

Vera White and Charles Wiley. *New Worshiping Communities: A Theological Exploration*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2018. 108 pages. \$20.

In 2012, the Presbyterian Church (USA) launched 1001 New Worshiping Communities (NWC), an initiative to launch often untraditional Christian communities within the denomination. In this new book, Vera White and Charles Wiley—the Coordinators of NWC and the Office of Theology and Worship in the PC(USA), respectively—reflect on the initiative’s six years in dialogue with a wide array of practitioners and theologians.

NWCs are an intriguing line of study because they are currently reaching a demographic so often missing in traditional mainline services: a younger, more diverse group of people with little to no experience with churches (93-6). Further, NWCs call into question several of the basic assumptions many hold about how a church starts, what a church is, and how a church should live out its mission in the modern world. Beginning by dropping the label “church” with its often-problematic institutional baggage, many NWCs diverge from traditional concepts of church in several key ways. Over half of NWCs meet in a non-church setting, with 21% meeting in homes, 27% meeting in coffee shops or bars, and 8% meeting outdoors (94); many are led by people who do not hold traditional denominational credentials and are not seminary-trained; and they often include people who may share little to none of the theological commitments of traditional Christian doctrine, let alone the particularities of Reformed theology.

While the book deftly explores these questions over a wide range of theological topics—discipleship, evangelism, mission, accountability, and sustainability—what is of particular interest for readers of *Homiletic* are the middle chapters exploring new forms of worship and preaching within NWCs. Unlike previous church plants that often began with the “launch” of a worship service in a distinct church building, NWCs often start with relationships or mission and only later form a distinct worshiping community that may look quite different from traditional services of Word and Sacrament in other PC(USA) churches. This raises a series of important questions for these new communities of faith and their supporting denominations to grapple with. For example, what does it mean for the study of homiletics if, as the book argues, “The Word needs to be proclaimed, but preaching is not the only way to proclaim the Word” (52)? In NWCs, the service of the Word might involve people discussing a passage around a breakfast table or responding to the Word with art projects rather than a hymn. How does this change how we understand the formative power of the service of the Word and the traditional role of the pastor-as-preacher?

More generally, how central is worship to communities of faith? If these communities start with mission or relationship, shouldn’t these be considered the central mark of the church? Rather than simply answering the question, the book highlights two divergent views from theologians Darrell Guder and Edwin van Driel. Guder argues that “every dimension...of Christian worship...must necessarily relate to the missional vocation of the church” (41-2), while van Driel cautions that such a view can make worship “instrumental to mission” rather than an end in and of itself (43-44). While the book leans toward van Driel’s view (it is *New Worshiping Communities* after all), this conversation highlights one of the great strengths of this study: it does not give a one-size-fits-all answer for all churches everywhere, but rather calls communities of faith to grapple with these thorny questions in their particular contexts.

As is often the case, the strengths of the book often lead to corresponding weaknesses. While the number of theological and pastoral interlocutors helps raise a diversity of perspectives, it occasionally feels disjointed—though this might model the multiplicity of voices and

perspectives present in NWCs. Also, while the book's commitment to the PC(USA) and Reformed theology gives the study its necessary context, it might limit its applicability for those of other traditions. Yet, with suitable theological translation, the reflections will no doubt be helpful for other faith traditions that are struggling with many of the same basic questions.

*New Worshiping Communities* is a valuable resource for denominations, academics, and pastors as they start new faith communities that seek to maintain a healthy dialectic between honoring the core traditions of the Christian faith that have been handed down through the ages while also ensuring that this tradition speaks in new ways to particular contexts in contemporary cultures.

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