate or imagine as originating from themselves?

Figure 4.1 Christians by Continent



For centuries, mission was construed as a unidirectional movement—from the West to the rest—leaving durable traces in ecclesial structures, theological practices, and claims to moral authority. This imagination obscured the deeper confession of *missio Dei*: that mission originates not in the church but in God, whose activity precedes and exceeds every ecclesial project.

Within this distorted framework, *diakonia* was often reduced to the language of "servanthood," a concept that, while seemingly humble, frequently concealed a vertical power dynamic. As argued in *Decolonizing Diakonia*, the rhetoric of service was repeatedly spiritualized in ways that blunted its critical edge and rendered it the language of the privileged.[37] It established a durable dualism between "those who serve" as active subjects of agency and "those who are served" as passive objects of need, thereby reinscribing the very hierarchies that mission was called to unsettle.

To disturb this inheritance is not simply to amplify voices from elsewhere within existing frameworks or to imagine a neat reversal of direction. It is to expose how the posture of "being for others" can function as a benevolence trap, maintaining the agency of the global North while deflecting the deeper call to be *with* others.

Here, a temptation must be named. Global North churches, including my own, The United Church of Canada—shaped by anxiety over decline—may instrumentalize *missio Dei* as a tool for institutional renewal or reject it precisely because it unsettles church-centred understandings of mission. We may extract insights from *Together towards Life*—mission from the margins, Spirit-led practice, companionship—and redeploy them to bolster our congregations without submitting ourselves to the demands of relinquishment they require.

This domesticates the very vision we claim to embrace. It repeats a colonial pattern in subtler form: appropriating what proves useful while deflecting the deeper challenge to power, authority, and self-understanding.

Intercultural theology resists this manoeuvre. Genuine encounter requires vulnerability—the willingness to be changed rather than merely informed. To receive from churches shaped in the global South is not to borrow techniques for renewal or growth. It is to allow oneself to be questioned by communities formed through histories of dispossession, survival, and faithfulness under conditions the global North has often ignored, benefited from, or helped to produce.

I write as a Korean immigrant to Canada, formed in a space that cannot be neatly located within the global South, yet one that remains deeply marked by its histories and perspectives. My Christian formation unfolded within a church shaped by long-standing practices of partnership, particularly through processes

37. Cho and Park, *Decolonizing Diakonia*, 11–18.

of mutual transformation between the Presbyterian Church in the Republic of Korea (PROK) and UCC. Through this history, I learned that genuine partnership cannot be sustained without a deeper shift—from servanthood to companionship. Drawing on the work of Katharine B. Hockin, companionship offers a postcolonial critique of power, reimagining mission not as the delivery of resources or expertise but as a shared journey marked by mutual accountability.[38] It reframes mission from vertical intervention to lateral solidarity: a practice of *being with* that unsettles the inherited hierarchy of benefactor and beneficiary.

Yet this formative experience does not authorize me to speak for the global South. Rather, it situates my experience alongside many others—often shaped quite differently—through which mission has taken divergent forms across regions and histories. Not all mission relationships have yielded mutual transformation; many remain far from genuine companionship. Where mission has operated primarily as servanthood—power exercised *for* others rather than *with* them—the language of partnership has often functioned to mask enduring asymmetries. Global North churches are therefore invited to examine honestly whether their mission relationships have embodied companionship—facing the same direction alongside others—or whether they have continued to inhabit the posture of benefactors acting on behalf of those presumed to lack.

This critique of global North appropriation finds support in recent ecumenical reflection. If *Together towards Life* provides the orientation, the theology of companionship provides the theological grounding. Central to this theology is the recognition that God's mission precedes and exceeds the church's initiatives, and faithful participation requires relinquishing the assumption that the church sets the terms of engagement.

To take this seriously—not as rhetoric but as ecclesial practice—would mean cultivating relationships with churches in the global South organized around mutual learning rather than funding streams, technical expertise, or development agendas. Such relationships would be shaped by asymmetry, vulnerability, and accountability. It would mean engaging theological work from Africa, Asia, and Latin America not as contextual supplements to Western theology but as critical voices that name realities Western traditions have often failed to perceive. It would mean submitting liturgical practices, governance structures, and theological assumptions—long treated as neutral—to interrogation by those who experience their effects differently.

38. Katharine B. Hockin, a United Church of Canada missionary in China and later a missiologist and teacher at the United Church Training School (now the Centre for Christian Studies) and the Ecumenical Forum of Canada, both in Toronto, developed what she called a missiology of "companions on the way," reframing mission away from acting *for* others toward a mutuality she saw as absent even from well-intentioned partnership models. For a full treatment of her missiology and its postcolonial implications, see Hyuk Cho and JungHee Park,*Decolonizing Diakonia*, part 3, chaps. 6–8, and chap. 10.

Understood in this way, the move toward companionship is not a matter of cultural exchange; it is a form of conversion.

A church that learns to receive in this way will not remain what it was. Its centre of gravity will shift, its certainties will loosen, and it will come to recognize that what it once offered as gift was frequently entangled with control. To relinquish that control is not loss alone; it is a necessary dimension of repentance.

This, too, is Lenten discipline. To receive what we cannot govern is to fast from mastery. It is to trust that the Spirit moves beyond our programmes and ahead of our plans. Global North churches may experience this as loss—the loss of centrality, authority, and the assumption that we set the terms. Yet Lent teaches that such losses can become openings. Ground that appears barren may be preparing space for life we did not plant.

The gardener in Jesus' parable did not own the vineyard. He tended what was not his, trusting that fruitfulness might yet emerge. *Sallim*—the patient, life-giving labour explored in chapter 3—names a similar Lenten wisdom: sustaining life without claiming ownership over its outcomes. Global North churches are being invited into this posture: to tend relationships they do not control, to receive wisdom they did not generate, and to trust that God's mission continues—with or without their management. This is the essence of *diakonia* as companionship: a critique of power that aligns with the ministry of Jesus, Martha, and Mary—a ministry not of mastery but of presence.

Conclusion: Never-Ending Mission of God

This chapter has traced a theological arc from crisis to practice. *Missio Dei* was forged in crisis—Barth's refusal, in 1930s Germany, to align God's name with national destiny—and it speaks with renewed urgency to our own moment: mission is justified only when its source is the self-sending God, not national interest or cultural preservation. Wherever the church serves as chaplain to *missio imperii*—blessing borders, sanctifying sovereignty, or treating national greatness as divine mandate—it has departed from the *missio Dei* it claims to serve. The danger Barth identified has not passed; it has migrated.

This foundational insight—mission as God's alone—has developed through successive reorientations. Viewed across this historical arc, *missio Dei* emerges not as static doctrine but as a call to discernment—requiring each generation to articulate afresh what it means that mission belongs to God alone. From church-centred mission (Willingen), to God-centred mission (Uppsala), to Spirit-centred mission from the margins (*Together towards Life*), each shift represents the church learning to release its grip. The paradigm shift from God–church–world to God–world–church is not merely historical; it is a criterion of faithfulness. Churches that position themselves as mediators of divine blessing

to a chosen nation have not yet undergone this shift: they remain captive to an ecclesiocentrism that has merely exchanged ecclesial boundaries for national ones.

These historical shifts converge in contemporary practice. The three implications traced in this chapter—mission from the margins, mission in the Spirit, and companionship—together constitute a sustained critique of *missio imperii*. They refuse the centre-claiming logic of nationalist Christianity, resist the Spirit's confinement to national boundaries, and redefine mission not as the extension of power but as the discernment of where God is already bringing life. Lent offers its interpretive wisdom here: the church is formed not for mastery but for attentiveness and trust. The interlude's barren fig tree sharpens this insight—the tree is not condemned but is granted time for cultivation. The church, too, receives time: to listen, to learn, to be transformed.

This chapter has explored three guiding questions. *How is mission justified?* By God alone—not by nation, culture, or institutional self-interest. *Where does God work?* In the world, often from the margins, among those whom nationalist Christianity treats as threats rather than agents of mission. *How do we participate?* Through listening, shared concern, companionship, and Spirit-led practice—postures that refuse the domination *missio imperii* requires. Lent prepares us for Easter; wilderness prepares us for resurrection; mission without mastery prepares us for reconciliation without mastery. The wilderness has prepared us; now we must learn whether wounded relationships can bear resurrection. Chapter 5 turns to this task—asking how companionship is sustained when wounds persist and how faithfulness is practised when the path forward remains unclear.

Questions for Reflection

1. Lent as Relinquishment: The chapter reframes mission not as conquest or expansion but as a "Lenten discipline" of letting go—relinquishing control, certainty, and the need for mastery. In our church's approach to outreach, are we focused on "success" and "growth," or are we willing to "fast" from power to simply listen to where the Spirit is already at work?
2. The Location of God: We often operate as if we possess the truth to take to the world (God→church→world). This chapter argues for a shift to God→world→church, recognizing that God is already active in the secular neighbourhood. If we truly believed God was already at work in our community before we arrived, how would that change the way we pray for, enter into, and participate in our public spaces?
3. Teachers from the Margins: Who are the people on the margins of our community—those we might too easily dismiss or overlook? Do we approach them as "projects" to be managed or as teachers who can reveal to us what God is already doing?
4. The Go-Between Spirit: The Holy Spirit is described as the "go-between God" who is active in the spaces between people who are different, creating connection without forcing sameness. Can you identify an unlikely relationship in our community—perhaps with a different faith group or secular organization—where the Spirit might be inviting us to connect: not to convert but to discover?
5. The Power of Shared Concern: The chapter suggests that true unity often comes not through shared doctrine but through "shared concern" for the world's wounds. What is one specific issue in our neighbourhood—housing, climate, loneliness—that affects everyone? How could working on that *together* with others be a form of Christian witness?

5

Reconciliation Without Mastery:

Easter, Companionship, and the Refusal of Closure

Easter

If Lent disciplined the church away from urgency and control, Easter does not reward that restraint with resolution. The risen Christ appears not in triumph but with wounds still visible (John 20:27). Resurrection, in this telling, is not the erasure of suffering but the capacity to stay with it—hope that endures through what has been broken rather than despite it. Reconciliation, therefore, cannot be imagined as an achieved outcome or moral closure. It names a way of remaining present within relationships marked by harm, memory, and unequal power. This is the horizon within which reconciliation must be reimagined.

Chapter 4 argued that mission is not an activity the church initiates but something it joins: God's life-giving movement already at work in the world. Yet this participation is never innocent. To be present within changing landscapes is to encounter histories of harm: colonial dispossession, racialized exclusion, and relationships fractured by power the church itself has exercised. Lenten restraint does not absolve the church of these entanglements; it prepares the church to remain within them without forcing resolution. The question now sharpens: if mission is participatory presence, what does reconciliation look like when the church cannot stand outside the wounds it helped to inflict?

Easter does not erase wounded histories or resolve asymmetrical relationships; it exposes what kind of hope remains possible within them. Resurrection does not eliminate *hüzün*; it makes it bearable. Shared woundedness remains, but it is no longer abandoned.

Easter begins not with certainty but with fear and silence. The women approach the tomb carrying grief; the disciples hide behind locked doors; hope appears crushed by imperial violence. Yet Easter does not remain where it begins. When God raises Jesus from the dead, God does not simply undo death; God raises a people—from despair to courage, from paralysis to action, from fear to witness. The Greek verb *egeirō* (ἐγείρω) means to raise or to rouse, and in the passive, to rise or get up. It is the ordinary word for waking a sleeper or lifting someone to their feet—and it is the word the New Testament uses for what God

does to Jesus. Rising from death and rising up are not two meanings but one.[1] Easter, therefore, concerns not only what happens to Jesus but what happens through Jesus: to bodies, communities, and moral imaginations deformed by domination.

When God vindicates the crucified Jesus, Jesus is raised—and at the same time, his followers rise from fear and hopelessness. Easter marks the moment when a silenced community begins to speak again, when witnesses emerge who dare to proclaim, "Jesus is Lord ... God raised him from the dead" (Rom. 10:9), thereby refusing the authority of all other powers. Resurrection is not a retreat from history but renewed engagement within it, shaped by courage, memory, and compassion.

Matthew's Gospel offers a striking and often overlooked Easter witness. The tombs open at the moment of Jesus' death, yet those raised do not emerge until after his own resurrection (Matt. 27:52–53). Matthew holds the two days together: what breaks open at the cross is not completed until Easter. Jesus is not raised alone. Easter is not a solitary miracle but a collective rising. This is a Holy Saturday theology: Christ descends into death's depths and draws others with him into life. Resurrection is revealed as communal, expansive, and disruptive of death's hold on history.

This vision of collective rising reshapes how reconciliation must be understood. In secular imagination, reconciliation is often assumed to be an unqualified moral good—a process guiding societies from conflict toward harmony. Yet reconciliation never takes place on neutral ground. It unfolds within public life structured by unequal recognition, inherited advantage, and long histories of injury. Especially in settler-colonial contexts, reconciliation is burdened with expectations of closure: that apology should enable "moving forward," that difference should be absorbed into a shared story, and that wounds should become manageable once acknowledged. Such expectations frequently place the greatest burden on those most harmed while allowing those with power to determine the terms, pace, and meaning of repair.

This chapter argues that reconciliation cannot be reduced to moral resolution or institutional completion. Read in the light of Easter—where the risen Christ appears with wounds still visible—reconciliation names a way of remaining present within relationships the church cannot repair on its own terms. Because such presence is practised in public life rather than apart from it, the chapter first examines how secular frameworks of neutrality and fairness shape what reconciliation is permitted to mean. It then turns to two parables: the

1. *Egeirō* is used both for ordinary rising—waking, standing up, being lifted—and for God's raising of Jesus, as in Rom. 10:9 (*ēgeiren*). The New Testament also uses *anistēmi* and its noun *anastasis* for resurrection; *egeirō* carries the additional sense of being roused or set on one's feet, which is the resonance drawn out here.

Prodigal Son, which exposes how appeals to fairness can mask entitlement, and the Good Samaritan, read through Van Gogh's painting, where moral authority shifts from the rescuer on the road to the wounded body in the ditch. It considers how colonial dispossession was normalized through governance and scriptural interpretation, and how a local history of shared survival on Musqueam land tells a different story. Finally, it proposes companionship as a disciplined way of remaining present without mastery, learning from the Two Row *Wampum* belt: coexistence grounded in mutual restraint and ongoing accountability, travelling side by side without steering another's vessel.

1. Secularism and the Conditions of Reconciliation

Reconciliation does not occur in a vacuum. It unfolds within public spaces already shaped by historical, moral, and political assumptions. In modern liberal societies, these assumptions are largely structured by secularism, often understood as a neutral arrangement between religion and the state. This section challenges that assumption by arguing that secularism functions as a normative moral framework—one that regulates visibility, manages difference, and defines the boundaries of legitimate participation in public life. Because reconciliation takes place within public life rather than outside it, its possibilities and limits are inseparable from the moral order of that space. Recognizing secularism as morally contested is therefore essential for any meaningful account of reconciliation.

Secularism as a Contested Moral Space

Secularism is commonly described as a neutral framework for managing religious diversity through the separation of religion from state institutions. In liberal democratic societies, it is often framed as a procedural arrangement designed to safeguard freedom of conscience while preventing religious domination in public life.[2] Such descriptions, however, obscure the extent to which secularism operates as a moral and political ordering of public space. It shapes which forms of belonging are rendered visible, which voices are regarded as credible, and which ways of life are perceived as disruptive or excessive. In this sense, secularism is not merely a technical response to religious plurality but a normative project embedded in historical struggles over identity, sovereignty, and nation-building.

This moral ordering becomes visible in the regulation of religion within public life. While secularism claims to protect freedom of belief by presenting the state as neutral in matters of faith, its application has increasingly generated new forms of exclusion. Certain religious expressions are restricted or disciplined, while others are absorbed into dominant cultural norms and rendered invisible

2. Jocelyn Maclure and Charles Taylor, *Secularism and Freedom of Conscience* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 19–26.

as "religion." Neutrality, in practice, often masks a selective regulation of difference.[3]

These tensions cannot be understood apart from secularism's historical development. As Charles Taylor has shown, the secular names a shifting relation between immanence and transcendence—between the here and now and what lies beyond it.[4] While these dimensions were once held together within Christian social imaginaries, modern secularization increasingly separates them, casting religion as private and public life as self-sufficiently immanent. At the same time, as José Casanova has argued, religion has never been fully absent from public life.[5] The very process of secularization—the transfer of authority from ecclesiastical to civil institutions—presupposes an earlier entanglement of religion and politics.

A Secular Age and the Limits of Neutrality

These shifts alter not only institutional arrangements but the conditions of belief itself. In *A Secular Age*, Taylor argues that secularism does not simply mark the decline of religion; it names a transformation in how belief and unbelief are lived. Belief in God becomes one option among others rather than a shared horizon of meaning.[6] Public life is increasingly organized without reference to transcendence (the divine/beyond), even as desires for meaning beyond immanence (the here and now) persist.

Taylor describes these tensions as "cross-pressures"—ongoing conflicts between immanent accounts of meaning and lingering transcendental longings. Because secularism is so often treated as neutral, these tensions are frequently denied or concealed. The result is not moral neutrality but the normalization of a dominant moral perspective, typically aligned with majority culture and historical power. Decisions about which symbols are acceptable, which practices disrupt social cohesion, and which identities are perceived as threatening are

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3. See Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 1–17; José Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 211–34.

4. Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007); and Taylor, "What Is Secularism?" in *Secularism, Religion and Multicultural Citizenship*, ed. Geoffrey Brahm Levey and Tariq Modood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), xi–xxii.

5. José Casanova, "Public Religion Revisited," in *Religion: Beyond a Concept*, ed. Hent de Vries (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 105.

6. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 3. He writes, "The shift to secularity in this sense consists, among other things, of a move from a society where belief in God is unchallenged and indeed unproblematic, to one in which it is understood to be one option among others, and frequently not the easiest to embrace." Religion, once the default horizon of meaning, thus becomes one possibility among many, as public life is increasingly organized without reference to transcendence.

never neutral; they reflect underlying assumptions about citizenship, agency, and belonging.[7]

For this reason, secularism is best understood as a contested moral space. Inclusion and exclusion are not simply administered through neutral rules but negotiated through laws, institutions, and cultural narratives that distribute power unevenly. Historically, appeals to secular neutrality have also allowed serious harms to evade ethical scrutiny.[8] Practices such as land dispossession, bureaucratic control, and legal exclusion have often been treated as matters of governance rather than moral responsibility. When public life is already structured by power and values, reconciliation does not take place on neutral ground.[9]

Calls for reconciliation are therefore always mediated through institutions and narratives that define who must adapt, forgive, or translate themselves in order to be recognized. When secularism is applied rigidly, reconciliation can become a demand for conformity. Those most affected by injustice are asked to accommodate dominant norms, while those with greater power retain authority over the terms of recognition. Responsibility is not shared equally; it is distributed asymmetrically.

From a Christian perspective, reconciliation cannot be reduced to a political ideal or procedural goal within a secular framework. It is a theological practice shaped by the moral realities of public life. It asks not only how harmony might be restored but whose lives are valued, whose wounds are recognized, and whose histories remain marginalized. When reconciliation proceeds without attention to these conditions, it risks becoming superficial—a call for civility or tolerance that leaves deeper injustices intact.

A meaningful theological account of reconciliation must therefore begin not with consensus or resolution but with a critical examination of the moral assumptions governing recognition, responsibility, and belonging. Acknowledging the non-neutrality of secular public space does not require a return to religious domination. Rather, it opens space for alternative moral

7. For a detailed case study of secularism as a contested moral space in a settler-colonial context, see Hyuk Cho, "Beyond Secularism (*laïcité*): Rethinking Religious Difference, Public Space, and Freedom of Conscience in Québec," *Religions* 16, no. 5 (2025): Article 568, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel16050568.

8. Historically, appeals to secular neutrality have legitimized colonial schooling, regulated minority religious bodies under laïcité, normalized racialized policing, and reduced multicultural justice to symbolic recognition, allowing systemic harm to persist while appearing morally impartial.

9. See Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, *What We Have Learned: Principles of Truth and Reconciliation* (Winnipeg: Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015), which repeatedly affirms that reconciliation must address the ongoing structures of colonial power embedded in law, education, churches, and public institutions rather than presuming a neutral social or political starting point. Reconciliation, the Commission insists, requires confronting how these institutions continue to shape relationships unevenly in the present.

languages capable of challenging entrenched power without reproducing new forms of exclusion.

If secular public life is morally structured rather than neutral, the question is not whether reconciliation will be shaped by norms, but which ones. Appeals to fairness often appear self-evident, yet they carry their own histories and exclusions. Fairness functions as the moral logic of neutrality: just as the state claims to be an impartial arbiter, individuals presume a level playing field that rarely exists. This raises a pressing question: Can reconciliation grounded in fairness adequately respond to asymmetry, injury, and unequal power?

2. Reconciliation Beyond Fairness: A Biblical Counter-Imagination

The biblical tradition offers a counter-imagination to reconciliation grounded in neutrality and balance. Just as secularism relies on fairness to maintain order without confronting its own biases, we often appeal to fairness in relationships to preserve control without risking transformation. We assume that reconciliation requires equal effort and proportional responsibility. Scripture repeatedly unsettles this assumption.

The biblical witness does not present reconciliation as the balanced resolution of competing claims or the restoration of equilibrium between formally equal parties. Instead, it depicts reconciliation as a disruptive act that reorders relationships, reallocates moral attention, and challenges prevailing frameworks of merit and belonging. This counter-imagination becomes particularly clear in the parable commonly known as the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11–32).[10]

At the heart of the parable lies a conflict between two moral visions. The elder son embodies a framework shaped by obedience, reliability, and moral consistency. He has remained within the household, fulfilled his duties, and upheld its continuity. His objection to the father's response is not trivial; it reflects a widely shared moral intuition that reconciliation should follow responsibility, effort, and fairness.

The father's actions directly disrupt this logic. He welcomes the younger son unconditionally—before restitution, before moral clarification, and before the son's prepared confession is complete. Reconciliation is not delayed until balance is restored. It is enacted immediately, publicly, and extravagantly. The celebration does not resolve moral disagreement; it reshapes the relational space in which moral claims are negotiated.

10. This section draws on theological themes first developed in my sermon on Luke 15:11–32, *"God Is Not Fair,"* preached at West Point Grey United Church (Vancouver) on 31 March 2019, and has been substantially reworked here for analytical and scholarly purposes.

This does not mean wrongdoing is denied or responsibility dismissed. What the parable refuses is the assumption that reconciliation must be earned in advance or secured through moral equivalence. Here, reconciliation is not the reward for repentance; it is the condition within which repentance, responsibility, and repair may begin to take shape. Vulnerability, rather than merit, becomes the decisive site of moral attention.

Such reordering comes at a cost. The father's action risks alienating the elder son, whose sense of belonging has been formed through loyalty and recognition within an established moral order. His refusal to join the celebration reveals a central tension in biblical reconciliation: it is often resisted not through hostility but through moral injury—the experience of being overlooked when inherited norms of legitimacy are unsettled.

The parable thus exposes how appeals to fairness can hinder reconciliation. Fairness stabilizes social systems by fostering predictability and cooperation, especially within dominant frameworks of recognition. Yet when fairness becomes the governing logic of reconciliation, it can reinforce existing hierarchies of legitimacy. Those who know how to belong within prevailing moral systems are affirmed, while those marked by failure or exclusion must first make themselves intelligible within dominant terms.

The father's actions refuse this logic. He does not ask which son deserves reconciliation. He acts on the conviction that the household remains incomplete as long as one member is absent. Reconciliation is not a negotiated settlement but a renewal of shared belonging. Responsibility is not erased but redistributed. The younger son bears the weight of loss and dependence, but no longer alone. The elder son is called into a responsibility he did not choose: sharing space, inheritance, and recognition with one whose return destabilizes established norms. Reconciliation does not equalize responsibility; it makes responsibility mutual.

This biblical counter-imagination speaks directly to the dynamics of public life discussed earlier. In secular settings where neutrality and fairness dominate, reconciliation is often pursued through procedural inclusion or symbolic recognition. Such approaches may acknowledge difference while leaving deeper structures of exclusion untouched—especially when marginalized communities must translate their histories into dominant moral languages to be heard. The parable exposes the fragility of reconciliation grounded in equivalence and highlights the need for practices capable of naming asymmetry, holding resentment, and risking disruption.

Biblical reconciliation does not promise closure. The parable ends unresolved: the elder son remains outside, and the household stands at a threshold. This open ending underscores a difficult truth. Reconciliation cannot be forced, even

by grace. It remains an invitation, presenting each participant with a choice—whether to cling to inherited moral frameworks or to enter a reconfigured space of shared responsibility.

Reconciliation, then, is not a final state but an ongoing practice. It resists both forced assimilation and premature harmony, focusing instead on transforming the conditions under which belonging is understood.[11] What appears in the parable as familial resentment reappears in public life as resistance—particularly in settler societies—to forms of reconciliation that unsettle claims to neutrality, merit, and moral innocence.

Easter sharpens this reorientation. The risen Christ does not stand above history offering resolution but appears bearing wounds that refuse erasure. If reconciliation is to remain faithful to this Easter horizon, its moral authority must be relocated—not with those who mediate healing from a distance but at sites of exposure where harm has been endured and responsibility is demanded. This relocation prepares the ground for the next turn in the chapter, where the church is invited to see reconciliation not from above but from below.

Seeing from the Ditch: Reconciliation without Mastery

In the changing landscapes of contemporary Christianity, reconciliation is increasingly framed as a technical or moral achievement rather than a transformation of responsibility itself. This shift is already present in Jesus' teaching, which repeatedly unsettles inherited boundaries of belonging, legitimacy, and power. It receives particular clarity in the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37)—a parable examined in chapter 3 as an illustration of how vulnerability, rather than social standing, becomes the site of moral reorientation—and it is rendered with striking visual force in Vincent van Gogh's painting *The Good Samaritan* (1890).

Van Gogh created this work during his year at the Saint-Rémy asylum, following his psychological breakdown—a period of profound personal vulnerability. He painted it as a reinterpretation of an earlier work by Eugène Delacroix, yet what emerged was not merely a copy but a spiritual meditation.

11. Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, *What We Have Learned*. The Commission emphasizes that reconciliation is an ongoing process rather than a completed goal, requiring the transformation of social, political, and institutional structures that shape belonging and relationship and explicitly rejecting approaches that prioritize assimilation or superficial harmony over justice and responsibility.

The artist who saw from his own ditch offers the church a way of seeing from the ditch of the parable (Figure 5.1).[12]

Figure 5.1 Vincent van Gogh, *The Good Samaritan* (1890), oil on canvas, 73 × 60 cm, Kröller-Müller Museum

At first glance, Van Gogh's canvas appears to reinforce a familiar asymmetry. The Samaritan dominates the scene, towering in height and muscular effort, while the "half-dead" man appears diminished—smaller and lower, positioned beneath the rescuer's straining form. In the distance, the priest and the Levite are already walking away. Seen from the conventional vantage point of the road—the perspective of stability, safety, and established power—this disparity supports what might be called a charity framework: a mode of relation in which the helper retains agency, initiative, and moral standing while the helped becomes an object of benevolence. Within this framework, the Samaritan appears as the moral protagonist, the one with strength and resources, while the wounded man, rendered in muted earth tones, becomes a problem to be managed rather than a presence that disrupts and reorders the scene. Read this way, the painting mirrors a common ecclesial posture in which the church imagines itself as the bearer of truth and capacity, reaching downward toward the vulnerable.

Yet the parable itself—and Van Gogh's painting, when viewed differently—refuses this vertical logic. If we shift our gaze from the road to the ditch, from the upright figure to the ground-level perspective of the wounded body, the meaning of the Samaritan's "might" changes entirely. From below, his strength is no longer triumphant or self-contained. His body is twisted and strained, legs braced, back bent beneath the dead weight of a stranger. He does not stand over

12. Van Gogh painted *The Good Samaritan* (after Delacroix) in May 1890 at the Saint-Paul-de-Mausole asylum in Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, where he had admitted himself in May 1889 following his breakdown in Arles. During this period, he frequently made painted "translations" of works by artists he admired—Delacroix, Millet, Rembrandt—as a form of spiritual and artistic discipline, engaging subjects of suffering, compassion, and human dignity while working through his own vulnerability. Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo, inv. KM 108.784.

the wounded man; he is entangled with him. The Samaritan's power is revealed not as dominance but as exposure and dependence. Without the broken body before him, there is no ethical summons, no transformation, no story at all.

As argued in chapter 3, the parable's deepest disruption lies not in the Samaritan's virtue but in the wounded body that reorders moral authority. Vulnerability relocates moral gravity away from the protected centre and into the exposed margins, making responsibility possible in the first place. This is asymmetry in its ethical sense: the wounded Other, diminished in social power, stands above in moral authority—commanding response before calculation or consent. This chapter presses this claim further by attending to what such vulnerability *demands*. Seen from the ditch, responsibility is no longer a matter of benevolence exercised from a position of control, but a costly binding that unsettles autonomy and exposes those who respond to imbalance, risk, and loss. The Samaritan's strength is not mastery; it is the strength of one who cannot remain untouched.

Van Gogh's visual tension intensifies this insight. Though positioned lower and rendered more vulnerably, the wounded figure occupies the gravitational centre of the painting. His broken body interrupts the landscape, exposing how easily social systems—and ecclesial practices—privilege order, efficiency, and self-preservation over responsiveness to suffering. Seen from the ditch, charity is revealed as an insufficient response. What is required is not the management of vulnerability but a reordering of relation itself.

To read the painting this way is already to practise something of what this book has called intercultural theology: allowing a familiar image to be seen afresh through a shifted perspective and discovering that the shift transforms not only what we see but who we understand ourselves to be. For an intercultural church living amid unravelling and waiting, this distinction is decisive. The church must resist the temptation to imagine itself as the "mighty" Samaritan dispensing aid from a position of control. Instead, it is called into a theology of shared woundedness. Those rendered "half-dead" by colonial histories, economic exploitation, racialization, and displacement are not peripheral to Christian identity or mission. They are the very sites where theological truth becomes visible. Their lives are not problems awaiting solutions but witnesses who reconfigure how faith is learned, practised, and embodied.

Van Gogh's *The Good Samaritan* thus serves as both a caution and a call. It warns against mistaking strength for moral weight and charity for faithfulness. By centring vulnerability rather than virtue, the painting insists that true *diakonia* is not an act performed from above but a way of being bound to others in the ditch. What emerges here is not benevolence at a distance but companionship: a shared entanglement in which responsibility arises from proximity rather than

superiority. It is in this binding of lives—uneven, unfinished, and exposed—that reconciliation takes form and God's reign quietly comes into view.

3. Scripture, Land, and the Governance of Conquest

Reconciliation in public life involves more than repairing broken relationships; it also entails a struggle over how wounds are named, remembered, and governed. Just as the preceding parable showed how appeals to fairness can conceal unequal responsibilities, so this section turns to the structural and historical conditions that allow such appeals to persist. Public woundedness is not simply the residue of past harm. It is actively produced and regulated through moral frameworks that determine which wounds are recognized, which histories are remembered, and which claims to justice are deferred in the name of social order. To understand reconciliation—even in ostensibly secular settings—thus requires attention to the governance of memory: the often unspoken rules that decide which stories are authorized and which are silenced.

Because Western concepts of land, authority, and legitimacy have been shaped by the Bible for centuries, the governance of public memory cannot be disentangled from the interpretation of scripture. The tensions surrounding reconciliation in settler-colonial contexts are deeply embedded within the biblical tradition itself. Scripture has functioned both as a source of liberation and as a theological justification for domination. Any serious account of reconciliation must therefore reckon with these internal tensions—most notably the unresolved relationship between the Exodus tradition and the conquest narratives.

On the one hand, the Exodus stands as one of the most powerful liberation stories in history. God hears the cries of the enslaved, confronts imperial power, and leads an oppressed people toward freedom (Ex. 3:7–10). Across contexts of struggle, this story has inspired resistance to domination: enslaved Africans sang Exodus as spiritual defiance; Latin American communities read it against dictatorship; Korean movements for democracy drew on its promise. In these settings, Exodus testifies to God's solidarity with those who suffer and rightly functions as a symbol of hope.

Conversely, the conquest narratives—most prominently in the book of Joshua—portray Israel's entry into Canaan as a divinely sanctioned mandate involving the displacement of the land's original inhabitants (Josh. 10:32, 40–42). In settler-colonial contexts such as Canada, the United States, Australia, New Zealand, and Israel, these texts were repeatedly read as theological warrants for domination. European colonizers identified themselves with Israel and cast Indigenous peoples as "Canaanites," imagined as obstacles to God's purposes and therefore marked for elimination. As Mitri Raheb insists, this is not a neutral misreading of scripture but a sustained theological practice in which the Bible

itself is weaponized, abstracted from lived realities and redeployed to legitimize settler sovereignty and erase Indigenous presence.[13]

The Exodus–conquest paradigm thus became a powerful framework within colonial history, particularly within the logic of settler colonialism. From the mid-15th century onward, the Doctrine of Discovery supplied the legal architecture for the seizure of Indigenous lands, treating non-Christian peoples as lacking the sovereignty that would make their territories inviolable—a framework that later hardened into doctrines of *terra nullius*, by which lands inhabited by flourishing societies were declared legally empty.[14] Though Catholic in origin, Protestant settlers readily absorbed this logic, asserting that non-Christian peoples lacked full moral and legal claims to land.[15] Even as explicit theological justifications faded, conquest did not disappear; it was translated into secular governance, reappearing as moral necessity, civilizational progress, and national destiny.

This logic is further reinforced by scriptural readings that portray God as triumphant conqueror. Decolonizing biblical memory therefore requires asking difficult and destabilizing questions: Who is imagined as Israel, and who is cast as Canaanite? Whose survival is threatened when conquest is sanctified? Intercultural interpretation refuses to leave conquest theology unchallenged. It insists on listening from the perspective of the dispossessed, recognizing that God's voice is often heard more clearly in the cry of those under threat than in narratives of victorious settlement.

This work cannot remain abstract. Indigenous theologians have long insisted that theological interpretation must reckon with lived histories of dispossession. Robert Warrior's seminal essay, "Canaanites, Cowboys, and Indians," names the deep difficulty Indigenous peoples face in receiving Exodus as a story of liberation without also confronting the annihilation of the Canaanites in Joshua.[16] To decolonize biblical memory, scripture and theology must be read

13. Mitri Raheb, *Decolonizing Palestine: The Land, the People, the Bible* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2023), 67–80.

14. Robert J. Miller, Jacinta Ruru, Larissa Behrendt, and Tracey Lindberg, *Discovering Indigenous Lands: The Doctrine of Discovery in the English Colonies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 131–32.

15. Johnson v. McIntosh, 21 U.S. (8 Wheat.) 543 (1823). In this foundational Supreme Court case, Chief Justice John Marshall codified the Doctrine of Discovery into US law, ruling that Indigenous title was diminished by the Christian European "discovery" of the continent. See Steven T. Newcomb, *Pagans in the Promised Land: Decoding the Doctrine of Christian Discovery* (Golden: Fulcrum Publishing, 2008), 73–87.

16. Robert Warrior, "Canaanites, Cowboys, and Indians: Deliverance, Conquest, and Liberation Theology Today," *Christianity and Crisis* 49, no. 12 (1989): 261–65.

with "Canaanite eyes"[17]—from the perspectives of Indigenous peoples and other communities rendered expendable by conquest.[18] Such readings expose how theological triumph has masked violence while recovering counter-traditions oriented toward justice, shared life, and relational accountability.

These debates over interpretation are not marginal; they are decisive for the church's identity. How scripture is read shapes how the church understands its relationship to land, power, and history. When biblical memory goes unexamined, reconciliation risks perpetuating conquest under more hospitable language. An intercultural church cannot reduce reconciliation to inclusion or symbolic diversity alone. It must instead learn to dwell on contested ground, practising shared responsibility without assuming moral innocence. In this way, the church participates in the ongoing work of reconciliation: rejecting domination and committing itself to the slow, demanding, and unfinished labour of repair.

Interlude:

The Shared Garden

When the theological tensions of conquest and memory resist mastery—refusing to be planned, managed, or brought to closure—their true contours often emerge not through official programmes or formal agreements but through fragile, local histories of shared survival. One such history is that of the vegetable gardens tended together by Musqueam families and Chinese migrant farmers in the early 20th century, on the unceded, ancestral, and traditional territories of the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam) people. This history offers a counter-narrative that unsettles familiar theological assumptions about land, liberation, and reconciliation.

From the early 1900s, the Musqueam—already severely constrained by the *Indian Act*[19] and confined to a small reserve at the mouth of

17. Reading "with Canaanite eyes" does not mean rejecting the Hebrew Bible or casting it as inherently violent. It means attending to voices within scripture that resist triumphalism—prophetic traditions of justice, lament, and critique that have always existed within Jewish interpretation.

18. See Carmen Lansdowne, *Wearing a Broken Indigene Heart on the Sleeve of Christian Mission* (Winnipeg: CMU Press, 2025), 91–107, where she develops missiology from an Indigenous perspective. To read with "Canaanite eyes" is not to accept the biblical narrative's judgement upon Canaanites but to recognize them as the displaced—those whose land was taken and whose voices were silenced. It is to ask whose survival is endangered when conquest is sanctified.

19. Enacted in 1876, the *Indian Act* is a Canadian federal law that has regulated Indigenous identity, land, and governance, serving as a primary instrument of settler-colonial control and assimilation. Despite significant amendments, it remains in force and continues to shape Crown–Indigenous relations.

the Fraser River—entered into a relationship with Chinese migrants who were increasingly excluded from Canadian society. Many of these migrants, largely from Guangdong Province, had been drawn to Canada to build the Canadian Pacific Railway in the late 19th century, only to face punitive head taxes, racial exclusion laws, and legal barriers that denied them the right to vote, practise professions, or purchase Crown land.[20] Having helped build the nation's infrastructure, they were rendered surplus to its imagined future.

What makes this history distinct is not just that two marginalized communities met but that their meeting took place outside the dominant colonial logic of possession and conquest. By the early 20th century, the Musqueam offered parts of their reserve land to Chinese farmers for farming—despite living under strict surveillance by the Department of Indian Affairs, facing limited mobility and an increasingly invisible presence in the fast-growing city of Vancouver. Although these arrangements were formally managed through colonial bureaucracy, with the Department of Indian Affairs acting as middleman, the relationships that formed went beyond the usual contractual exchange.

By 1917, at least eighteen Musqueam–Chinese farming leases covered more than twenty acres of reserve land.[21] Vegetable gardens spread across the territory: celery and cabbage grew alongside bok choy, gai lan, and su choy. These gardens supplied fresh produce not only to the City of Vancouver but throughout the Lower Mainland. More importantly, they cultivated relationships. Musqueam families and Chinese farmers worked side by side, sharing labour, food, and the rhythms of everyday life. "So these two marginalized groups—one with a background in farming but no land, the other with land but no tradition or desire to farm it—found one another," recalls Larry Grant, Musqueam–Chinese Elder.[22] Despite official prohibitions against non-Indigenous people residing on reserve land, some Chinese farmers lived in bunkhouses, participated in community life, and were welcomed into Musqueam ceremonies and celebrations. In some cases, these relationships deepened into kinship through marriage.

This history matters theologically because it offers a concrete exegetical alternative to the dominant Exodus-as-conquest narrative that continues to shape settler-colonial imagination. Within that narrative,

20. Larry Grant with Scott Steedman, *Reconciling: A Lifelong Struggle to Belong* (Toronto: ECW Press, 2025), 28.

21. Grant, *Reconciling*, 29.

22. Grant, *Reconciling*, 28–29.

liberation is achieved through displacement, land is taken under divine authority, and history advances through replacement rather than relationship. The Musqueam–Chinese vegetable gardens tell a different story. Here, land is not seized but shared. Liberation does not come through victory over others but through mutual care under conditions of constraint. Two communities wounded by the same colonial system support one another without erasing difference, denying asymmetry, or claiming moral innocence.

The story also reveals the limits of understanding reconciliation mainly as closure. The partnership lasted for decades, yet it ended in the mid-1950s when the Department of Indian Affairs reduced agricultural leases from yearly to 30-day permits—conditions under which farming could no longer be sustained.[23] That administrative "closure" changed nothing. It neither restored land nor reversed colonial dispossession. Its importance lies elsewhere: it shows reconciliation as a delicate, context-dependent practice of responsibility, one that neither forgets the wound nor uses it instrumentally and that resists both resignation and redemptive triumphalism.

Such histories matter for how scripture is read. Set against the conquest narratives examined above, they show the Bible functioning as the contested archive it is—capable of authorizing dispossession and of sustaining life against it. The gardens on Musqueam land remind us that reconciliation does not begin with land, truth, or text but with the willingness to remain in relation without mastery, even when the ground beneath remains unsettled. This history does not resolve colonial injustice, but it reveals a way of staying present within it—neither denying the wound nor claiming authority to heal it. This posture is what this chapter names as companionship.

4. Companionship as an Ecclesial Practice of Shared Responsibility

If reconciliation in a secular world is non-neutral, unfinished, and marked by asymmetrical wounds, then the question confronting the church is no longer how reconciliation can be achieved but how faithfulness is to be practised within its unresolved reality. The previous sections have shown that reconciliation cannot be secured through procedural neutrality, moral equivalence, or institutional closure nor sustained through appeals to harmony that bypass power, memory, and injury. What is needed instead is an ecclesial posture capable of remaining present within contested public life without claiming moral supremacy or

23. Grant, *Reconciling*, 133.

retreating into private virtue. This section proposes companionship, understood as *diakonia* in its go-between form, as such a posture.

Diakonia as Go-Between Practice

Understanding *diakonia* in its biblical and missiological depth reveals it not as an act of downward service but as a ministry of the in-between, a kinetic practice of mediation.[24] While *diakonia* has often been interpreted as lowly or self-effacing service, recent scholarship emphasizes that the *diakon-* word group primarily signifies agency and mediation: the carrying out of a task on behalf of another. *Diakonia*, in this sense, is a ministry of the go-between. Unlike servanthood, which frequently assumes a vertical (top down) relationship—a provider bending down to a receiver—*diakonia* operates laterally (side by side). It positions the church not above the world as benefactor but within it as messenger, intermediary, and companion.

From this understanding, *diakonia* emerges as a relational vocation located between parties—a practice that cannot be reduced to moral equivalence or organized within a hierarchy. It situates the church neither above society as a moral authority nor outside it as a prophetic observer but within the shared vulnerability of public life, exposed to competing claims, unequal wounds, and unfinished responsibilities. As a mediating practice, *diakonia* rejects the illusion of neutral intervention or redemptive control. It sustains connection without fusion and responsibility without domination. Companionship, therefore, is not a departure from *diakonia* but its reinterpretation and faithful expression under conditions of unresolved harm, asymmetrical power, and irreducible difference.[25]

Companionship does not refer to a tool for reconciliation or a strategy for managing differences. Nor is it simply partnership—which typically implies a contractual agreement for mutual success—or allyship, which often focuses on advocacy while leaving the advocate's own vulnerability unexposed.[26] Instead, it describes a disciplined way of being with others when reconciliation cannot be achieved and responsibility cannot be evenly shared. Developed in clear contrast to dominant theological models of servanthood, companionship rejects the idea that agency, moral clarity, or initiative are proper only to those who "serve." Whereas servanthood has often operated—particularly within colonial and missionary histories—as a moralized asymmetry that concentrates interpretive authority among the powerful, companionship instead begins from shared

24. John N. Collins, *Diakonia: Re-interpreting the Ancient Resources* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 195–234.

25. Cho and Park, *Decolonizing Diakonia*, 135–48.

26. Cho and Park, *Decolonizing Diakonia*, 103–106.

vulnerability and relational exposure.[27] It opposes both the illusion of moral innocence and the urge to control outcomes in advance.

This contrast signifies a crucial shift in theology. We need to be honest about the benevolence trap embedded in much of the church's language of servanthood. When the church mainly describes itself as "servant" to the marginalized, it can subtly preserve the stance of one who holds resources, truth, or answers and distributes them to those presumed to lack. Even when presented sacrificially, servanthood often maintains a top-down logic where agency and responsibility flow from the powerful to the powerless, reinforcing the very hierarchies that reconciliation aims to dismantle.

Companionship interrupts this logic. It recognizes that those who accompany others are themselves wounded, limited, and in need of relationship. The stance shifts from benefactor to neighbour, from acting for others to staying with others. In companionship, responsibility is no longer exercised on behalf of others but is held within relationships that no one party fully controls. By rejecting the idea that reconciliation's meaning, pace, or outcome can be predicted in advance, companionship exposes all participants to vulnerability, critique, and transformation.

As Fernando Enns argues in articulating an ecumenical theology of companionship, such a posture emerges when churches abandon paternalistic modes of advocacy and instead create space within their own narratives for the truths, wounds, and memories of others to take shape.[28] Companionship, in this sense, is not a technique of accompaniment but a kenotic practice of shared exposure—one that relinquishes control, certainty, and moral superiority in order to remain faithfully present within relationships marked by asymmetry, vulnerability, and incompleteness.

Shared Responsibility without Closure in Public Life

This reorientation has clear ethical implications. Companionship redefines reconciliation not as an achievement but as a continuous presence. It recognizes that reconciliation occurs within histories that cannot be resolved through balance or fairness and that responsibility cannot be equalized without erasing differences. Instead of striving for moral symmetry, companionship maintains relationships despite asymmetry. Those who engage in companionship from positions of historical power are not exempt from accountability; rather, they are called into forms of responsibility they cannot manage or complete alone. This calling demands practices of restraint—restraint in speech, interpretation, and

27. Cho and Park, *Decolonizing Diakonia*, 77–82.

28. Fernando Enns, "Towards an Ecumenical Theology of Companionship: The Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace as a Kenotic Movement," *Ecumenical Review* 74, no. 2 (2022): 268–83; discussed in Cho and Park, *Decolonizing Diakonia*, 150–51.

leadership—understood not as silence or withdrawal but as ethical disciplines that oppose the premature closing of meaning.[29]

Such restraint is particularly important in secular public life, where reconciliation is often reduced to civility, tolerance, or procedural inclusion. As *diakonia* in its intermediary form, companionship resists the temptation either to reclaim ecclesial authority over public space or to translate theological commitments into neutral moral language stripped of their critical force.[30] It does not aim to govern public life, nor does it reduce responsibility to interpersonal goodwill. Instead, companionship maintains a form of ecclesial presence focused on shared responsibility across differences—responsibility that remains open, contested, and relational rather than resolved through consensus or compliance.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) of Canada gives public articulation to this same ethical posture. By insisting that reconciliation cannot be rushed, completed, or imposed, the Commission echoes the logic of companionship as shared responsibility without mastery. Survivors repeatedly warned against moving too quickly from truth to reconciliation, emphasizing instead the necessity of time, healing, and relational trust.[31] Companionship honours this warning by refusing the pressure to resolve what remains ethically unfinished.

At this point, reconciliation must be released from the logic of completion. As Commission chair Murray Sinclair has insisted in the context of the TRC in Canada, reconciliation is not a destination one reaches but a responsibility one continues to bear—grounded in truth-telling, sustained relationship, and an honest reckoning with who we are, where we come from, and what we owe one another.[32] Under these conditions, reconciliation cannot be claimed as an achievement without repeating the very harm it seeks to address.

Companionship therefore resists reconciliation on demand and accepts that faithfulness may require remaining present long after institutional processes have concluded. In this sense, companionship does not supplement the work

29. Cho and Park, *Decolonizing Diakonia*, 110–13.

30. Cho and Park, *Decolonizing Diakonia*, 141–43.

31. See testimony by Stan McKay, former Moderator of The United Church of Canada and a residential school Survivor, in Truth and Reconciliation Commission, *What We Have Learned*, 115–16. McKay cautions against moving prematurely from truth to reconciliation and insists that reconciliation requires time, humility, and shared responsibility for healing. He argues that reconciliation cannot proceed if it assumes that only Indigenous peoples need healing, noting that "the perpetrators are wounded and marked by history in ways that are different from the victims, but both groups require healing," and that reconciliation demands a fundamental shift away from paternalism toward mutual respect, listening, and responsibility.

32. Murray Sinclair, *Who We Are: Four Questions for a Life and a Nation* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2022).

of reconciliation; it names the form reconciliation must take when closure is neither possible nor just.

Companionship also reshapes how we imagine reconciliation over time. Institutional approaches often rely on timelines, benchmarks, and measurable results, assuming wounds can be healed through planned acts of acknowledgement and closure. In contrast, companionship accepts that some durations lack resolution. It recognizes that wounds embedded in bodies, lands, and collective memory—especially within contexts influenced by colonial histories and ongoing dispossession—cannot be healed according to external timelines. Thus, companionship is not merely passive waiting at the table but active endurance: a commitment to stay present even when progress cannot be measured or easily told.[33]

Within an intercultural ecclesiology, companionship describes a way of being church that neither assumes shared ground nor tries to create it. Difference is not seen as a problem to be fixed or controlled but as the fundamental condition where responsibility arises.[34] This contrasts with multicultural frameworks that organize diversity around a fixed centre as well as inclusionary models that accept difference only if it remains understandable within dominant moral languages. Companionship keeps open the possibility that relationships themselves might transform the church's centre, challenging inherited assumptions about identity, authority, and belonging.

Theologically, companionship embodies an understanding of responsibility that surpasses reciprocity and contracts. Responsibility does not stem from agreement, mutual recognition, or shared values, but from exposure to another whose life disrupts one's moral narratives and ecclesial self-comprehension. In this way, companionship upholds an ethics of responsibility that is asymmetrical without being unilateral, shared without becoming equalized. It challenges both the moral economy of fairness and the sentimental economy of empathy, instead emphasizing forms of presence able to bear resentment, ambiguity, and unresolved tensions.

Practised diligently, companionship transforms how the church perceives its role in reconciliation. Reconciliation is no longer something the church merely leads or manages but a condition into which it is drawn and shaped. The church does not stand outside wounded public life as its healer or mediator; it is itself entangled in the histories and structures that have caused harm. As *diakonia*-as-companionship, the church's calling is not to reconcile others but to stay vulnerable, accountable, and open to interruption within the ongoing process of reconciliation.

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33. Cho and Park, *Decolonizing Diakonia*, 150–52.

34. Cho and Park, *Decolonizing Diakonia*, 141–43.

Companionship does not guarantee healing, harmony, or success. Instead, it offers a way of living faithfully amid the world's brokenness—without dominance, withdrawal, or the illusion that reconciliation can be fully mastered. As the following section will reveal, this stance finds a meaningful relational parallel in Indigenous treaty wisdom, especially the Two Row *Wampum* belt, which presents a counter-imagination of reconciliation rooted not in neutrality or fusion but in shared journey, mutual restraint, and enduring responsibility across differences.

5. The Two Row *Wampum* Belt as a Counter-Protocol of Reconciliation

Companionship, as discussed earlier, names an ecclesial stance capable of sustaining reconciliation without forcing closure. It refuses the fantasy that wounds can be resolved, histories redeemed, or relationships mastered through moral consensus or institutional repair. The question that follows is whether such a stance can also be recognized and learned beyond the church—within public life marked by asymmetrical power, lingering historical wounds, and contested moral frameworks—and, if so, what the church itself might receive from such learning.

Indigenous treaty wisdom, particularly the Two Row *Wampum*, offers not merely an alternative conceptual framework but a concrete intercultural protocol through which companionship is enacted, sustained, and renewed over time. As explored in my book, *Relation without Relation*, the Two Row *Wampum* belt functions as a living protocol of coexistence—one that resists both assimilation and separation and that holds difference together without collapsing it into sameness.[35]

Treaty as a Counter-Protocol of Reconciliation

Articulated through Haudenosaunee law, memory, and treaty practice, the Two Row *Wampum* does not understand reconciliation as moral equivalence,

35. Cho, *Relation without Relation*, 143–58. The Two Row *Wampum* is a living treaty tradition maintained by the Haudenosaunee Confederacy. Its meaning and protocols are interpreted within that community. I offer this reading with gratitude and humility, recognizing that I do not hold interpretive authority over this teaching.

neutrality, or administrative settlement.[36] Instead, it establishes a protocol of coexistence that binds distinct peoples together without erasing difference, organizing relations through mutual restraint, ongoing accountability, and respect for otherness that cannot be reduced or absorbed. In this sense, the *Wampum* operates not simply as a historical artefact but as a living counter-protocol—one that challenges dominant secular models of reconciliation oriented toward fairness, integration, or closure. The Indigenous teachings engaged here do not belong only to the work of reconciliation; they expose limits in how Christian theology has imagined land, mission, and communion throughout this book.

As this protocol has been shared by Indigenous elders to guide us settlers in understanding our obligations, it has offered a vital corrective to my own theological imagination. My understanding began in a learning circle at the Francis Sandy Theological Centre in 2008, where Ray John of the Oneida Nation of the Thames opened my eyes to its relational depth. Describing the parallel paths, he noted that "the two paths are like my shoulders on right and left sides"—distinct yet connected in one body. This teaching, which reframed separation as a form of relationship, led me to delve further into the belt's logic.

The *Wampum* depicts two vessels—a canoe and a ship—travelling side by side down the same river, neither steering the other nor interfering with its internal life. Crucially, this image does not presume equal power, shared histories, or balanced wounds. Difference is not a temporary obstacle to be overcome but a lasting condition of relationship, and asymmetry is acknowledged rather than denied. What binds the parties together is not convergence or fusion but a continuous commitment—marked by peace, friendship, and respect—to remain in relation without domination. The river is shared, but the paths remain distinct. Reconciliation here is not the resolution of past injury but the sustained practice of relationship under conditions that remain unsettled.

Mutual Restraint, Asymmetry, and the Refusal of Mastery

Read in this way, the Two Row *Wampum* directly engages the critique of reconciliation developed earlier. While secular reconciliation often relies on neutrality to manage difference, treaty begins from the recognition that public

36. The Two Row *Wampum* belt is understood in Haudenosaunee tradition as recording an early treaty relationship with European settlers, often dated to 1613, though the precise year remains debated due to the loss of colonial records and the oral transmission of Indigenous law. The belt's two parallel purple rows—frequently described as a canoe and a ship—symbolize distinct peoples travelling side by side, while the white rows signify peace, friendship, and respect; the unfinished ends indicate an ongoing relationship. More than a symbol, the Two Row *Wampum* functions as an intercultural diplomatic protocol governing treaty-making and coexistence without assimilation or hierarchy, with *wampum* belts serving as sacred mnemonic devices through which agreements were publicly ratified and periodically renewed. See Cho, *Relation without Relation,* 147–56.

life is already shaped by history, power, and memory. Its moral authority does not arise from abstract universal principles or procedural fairness but from specific, historically rooted responsibilities that cannot be discharged once and for all. The church encounters a crucial corrective: reconciliation is not grounded in moral clarity or ecclesial intention but in sustained accountability to relationships it did not choose and cannot complete.

Like companionship, the Two Row *Wampum* rejects the logic of mastery that underwrites many reconciliation initiatives. It does not authorize one party to define the meaning, pace, or outcome of reconciliation for the other. Nor does it imagine reconciliation as a benevolent gift extended by the powerful to the wounded. Instead, it demands practices of mutual self-limitation: each party is bound to refrain from steering the other's vessel, even when such interference appears justified by appeals to progress, efficiency, or moral certainty. For the church, this restraint is not passivity but conversion—a reorientation of power, authority, and mission away from control and toward faithfulness in the in-between.

This refusal to steer the other's vessel is not merely a strategy; it is a resistance to a specific form of formation. As Jennings argues in *After Whiteness*, our institutions have long engaged in a "soul-killing performativity" aimed at forming us into the image of "the white self-sufficient masculinity"—a figure defined by the virtues of possession, control, and mastery.[37] Reconciliation shaped by such formation inevitably seeks closure, control, and resolution on its own terms. Faithful relationship, by contrast, requires the dismantling of this image, receiving relation not as an achievement to be mastered but as a gathering in which we belong to one another in ways we cannot command or complete.

Endurance without Closure: Treaty, Responsibility, and Conversion

Once mastery is refused, time itself must be reimagined. The temporal imagination of the Two Row *Wampum* mirrors the logic of kinship. Treaty is not a single event located in the past but a living relationship carried forward across generations. There is no promise of closure, no final moment at which responsibility can be fulfilled or relinquished. The durability of the belt itself—preserved, remembered, and reinterpreted over time—signals that reconciliation unfolds through endurance rather than resolution. Faithfulness is measured not by finality but by the willingness to remain bound to a relationship whose demands cannot be exhausted.

Crucially, the Two Row *Wampum* does not equalize responsibility. It names coexistence within an asymmetrical field shaped by colonial violence, land dispossession, and broken treaties while refusing to allow this asymmetry

37. Jennings, *After Whiteness*, 8.

to collapse into either domination or withdrawal. Those who have benefited from colonial power are not granted moral innocence or passive regret; they are summoned into forms of responsibility that require listening, restraint, and a willingness to have their own identities, assumptions, and institutions unsettled. For the church, this means receiving reconciliation not as affirmation of its moral role but as a call to transformation that destabilizes inherited claims to authority and neutrality.

For an intercultural theological vision shaped by shared woundedness, the Two Row *Wampum* offers more than an illustrative parallel to ecclesial companionship: it disciplines and deepens it. It teaches the church how to remain in relation without assimilation, to practise accountability without supremacy, and to sustain commitment without control. It discloses a public ethic in which difference is not a problem to be solved but a condition under which justice must be pursued.

Both companionship and the Two Row *Wampum* refuse reconciliation as an endpoint and instead reframe it as a shared journey whose faithfulness is measured not by resolution but by the integrity of relationships sustained over time. Reconciliation, then, never unfolds in isolation or abstraction. It takes place on a river—a shared, flowing, and ancient current that carries distinct peoples forward together without collapse, erasure, or domination.

Conclusion: Reconciliation Without Closure

This chapter has argued that reconciliation in a secular world cannot be reduced to moral resolution, institutional completion, or symbolic repair. It unfolds within a public life shaped by normative frameworks of recognition, memory, and belonging—frameworks that present themselves as neutral. Far from offering a level playing field, secularism functions as a moral order that frequently overrides ethical responsibility, particularly in settler-colonial contexts, by recasting domination as administration and dispossession as governance.

Against this backdrop, the parable of the Prodigal Son exposes the limits of reconciliation grounded in fairness. The elder son's moral injury reveals how appeals to merit can secure inherited claims while foreclosing restored relationship. Reconciliation does not restore moral balance; it interrupts it. Responsibility is neither equalized nor suspended but redistributed, often against the will of those whose security depends upon established orders.

These dynamics are intensified through colonial memory and theological interpretation. Apology and commemoration too easily substitute for structural accountability, while conquest-oriented readings of scripture have rendered dispossession morally intelligible. Decolonizing reconciliation therefore requires

a double critique: of secular frameworks that conceal violence behind neutrality and of theological traditions that have sanctified domination.

In response, the chapter proposed companionship as an ecclesial posture capable of inhabiting reconciliation without mastery. Whether expressed in the shared survival of Musqueam–Chinese vegetable gardens or in the diplomatic wisdom of the Two Row *Wampum*, this posture rejects reconciliation as a project to be managed. It sustains relation across asymmetry, resists moral innocence, and relinquishes control over meaning and pace. Moving side by side without steering the other's vessel reframes reconciliation as fidelity over time rather than repair of the past.

Read in the light of Easter, reconciliation is grounded not in triumph but in resurrection as communal rising (*egeirō*)—a movement from fear into responsibility, from paralysis into endurance, and from closure into sustained accountability. The church is called not to reconcile the world from above but to be re-formed within reconciliation's unfinished reality.

Yet a pressing question remains: How is the church formed to sustain such faithfulness? The Two Row *Wampum* teaches that moving side by side requires capacity—the learned ability to read the current, paddle in rhythm, and resist the impulse to steer. What forms the church for this work? Chapter 6 turns to Pentecost—not as resolution but as ongoing formation. The Spirit does not close what remains unfinished; the Spirit forms a people capable of dwelling within it faithfully.

Questions for Reflection

1. Resurrection as Uprising: The chapter describes Easter not just as Jesus rising from the grave but as a community rising (*egeirō*) from fear and silence. In our work of reconciliation, are we waiting for a "solution" from above, or are we practising a "communal uprising" of courage and witness? What would that look like in our neighbourhood?
2. The Elder Brother's "Fairness": We often think of reconciliation as restoring "fairness." Yet the parable of the Prodigal Son suggests that fairness can actually block healing. Do we, like the elder brother, feel a "moral injury" when grace is shown to those who haven't followed our rules? How does our desire for everything to be "fair" prevent us from fixing broken relationships?
3. The Benevolence Trap: The author warns against the trap of "servanthood"—where we position ourselves as the benevolent givers helping the "needy." How does our church typically do mission? Do we act as "benefactors" (vertical power), or have we learned the practice of "companionship" (lateral presence)?
4. Reading with "Canaanite Eyes": The chapter notes the tension between the Exodus story (liberation) and the conquest story (displacement of Canaanites). When we read scripture or look at our church's history, whose eyes do we see through? What happens if we read the story of our land from the perspective of the displaced rather than the settlers?
5. Steering the Vessel (Two Row *Wampum):* The Two Row *Wampum* depicts two vessels travelling side by side with a commitment that neither will try to "steer" the other. In our relationships with Indigenous communities or other marginalized groups, where are we still trying to "steer the vessel"—controlling the timeline, the outcome, or the terms of the relationship? What would it mean to practise "mutual restraint" instead?

6

The Miracle of Listening:

Pentecost, Shared Power, and the Cry of the Earth

Pentecost

Chapter 5 ended with a question: What forms the church to sustain companionship without mastery, to remain faithful within relationships marked by asymmetry and unresolved harm? The answer is Pentecost—not as a singular event in the past but as the Spirit's ongoing formation of a community capable of listening, sharing power, and bearing responsibility together. The church is formed not by acquiring techniques of reconciliation but by learning to receive the Spirit's work through difference itself. Pentecost here is not arrival but orientation—a way of inhabiting plurality without reclaiming the centre and of bearing responsibility together within a world that remains fragile, diverse, and unfinished. Pentecost does not resolve the church's tensions; it sustains practices of listening, shared power, and responsibility within them.

A few years ago, on the Sunday celebrating the baptism of Jesus, a newly baptized member from Iran was welcomed into the congregation. For the church, his presence symbolized new life; for him, it was also an opportunity to offer a gift back to the community. A few weeks later, during the Epiphany season, he asked whether he might share the season's symbol of light through his own heritage by singing *Ey Farzandâne* Nūr ("Children of Light") in Farsi.

For him, this was more than a song. It was a testimony. The hymn both encourages and exhorts, calling believers to live faithfully, grounded in the biblical witness: "Live as children of light" (Eph. 5:8). As he sang in his heart language, the atmosphere in the sanctuary subtly shifted. He was no longer simply a recipient of the church's tradition. He became a bearer of the light, illuminating the gospel through a Persian cultural form that the congregation itself could not have created.

As the congregation listened, Epiphany was not only observed but deepened. The light of Christ was refracted through the Persian witness, reminding everyone present that God's self-disclosure cannot be confined within a single culture or language. This moment was not just about recognizing difference; it drew the community into the mystery of a God who speaks every tongue and whose light appears through voices from elsewhere. Yet if one listens closely to that Persian hymn, another season can already be heard. Beneath the song of Epiphany echoes the sound of Pentecost.

Throughout this book, we have traced a liturgical arc: from the deep waiting of Advent, through the exposed vulnerability of Christmas, the displaced revelation of Epiphany, the wilderness discipline of Lent, and the collective uprising of Easter. In this final chapter, Pentecost names not an arrival but a way of living forward within these tensions. When that Iranian brother lifted his voice in Farsi, he enacted—quietly but unmistakably—the miracle of Acts 2, where the wonders of God are heard in many tongues, each in its own language. What Epiphany reveals as promise—that the light is for all nations—Pentecost sustains as shared life. The Spirit descends not to erase cultural particularity but to make it audible and accountable within community. It is here that the dignified sorrow (*hüzün*) cultivated in Advent finds its vocational counterpart. If the journey began by learning to dwell with loss, it now unfolds as the practice of *sallim*—the Spirit-led labour of sustaining life and responsibility within the very wounds the church continues to bear.

This chapter therefore moves from vision to practice, from revelation to ecclesial form, by tracing how Pentecost takes shape in the concrete life of the church. It begins with *listening* as the church's foundational posture—receiving difference not as a problem to be managed but as a site of the Spirit's work. It then turns to shared power, asking how listening must be made structural through companionship and the redistribution of authority. From there, the chapter moves outward to embodied witness in a religiously plural world, reimagining Christian confession as fidelity without supremacy, spoken relationally rather than imposed competitively. Finally, it extends this Pentecostal imagination beyond the human community to ecological *metanoia*, where the church learns to listen to the groaning of creation and to live without domination toward the earth itself.

When woven together, these are not optional practices or contextual adaptations. They are the marks of a community living within the fire of the Spirit—a distinctive intercultural ecclesiology formed through listening, restraint, responsibility, and hope. Here, the church appears not as a single voice mastering others but as a body of many languages and peoples, moving together in faithfulness, bearing the light of Christ in a fractured and longing world.

1. Pentecost: The Miracle of Listening

Pentecost (Acts 2:1–21) is rooted in a rich Jewish tradition. Originally called the Feast of Weeks (*Shavuot*), it celebrated the spring harvest and was closely linked to land, labour, and gratitude (Lev. 23:15–21).[1] As Jewish life expanded beyond an exclusively agricultural context, the festival gained additional meaning

1. Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Z. Brettler, eds., *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 223.

through its connection to Sinai and the giving of the Torah.[2] These layers of significance did not replace one another but built up over time. *Shavuot* thus came to represent the formation of a people through divine address, uniting liberation with responsibility and freedom with covenantal obligation.

Rabbinic tradition further refines this understanding by portraying the giving of the Torah at Sinai (Ex. 19:1–20:26) not merely as a broadcast of divine speech but as a communal event structured through listening. Midrashic interpretations describe God's voice as being received by each individual according to their capacity, as if divine address unfolds across multiple tongues.[3] The focus is not on diversity itself but on the idea that covenantal listening does not require cultural erasure.[4] Divine speech does not impose a single cultural norm; it encounters listeners in their particularity while upholding a shared calling. *Shavuot* thus articulated a theology of gift—first the gift of sustenance, later the gift of Torah—shaping a communal life centred on accountability, memory, and shared responsibility rather than autonomy.[5]

The Christian story in Acts emerges from within this Jewish theological framework rather than replacing it. Luke situates the Pentecost event in Jerusalem during this pilgrimage festival, a city temporarily filled with Jews from across the diaspora. This diversity exists within a setting shaped by imperial power, social hierarchy, and political concerns. After the crucifixion, Jesus' followers appear less confident as agents and more as a marginal and vulnerable group, retreating from Jerusalem in what might be called a scarcity of hope (cf. Luke 24:21).

Pentecost signifies a clear break from this state. The Spirit does not settle disputes by restoring authority through familiar or oppressive means. Instead, the Spirit grants a new ability: listening across differences. Those previously held back by fear speak openly—not in a single or dominant language but using the specific idioms shaped by their own histories. Their testimony is not about a new law replacing the old but about the new life they have received. Empowerment here does not mean control but intercultural testimony. Long-restricted capacities—imagination, responsibility, and the ability to speak publicly—are freed without being used to enforce domination. This account is often regarded

2. Louis Jacobs, "Shavuot," in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 2nd ed., vol. 18 (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007), 422.

3. Jonathan Sacks, *Covenant & Conversation: Exodus—The Book of Redemption* (Jerusalem: Maggid Books, 2010), 150, and Shemot Rabbah 5:9.

4. Jonathan Sacks, *The Dignity of Difference: How to Avoid the Clash of Civilizations*, rev. ed. (London: Continuum, 2003), 53–55.

5. Jacobs, "Shavuot," 422–23.

primarily as a miracle of glossolalia (speaking in tongues). Luke, however, shifts the emphasis elsewhere.[6]

Acts 2:6–7 emphasizes that the crowd understands the disciples speaking "in the native language of each," even while calling them Galileans—figures associated with provincialism rather than authority. The story highlights a disconnect: the speakers remain linguistically specific, yet understanding occurs across differences. Luke thus depicts a communicative event where speech originates from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds and is still received by others in their own. This indicates neither universal fluency nor the end of linguistic differences. Instead, it underscores a shift in the posture of the listener. Meaning is shared without being simplified; intelligibility appears without extensive mastery. The remarkable aspect is not that the sound waves were universally translated but that the gathered crowd was enabled to listen to voices they would normally have ignored.

Pentecost is sometimes seen as a reversal of Babel (Gen. 11:1–9), as if the Spirit restores a single language instead of embracing diversity. This view implies that unity is achieved through linguistic convergence. However, this interpretation risks misrepresenting both Babel and the work of the Spirit by portraying difference as a problem to be fixed. When Pentecost is mainly regarded as a solution for linguistic division, its full theological significance is limited.

What is decisive in Luke's account is that Pentecost does not resolve differences by eradicating languages or elevating certain speakers above others. Instead, the Spirit upsets established power structures. The listeners in Jerusalem were pilgrims from "every nation under heaven"—cosmopolitan, devout, and holding the social capital of the diaspora. In contrast, the speakers were Galileans, a group marked as provincial, uneducated, and culturally peripheral.

In this disparity, we see the dual work of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit empowers the powerless to speak with authority while also allowing the powerful to listen with humility. The miracle is not just that the disciples found their voice but that the gathered nations—those with higher status and religious stature—were given the ability to listen to a message emerging from the margins. Authority is thus redistributed: the voiceless are given speech, and the powerful are invited to listen with discipline. The Spirit's work at Pentecost is therefore twofold: empowering the marginalized to speak and enabling the privileged to listen. Both are gifts; neither is natural.

6. See Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1992), and Beverly Roberts Gaventa, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), both of whom read Acts as a theological narrative concerned with the Spirit's reconstitution of communal life rather than as a mere record of extraordinary phenomena.

Pentecost may therefore be understood less as a miracle of speech—or even of passive hearing—than as a miracle of listening.[7] The distinction between hearing and listening carries significant theological weight. Hearing can be described as physiological: sound waves reach the ear and are processed. Listening, by contrast, signifies an ethical and spiritual attitude—it involves attention, humility, and willingness to be changed by what one receives. Listening is formative: it shapes the listener. Hearing may leave one unchanged; listening makes one accountable for what has been heard.[8] Furthermore, listening can be refused. Unlike hearing, it involves moral agency. This matters for any ecclesiological appropriation of Pentecost: the church must choose to keep listening. Finally, listening across differences is difficult. It requires relinquishing the assumption that one's own framework is the norm into which others must be translated.

In this respect, Pentecost echoes Sinai traditions where God's voice is received in accordance with human capacity. The link is not incidental. Both events portray divine communication as differentiated reception rather than uniform broadcast. Difference is neither eradicated nor ignored. The Spirit works within specific languages and cultures, affirming them as spaces of divine communication. Speech arises from within particular histories and is listened to without being absorbed into a dominant norm.

Thus, Pentecost presents a normative vision of intercultural community. Unity is created not through sameness but through practices of mutual listening focused on shared responsibility. The Spirit works through everyday human speech rather than extraordinary acts, maintaining relational bonds across differences. Such a community is shaped less by uniformity or control than by dignity, reciprocity, and ongoing attentiveness.

When Pentecost is described as the "birthday of the church," it refers not to the founding of an institution but to the emergence of a community governed by a different form of power. Patterns of voice and attention are reconfigured: those without social authority speak, while those accustomed to dominance are required to listen. The church takes shape as a Spirit-formed community in which attentive listening becomes a central practice.[9]

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7. I first encountered this understanding through the work of Eric H. F. Law; see Eric H. F. Law, *The Wolf Shall Dwell with the Lamb: A Spirituality for Leadership in a Multicultural Community* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1993), 45–51.

8. Gemma Corradi Fiumara, *The Other Side of Language: A Philosophy of Listening* (London: Routledge, 1990), 82–94.

9. Willie James Jennings describes Pentecost as "the revolution of the intimate," emphasizing that the Spirit's work is not merely communicative but erotic—drawing bodies into a "joining" that transforms identity itself. See Willie James Jennings, *Acts: A Theological Commentary on the Bible* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2017), 27–32. While this chapter emphasizes listening as disciplined attention, Jennings's language of desire and intimacy reminds us that such attention is never merely cognitive; it is a participation in divine love.

Pentecost, then, functions not only as an origin story but also as an ongoing ecclesial orientation. In contexts marked by persistent diversity and structural misunderstanding, it depicts the church's calling as one of continuous listening across difference. Intercultural life is not seen as a problem to be fixed but as a field of responsibility where difference is received, negotiated, and held in relation through the discipline of listening.

This calling is demanding, perhaps even disruptive. Institutions tend toward stability, efficiency, and shared norms—all of which work against the kind of sustained attention across difference that Pentecost envisions. Contemporary churches, often structured around shared language, culture, or politics, may find the Pentecost paradigm uncomfortable rather than affirming.

If the Spirit's work at Pentecost was to enable listening where it had previously been refused, then the church's ongoing vocation is not simply to celebrate diversity but to cultivate the dispositions—patience, humility, vulnerability—that make genuine reception possible. The gift of the Spirit, like the gift of Torah at Sinai, is not a one-time event but requires ongoing reception. Pentecost invites the church into a harvest it did not plant: the fruit of attending to voices that emerge from unexpected places, spoken in unfamiliar tongues, and carrying the weight of histories the listener has not lived.

2. Shared Power: Leadership as Companionship

If Pentecost is seen as a miracle of listening, then the first fundamental sign of an intercultural church must be its institutional expression of that listening. It is not enough for ears to be opened liturgically if church authority continues to function through closed and familiar systems. Without structural change, Pentecost remains an event remembered rather than an ongoing practice.[10]

For many churches, this marks a crucial turning point. It is relatively simple to diversify visible aspects of congregational life—such as worship leadership, music, or symbolic representation. However, it is much more challenging to redistribute authority in spaces where decisions are made, resources are allocated, and futures are shaped. The "Other" is often welcomed as a guest, participant, or contributor, but much less frequently as a co-author of the community's

10. A word of ecumenical honesty is needed here. Christian traditions differ significantly in how they understand the theological basis of ecclesial authority. For Orthodox and Catholic Christians, episcopal hierarchy is not a cultural arrangement but a divinely instituted structure rooted in apostolic succession—received, not constructed. This chapter does not argue that all churches must adopt identical governance models, nor does it suggest that hierarchy is inherently opposed to the Spirit's work. Rather, it asks how authority—however structured—can be exercised in ways that genuinely listen across cultural difference. Even within hierarchical traditions, the question of how bishops, priests, and councils attend to voices long marginalized remains theologically urgent. The following reflections emerge primarily from Protestant and conciliar contexts, but the underlying concern—that institutional power can become deaf to the Spirit's multilingual witness—speaks across ecclesial boundaries.

direction. Presence is invited while protocols stay the same. Voices are heard, yet the decision-making power remains with the familiar hands.

This gap between appearance and governance creates what can be called decorative diversity: a church that looks Pentecostal visually while still functioning institutionally according to monocultural norms. Moving from decorative diversity to true structural integrity requires more than just inclusive words. It calls for a theological shift in leadership itself—a move from *mastery*, seen as controlling everything alone, toward *kenosis*, seen as the disciplined practice of creating space. Companionship defines this shift relationally: leadership exercised not over others but alongside them—a structure where listening becomes the main act of leadership.

The Covenant of Restraint: The Two Row Wampum

As discussed in earlier chapters, companionship describes an ecclesial stance capable of holding difference without seeking control, closure, or assimilation. When applied to leadership, companionship reinterprets authority as a shared journey rather than a controlled outcome. Leaders do not stand above or ahead of the community; they walk alongside others, remaining accountable to relationships that cannot be reduced to roles, procedures, or outcomes.

This posture finds a concrete analogue in the covenantal wisdom of the Two Row *Wampum*. As noted previously, within Haudenosaunee treaty tradition, the belt depicts two vessels—often described as a canoe and a ship—travelling the same river side by side. Each carries its own laws, customs, and ways of life. The covenantal promise is neither merger nor hierarchy but a disciplined coexistence grounded in mutual restraint: neither party steers the other's vessel.

Read ecclesiologically, the Two Row *Wampum* articulates a covenantal form of companionship under conditions of asymmetrical power. It does not assume equality as a precondition but names restraint as an ethical obligation—especially for those with greater capacity to steer direction. Shared leadership, understood not as the distribution of roles but as a practice of mutual listening and self-limitation, is therefore not an act of generosity on the part of the dominant culture. It is a covenantal discipline: the voluntary refusal to govern the church solely by its own instruments of navigation.

This abstract principle of "travelling the river" calls for a tangible, embodied practice. In our congregation's context, this manifested during the COVID-19 pandemic, when we adopted the theme "Let's Paddle Together" for the Season of Commitment. Initially seen as a pastoral image for stewardship, the phrase gradually came to represent the specific effort needed to embody the Two Row *Wampum*. To "paddle together" does not mean merging into a single uniform boat; rather, it recognizes that navigating the same river requires coordinated

effort and mutual awareness. During the uncertainty and disruption of the pandemic, the community discovered that endurance depended not on centralized command but on the "paddling"—the rhythmic, shared effort of staying present to one another in the storm.

This presence is anchored in the Pauline injunction to "rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep" (Rom. 12:15). In the context of shared leadership, this scripture becomes a navigational imperative. We cannot paddle in rhythm if we are indifferent to the water filling the other's boat. To "weep with those who weep" is to refuse to speed ahead when our companions are weighed down by sorrow; to "rejoice with those who rejoice" is to validate resilience and flourishing we did not engineer ourselves.

In this way, "paddling together" became an embodied lesson in kenotic leadership. It taught us that resisting the impulse to seize command allows God's faithfulness to be disclosed through shared labour and shared emotion. Applied to church governance, this challenges the dominant cultural norms where urgency and efficiency often override relationship. To travel the river together means that no single vessel claims the authority to read the water—or determine the emotional temperature—for the whole.

Out of that season, our music director, Eileen Padgett, wrote a song that the congregation learned and sang together.

> The world is a storm, we don't know what the wind will bring and
> we're all aboard, our vessels all untied.
> No maps in our hands, no compass but the love that sings
> in our paddling song, as we travel side by side.
>
> Paddling together, amid the sea and ocean spray.
> Paddling together, in fellowship and joy.
> Paddling together, letting God show us the way
> to a new beginning, to a brand new day.
>
> Words © Eileen Padgett (2020). Used by permission.

Leadership remains one of the most telling aspects of church life because it reveals whose voices are trusted to read the water. In many Canadian church settings, leadership structures have traditionally reflected Euro-Canadian norms, with clergy trained primarily within European theological frameworks and governance bodies composed largely of members with settler backgrounds.

Pastoral experience consistently reveals a recurring pattern: even when immigrant and racialized members fill the pews, their influence within decision-making bodies remains limited. Diversity becomes visible in worship while remaining absent in council chambers and finance committees. In such contexts, inclusion often functions symbolically: representation approaches tokenism rather than genuine participation. Companionship sharpens this critique by shifting the central question from *who is present* to *who holds the paddle*.

From Acts of the Apostles to the Body of Christ

This struggle over the "paddle"—over the instruments of decision-making—is not a modern invention; it is a tension that threatened the integrity of the early church. In Acts 6:1–6, a conflict arises between Hellenists and Hebrews over the neglect of widows. Although often seen as a practical dispute over food distribution, a closer look at the *diakon* language indicates a deeper missional division. As John N. Collins has noted, widows were probably excluded from the *diakonia* of the word, marginalized from the daily proclamation because of linguistic and cultural barriers.[11]

The apostolic response was therefore not just about managing a social programme but about sharing the mission itself. Recognizing that they could not effectively mediate the gospel across this cultural divide, the Twelve authorized leaders from within the Hellenist community. The selection of seven leaders with Greek names signifies a decisive act of power sharing. Authority was redistributed so that the mission could proceed through those most familiar with its contested terrain. This intervention reflects a core principle of companionship: leadership is not imposed from the centre but nurtured from the margins so that the whole body may be served.

Paul's vision of the church as the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12) deepens this theological foundation. The body is not just a metaphor for diversity or cooperation; it signifies participation in Christ himself. No member can be excluded without corrupting that participation, and no part can claim sufficiency on its own. Leadership structures that marginalize specific groups are therefore not only unjust but also Christologically inconsistent. Jesus' redefinition of authority in John 13 further clarifies this perspective by placing leadership in service rather than control. In this convergence, *kenosis*, companionship, and the Two Row *Wampum* align as refusals of mastery in favour of relational accountability in Christ.

11. Collins, *Diakonia*, 54–58.

Practices of Shared Power and Companionship

In practical terms, intercultural leadership involves intentionally sharing authority. This belief has influenced my pastoral approach. For example, Mandarin-speaking members have been purposefully brought into leadership roles—initially through shared or co-leadership arrangements and eventually taking on full responsibility. These practices foster companionship by acknowledging that leadership skills develop through accompaniment, mentoring, and gradually sharing responsibilities. Power is not simply handed over; it is learned collectively.

Beyond individual appointments, procedural practices also demand scrutiny. While majority voting is efficient, it often perpetuates the influence of the dominant vessel guiding the process. Conversely, consensus-oriented approaches, though slower, better embody a sense of accompaniment: they emphasize listening, relational accountability, and collective discernment. Practices like storytelling, reflective silence, or shared theological reflection before decision-making help ensure that efficiency does not overshadow attentiveness.

Structural mechanisms—rotating leadership, role-sharing, quotas, or intercultural audits—may appear administrative, yet they are deeply theological. They give institutional form to companionship by ensuring that authority circulates rather than accumulates and that no single vessel carries the fullness of wisdom.

Ecclesial Effects of Shared Leadership and Companionship

Efforts toward shared leadership and companionship inevitably face resistance. Those familiar with authority may fear losing control or worry that cherished traditions will be altered. Paternalism can remain beneath inclusive language, inviting participation while quietly holding onto decision-making power. Differences in cultural leadership styles—hierarchical versus consensual, direct versus indirect—may cause frustration. Additionally, shared leadership often slows down institutional processes, challenging organizations built on speed and certainty.

These tensions are not signs of failure. They reveal the depth of formation needed when mastery is relinquished. Within a companioning framework, slowness becomes a discipline—a refusal of premature closure and a commitment to relational faithfulness. Conflict, when embraced through practices of listening, can surface hidden assumptions and foster more durable trust.

The effects of power sharing practised as companionship are significant. Diverse perspectives reveal blind spots and enhance communal understanding. Younger generations—especially those from immigrant and racialized communities—are more likely to stay engaged when leadership represents their

presence and experience. Congregations that practise shared power internally also increase their credibility when speaking publicly about justice and reconciliation.

Shared leadership, grounded in companionship, is therefore not merely an optional administrative adjustment but a theological essential. It stems from Christ's kenotic redefinition of authority, Paul's Christological vision of the body, and the Spirit's call to intercultural community. At its core, it relies on trust—trust in one another and trust in the Spirit who energizes the church. It affirms that wisdom arises not from a single voice but from many; not from uniformity but from communion in Christ amid difference.

To lead as companions is to accept the discipline of paddling the river together—without seizing the steering paddle, without collapsing vessels into one, and without abandoning the shared journey. This is both the promise and the cost of intercultural ecclesiology: a church shaped not by domination but by listening made structural through companionship in Christ. If power within the church must be exercised without mastery, then Christian speech in public must undergo the same discipline. This discipline requires us to rethink not just how we speak but to whom we belong. Before we can witness to the world, we must recognize who is truly in our family.

Yet the church does not practise shared power in isolation. It exists within a religiously plural world, where questions of authority and truth cannot be answered through internal restructuring alone. If Pentecost teaches the church to relinquish mastery within its own life, how does this posture extend to its witness among neighbours of other faiths? How can Christians confess Christ truthfully without reinforcing patterns of dominance that companionship seeks to dismantle?

3. Witness in a Plural World: From Confession to Shared Concern

Religious pluralism presents the church with a challenging question: How can Christians confess Christ truthfully in public without reinforcing patterns of dominance? In settings marked by multiple faiths, uneven power dynamics, and shared vulnerability, witness is judged no longer by the strength of assertion but by the quality of presence it creates. The question is not whether Christians hold certain beliefs but whether those beliefs are offered as gifts or used as tools of coercion. Ultimately, what matters is the form that confession takes when it enters a shared world.

This section argues that Christian confession can be both firm and non-oppressive. By reclaiming the relational and embodied aspect of confessional speech—particularly in texts like John 14:6—it becomes possible to differentiate fidelity from exclusion and commitment from domination. Contrary to the

conventional understanding of this text, confession signifies a way of belonging rather than a claim to superiority. Such a shift opens space for a form of witness rooted in responsibility, solidarity, and shared concern for justice, enabling Christian faith to be expressed publicly without undermining others' integrity or sacrificing its own.

Confession without Supremacy

John 14:6—"I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me"—is often seen as the main hurdle to interfaith dialogue. Over time, this verse has frequently been understood as both a universal and exclusive statement about access to God. When read this way, it acts as a metaphysical gatekeeper: all spiritual paths outside Christian belief are not just different but invalid. Such interpretations have significantly influenced how Christians approach other religions, encouraging defensiveness, superiority, and rejection.

A closer reading, however, invites attention not only to *what* the text says but also to *how* it speaks. John 14:6 does not belong to the realm of abstract philosophical argument or comparative religious theory. Jesus is not trying to categorize all the world's religions. He is speaking within the intimate and vulnerable setting of a farewell discourse, addressing disciples who are anxious, disoriented, and facing the imminent loss of his physical presence. The question, therefore, is not only what the statement claims but also how it functions within this relational context.

To understand this, we must distinguish between the language of law and the language of love—that is, between propositional judgement and confessional speech.[12] Consider an analogy: when someone speaks to a beloved partner in a moment of deep commitment and says, "You are the most beautiful person in the world; there is no one else for me," they speak truthfully. The statement is true for the one who confesses it. Yet this truth is not scientific, statistical, or comparative. It does not claim to have surveyed all others, nor does it deny the worth or beauty of anyone else. If subjected to empirical verification in a courtroom, the statement would collapse. But within the relationship, it is profoundly true. Its truth resides not in measurement but in fidelity.

John 14:6 functions within this confessional register. When Jesus says, "No one comes to the Father except through me," he is not condemning religious traditions he never encountered. He is expressing covenantal faithfulness. For this community, within this relationship, Jesus is the definitive mediation of God's presence. To turn elsewhere is not seen as an intellectual error but as a breach of trust. The claim is relational before it is propositional.

12. Paul F. Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2002), 133–34.

This interpretation is reinforced when we recall the historical circumstances of the Johannine community. Likely marginalized, facing exclusion from the synagogue (John 9:22; 12:42; 16:2), and struggling to define their identity, they lived as a small and vulnerable group within a hostile environment. These references most plausibly reflect local intra-Jewish disputes during a period when the boundaries between emerging Christian communities and other Jewish groups were still being negotiated—not a blanket rejection of *Judaism* as such. High-contrast language often emerges under conditions of threat, not as a strategy of exclusion but as a means of communal preservation. In such contexts, communities do not speak in tentative probabilities; they speak with conviction. *Jesus is our way. Jesus is our truth. Jesus is our life.* What we see here is survival language transformed into the language of love. It was never intended as a weapon against future neighbours of other faiths but as a lifeline holding together a frightened community.

This distinction opens a vital path for interreligious engagement. We must carefully distinguish between confessional exclusivism and ontological exclusivism.

> A confessional exclusivist says: We know God through Jesus. This is our way, our truth, and our life. We bind ourselves to this path with trust and loyalty.

> An ontological exclusivist claims: God is metaphysically incapable of being encountered elsewhere, and all other paths are devoid of divine presence.

When these registers are collapsed, faith is easily weaponized. Read as confessional language, however, John 14:6 allows Christians to be fully committed to Christ without denying the reality of others' encounters with God. To confess Jesus as the way is not to declare that one's neighbours have no way; it is to bear witness to the way through which one has come to know God.[13]

Understood in this way, Christian confession does not authorize judgement but forms a posture of witness. Christian identity is rooted not in denying difference but in committed accountability—a fidelity expressed not through rivalry but through responsibility. Confession lived as love naturally turns

13. The distinction between confessional and ontological registers is not meant to deny that Christ's incarnation, death, and resurrection constitute an objective, cosmic reality—what the Church Fathers described as the actual healing of human nature. Orthodox and Catholic traditions rightly insist that what happened in Christ happened for all humanity, not merely for those who confess it. The pastoral concern of this section is not to diminish that ontological claim but to resist its weaponization—to distinguish between affirming Christ's universal significance and presuming to know the limits of God's mercy toward those who have not encountered him.

outward toward the concrete sites where faith is tested and practised: shared struggles for justice, compassion, and the flourishing of life.

Shared Concern for Justice

As noted in chapter 3, the shift from rivalry to responsibility redirects dialogue toward a shared concern for justice. This shift alters not only the subject of the conversation but also the community able to sustain it. When mission begins with concern rather than confession, partners are defined less by their religious ties and more by their dedication to the wellbeing of humanity and the earth. The circle of dialogue expands to include people of other faiths, Indigenous communities, social movements, and those who claim no religious identity but act out of moral responsibility. The guiding question becomes less about "What do we believe differently?" and more about "Who is already responding to this shared wound, and how are we called to walk alongside them?"

This shift was identified 60 years ago in the *World Mission: Report of the Commission on World Mission* (1966) by The United Church of Canada. The report acknowledged that Christian mission could no longer assume cultural, religious, or moral superiority. Christians are increasingly meeting people of other faiths—and those with no explicit faith—not as targets of mission but as partners in tackling pressing issues that influence life. The report articulated this shift with striking clarity. "Today it is normal for Christian and non-Christian to work side by side, on the basis of equality, struggling with common problems of far-reaching importance."[14]

What is named here is not merely a sociological adjustment but a theological reorientation. Mission becomes not an episodic response to crisis, nor an activity reserved for the church alone, but a sustained way of inhabiting the world together. Equality, in this vision, is moral rather than strategic: a rejection of spiritual hierarchy in favour of shared vulnerability and responsibility.

At the heart of this model is a fundamental change in perspective. Mission does not begin with doctrine, confession, or even scripture alone but with the specific wounds, crises, and vulnerabilities that threaten life. Environmental destruction, economic injustice, political marginalization, and social fragmentation are not confessional issues confined to a single tradition; they are shared realities that call for collective action. When Christians collaborate with others to address these challenges, they engage in what Thomas Thangaraj calls "*missio humanitatis*," the mission of humanity.[15] Mission is therefore not the

14. United Church of Canada, *World Mission*, 124.

15. M. Thomas Thangaraj, *The Common Task: A Theology of Christian Mission* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999), 47–60.

exclusive domain of the church but is a public and relational calling rooted in the collective effort to sustain life.

This shift does not abandon the theological language of *missio Dei*; instead, it redefines it ecumenically. God's mission is primarily directed toward the world rather than the church. The church participates by aligning itself with God's concern for humanity and creation. In a pluralistic setting, such involvement does not require theological agreement among partners. What unites them is not a shared creed but a shared commitment to the common good. *Missio Dei* and *missio humanitatis* merge through the practice of shared concern.

Because partners do not necessarily share a single worldview, this model calls for a different mode of engagement. Forms of dialogue oriented primarily toward debate or persuasion are often inadequate when encounter takes place across deep cultural and religious differences. Instead, the model turns to dialogical dialogue, as articulated by Raimon Panikkar and developed in chapter 3. This is not an exchange of doctrines or a search for consensus but a disciplined openness to the Other—a willingness to listen, to be questioned, and to remain vulnerable within the encounter. In this posture, truth is not something one possesses or controls; it emerges relationally, through participation in the life of the other.

In this way, the altruistic model of shared concern for justice provides a disciplined and theologically rooted approach to mission. It calls the church to relinquish control, to listen intently, and to act alongside Others—sharing responsibility for the world God so dearly loves.

Yet this outward movement from self-protection to shared concern cannot stop at the boundaries of the human community. The logic of supremacy dismantled throughout this chapter operates not only in relation to other cultures but also in relation to the earth itself. The same colonial imagination that treats peoples as territories to be conquered has also rendered land, water, and air as resources to be exploited. Colonialism against people and colonialism against the earth are not separate failures; they are expressions of the same sin. What remains is to ask what repentance looks like when the wounded party is the ground itself.

Interlude:

Have You Eaten?

If Pentecost names a community formed by listening rather than domination, the question that follows is not only how the church speaks or leads but how it sustains life. We return here to the theology of *sallim*, introduced in chapter 3 through the quiet labour of the

mother who provided the loaves and fishes. As we noted, *sallim* names the work of saving and sustaining life—often minimized as mere "housekeeping" or a domestic chore, yet revealed in the gospel as the essential infrastructure of the miraculous.

To speak of *sallim* in the context of Pentecost is to recognize this labour as a form of political and spiritual resistance. It unmasks systems of death that render such care invisible or economically insignificant. A theology of *sallim* refuses this erasure. It revalues the daily work of cooking, cleaning, caring, and nurturing not just as service but as a direct struggle against forces that exploit life for efficiency or profit.

Within the practice of *sallim*, rice holds a central place in many Asian cultures. Without rice, *sallim* cannot take place; it is the most widely consumed staple and a daily necessity. Rice is not simply food; it is a measure of life itself. This meaning appears even in everyday greetings: in Korean, 진지 잡수셨어요 (*jinji jap-su-syeoss-eo-yo*)?—"Have you eaten?" In Tagalog, *Kumain ka na?*—"Have you eaten?" Though spoken differently, these greetings share the same life-centred concern for the wellbeing of the other.

Rice embodies a holistic worldview. A single bowl gathers together the work of heaven and earth—sunlight, rain, soil, and the nurturing embrace of the land—joined with patient human labour. Rice thus becomes a symbol of interdependence and shared life. It is also an embodiment of peace. The word for peace in Mandarin (*hépíng* 和平), Japanese (*heiwa* 平和), and Korean (*pyeonghwa* 평화 / 平和) is written with two characters: 和, whose graph joins grain (禾) and mouth (口) and is traditionally read as eating together, and 平, meaning level, even, or fair. Peace, in this vision, is impossible where rice is hoarded or denied. There can be no peace where people go hungry.

Simply put, eating rice together is peacemaking. To share rice is to practise *sallim*. Because rice embodies shared labour, mutual dependence, and divine gift, it must be shared (Acts 2:46). Peacemaking, then, is the work of giving life—*sallim*—by transforming unjust systems that exploit the lives of the *minjung* and by cultivating relationships in which everyone can sit at the table and eat together in peace. In this sense, *sallim* is Pentecostal joy without triumph: life sustained not by spectacle or control but by the slow, shared work of keeping one another alive.

4. Ecological *Metanoia*: A Pentecostal Turn

The convergence of sacramentality, intercultural theology, and *diakonia* as companionship provides a vital framework for imagining Christian life in a world of cultural diversity, displacement, and wounded histories. At its heart, sacramentality represents a way of perceiving God's presence through the material world, rejecting the false divide between "sacred" and "secular." If the finite can mediate the infinite, then creation, human relationships, and daily labour are not just backgrounds for spiritual life but the very places where divine grace is revealed. In this perspective, acts of companionship, justice, and care are not merely ethical obligations; they are participation in God's ongoing self-giving.

If Pentecost draws the church into a more-than-human communion, the current ecological crisis highlights the urgent and embodied nature of that communion. The "groaning of creation" (Rom. 8:22) is no longer a theological metaphor; it has become a tangible planetary reality. As seas rise, forests burn, and species vanish, the earth is speaking, sacramentally bearing witness to both its profound brokenness and God's persistence within it. The question for the church is not whether to respond but whether it will learn how to listen.

The groaning of creation is not an abstract concept; it is a visible wound. This reality comes into view in the work of Emily Carr (1871–1945), one of Canada's most distinctive painters, whose late canvases gave form to landscapes scarred by industrial logging. Painting in the mid-1930s—amid personal illness and the Great Depression—Carr did not avert her gaze from the devastated forests of British Columbia.

In *Scorned as Timber, Beloved of the Sky* (1935), she depicts a clear-cut forest: a torn ridge of splintered remains. She called the stumps "screamers"—a word that appears in her journals as early as 1934 and would shape her visual imagination for years afterward. She was horrified by them—a "horrible sight," she wrote, turning grey and slowly rotting. Yet as she wrote, "As you pass among them you see their screamers sticking up out of their own tombstones, as it were. They are their own tombstones and their own mourners."[16]

Carr's attention did not linger only on devastation. She also noticed the slender single trees left standing amid the ruin—survivors deemed too thin or weak for the mill. These are the "scorned" timber. Yet Carr depicts them reaching upward, connecting the wounded earth to the light above. They stand as a fragile *axis mundi*, a testament that even in a landscape defined by extraction, the connection between heaven and earth has not been severed. Her gaze was not one of denial or despair but of disciplined attention.

16. Emily Carr, *Hundreds and Thousands: The Journals of Emily Carr*, June 16, 1934 (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 2006 [1966]), 188.

Carr's vision, however, is neither passive waiting for renewal nor repentance as a means of securing it; rather, it is a way of learning to live forward within damage. She does not imagine restoration as a return to innocence; the forest remains scarred, uneven, and exposed. What she trains the eye to see is endurance without triumph—a form of life that grows not by erasing injury but by persisting within it. Like the "shoot from the stump of Jesse" we explored in Advent, Carr discerned that the scarred ground was not only a graveyard but also a nursery. This is the posture of ecological *metanoia*: the courage to face the "screamers" of our time without losing sight of the new life God is already tending among them.

Figure 6.1 Emily Carr, *Scorned as Timber, Beloved of the Sky* (1935), oil on canvas, 112 × 68.9 cm, Vancouver Art Gallery

A Kairos Moment: Johannesburg 2025

This call to listen took on historic weight in June 2025 when I sat with delegates from around the world at the central committee of the World Council of Churches in Johannesburg, South Africa. Amid testimonies from communities already living with irreversible loss—flooded islands, rivers turned to dust, and scorched farmlands—the global fellowship of churches made a decisive commitment: the launch of the Decade for Climate Justice Action (2025–34).[17]

This was not simply a new initiative added to an already crowded ecclesial agenda. It marked a moment of spiritual reckoning—a collective recognition that the climate emergency is not merely an environmental concern but is a crisis of faith, discipleship, and witness. The gathering discerned that the church has entered a *kairos* moment: a time of "life or death" (Deut. 30:19) that demands a

17. World Council of Churches, "Decade for Climate Justice Action," https://oikoumene.org/what-we-do/care-for-creation-and-climate-justice/ecumenical-decade-of-climate-justice-action.

clear choice. The climate crisis reveals the consequences of a world ordered by domination, extraction, and control—logics the church has too often mirrored rather than resisted. To recognize this truth is to step into the necessity of repentance.

This moment invites the church into ecological *metanoia*: a profound shift in imagination, desire, and practice. *Metanoia* here is neither guilt-driven paralysis nor a tactic for moral self-redemption. It is the transformation that happens when the church recognizes that continuing on familiar paths would betray the gospel it proclaims. Ecological *metanoia* refuses to normalize destruction, delay action, or spiritualize suffering. It is repentance aimed at transformation—reordering life to make room for healing, restraint, and collective flourishing.

"See, I Am Making All Things New"

The eschatological vision that drives ecological *metanoia* is not about fleeing the earth but about God's renewed presence within it. The apostle John gives voice to this hope with words that have sustained vulnerable communities across generations: "See, the dwelling of God is among mortals ... God will wipe every tear from their eyes ... See, I am making all things new" (Rev. 21:3–5). Crucially, the promise is not that God will make *new things* to replace the old but that *all things* will be made new. The logic of Revelation resists supersession and erasure. Renewal is described as restoration without denial of history, continuity without domination. Tears are wiped away not because suffering never occurred but because it has been named, remembered, and gathered into God's redemptive presence. Ecological *metanoia* draws its theological depth from this vision: repentance is not a retreat from the earth but a turning back toward it as the place God refuses to abandon.

Read in the light of Pentecost, this eschatological hope extends beyond the human community. If the Spirit is poured out on "all flesh" (Acts 2:17), then creation itself participates in the horizon of redemption. The earth's suffering is therefore not meaningless noise but a cry addressed to God and overheard by the church. To live Pentecostally in an age of ecological crisis is to learn to listen to this cry as a summons to responsibility rather than relegating it to the background of human salvation.

Can the Subaltern Speak? From Bhaduri to the Burning Forest

The challenge of listening to creation requires first understanding why some voices remain systematically unheard. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's famous question—"Can the subaltern speak?"—illuminates the problem.[18] If even

18. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (London: Macmillan, 1988), 271–313.

human voices from the margins are overwritten by dominant interpretive frameworks, how much more vulnerable is the testimony of the non-human world?

In her 1988 essay, Spivak recounts the story of Bhubaneswari Bhaduri, a young Indian woman involved in the armed struggle for independence who took her own life in 1926. Unable to carry out a political assassination, Bhaduri hanged herself while menstruating—a deliberate act intended to signal that her death was political, not the result of illicit pregnancy. Yet her family, including the women closest to her, interpreted the death precisely in those terms. Her speech—inscribed on her own body—was overwritten by the only interpretive framework available to them.

Spivak's much-debated conclusion—that *"the subaltern cannot speak"*—was widely criticized as silencing the very voices she sought to recover. But her claim is more exacting. Even when the subaltern speaks, Spivak argues, she is not heard, because there is no social or epistemic infrastructure capable of receiving her testimony. The problem is not muteness but systematic mishearing.

This insight sharpens the ethical force of the parable of the Good Samaritan. Can the half-dead person speak? No. And yet the Samaritan hears the voiceless summons and responds. If the parable were staged as a play, the half-dead person would be the easiest role to cast—requiring no lines—yet the most indispensable. Without this wounded, silent body, there is no ethical claim and no story at all. The body itself becomes a whistle-blower, revealing what is at stake. If the cries of human bodies can be so thoroughly overwritten by dominant scripts, how much more vulnerable is the testimony of the non-human world?

The question presses further: *Can trees speak? Can the earth testify?* For much of Western modernity, the answer was effectively no—not because creation was silent but because prevailing frameworks lacked the capacity to hear. What could not be received was dismissed. The groaning of creation was reduced to a metaphor: background noise to the human drama rather than a testimony demanding response.

Spivak's insight thus becomes an ecological imperative. The subaltern of the climate crisis includes not only frontline human communities but creation itself—forests reduced to "resources," species driven toward extinction. Creation speaks, yet dominant epistemologies ensure that its testimony is translated into data for management rather than received as a summons to transformation. Ecological *metanoia* therefore requires more than changed behaviour; it demands changed perception: the building—or unlearning—of the infrastructures that determine what can be heard. For the church, this entails the recovery of liturgies of lament, the cultivation of theologies of kinship, and the practice of forms of silence capable of receiving the earth's testimony.

What might such an infrastructure of listening look like? One answer emerges from the work of Canadian forest ecologist Suzanne Simard. This Pentecostal reorientation calls for a fundamental shift in how creation itself is imagined. In *Finding the Mother Tree*, Simard demonstrates that forests function through complex networks of interdependence, in which so-called Mother Trees sustain life by sharing nutrients, memory, and resilience rather than by exercising dominance. Trees, she writes, "perceive, relate, and communicate … cooperate, make decisions, learn, and remember."[19] To acknowledge such agency is to extend moral regard beyond the human, unsettling extractive assumptions about life and value.

Read theologically, Simard's work does more than revise ecological science; it exposes the limits of anthropologies shaped by colonial mission and extractive economies—anthropologies that presume life is secured through control, competition, and accumulation. Against these logics, her research gestures toward a relational ontology already anticipated by Pentecost. The Spirit poured out on "all flesh" gathers human and more-than-human life into a shared economy of care, where flourishing depends not on mastery but on mutuality. Ecological repentance, therefore, is not an auxiliary ethical concern but a conversion of imagination and practice: a turning from possession toward companionship and from domination toward participation in a wounded, yet life-sustaining creation.

Listening from the Margins: Climate Justice and Pentecostal Responsibility

Scientific research now confirms what frontline communities have long known: the world is approaching ecological tipping points beyond which damage may become irreversible. Yet the distribution of harm remains profoundly unequal. Those least responsible for environmental degradation—Indigenous peoples, frontline communities, and the global South—bear its heaviest burdens. This asymmetry reflects patterns traced throughout this book: racialized vulnerability, colonial extraction, and economic exclusion now intensified within an ecological register.

An intercultural ecclesiology shaped by Pentecost cannot ignore this imbalance. If the Spirit gathers voices from the margins, then those most affected by climate injustice must be recognized not merely as victims in need of aid, but as bearers of theological insight. Their lived experience becomes a sacred site of discernment—an interpretive lens through which the church learns what faithfulness now requires.

Here, the words of Jesus sharpen the church's accountability: "just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to

19. Suzanne Simard, *Finding the Mother Tree: Discovering the Wisdom of the Forest* (New York: Knopf, 2021), 294.

me" (Matt. 25:40). Ecological indifference is not neutral. To remain complicit through inaction is to permit ongoing harm to both communities and ecosystems. Ecological *metanoia* therefore calls the church to move beyond accommodation toward resistance, beyond quiet concern toward public responsibility.

The Decade for Climate Justice Action signifies a commitment to move beyond isolated responses toward systemic change. But this movement requires a specific ecclesial shape. The Spirit of Pentecost does not produce uniformity; it creates coordination without domination. Diversity is not erased but is brought together into shared direction.

Ecological transformation thus becomes a testing ground for intercultural practice: Can the church act collectively without reproducing hierarchy? Can it follow those long silenced? Can it choose restraint, redistribution, and repair over control? To frame climate justice sacramentally is to acknowledge that transformation is not mainly technical but relational. It involves reordering desires, redefining success, and reimagining faithful witness. The credibility of the intercultural church depends not on speaking *about* creation but on allowing its own life to be reshaped in response to creation's suffering.

Conclusion: Pentecost as Ongoing Formation

This chapter has explored Pentecost not as a singular event to be commemorated but as an ongoing formation—the Spirit's work of creating a community capable of listening across difference, sharing power without domination, and bearing witness without supremacy. If the book began in Advent's *hüzün*, learning to dwell with loss and displacement, it culminates here in Pentecost's *sallim*: the Spirit-sustained labour of giving and sustaining life together.

The arc has been liturgical and theological. Epiphany taught the church that truth arrives from elsewhere, carried by strangers. Lent disciplined the impulse to act with urgency and control. Easter revealed resurrection not as the erasure of wounds but as the capacity to remain present within them. Now Pentecost forms the church to live forward within these tensions: not by resolving them but by learning to listen, to relinquish mastery, and to participate in God's life-giving movement already at work in the world.

Four practices have emerged as marks of this Pentecostal community. First, listening displaces speaking as the church's primary posture. The miracle of Acts 2 is not that the disciples spoke in tongues but that the crowd was enabled to listen—to receive testimony in their own languages without erasure or translation into a single norm. Second, shared power reshapes leadership from benefaction to companionship. Authority is no longer exercised for others but practised with them, distributing voice and responsibility across the body. Third, embodied witness reframes confession as fidelity rather than domination. To

confess "Jesus is Lord" is not to deny that God is encountered elsewhere but to name the particular path through which we have come to know God's grace.

Fourth, ecological *metanoia* extends this Pentecostal imagination beyond the human community to creation itself. If the Spirit teaches us to listen to our neighbour without domination, that same Spirit calls us to listen to the groaning of the earth. Ecological *metanoia* is not an auxiliary concern but a test of the church's faithfulness: Can we relinquish mastery not only over other cultures but over creation? Can we move from extraction to companionship, from possession to participation?

Companionship—the book's guiding image—names precisely this posture. It is the practice of walking together without steering another's vessel, of sharing a meal without claiming the head of the table, of moving side by side on the same river while respecting distinct paths. Like two canoes travelling parallel—neither merging nor drifting apart, neither leading nor following, but coordinating movement through mutual attention—companionship sustains relationship across asymmetry. It refuses both fusion and separation. In a wounded world marked by colonial histories, racialized violence, and ecological crisis, companionship is not sentimental togetherness but disciplined presence: the refusal of mastery, the practice of restraint, and the commitment to remain accountable within relationships we did not choose and cannot complete.

The intercultural church does not claim to have arrived. It remains in the in-between—between cultures, between traditions, between what has been lost and what is being born. Yet it is precisely here, in this vulnerable space, that the Spirit descends. Pentecost does not close the tensions this book has traced. It sustains the practices through which the church remains faithful within them: listening without controlling, sharing power without grasping, confessing without dominating, and tending the earth without mastering. This is the church's Pentecostal calling: to live as many tongues and many peoples, moving together in the fire of the Spirit, paddling side by side toward a reconciliation we cannot force but can faithfully pursue.

Questions for Reflection

1. The Miracle of Listening: The chapter argues that Pentecost is often misunderstood as a miracle of speaking (tongues), when it is actually a miracle of listening—where the powerful centre (Jerusalem) is enabled to listen to the margins (Galilee). In our church meetings and decision-making, do we focus on "giving people a voice," or do we focus on training our leaders to truly *listen* without filtering what they hear through old assumptions?
2. Decorative Diversity: The author uses the phrase "decorative diversity" to describe churches that look diverse on Sunday morning but remain monocultural in how they make decisions. If an outsider looked at our church's "power centres" (finance, board, hiring committee) rather than our "worship stage," what would they see? Is our diversity structural or merely decorative?
3. Leadership as "*Kenosis*" (Self-Emptying): True intercultural leadership requires *kenosis*—a voluntary "self-emptying" or restraint. It means refusing to steer the ship alone. Can you identify a time when a leader in our community (or perhaps you) had to step back or slow down so a different cultural wisdom could shape the outcome? How did that feel—frustrating or faithful?
4. John 14:6 and the Language of Love: Many Christians fear that respecting other religions means watering down their faith. The chapter suggests reading "I am the Way ..." not as a legal judgement against others but as "love language" spoken to Jesus—like telling a spouse, "You are the only one for me." How does this distinction help us witness to our faith in a pluralistic neighbourhood without being arrogant or defensive?
5. Ecological Repentance: The chapter ends by linking the "cry of the poor" with the "cry of the earth." It suggests we need "ecological *metanoia*" (repentance/turning). If our church began to treat the climate crisis not as a political issue but as a crisis of discipleship, what is one concrete thing we would stop doing and one thing we would start doing?

Conclusion

Companionship:

Walking Together in a Wounded World

This book began in the in-between—with a reader who senses a summons without clarity, and with an image of unravelling: old yarn loosened from a worn sweater, not discarded but prepared for transformation. We end with another image: two vessels travelling the same river, side by side, neither steering the other. Between these images lies the practice that has quietly sustained every chapter, every season, every turn: *companionship*.

Companionship is not a theory to be mastered or a strategy to be implemented. It is a way of being church—a disciplined practice of remaining present with others across difference, asymmetry, and wounded histories. It does not resolve tensions or erase harm. It does not claim neutrality or stand outside contested relationships. Instead, it names the form that faithfulness takes when closure cannot be claimed without denial, when power cannot be shared without relinquishment, and when reconciliation cannot be rushed without repeating the very patterns it seeks to undo.

The Journey from Advent to Pentecost

Through the liturgical seasons, we have traced not a progression toward completion but a formation into capacity. Each season has shaped the church for companionship in particular ways:

Advent taught us to wait without grasping—to live in the in-between without rushing toward resolution or retreating into nostalgia. The capacity to hold *hüzün*, that dignified sorrow for what has been lost, prepares us to cherish life without denying its fractures. Waiting becomes a theological ground for companionship: we learn to remain present when clarity has not yet arrived.

Christmas confronted us with the scandal of a God who enters the world not through power but through racialized vulnerability. The contrast between crumbs theology and banquet theology exposed how churches have too often managed diversity through inclusion without transformation, offering scraps while protecting the centre. Companionship refuses this logic. It insists that the table must be restructured, that communion requires shared power, and that God's feast cannot be administered from a position of control.

Epiphany displaced truth from the centre, revealing that divine light is refracted through the stranger, the migrant, the one positioned at the margins.

Intercultural theology is not about managing diversity but about recognizing that we do not possess truth—we receive it through encounter. Companionship becomes the discipline of listening to voices we have long ignored, knowing that the Spirit speaks from places we did not expect.

Lent formed us through restraint. The wilderness is not a space for achieving clarity but for cultivating the patience required when God's mission unfolds beyond ecclesial control. *Missio Dei* reminds us that God's work precedes the church, that mission flows from the margins, and that the Spirit's movement cannot be confined to our categories. Companionship, then, is not a tool for mission but the form mission takes when we relinquish mastery.

Easter redefined hope—not as triumph or closure but as communal rising (*egeirō*) within wounded relationships. Reconciliation cannot be rushed or completed through institutional processes alone. It requires the ongoing practice of shared responsibility, sustained over time. We saw this in the shared gardens on Musqueam land, where Chinese farmers excluded from owning property and a nation confined to its reserve found each other through the narrow opening colonial law had left—two dispossessed communities building a life together that neither could have built alone. The Two Row *Wampum* offered us a counter-protocol: two vessels, one river, neither steering the other. This is companionship embodied—accountability without supremacy, presence without domination.

Pentecost released the church into practices it can actually sustain. The miracle was not that the disciples spoke in tongues but that the crowd was enabled to hear—to receive testimony in their own languages without erasure. A Pentecostal church is not one that has arrived at unity but one capable of sustained listening across irreducible difference. Companionship here becomes liturgical: we learn to listen together, to share power without seizing control, and to witness in a plural world by attending to shared concerns rather than defending exclusive claims.

From Servanthood to Companionship

At the heart of this book lies a theological reorientation: the shift from servanthood to companionship. For too long, the church has positioned itself as the benevolent servant to those deemed in need—a stance that, however well-intentioned, preserves hierarchy and conceals power. The servant stands above, holding resources, truth, and agency while those served remain recipients of grace administered from elsewhere.

Companionship interrupts this logic. It recognizes that those who accompany others are themselves wounded, limited, and in need of relationship. The stance shifts from benefactor to neighbour, from acting *for* others to staying

with others. Responsibility is no longer exercised on behalf of the vulnerable but *alongside* them—within relationships marked by mutual exposure and asymmetrical histories.

This is not partnership in a contractual sense, nor is it allyship that leaves the ally's vulnerability unexposed. Companionship is *diakonia* in its truest form: a ministry of the in-between, a kinetic practice of mediation that refuses to claim the centre. The church does not stand above society as moral authority, nor outside it as prophetic observer, but *within* the contested spaces of public life—listening, mediating, and remaining accountable without dominating.

Companionship as Formation

Companionship is not something the church does; it is how the church is formed. It shapes how we see, how we listen, how we lead, and how we hope:

Companionship teaches us to see difference not as a problem to be managed but as the fundamental condition where responsibility arises. We do not choose whether we are related to others; we choose how we will bear that relation—defensively or faithfully, anxiously or attentively, through domination or through care.

Companionship forms us to listen without claiming to understand fully. The Pentecost miracle reminds us that listening precedes speaking, that the Spirit's work unfolds through receptivity, and that many tongues remain many tongues. Understanding arises not from uniformity but from sustained attention.

Companionship redefines leadership as shared power. Authority does not gather responsibility into a single set of hands or hurry communities toward premature clarity. It redistributes responsibility across relationships, learning when not to lead, when to listen longer, and when to remain alongside rather than ahead. Like paddling the same river together, leadership becomes a matter of shared rhythm, mutual vulnerability, and restraint.

Companionship sustains hope without demanding closure. Resurrection is not a return to innocence but a communal rising that endures within wounded histories. We do not resolve the tensions this book has named; we learn to live faithfully within them—sustaining relationships across asymmetry, memory, and harm without abandoning those who have been most injured.

The Cost and Promise of Companionship

Companionship is costly. It requires the church to relinquish control, to redistribute power, to listen to voices it has historically silenced, and to remain present within relationships where harm has been done and reconciliation remains unfinished. It means accepting that the church is not the master of

God's mission, that truth is received through encounter rather than possessed as heritage, and that faithfulness may require enduring tension rather than resolving it.

For global North churches—particularly those shaped by colonial histories, racial privilege, and cultural dominance—the practice of companionship demands conversion. It means learning to receive from the margins without appropriating, to listen without extracting, and to accompany without steering. It means trusting that what appears as institutional decline may be a necessary unravelling, preparing the church for a form of life it cannot yet imagine.

Yet companionship also carries promise. A church formed through companionship is not immobilized by unfinished histories. It knows how to move without dominating, to decide without finality, and to give life without securing outcomes. It can risk vulnerability, reorder leadership, redistribute power, and practise care—not because the work is complete but because the Spirit has already formed it for this kind of faithfulness.

*From **Hüzün** to **Sallim**: Holding Sorrow and Giving Life*

The journey traced in this book moves from *hüzün* to *sallim*—from the capacity to hold dignified sorrow to the practice of giving life. These are not opposites but companions. We cannot truly cherish life until we have mourned its fracturing. The spiritual capacity to hold grief without denial widens the heart for care.

Hüzün names what Advent taught us: the willingness to remain present within loss without rushing toward restoration. It is the discipline of waiting, of living in the in-between, of refusing to cover over wounds with premature hope.

Sallim names what Pentecost releases: the patient, life-giving labour of sustaining existence in its everyday fragility—cooking, cleaning, tending, nurturing, preserving. This work has been dismissed as marginal, yet it locates God's movement in the hidden labour that makes flourishing possible. The unnamed woman we imagined behind the boy's offering practised *sallim*—the life-sustaining preparation without which the miracle of abundance could not have occurred. So did the farmers in the Musqueam gardens: vegetables grown, land tended, two peoples fed by work that no colonial record thought worth counting.

Read together, *hüzün* and *sallim* describe the full arc of companionship. Through *hüzün*, we stay with the wound; through *sallim*, we tend the life that insists on growing within it. Intercultural theology is revealed not only as a theology of relation but as a theology of life-giving relation. To practise companionship is to participate in *sallim*: resisting systems that exploit life, transforming relationships shaped by hierarchy, and patiently cultivating conditions in which life can flourish.

Companionship and the Two Row Wampum

Indigenous treaty wisdom has accompanied this work as both teacher and witness. The Two Row *Wampum*—depicting two vessels travelling the same river, each carrying its own laws and customs, neither steering the other—offers not merely a metaphor but a concrete protocol for companionship across asymmetrical power.

This is not a call to appropriate Indigenous wisdom but to learn from it with humility. The Two Row *Wampum* teaches restraint as an ethical obligation, especially for those with greater capacity to steer. It refuses the logic of mastery that underwrites colonial reconciliation—the assumption that one party can define the terms, pace, or outcome for the other.

When read ecclesiologically, the Two Row *Wampum* disciplines companionship in several ways:

It teaches the church to travel *alongside* rather than *for* or *over* others. Shared life does not require fusion or assimilation; it requires sustained presence across difference.

It insists that faithfulness is measured not by outcomes controlled but by relationships sustained. The river continues to move; the work remains unfinished. Companionship commits to staying in the journey.

It resists the temptation to steer another's vessel—even with the best intentions. Leadership shaped by the Two Row *Wampum* knows when to refrain, when to listen, and when to allow others to navigate according to their own wisdom.

This is the discipline that companionship requires: the refusal to dominate, the willingness to remain vulnerable, and the trust that God's future unfolds not through ecclesial control but through faithful presence.

Living Without Mastery

Companionship refuses mastery in every form. It refuses the mastery of certainty—the demand that truth be secured before we act. It refuses the mastery of outcomes—the insistence that faithfulness be validated through visible success. It refuses the mastery of time—the impatience that rushes reconciliation or forces closure before wounds have been tended.

To live without mastery is not to live without direction. It is to trust that direction emerges through shared discernment, sustained listening, and the Spirit's movement in places we did not anticipate. Like paddling a kayak, movement arises not from force but from rhythm, attentiveness, and responsiveness to shifting currents.

The church is being called—sometimes gently, sometimes insistently—to relinquish the centre. This is not loss alone; it is preparation. The unravelling we have named throughout this book is not the church's ending but its *reformation*. The yarn is being loosened so that something new can be knit—something warmer, more truthful, and better suited to the season now unfolding.

An Invitation to Companionship

This book ends where it began—in the in-between. The river is still moving. The maps we inherited no longer match the currents beneath us. Familiar certainties have loosened, and new paths have not fully emerged. Yet we are not alone.

Companionship is the practice that sustains us when assurance cannot. It does not promise resolution, but it offers presence. It does not guarantee success, but it cultivates faithfulness. It does not erase asymmetry, but it creates space for shared responsibility within it.

For exhausted clergy and lay leaders, for congregations navigating decline, for churches learning to listen across difference, companionship offers a way forward that is neither restoration nor abandonment. It is the discipline of remaining present when clarity has not yet arrived, of sharing power when control feels safer, of listening when speaking feels more urgent.

Becoming an intercultural church is not an achievement to be completed. It is a way of life continually being learned—stroke by stroke, decision by decision, relationship by relationship. Formation precedes resolution. Companionship sustains the work. Justice unfolds over time.

The work remains unfinished. The responsibility remains shared. Yet the Spirit continues to move—often quietly, often through ordinary labour—calling the church not to certainty but to faithfulness; not to domination but to *sallim*; not to mastery but to companionship.

Let's paddle alongside one another.

"We are not alone. Thanks be to God."

Glossary of Terms

Advent: More than a liturgical season, Advent names a theological posture of waiting without control. In this book, Advent describes the church's present condition: living between inherited forms that are unravelling and futures not yet fully visible. Advent faith resists urgency, mastery, and premature solutions, cultivating patience, attentiveness, and hope amid uncertainty.

Affective theology: A theological approach that attends to emotions, bodily experience, and shared feeling as sites of formation and ethical responsibility. Here, affective theology focuses not on private emotion but on *shared affect*—how grief, fear, fatigue, hope, and longing shape ecclesial life unevenly and under conditions of power.

Antisemitism: Christianity's oldest and most persistent form of theological othering, rooted in the *adversus Judaeos* tradition. It functions as a template for construing the "other" as theologically deficient, forming an architecture in which Jewish suffering is ignored or justified and later extended to colonial and racialized contexts.

Asymmetry: This book uses asymmetry in two related senses. (1) Sociological asymmetry: the unequal distribution of power, vulnerability, and historical harm within a relationship—differences produced by colonialism, racism, gender, or structural violence. (2) Ethical asymmetry (drawing on Emmanuel Levinas): the priority of the Other, who addresses me with a claim prior to my choice or consent. In this second sense, the vulnerable Other stands "above" me in ethical authority, commanding responsibility before I can calculate or refuse. These two meanings are related by reversal: those rendered "below" by sociological asymmetry often reveal most clearly the ethical asymmetry that summons the church to accountability. Faithful relationship does not erase either form of asymmetry but learns to live responsibly within both.

Banquet theology: A biblical and theological image for God's reign characterized by abundance, shared power, and mutual belonging. In contrast to "crumbs theology," the banquet signifies inclusion that transforms structures rather than merely symbolizing welcome. It calls the church toward practices of justice, redistribution, and shared responsibility.

Christendom / Post-Christendom: Christendom refers to the historical alignment of Christianity with political power, cultural dominance, and social norms, especially in Europe and North America. Post-Christendom names the unravelling of this alignment, in which the church no longer occupies the cultural centre and must rediscover its vocation without privilege, coercion, or assumed authority.

Christian nationalism: A theological distortion where the church refuses to relinquish the centre, conflating God's will with national interest. Driven by an impulse for mastery, it treats mission as the expansion of cultural power (*missio imperii*), defending truth as a possession rather than discerning the *missio Dei* through companionship and restraint.

Communion-in-difference: A form of shared ecclesial life in which difference is neither erased nor resolved but held responsibly within relationship. Grounded in incarnation and eucharist, communion-in-difference resists assimilation and domination, binding the church to ongoing responsibility amid asymmetry, vulnerability, and unfinished histories rather than harmony or closure.

Companionship: An ecclesial practice of participating in God's mission through *being with* rather than *acting for*. It rejects hierarchy, charity, and mastery, attends to power asymmetries, and embraces mutual vulnerability, shared discernment, and co-journeying across difference and wounded histories without seeking dominance, resolution, or moral innocence.

Cosmotheandric: A term developed by Raimon Panikkar describing reality as an inseparable communion of *cosmos* (creation), *theos* (God), and *anthropos* (humanity). No dimension exists independently. Reality itself is relational. Intercultural encounter is therefore not merely ethical choice but participation in the fundamental structure of existence, grounding both theological and ecological responsibility.

Counter-sacrament: A theological description of practices such as racism that undermine communion. While sacraments mediate God's grace through embodied practices of belonging, counter-sacraments train communities in exclusion, hierarchy, and mistrust. Racism functions as a counter-sacrament by reorganizing bodies, authority, and worth against the logic of incarnation.

Crumbs theology: A form of inclusion that offers symbolic recognition without shared power or structural change. Crumbs theology affirms diversity while leaving existing hierarchies intact. The term draws on the challenge of the Syrophoenician woman and critiques forms of multiculturalism or church reform that manage difference rather than transform relationships.

Decolonization: A theological practice of unlearning colonial imaginations embedded in Christian theology, mission, land relations, and authority. Decolonization does not mean erasing tradition but re-examining how Christianity has been shaped by conquest, displacement, and hierarchy and re-forming the church toward responsibility, mutuality, and justice.

Decorative diversity: A condition in which a church appears diverse visually—through representation in pews, leadership, or worship—while continuing to function according to monocultural norms. The Other is welcomed as guest

or contributor but not as co-author of the community's future or as a bearer of authority.

Diakonia: Reinterpreted in this book not as humble service alone but as a *ministry of the in-between* or a *go-between practice*. *Diakonia* names agency and mediation that operate laterally between parties, positioning the church within shared vulnerability rather than above others as benefactor or moral authority.

Dialogical dialogue: A concept associated with Panikkar describing an encounter that goes beyond debate or consensus-building. It is a spiritual discipline that requires vulnerability: the willingness to be questioned and interpreted by the Other and to accept that one's own understanding of reality remains incomplete.

Egeirō: A Greek verb (ἐγείρω) meaning "to raise" or "to be raised," emphasizing resurrection as an act received rather than seized. The book uses this term to frame Easter not as a solitary miracle but as a communal rising in which a community is raised from fear and silence into courage, witness, and shared life.

Garrison mentality: A colonial theological imagination that treats the world outside the church—or empire—as dangerous, empty, or lacking meaning. Authority, truth, and safety are imagined as residing "inside the fort." This mentality sustains exclusionary practices of belonging and mission shaped by fear rather than trust.

Haudenosaunee (pronounced *ho-den-o-SHOW-nee)***:** "People of the Longhouse"—the confederacy of six nations (Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Cayuga, Seneca, and later Tuscarora) whose territories span what are now southern Ontario, Quebec, and New York State. Known in older European sources as the Iroquois.

Hüzün (pronounced hew-ZOON)**:** A Turkish term describing a shared, dignified melancholy rooted in collective memory and loss. In this book, *hüzün* names a theology of shared woundedness—a way of dwelling with sorrow without despair or nostalgia. Read alongside Advent, it offers a posture of patient endurance and attentiveness amid unfinished histories.

Imago Dei: The theological claim that humanity bears God's image not as isolated individuals but as relational beings created for mutuality and shared dignity. Racism distorts the *imago Dei* by ranking bodies and turning difference into hierarchy, thereby undermining communion.

In-between: A theological and cultural space of transition between the fading of Christendom and a future not yet fully formed. The in-between is not a void to be escaped but a holy site of formation, where creativity, tension, and new forms of relationship emerge without guarantee or closure.

Intercultural theology: A theological approach that understands truth as emerging through encounter rather than possession. Intercultural theology emphasizes relationality, asymmetry, and dialogue shaped by power, history, and difference. It rejects neutrality, insisting that theology is always formed within concrete relationships.

Kenosis: The theological concept of self-emptying, applied here to leadership and ecclesial practice. *Kenosis* names the disciplined creation of space—the relinquishment of mastery so that authority may be shared and the community led by the Spirit rather than a single dominant voice.

Kin-dom: A theological reimagining of the "kingdom of God" that emphasizes relationality, mutual belonging, and shared life rather than hierarchy or domination. Developed within feminist, *mujerista*, and Indigenous epistemologies, *kin-dom* portrays God's reign as familial, communal, and life-giving, foregrounding justice, care, and interdependence over power and control.

Landscapes: More than physical land, landscapes include memory, naming, power, and belonging. Colonization imposed landscapes by erasing Indigenous presence and legitimizing displacement. Changing landscapes expose hidden theological assumptions and invite the church into renewed attentiveness and responsibility.

Liminality: A condition of being in-between—between past and future, loss and possibility, stability and emergence. In theology, liminality names a formative space where identities and structures are unsettled but not yet resolved. Rather than a problem to escape, liminality is a threshold where discernment, transformation, and new forms of faithfulness can emerge.

Metanoia: A Greek term often translated as "repentance," *metanoia* more fully names a deep reorientation of mind, heart, and life. It involves turning away from distorted patterns of desire and power toward renewed participation in God's life. *Metanoia* is not mere moral correction but an ongoing conversion shaped by relationship and responsibility.

Missio Dei: The mission of God understood as God's movement toward the world rather than the church's project. In this book, participation in *missio Dei* is marked by restraint, listening, and humility, resisting urgency, control, and self-justifying forms of mission.

Missio humanitatis: The mission of humanity—an ecumenical and interfaith orientation to mission grounded in shared concern for justice and the common good. It involves working alongside people of other faiths and no faith to address shared wounds, such as climate change or poverty, as a form of Christian witness.

Musqueam (xʷməθkʷəy̓əm): A Coast Salish nation and traditional hən̓q̓əmin̓əm̓-speaking people whose ancestral and unceded territory

encompasses much of what is now Vancouver, British Columbia, with the present reserve near the mouth of the Fraser River. The name derives from məθkʷəy̓, a plant of the river estuary; xʷməθkʷəy̓əm means "place of the məθkʷəy̓," and the people are known as People of the River Plant. In this book, the Musqueam–Chinese vegetable gardens of the early twentieth century serve as a lived counter-narrative to conquest theology: land shared rather than seized, and companionship formed under conditions of mutual constraint.

Ontological: Referring to the nature of reality or what it means to *be*. In this book, "ontological" names claims about how life itself is structured, not merely how people think or act. To speak ontologically is to ask what kinds of relationships, responsibilities, and differences belong to reality itself, not simply to social arrangements.

Pentecostal listening: A communal practice of attentiveness shaped by Pentecost. Pentecostal listening emphasizes understanding without erasure, difference without hierarchy, and shared power without uniformity. It forms communities capable of sustaining disagreement while remaining in relationship.

Perichoresis (περιχώρησις, pronounced peh-ree-koh-REE-sis)**:** A theological term describing the mutual indwelling of the persons of the Trinity. In this book, *perichoresis* functions as a model for *communion-in-difference*, naming forms of life together that maintain distinction without hierarchy or erasure.

Racism (theological wound): More than personal prejudice, racism is a systemic and theological distortion that reorganizes community through hierarchy and exclusion. It wounds those who are marginalized and damages the church's capacity for faithful witness by undermining incarnation, communion, and reconciliation.

Relation beyond relation: The central theological claim of the book. It names forms of relationship that exceed dialogue, inclusion, or agreement—relations that place the church under obligation before offering comfort or clarity. These relations are asymmetrical, unresolved, and transformative.

Relational ontology: An understanding of reality in which beings do not exist in isolation but are constituted through relationships. Identity, responsibility, and meaning arise from connection rather than autonomy. In this book, relational ontology grounds intercultural theology by affirming that difference and interdependence are not obstacles to life but conditions of its flourishing.

Sallim (살림, pronounced SAH-leem)**:** A Korean term meaning "giving life" or "sustaining life," derived from *sallida* (to make alive). In this book, *sallim* names a life-giving theological practice that resists systems of domination and death by valuing the everyday, embodied work—such as caregiving, nourishment, and ecological care—that sustains shared life. It reframes justice, peace, and reconciliation as the patient work of enabling all to flourish.

Shared power: An ecclesial practice that redistributes authority rather than merely diversifying representation. Shared power reshapes leadership, decision-making, and voice as practices of mutual responsibility, accountability, and participation rather than control or dominance.

Shared woundedness: The theological condition of church and world shaped by histories of colonization, racism, and displacement. Faithful community is formed not by denying these wounds but by bearing them together as shared ground for formation.

Two Row *Wampum* Belt (Gasweñdah): A Haudenosaunee treaty symbol expressing a covenant of coexistence between Indigenous peoples and settlers. Two parallel purple rows on a white field—a canoe carrying the Haudenosaunee with their own laws and ways of life, and a ship carrying the Europeans with theirs—travel the same river side by side, neither steering the other. The white field signifies peace, friendship, and respect; the unfinished ends mark a relationship without end. In this book, it names a counter-protocol of reconciliation grounded in respect, non-domination, and ongoing relational responsibility rather than assimilation or closure.

Ubuntu: A Southern African ethical and philosophical concept often summarized as "I am because we are." *Ubuntu* emphasizes relational identity, mutual responsibility, and shared humanity. Personhood is understood as emerging through community rather than individual autonomy. In theology, *ubuntu* challenges Western individualism and supports visions of justice grounded in interdependence and care.

Unravelling: A metaphor for the church's present condition, in which inherited patterns loosen and familiar certainties give way. Unravelling is not failure but preparation, making possible reknitting, creativity, and new forms of faithful community.

Uri (우리, pronounced OO-ree)**:** A Korean term meaning "we" or "our," used to express relational belonging that precedes individual identity. *Uri* reflects a cultural imagination in which selfhood is formed through shared life, kinship, and responsibility. Theologically, *uri* challenges possessive individualism and supports communal understandings of faith, identity, and shared woundedness.

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The church finds itself between inherited certainties that no longer hold and futures not yet visible. Migration, racial reckoning, ecological crisis, and the long shadow of Christendom have unsettled what once felt stable. For many, this passage brings genuine grief. Yet what if this unravelling is not only loss, but formation?

Becoming an Intercultural Church invites the church to dwell in the tension without grasping for quick resolution. Structured around the liturgical year—from Advent's patient waiting to Pentecost's surprising witness—Hyuk Cho reimagines the church not as a centre to be restored but as a community shaped through shared woundedness, accountable presence, and companionship.

Drawing on intercultural theology, postcolonial critique, and lived pastoral experience, Cho challenges superficial inclusion and the managerial fixes that stand in for change. He exposes "crumbs theology"—the ecclesial practice of offering minimal access while protecting institutional power—and calls the church toward God's abundant banquet, where communion requires shared power, mutual vulnerability, and ethical responsibility.

Learning from Turkish *hüzün* (dignified collective sorrow), Korean *sallim* (life-affirming care), and the Haudenosaunee Two Row *Wampum* (a canoe and a ship on one river, neither steering the other), Cho offers practices for remaining with one another across difference. These are practices for resisting domination in its subtle forms and for discerning the Spirit's movement amid unfinished histories. Discussion questions make each chapter ready for congregational study.

This is not a manual for managing diversity or reviving declining institutions. It is a theology of formation—an apprenticeship in staying.

The river is moving.

Let us paddle alongside one another.

Religion/Ecumenism

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