

Vision: A Journal for Church and Theology

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Editorial

Andy Brubacher Kaethler

While completing a master's degree at Toronto School of Theology in the 1990s, I attended classes at numerous denominational colleges. On one occasion I sat beside a young priest from Angola at a Catholic college. Making small talk before the class started, I mindlessly asked, "How big is your family?" I noticed the puzzled look on his face and was immediately embarrassed by the obvious faux pas I had just committed. Priests do not marry. What an insensitive question.

I apologized for my transgression, but the priest quickly clarified that his puzzlement was not that I thought he was married and had children. As an Angolan man, he had so many siblings, cousins, aunts, uncles—not

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to mention ancestors who had died long ago—that he had no idea how to count them all.

My assumptions about what *family* means were clearly different from his.

The priest's confusion reminds us that we do not use the term *family* consistently between societies. But the term

is also used to connote different configurations of family relationships *within* a society, and these understandings are not static over time.

The myth of family

In the West in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the normative assumption has been that a family consists of a man and a woman who are married to each other for life and who procreate to have one or more children. This understanding of what constitutes a family has shaped government policy, social services, church activities, education—virtually every aspect of life.

The height of the traditional family was in the decades following World War II. There was relative peace and prosperity in the West, and social institutions proliferated. The family unit was at the center of social stability and economic growth. The television show *Leave it to Beaver* (1957–1963) reflected and promoted the stereotype of the modern, suburban family as the center and ideal of Western society.

This notion of the traditional family is a myth. It was a myth before the twentieth century. It was a myth during the twentieth century. It is a myth today.

The term *myth* here does not mean make-believe or untrue. A myth is a narrative that serves a social organizational purpose. Myths are not in themselves negative. But myths are harmful when they become dominant narratives that exclude other possibilities. The myth of the traditional family is harmful when it denigrates or excludes family configurations that do not conform to heteronormative, life-long, monogamous, procreative marriage unions.

Family is at the center of political debate and acrimony. Religious and political conservatives tend to express concern that there is an assault on the traditional family. Those



Many political debates are fought on the battleground of the family.

to the right fear progressive values and permissive practices weaken individual well being and the social structure necessary for stable political and religious institutions. Religious and political pro-

gressives are concerned that laws and practices that narrowly define family as a man and a woman and their binary children perpetuate patriarchal violence and curtail individual freedom in the expression of sexuality, gender, and love. Many political debates are fought on the battleground of the family.

Family in the Bible and church

The Bible itself provides surprisingly few examples of healthy, enduring families—at least, families that fit the modern Western myth. Dysfunction among families is frequent in Scripture. There are plenty of polygamous and polyamorous relationships. In the Bible, God works *in* families, *through* families, and regularly, *in spite of* families.

Nevertheless, family remains a central feature to individual identity, social organization, culture, and religious life. We invest considerable amounts of time, emotional energy, and finances into family and family relationships. And, as central as family is to individuals, societies, and the church, it is difficult to find a common, enduring definition of *family*. Perhaps that is a good thing.

The church has played a role in fostering positive, enduring understandings of family. It has also played a role in perpetuating ethically harmful and theologically unsound understandings. Two motivating questions

this issue of *Vision* asks are: (1) How can the church play a positive role in supporting families without relying on a narrow understanding of the ideal family unit itself? (2) What definition of *family* needs to replace the antiquated and probably-never-accurate conceptions of the traditional, nuclear family?

In this issue

Following these questions, the first three essays acknowledge and embrace the widening possibilities for family configurations in the first half of the twenty-first century. Erica Lea-Simka provides an inspired reflection on how Queer families are holy families, embodying the fullness of radical belonging. Alicia Maldonado-Zahra probes the challenges and joys of a Puerto Rican-American and Iraqi-Palestinian intercultural marriage. Emily North shares her experience of how a Mennonite-Jewish interfaith marriage can deepen and strengthen the connection of each to their faiths.

The next two pieces deal with biblical and theological considerations for founding a healthy, faithful understanding of the family. Micah Peters Unrau offers provoking insights into Jesus's use of family imagery to foster discipleship. Ben Woodward-Breckbill explores non-patriarchal ways of understanding the text of the Lord's Prayer.

The essay by Joe Kotva offers considerations of recent developments in Assistive Reproductive Technologies (ART), which bring hope and joy for women experiencing involuntary childlessness along with a myriad of moral questions.

A poem by Canadian poet D. S. Martin kindles awareness of the human yearning for relational wholeness, likening the journey of the poet toward wholeness to the child in utero seeking birth and to other evocative images.

Two essays by Canadian authors address relationships between adults and their parents. Susan Fish shares humorous reflections on her relationship with her mother, while Arthur Boers grapples with his family's history of abuse.

Continuing to address family dysfunction, Cathrin van Sintern-Dick offers insights as a family mediator into how parents in conflict can provide a stable environment for their children to grow.

One congregational prayer is included: Ruth Boehm's prayer for women and moms on Mother's Day.

We conclude this issue with two selections reprinted from the recent Institute of Mennonite Studies publication *Resistance: Confronting*

Violence, Power, and Abuse in Peace Churches (2022). Lydia Neufeld Harder and Ingrid Bettina Wolfear together process their experience of adoption during the “Sixties Scoop” and coming to terms with it later in life. Steph Chandler Burns reflects through poetry about how the image of God as a grandmother is healing for her as a Queer Mennonite.

Each contribution to this issue addresses the changing, broadening understanding of family, prompting the church to continue to foster loving, caring, and stable relationships.

About the author

Andy Brubacher Kaethler is a pastor and teacher, recently relocated from Elkhart, Indiana, to Ottawa, Ontario. Andy spent twenty years at Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary (AMBS) as a professor of Christian Formation and Culture, director of !Explore: A Theological Program for High School Youth, and co-editor of *Vision*. He recently returned to pastoral ministry at Ottawa Mennonite Church. His understanding of family deepened and broadened while raising a family with his wife and through many meaningful interactions with families of many configurations at AMBS, Belmont Mennonite Church, and beyond.


Holy families

Erica Lea-Simka

The Holy Family is a Queer family, and Queer families are holy families—not because Queer families are perfect but because our very existence communicates radical belonging.¹ One of the most powerful magnetic forces in society is the need to belong. My family belongs in Mennonite circles, Jewish circles, Queer circles, and more—all at the same time. With the power of belonging comes also the power of othering. Queer families are relatively common as more people than ever are out.² We are prophetic, truth-telling witnesses to the upside-down *kin-dom*.

Holy families in the Gospels

In Matthew 1, most commonly read during Advent, the annual anticipation of a new reality birthed from Jesus’s life, Joseph receives a divine

 **By naming Jesus, Joseph becomes his adopted father, claiming Jesus as his kin. Jesus becomes socially legitimate by Joseph claiming him.**

message telling him: “Do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.”³

By naming Jesus, Joseph becomes his adopted father, claiming Jesus as his kin. Jesus becomes socially legitimate by Joseph claiming him and is messianically legitimate by being from the line of David.⁴ However, as Matthew includes some women in the listing of Jesus’s genealogy and writes that Mary is pregnant “by the Holy Spirit,” he signals that this Jesus and this

1 Parts of this essay are inspired by a sermon I preached at Albuquerque Mennonite Church December 18, 2022, “A Very Spock Nativity.” By *queer* I mean non-conforming, unexpected, counter to social norms, especially related to people with gender and sexuality minority identities.

2 See Jeffrey M. Jones, “U.S. LGBT Identification Steady at 7.2%,” *Gallup*, February 22, 2023, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/470708/lgbt-identification-steady.aspx>.

3 Matthew 1:20b–21 (NRSV).

4 Matthew 1:1–17.

family are doing things differently. “Doing things differently” is a simple definition of *queerness*.

Scholar Warren Carter writes this: “I read Matthew’s gospel as a counternarrative. It is a work of resistance, written for a largely Jewish religious group. It ‘stands and/or speaks over against’ the status quo dominated by Roman imperial power and [religious] control. It resists these cultural structures.”⁵



In my mind this makes Joseph Queer—non-conforming, unexpected, counter to social norms.

It is precisely in Jesus’s alternative empire that men like Joseph are celebrated. Joseph acts honorably because of his faith, not in spite of it. He lives into what scholar Amy-Jill Levine calls

“higher righteousness.”⁶ She also identifies the women in the genealogy as having something in common: they lived with higher righteousness too because so much was working against them, yet they had the courage to do the surprisingly right thing. Perhaps the genealogy signals where Joseph is coming from with his decision to marry Mary and raise Jesus. Joseph comes from a long line of righteous courage.

Amy-Jill Levine also says this specifically about Joseph: “Like the unconventional figures in the genealogy, he does what he considers proper even though his action is neither legally necessary nor socially expected.”⁷ In my mind this makes Joseph Queer—non-conforming, unexpected, counter to social norms. A public model of masculinity in his day is Herod, with his cruel domination, yet Joseph chooses gentleness and service instead.

When we recognize the nonconformity of Jesus’s origin story and Joseph’s uncommon courage, we are more likely to recognize the legitimacy of other people and parents and families who are nonconforming as part of God’s larger family, too. When we recognize the legitimacy and holiness in nonconformity, we are more likely to act for justice, resisting the toxic and dangerous heteropatriarchy that keeps us all under its oppressive thumb.

5 *The Queer Bible Commentary*, edited by Deryn Guest *et al* (London: SCM, 2015), 491.

6 *Women’s Bible Commentary*, 3rd ed., edited by Carol Newsom, Sharon Ringe, and Jacqueline Lapsley (Louisville: WJK, 2012), 340.

7 *Women’s Bible Commentary*, 340.

Matthew's early listeners then and readers today are invited to see the Gospel of Matthew, literally from the beginning, as a counternarrative, an upside-down making reality that differs from the contemporary, mainstream, empire-oriented experience. Matthew sets the tone for the Gospel from the beginning and sustains this theme of unexpected non-conformity through to the end.

As Jesus is executed, Matthew describes darkness at noon and then the temple curtain torn vertically. Jesus is buried in a rich man's tomb and then returns to life. This Jesus and his people—family, disciples, and otherwise—are not like everyone else.

Queer Theologian Thomas Bohache writes, "Queer readers strike a balancing act between the straight world, which colonizes our daily lives, and our own queer imaginings, in which we are free to dream of the world as it should be, which is precisely what Matthew's community did as they came together to read or listen to stories of Jesus' alternative empire."⁸

Each of the four canonical Gospels depict Jesus as exceptionally nonconforming. Unique to the Gospel of John is the story of Jesus on the cross bringing together his mother and the "disciple whom he loved," creating a family of choice in chapter 19. Jesus reaffirms Mary and the disciple's belongingness to each other. Queer theologian Robert E. Goss compares this scene with gay men dying during the AIDS crisis. Many of these men were cast out of their families of origin, so family of choice was an absolute lifeline.⁹ Goss writes, "The Beloved Disciple and the mother of Jesus create a new family of choice, accepting responsibility for continuing the ministry of Jesus' coming out in the moment of death. Here in the last moments of his life, Jesus establishes a family of choice, based on his homoerotic relationship with the Beloved Disciple. Many mainline and fundamentalist Christian churches play the role of the Romans, crucifying Christ, and attempt to destroy [queer] families of choice."¹⁰

Matthew's early listeners then and readers today are invited to see the Gospel of Matthew, literally from the beginning, as a counternarrative.

8 *Queer Bible Commentary*, 492.


9 *Take Back the Word: A Queer Reading of the Bible*, edited by Robert Goss and Mona West (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2000), 212–14.

10 *Queer Bible Commentary*, 562–63.

Holy families today

Today, the church local and global is invited to be family of choice in the Cosmic Christ family rather than perpetuating hostility against holy families of any variety. All people, especially Christians, are invited to become supporters as surrogate aunts and grandfathers, siblings and children, to one another. Any family that belongs to God's family is to be welcomed within the church family.

Forming familial bonds by simply saying so, claiming one another, was enough for Jesus and the Holy Family from beginning to end and should



Most Queer people and families do not experience belongingness in the church, especially in local congregations that are charged with being family to those who need a sibling, a parent, or a faith partner.

be enough for all Christians. When people say they belong together, others are not to question the commitment but to respect this truthful reality. To belong is sacred, and to be claimed is divine.

Unfortunately, most Queer people and families do not experience belongingness in the church, especially in local congregations that are charged with being family to those who need a sibling, a parent, or a faith partner. Christians are invited to approach the Holy Family with wonder—wonder at the ever-expanding possibilities of family and belonging. So it is with Queer families in the contemporary church.

To be Queer is both to question conformity and exist in nonconformity. Are not Christians exhorted to avoid conforming to the pattern of this world but to be transformed by the renewing of our minds?¹¹ As Queer families push the church's imagination of family and belonging, everyone is invited to what Rev. Dr. Wil Gafney calls "sanctified imagination."¹²

Rather than perpetuating a WASP-y Standard North American Family idealized model of families, the Bible itself recognizes and in some cases elevates a much larger range of family than contemporary American mainstream imagination.¹³ Contemporary faith communities that call

11 See Romans 12:2.

12 Wil Gafney, "Of God, Men, and Kings, *Womanists Wading in the Word*, February 6, 2018, www.wilgafney.com/2018/02/06/of-god-men-and-kings/.

13 WASP stands for White Anglo-Saxon Protestant. Feminist historian Stephanie Coontz discusses the term *Standard North American Family* at length in her work—referring

themselves Christian have a divine imperative to enthusiastically welcome diverse types of families.

Diversity comes in the form of gender configuration (adults of any gender combination), orientation configuration (adults of any sexual orientation combination), generational configuration (grandparents raising grandchildren, multi-generational households, etc.), various abilities and disabilities, families that include children of any age or no children, and multi-racial and intercultural families. Family is a particular group of individuals who are committed to doing life together—whatever life looks like and whatever family looks like.

Conclusion

In the Gospels, New Testament epistles, and throughout history, Christians have been encouraged to see the local and cosmic faith community as a type of family, especially during times of trouble. Lord knows we live in a troubling time, which is all the more reason for receiving the wisdom of previously suppressed voices and lives.

Love, commitment, courage, and humility make a family—whether a nuclear family or kin-dom family. While this runs counter to the logic that egg plus sperm equals child and therefore the providers of those parts are parents, the logic that love makes a family is sound in experience and in practice, not least of which is Joseph’s love for Mary and Jesus, Jesus’s love for the Beloved Disciple, and the Beloved Disciple’s commitment to Mary.

The church is invited to say yes to love, yes to non-conformity, and yes to participation in the liberating work inspired by Jesus who lives on in us, especially through our courage to resist injustice and to respond to vulnerable people. What a witness to rigid empire the church could be if we celebrate holy families alongside the Holy Family.

About the author

Erica Lea-Simka is a Christian minister with over ten years of experience serving as a missionary and pastor. She has served primarily Baptist congregations in Wyoming, Texas, North Carolina, and Washington, DC. She currently serves as pastor of Albuquerque Mennonite Church in Albuquerque, New Mexico.

to one man and one woman, married with children, sharing one household and following normative North American gender roles.

Making it work

Intercultural and interfaith marriage

Alicia Maldonado-Zahra

There's a beauty of intercultural relationships that is often admired but rarely discussed beyond the superficial. For the last five years, I have been married to a man—and married into his family—that adds a new cultural dimension to my already intercultural family. While I have navigated cultural differences my entire life, I have learned a new way of being with others who are unlike me. I have also learned that, though we are bound together by marriage, being family is more a choice that requires intentionality, grace, and patience.

Learning about my culture by encountering my husband's

As a Puerto Rican in the United States, I used to imagine two marital options that fit into the narratives of my family and the dominating culture: Puerto Rican or white. Anything beyond that seemed unreasonable and unlikely—until I met Omar. Born in Iraq with Palestinian ethnicity to a Muslim family, Omar—my now husband—and I had an “on again, off again” year and a half of dating before deciding on marriage. As I reflect, I cannot help but chuckle at the lack of conversations about our differing cultures due to being hung up on our contrasting religions. Even though I read books with topics regarding conversations you need to have before marriage, none of them considered vast cultural differences like those between Omar and me.

I am a Puerto Rican who was born in Southwest Florida into a Christian family. Though I spent much of my life in a variety of different cultural settings, I had not engaged with many Arabs or Muslims. I had been coopted into believing that white people are better. Because of this, I rejected the ethnicity, language, culture, and traditions that are inherently a part of me. After spending a few months in Palestine, I realized that I knew more about Omar's history than my own. I made a commitment to myself that I would do better by myself and my ancestors and began to unlearn the dominant ideology of my youth that was rooted in white supremacy. I learned the history of the colonization of Puerto Rico, how

to make cultural dishes like *arroz con gandules*, the Spanish language of my people, and so much more. It was in this journey that I began to develop a deeper understanding of and appreciation for “culture.”

My journey gave me the understanding that culture is far more than one’s ethnic or racial identity and religion. It gave me the freedom to be deeply curious about who Omar is and the many things that shape him, as well as the ability to navigate our differences in a way that encouraged conversation and adaptability. He and I are nowhere near perfect in embracing these differences. We have experienced challenges and found areas of growth in the midst of the overwhelming joys of being in an intercultural marriage.

Challenges of intercultural marriage

Like most other marriages, the first year or two of our marriage was riddled with conflict. There were many times that I questioned whether our union was done out of an idealistic version of the other or false love. Either way, we made a commitment for better or worse. Our biggest struggles were implementing boundaries, sanctifying our marriage, and communicating in healthy ways in conflict.

I heard a therapist say recently that implementing boundaries is not necessarily about *telling* others how you want them to be but about *showing* them. This was not easy, as we had to do it with some of our closest family and friends. This brought such intense conflict that communication

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ceased for long periods of time. Although this was not our preference, Omar and I had to learn how to lean into the preciousness of our union without letting such issues interfere.

This was not easy. One of the most beneficial changes we made was giving ourselves space. Space is not meant for everyone, and it does not fix everything.

However, giving ourselves space made it clear that access to us was limited, and the time—while it is everything—needing to be tended to with love. Herein lies another challenge of merging our cultures: being together.

As an outsider to Arab Muslim lifestyles, I continue to find it challenging to gain my new family’s trust. Omar and I have had many discussions and conflicts regarding our families, which are quite different from

each other. Now that we are adults, my siblings and I have developed new relationships with our parents as friends. While they have always been expressive with their love and support, I had not known my parents the way I do now. There is a recognition of and respect for our decisions, and guidance is offered when we desire it. My appreciation for this phase

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of our parent-child relationship has ballooned and altered my expectations of others when engaging with my husband and me.

Even as I knew that not all families and peoples are the same, I still did not expect the hovering hand of control that my in-laws had over my husband. The fact that he married someone of a different ethnicity, religion, and country of origin was worrisome to them for

many years. On numerous occasions, they asked Omar when I would convert; demanded that, should I have children, they would be a certain identity, thus following those norms; stated that we would be divorced in a few years; or expressed fear that he would become Christian. Because of these concerns, fears, and perception of me and our relationship, there were plenty of occasions that I did not want to talk to them, much less visit them. For many years I did not care about how my distance impacted our relationship, until I had the realization that I needed to show them who I am and who we are together.

Embracing family across cultural divides

It took time, but I finally felt comfortable enough to be intentional and try my hardest to be family with my in-laws. Over the last year or two, I have made it a habit to regularly send my mother-in-law pictures and call to check in. Although I do not speak Arabic well, I have been learning, while my mother-in-law learns English. They share their recipes with me and make my favorites for me to bring home. It has been challenging to take regular trips to visit them—as they live ten hours away—but we go a few times a year for about a week without an agenda. In these visits we always try to take them gifts, whether it is a picture of us, a hat from a local store, or souvenirs from our travels abroad. On our most recent visit, we decided to get them a throw blanket for movie nights in the living room—a regular occurrence after dinner. I was pleasantly surprised when

my father-in-law immediately began to enjoy it. Though there were only six of us in the house, he made it clear that I had chosen the blanket for him; it was his and no one else's. I remember that with a different kind of joy, as the relationship between my father-in-law and me has been especially contentious.

Even accounting for the more obvious cultural differences between us—ethnicity, religion, and birthplace—I struggled to understand why my husband's family had a hard time accepting me. I was reminded that culture is not just the obvious but also includes language, food, communication and conflict styles, emotional expression, body language, clothing, unspoken rules, and more. When culture is broken down in such a way, I can recognize why they may have been reluctant to consider me one of their own. It was an unpleasant realization that I had been—and likely continue to be at times—disrespectful to them and their culture.

Respecting each other across cultural differences

One day Omar and I had a vital conversation, after a few days of conflict, about *respect*. It may seem odd that there needed to be a dialogue about this specific word, but we were both in a place of realization about the different and conflicting ways in which we and our families define re-

I was going about this in all the wrong ways; I was pushing them away, making them not want to know me.

spect in communication and behavior. Up to that point in the merging of our families, I had worn shorts and tank tops around my in-laws, I had rejected or not participated in certain traditions, I openly questioned Islam and Muhammad, I argued with my father-in-law about how my potential daughter would

one day dress and what she would be allowed to do, and so on. I was open to being unlike them and their culture. I believe that Omar's parents have always had a desire to know me deeply and thus did not have a will to silence or suppress me in any way. However, I was going about this in all the wrong ways; I was pushing them away, making them not want to know me.

Though I do not have any intentions, most of the time, of causing conflict, I have typically been unconcerned with being disruptive, which is in itself conflictual. I have learned that there is a way to have discussions and share my beliefs and opinions that are respectful. In defining *respect*, we concluded that there needs to be adaptability based on our

settings. My parents, having come from oppressive and abusive families, were determined to not only nourish our independence but also our critical thinking skills. They valued and encouraged asking questions, standing up for oneself, and standing against injustices and controlling behaviors. My parents did teach me respect, especially for my elders, but they also gave me the freedom to challenge, or question, things that I did not understand or was unsure about. Their childrearing, in addition to my character, has made me a confrontational person. When used correctly and in the appropriate situations, a confrontational personality can be beneficial. With age I am becoming aware of when and how to use this part of my personality.

Omar and I still struggle with a variety of things as an interethnic, intercultural, and interfaith couple. Big emotions and disagreement are not unique to us; we have just had to work hard at traversing challenging situations. The work we have put in has made it easier to enjoy each other and our loved ones.

The benefits of intercultural marriage

While I have focused on the challenges of intercultural marriage, there is also an abundance of reasons why Omar and I work. Like many others, I had a few prerequisites for the man that I would marry: he had to be (1) a



Though I am the follower of Christ in our relationship, my husband has given me another example of what it means to be like Christ.

God-fearing and humble person, (2) caring towards his family, (3) a hard worker with solid goals, (4) loving toward others, and (5) humorous. Though I am the follower of Christ in our relationship, he has given me another example of what it means to be like Christ. This has encouraged me to be generous, patient, kind, and hopeful. Both of us are close to our families, but he has shown

me how to appreciate mine in a way that overcomes faults and flaws. He works all day to make things happen and provide for us. And the genuine love he gives to people, animals, plants, and all of life is palpable.

There is a plethora of other reasons, for both of us, that allows us to maintain unity. In addition to exchanges and experiences that challenged our sense of self, we have had, and will continue to have, conversations that are filled with learnings about the other and so much laughter. We share a love for travel and indulging in cross-cultural encounters. We have

learned to do this with a mindfulness of our intention and impact. We have a curiosity for random things that lead us to discussing UFO's, wild-life and plants, sustainability, true crime, food, religion, human needs, and so much more.

Knowing that we have a lifetime of both joys and hardships, we have a mutual set of values that maintain a healthy relationship, which include *agape* love, respect and dignity, thoughtfulness and compassion, and an equal amount of conviction and curiosity. We falter at times and need to continue bettering ourselves in the name of God—for God and each other. Being in an intercultural marriage has shown us a way of doing just that. While personal growth is possible in a monoculture relationship and setting, there is something about discomfort that forces people to

step out of themselves—if they are willing. Extending oneself in this way causes a depth of change that is mental, emotional, and spiritual. Sometimes one can even expand physically if there is delicious food to enjoy in the discomfort.

Besides what it can do for a single person, couple, or immediate family, there is something bigger that happens in intercultural marriages. By knowing Omar and his family, and them knowing

me, I have seen a shift in our automatic assumptions and judgments about those unlike us. This was not immediate, but with time and the right way of communicating, these changes do happen. With change comes the power of not just intercultural competency but also the intentional inclusion of the “other.” From my perspective as a Christian, I can see and experience the love of Christ being extended *because of* and *regardless of* my intercultural and interfaith marriage.

From my perspective as a Christian, I can see and experience the love of Christ being extended *because of* and *regardless of* my intercultural and interfaith marriage.

Conclusion

Being in an intercultural relationship is not easy, but it is not merely a challenge. It pushes and pulls a person to be uncomfortable, while simultaneously creating or maintaining a sense of stability of oneself. It encourages personal and communal growth that outpaces the that of monocultural settings in authenticity, curiosity, understanding, empathy, communication, and more. It is a beautiful thing to reflect and recognize

the magnitude of impact one friendship, marriage, or experience can have in creating a more just and right individual and community.

About the author

Alicia Maldonado-Zahra is part of the second generation of her Puerto Rican family to be born in the United States. Originally from Fort Myers, Florida, she now resides in South Bend, Indiana, with her husband, many animals, and her parents—who are their neighbors. She is a graduate of Hesston College and Eastern Mennonite University, where she received a bachelor's degree in social work and another in global development. Alicia is currently pursuing a Master of Arts in theology and peace studies from Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary. She works with the Intercultural Competency and Undoing Racism department at the seminary, collaborates with her church community in leading their youth, and manages her conflict transformation business, Prodigal Processes.

The flourishing of interfaith marriages

Emily North

While the number of interfaith marriages in the United States is growing, many faith communities do not believe that being part of an interfaith family is a way to enhance or strengthen one's marriage or faith. As one who is in an interfaith marriage, I have found the opposite to be true. Our

Our interfaith marriage has enhanced our relationship, our understanding of each other's religion, and our own personal faith journeys.

interfaith marriage has enhanced our relationship, our understanding of each other's religion, and our own personal faith journeys.

Like any dynamic in intimate relationships, disagreements or differences have the potential of bringing two people closer together or pushing them apart. Issues like how one approaches money, whether to have kids, or parenting styles

can be divisive and break up a relationship. Because one's faith is an area that reflects core values and often unconscious assumptions and understandings about how to live one's life, being married to someone with a different faith can either enhance a relationship or end it. My husband, Ben, and I have chosen to allow space for different rituals and traditions to be present in our marriage. Rather than seeing them as threatening, we have accepted and learned from each other within our different faiths. This has led us to appreciate and deepen our connection to our faiths.

Concerns with interfaith marriage

From the beginning Ben and I were open about our different religious backgrounds—me Mennonite Christian and Ben Jewish. Even in those conversations we felt more similarities than differences when it came to values such as honesty and integrity, compassion for those who are marginalized, community, and living simply. We wanted to understand each other's perspective and found that while we did not speak the same religious language the things that were most important to us were present in both our backgrounds. It was not a threat to my own faith because I could

find so many similarities between our two faiths: valuing service, repairing the brokenness in the world, and the interdependence that we have with other people and the natural world.

While our families had questions about our relationship, they were for different reasons. Ben's family wondered if Mennonites were some kind of fringe religious sect. They were culturally Jewish, attending temple on the High Holy Days and having

My family was concerned that I might abandon my faith and no longer value what it means to be a Mennonite.

a Seder meal at Passover, but were not observant in a daily or weekly way. Ben's parents had family who had experienced the violent pogroms in Europe, and the Holocaust was very real for them as they lost family members in concentration camps. Their cultural history was important to them, and their faith was tied up in that identity. They were curious how I would fit into their family and what my attitude would be toward their Jewish identity.

My family was much more hesitant about supporting an interfaith relationship. They were concerned that I might abandon my faith and no longer value what it means to be a Mennonite. I grew up in a very religious home where faith was central to our lives. We said daily prayers at meals and went to church at least twice a week. Mennonites were suspicious of not only other faiths but also other Christian denominations. Early Anabaptists experienced persecution and death. When they refused to go to war, they experienced derision and persecution from the government as well as other Christians. Beliefs, values, and lifestyle were all connected in what it means to be Mennonite. They feared that having a spouse who had a different faith could be a strong influence to no longer choose to be Mennonite.


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Challenges of interfaith marriage

Instead of experiencing each other's faith as a detriment to our own, we grew in our appreciation for each other's experience and sense of connection to our cultural identity and faith. I continued to attend Mennonite churches, and Ben continued to see himself as Jewish. We grew to understand that there are different kinds of Jews and Mennonites. Our stereotypes and assumptions did not hold up in the context of getting to know each other.

The challenges we experienced regarding faith were mostly from forces outside of our relationship. After our three children were born, we moved to Harrisonburg, Virginia, where my parents and one of my sisters lived. In this conservative, mostly Christian community, Christianity was always present even in public, secular places. Prayers would be said before public meetings, and there were assumptions about beliefs and comfort with Christian language.

In this community there was no room for other faiths and certainly not interfaith marriages. The influence of a more conservative theology

 **The challenges we experienced regarding faith were mostly from forces outside of our relationship.**

was significant. Such theology interprets New Testament scriptures as being clear that interfaith marriage is not permitted by God. The New Testament passage that is most often used to argue against interfaith marriage is 2 Corinthians 6:14. It advises that you should not be mismatched with unbelievers. It equates

nonbelievers with lawlessness and darkness and believers with righteousness and light. But this is not the only way to interpret this passage.

Given the context of the whole chapter, Paul is not talking about marriage in this passage. Instead, he is referring to the difficulty of being part of this Christian community. Those who were not part of it did not understand it and were not willing to participate in the same way. Paul asked the church in Corinth to not reject his teachings and be influenced by the larger Greco-Roman culture and religion. These unbelievers more likely are false prophets or those who were against the teachings of Paul. For me, this passage is not relevant to an intimate relationship where there is openness to and acceptance of each other's faith.

Living in this conservative community that assumed everyone was comfortable with religious language or prayers at public events, we found even secular events to be more and more uncomfortable. I learned that I needed to recognize when I just went along with Christian practices in these settings even though not everyone was Christian. I needed to challenge the assumption that everyone present was Christian or should feel comfortable with Christian language. We were not concerned about what specific scriptures said. Rather, we wanted to be consistent with our values that were inclusive and welcoming. In our marriage there was not animosity or belittling of each other's faith. We allowed room for our

perspectives and practices. We did not expect each other to change what we believed.

Navigating interfaith marriage

Interfaith marriages were steadily on the rise in the 1990s when we got married. Our friend group consisted of several couples who were Christian and Jewish or marriages in which one spouse was agnostic or atheist and the other adhered to a faith. We were fortunate to get connected to an interfaith peace camp for our children to attend that resourced the areas Muslim, Jewish, and Christian communities. This helped our children find a common language and a way to think about religion that celebrated the similarities and differences instead of seeing religions as antagonistic towards each other. We found two other interfaith families, and we observed Passover and celebrated Hanukkah together. Some of us went to a Mennonite church with our children, while others found other ways to connect their faith identities as families. Those were important rituals for our children to learn about Judaism and feel connected to Ben's faith. They also experienced connection to my faith in our church family. We valued the support of families in similar situations.

To be in an interfaith marriage means that while we had different experiences growing up in terms of religious story and ritual, those differences are deeply enriching and do not diminish our own faiths because we share fundamental values for how we live our lives and understand the world. Instead of seeing our religious differences as competing or at odds with each other, we choose to see the commonalities and challenge each other to live with integrity and be consistent with our shared values. There is not just one way to arrive at the same way to live.

Welcoming interfaith families in our churches

As the number of interfaith couples continues to increase in the United States, there are more interfaith families showing up in churches. I have found that there are two important aspects to welcoming interfaith families into Christian congregations. One aspect is how to interact with the family or couple; the other is to help the congregation understand and interact with other faiths. Telling a family that the non-Christian spouse is welcome and going no further are empty words. The family and the congregation miss out on learning about how to understand and appreciate a different religion's beliefs and practices.

Pastors should do research to understand a different religion from the other religion's point of view, not just what Christians are saying about that religion. An interfaith family will not feel welcome if there is a theology or message of exclusivity or bias against other religions. Pastors should

Pastors and congregations should show hospitality and acceptance to interfaith families as they would any other family.

participate in interfaith gatherings in their communities if those resources are present. This gives pastors an opportunity to interact with and learn from other religious leaders in their community.

Pastors and congregations should show hospitality and acceptance to interfaith families as they would any other family. Allow them to participate at whatever level they feel comfortable. Do

not treat the non-Christian as the expert on their religion or expect them to speak for all people of their religion. Check in with them from time to time to see how they are experiencing worship and congregational life. Sincerely ask for their perspective.

It is important to take antisemitism and anti-Muslim theology and rhetoric seriously. Pastors should be careful how they talk about other religions and their assumptions about them. If a congregation holds a Seder meal, they should learn what it means for Jews to observe it and publicly honor it as a Jewish ritual. This is an important opportunity to understand and avoid appropriating Jewish rituals by making them "Christian."


Christianity can be biased against other religions. The great commission that exhorts Christians to tell the good news to all people has been traditionally understood as a mandate to convert all people to Christianity. Other religions are seen as inferior and misguided. That mentality does not give space for appreciation and an attitude of learning from other religions. Congregations need to hear this understanding of the great commission challenged overtly from the pulpit. They need to hear sermons that wrestle with what it means to claim one's identity as a Christian and not feel threatened by other religions or feel a need to convert them.

Pastors need to recognize the antisemitism present in some expressions of Christianity and in their larger community. Some traditional interpretations of Christian scripture became more problematic when seen through the eyes of the spouse who is Jewish. They should study how different biblical passages—especially in the Old Testament or Hebrew

Scripture—are talked about. Many Christians talk about Jesus rebuking the Jews for their treatment of those in need or for their legalistic rules, when he was speaking only to religious leaders and their specific attitudes and not to all Jews or Judaism. When pastors put in the effort to understand this dynamic, interfaith families are more likely to know they are supported and included in that congregation.

Conclusion

My faith has been strengthened by my relationship with my Jewish husband. When you develop your faith in the context of family or others who share your faith, you often do not have to articulate in a fundamental way what your beliefs are or why you believe them. There are common definitions, language, and imagery that are “understood” within that group. As



My faith has been strengthened by my relationship with my Jewish husband.

I described Christianity to my husband from my experience, his questions challenged me to articulate what I believed in a way that made sense to someone who knows Christianity only through broader cultural references. I cannot use

shortcuts or assume that he knows what I mean when I talk about the beatitudes as how to follow Jesus, for instance. As someone who grew up in the church, I had not described, for example, what it meant to be pure in heart or experience blessing from being poor in spirit to someone who has never heard that language. I just “knew” its meaning. Other theological concepts were challenging as well. I had to ask how I would clearly explain what the trinity is or other uniquely Christian concepts. This helped me see what the most important parts of my faith were and be clear for myself and for my husband what my faith is.

This work is not easy or without bumps. In my attempts to understand Judaism, I will always look at it through a Christian lens that adds layers of meaning that do not necessarily match my husband’s. How he was taught to understand biblical stories is different from how I was taught. Instead of jumping to the conclusion that I understand his perspective, I have learned to listen and see the multiple ways to interpret or get meaning from his interpretation. When he makes observations about Christianity that do not reflect my beliefs, I am able to expand his understanding of different beliefs that Christians hold.

My theology sees the whole world as sacred; it does not divide the world between sacred and profane. God has acted and continues to act

through all our experiences and in all people. Being willing to learn from another religion is just one aspect of that openness and refusing to judge one as good and the other bad. We both are working to bring reverence to and see the good in our whole lives—relationships, work, and family—and this transcends our different religious backgrounds.

All marriages require a lot of work and good communication. Ben and I have had many conversations about our beliefs. We experience that having an interfaith marriage can work as it strengthens both our faith identity and our relationship.

About the author

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Jesus's surprising embrace of family

Familialism, family, and discipleship in the Gospels

Micah Peters Unrau

Introduction

North American Christians seeking religious revival can find familial language in Scripture a compelling starting point. Shedding an old family and stepping into a new one is a powerful idea for those desiring radical community, and it is an idea Jesus seems to promote at length. It is concerning, however, that encouraging followers to separate from their existing families is also a tactic abusive leaders can use to isolate vulnerable people. Is this what Jesus was doing when he said, “Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters . . . cannot be my disciple”?¹ On their own, these words can become manipulative, and Jesus’s teachings on family have indeed been weaponized by exploitative cults.² Given the damaging potential of misinterpreting Jesus’s message, clarifying the relationship between Jesus, discipleship, and family is crucial.

In order to understand Jesus’s emphasis on discipleship as a new family, we have to consider the culture of familialism that shaped first-century Judea. Family’s place at the center of socioeconomic life in Jesus’s time and place means family imagery in his context promotes engagement in a new, public form of community, not a retreat into an isolated group. Jesus explicitly endorses connections with existing kin, except when those connections directly interfere with the demands of mission.

Family and Jesus’s context

For many North American readers, passages on family in the Gospels do not stand out as uniquely important relative to Jesus’s other teachings. After all, in much of the West family is but one institution around which life

1 Luke 14:26. Unless otherwise stated, all biblical references are from the NRSV.

2 See further discussion in Mark L. Strauss, *Jesus Behaving Badly: The Puzzling Paradoxes of a Man from Galilee* (Downer’s Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2015), 109–110.

is patterned, and it is rarely the primary means by which an individual defines themselves. In the world of first-century Judea, however, kinship was an essential framework for understanding reality, from the largest structures of society to the core of one's identity. Members of Jesus's audience

Kinship systems had a more prominent role as social and economic structures in Jesus's context than they do in present-day North America

and the first audiences of the Gospels lived and sometimes died for this all-encompassing familialist orientation.

Kinship systems had a more prominent role as social and economic structures in Jesus's context than they do in present-day North America. Family or household vocabulary in ancient Jewish society expanded beyond the nuclear two-generation model, referring not

only to several generations of family members but also to household slaves and personal property. Strategic marriages bound these mega-households to each other into increasingly higher levels of larger social bodies, and these familial bonds and patterns of inheritance formed the average Jew's main political and economic network. Family was a primary metaphor for understanding all alliances, including ones North Americans would not consider familial.³ Members of a neighbourhood, for example, would often associate with and treat each other as family members, sharing in life events as though one household.⁴ Even relationship with God was expressed through the medium of family, as with the promise of offspring at the centre of the Abrahamic covenant.⁵

Pervasive familialism in Jesus's cultural context puts kinship systems at the heart of both socioeconomic interaction and self-conception. Family represented most forms of interpersonal support, and interpersonal support was in turn interpreted through familial language. Mentions of kinship in the Gospels, then, must be read with the household's extensive sociopolitical significance in mind.

3 For more on the observations in this paragraph, see Bruce Malina, *The Social World of Jesus and the Gospels* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 50, 53; Lina Toth, "Back to the Roots: From the Old Testament to Jesus," in *Singleness and Marriage after Christendom: Being and Doing Family* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2021), 26–40.

4 Malina, *Social World*, 53.

5 Romans 4:18–20.

Discipleship and the new family

Locating Jesus in a familialist context sheds new light on his teachings about discipleship as life in a new family. Instead of drawing on a private sentimentality suitable to the pop spirituality of today, comparing discipleship to family evokes a transformation of society and self. Likewise, many of Jesus's more explicit teachings about social transformation

The association between discipleship and societal familialism is key for interpreting Jesus's use of family language.

contain culturally relevant references to family structures. This association between discipleship and societal familialism is key for interpreting Jesus's use of family language.

Some images Jesus uses to describe discipleship are conspicuously familial. For instance, throughout the Gospels he refers to God as a Father to him and

his disciples.⁶ While there are undertones of familiarity and closeness in Jesus's use of *Father*, it should not be lost that a first-century Judean father bears socioeconomic responsibilities for his household and connected households. A patriarch and his family cannot simply withdraw from wider society into the private sphere, but they must live as an integrated social body.⁷ Likewise, when Jesus calls his disciples "mother" and "brothers," he is referring to participation in family as a highly visible institution.⁸ The privacy with which present-day Western family life is conducted can lead readers to focus on the nuclear intimacy of these images, but considering a family's political significance for Jesus's audience brings out a vision of a new social order rather than a secluded commune.

The more subtly familial themes in the rebirth imagery of John's Gospel also step into the societal sphere when read within a familialist context. Being born again can be interpreted as an individual, internal transformation, but Jesus also connects this rebirth to the kingdom of God, the new societal order in which God's will is done.⁹ He seems to anticipate the question, *What kind of family will you be born into?* and gives God's Reign and life in the Spirit in response. This is no mere personal

6 Mark 11:25; Matthew 5:44-45; 6:32; 10:20; Luke 2:49; 11:2; 12:32; John 2:16; 5:17; 16:27.

7 See Toth, "Back to the Roots."

8 Mark 3:34-35; Matthew 5:23-24; 12:48-50; Luke 8:21.

9 John 3:3-5.

growth, but it is adoption into a new cosmic household alongside fellow disciples.¹⁰ Like Jesus's use of *Father* and *mother, brothers, and sisters*, the rebirth image is distinctly familial, and when understood through Jesus's experience of the household, it does not evoke anything like a transition into isolation.

Sometimes the societal dimensions of Jesus's behaviour and teachings are evident to present-day readers, but the familial connotations are what is lost. Jesus's conversations with women traverse a cultural gender boundary integral to preserving familial honour via female purity.¹¹ When women like the Syrophoenician/Canaanite and the Samaritan at the well question Jesus and Jesus responds, they transgress the cultural value of female submission thought to regulate their mobility and in turn lines of family inheritance.¹² The sexism that

Jesus antagonizes by engaging with and praising women's faith is a generally societal feature, but it is also rooted in concerns for family structures specifically.

In that same vein, many of the meek members of society whose empowerment Jesus proclaims—slaves, eunuchs, and children—are located within the family. Jesus calls disciples to emulate

the lowliest members not just of broader society but of the household specifically, once again speaking to social realities and discipleship in familial terms.¹³

Reading the Gospels with an eye to familialism blows the family images in Jesus's teachings wide open. No longer is family a symbol conveying withdrawal into intimate solitude, but it represents a visible body with tremendous influence on society. It becomes clear that the present-day Western association between family and privacy is what makes Jesus's teachings about new family potential weapons for seducing cult followers into isolation. By discussing discipleship as life in a new family, Jesus pro-

Many of the meek members of society whose empowerment Jesus proclaims—slaves, eunuchs, and children—are located within the family.

10 Strauss, *Jesus Behaving Badly*, 120.

11 Malina, *Social World*, 53–54, 116; Carolyn Osiek and David L. Balch, *Families in the New Testament World: Households and House Churches* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 218.


12 Malina, *Social World*, 116; Mark 7:24–30; Matthew 15:21–28; John 4:10–12.

13 Osiek and Balch, *Families in the New Testament World*, 135, 188, 218–19.

claims transformation within the context of society, not seclusion from the public eye.

Leaving the family of this world?

The most potentially disturbing of Jesus's teachings on family are his calls to leave family behind: "Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple."¹⁴ While

 **There are several examples of Jesus showing respect for this-world family and calling others to do the same.**

Jesus requires followers to relativize their connections to this-world families in commitment to God, rejecting those families outright is not a necessity. Jesus repeatedly demonstrates deep concern for this-world family, and even when he challenges his own family, he does so

due to particular conflicts between his mission and his relatives' expectations, conflicts about which he in turn warns his disciples.

There are several examples of Jesus showing respect for this-world family and calling others to do the same. When Luke describes a young Jesus's disobedience in the temple at Jerusalem, he assures the audience that Jesus obeyed his parents thereafter, tempering himself for their sake.¹⁵ In John, Jesus shows care for his mother's wishes at the Cana wedding. Even at his crucifixion, he ensures she will receive care from the Beloved Disciple, fulfilling his duties as her son and highlighting how his two families can co-exist.¹⁶

Jesus's love of this-world family is reaffirmed in his defences of the Mosaic Law to honour parents.¹⁷ That he invokes this law in critique of the Pharisees' filial neglect suggests that he not only sees faithfulness and family as compatible, but he rebukes those who preach the abandonment of family for religious commitment.¹⁸

The compatibility of this-world family and faithfulness is further displayed through Jesus's disciples. The first four people Jesus calls in Mark

¹⁴ Luke 14:26.

¹⁵ Luke 2:51; F. Scott Spencer, *What Did Jesus Do? Gospel Profiles of Jesus' Personal Conduct* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2003), 35; Strauss, *Jesus Behaving Badly*, 112.

¹⁶ Spencer, *What Did Jesus Do?*, 39, 42.

¹⁷ Mark 7:9-12; Matthew 15:36.

¹⁸ See Spencer, *What Did Jesus Do?*, 26, for further discussion.

are biological brothers, and their bonds to one another are not dissolved. Moreover, while James and John do walk away from their father, nothing indicates that Simon-Peter and Andrew emotionally part from their households. Mentions of Peter's mother-in-law suggest that he is married, or if he is a widower, he continues looking after his wife's family, even after leaving behind his occupation as a fisherman.¹⁹ These examples point to a Jesus who makes room for disciples to appropriately support their existing families as they follow him.

Despite this family-friendly tendency, when familial priorities interfere with his mission, Jesus and his this-world family do clash. His most explicit familial conflict occurs in Mark 3, when he is accused of madness and his relatives attempt to restrain him.²⁰ Almost immediately after this, while in someone's home Jesus hears his mother and brothers wish to

Despite Jesus's family-friendly tendency, when familial priorities interfere with his mission, Jesus and his this-world family do clash.

see him, but he turns to his followers and calls those who do the will of God his true family.²¹ Jesus's new mention of a "true family" marks a new boundary between him and his biological relatives. He distinguishes his families this way not because his mission is intrinsically anti-this-world family, but because at this point his this-world family has

shown they are more preoccupied with the risk of household shame than Jesus's ministry. The distinction is accentuated by the family's position outside the house. Jesus's true family, the family that embraces him, is the crowd gathered around him.²²

Other instances of Jesus distancing himself from family identity are outcomes of deviating from his place in a familialist society. In Matthew, Mark, and Luke, there is a mutual forsaking between Jesus and his home community, Nazareth—a community that, as has been discussed, would have understood itself in familial terms. When Jesus takes up a ministry whose duties exceed his given place within the household, Jesus's neigh-

19 Stephen Ahearne-Kroll, "Who Are My Mother and My Brothers?" *Family Relations and Family Language in the Gospel of Mark*, *The Journal of Religion* 18, no. 1. (2001): 10; Mark 1:30; Matthew 8:14.

20 Mark 3:20–21.

21 Mark 3:31–35; Strauss, *Jesus Behaving Badly*, 113.

22 Ahearne-Kroll, "Who Are My Mother and My Brothers?," 14.

bourhood, which is part of the structure he is violating, rejects him.²³ Similarly, in being declared *Son of God* and *King of Israel* in John 1:49, Jesus has his familial title, *Jesus, son of Joseph from Nazareth*, subdued.²⁴ These conflicts between Jesus and his familial identity exist not because

Jesus's commands for disciples to relativize this-world family do not translate into absolutely rejection.

Jesus hates his biological family but because he deviates from social structures that happen to be familial in his context.

Likewise, Jesus's commands for disciples to relativize this-world family do not translate into absolute rejection. Hyperbole is a frequent technique in Jesus's teaching, and literalistic readings

of provocative language like "hate" in Luke 14:26 are suspicious.²⁵ One way to contextualize the "hate" hyperbole is by reading it next to Jesus's demands to follow him without burying or saying goodbye to one's relatives.²⁶ Mark Strauss notes that Jesus's comments on family burials and farewells evoke Elisha's drawn-out preparation for discipleship following Elijah's call, interpreting Jesus's phrasing to convey how much more urgent his cause is than Elijah's.²⁷

Another way Jesus talks about relativizing this-world family is in parallel to taking up the cross and giving up one's life.²⁸ To a familialist-oriented reader, the parallel placement of these sacrifices highlights the death-like consequences of leaving one's household for one's social security and sense of self. Importantly, however, like giving up one's life, relinquishing this-world family is not something every disciple will do. As Stephen P. Ahearne-Kroll puts it, cutting ties with one's household is "not a prerequisite to, but a possible consequence of, following Jesus."²⁹

When viewed as a whole, Jesus's life and teachings are nowhere near an absolute statement that disciples should leave their households behind. He praises this-world family, and when he distances himself, he

23 Spencer, *What Did Jesus Do?*, 37.

24 Spencer, *What Did Jesus Do?*, 38; John 1:45.

25 Strauss, *Jesus Behaving Badly*, 121.

26 Matthew 8:21–22; Luke 9:59–62.

27 Strauss, *Jesus Behaving Badly*, 121; 1 Kings 19:19–21.

28 Matthew 10:37–39; Luke 14:26–27.

29 Ahearne-Kroll, "Who Are My Mother and My Brothers?," 18.

does so conditionally. His teachings on leaving family reflect urgency and warn of family division only as a grave contingency.

Conclusion

When the Gospels are read as a whole, they do not depict a Jesus who seeks to separate people from their families. Family was a core organizing principle through which first century Judeans saw the public world, meaning family enjoyed none of the connotations of seclusion that are so advantageous for drawing people away into vulnerable isolation. Moreover, Jesus and his disciples demonstrate allegiances to this-world relatives that, while secondary to doing God's will, are positively appraised at many points. Rather, on the path of discipleship, Jesus makes room for bonds of earthly and spiritual kinship to coexist.

About the author

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Praying as God's children

Images of God and the Lord's Prayer

Ben Woodward-Breckbill

In spoken prayer, humans are challenged to articulate an image of God. The variety of verbal images of God in Scripture is appropriate to the limits of human language and the variety of human experience of God. Every life situation may yield a new encounter with God and a new way of putting to words who God is. Each metaphor tells a story about how the one praying relates to God.

When Jesus teaches his disciples to pray in Matthew 6 and Luke 11, he instructs them to address God as *father*. This metaphor tells a surprising story: that followers of Jesus relate to God as children to a parent. In this essay, I journey through the Lord's Prayer, collecting biblical, theological, and ethical insights to explore Jesus's rich verbal image of God.

Our Father in heaven

My modest suggestion for anyone praying during public worship is to try not to lose your congregation's hearts and minds as you begin your prayer's first line. For several years in my congregation we prayed "the prayer that Jesus taught" weekly in worship. Members of the congregation would sometimes question the use of the prayer, specifically in calling God *father*. Isn't a male-gendered word like that exclusive of women in the congregation? Doesn't referring to God as father excuse or even bless violent and cruel fathers? Hasn't the male language for God contributed to the mistreatment of women and children throughout Christian history? The horror of patriarchal and gender-based violence throughout Christian history requires biblical, theological, and ethical reflection that this essay does not take on. Even so, these questions draw attention to the fact that our images of God matter. The metaphorical language that we use to address and express the ineffable has practical consequences worthy of our attention. And for some in the congregation, the words *our father* removed them from receptivity to prayer.

In an effort to honor this difficulty and to continue to pray a version of the prayer Jesus taught, we would frequently pray to *our mother* or *our creator*. Sometimes the rest of the prayer would stay in its traditional form, while other times we would use paraphrases. Yet this had the

Whether we pray to father, mother, or creator, our choice of language for God can activate both uncomfortable emotions and disorienting questions.

same effect of jolting congregants out of receptive prayer: in changing familiar words, we engaged their analysis of our images for God. The images are worth critical thought, but such analysis is not the intent of a congregational prayer for church and world.

Whether we pray to father, mother, or creator, our choice of language for God can activate both uncomfortable

emotions and disorienting questions. Our discomfort and disorientation often makes us combative: Is God more male or female or something else? What human traits does God have, and to which human gender do we assign those traits? Who gets to be the image of God by better matching our verbal image for God?

May your name be holy

In the second line of the prayer, Jesus immediately undercuts any attempt to turn a verbal image into an idol. We are not the God to whom we pray. God is holy—God is other—and our words cannot capture or contain God. The word *father* asks disciples to relate to God as children to a parent, not to identify as God—or fathers or men. Jesus asserts God's holiness to distance us from over-identification with God or even our images of God. There is something telling here about our social disregard for children and our own extreme self-regard: when encountering Jesus's prayer, we would sooner identify ourselves with the transcendent Lord of creation than we would identify ourselves as children. In our jockeying to be the image of God, we forget that we are not God. Instead, we are disciples learning to pray.

Disciples are invited to be children. Being a child can mean any number of things, and we may be tempted to define *childhood* as some kind of essence: youth, biological descent, or level of maturity. In this prayer, though, childhood is relational. God is parent by having children, and the disciples are children by having a parent. It is the nature of the relation-

ship with God that defines the disciples' childhood before God. Jesus has a well-developed idea of what a childlike relationship to God looks like.

May your kingdom come

Jesus's view of childhood before God emerges, perhaps surprisingly, from examining the core petition of his prayer: that God's kingdom would come. First Jesus invites the disciples to claim to be God's children; then

First Jesus invites the disciples to claim to be God's children; then he instructs them to pray for God's kingdom.

he instructs them to pray for God's kingdom. This is not the only time when Jesus connects childhood and the coming of God's reign.

In two other notable stories from the Gospels (Matthew 18:1–5 and Matthew 19:13–15, both with synoptic parallels), Jesus teaches his disciples about the importance of children in the coming

of God's kingdom. In her examination of these passages, Judith Gundry-Volf argues that Jesus identifies children as *recipients*—perhaps even paradigmatic recipients—of the reign of God and as *models* of entering the reign of God.¹ Jesus's disciples would have been shocked to hear such a thing because “nowhere in Jewish literature are children put forward as models for adults, and in a Greco-Roman setting, comparison with children was highly insulting.”² Yet Jesus makes this comparison not only in two explicit teachings on children but also as he teaches his disciples to pray.

For example, in Matthew 18:1–5, Jesus's disciples are contesting who among them will be the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Jesus responds, “Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 18:3–4). Becoming like a child is essential to entering into the kingdom, and being like a child is connected to *humility*.

Being *like* a child can mean any number of things, so it is helpful for Jesus to narrow his focus to humility. In this context, humility and greatness are not to be understood as states of heart. The disciples are not

1 Judith M. Gundry-Volf, “The Least and the Greatest: Children in the New Testament,” in *The Child in Christian Thought*, ed. Marcia J. Bunge (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 37–42.

2 Gundry-Volf, “The Least and the Greatest,” 39.

seeking to *feel* greatest in the kingdom of heaven. They are seeking status and power. Jesus draws attention to a child and calls them humble, not great. The child's lack of social status and power is key to greatness in the kingdom of heaven. Embracing childlike humility is essential to entering the kingdom of heaven. The disciples are to be like children.

May your will be done on earth as it is in heaven

Being a child in our world does not connote only a lack of social standing or a relationship to a parent, though both are important. Much reflection is required about both our misconceptions of, and our best theological insights on, the role of children in relationships, families, and societies. Bonnie Miller-McLemore, in her book *Let the Children Come*, identifies several ways that modern Westerners might misunderstand childhood: we are heirs to puritan understandings of “depraved” children and idealized romantic notions of “innocent” children, along with capitalist visions of children as valued potential consumers, on one hand, and drains on parental resources, on the other. None of these is adequate, and Miller-McLemore investigates biblical, theological, and feminist perspectives on childhood to suggest a new view.³

Miller-McLemore, as she constructs a theology of childhood, focuses on children as *labors of love* and as *agents*, approaching childhood from the perspectives of both parent and child. In human parent-child relationships, as with God-disciple relationships, there is a decided difference in power. We are challenged, in such a situation, to chart a relationship that works within an imbalance of power but that respects the agency and personhood of both parties in a relationship that “aims at mutual-

ity.”⁴ We see the move toward mutuality, taking into account the power differential, in the three subsequent petitions of the Lord's Prayer. All three are presented as the disciples' petitions to God, but the triad takes on new meaning when we take seriously the petitions' parallels to child-parent relationships.

In human parent-child relationships, as with God-disciple relationships, there is a decided difference in power.

3 Miller-McLemore provides an overview of these historical “reinventions” of childhood in the first chapter of Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, *Let the Children Come: Reimagining Childhood from a Christian Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2019), 1–23.

4 Miller-McLemore, *Let the Children Come*, 127, quoting Christine Gudorf.

Give us today our daily bread

Children are dependent on their parents in many concrete ways, and parents, in a healthy and whole relationship, offer the care their children need. This is the relationship that Jesus points to with his “Father in heaven” later in the Sermon on the Mount:

We must be aware that there are and have been many human fathers who do not match this generous, nurturing ideal.

“Is there anyone among you who, if your child asked for bread, would give a stone? Or if the child asked for a fish, would give a snake? If you, then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him!” (Matt. 7:9–11). Jesus’s

portrait of God’s parenthood in the Sermon on the Mount shows God caring for the disciples’ needs, even more than human parents already care for their children.

We must be aware that there are and have been many human fathers who do not match this generous, nurturing ideal. Human parent-child relationships are too often marked by abuse, coercive control, and neglect. But when Jesus invites *all* of his disciples to be “children of the heavenly Father,” he has a portrait of a nurturing, generous parent in mind.⁵ In pointing to God as a model of true relational parenthood, Jesus makes an implicit rebuke of human parenting that does not care for the child’s basic needs.

Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us

There is more to the parent-child relationship than total dependence, a one-way provision of children’s needs by a parent. If children are to be *agents*, afforded their full humanity, they also need independence. And with independence comes the ability to do harm to self and others; with agency comes the possibility of sin. There are many thorny issues in applying the category *sin* to children, especially young children—most notably the way an idea of children’s sinfulness has at times throughout Christian history led to physical and spiritual abuse in the name of “discipline.”

However, in trying to chart a parent-child relationship “aiming at mutuality,” Miller-McLemore finds it important to reclaim the category of

5 For a discussion of some relevant issues, see, for example, Dale Allison, *The Sermon on the Mount: Inspiring the Moral Imagination* (New York: Crossroad, 1999), 120.

sin. She writes, "As agents, children are neither entirely virtuous nor entirely depraved. Rather, they are a complex amalgamation of imperfection and potentiality."⁶ Elsewhere, she reflects that children must experiment with "a range of roles and desires" as they grow into mutual, loving relationships that balance self-fulfillment and self-giving. "Although parents must make difficult, discerning choices about when to indulge and when to override children's desires, for the most part this discrepancy between

It is appropriate for children to expect grace from their parents as they grow toward "loving mutuality."

adults and children warrants gracious leniency on the part of adults toward children's neediness."⁷ Because children are learning about, experimenting with, and hopefully growing in their relationships with their parents and with one another, they will inevitably stray from relational perfection. It is appropriate for children

to expect grace from their parents as they grow toward "loving mutuality." Jesus suggests that disciples can expect the same from God and from their siblings who are also learning and growing.

Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil

Sin is not simply a marginal overstepping of role and relationship; it is also systemic and structural. This points to another parallel between children and disciples: though children are agents, able to make real choices about their lives, their ability to affect or resist death-dealing social systems is limited. Children require caring adults to guide them through a world full of potential harm and malformation.⁸ Adult disciples may resist this level of dependence on God, imagining that we can independently resist the world's evils through pure virtue or sheer force of will. Jesus knows this is not true and instructs his disciples to pray for divine parental help.

6 Miller-McLemore, *Let the Children Come*, 144.

7 Miller-McLemore, *Let the Children Come*, 131.

8 For example, Horace Bushnell, who wrote a nineteenth-century theology of childhood, understood that "children prompt reflection not so much on the dangers of a child's sinful nature, but rather on elements in a child's culture or family life that could corrupt him or her." See Marcia J. Bunge, *Child in Christian Thought*, 17. See also Marcia J. Bunge, ed., *The Child in Christian Thought, The Child in the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008); Marcia J. Bunge, ed., *Child Theology: Diverse Methods and Global Perspectives* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2021).

Human parents have also failed to see this as their responsibility to children. Miller-McLemore points this out as she discusses children's moral complexity: "the muddling of innocence and depravity reveals that children are all the more vulnerable. By picturing children as innocent, adults failed to take them seriously and often abused adult responsibility for earnest protection of children's physical, moral, and spiritual well-being."⁹ Adults have real responsibility for children's well-being, and children have the right to make this petition to their parents: do not lead us into situations that will harm our development toward mutual, loving relationships, and keep us away from physical, spiritual, and moral injury.

For yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever

The disciples as children both seek and receive the good gift of the kingdom. Yet in light of God's holiness and power, reaffirmed in the traditional (if extra-biblical) last line of the prayer, it is extraordinary that we could be invited into such a close relationship with God at all. On what grounds

We are images of God through Jesus, the child in God's image, taking human form and inviting us to become like him.

could we be so bold to pray to God in such a familial way? An insight into the question is offered by Karl Barth: "The distinctive value and importance of the 'our Father' as the Lord's Prayer consist[s] in the fact that in it Jesus ranges Himself alongside His Disciples, or His disciples alongside Himself, taking them up with Him into His own prayer. The

'We' of this prayer is the We to which the Lord attaches Himself with His people."¹⁰ We pray "our father" not just as a community of disciples but also in community with Jesus. It is God's eternal child who invites the disciples into the divine parent-child relationship.

It is not by being father or mother, male or female that we might "achieve" being the image of God. Instead, God offers Jesus, "the image of the invisible God." We are images of God through Jesus, the child in God's image, taking human form and inviting us to become like him. All that is required to be the image of God is to accept Jesus's invitation: to humble ourselves and meet God as beloved children.

⁹ Miller-McLemore, *Let the Children Come*, 21.

¹⁰ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2010), IV.ii, 705.

About the author


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Assisted reproductive technology and the modern family

Joseph J. Kotva Jr.

A modern story

Let's imagine the formation of a modern family. Michelle and Liz are lifelong friends who agree that they want to coparent a child. They are cisgendered, heterosexual women in their mid-forties without male



Since nearly 90 percent of women are infertile by the age of forty-five, Michelle or Liz would likely have needed donated eggs if either hoped to get pregnant.

life-partners. Besides a deep longing for children, Michelle and Liz want to honor the memory of their mutual friend Tatiana, who had died two years earlier from pancreatic cancer. Hoping to one day start a family and knowing that oncology treatments often leave women infertile, Tatiana had frozen a dozen of her eggs before beginning chemotherapy. Once it became obvious that she would not survive, Tatiana donated the eggs to her older friends, Michelle and Liz, asking

them to care for the eggs as they felt led. Since nearly 90 percent of women are infertile by the age of forty-five, Michelle or Liz would likely have needed donated eggs if either hoped to get pregnant. However, an equally important consideration for them is their shared desire to celebrate Tatiana by utilizing her eggs in creating their own family.

They quickly decide that Liz should be the gestational mother. Liz has always wanted to experience pregnancy; besides, her job as a work-from-home copy editor more readily accommodates pregnancy than does Michelle's job running an urban organic farm.

They still need sperm. Rather than use a sperm bank, they ask Steve, a gay man from their church, if he would be willing to donate. Steve is delighted, in part because he thinks that Michelle and Liz will be wonderful parents and in part because he always desired to have children. All three agree that he will be "Uncle Steve," playing an ongoing role of loving male role model for their child.

In getting ready for in vitro fertilization (IVF), where mature eggs are fertilized with sperm in a lab, Steve's sperm turns out to have motility limitations. Not to worry, though: thanks to Intracytoplasmic Sperm Injection (ICSI), a procedure where a single sperm is injected into an egg via a special pipette, nearly every sperm can reproduce. The combination of Tatiana's thawed eggs and Steve's ICSI-assisted sperm results in eleven embryos.

After a few days, Preimplantation Genetic Diagnosis (PGD) is used to screen the embryos. Since Michelle really wants a girl, a choice that suits Liz, they are going to only implant embryos with XX chromosomes. They also use PGD to screen for the PALB2 gene that might have contributed to Tatiana's pancreatic cancer and to screen for Down syndrome. Eight of the embryos appear to be developing normally and without the PALB2 gene or the third copy of chromosome 21 that leads to Down syndrome. Although four embryos have XX chromosomes, only two are transferred to Liz's uterus, since they have heard that multiple births are more dangerous for mother and child alike. They freeze the remaining healthy embryos.

As often happens, the first IVF cycle is unsuccessful. Disappointed but undeterred, Michelle and Liz agree to another round of IVF. Utilizing the two remaining XX eggs, Liz gets pregnant with twins. As frequently happens with multiple births, Liz struggles with hypertension and urinary

tract infections during the pregnancy. The girls are born slightly premature and underweight but otherwise healthy.

Exhausted from the ordeal and the demands of twins, Michelle and Liz are nevertheless deeply grateful and more in love with their daughters than they thought possible. "Uncle Steve" has

found a place in the family, often dining together and providing parental respite on the weekends. As far as assisted reproductive technology (ART) goes, they got away cheap, spending only thirty thousand dollars. They both say it is the best money they ever spent. No one has yet discussed what will become of the remaining frozen embryos or the two-thousand-dollar annual bill to maintain them. Everyone is too happy and too tired to worry about frozen embryos.

As far as assisted reproductive technology (ART) goes, they got away cheap, spending only thirty thousand dollars.

A new reality

While the above story is fiction, each aspect of the story is now common practice. It is now common for women in their forties and fifties to give birth. It is now common for children to be genetically unrelated to the gestational mother. It is now common for friends without romantic attachments to coparent. Twins are now far more common than they were

ART presents us with a new reality, and the concept of family is now entirely open.

only a few decades ago, in large part due to ART. The long-term frozen storage of sperm, eggs, and embryos—sometimes in the face of cancer but more often for the sake of commerce—is common, as is sex selection. “Uncle” is now a common designation of a sperm donor, straight

or gay, who participates as a weekend dad. Thanks to ICSI, millions of children have been born from weak and misshapen sperm that evolution had previously prevented from reproducing.

ART presents us with a new reality, and the concept of family is now entirely open. To be sure, families have always been cobbled together. Infidelity, adoption, divorce and remarriage, tribal alliances, even baptism’s imagery of joining a new people have pushed against solely genetic concepts of family. But our current reality goes further. As Liza Mundy points out, “Never before in history has it been possible for a woman to give birth to an infant who is genetically unrelated to her. Never before has it been possible for women to be the genetic parent of living children to whom she has not given birth.”¹ So, too, never before has it been possible for genetic offspring to be born to deceased parents. Never before have we seen detailed planning in advance for families to have one parent or many parents, with complex or nonexistent genetic relationships. Never before did gay couples create families through donated eggs and the borrowed wombs of surrogates. Never before did lesbian and gay couples coparent children with genetic relationships to both sets of parents. Never before could we guarantee the sex of our children or eliminate from the start the possibility of various disabilities. Never before could prospective parents shop online for the height, weight, skin color, eye color, hair color, or athletic and academic achievements of the donors from whom will come the sperm and eggs that will merge to create their children.

1 Liza Mundy, *Everything Conceivable: How Assisted Reproduction Is Changing Our World* (New York: Anchor Books, 2008), xiv.

Involuntary childlessness

Although there are good reasons to have ethical reservations about many aspects of ART, we should tread lightly in our moral judgments. Involuntary childlessness is often experienced as a profound affliction. Christian ethicist Maura Ryan explains that it is often experienced as “an assault on important life plans and widely shared conceptions of the good life. It is an experience of physical powerlessness and loss of control . . . [confronting] patients with the need to redefine personal and relational goals and expectations in a way that shares at least some features of chronic and life-threatening illness.”²

Many sense that their bodies have betrayed them or that natural and social forces have conspired against them. Frequent is the “feeling that one is a failure, essentially, sexually, and interpersonally.”³ Children, so often referred to in our culture as a *blessing*, are denied many who desperately want them. Those experiencing involuntary childlessness often describe

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themselves as feeling hollow or empty, with their identity in tatters. ART promises, and often delivers, a fix for this lost sense of purpose and identity.

Infertility, the inability to conceive after one year of frequent unprotected sex, affects about 15 percent of the population. Many factors are behind this large and growing infertility rate: poverty, earlier sexually transmitted infections

(STIs), endometriosis, fibroids, ovulatory problems, testicular issues, cancer treatments, environmental toxins, and so on. Delayed childbirth is a large and growing contributor. Fertility rates drop off dramatically after the age of thirty-five. Yet, there are many social and economic pressures to delay childbearing. Our society often makes career advancement incompatible with having children, especially for women. Even the success of ART is itself a contributing factor since it has convinced many that they can delay child-rearing almost indefinitely.

Involuntary childlessness is not limited to those wrestling with infertility. Lack of a willing life partner is common. Sometimes life partners

2 Maura A. Ryan, *Ethics and Economics of Assisted Reproduction: The Cost of Longing* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2001), 71.

3 Ryan, *Ethics and Economics of Assisted Reproduction*, 71.

are the same sex. Trauma can make one unable to engage in sexual intercourse. People who are asexual might likewise find themselves unable or unwilling to travel the traditional road to having children. So too, trans women cannot get pregnant, although they are seldom counted among those struggling with infertility.

The morally fraught nature of ART

We can only gesture toward a few of the complex moral questions surrounding the use of ART. Such gestures can at most suggest lines of conversation for our mutual discernment about ART.

Denying genetic connections but affirming genetic essentialism

ART's proponents and utilizers simultaneously deny and affirm the role of genetics in constituting a family.⁴ Much of ART is about bypassing genetic connections, using donor eggs or sperm or surrogates or all three. Yet, parents often desperately search for donors who share physical characteristics of the parent or parents that are not genetically tied to the child. Parents also endlessly worry that biology will trump parental love—that their children will come to view an often anonymous sperm or egg donor as the *real* parent. And, indeed, children often want to know their biological inheritance or genetic siblings raised in other households. Relatedly, sperm and egg banks often promote genetic essentialism by pushing the idea that donor characteristics and achievements are predictive of what the yet-unformed child will look like or accomplish.

Both sides of this equation are unwise. Many ART practices essentially deny that a biological relationship with a child carries an obligation to care for that child. It is ethically foolish and experientially fallacious to undercut genetic relationships in this way. But genes are not destiny. Hospitality toward children is more essential than genetic-dependent obligations. And the genetic essentialism of donor selection implies a perfection it cannot deliver and a corrupt notion of what it means to be successful.

ART as big business

Fertility treatment is a high-paying medical specialty. Many of the clinics are for-profit entities, often chains. A single round of non-donor IVF

4 For a theologically rich discussion of ART, including the dual dangers of denying genes any ethical relevance and promoting genes as determinative, see "Genetics," in *On Moral Medicine: Theological Perspectives in Medical Ethics*, 3rd ed., edited by M. Therese Lysaught and Joseph J. Kotva Jr. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 965–1023.

costs around twelve thousand dollars, not including various exams and injectable medications. Patients often need multiple rounds of IVF. Donor sperm is comparatively cheap, but donor eggs start at fourteen thousand dollars and can cost upward of fifty thousand dollars. Egg and embryo storage costs thousands per year. Depending on the employer and state, most, some, or none of this cost will be covered by insurance. People

Egg donation agencies are particularly troublesome. They are like brokerages or real estate firms, facilitating the legal transfer of property.

commonly spend forty to fifty thousand dollars on fertility treatments, frequently without a resulting baby to take home. The poor are out of luck in this game.

Egg donation agencies are particularly troublesome. They are like brokerages or real estate firms, facilitating the legal transfer of property. Young women are paid five to ten thousand dollars

each time they donate—or more if they are particularly desirable. Typically, the donors wrongly assume that the recipients are screened.

Things are not much better when it comes to surrogacy. Some women certainly see surrogacy as a form of self-giving. But in most cases, it is a situation where the surrogate takes on all the physical and emotional risks of pregnancy in exchange for thirty to forty thousand dollars. The agencies make good money for facilitating this exchange. The cost to those seeking a surrogate runs anywhere from sixty to two-hundred thousand dollars.

By contrast, adoption is run primarily by non-profits, is heavily regulated, and, in principle, gives center stage to the welfare of the child. The world of ART is relentlessly profit making. Families are given little or no counseling and no support following the interventions, regardless of the success or failure thereof. While there are many fine physicians working within the fertility establishment, the fundamental principles of fertility treatment are profit and the rights of the paying consumer to obtain children through reproductive freedom.

Technological values

Like all technological innovations, ART reflects and shapes the society in which it develops. ART would not have gained such a quick foothold if we were not already formed to expect complicated technology to be an everyday part of our lives. Only in a world where airplanes, cell phones, Apple watches, the internet, and heart valve and knee replacements are so common as to be pedestrian would we readily adopt the scope of reproductive

technologies. Because we swim in a sea of technology, we fail to notice how the next technological thing, such as inserting misshapen sperm into donated eggs, is changing society. Instead, it merely feels like part of the technological escalator that we all ride. It seems as if ART simply gives us more choice, more freedom—the illusion that goes with much technology.

Like so much of technology, ART is partially about shaping our desires and then training us to fulfill those desires. In the case of ART, reproductive technology teaches us to refrain from having children when it is inconvenient and then to get the children we want no matter how long we have waited to try. Choice, freedom, and speed are among the

Like so much of technology, ART is partially about shaping our desires and then training us to fulfill those desires.

technological values and norms of our society. ART fits and promotes that paradigm in the context of forestalling and having children.

A common refrain among those using ART is that they never thought that they would go as far as they did in seeking children. Couples who thought they

would never agree to IVF find themselves readily doing so when the fertility drugs do not work. Then, against earlier beliefs, they agree to making excess embryos to freeze and to transferring two or more embryos in an attempt to assure success. When that does not work, they agree—against all their previous convictions—to use donated sperm or eggs. And if that fails or is unworkable, they sometimes find themselves willing to hire a surrogate. The journey of ART is morally shaping. Each technological stage, along with its financial and emotional sunk costs, prepares people to accept the next stage.

Frozen embryos

There are at least one million frozen embryos in the United States. Their moral status is hotly debated, as is what should be done with all these excess embryos. Several hundred thousand have been abandoned by the people who created them. Legally, they are property, but they are property with an elevated value such that the storage companies cannot simply destroy the abandoned embryos without the consent of their creators.

Even many progressive, pro-choice IVF patients seem unable to view their excess three-day-old embryos as mere tissue that should be left to expire or donated to research. Most of the leftover embryos belong to people who know from experience that those embryos, given the right sup-

port, could turn into beloved children. These patients often see the frozen embryos as “virtual children having interests that must be considered and protected, siblings of their living children, genetic or psychological insurance policies.”⁵ There are specialized agencies that facilitate “embryo adoption.” The cost is often lower than other approaches to IVF with donor sperm or eggs (although still expensive). The best known, Snowflakes Embryo Adoption Program, is a conservative Christian organization that refers to the embryos as “frozen babies”⁶—nomenclature that is as hard to justify as is referring to frozen embryos as “tissue.” Embryo Solution, another embryo adoption agency, appears less likely than Snowflakes to discriminate against single parents or members of the LGBTQ+ community.⁷ The wisdom of embryo adoption depends much on how we evaluate the moral status of the embryos and what weight we give to genetic ties. There are many would-be parents for whom embryo adoption might make sense.

Risks and informed consent

Historically, 43 percent of infants conceived with ART are twins, with 3 percent being triplets or higher. Twins occur naturally at a rate of 2 percent. Multiple births are dangerous: 50 percent of twins and 90 percent of triplets are born premature. Premature babies are more likely to have learning disabilities, neurological and physical damage, and developmental delays. Twins are six times more likely to have cerebral palsy. Women having multiples are at increased risk of preeclampsia, thromboembolisms, gestational diabetes, anemia, urinary tract infections, and postpartum hemorrhage and are at a four times greater risk of death. Even when everyone is healthy, the birth of twins correlates with higher subsequent rates of depression in the parents.

Thankfully, many clinics now focus on single embryo transfers, as recommended by the Center for Disease Control (CDC) and the American Society for Reproductive Medicine and as practiced in most of Europe.

5 Mundy, *Everything Conceivable*, 292.

6 “Open Hearts Program,” in *Nightlight Christian Adoptions*, <https://nightlight.org/snowflakes-embryo-adoption-donation/open-hearts-program/>.

7 “Your Future Is Here—Adopt an Embryo and See the Miracle,” in *Embryo Adoption*, <https://www.embryosolution.com>. Private communication dated July 2, 2023, confirms that Embryo Solutions works “with married couples, same-sex couples, single parents, couples in committed relationship, and parents who plan to use a surrogate” and has “no age limits on the intended parents.”

But historically, patients were not usually apprised of the increased risks associated with multiple transfers. It remains unclear how many fertility clinics still do multiple embryo transfers or how “informed” patient consent is. It is clear that patients often want multiple transfers to increase the likelihood of first-round success and to get instant families.

The society-wide increase of twins is not only due to multiple transfers during IVF. The older a woman is when she conceives, the more unpredictable becomes ovulation, increasing the odds of twins. This dynamic increases still further when fertility drugs are given to women to boost egg production. In other words, even with improvements to IVF practices, current social pressures, fertility medicine, and parental preferences make twins more likely.

ART increases risks to infants even for singletons. Singleton IVF babies are at increased risk of lower birth weight, premature birth, and various defects and neurological challenges.

We should be having a more robust conversation about the unknown and known risks to children introduced by the use of ART.

We are in an era when women typically try to protect the fetus’s health by taking prenatal vitamins and avoiding tobacco, alcohol, and caffeine. Yet, we rarely talk about the fact that ART introduces additional risk. Moreover, many risk factors remain unknown and understudied. The culture mediums used for IVF are proprietary and therefore understudied.

We do not know if the mediums (which are not all the same) in which sperm and egg are brought together introduce increased risk. Relatedly, we do not know how much additional risk to children is being introduced by ICSI, although it is likely that we are often inserting new genetic aberrations. We should be having a more robust conversation about the unknown and known risks to children introduced by the use of ART. A more robust form of consent to ART is also long overdue.

Where is the church?

A feature of the opening story is the absence of the church. We know that Michelle, Liz, and Steve are churchgoers; they know each other from there. Yet the story contains no other hint that their church played a role in their journey with ART and family creation. There is no wrestling with church teaching, no mutual discernment with a small group or pastor, and no obvious support for the couple navigating life with twins.

The story reflects the vacuum experienced by most churchgoers struggling with infertility, navigating ART, or grieving involuntary childlessness.⁸ Infertility and ART are relegated to the personal arena, while family, parenting, and children are communally celebrated during the liturgical year. If infertility or childlessness is mentioned in church, it is in the reading of Scripture texts that depict “barrenness” as a form of divine judgment or as an occasion for a miraculous intervention. When people experiencing unwanted childlessness muster the courage to reveal their struggles, they often meet careless recommendations to “just adopt” or to throw themselves into church work.

We can and should do better. There can be prayers and liturgical elements that acknowledge the pain of longing for parenthood. We can encourage adoption as a viable option for all families, not just those unable to conceive in traditional ways. We can challenge the countless ways that North Americans turn family and children into idols, replacing love of God and love of neighbor. We can likewise challenge in our worship, our Sunday schools, and our small groups the idolatry of a medicine that assumes that every form of suffering is a technical problem in need of a technical solution.

As church, we must walk with people as they go through loss, gain self-acceptance, and embrace new tellings of their stories. So, too, we must develop better mechanisms of mutual discernment. Every facet of involuntary childlessness and ART is fraught with pain and moral ambiguity. None of us should be navigating this territory alone.

What are children for?

To address what we as Christians should make of ART or the new family configurations it engenders, we need richer theological accounts of notions we often take for granted, such as what children are for. What is the role or place of children in the family or in the church? Are current cultural assumptions about children at odds with how Christians should view them? Where do we place the good of having children among other goods, including the good of Christian fidelity? We cannot confidently think about involuntary childlessness, or the solutions offered by ART, if we do not know what to make of children in the first place.⁹

8 Maura Ryan, “Faith and Infertility,” in *On Moral Medicine*, 865–69.

9 Lysaught and Kotva, *On Moral Medicine*, 758.

A place to start is by joining theologian Joel Shuman and pediatrician Brian Volck in rejecting competing notions of children as commodities whose value depends on adult intention and desires, hedges who provide future security or personal legacy, or the glue that cements our relationships.¹⁰ Shuman and Volck invite us to instead consider children within several biblical images—hospitality to strangers, the church as body, and the church as family.

Shuman and Volck contend that children are strangers briefly entrusted to our care. As strangers, they are entitled to hospitality, love, and patience. They are also strangers hosted within a broader family and a complex body. Biblical imagery does not allow us to view the raising of children as a solitary or isolated activity or one over which we can

Those struggling with childlessness might well be silent, suffering members of our family, wounded appendages of our body, or strangers in need of hospitality.

claim complete control. Instead, raising children should be a self-consciously communal activity of hospitality by the church. When childrearing is taken seriously by the church, parents are never alone in their efforts, and people without children are never childless.

Shuman and Volck go still further. They contend that notions of hospitality to strangers, an inclusive body, and an expansive family call us to see “our

children” in the places where we might not have been looking, such as those funneling through foster care or suffering treatable maladies such as diarrhea and malaria in the “developing world.”¹¹

Continuing beyond Shuman and Volck’s argument, the triple notes of hospitality, body, and family apply to more than children. Those struggling with childlessness might well be silent, suffering members of our family, wounded appendages of our body, or strangers in need of hospi-

10 Joel James Shuman and Brian Volck, “What Are Children For?” in *On Moral Medicine*, 761–70.

11 More complex theological reflections on what we should make of children can be found in the work of Marcia Bunge. For example, Bunge suggests that “the Christian tradition represents children in complex, almost paradoxical ways, as *gifts of God and signs of God’s blessing*, though they are *sinful and selfish*; as *developing creatures in need of instruction and guidance*, yet as *fully human and made in the image of God*; and as *models of faith, sources of revelation, and representatives of Jesus*, though they be *orphans, neighbors, and strangers* who need to be treated with justice and integrity.” Marcia J Bunge, “A More Vibrant Theology of Children,” *Christian Reflection: A Series in Faith and Ethics* (2003): 13.

tality. They might simultaneously be the wise elders, the powerful legs or keen eyes, or the strangers who turn out to be more host than guest. We cannot lose sight that both messy children and those who wish they had them are a part of us. Such a framework does not provide easy answers, but it might help us think more carefully, creatively, faithfully, and lovingly about ART and the modern family.

About the author

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So ought we

D. S. Martin

After Thomas Traherne

As a seedling grows toward the sun
As the flame's tongue hungers once the fire's begun

As wildflowers bloom for wonder's sake
As migrating geese settle onto the lake

As the rising tide is drawn by the moon
As the waiting woman wants *this* over soon

As a child in utero is drawn toward birth
As cloud-released raindrops fall toward earth

As splattering rain drains toward the river
As a grateful heart is drawn toward the giver

As the wolf's eye is drawn toward sheep
As the weary child drifts into sleep

As a ship in the storm makes for the coast
As a man's eyes go to the one he loves most

Not by wheels or feet but a journey of the soul
the poet carried by desire is made whole

About the author

D. S. Martin is poet-in-residence at McMaster Divinity College in Hamilton, Ontario. His book *Angelicus* (2021)—a poetry collection written from the point of view of angels—is available from Wipf & Stock.

Mother Inferior


Susan Fish

It was a spring morning in 2009 when the phone rang. On the other end was a person with an accent I could not quite place—something between Italian and Irish. The caller determined that it was me speaking before claiming that my visit to a convent in Florence, Italy, three weeks before, with my husband, had resulted in damage to one of the twin beds in our room and that there was evidence that two people had slept in one bed. Then the caller could no longer contain her laughter.

It was my mother. It was April Fools' Day. She had got me.

A year later the phone rang again. Every year since, on the first of April, the Mother Superior, as she calls herself, has telephoned with long-standing concern for this broken bed.

When my parents started needing more help with household and yard chores, my husband and I began making regular visits. I am not particularly handy—years before, my young

 I gave myself my own joking moniker: the Mother Inferior.

daughter was incredulous when I had repaired something, saying, “*You* can fix?”—but my husband is. My mother began calling him Saint David for the help he gave her. My job was mostly to make

tea and sit and talk with them while he fixed things. My skills were ones they valued but that would not fix the dishwasher door or get the winter wreath down from over the garage. I was exceedingly proud of myself the day I figured out how to empty and reload their mousetraps.

I gave myself my own joking moniker: the Mother Inferior.

As the years passed, I began to write a novel set in a fictionalized version of the Florentine convent where we once stayed. It, too, has twin beds and a Mother Superior fierce enough to make calls for more than a dozen years if need be. But unlike me, my protagonist travels alone. There is no risk of two people in one twin bed in this story.

This novel began as a pleasant story about Italy, and my protagonist was going to have a version of the lovely trip I had had. I wrote scenes that took me back. Then in my own life I experienced a sequence of parenting events that flattened me, leaving me feeling like a Mother Inferior indeed.

Carrie Fisher famously stated, *Take your broken heart and turn it into art*. And so I did. I began to imagine that my character had gone to Italy not out of desire but out of necessity—that she had fled there after a family crisis. That was where fiction came in: the events that left her feeling that she needed to leave the country bore precisely no resemblance to the events in my own life, but as I drew on the feelings, the novel quickly found its shape.

Now with the book coming out this year, I have to contend with the feelings once more. Like the allegedly broken bed, not all is mended even years later. But how do I speak

There is more than one person in every mother: the strong desire to be the best mother you can be—the mother superior—but also the reality of being a mother inferior.

of this? My most recent novel is about a widow who hosted weekly soup suppers—and people have asked me again and again about my own hosting of such dinners, my own widowhood, unwilling to believe that fiction is not thinly veiled autobiography. The reality is that only the occasional, small, real-life detail ever makes it into my fiction—a kiss on the ear, a shop I have visited, a line from a

movie I have loved. But I also believe I am in there too, only not where you would think to look for me.

Maybe it is true to say that two people sleep in the bed that is my novel, squashed together. Me, the author, and my character. We bump elbows and breathe bad breath into each other's faces. We pull the covers off each other in our sleep. We might cause the bed to sag some or to creak ominously. But there are two people in this bed, not just one, not just me. No matter that the other is fictional: she takes up her own space and is not the same person as me.

But I also suspect that there is more than one person in every mother. And that is one thing this book addresses: the strong desire to be the best mother you can be—the mother superior—but also the reality of being a mother inferior, the mother who is all too human and who aches with the mistakes she has made along the way. Parenting books may encourage us to drop the guilt and the comparison, saying that *superior* and *inferior* suggest a competition of sorts, but ultimately such books encourage us to be better parents than we would otherwise be. That is not where my book lands. It does not encourage *worse* parenting, but it changes the question so that superiority and inferiority become less about comparison

and more about the size of this role within a person's identity. My novel reclaims the truth that we are more than our roles of any sort—whether that is a parent or any other role.

Princess Leia was on to something, I realize. Not only has this broken heart of mine been turned into the art that is a novel, but the writing of it has also helped me in the art of living with my broken heart. I am less of a mother than I hoped I might be. And I am learning to be okay with that.

About the author

Susan Fish is a writer and editor living in Waterloo, Ontario, with her husband, dogs, and sometimes young adult children. She has a Masters of Theological Studies (2022) from Conrad Grebel University College. Her third novel, *Renaissance*, recently published by Paraclete Press, was the book she was writing during the events she describes in this essay.

Picking up the pieces of my father's rage

Arthur Boers

Sorting through baby photos, I came across one that most would regard as happy. My grandmother apparently did. I am not as sure. At around age sixty, I decided to interrogate my life and began investigating the violence and abuse of my childhood, breaking family rules about things we knew were not supposed to be mentioned.

In the early years of my parents' marriage there was little work most winters. A few times water and phone services were disconnected because my parents could not keep up with the bills. When I was born, they could not afford the doctor, a fellow church member. He badgered them for payment until my father blew up.

The year I was born my father's house painting business failed. He settled debts and worked part-time driving a van on slushy St. Catharines streets, delivering newspaper bundles to corner stores and paperboys. This did not pay well. Papa borrowed money to send my mother and me by ship to stay with his parents in their Netherlands row house until finances improved.

My parents planned a six-month separation, but my mother lasted two. Relatives report I had a glorious time abroad. But my mother, homesick for her husband and Canada, persuaded my father to let her return home early. He borrowed money for those tickets too.

*

Since I cannot recall that infant odyssey, my first memory of the Netherlands is as an eleven-year-old visiting my by-then-widowed grandmother for a month. During that later visit, relatives and friends told me how as a baby I joyfully rattled my playpen bars, bouncing on my toes whenever anyone approached. I stretched my arms high for someone to scoop me up. I liked the comfort of being held.

As the first and until-then-only grandchild—and named after Opa Arie to boot—I garnered a lot of attention. My grandparents had seen little of my father, their only child, for years. After emigrating he had never been back to the Netherlands, and might never return, not even to

visit. They seldom heard his voice. Transatlantic phone calls—expensive, inconvenient, echoes reverberating and colliding with each other down long tunnels—happened once or twice a year. I can only imagine what the arrival of daughter-in-law and grandson meant to them. They lobbied my

**My grandfather,
father, and I were
seldom together on
the same continent,
much less the same
room.**

mother to stay permanently and asked my father to come back, offering to buy us a house. My parents declined.

My grandfather, father, and I were seldom together on the same continent, much less the same room. But one photograph snapped in my grandparents' living room is a kind of group shot. In

this triptych, three of us—grandfather, father, son—ascend diagonally in black and white. Arie, my paternal grandfather, stands in his row house living room, in front of the rippled glass of a door, holding his infant grandson Arthur up to a photo of my father on the wall. We measure a direct line. Arie, the man holding me, was his father's oldest son. Arie's oldest son (and only child) was my father, whom he named Pleun. And I, the baby in the middle, was Pleun's first, and at that point only, child. I would always be his only—I resist the adjective “begotten”—son. Pleun named me after his father.

I remember that room well. I visited it several times over three decades. Mottled wallpaper and lingering fragrances of bitter coffee, over-boiled tea, hazelnuts, milk chocolate—a combination of scents that I would always recognize even though years separated my stays there.

My grandfather wears a darkly sober suit as he normally did in photos. As men did in 1957. His silvery tie slightly loosened, almost informal. Maybe it's Sunday afternoon, church obligations fulfilled. A plain wedding band, one that eventually migrated to my finger, glints from his hand. He's fifty-four. I am over a decade older than that now, but to my eye today he could be seventy-something. I wonder whether I'll ever look his age.

Arie's short dark hair is plastered into a sparse comb-over, a large mole looming from his tonsure. His chin juts in concentration. His mouth slightly open, not quite smiling. Lifting me, his only grandchild so far, his hands cradle my rump. Arie's eyes, level with my little shoulders, gaze at my back.

My grandfather, like Abraham, offering me up as a sacrifice—not to God but to my dad. Isaac seemed uneasy during that journey with his

father. Read between the Genesis lines and it looks like he was damaged for life. I can relate.

Nine-month-old me has more hair than Arie. I wear a T-shirt; chubby legs dangle beneath Opa’s hands. I intently reach for something; my left hand grips the framed photo hanging on the wall. My fingers disappear behind it, thumb pressing the glass.

I surely cannot recognize my father’s image and am just curiously grabbing; maybe Opa directed my attention. But the viewer wants the scene sentimental: baby reaching for father, the far away man, on the other side of the Atlantic. The baby appears determined. No one seems worried I might tug the picture from the wall, knock it to the ground, shatter its glass. But I look like I would not hesitate.

*

My grandmother, Oma, wrote on the back of the small black-and-white of this scene: *Zie zijn kleine duimpje op de foto van jouw.* “See his little thumb on the picture of you.”

The *you*, almost under my thumb, is her son, my father Pleun. Behind glass, dark hair slicked back, sheening from the photographer’s flash. A formal head and chest shot: mid-twenties, in black suit and knotted tie, taken prior to his emigration. He kept trying to get away. Oddly, ever-green sprig antlers jut from the top of the frame.

I am the center of attention in this potentially happy domestic scene.

His wire rimmed glasses and angular face incline seemingly at the baby who may be trying to tug him from the wall, to take down his father. I face my dad’s

image, reach toward him—as I often did in life, seldom succeeding. Opa looks at me from behind. I am the center of attention in this potentially happy domestic scene.

The top of my head is a few inches above Opa’s, a couple of inches below my dad’s crown. In this staircase of skulls, Opa’s head is the largest, mine smaller, and my father’s the smallest—like helium balloons diminishing in size as they drift up and into the distance.

How can one tell that all three of us knew, or would know, what it means to be beaten, battered by fathers? That two abused their sons? I say this reluctantly—we never named these realities, and somehow I knew we were not supposed to talk about such things.

How can one tell from this cheery living room snapshot that for us home could be a place of terror at the hands of someone we might expect to protect us? How does one photo contain so many contradictions of love and loss, affection and resentment, fondness and danger?

What do I do with the deep sorrow I feel when I think of this photo?

*

My father's portrait hung in my grandparents' living room for forty years, until my widowed grandmother's advanced dementia forced her into a locked nursing home ward. In a narrow silver frame and wide white matting, the picture's prominence on the wall demonstrated how families once honored deceased loved ones.

Pleun worked hard at leaving, crossing the Mediterranean and Red and Arabian seas, the Indian and Atlantic Oceans, first volunteering as a soldier in Indonesia and then moving to Canada. He had reasons: fight for his country, search for a better life—and he wanted to get away. Each time he departed—first perilous overseas battles and then emigrating—parents and son never knew whether they would see each other again. Did my father, their only child, regret these separations? I suspect not. But his parents kept wanting him back, wanting him safe, wanting him near.

I imagine them worrying about their only child fighting in jungles and rice paddies. When he returned, relief did not offer long-term consolation. He went to Canada a few years later. I do not know whether he tried staying in touch. I never saw him write a letter. After my folks married (only Oma could afford to attend the wedding), my mom took responsibility for correspondence, saving postage by cramming weekly news on flimsy blue airmail forms.

*

When my mother and I visited, Opa and Oma made the best of their chance to celebrate St. Nicholas with a descendant. They never before had a Christmas tree, whether from Dutch frugality or strict Calvinism I am unsure, but they acquired one during our stay and decorated it, borrowing sparkling ornaments and purchasing colored light bulbs. Hence the pine sprig antlers adorning the living room photo.

People say that my grandfather, once so stern with my dad, doted on me. And here's how I know. Audiophile Opa splurged on a Dutch-manufactured Philips radio. He enshrined the monolith, an elaborate affair with multiple dials and polished wood, on its own shelf. Opa precisely

adjusted dials, poised to capture elusive radio waves of classical music on hard-to-tune stations. He forbade anyone from touching his venerated object. Even my finicky housekeeper grandmother did not dare dust it. Company avoided it too. Opa's rowdy brothers had to keep *pooten* ("paws") off, especially when drinking.

But he welcomed my curiosity. Baby Arthur could play with the device, not just admire it from afar. Opa allowed my sticky fingers on its shiny surface, messing with painstakingly positioned knobs. So people tell me. A nice enough story, a little hard to believe, possibly apocryphal, if not for black-and-white proof. Still another photo. There I am, round-headed and beaming, my right index finger stretched, like Michelangelo's Adam toward God, straining straight at dials.

Did my own father have comparable fun with that man, his dad? I doubt it.

*

I cannot ask. Direct witnesses gone, I puzzle things out by inference.

I, the oldest son in a line of oldest sons, examine our family tree and know this: Boers men beat Boers sons. Great-grandfather Pleun beat his eldest, Arie, my grandfather, who abused his son Pleun, my father. I was only seven and blacked out the first time Papa beat me, and I was always vigilant, always fearful, with him. I heard that my grandfather resented my father for not being a girl and that this ramped his rage. How can this be? Grieving Oma's stillbirths and miscarriages I understand, but punishing the only living child for such sorrows or blaming his gender?

Perhaps my grandparents still felt shamed by his untimely arrival a few weeks short of nine months after their wedding. That timing triggered a visit from church elders who wanted to know whether the relationship had been consummated before the ceremony. If so, the young parents would endure public shaming on Sunday before the congregation; their Calvinism was stern. My grandparents, though, convinced the authorities of good behavior and escaped church discipline. But still. I only speculate.

Here is something I know. Pa could not wait to leave.

Some parents divide labor and chores. His allocated discipline. Oma punished little things, however defined. Trying to protect my father, she



I, the oldest son in a line of oldest sons, examine our family tree and know this: Boers men beat Boers sons.

explained, seemed safer than letting Opa discipline. She seldom threatened, "Wait until your father gets home." Oma frequently slapped my father, and wielded wooden spoon, wicked wicker *mattenklopper* ("rug beater"), or some other household device against his posterior, hands, head, or back. She worried that their only child might grow up "spoiled." Their family, like mine, like most Dutch families I knew, was preoccupied with "spoiling" children. This was not only about wrecking a child but also worrying about how *others* might view their child-raising. Yet how to

More than once at the end of a day, Opa, still wearing heavy work boots, kicked his boy—one of the few things my father told me about his upbringing.

define "spoiled"? My firm disciplinarian parents did not spare the rod, did not spare me. I may not be spoiled, but at times I feel ruined.

The things we do from fear.

Worried about Opa's rampages, Oma frequently punished and fed and put my father to bed *before* his dad returned from work. But Opa dealt with "bigger things." Character issues or flaws? Sneakiness? Lying? Defiance? I'm

unsure. More than once at the end of a day, Opa, still wearing heavy work boots, kicked his boy—one of the few things my father told me about his upbringing. Maybe it's not strange that Papa would also eventually boot me with systematic fury.

Oma said Opa didn't know how to stop. My mother said the same thing about my father: he did not know how to stop. My dad, once on the receiving end, ultimately delivered too.

In spite of beatings, my father enjoyed misbehaving. He often told me that threats never deterred him. "I knew I was going to be punished, knew that would hurt, but did it anyway. I couldn't stop myself." That out-of-control theme again. He disliked rules. Playing Monopoly with friends, he smuggled in his own play money for an advantage. Later, as a businessman, he was sued for stealing a patent and, based on what he told me, I know he was guilty.

I wonder how I turned out to be such a goody-goody, cautious about rules and obsessed with avoiding parental disapproval. Afraid of being hit and hopeful that perfection would keep me safe? Trying to ingratiate myself?

*

Now at an age that neither my father nor my grandfather ever reached, I have questions. About their relationship to each other and to me. About anger and violence, hydraulic fury, pulsating from generation to generation. The sins of the fathers, you might say. Sounds biblical. Mysteries to me, to each other, to themselves. But then perhaps not such a mystery after all. Angry abusive men appear throughout my family tree.

Such were the fathers I knew best.

About the author

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This essay is excerpted and adapted from his recent book *Shattered: A Son Picks Up the Pieces of His Father's Rage* © 2023 (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.) and is reprinted by permission of the publisher.

For the best interest of the child

Co-parenting after separation

Cathrin van Sintern-Dick

“I wish it would have worked out, but I can’t tolerate any more lies.” “I feel incredibly lonely in this marriage. I would rather be alone and take care of myself than stay in this place.” “I fear for my own well-being and the well-being of my children.” “I am afraid our children will grow up thinking that constant yelling and arguing between parents is normal.” “I already do everything anyway, so what would change?”

There are multitudes of factors contributing to the breakdown of families. When I initially entered the field of family mediation—and with it the field of setting families up for new beginnings, in many cases apart and yet together in co-parenting relationships—I was asked: *Why don’t you spend the time on reconciliation with them? Why do you help “destroy” a marriage? Don’t you believe in marriage anymore?*

Let me say that I still strongly believe in marriage. I believe in love, commitment, and the vows made in marriage. Nevertheless, I am aware that people can deeply hurt each other, emotionally through words and physically through actions. There are unhealthy marriages where various forms of abuse are present: emotional, verbal, physical, and financial. Some marriages create an unsafe environment for children, not just in terms of physical safety but also by subjecting them to constant conflict between their parents.

The best interest of the child

Moving forward as a family requires finding common ground to build on, often centered on *The Best Interest for the Child*. However, this term itself is subject to interpretation. Who decides what is in the best interest of the child? In cases where parents, either on their own or with legal assistance, cannot address matters concerning their children according to family law, who will make those decisions? In most cases, it will be a judge—a third party who is often unknown to the parents and not chosen by them—to determine the future of their ongoing family life. Is that the answer?

It is difficult to imagine a group of people who used to live together, however dysfunctional that living was, leaving the decisions regarding their future in the hands of a stranger. By doing so, they forfeit the opportunity to sit together, prioritize their child and their family, and place their own anger, hurt, pain, and frustration about the past—as well as their hopes, dreams, and wishes for the future—in a secondary position.

In my opinion, there exists a false narrative that a family ceases to exist after a separation. In reality, the family dynamics shift and change. It is now a family residing in two different homes, and for many years to come, depending on the children's ages, these families will continue to interact with each other.

The Vanier Institute of the Family defines *family* as:

Any combination of two or more persons who are bound together over time by ties of mutual consent, birth and/or adoption or placement and who, together, assume responsibilities for variant combinations of some of the following:

- *Physical maintenance and care of group members*
- *Addition of new members through procreation or adoption*
- *Socialization of children*
- *Social control of members*
- *Production, consumption, distribution of goods and services*
- *Affective nurturance – love*

Our definition of family is deliberately broad to ensure that it captures all families and family experiences. It is a functional definition of family that focuses on relationships and roles—what families do, not what they look like.

Our definition is inclusive of diverse family structures including (but not limited to) single parents, same-sex couples, stepfamilies, married or common-law couples (with or without children), skip-generation families and more.

The definition includes at least one relationship between an adult and another person (adult or child)—a relationship over time, which signifies that a commitment has been made.¹

¹ “Definition of Family,” Vanier Institute of the Family, <https://vanierinstitute.ca/definition-of-family>.

In approaching this article, I am provisionally adopting the definition provided by the Vanier Institute. The definition focuses on the role family has rather than how the family appears. This insight allows us to shift our attention toward the needs of the children and explore what it takes to prioritize them, to explore what is in the best interest of the child.

Like any broad term, there are various interpretations of what is in the best interest of the child, what should be included or excluded, and

There are various interpretations of what is in the best interest of the child, what should be included or excluded, and who decides.

who decides. In our daily family life, we do not often dwell on the concept of the best interest of the child, at least not to the extent of actively applying it. Instead, we engage in discussions about practical matters such as which summer camp our children should attend, how much screen time is too much, whether our children are ready to work in the summer months or during the school year,

whether we feel safe having them babysit other children, which school will give them more opportunities later on, what their gifts are and which one we should foster (or can afford to foster), and whether we should consult them for their input on such matters.

Parenting looks different in every family, and seeking the best interest of the child is the careful determination of what will be most beneficial for the child's well-being in the context of their family. It is recognizing that children are vulnerable, and we are called to protect them. Whatever decisions parents make, they should prioritize the needs of the children above all else, taking into account their specific family circumstances.

When it comes to family mediation, we approach the best interest of the child by actively involving the parents or guardians. Rather than leaving the decisions in the hands of a judge or arbitrator, parents are empowered to find their own solutions, considering the unique needs of their child and the unique needs and dynamics of their family.

While the romantic relationship between parents may have come to an end, the family continues to exist. It transitions into a new mode where the parents enter into a co-parenting relationship. They now operate in the "business" of co-parenting.

To make sound "business decisions" regarding what is the closest and dearest to their hearts—their children—parents need to establish key con-

siderations as they move forward. Good co-parenting relationships live by good, mutual understanding of what is expected and who is responsible.

Creating a family in two homes is often an emotional journey—in addition to the many legal considerations. The law gives a framework, and conflict resolution provides the ability to set up a path into the future. Hence, the following is not legal advice but a tool for building strong co-parenting dynamics, providing a solid foundation for children to flourish, and allowing parents to navigate their journey forward with positivity and growth.

Building a new family

Communication

Exploring communication styles and expectations around communication helps co-parents navigate future decision-making—for example, handling children over after a long weekend, organizing arrival of children for baseball practice, or setting up dentist appointment. Mediators and other professionals stress that it is not for the children to become the messen-



Exploring communication styles and expectations around communication helps co-parents navigate future decision-making.

gers. They are not to carry the information of when and where they need to be, nor should they carry the responsibility of inadequate communication between parents.

Consider this line of questioning: “What do you mean, your father didn’t bring you to your orthodontist appointment? Didn’t you remind him to do so?”

Such questions lay the responsibility on the child, not on the parents. Moreover, they might make the child feel the need to defend the other parent: “It wasn’t his fault. I totally forgot and didn’t want to go anyone.”

Parents have access to a wide range of communication tools—texting, email, phone calls, shared online calendars—many of which are free for parents to use. The development of co-parenting apps—some of which are free on their most basic levels—not only offer a calendar but also include messaging, file keeping, reminders to renew paperwork, and so on.

Parents of school-aged children are encouraged to be in contact with the child’s school and be on the email list. It is an additional measure to effectively navigate communication and minimize missed information and therefore reduce the possibility of comments like, “Once again you forgot to tell me about the school play. I never get to see her.” The respon-

sibility to inform the other co-parent regarding important school events no longer rests with one parent, and if an event is missed, the communication had been provided directly by the school.

Creating a stable and consistent environment

Under the old *Divorce Act* in Canada, parenting arrangements were referred to as “custody” and “access.” When the changes to the *Divorce Act*

Custody and access are commonly associated with property ownership. New terms hopefully encourage parents to focus on the needs of their children.

came into force on March 1, 2021, these terms were replaced with new language that focuses on parents’ responsibilities for their children and the tasks required to care for the children.

“Custody” and “access” are now referred to as “decision-making responsibility” and “parenting time.”² Custody and access are commonly associated with property ownership. These new

terms hopefully encourage parents to focus on the needs of their children instead of thinking that one has ownership of a child.

This shift in language can further the understanding of thinking about the best interest of the child. Decision-making is taking on the responsibility of making significant decisions for a child’s well-being and focuses on the following four areas: (1) health, (2) education, (3) religion and spirituality, and (4) and special activities. Parenting time is the time spent with the child.

Family mediators are trained to mediate parenting time and decision-making and therefore ensuring that a stable environment for the children is created. The more clarity there is regarding the parenting plan—times the children spend with one parent or the other, when and how long the children will stay with family for special holidays and with whom they are staying on Christmas Eve on even or uneven years—the less conflict the children are exposed to. An understanding of parenting time and decision-making responsibility and a dispute resolution mechanism create a path into the future for co-parents and children.

It should be understood that ethnic, cultural, and spiritual values are reflected in a parenting time plan. While a mediator is not familiar with

² These terms are used in most Canadian provinces. The use of legal terms might differ depending on jurisdiction.

every culture, ethnic, or spiritual expression, the mediator will validate these.

The child's needs come first

According to the Canadian government, “A court must give the primary consideration to the child’s physical, emotional and psychological safety, security and well-being. This means that your child’s safety, security and well-being are the most important thing that the court will take into account.”³ Courts must also consider a number of factors, such as the

child’s needs, in consideration of their age and stage of development, the relationship the child has with each parent, and if there are other siblings, grandparents, or important people in their lives.

Care arrangements, which were present before the separation, and any future plans regarding the care of the child, views, and preferences, as well as cultural, linguistic, religious and spiritu-

al upbringing, and heritage—including indigenous upbringing and heritage—have to be considered.

Considerations also include whether there is violence present in the home, whether parents are able and willing to look after the child, and whether they are willing to support a relationship with the other parent.

This list is not a closed list. Any factor that is relevant to the upbringing of a child can be taken into consideration.⁴

Fostering a positive relationship with both parents, family, and friends

We have often heard it said, *It takes a village to raise a child*. Support in child rearing is not only good for the parents; it is also beneficial for the child. Hence, it is relevant for children to continue to see, visit, and have meaningful relationships with those special people in their lives.

Communication between the parents has an impact on how these relationships are experienced for the child. Children needing to defend one

3 “Parenting arrangements after separation or divorce,” Government of Canada, <https://www.justice.gc.ca/eng/fl-df/fact-fiches.html>.

4 “Parenting arrangements after separation or divorce,” Government of Canada, <https://www.justice.gc.ca/eng/fl-df/fact-fiches.html>.

parent to the other is just as unhelpful as needing to serve as a messenger between them.

Fostering relationship does not end with the parents. Grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins can also play a role—as could family friends, friends from the neighbourhood, or the neighbour across the fence who might help with babysitting. Not every one of these relationships needs to be enforced through law. It is about creating strong relationships to give children stability, a sense of belonging, and in a family that is undergoing change, adult awareness and recognition of the changes that are accruing.

Seek professional support

Counseling for children and teens, counseling for parents, and co-parenting education are all valuable tools to help families move forward and adjust to their new normal, a family in two homes. This does not mean that a trained professional will be forever in the child's life. They might be a travel partner for a short while to gain deeper understanding, a confidant outside of the family home, a reassuring presence for the child, and someone who can make sense out of what is going on in the child's life.

A separation is a lot for a child to comprehend. While parents try to be emotionally and physically present in a timely manner, they also have a lot to process themselves: grief, financial concerns, uncertain future, self-worth concerns, and so on. Seeking help and support is thus a sign of strength.

Moving forward

Some of the steps family mediators take separated couples through do not end with the separation and the realization that it is now one family in two homes. Many of these skills could be applied in any relationship.

Ongoing communication

Active listening, speaking respectfully, and being willing to compromise will be priority for years to come in a co-parenting relationship.

Conflict resolution

Creating pathways of nonviolent communication for conflict resolution will be essential in creating a stable home for the children and building a future.⁵ Nonviolent communication is a growing awareness of self and the way we talk and interact with each other.

5 Marshall B. Rosenberg, *Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life*, 3rd ed. (Encinitas, CA: PuddleDancer, 2015).

Even with the best-laid plans, conflict between the co-parents can arise; returning to mediation provides a safe and neutral space for resolving conflicts within a constructive framework.

Building peace

Dorothy Thompson famously wrote, “Peace is not the absence of conflict but the presence of creative alternatives for responding to conflict—alternatives to passive or aggressive responses, alternatives to violence.” Ultimately, the best interest of the child should always be at the forefront of any family. By working together and putting their child’s needs first, parents can create a co-parenting environment that promotes stability, consistency, and emotional well-being for their child and enables the child to thrive. Doing so builds peace for our children.

About the author

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Thank you for women, and moms, on Mother's Day

A congregational prayer

Ruth Boehm

Introduction

I have two children by adoption. I am so grateful for birth mothers and foster mothers. I remember years of leading parent-child blessing services on Mother's Day and how difficult that was for me before I had children. Even now, Mother's Day is a tough day for children who are adopted. In our congregation we have people who have birth grandchildren, had difficult mothers, or are raising their sister's children. We have a host of strong and courageous women. This prayer is for all such people.

Thank you for women, and moms, on Mother's Day

Nurturing God, Wisdom, Sophia,

We thank you *for women*.

Strong. Creative. Nurturing women.

Who use their brains to calculate numbers and count the stars.

Who use their fingers to play keys and create sounds.

Dynamic. Quiet. Courageous women.

Who see a need, call a meeting, and raise money.

Who help those who require refuge, who are hungry,

or who need a friend.

Teachers. Advocates. Empowering women.

Who reach out to children and notice the needs and potential of younger people.

Who plant gardens and watch birds.

Who sew and cook. Intervene. Love.

Thank you God for strong women.

Thank you *for mothers*.

Gutsy women who open their whole selves to you.
Who open their spirits to let your light shine through.
Who open their bodies to let you knit together precious ones
in their wombs.
Who open their hearts to love.
Thank you for birth mothers, adoptive mothers, foster mothers.

Mothering is complicated, O God.
Sometimes it is the best things ever.
And sometimes it is not.
When heartache and love must be held side by side.
When loss wrenches the fibres of our beings and we are forever changed.

Comfort those whose wombs remain empty.
Console those whose arms are vacant after miscarriage
and early infant loss.
Stand by and keep vigil with those who have been separated
from their children.
Due to many factors, including addiction, mental illness, disease,
or death.
May we honour the pain and joy that these experiences
of mothering brings.

Today, O God, we thank you for *our* mothers.
Real, flesh and blood women,
Embodied in our complicated humanness.
With skills and faults,
Loves and hates,
Frailties and strengths.
Yet created by you in your image.
Wonderfully made.
Help us to honour them or treasure their memory.

Bless *all women*.
Those who worry if they are enough.
Those who wonder who they are called to be.
Those who balance work, friends and family.
All who are invited to remain open to you and your love.
Bless all women with wisdom and joy.
Amen.

About the author

Ruth Boehm is a mother of two amazing children through the process of adoption and is married to Barry Bergen. She has been pastor at Faith Mennonite Church in Leamington, Ontario, for eighteen years. Previously, she volunteered with Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) in Winnipeg with conflict resolution, was pastor for twelve years at Bethel Mennonite Church in Winnipeg, and spent three years in Nigeria with MCC seconded to Gindiri College of Theology teaching conflict resolution. She is a graduate of Canadian Mennonite Bible College and Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary. During her most recent sabbatical, she worked on a project that brings together images, scriptures, and prayer called *Seeing with the Heart*. It that can be found on Common-Word.ca.

This prayer was inspired by strong women who are the backbone of her family and friends, congregation and neighbours. It was originally published in 2023 at *Together in Worship* (www.togetherinworship.net) under Creative Commons: Attribution Non-Commercial 4.0 International (CC BY4.0) and is reprinted here by permission.

Remembering rightly

Our experience of the Sixties Scoop

Lydia Neufeld Harder with Ingrid Bettina Wolfear

We want to tell the story of how our mother/daughter relationship was affected by the Sixties Scoop of Indigenous children in Canada.¹ We will each speak in our own unique voice, Ingrid's words written in italics and Lydia's in roman.² Our memories are colored by the present and the past, by what we are learning now and what we knew then. In all of this we are attempting to "remember rightly" what happened then and what is happening now.³

The term "Sixties Scoop" was coined by Patrick Johnson, author of the 1983 report *Native Children and the Child Welfare System*.⁴ It refers to the practice in Canada of removing primarily Métis and Aboriginal children from their families in the 1960s to 80s and placing them in foster homes or adopting them into white middle-class homes. Social workers, often untrained and unfamiliar with the culture and history of Aboriginal communities, evaluated the proper care of children according to Euro-Canadian values. For example, a diet of dried game, fish, and berries was not considered adequate, though this had sustained Indigenous people on the prairies for many years. In many cases children were unexpectedly and forcefully apprehended because parents were living in poverty or because children were being raised by relatives, even though otherwise the chil-

1 I use *Indigenous*, *Aboriginal*, and *First Nations* interchangeably to refer to the descendants of the inhabitants of Canada before it was settled by Europeans.

2 Ingrid's words are excerpted from an interview recorded by Michele Rizoli for the purpose of this paper. Her words have been lightly edited for clarity.

3 Miroslav Volf uses the term "Remembering Rightly" in the subtitle for his book *The End of Memory: Remembering Rightly in a Violent World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006). His book is helpful but concentrates on how a victim should remember. Much more needs to be said about what it means for a perpetrator or someone involved in systems that perpetrate violence to remember rightly.

4 Patrick Johnston, *Native Children and the Welfare System* (Toronto: James Lorimer and the Canadian Council on Social Development, 1983).

dren were receiving loving care. According to one report by a social worker in British Columbia, almost all the newly born babies were removed from their homes on the reserves during some of those years.⁵

Mennonites, as a faith community, were involved in this process as well, both as social workers and as adoptive or foster parents. A resolution passed in 1966 by the Conference of Mennonites in Canada, on the theme of Indian-Métis relationships, testifies to this involvement. It reads in part:

WHEREAS our country is increasingly facing race problems related to Indian and Métis, and

WHEREAS we are largely responsible for the problem, and

WHEREAS the solution also depends largely on us, and

WHEREAS various governmental (i.e. Indian Affairs) and non-governmental organizations (i.e. Children's Aid) are making strong efforts to give first Canadians a better future . . .

BE IT RESOLVED: . . .

*3. That we encourage more Mennonite families to adopt and foster homeless Indian and Metis children. . .*⁶

What does remembering rightly mean for each of us in this context?

See, my body remembers, and my body reacts, and I don't remember. The research that has been done recently about blood memory is totally correct. . . . What the body retains and how far back it goes. . . . I was born Aboriginal, First Nations. All the pain and suffering that my people carried are part of my blood memory. I was born in Calgary as part of the Siksika Nation, who are Blackfoot, of the Plains Indian part of the Confederation, Treaty Seven. I have a ten-digit status card recognized by the Canadian government. But I did not know that until I was in my twenties. I grew up confused, with a loss of identity. . . . The question of why this was so was never answered until now when there has been more research done on how the connection between the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual is carried in the body. So, for myself, though I don't remember consciously with my mind, I now know there is a good reason for that loss of memory.

5 Erin Hanson, "The Sixties Scoop & Aboriginal child welfare," Indigenous Foundations, https://indigenousfoundations.arts.ubc.ca/sixties_scoop/.

6 "Minutes of the 64th Session of the Conference of Mennonites in Canada," in *The 1966 Yearbook*, Winnipeg, MB, July 6-10, 1966, 1.

I want to remember the story rightly of our adoption of Ingrid, whom we named Kristen, by recalling the larger political context and the systemic injustice that affected us deeply as a family. I was unaware of the power I carried as a Canadian citizen with the privileges and rights that I assumed were mine and as a Mennonite with a strong sense of identity as a Christian. I wonder how to tell my story when my memories are shaped by my own biases and prejudgments. I want to explore the power dynamics and injustices involved in this story; however, I also want to leave room for the joyful and reconciling moments that continue to nourish our relationship.

The adoption process

What I recall about the interviews with the social worker were her probing questions. “What are the prejudices you carry? Is there a child that you would find difficult to bring into your family circle?” She was most afraid, I think, that we were “do-gooders” who would soon tire of the challenges that came with adoption.

At the time we were happily settled in Edmonton after several years of seminary training. My husband, Gary, was pastor of a Mennonite church. I was a homemaker, parenting our two boys, ages six and four, and very involved in volunteer activities in our congregation and community. Why were we considering adoption when we already had two children?

First, we were hoping for a daughter since we had two sons. Both sides of our family tree seem to specialize in boys. Adoption would be a sure way to ensure the right sex for our next child. Second, we felt family planning was an ethical choice. During the 1960s, in our Mennonite theological circles, there was a great concern with the over-population of the world and the lack of resources for that population explosion. In addition, we were convinced that all life needed to be in service to God, including the shape of our family. Since successful methods of birth control were now available, we needed to make a choice about the size and type of family we wanted to be. And third, we naively thought we had something we could offer a child without a parent—a stable, loving home environment.

I knew I was not ready for another round of diapers and baby food and talk about babies and home-making with other mothers. I was yearning to go back to my career of teaching, to rational discussion of theology and politics, to move away from the physical labor of housework. We de-

cided we were open to a somewhat older child and that racial background was not a barrier.

It was the Friday before Thanksgiving in 1973, nine months after we had received the approval for adoption. All day I had a premonition that the social worker would call. I remember feeling disappointed and discouraged when I glanced at the clock and realized that the social work offices would soon close. And then we received the call. An Aboriginal girl, age two years and four months, was waiting for us in Calgary. We could meet her on the Tuesday after the holiday weekend, and if everything went well, take her home the day after that. There was jubilation within our family. Our older son had been praying faithfully for a sister. Our prayers were going to be answered!

At the time of adoption, I knew that other Mennonites were adopting Indigenous children and that Mennonite social workers were involved in that process.

To our surprise, the social worker who met us was a friend and former pastor of our congregation. He was able to reassure us in our choice to adopt but gave us very little information as to the child's earlier life. That was all confidential

and not available to us. We were more anxious to meet this little girl than probe into her background. Our sons, who felt privileged to meet her first, were playing with her in the playroom. As a child I had always envied other girls who had black hair and brown eyes but had never imagined I would have this beautiful girl as my daughter. We had no doubts that she belonged in our family. I remember going down the elevator on the day we took her home, overwhelmed with joy.

At the time of adoption, I knew that other Mennonites were adopting Indigenous children and that Mennonite social workers were involved in that process. But I did not reflect deeply on the birth parents and their pain or on the Indigenous community and its values, nor did I ask many questions about how these children came to be in the welfare system. I naively assumed that social workers knew what they were doing.

Yet I do remember that niggling feeling I had when the questions I did ask were so quickly and superficially answered. I was told that the mother was unable to parent the child and had given her up. The father was unknown. I asked about whether it was wise to rename the child or whether we should keep her name. The social worker told me she had been called "baby" for most of her life thus far and so changing the name

would not be problematic. I asked about her somewhat delayed physical development and was told that in her first foster home, she had not developed well because she had spent too much time in her crib. I asked about getting some photos from her first two years but was told these were not available for adoptive parents.

Our daughter came to us with a large paper grocery bag filled with a few clothes and two stuffed toys. It was as if her first two important years of life were wiped away. But we thought our love and embrace would wipe away all neglect that she may have experienced. We did not recognize our middle-class white privilege or the class distinctions that were subtly affecting the adoption process. We now confess that our eyes needed to be opened.

As an infant who was handed off to various people for short periods of time, I never learned the right tools to protect myself. I have been labelled with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, which helped me make sense of why I have been in survival mode all my life. . . . I grew up being uncomfortable, feeling different, yet not seeing myself as an Aboriginal person. Yet when people looked at me, that is what they saw. When I look at the family photos, I can see the discomfort in my face, not really believing that “OK, I am happy.” Right from the first two and a half years, I knew how-to-put-on masks and how to build walls of protection around myself. I did not have the bonds with others that I should have learned as an infant. I missed out on life because I dissociated from my feelings and so was not linked with another human being. I became numb so did not know what it was like to feel. . . . I didn’t know how to walk until after two. I didn’t know my name, so that’s messed up. For this newborn child to go through trauma immediately after birth, having that systemic bloodline of trauma (including parents in residential schools) and then also not getting the early tools to manage the trauma—that means I was already behind in so many ways. The “system” failed me from birth and did not allow me to develop and flourish.


Becoming a “family”

As I look at the photos and mementos of Kristen’s childhood, I smile. Balloons and popcorn symbolize for me the celebrations and ordinary, everyday happiness that were part of our experience with our new daughter. Hiding in closets and jumping out to surprise us never failed to bring forth laughter. Kristen was certainly a unique personality with strong likes and dislikes. Yet she fit into our family patterns quickly. I remember our

five-year old Kendall looking at a family picture only months after the adoption and wondering why Kristen wasn't in the picture.

A few months after the adoption, Gary's mother came to see us and to become acquainted with her new granddaughter. She arrived after our children had been put to bed. But I decided to wake Kristen, so she could meet her new grandmother. It took only one moment before Kristen ran to her for a hug. We wondered if this grandmother reminded Kristen of her last foster mother. A connection was established that only became stronger throughout that grandmother's life. Whenever Kristen had a difficult time falling asleep as a young child, I would suggest: "Think of a safe warm place where you can snuggle in and fall asleep." The place was always Grandma's lap.

I also remember that Kristen easily accepted anyone as a caregiver. Although she called us Mom and Dad, she did not demonstrate that there

 **Was this her intuitive grasp that I was placing her outside of our family circle because of her Indigenous roots?**

was a special bond between us for quite some time. She would give anyone a hug and stay willingly with any babysitter. It wasn't until the year we spent in Paraguay when she was six years old that our family relationships became stronger. In a foreign country where everyone speaks a different language, we had to learn to

depend on each other. I do remember Kristen being excited to meet so many people with brown skin and black hair. She even expressed this to us: "Now you are the different ones and I am the same!"

One incident in Kristen's childhood demonstrates the cracks that were beginning to appear in our approach to Kristen. We were on a family outing and came to a park featuring a large teepee. I asked Kristen to stand in front of it for a photo. She steadfastly refused to do it. Was this her stance against being objectified as an "Indian"? Was this her intuitive grasp that I was placing her outside of our family circle because of her Indigenous roots? Was this her response to not having any exposure to the culture of the people to whom she belonged? I still cringe when I think about that day.

We were glad that we lived in a multicultural neighborhood, but our important church context was quite mono-cultural. I now recognize that I was trying hard to impart my values to our daughter without an equal effort to help her connect with her own Aboriginal community and its values. We had no Indigenous friends during those years and only read

about “Indians” in books—not many of them accurate portrayals. Our efforts in parenting focused on Mennonite and Christian values subtly influenced by what we now understand as more generally Euro-Canadian values. We did not value the deep spiritual and cultural roots of the Aboriginal nations. We assumed that the differences in our blood heritage did not matter. No wonder that Kristen responded differently to situations and experiences than our other two children.

When I was around six years old, this girl in my Sunday school class said to me, “God doesn’t love you because you’re brown.” I visually remember exactly where in the church she said it to me. She was younger than I was, also had an adopted sister my age. I was blown away that this little kid could say something so powerful, so terrible. And in church! So that stuck with me for the rest of my life.

When I was a child, my hair was kept very short and that made me uncomfortable. I was a girl, but I had a boy haircut. Oh, yeah, my dad pulled out the masking tape for the bangs so that they could be cut straight. I remember in kindergarten there was another Aboriginal boy and he was a big boy and I avoided him. And then in grade 7 I met an Aboriginal girl. When the Aboriginal dancers came to the school she would say, “This is who we are.” And I said, “Okay?”

I remember my grandma as being gentle and accepting. But so often I was stepping into situations that I was not prepared for and was hurt in the process. Bonding is the key to relationships, but I was just receiving and not knowing what the boundaries were.

Moving throughout the country was another dislocation; there was no connection to the land, which is a major part of identity, especially for Aboriginals. It was during the move to South America that I started to see myself as a brown person after seven years of not knowing what people were seeing and not knowing how I’m feeling and just feeling displaced—not in the right spot because I’m brown and they’re white with blond hair and blue eyes.

In Paraguay the ladies on the bus would take care of me because they saw me as indigenous. The care. I felt the care! And then I was put into a Mennonite private school (with its blond-hair, blue-eyed students) learning two totally different languages (German and Spanish). The Paraguay experience was a major turning point in my sense of identity.

A fragile identity

As Kristen grew older, she began to ask more and more questions, which revealed some of the struggles she was having. I wrote down some of her questions at age twelve: *How come it is so hard to live the right way? How come*

we have to live? Why are there words like love and care? Why is it so hard to not use God's name in vain? Why does Mark [older brother] have it so easy?

The teen years were difficult. I became afraid for Kristen's safety when I realized how vulnerable she was to abuse as an Indigenous girl.

One day Kristen came home from high school and told me, "Now I can tell everyone I am a Mennonite!" This was a big surprise to me.

Kristen began to seek her independence and try to find her identity in various peer groups. She was often angry, and at times she was quite depressed. I was losing patience with her and was discouraged when I realized how I so often reacted in anger. We took Kristen to a counselor, but she refused to say a word. I remember a conversation in our front yard when she told me that she often felt like running away and would do so if I

forced her into counseling. We made a deal that she would not run away and that we would try to trust her more to make good decisions.

This was difficult for me to do as I watched her making choices that did not express our values and that put her in danger. I spent many nights waiting and worrying about her. When she did experience abuse and mistreatment, we tried to be there for her. I soon realized that I needed to create some space for nourishing my own spirit, so I entered a program of studies that led our family to Toronto, a difficult move for Kristen just before high school.

One day Kristen came home from high school and told me, "Now I can tell everyone I am a Mennonite!" This was a big surprise to me. She informed me that she had taken a course at school about Mennonites, describing them as conservative, Swiss background people, who used horses and buggies to drive to church, who refused to use electricity, and who lived in rural areas of Ontario. "Now I can tell everyone that I am a Mennonite! No one will believe me anyway!" she said.

Kristen was sure of one thing. She needed to get back to the western provinces where she felt more at home. For her last two years of high school she decided to go to Rosthern Junior College (RJC), a small Mennonite boarding school in Saskatchewan that some of her Edmonton friends were also attending. Though we were reluctant to send her so far away, we also realized that the independence she would have from us could be helpful in our relationship. She made some good friends and had some positive experiences. But she also found the rules and regula-

tions restrictive and often felt misunderstood and even betrayed when she shared feelings that were not kept confidential by the staff. I began to sense how difficult it was to be one of only a few Indigenous students, all of whom had been adopted, in a town where the barriers between Mennonites and Indigenous folk were huge.

Now we see that we too were part of the larger system that was trying to destroy the culture and unique identity of First Nations people by assimilating them through the fostering and adoption process. As Fournier

Our vested interests as parents were often disguised and hidden as we talked about doing what was best for the Aboriginal children in our midst.

and Grey explain, “The impossibility of emulating the genetic characteristics of their Caucasian caretakers results in an identity crisis unresolvable in this environment. . . . The Aboriginal child simply cannot live up to the assimilationist expectations of the non-Aboriginal caretakers.”⁷ The harm that was done is summed up in a decision by Superior Court Justice Edward Belbaba who ruled in favor of the plaintiffs in an Ontario

Sixties Scoop class action lawsuit. He stated that Canada had breached its common law duty of care to take reasonable steps to prevent adopted children from losing their Aboriginal identity. This left these children as “fundamentally disoriented, with a reduced ability to lead healthy and fulfilling lives. The loss of Aboriginal identity resulted in psychiatric disorders, substance abuse, unemployment, violence and numerous suicides.”⁸

Our vested interests as parents, as school administrators and teachers, as social workers and as guidance counselors were often disguised and hidden as we talked about doing what was best for the Aboriginal children in our midst. We did not understand that the choices available to Aboriginal teens were fewer and different because of the disorientation and loss of identity that came with adoption into a dominant culture that had oppressed their peoples for centuries. At the time I had little idea how deeply this affected not only individuals but also the larger Indigenous community.

7 Suzanne Fournier and Ernie Grey, *Stolen From our Embrace* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 1997), 30.

8 *Brown v. Canada (AG)*. 2017 ONSC 251 [Sixties Scoop Class Action] para.7 [4].

I was asking questions as a teenager because I did not know what it means to love. There's a difference between the dictionary meaning of love and knowing what it means when people say, "I love you." I know I love popcorn, but do I know I love another human being? I can say to my kids, "I love you," but do I really? And for me to say I love myself; I don't know what that means. So I put on a mask of pretending to know what it actually means.

Before RJC I was confused with no answer to the question of why this was so. The world didn't make sense, society didn't make sense. I observed hypocrites within the church and community, seeing their actions and hearing the words but also seeing the disconnect. Rosthern is a small town in Cree territory where Mennonites had settled as immigrants. While at RJC I was connecting with Indigenous people who lived on the reserve. The poverty on the reserve was a reality that was ignored by the Mennonite people. Many of these Indigenous people had gone to residential schools and had lost their identity.⁹

When I went to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission¹⁰ meetings in Toronto in 2011 with my brother Mark, I sat in on a session where somebody was speaking of their experience in residential schools. This triggered a strong response in me. I realized that the experience of the residential schools and my own experience as an adoptee were very similar. The adoption of Indigenous children was another version of the same thing—to take the Indian out of the human being. To lose the Indigenous part of us. To forget the unique role that we as Indigenous were given by the Creator.

Discovering roots

After successfully finishing high school, Kristen felt ready to begin the search for her birth mother. Together we looked through the adoption papers and especially her health records for clues to her birth family. It was not difficult to hold the papers up to the light and discover traces of Kristen's birth name that they had tried to erase. The name "Wolfear" led us to the Blackfoot reserve beside Gleichen, a reservation on which the Siksika nation had been placed only a few miles away from Rosemary, Alberta, where my husband, Gary, grew up. Over the next few months, both Mennonite and Aboriginal networks were enlisted to find her family. A call from a sister surprised Kristen one day, and they talked for hours as

⁹ I resonate deeply with the experiences and feelings of the main character in the novel Carol Rose GoldenEagle Daniels, *Bearskin Diary* (Gibsons, BC: Nightwood Editions, 2015).

¹⁰ For more information on these meetings throughout Canada, see Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (<https://www.trc-ca>).

she discovered a family she knew nothing about. The experience of meeting her mother for the first time was traumatic. Kristen writes about her feelings in *Intotemak*, a Mennonite periodical for Native Affairs.¹¹

*I get a lump in my throat
Tears in my eyes
When I think of that time
The moment of fear
“I would not survive”
Every feeling known
Jumping frantically
In my heart and soul
Feeling confused and alone
Laughing on the outside
Crying on the inside
Patience and time
Proved I could survive
And I will the next time too.*

This marked the beginning of Kristen’s formal search for her Aboriginal roots. In 1992 she went to Guatemala with a Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) Youth Discovery Team to acknowledge and affirm the resilience and survival of native people of America during the last 500 years. Perhaps this could counter the recognition of the “discovery” of North America by Christopher Columbus (who had lost his way in the trip to India!). She was disappointed to discover that MCC was unable to enlist any other Indigenous person for what she had understood was to be a four-member Indigenous team from North America. The other three young people who were now part of the team were not nearly as engaged in the larger purpose of the group as she was. She then worked as an MCC volunteer at the Walnut Receiving Home for helping Indigenous mothers in Winnipeg. She also traveled across Canada with a Peace Bus tour that visited various reserves to encounter Aboriginal peoples. They caught a glimpse of the rich culture and spirituality but also noted how much was taken away. In an interview after these varied experiences she speaks about how churches should respond to adopted native children

11 Special thanks to Mennonite Church Canada, the publisher of the periodical *Intotemak*, for permission to republish this poem, which originally appeared in *Intotemak* 22, no. 2 (March–April, 1993): 6–7.

in their midst: *Churches should support whichever decision that person would make, whether it is to never look into their blood heritage or stay with the Mennonite system or . . . try to make them match.*¹² She has continued her search for roots as she meets more of her relatives, as she visits reserves and hears the stories, as she participates in the ceremonies and rituals of native spirituality and as she meets Aboriginal folk in a variety of other settings.

The words of my mother to Kristen when she told her she was going to Calgary to meet her birth mother encouraged me during those years. “Kristen,” she said, “you know you can always love *more* people.” My

Kristen’s search for her roots also began our search for greater understanding of the relationship between the First Nations of Canada and the settlers who came later.

mother recognized that we need not fear that finding a birth family would necessarily erase the experiences and love that we had shared over the years. I have held that truth tightly through the many ups and downs in the years that followed.

Kristen’s search for her roots also began our search for greater understanding of the relationship between the First Nations of Canada and the settlers who came later. What we discovered was a

trail of oppression by government, churches, and ordinary citizens like us—residential schools, physical and psychological abuse, broken treaties and promises, and much deception. For example, the government took reserve land (Kristen’s home reserve) without permission to build a dam that brought prosperity to the Mennonite community in which Gary grew up. Kristen’s parents and her husband’s parents spent time in residential schools and have told us stories about the abuse suffered there. Stereotypes of Indigenous people and distorted historical facts continue to be taught in our schools. As settlers we benefitted from these abusive situations.

Emotionally we also needed to come to terms with the fact that not only was Kristen searching for her family; her family was also searching for her. We cannot imagine the pain of families who were separated without having the knowledge and power to find out where and why this was happening to their family. A CBC podcast titled “Finding Cleo” tells a heart-wrenching story from the point of view of those searching for the

¹² Margaret Loewen Reimer, “Kristen Uncovers Her Aboriginal Heritage,” *Mennonite Reporter*, September 20, 1993, 5.

truth about their lost family member.¹³ We are only beginning to hear how these forced separations of family members have affected not only individuals but the larger communal identity of our First Nations people.

So much of our own thinking was influenced by the settler mentality which assumed that the Doctrine of Discovery with its “fabric of lies” gave us the power to decide what happened to Indigenous folk who had lived in the land for centuries.¹⁴ This false sense of privilege has permeated every aspect of the relationship between settlers and Indigenous peoples by legitimating untold violence and injustice. We need to consciously repudiate and reject and dismantle this Doctrine of Discovery in order to be open to transformation. As Christians who settled on Indigenous land, we need to look again at the biblical and theological justifications that were used and point out how they benefitted us as settlers.

Why did I look for my parents? It was all Lydia’s influence. She wanted me to find out what my last name was. . . . To meet my mother was devastating because I saw the poverty and the distrust. . . . I also met my younger sister. She’s messed up too. Going from a middle-class family into what I assume was social housing, experiencing the difference in lifestyle was traumatic. . . . To be with bloodline family but they were strangers—perfect strangers.

One of the commonalities was humor, so there was a lot of laughter and joking to avoid the opposite feelings. It is more natural for Indigenous people to resort to humor.

I had a relationship with my mother, Heather, for ten years before she died. Meeting her, meeting my family, that in itself was traumatic. Finding out the traumas that my family have gone through (and of course not talked about) and seeing the effects as the aunties and uncles and my mother were trying to numb themselves, and then seeing their kids who were also trying to numb themselves and I too for various reasons . . . It’s the body that remembers.

13 Connie Walker, *Missing and Murdered: Finding Cleo*, CBC Radio, Podcast Audio, April 2, 2018, <https://www.cbc.ca/radio/findingcleo>.

14 The Doctrine of Discovery is the “ostensibly legal justification for European claim to, and sovereignty over, indigenous lands and peoples.” Cheryl Woelk and Steve Heinrichs, *Yours, Mine, Ours: Unravelling the Doctrine of Discovery* (Winnipeg, MB: Mennonite Church Canada, 2016), 7n1. See also Shari Russell, “Still Questioning: The Theft of Indigenous Children,” *Intotemak* (Fall/Winter, 2016): 28–31; Sarah Augustine, “The Doctrine of Discovery and the Anabaptist Coalition to Dismantle It,” in *Resistance: Confronting Violence, Power, and Abuse within Peace Churches*, edited by Cameron Altaras and Carol Penner (Elkhart, IN: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 2022), 17–30; Jennifer Delanty, “Dismantling the Doctrine of Discovery: One Congregation’s Response,” in *Resistance*, 65–71.

The first teaching that I remember came straight from the Creator. . . . I saw a white owl on my cedar tree in my back yard. . . . Several different elders explained to me its meaning: “It is a messenger of death.” That is when I was called to the hospital because my mother was dying. . . . I was put as next of kin but did not know what this meant, who to ask, and what part of culture should be involved. . . . I was at her bedside when she passed. . . . This was all confusion, not knowing the power of the Sprit and the connection with the Creator; it was all foreign ground.

The funeral was traditional, a new teaching for me. My instinct was to do the traditional thing, but I didn’t really know what that was. That’s when my gut instincts guided me. . . . I had my head shaved and put the hair into the coffin. . . . At the funeral everyone else began taking small strands and braids from their own hair to also put into the coffin. It was instinctively the right thing to do.

Small pieces toward reconciliation

Through the counseling and being part of the Aboriginal elder wisdom and really observing what is in front of me and going with the flow brought me to where I am today. It has been a gift, having my eyes opened. There are many blessings, but at the same time, it has been extreme. . . . So I was brought into this world in trauma, in pain. My question is, Why? What is the larger teaching in that? There is still some anger; there is a lot of confusion; there are communication barriers. . . . The physical element (the body memories) is what is holding me back. But I had the inner strength to go through all that! The “intuitive vibe” is an amazing thing that I was given. I know that with everything, there is a time and place, plus everything happens for a reason. . . . Patience is the way to live.

As for the adoption, that’s been one of the strong poles that has allowed me to connect back to my Indigenous side. Because my parents were open-minded, they were supportive. They were able to take things in. Having a father who has the teachings on how to manage trauma is a blessing. And him being an introvert as well because he can listen. (That has been a challenge, having an introvert as one parent and an extrovert as the other. It’s quite a dynamic.)

I have to accept what has happened for what it is. It is not something that as a human being I can overcome, but spiritually I have trust in the Creator and in time.

Kristen has blessed us in so many ways. We took many trips to British Columbia where she had settled and were able to hold each of Kristen’s babies in our arms soon after their birth. When she moved to Toronto, after she became a single mom, we could support her and participate more

in the daily and weekly life of her family. We have also shared pain—when there was abuse, when relationships were broken. Sometimes our relationship was tenuous; however, gradually we were able to reconnect in more healthy ways, giving each other space when needed.

There were many birthday parties for grandchildren and trips to the zoo or the lake. Watching our grandson dancing at a pow wow, attending school graduations, camping with the larger family circle all hold precious

The question of what reconciliation looks like on a personal and a systemic level still haunts me. Healing is often elusive for Aboriginal people.

memories for us. We have experienced many joyous times together and have met some of Kristen’s Indigenous family and friends. Most important to me was meeting Kristen’s mother and sharing a Christmas meal with her at our home. We thanked each other for the part we each played in Kristen’s life. Kristen gave us each a similar candle holder. I cherish the photos of that Christmas. Another

highlight was the wedding of our daughter a few years ago—celebrated by a Mennonite ceremony attended by the two families, Aboriginal and Mennonite, followed several months later by an Aboriginal ceremony also attended by both extended families.

Yet the question of what reconciliation looks like on a personal and a systemic level still haunts me. Healing is often elusive for Aboriginal people who continue to bear the wounds of injustice because injustice continues in a variety of ways. But I know that we, who adopted children during the Sixties Scoop, also need healing and forgiveness. Remembering rightly is part of that process for me.

A few weeks ago, Kristen came to me and asked my help in applying to change her name officially to Ingrid Bettina Wolfear, the name given to her at birth. Intellectually I was ready for this; what surprised me was that I wholeheartedly could support this emotionally as well. Ingrid has moved north to live with her husband on First Nations land and is appreciating the presence of the lake and trees and sky all around her. She has a young daughter named Charlotte Marlene, the “Marlene” chosen because my second name is Marlene. We continue to keep in close touch with each other.

Our grandchild, Mitchell, when he was around six years old, asked us, “When did God and the Great Spirit become friends?” Somehow, he had caught a glimpse of a reconciliation “made in heaven.” I pray that this

kind of reconciliation may come on earth as it is in heaven. Remembering rightly may be the first step.

About the authors

Lydia Neufeld Harder, PhD (Toronto School of Theology), is retired from her formal work as theologian and pastor, but she continues to reflect on Mennonite theology and practice, particularly on the way power has functioned within the church and scholarly communities. She has taught sessionally, presented at numerous academic conferences, and worked as a pastor in the Mennonite Church. Her most recent book, *The Challenge Is in the Naming*, chronicles her theological journey by placing earlier published essays into the personal, social, and church contexts in which they were written. Lydia and her husband, Gary, live in Toronto, Ontario, where they attend the Toronto United Mennonite Church. Their three children and their spouses and their nine grandchildren and one great grandchild give them ample reason to travel and to keep in touch with the challenges of the next generations.

Ingrid Bettina Wolfear was born into the Blackfoot Nation, where all of her larger family and community were survivors of Residential School. She was in survivor mode from before the time she was born with blood memory as her backbone. She was a single parent to three children born within twenty-five months, until she met her husband of ten years. She and her husband live with their school-age daughter on Sagamok Anishnawbek Nation in Ojibway territory. Healing continues for all.

This essay is adapted with permission of the publisher from Lydia Neufeld Harder with Ingrid Bettina Wolfear, “Remembering Rightly: Our Experience of the Sixties Scoop,” in *Resistance: Confronting Violence, Power, and Abuse within Peace Churches*, edited by Cameron Altaras and Carol Penner (Elkhart, IN: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 2022), 47–64.

Grandmother God

Steph Chandler Burns

Introduction

Identifying as queer and Mennonite is both gift and difficulty. These dual, sometimes at-odds identities often clash or confuse one another. They can create wedges in how I find I can interact with the wider church or other people and even in my own healthy interactions with myself. But do not be mistaken: these difficulties do not come from being queer. Knowing God to have created me with love and seeing that even in the parts of myself that the church would reject have long brought me closer to God. Self-exploration, reflection, and discernment on these two, often competing, parts of identity have been a beautiful and fruitful piece of my life and my relationship to a God of love, compassion, and justice.

In recent years I've come to realize the ways that pieces of our identities can show us parts of who God is. My experience as a white, middle-class, bisexual, non-binary, queer, Mennonite, Christian person has influenced my understanding of the divine. I have begun writing intentionally to include both themes of faith and sexuality in the same work. My poetry explores topics of faith, sexuality, belonging, lament, pain, and exclusion and reflects my journey to find my place of belonging within the body of Christ. Given that LGBTQ+ folks still have fewer spots at the proverbial table in faith discussions, power ends up being a key theme throughout my poetry. What does it mean to seek power as someone on the margins of the church? Whose voices are heard, and who needs others to advocate for them? What does it mean to find a voice in the church? This poem is not meant to get into the weeds of making an argument for LGBTQ+ inclusion. It is not meant to prove that the church is not yet a safe place for LGBTQ+ voices, or even to explain queer theory or theology, as these things are handled in more detail elsewhere.¹ Instead, this poem shares a few glimpses of my own experiences with being queer and Christian.

1 See, for example, Steph Chandler Burns, "Nonbinary Identity in Ruth and the Restructuring of Power," in *I've Got the Power: Naming and Reclaiming Power as a Source for Good*, edited by Jenny Castro (Elkhart: Women in Leadership Project, Mennonite Church USA, 2018), , 95–106, and my other works delving into queer and Mennonite identity in more depth.

This poem is about my grandparents, who were active in the early days of LGBTQ+ advocacy in the Mennonite Church. They and other advocates in the mid-to-late 1980s began the work of trying to make room for LGBTQ+ people in the Mennonite Church.² I am deeply grateful for the previous generations of advocates and justice workers who began paving the way for the level of acceptance and welcome that I do get to experience today. My own grandparents have taught me something of God: God is a grandmother. She is fiercely loving of her grandchildren and stands up to anyone who would exclude them. More than anything, she wants her beloved grandchildren to thrive in a church that loves them as much as she does.

Grandmother God

I remember the day I learned
 my grandma was a feminist
 how much less alone I felt knowing
 this really is in my blood

and grandma,
 in fighting by resisting
 the norms placed on her and her children
 in quietly, in her way
 standing up to the world, proclaiming:
 “this is not okay”

made room
 for queer little me at the table
 for me to own my voice
 in echoing her lament:
 “this is not okay”

and in so doing
 ushering, birthing

Her kingdom come
 On earth as in heaven

² For more information on this history, see Dave Rogalsky, “A Voice from Outside the Gate,” *Canadian Mennonite* 21, no. 7, March 22, 2017, 19.

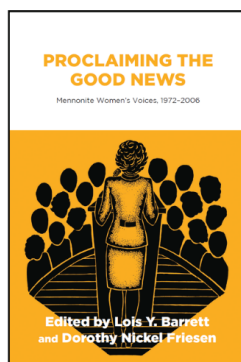
About the author

Steph Chandler Burns, MTS (Conrad Grebel University College, Waterloo, Ontario), works as a pastor with young adults on the margins of church. Steph is bisexual, queer, non-binary, and very opinionated. Steph has published theological reflections on being queer and Mennonite and enjoys thinking about the ways that queerness reveals parts of the divine. When not engaging with church, Steph can be found playing board games or getting new tattoos. Steph lives with a partner, Greg, and their cat, Lulu, in Kitchener, Ontario, on the Haldimand Tract, the traditional territory of the Haudenosaunee, Anishinaabe, and Attawandaron First Peoples.

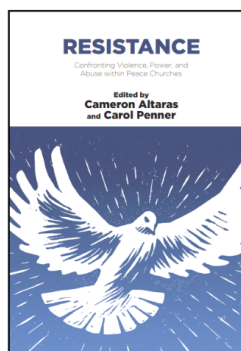
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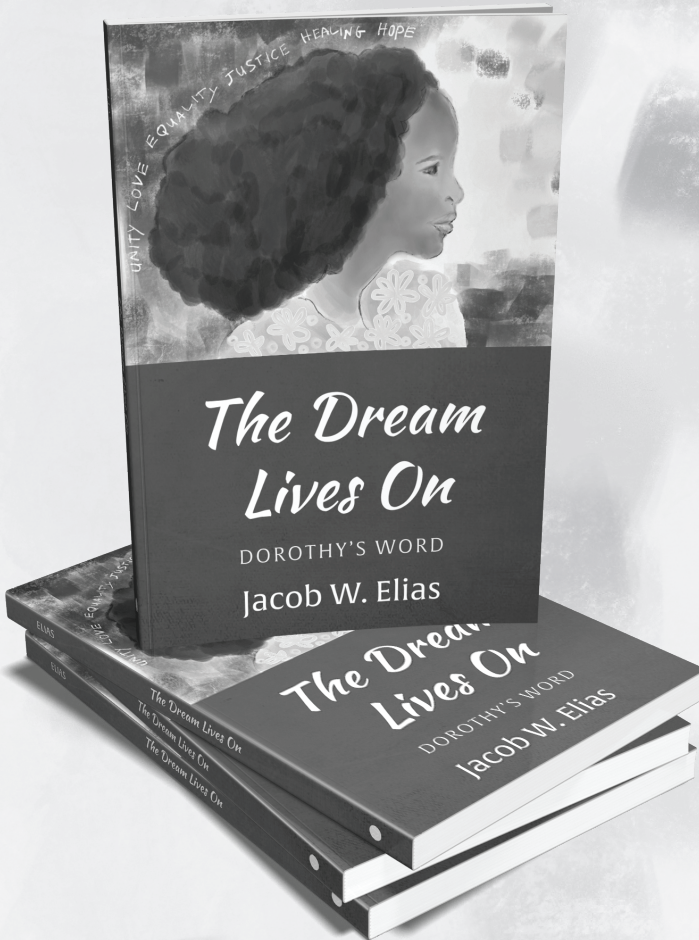


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