

**Roundtable Worship**  
**A Reflective Guide**

William Johnson Everett

2009

Copyright William Johnson Everett 2009

This work may be printed out for individual and study group use, but is not to be distributed by sale or reproduced in any other form.

### **In Gratitude and Acknowledgment**

I am grateful for encouragement and enlightenment at Roundtable by many friends, including Sylvia Everett, Kenneth Johnson, Garland Young, Helen King, Wannie and Betsy Hardin, Roger and Jane Dowdy, Bryant and Linda Lindsey, Earl Thompson, Marge Marsh, Charlie and Dianne Reeves, and Sandy Giles. We all remember with great gratitude our inspiration from our departed friend, Mel Harbin.

## Introduction

You may be one of those people seeking a more intensive spiritual life grounded in dynamics of reconciliation and restoration of self, community, and ecology. You may be especially longing for forms of prayer, nurture, and communal support that take seriously our need for equal participation in circular forms of communication and transformation. This little book may help you in that quest. More than twenty years ago my wife Sylvia and I started gathering a few people together on occasional Sunday nights in Atlanta for singing, prayer, reflection, and the traditional elements of the Christian meal. We chewed on the bread and offered each other our crumbs of meditation. The small symbols of our gathering left us with a special satisfaction. We weren't sure why we gathered in circle at a simple card table, but somehow it felt right and renewing. Over the years we continually felt pulled back to this simple form. For me, there was decreasing power in the traditional forms of worship seated in fixed pews consuming sermons, anthems, and prayers. Worship shows with rock bands and backup singers quickened my pulse but not my spirit. I was tired of manipulation rather than genuine participation. The table gatherings remained a beckoning light.

It was in a Roman Catholic setting that I had first experienced the power of coming to table. After the Second Vatican Council, the Roman church was trying to recover the original meaning of the table. Altars that had been pushed against a wall were brought forward. Rails that had separated the people from the table were torn away. When I arrived at St. Francis Seminary in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, in 1969, I was introduced to a form of Holy Communion that was table-centered and people-centered. While priests still presided, the table was

opened up as a power and authority of its own – even for people like me from the separated churches of the Reformation. The power of the table, framed in liturgies that shaped its enduring meaning, became a beacon for my future and for later gatherings at table.

In the year 2000 I felt a powerful urge to create a round communion table for Andover Newton Theological School, where I was teaching at the time. The power of the gathering at table protested against the pulpit wordiness, the pews, the altars fixed against the wall in Gothic Protestant churches. In addition, another experience had begun to reshape my intuitions. I had recently spent many months in South Africa doing research on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission that had been created to enable victims of apartheid to gain a voice and the perpetrators of crimes to give account of their acts in public. It was a great national experiment in the work of reconciliation and restorative justice. Without it, the work of building a new republic on a democratic basis would have been much more difficult, if not impossible.

The connections came in a flood. I realized anew that the work of reconciliation is the heart of the Christian calling – our reconciliation with our Creator, with all other humans, our fellow creatures and plants, and with this precious earth, our only home. This work of reconciliation and restoration cannot take place without listening to the pain and hope of the other person, without acknowledging the equal dignity of the other, and without finding our own voice. This cannot happen without a nurturing grace symbolized in the simple food of the table. All of these elements come together at a round table whose wood recalls our bonding with the earth. I spent the next three months taking my woodworking skills to a new level and returned to Andover Newton with the table.

When I retired the following year at age sixty, people knew that I had to build more tables and continue wrestling with the work of reconciliation that the tables symbolize. Over the past seven years I have helped lead a small group that has gathered regularly at a round table to engage in a form of worship grounded in these basic elements of reconciliation. In our gatherings we are both inspired and strengthened in our efforts to live out this reconciliation in our communities. This little book is an effort to tell others about this Roundtable Worship and the Roundtable Ministries that it seeks to support. In telling the story I also want to set forth briefly the kind of faith and theology it expresses. I want to say what we do as well as why I think we do it.

These are definitely notes on a journey. Part of that journey has been inspired by my work with Tom Porter and the JustPeace group in the United Methodist Church. Out of their work came an earlier book, *Conflict and Communion*, in which various people reflected on the relationship between Holy Communion and restorative justice. This book is a successor to that one and a companion for Tom's recent book, *The Spirit and Art of Conflict Transformation: Creating a Culture of JustPeace* (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 2010), which sets out the practices of circle conversation and conflict transformation at the heart of the Roundtable's understanding of reconciliation. There are many other similar initiatives that have emerged in our conflicted times. They speak of reconciliation, conflict transformation, and restoration. This is one voice to add to the conversation.

In the next chapters I will walk you through our typical gathering, sharing at each point my understanding of why we do this. While others in the group have commented on my report, this is my theological understanding, not necessarily theirs! I will then

summarize some of the things we have discovered in this experience and the challenges we have encountered along the way. I conclude with some observations about the ancient traditions this practice retrieves and the possible future trajectory it might take. At the end are some sample liturgies that readers might find helpful.

## **Our Roundtable Experience**

Over the past six years about a dozen people have gathered every month for a time of prayer, song, conversation and communion at our Methodist church in Waynesville, North Carolina. We call it Roundtable Worship. It arose as an effort to express in a worship format the work of mediation and conflict transformation at the heart of reconciliation. Through it we wanted to embody this work of reconciliation in a symbolic form as well as strengthen us for this work. In this little book I want to describe this worship activity and reflect on why we do it.

### **A. We Gather at the Table**

The small round table is placed at the center of the sanctuary and we circle chairs around it. A candle is placed on the table along with a plate with bread and a pitcher of juice to its side. It is late winter. A sprig of early forsythia, its buds about to burst, lies beside a feather. The bloom is earth's sign to us in this season, the feather our symbol for the table's reconciling conversation. People begin to take their seats around it.

With these objects and actions we make some powerful statements. We are not sitting before an altar. We are gathered at table. We are not facing a pulpit above us but a table before us. We are not seated at a stage to see a show but at a table facing others ready for a meal and conversation. It is a moment calling for participation, a moment with its own anxiety and its own promise.

It is a round table. In our own time the round table has become a symbol of conversation and negotiation in the collapse of empires, tyrannies and dictatorships. As early as the 1930s, E. Stanley Jones

was convening roundtables to bridge divisions among India's religious groups, while Mahatma Gandhi was participating in Roundtables to begin the process of liberating India from British imperial rule. When the Berlin Wall fell in 1989, taking the East German regime with it, people gathered at roundtables to debate their democratic future. Since then, roundtable discussions have pervaded not only the media but also local community building efforts around the world.

"Roundtable" is not merely a description of a physical table but of a process in which all have equal voice. It takes place in a circular process of speaking and listening that accords respect and dignity to all participants. It is a conversation focused on the interests that unite as well as divide us, not the personalities that give them voice. It is a conversation led by hope for reconciliation and negotiation of a new future together.

We place a candle on the table to remind us that there is a spirit of wisdom and illumination presiding at the table. This is a table where we declare the Spirit of Christ is to preside. When we light the candle at the table's center we are saying that we seek a conversation in the light of Jesus's ministry and the long line of people before and after him who have walked this path and kept the light alive. In saying that "Christ" presides, we mean that there is a governing authority who has been, is, and will be in our midst to inspire and guide our conversations.

Finally, in saying "Christ presides at this table" we are saying that our coming to the table is an act of faith. It is a faithful trust that new understandings and new possibilities of reconciliation will emerge in our gathering. But because "Christ" appears in the process, indeed, that Christ is here "in the Spirit," we realize that each of us is responsible to act in accord with that spirit. It requires a discipline in

each one of us to listen with a desire for understanding, to speak from the heart rather than from our defenses, and to search for a way ahead that builds community. We affirm this "Christ," this "anointed one," as the center of a peace-building spirit that presides through persuasion rather than conquering by coercion. The presidency of Christ is, like Jeremiah's covenant, "written in our hearts," but it is realized in the crossroads of communal conversation. While we have different thoughts and feelings about the term "Christ," we join together in an effort to let this kind of spirit take root in our hearts and actions.

Indeed, this setting of the table as a signature act of the divine life goes back to the Wisdom literature that underlies the idea of "the Christ." A passage from Proverbs that also reappears in the Gospels gives vivid expression to this character of the Holy One:

Wisdom has built her house,  
     she has hewn her seven pillars.  
 She has slaughtered her animals, she has mixed her wine,  
     she has also set her table.  
 She has sent out her servant-girls, she calls  
     from the highest places in the town,  
 "You that are simple, turn in here!"  
     To those without sense she says,  
 "Come, eat of my bread  
     and drink of the wine I have mixed.  
 Lay aside immaturity, and live,  
     and walk in the way of insight."

Proverbs 9:1-6

With the bread, drink, and flowering branch we establish our grounding in this earth and its fruits. Our conversation is rooted in the

earth's indispensable nurture and beauty. Without the kind of awe experienced in the face of earth's intricate beauty and enormous power we lose our inspiration for living. We forget our finite place within the whole, the place of our vocation. We forget the geography of our faith.

In seeing these elements of grain and grape severed from their origins we also recognize our deep estrangement from this earth, its creatures, its harmonies, its abundance and its finitude. We are reminded that the table beckons us to reconciliation with the earth as well as to each other. The two webs of human and ecological reconciliation are tied ineluctably to each other. These two pathways of reconciliation are the biggest challenges of our lives. The Cherokee people, near whom we live and whose wisdom and struggle have influenced my later years, have the word "duyukta" – a right relationship of harmony among things – that seems to get at this complex shape of reconciliation. Perhaps *shalom* and *salaam* convey roughly the same thing. It is a peace grounded in right relationships among all earthly beings.

The feather – also an artifact of Cherokee culture – is a powerful symbol of right relationship in conversation. It is light and transient, yet as it is passed from person to person, it gives them authority to speak and to the others a profound call to listen. In our own experience the feather – which could be any "talking piece" – does more than anything else to reconnect our tongues to our hearts, discipline our impulsive chatter, and open our ears to non-anxious reception of the truths emerging from the other. It is a form of Christ's presiding in the spirit.

## B. We Respond to the Call

Our voices come together first in an exchange of call and response. Beginning with a call of some kind is an ancient action in Jewish, Christian, and Islamic life. It is an interruption of our normal round of activities. It breaks into our labors and our self-interested busyness. By using the call and response form we establish that this is a call to dialogue and conversation. It is a mutual acknowledgement of a movement from life-as-usual to life-at-table. To give you an idea of this dialogue, here is one call to the table we have used:

From violent streets and shouting words

**You lead us to your home of peace.**

From ruined hopes and darkened roads

**You lead us to your lighted path.**

From the desert of our self-concern

**You lead us to oases of your peace.**

To your table you invite us, enemy and friend,

**From your hand we take the bread of life.**

All: ***We come to your table, we come to your peace.***

“The Call” can take many forms – as a word from afar, as a voice within, as a deep recognition coming into consciousness. In the ancient Greek-speaking church, “call,” that is, *klesis*, was the root of *ekklesia*, the “assembly.” This is the name the church took for itself as a gathering of those called out from their ordinary life into a new Way. In our case this call is a call to table, to a life lived together in sharing of the earth’s abundance and in conversation with others.

The call to table is also a call to each one of us to come out of our fearful silence and find the courage (that is, the “heart”) to speak what we know. Much of our speech flows from our anxiety and fear. It may sound commanding and dominating or it may sound like a

croaking whisper of subservience. Both flow from fear in myriad ways. The media of our time only amplify this fear. They do not mitigate it. The spirit of the table begins to permeate our senses like aroma from a banquet table. It provides a setting for a kind of grace that frees us from our fear. Little wonder that Luke begins his story of Jesus's life with the angel's declaration "Fear not."

The grace of the table is not merely a balm for fear. It is an act of moving out of isolation and silence into conviviality. Conviviality is "living together." The table symbolizes the essence of living together on this earth in a human way. The call is not an individualistic call but a call into a certain kind of relationship. The form of call for the roundtable is already a participation in the mutuality of call and response that is at the heart of movement into conviviality, a movement into communion and conversation.

Finally, the very word "call" always implies a movement forward, but a movement that never quite reaches its goal. Our actions at table only begin a process in our lives. They set a goal, a *telos*, a direction. They give shape to our deepest hopes in a tangible way. They let us taste the meal yet to come. They let us sense the purposes of the Creator who is always re-creating us and our universe.

### C. We Confirm God's Presence

Traditionally, the "invocation" is a request for God's presence in our midst. At Roundtable, we come to the table because we have already heard the call of the special power present at table. God is there before we come. It's not our table, but God's table.

Many times after our gathering I have heard people say something like "I came without big expectations, but something stirred in the gathering and the conversation that wouldn't have happened

otherwise.” This is a confirmation of the holy power present in the simple act of eating and conversing at a table that honors our equal dignity. It is the power of the circle process undergirding all created things. In the words of the legendary Black Elk of the Oglala Sioux:

Everything the Power of the World does is done in a circle. The sky is round and I have heard that the earth is round like a ball and so are all the stars. The wind, in its greater power, whirls. Birds make their nests in circles, for theirs is the same religion as ours. The sun comes forth and goes down again in a circle. The moon does the same and both are round. Even the seasons form a great circle in their changing and always come back again to where they were. The life of a person is a circle from childhood to childhood. And so it is in everything where power moves. (*Black Elk Speaks* [2008], pp. 155-56)

In this same passage Black Elk recounts how his nation had power as long as they lived in circular arrangements, but when the White man forced them into boxes they lost their power and young men took much longer to mature.

At roundtable we enter once again into the power of this circle of life. And so at this point we simply “affirm” this presence and this power. We draw out words that seek to align ourselves with this power. We seek to depart from the usual, “boxed in” relationships of our work, family, and community, and live into a deeper relationship more in tune with the circle process at the heart of creation.

The relationship patterns at the heart of creation find human expression in words of dialogue. We started with dialogue and here we confirm its depth and power. For this communion in conversation to continue we also need to affirm trust in its power to guide us toward reconciliation rather than alienation and destruction. We acknowledge

that there is a spirit that “presides” here at table. It does not impose its will apart from ours, but calls, persuades, and loves us into participation at this table.

In this dialogue we bring together the awesome creative power of atoms, solar systems, and galaxies with the “personal” interaction of conversation and prayer. This is what we mean by a “personal God,” not some supernatural being floating in the sky, but the source and initiator of a circle process of continual re-creation among actors of ultimate worth and dignity engaged in transformative conversation.

In using the language of “presidency” and “presiding” we enter our contemporary political world, just as kingship and fatherhood reflect past political orders. In using this language we try to get at the way in which the manner of Jesus’s presence evoked people’s participation, provided a way of seeing and doing, and, in forgiving sin, released them to start over and over again in their struggle to live out God’s purpose in their lives. In this spirit we try to link power, authority and service. I will come back to this motif when I talk about the work of the steward at table.

Finally, to confirm that the Spirit of Jesus is presiding at this table in this particular way is to say that each one of us is called to share in this work of the circle. This is not an activity in which one or two people are putting on a show, but one in which all are called to participate in a process. No one person is representing Christ, the church, or the divine power. It is the circle of people as such that represents this power. This is a sacred responsibility, if you will, and we often don’t feel up to it, but we gather in the hope and trust that this power will be made manifest in the formation of the circle.

## D. We Remember

Important meals are times of remembering. Christmas, Thanksgiving, birthdays and anniversaries are times of stories that give us a sense of place and time. They remind us of where we fit into a larger drama of family, community, church, nation, and perhaps the universe itself.

Food is not merely an occasion for memory. It is a powerful vehicle of memory. Taste, like smell, is one of the deepest forms of memory, reaching back to unremembered childhood. Whenever I taste of peanut butter and grape jelly, I can almost feel the cold milk that went along with it. I am taken back to our kitchen. It is after school and I am eating it before going out to play basketball or softball with my friends. When I am with others in a church setting the taste of wheat bread and grape takes me back thousands of years, to a crowded room of fearful followers of a courageous Rabbi. Because of the deep memory contained in taste, we do not eat at this table simply to strengthen our bodies, but to enter a door into a special drama that orients our lives.

The drama these food memories take us into is one of alienation and reconciliation. That is the whole point of the roundtable. Without memory there can be no reconciliation. But mere memory can also wall us into a circle of fear and retribution. South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission discovered over and over again how important it was to enable victimized and traumatized people to tell the truth they knew. They also discovered how elusive an accurate memory is. They struggled with the problem of verifying the claims of people who testified, especially if they were accused of crimes and inhumane actions. At many points they had to deal with the realization

that we would never know exactly what happened, what blood had seeped into the earth unacknowledged and unclaimed.

We must never give up the struggle to remember. Eating and conversing in circle is a powerful way to walk the road of memory. Remembering is a collective act. It joins personal and social life. Our action of remembering at roundtable usually takes the form of a statement that we say together. Here is one example.

Jesus walked through walls of fear,  
 Called to children in the shadows.  
 Ate with unclean sinners, broke the laws of rank and power.  
 At his table all were equal in their gifts and in their loss.  
 To his banquet he invited friend and foe to share God's feast.  
 At roundtable we draw on a collective memory of the original  
 "way of the table" set in play by Jesus of Nazareth. In this way of the  
 table memory must always contain an element of gratitude if it is to  
 flower into reconciliation. To take part in a meal is to receive a good  
 gift beyond our expectations. Many times, as with a returning soldier,  
 worker, or invalid, it celebrates a return to abundance from a time of  
 privation and danger. It is a time of remembering our peril and also  
 the gracious power by which we have survived to eat and drink with  
 friends and family once again. It is also a time of remembering those  
 who are no longer present with us. They have been lost to violence,  
 disease, and decay. We sense their loss more vividly and we  
 remember the contribution they made to our own lives. They, too, help  
 nurture our life's renewal. Memory is the pedestal of gratitude.

## E. We Give Thanks

The expression of gratitude has always been so central to the table that it gave rise to one of the words we associate with this

Christian rite – Eucharist, from the Greek word for “thankful.” Literally it means “good grace” or “good charism.” It shares a common root with the Hindu and Buddhist notion of karma. Indeed, we still call table blessings “grace” in many traditions. Simply put, it is an acknowledgement of our dependency on powers outside our grasp and knowledge. It is one of the most fundamental expressions of an acceptance of what is outside our power into our deepest inner self – the self of need.

Gratitude is a door into other dimensions of the work of reconciliation. It leads to openness, for it is itself an expression of being open to the support we need. This openness extends not only to hospitality for the stranger, but also to hearing and listening deeply to the stranger. We admit the stranger not only to our table but also into our consciousness. Gratitude is also a recognition of our dependence, what the philosophers might call our “contingency.” We are always cradled in the arms of others, not merely at our birth but all along in life until we die. Gratitude and thanks are therefore always a sign of being in relationship. It is the mark of being vulnerable to the action of another. It is a vulnerability that requires that we trust another for our life. This may be why Meister Eckhart, the medieval mystic, said that if we had only one prayer to say, it should be “thanks.” Here is one example from our gathering:

O Holy Source of Life and Light,

With beauty you invite us to the day, with beauty you release us to the night. From dark, dank soil fruit and flowers grow. In saddening tears the oceans find the formula of life. On cross and weeping women’s faces we receive the leadership of love. Now at this table, bounty of your earth renews our bodies, minds, and spirits — the leadership of grace. Be here. Be now.

Be here in word and nurture, leading us to peace. Be in our voices as we sing our thanks.

“Thank you, God, Holy One. Thank you, God Creator, thank you, God.

“Thank you, God, Holy One. Thank you, God Redeemer, thank you, God.

“Thank you, God, Holy One. Thank you, God, Great Spirit , thank you, God.”

As the door to reconciliation this act of gratitude is indeed what makes this a holy time – a time that plumbs the depths of the creative life that is our origin and sustaining home.

## F. We Eat and Drink

We then have a simple time of sharing from the bread and juice at the table. We often speak of it as God’s nurture from God’s abundance. Indeed, as we move from this act into our conversation, people often take seconds from the table. This, too, is an acknowledgement of God’s abundance. It participates in the generosity of a man who could offer bread to another man who was about to betray him. This kind of open generosity, it seems to me, can only flow from a deep sense of sufficiency rooted in God’s abundance. Thus, we don’t eat as if we would never see another meal. We do not eat without serving the neighbor first. We do not eat in haste, ignoring those around us. How different is this act from the fast food culture all around us!

Some people would recognize in this act the traditional Moravian love feast or agape meal. Indeed, it is tapping into the same sensibility, just as our conversation is kin to the Quaker meeting. The table – and its conversation -- has not been forgotten in Christian

tradition, but its meaning has changed dramatically and varies drastically among Christians. Most of Western Latin tradition has seen in this meal a drama of sacrifice and has construed reconciliation in terms of this sacrifice. The meal became a ritual shaped by penance and the satisfaction of a retributive God. It was a reward for the worthy. Clearly this is not what this meal is. This meal seeks the path of reconciliation in the celebration of God's abundance rather than the overcoming of our unworthiness. It puts the emphasis on the work of the Holy Spirit in the roundtable call to conversation. It finds the grace of God's forgiveness in the power of the circle to bring us to a new level of understanding and relationship. The grace of God's nurture leads us into the grace of a holy conversation.

## G. The Conversation

It is hard to speak of a good meal if it does not have good conversation. Sometimes meals lead into conversations that escalate into arguments and fights, leaving food undigested and rejected. Sometimes the conversation leads past traditional defenses into deeper layers that bond people together for a lifetime. The opportunity for conversation can arouse our anxieties as well as our hopes as we sit down with relatives, strangers, or even old adversaries. The same universe of possibilities confronts us at this roundtable, but here we enter into a form of conversation in which we publically acknowledge that we have stepped into a conversation governed by the spirit and the circle wisdom of Jesus.

In conversation we bridge the gap between "word" and "table." We are not involved in separate events of "Word" from a preacher and "Sacrament" from a priest. Here we have "word at table." The kind of word that is in conversation at table is not a one-way communication,

but one side of the process of relationship-building through speaking and listening. It invites us all to do both. In this circle of conversation we walk the path of reconciliation.

In this circle conversation we rehearse once again the fundamentals of any circle process – speaking from the heart, listening deeply, and seeking points of common ground to find a way together to a better place. In a regular gathering at roundtable we usually do not come to transform a particular conflict in our short time together, any more than a traditional Mass actually re-sacrifices Jesus. Transformation of a particular conflict might indeed happen, but that is not our primary intent. We come to engage in a process that plants these reconciling dispositions and behaviors ever deeper into our lives. We come together to make these kinds of actions visible and public, so they might call us and others into this kind of response to the conflicts that fill our lives.

### *The Readings*

Every conversation, knowingly or not, draws on earlier discourse, just as every conflict has antecedents and causes in earlier conflicts. Language itself is a vast repository of meanings, as any wordsmith will tell you. In the roundtable we begin the conversation with readings, usually one from Scripture and sometimes one from another source, that remind us of a benchmark discourse to open up our way into the focus for the day. The “word” in the reading invites our words from our experience today. We then enter into the circle of conversation that includes these founding voices.

Sometimes we ask someone in our community to visit with us to talk about their experiences in connection with some aspect of the work of reconciliation. We have had conversations on domestic violence, community mediation, prisoner and victim rehabilitation,

immigration issues and many more over the years. This requires advance preparation to enable the guest to fit into our worship framework rather than to revert to a kind of public presentation to an audience. Here we have to confront “boundary problems” between our worship experience and our community involvements, especially in light of the many exclusionary practices of worship and communion that have been practiced in the churches. It is important that guests understand the nature and purpose of the roundtable gathering ahead of time so that they feel genuinely invited and comfortable in their participation.

### *The Talking Piece*

The process of circle conversation depends on the “talking piece” and the steward. The feather usually serves as our talking piece. Others use stones, bowls, cloth, or a Bible. As it is passed from person to person it gives to the holder authority to speak and to the others the obligation to listen, indeed to listen deeply. As someone struggles to find words to share their experience I am reminded of the old Spiritual’s lines: “Sometimes I feel like a feather in the air...a long way from home.” The feather asks us to speak concisely and briefly from the heart. This is not an easy discipline. Words for some are a defensive wall to ward off attack. They cannot speak enough of them. For others they are a mist they cannot organize. Or they are the preferred means of domination. Bringing our inner life to speech is not merely something we learn as children, but a life-long task with ever-new challenges. For some, a song, a piece of art, a dance, the tones of a flute or the beating of a drum may express more than words. These expressions, too, must be invited into the circle of conversation. The talking piece, as one of our members points out, is to help us “talk peace.”

Even harder is the feather's call to listen. While others speak is not a time for preparing our own response. We can take a time of silence in the passing of the feather to compose our own thought. The feather is an invitation to see how the other is feeling like a feather in the air. It is a time to be hearing tone, pace, and breathing as well as seeing body, gesture, and expression. It is a time for compassion – co-suffering – as well as co-celebration. We can then give expression to our own thoughts and feelings, knowing that others are also listening this way.

### *The Steward*

If anyone is called to represent the governing spirit of Jesus at the table it is the steward. While each person must take responsibility for speaking and listening, we assign one person to guide the conversation and to mark its beginning and end. The steward serves the circle process. The steward is responsible for calling us back to the basic covenant that governs the circle. The steward does this in several ways.

The steward begins the conversation with a statement about our focus and a question designed to open our inquiry. Through consultation in advance the steward clarifies a focus that seems to bring together the dominant concerns of the members of the gathering. She or he then formulates a question to elicit understandings from the participants. The steward may also explain elements of the circle process to those who are participating for the first time.

The steward also has the responsibility of holding participants to the circle's covenant. Occasionally, the steward will have to remind a speaker that the circle requires greater brevity. This takes tact. Sometimes a hand gesture will do. Sometimes this can be a gesture to

pass the feather, or a short phrase of reminder about the covenant of brevity. Perhaps it is a reminder that others need to speak. The steward also needs to give permission to people to remain silent and listening. Listening is something everyone is called to do. Speaking must follow from the promptings of the heart. The steward needs to stay tuned to this dynamic of participation. The challenge here, for the steward and for all of us, is how to identify in our inner self our "prayer," our contribution, our offering for the table. The steward is one who is charged with safeguarding this process for the good of the whole.

When the feather has completed its round the steward can decide whether to ask another question to follow up on the first or to lay the feather on the table and invite conversation on the points that have been raised. At times the steward may summarize the contributions of the participants in order to emphasize that they have been heard and to help others confirm or revise what they thought they heard.

Finally, when the steward senses a point of closure, she or he signals a time for enlarging the circle of conversation in words of prayer to the listening God. Just as the conversation begins with records of founding conversations and stories, so it leads now to a wider plane that acknowledges the underlying "dia-logic" of the universe.

## H. Prayers: The Wider Conversation

The roundtable places dialogue at the center of the work of reconciliation. We assume that reconciliation is at the heart of Jesus's ministry and God's purposes. It is the bedrock reality of the universe. What we call "prayer" is our effort to align ourselves with this

dialogical character of reality and of God's purposes. In doing this, however, we are aware that this action has often been reduced to magical efforts at manipulation of this reality. So much prayer seems to simply be a replication of our infantile need for parental security. It is solely a petition for action beyond the laws by which we are normally bound. Many of us cannot enter into this action because it is often presented within an unbelievable theology or theory of the universe. It is simply "talking to the ceiling" or to Santa Claus.

With all of these reservations and limitations we still engage in a form of this ancient practice to affirm that there are dimensions of dialogue outside our knowledge and field of trust. It is an act of openness and trust toward a deeper, more mysterious dialogue that sustains the universe and its trajectory toward reconciliation. It is an opening of our table conversation to the widest reaches of our circles of existence. We still use words to affirm that this dialogue is a genuinely human dialogue, even though reaching beyond the bounds of human experience.

Like the circle steward, the prayer leader gathers up concerns that have been registered at table and directs them toward the Holy One who hears and remembers all. She or he then asks for other prayers – of thanks, of petition, of intercession – and we respond with words appropriate to our focus for that day. Sometimes there is a silent time of listening for our inner voices. There is a silence that offers openings beyond our words.

The prayer leader then leads us in a "hope prayer" rooted in the form that Jesus taught his disciples. Here we have tried to experiment with contemporary expressions of Jesus's ancient formula, commonly called the "Lord's Prayer." In its form of address to the Holy One, its political and social metaphors, and in its tone it seeks to embody the

grounded hope this prayer form expressed in the early church. Here is our present wording for this prayer.

O Source of Life, You alone are holy.  
Come and govern us in perfect peace.  
Give us today all the food that we need.  
Release us from sin as we release our enemies.  
Save us in the trials of judgment.  
Liberate us all from evil powers.  
For in you is our justice,  
Our constitution, and our peace. AMEN.

This language is both familiar (“give us today...”) and jarring (“For in you is our justice, our constitution...”). Like its original form, it is rooted in daily experience as well as in idealized political order. It is a longing for God’s liberation and justice as well as a hope for our own capacity for forgiveness and humility. It opens up an attitude toward the future that can prepare us for God’s work of reconciliation. The earliest Christian gatherings at table concluded with the Aramaic phrase “maranatha” – Our Lord, come” – giving voice to the hope and expectancy generated in the table experience. This “Hope Prayer” shares in that tradition and connects it directly to the form that Jesus introduced to his followers.

The traditional formulation of this prayer is incomplete in one regard important to our contemporary understanding of the full work of reconciliation – our reconciliation with God’s earth. Although this is implied in a full understanding of God’s shalom, it is not yet explicit, either in Jesus’s formulation or in our present expressions. This is still a challenge we have only begun to address.

## I. Commitments

Our roundtable, like all effective circle processes, is grounded in a covenantal relationship. Covenants are frameworks of mutual commitments that establish a bed of trust in which to live. Some of these are implicit. We only realize they are there when we break them. They are like a grammar for living. Others are explicit because we know there are alternative ways of living. These commitments we put into words. Here are the covenantal commitments guiding our worship at roundtable.

The Roundtable gatherings seek to provide an opportunity:

- for people to bring their concerns about their life and world to the table in a prayerful, structured conversation that respects a variety of points of view. Priority is given to public matters crying out for reconciliation. Exchange of concerns and perspectives can focus on a single topic, art piece or performance, scripture, or reading.
- for people to celebrate Christ's presence at table with tangible symbols of the bountiful banquet still to come.
- for people to worship in a way that seeks to:
  - use gender-inclusive language respecting the equality of all people and the mystery of the Holy One who includes and transcends all gender distinctions and sexual orientations;
  - be circular and participatory, with shared leadership;
  - use silence, the arts, and symbols that go beyond the spoken word.
  - employ language and symbols for God's just order drawn from our contemporary political and cultural world;
  - celebrate the wholeness and mystery of creation, especially our call to reconciliation with the Earth;

engage the challenges of justice, restoration, social service, and care for the earth.

These commitments are clearly aspirations, ideals, and goals to guide us. They are not minimal laws for participation. They do form a perspective, a set of reference points, for our planning, deliberations, and construction of our liturgies.

In addition, we share a set of commitments that shape the conversations into which we enter. They are the commitments underlying effective circle processes. Circle conversations rely on explicit covenants in order to pursue a path of conflict transformation and reconciliation. Each group needs to develop, adapt, and claim them for its own work. JustPeace has suggested this covenant for its circle groups and it is basically what we follow:

What is shared while in circle, stays in circle.

Personal information that is shared in circle is kept confidential except when safety would be compromised.

Speak with respect:

Speak only when you have the talking piece.

Speak only for yourself.

Be specific.

Speak in a way that encourages dialogue.

Be brief and to the point.

Listen with respect:

Listen for understanding.

Be open to be transformed.

Stay in circle.

Respect for the circle calls upon people to stay in circle while the circle works to find resolution to the issues raised.

Covenants need to be rehearsed, re-examined, and even revised. They are the fundamental constitutions of our common life. At each roundtable we are also revising and augmenting our own covenants for living. Under the impact of experience, of listening to others, of conversing with voices past and present as well as in an imagined future, we open ourselves to covenantal recommitments and revisions. As part of this ongoing process, at the conclusion of most of our gatherings we give voice to emerging common commitments. Here is one from a roundtable gathering focused on finding truth and God's wisdom in the midst of fear-mongering political rhetoric.

Though bombs and bullets shake the earth,

**We will speak Your words of peace.**

Though lies confuse and half truths blind,

**We will seek the fullness of Your Truth.**

Though greed corrupt and fear constrain,

**We will abound in Your love.**

ALL: ***For in Your Wisdom is our Truth, in Your Purpose is our peace.***

## J. The Blessing and Sending

We close in a very familiar way – with blessing and sending. It is a blessing we say or sing together. Usually we sing this blessing, some of us using hand gestures to dramatize the meanings:

Go now in peace, blessing and blessed,

Grounded in God, healing and whole.

Go now in peace, blessing and blessed,

Grounded in God, filled with God's love.

At the conclusion of the blessing song, we invite participants to extend a sign of peace to others around the circle.

Looking back over the entire sequence of our gathering we can see that this time of communion and conversation begins with gathering in memory and thanks, focuses in nurture and sharing from the heart, culminates in words of hope and commitment and is sealed by a blessing. This is a classic sequence in Christian worship, but it takes on a particular content in light of the way we understand God's work of reconciliation, the intent of Jesus's life and ministry, and our understanding of the world we live in.

With slight alterations this pattern has remained fairly stable. It serves to express our fundamental understanding of reconciliation. It also serves to form in us more deeply the dispositions, attitudes, perspectives, and understandings that we need in order to transform the conflicts distorting and destroying our lives and the life of this earth. With this picture in mind I hope we are ready to look at the challenges, difficulties, and possibilities we have discovered in living out this practice.

## **Pathways and Possibilities**

Our roundtable worship is not the re-enactment of fixed liturgies, even though it has developed a fairly stable form that would be familiar to most Christians. It is first of all an exploration in the light of God's work of reconciliation among us. The Roundtable Gathering is a public expression for our understanding of God's activity. It is a public means for forming us to participate in God's call to reconciliation and renewal of the earth. In taking this path in our worship life we have seen some new possibilities as well as experienced many challenges. In this section I want to lift up some of these discoveries and challenges to help inform others as they set out on this path.

### **A. Of Size and Space**

Our roundtable gatherings usually consist of 10 to 15 people. While it could be larger, this is a good size for a circle conversation. It enables people to participate but it is public enough that we stay focused on what is common rather than what is purely individual. It is not a setting for group therapy, though it is healing in another way. This is a decisive difference from worship models that reach toward thousands of people gathered in auditoriums and stadiums.

The optimal shape of the space for this event is a square or circular room. Most of our church buildings are rectangular, with the focus of attention against one wall housing the stage, altar, and pulpit. It is a setting for performance and presentation, not interactive participation. Church buildings tend to be shoeboxes rather than circles. Circular worship spaces do exist, but as the number of participants enlarges, they begin to be re-configured to put the focus to one side. In my own dreams I envision a domed, circular room that

could accommodate up to a hundred people. (See my worship fantasy in *The Politics of Religion* (United Church Press, 1970, ch. 7.) As it is, we have to carve out places within the shoeboxes and performance spaces of our existing churches. In any case, the roundtable gathering needs a space that enables the group to experience silence, to hear and see one another, to assemble in circle around the table, and to be as undistracted from their common purpose as possible.

Size and scale have a different impact on the possible non-verbal elements in roundtable worship. Ritual movements, whether dancing and circling the table or processing in various ways, are more effective with greater numbers and in larger spaces. While there are important rituals for the conversational scale, such as passing the talking piece, there can be other meaningful movements and actions in a larger space. How a gathering wants to balance and implement these elements will vary with the members and their sensibilities. Although the roundtable worship we have pursued places a great emphasis on verbal action, there are many other ways that people can internalize the circle processes of reconciliation.

If more people wanted to participate in our roundtable gathering, either we would have to establish additional roundtables of the same size, thus preserving the circle conversation, or we would have to symbolize this circle dynamic in a larger setting but forgo many participatory elements of the circle process itself. The first choice is, in one sense, already present in many large churches in the form of the small-group movement. In this case there could be roundtables of ten to twenty people along with large gatherings whose form is derived from the core model. Much of this small-group/large-group model is already happening in churches, but without the core commitments and processes I am describing here. Providing a short

summary of these principles and practices is the reason for writing this little book, which seeks provide a common and portable understanding of what we are attempting. It is, if you will, a kind of covenantal document, but one open to continual reworking and interpretation.

Whether or not a church has the smaller roundtables, planning for roundtable worship in a large assembly dedicated to this understanding of reconciliation requires both an attention to the crucial principles of the roundtable gathering and an ingenious capacity to pursue these values with flexibility. For instance, the judicious use of travelling microphones enables people to participate in large gatherings – town hall forums, for instance --in ways that were not possible only a few years ago. In a larger gathering a small panel might represent the conversation of the whole group. We can also be attentive to language, symbolism, and many other aspects of Roundtable worship that do not depend on size or arrangement of the assembly. What must be resisted, however is a change in arrangements that distorts the circle back into a shoebox or creates a performance stage rather than a circle of participation. Unless we have these principles in place we revert to the one-way communication model dominating our religious heritage.

## B. Language and Symbolism

We are committed to language that engages our actual situation in this world of conflict and reconciliation. In addition, we want our language to reflect the equality of all participants at the table, regardless of race, gender, sexual orientation, and the many other divisions we have erected between us. The divisions of social class and education are perhaps the most difficult of all to overcome. In the face of all these barriers, we want to embody the invitation "All are

welcome.” This involves more than gracious and hospitable invitations for people to come to the table. It also requires that our form of worship model the patterns of reconciliation grounded in the life and spirit of Jesus.

The reconciliation we are trying to live into has many dimensions. It is interpersonal as well as familial. It involves how we make decisions in organizations and business corporations. One of the most important is, of course, governmental and political. Reconciliation must constantly be negotiated among competing interest group and, aggrieved enemies. Courts must address criminal and civil injuries. The language they use in doing this shapes our lives very deeply, whether it is in phrases like “paying his debt to society,” “reaching across the aisle,” or “being brought to justice.” Worship that really seeks to live into God’s reconciliation has to select an appropriate language from the competing ways we talk about injury and repair, self-interest and cooperation, rights and obligations.

In our own time, after a long, long struggle, people around the world are trying to address their conflicts and need for cooperation with some form of republican and democratic order. They are gradually extending these democratic values to women and minorities in their populations. Even tyrannies, dictatorships, and repressive theocracies use republican and democratic language in order to claim legitimacy in the eyes of others. Yet our historic language of prayer and worship still reflects the feudal monarchies that gave it birth. The church speaks the language of baronial England rather than Washington, Berlin, New Delhi, and Jerusalem. Not only does this keep us from addressing our world; it also keeps us from fully expressing the essential dynamics of circle conversation at the center of reconciliation at Christ’s table.

As an example of our efforts, let's take another look at the "Hope Prayer" we are currently using in our gatherings. It is obviously patterned after the model prayer Jesus taught his followers. In Jesus's time it was expressed in the language of kingdoms and monarchs. In the version we are using, a different political model gains expression. Here it is again:

O Source of Life, You alone are holy.  
Come and govern us in perfect peace.  
Give us today all the food that we need.  
Release us from sin as we release our enemies.  
Save us in the trials of judgment.  
Liberate us all from evil powers.  
For in you is our justice,  
Our constitution, and our peace. AMEN.

Here, God is addressed as "Source of Life." The term "Father" as the title of God the Creator is central to a patriarchal culture, but in our own time this name cannot convey that ancient combination of authority, creativity, and care. Neither our biological nor our political understandings support it. Whereas for the ancients family roles and governance roles were combined, we have separated them for the sake of greater political justice. So we are using "Source." We then use language of governance rather than "will" and "kingdom" to call for the complete realization of God's purposes in this world -- that is, for a new pattern of relationships among all the creatures of this earth. In the following lines of the prayer we retain much of the language of English versions to express this longing for fullness of life. The terms of forgiveness in the original could be rendered as "debts," thus bringing in the sharp economic reality of our injustice toward each other and the earth. The last lines of the traditional version, missing in

the Gospel accounts (Matt. 6: 9-15 and Luke 11:2-4), bring governance language to the fore, with an emphasis on glorification of the ruler. Using contemporary words we have tried to render this affirmation of God's underlying right order in terms of constitution (drawing on old covenantal themes), justice, and peace.

Other Gatherings could work out their own understanding of how Jesus's ancient formula should speak in our own time. In this way we enter more vividly into the effort to sustain a conversation with God that nurtures God's purposes in this world – one that recalls us to God's way and renews us with God's promise.

In other parts of our liturgy we often speak of the Spirit "presiding" in our midst. For instance, one of our litanies of remembrance says this:

You were at the burning bush,

**Giving courage to Moses in his quest for liberation.**

You were in the anguished cries of prophets

**Yearning for your justice,**

You put your spirit in the mouth of Jesus,

**Claiming Isaiah's vision for his own.**

You were present in the garden,

**Giving voice to Mary Magdalene.**

Here at your table now you feed us,

**Presiding in our conversation.**

All: ***Presiding Spirit, now we welcome you.***

The challenge to build a better language is not an easy one to address. We struggle with words like "Lord" or "kingdom" that still have a familiar and comforting ring for most of us, even though we would reject their political forms in our everyday life. We also struggle with the use of contemporary terms like republics or constitutions that

may not have the ring of transcendence. Even the word “worship” has become a problem for people who feel in it the dead hand of the past rather than the living longing for renewal. Our search for words that transcend gender often leaves us with cumbersome sentences and labored constructions that are ethically sound but verbally unmusical. Though there is a sense of breathing fresh air when the new language of partnership clicks, we know we still have a long way to go to unite our worship with our ethics and aesthetics.

In spite of these challenges we have decided that it is better to speak than remain silent in the face of mysteries. We know that we are clumsy interlopers in a conversation with a world known more by faith and hope than ear and eye. While we work hard to use songs, prayers, and liturgies that embody our aspirations, we try to be charitable and forbearing, patient and forgiving, as we draw on whatever words we can use to share from the heart with others in conversation and prayer. These virtues, too, are useful for the work of reconciliation!

### C. Gathering as Formation

Every form of worship assumes a prior process of training. As children, most of us were taught to be quiet and sit still in worship. Worship was formation in passivity if not receptivity to a presentation. Some of us learned to sing “classical” music in harmony. A few of us learned to play keyboard instruments. In a similar way, the roundtable gathering has to assume and provide a process of formation in speaking briefly but from the heart, of listening attentively, and addressing others in circle. We are formed here to offer not only our money but also our thoughts, prayers, songs, and symbols at the table. This formation is not accomplished solely, or even primarily, by

words, but in movements, symbols, rituals, song, and rhythm. It is an action forming the whole self of body, mind, and spirit.

Methodists will see in our gatherings the “classes” that early Methodists assembled to re-form people in their faith and practice. Moravians will see elements of the agape meal. Quakers will see our circle as a meeting for deep listening to the Spirit. Indeed, we have learned from all of these and more, although at crucial points we also go beyond them. Early on in our meetings we heard that remains of an ancient church had been uncovered on the plains of Megiddo, near Nazareth, Israel. According to the account, “One of the most dramatic finds suggests that, instead of an altar, a simple table stood in the center of the church, at which a sacred meal was held to commemorate the Last Supper. “ A mosaic at the site contained an inscription that a woman by the name of Ekeptos had “donated this table to the God Jesus Christ in commemoration.” [*Ha’aretz* (Israel) 06/11/2005] That the basic form of Christian assembly was a gathering around a table reinforced our experience of the power of this form of worship. We are gathered in an ancient tradition that can also engage the work of reconciliation today.

Formation is not only being steeped in a tradition, but also in personal experiences that are continually reinforced as we gather with others over time. Many of us have already experienced the power of circles, whether in recovery and therapy groups or in mediation and small working groups. We bring those habits and expectations to the roundtable, even as we refine them in light of the wider transcendence we seek to open up in that setting. Sometimes one of us begins to wander in our words, or we do not find the heartfelt center from which to speak. It is at these times that we need the circle steward to care

for the work of the circle to give encouragement where needed, restraint where necessary, and respect for silence and listening.

Let us recall the role of the circle steward. The steward is not running the process. This is the work of the Spirit of the circle. The steward is minister to the circle and the Spirit presiding in it. The steward reminds people at the beginning of the conversation about their covenant, about speaking simply from the heart, and about our commitment to attentive listening. The steward is “forming” the participants for conversation. The steward is helping the Spirit of the table to “in-form” the assembly around it. At all times, the steward needs to help create a sense of the holy process of the circle, one to which we are constantly needing to be formed and re-formed. This formation in worship occurs not merely for the sake of individual growth but also to help us engage the conflicts around us in a reconciling manner. It is for the sake of our world.

We do not have a formal process to prepare people for this kind of gathering. There is no initiation process into our commitments or to the circle process. Perhaps we need something like this, whether in the form of a study circle or a manual. But we would have to think about whether that would create a barrier rather than an invitation. We need an instructive but also an inviting pathway into the gathering. Perhaps this little book may help in this process.

#### D. Diversity at the Table

Like so many churches and associations we lament our lack of cultural, racial, or demographic diversity. Part of that lack arises because our gathering is based on commitment to a common purpose rather than transformation of a specific conflict. While diversity does not create conflict, it often fuels its flame. It is in diversity that the

work of reconciliation appears most vividly. Not to have a diverse group at table is to reduce the expansiveness of our vision and our entrée to the world around us. Because of our focus on a common purpose, like most voluntary associations, our diversity is reduced. Becoming more diverse, as any church or association knows, cannot be a goal in itself but must arise from pursuit of its mission. If the mission – such as witnessing to reconciliation – is taken seriously enough, diversity will arise. Much of this work of diversity emerges in the circle conversations we have spun off from our worship table.

### E. The Gathering and the Circles

We call our worship time a gathering. We gather in response to a call from Christ's table of reconciliation. It is not usually or not yet a time for the transformation of actual conflicts. For that purpose we have begun a wider umbrella we call Roundtable Ministries, a term which has also been used elsewhere. Our gathering is part of this wider work of reconciliation. Within Roundtable Ministries we seek to implement the kind of circle conversations and processes Thomas Porter has set forth in *The Spirit and Art of Conflict Transformation*. Drawing on Porter's work with JustPeace, we have conducted training sessions for circle stewards. These help deepen our circle stewardship practices at worship and in these circle conversations in the community.

Over the past few years we inaugurated circle conversations around difficult issues such as homosexuality, war, and immigration. In bringing people together around immigration issues, for instance, we automatically engage diversity. This may not appear in the worship gathering that nourishes people engaged in this circle, but the two circles inform each other. The circle dealing with a specific problem in

our community is interdependent with the circle gathered at roundtable. They nurture each other.

In particular, the worship gathering seeks to form people for the work of circle conversation and conflict transformation by providing rituals and symbols of and for this work – the hospitable invitation, the circle conversation, the sharing of food, trusting in the Spirit presiding at the table, and grounding our hopes in God’s power rather than our own weakness.

Rather than merging these two circles, which might exclude people from both, we pursue a life of interlocking circles with differing special tasks but sharing, we believe, in the one work of God’s reconciliation. Keeping them in a genuine relation of mutual recognition remains an ongoing task.

## F. The Challenge of Ecological Reconciliation

The reconciliation toward which God calls us is also a reconciliation with God’s creation. In the Christian Biblical narrative full reconciliation between God and creation is the grace-filled renewal of the original garden. Ecological themes are beginning to appear (or reappear) in Christian worship, but we are only at the beginning of re-thinking the central theme of reconciliation in terms of our relationship with God’s creation. (See H. Paul Santmire, *Ritualizing Nature: Renewing Christian Liturgy in a Time of Crisis* [Fortress, 2008].) As we think about this in terms of a roundtable worship that takes ecological reconciliation seriously we have many questions. How do we give other creatures and actors in creation a “voice” at table? How do we re-imagine our conflicts in terms of conflicts over territory, water, energy, and beauty? How do the habits formed by being part of a conversation

reshape our understanding as creatures who are part of creation rather than its masters?

In our worship we have some small signs of the changes we might need. We place elements of non-human nature at the table in terms of plant, feather, bread and juice. Sometimes our conversation revolves around ecological themes. The circle itself is rooted in the forms of creation, as Black Elk has reminded us. In assuming that the reconciliation process is rooted in the transformation of conflict, we move away from the simple view that creation is a clock "obeying" God's laws. Rather, it is an ongoing, living creation whose many expressions of God's creativity are constantly interacting with each other at various levels of power and novelty. Some are as enormous and spectacular as exploding supernovae. Others are as tender and invisible as the love of people who have given life to one another. This is one more example of moving from a theology and world-view shaped by the image of obedience between Father and Son to one rooted in evolving systems shaped by fields of attraction as well as dissolution.

This systems view of evolving creation is reflected in the centrality of conversation rather than that pattern of preaching the "Word of God" and responding in obedience. It is also reflected in the priority we give to God's abundance in creation over our own progression to moral perfection. These are only small steps. The challenge of living into an ecological understanding of reconciliation confronts us all. We believe that in the roundtable gathering we have a peculiar possibility for addressing this challenge in the years ahead.

#### Summary

Our Roundtable Gatherings have constituted a journey as well as a process of constructing a new home for worship in the broad

Christian tradition. Some elements have become fairly reliable. I have tried to describe and explain them in the first part. Other features stand as boundary questions – of size, diversity, language, formation, and the ecological character of God’s work of reconciliation. They contain possibilities and pathways we are only beginning to address. They require entry into a wider conversation, which I hope this little book will stimulate.

At this point I can say that we see this form of worship as the kernel of Christian worship. It sings the song of God’s reconciliation at the core of our worship, but it does so in a new key. By focusing on the Holy Spirit’s work at the roundtable, it moves us away from an excessive preoccupation with the sacrificial contest of fathers and sons and from the monarchies and patriarchs of an earlier politics. By focusing on God’s nurturing goodness at table it builds up our capacity to help each other in our weakness and limited vision. By forming us for conversation in circles of mutual respect it helps us forge new covenants and relationships deeper than legal conformity.

The roundtable can be a worship gathering in any church in addition to the traditional or contemporary praise forms. It would lift up for people a way of coming to Christ’s table that is also engaged with the practices of reconciliation, conflict transformation, and peace-building emerging all over the globe. From it can flow practices that can influence both the other worship gatherings as well as ways of transforming conflicts in the church and its communities.

The various Christian traditions may well find that the Roundtable both resonates with and also clashes with particular features in their own heritage. One question that has arisen is Who presides at this table? Our overall theological response is to say that it is Christ’s spirit that presides at the table. Each one of us acts to seek

to make this presidency real. However, different traditions have different ways to try to make this presidency real, whether through the presence of clergy recognized by a particular church organization or formal and informal means of leadership training and selection. In addition, the presence or absence of certain words, liturgical actions, or formulas can be seen as critical to whether people can trust that this is indeed Christ's table. It is obvious that we cannot solve these age-old problems here. We have only tried to set forth our own practices and why we engage in them, hoping that others can find ways that they can be related in a vital manner to their own traditions without sacrificing the crucial elements of the roundtable experience.

While our own form of roundtable worship is clearly rooted in Christian tradition, I think it can also find an expression in Jewish practice. The Jewish High Holy Days provide one example. The passage from the new beginnings proclaimed at Rosh Hashana to the reflections and repentance of the subsequent days of Tsuvah ("turning," similar to the Greek Christian term of *metanoia*) and then to the celebration of forgiveness and reconciliation in Yom Kippur shares a paradigm common to the two traditions. Certainly the tradition of table and conversation are deeply rooted among Jews of all persuasions! We also need to explore points in Muslim worship, such as the fasts and feasts of Ramadan, where roundtable forms might gain root.

At its core the roundtable offers basic elements for interfaith dialogue that still need to be explored. This is a pathway that can be rich in new relationships, understandings, and commitments to building up bonds of reconciliation in our violent age. A number of people have been exploring how the image of Abraham's tent of hospitality in Genesis 18 provides an invitation for people in the

Abrahamic tradition to come together at table in conversation and nurture. (See A. Waskow, J. Chittister, M. S. S. Chisti, *The Tent of Abraham* [Beacon, 2007].)

The roundtable gathering is a powerful pattern of worship rooted in ancient traditions and contemporary commitments. It carries the possibility of re-forming us for the work of reconciliation in our sorely troubled world.

## Appendix A: Our Roundtable Commitments

In the midst of increasing conflict and war the Roundtable has come to symbolize the basic step in building reconciliation, just relationships, and peace. At the same time it is a symbol for Christ's presence as nurture and counsel.

The Roundtable gatherings seek to provide an opportunity:

- for people to bring their concerns about their life and world to the table in a prayerful, structured conversation that respects a variety of points of view. Priority is given to public matters crying out for reconciliation. Exchange of concerns and perspectives can focus on a single topic, art piece or performance, scripture, or reading.
- for people to celebrate Christ's presence at table with tangible symbols of the bountiful banquet still to come.
- for people to worship in a way that seeks to:
  - use gender-inclusive language respecting the equality of all people and the mystery of the Holy One who includes and transcends all gender distinctions and sexual orientations;
  - be circular and participatory, with shared leadership;
  - use silence, the arts, and symbols that go beyond the spoken word;
  - employ language and symbols for God's just order drawn from our contemporary political and cultural world;
  - celebrate the wholeness and mystery of creation, especially our call to reconciliation with the Earth;
  - engage the challenges of justice, restoration, social service, and care for the earth.

## Appendix B. Liturgical Elements of our Roundtable Worship

### Calls to the Table:

When we were young,

**You gave us growth.**

When we were certain

**You surprised us with mystery.**

When we were lost

**You took our hand.**

When we sank in despair

**You gave us a boat.**

When we faltered in fear

**You opened a door.**

When we were hungry

**You drew us to table.**

**All: *We come to Your table, We come in Christ's peace.***

\*

In the darkness

**We face ourselves within.**

In the darkness

**We must listen with our hearts.**

In the darkness

**We must touch to find our way.**

In the darkness

**Smell arouses us to hunger.**

In the darkness

**Light does not deny our death.**

Out of darkness

**We come to the table of light.**

**All: We come in peace to your table of light.**

\*

Amos calls out to us:

**"Let justice roll on like a river, and righteousness like a never failing stream."**

Micah reminds us:

**"God loves the foreigner . . . . and calls you to love them, for you, yourselves were foreigners in Egypt."**

Jesus beckons us:

***"Come, you who are blessed by God . . . . I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in . . ."***

**ALL: We come to your all-embracing table of peace.**

\*

From aching void and faintest light

**You call us to your centering love.**

Through clash of interest, clan, and creed,

**You draw us through refining fire to your truth.**

From the desert of our self-concern

**You lead us to oases of your peace.**

To your table you invite both enemy and friend,

**From your hand we find sustaining bread.**

**All: We come to your table, we come to your peace.**

\*

Out of seed's decay

**Grows beauty longing to be fruit.**

From ice-locked mountain peaks

**Flows water giving life.**

Within the magma of a molten earth

**Emerges rock and ash renewing soil.**

From God's self-giving love

**Springs forth abundant life for all.**

Come to God's table.

**The table of peace.**

\*

Out of our world of violence and fear

**Let us enter a house of peace.**

From shouted slogans of oppression,

**Let us turn to songs of justice.**

In a world of privileged ladders,

**Let us stand in a circle of care.**

Where people's eyes are sunk in suspicion,

**Let us sit around a table in hope.**

In a land of exploitation,

**Let us share at a table of plenty.**

**ALL: Let us come to the table, let us gather in peace.**

\*

**Confirmations of God's Presence**

O Source of Life, Lover of all,

Your arms upholding, your love enfolding, your wisdom sustaining, your mercy abiding, you spread out this table to welcome us all. Creation abounding gives food to your people, bright beauty to eye, breath of life to our lips, fresh waters of birth to the thirsty land. We greet you at table, sustained by your hand.

\*

In the warfare of our words, O God, you have brought the conversation of your peace.

Into the darkness of our doubt, You have sung the mystery of your love.

Into the cold fear of death you have brought a heart on fire.

Bound in the promise of your presence, we have gathered at your table.

Bound to all the earth in hope, we feel your web of care.

In your wisdom help us find the word and deeds that heal.

\*

O Holy Heart of All Creation,

In your creative waters we feel refreshments of our souls. In your fiery depths we sense your awesome power. In falling, shouting leaves your resurrection promise bursts the bounds of death. To your table come our hurts and hopes, our fears and loves, thirsting for your drink, longing for your bread. In the

stillness help us listen, in the clamor help us hear your voice.  
 Centered in your care, help us speak our heartfelt truths in love.  
 May our eyes be open to your beauty, may our ears be open to  
 your song. May we find renewal as we gather in your reconciling  
 power.

May it be so, today and every day to come.

\*

In the midst of conflict, you are here with healing, Holy One.  
 In the midst of doubt, you lead us to your deeper mystery.  
 In the midst of fear, you love us with a heart on fire.  
 In the promise of your presence, we are gathered at your table.  
 In the Wisdom of your new creation  
 We await your Word among us, your healing for our lives.

### **Remembrances**

From out of Mary's nowhere came the vessel of your power.  
 Filled in secret with your wisdom, strength, and courage, he  
 became the word for speechless people. In his birth were new  
 beginnings, in his death the end of endings. At his table walls  
 were leveled, first and last turned upside down. In his smile  
 blazed distant stars, from his hand flowed streams of mercy. In  
 his spirit we find Mary's nowhere as our pathway to new birth.

\*

Jesus spoke of mustard seeds become a tree of faith, taught of  
 sparrows saved within the eye of God. The hairs upon our heads,  
 the grains of sand, the stars within a billion galaxies are only  
 whispers of God's power. His road to death became a way to life.  
 His self-surrender opened up the heart of God. In his faithful

spirit walk the saints who open up our fists of fear into the  
outstretched hands of peace.

\*

Not as a word pinned down in letters but a life lived out in love.  
Not as commands to bring a curse, but invitations to a feast.  
Not as a king above but a partner in our life.  
Not as a period at the end but a comma in a conversation.  
So the Spirit comes where two or three are gathered at the table  
of God's love.

\*

She said Master.

**He said mother.**

They said Lord.

**He said friends.**

She wept Rabbi.

**He said servant.**

They cried King.

**He said child.**

She pled Savior.

**He but pointed to God's love.**

\*

In the midst of conflict, Jesus said he would be there.  
In the sting of judgment, Jesus said he would be there.  
In the life that conquers death, Jesus said he would be there.  
At table, in prison, in court and in home, in darkest cave and  
spotlit stage.

Jesus promised all of us. I will be there.

\*

God in Christ breaks down the walls that make us strangers to ourselves and divide us from one another.

**We are the body of Christ. Around this table, we enact our faith.**

The body broken is restored to wholeness; lifeblood poured out brings healing to our world.

**We dream, O God, of community, but in waking hours we forget such hopes. Our dreams we call "alien;" our sister and brother we call "stranger."**

You call us by name. With arms outstretched as on a cross, you call us to yourself, and you name us your own people.

**So with arms outstretched, we now embrace new friends and forgotten dreams. The body broken and lifeblood poured transform our fears, revive our visions. All: Renew us, O God, with your Spirit.**

\*

From table Jesus sent them out, proclaiming that the powers of death were overcome, that love was stronger than the torturer's chains. The circle round his words became a universe of conversation, the bread they ate a banquet for the world. So now the ripple of their words and actions reaches us, brings us to table, beckons us to listen and to speak, united in his love.

\*

He was like wheat between the millstones of colony and empire, like a helpless babe emerging from the womb. Like the steam of

boiling water he did not resist the heat of hell, but lived on laughing in the rain that greets the green of spring. By God's hand ground grain appears as bread to feed us, crushed grape pours out to quench our thirst. Words uttered once are passed by tongue and ear to guide unending conversation round the tables of our love. And so we gather here together, thankful once again. AMEN.

\*

Jesus walked through walls of fear,  
Called to children in the shadows.

Ate with unclean sinners, broke the laws of rank and power.

He spoke of God as hovering mother, as forgiving father with a wayward son.

At his table all were equal in their gifts and in their loss.

To his banquet he invited friend and foe to share God's feast.

This is the table, this the spirit hosting us.

### **Thanksgivings**

O Holy Source of Truth and Power,

As seed is buried in the earth, covered in a fiery splendor,  
so we let our bodies rest from labors at the table of your peace.

As wintry air reveals stars embedded in your awesome mystery,  
we touch the boundaries of our grasp, offer up our wants in your abundance.

Gathered at your table, we renew our lives. Living in the circle of your love, we enter into thanks for partnership in your

creation. In our song of thanks may we enter into deeper circles of your care.

\*

O Welcoming God,

Let our thanks pour forth like seeds upon the earth that gives us life. Let us taste your mercy in this bread, let us savor grace within these cups. Help our every moment be a testimony to your life, every breath a whisper of your care. At this table we speak out our gratitude, here we revel in the freedom of your peace. Here the breath you give springs forth as song:

Thank you, God, Holy One.

Thank you God, Creator.\* Thank you God.

\*Companion, Sustainer.

\*

O Bountiful God,

From your orchards and your fields we have this food and drink. For the hands that brought it here we give you hearty thanks. For the lives of those who brought us words to speak, faith to live, and hope that opens hearts, we sing our gratitude. For every reconciling act that heals wounds of war and violent rage we give you our unending thanks.

Thank you, God, Holy One.

Thank you God, Creator.\* Thank you God.

\*Great Lover, Great Spirit.

\*

O Source of Life,

From wintering ground you offer up the beauty of new life. From empty hands you generate a feast of humble care. In hungry hearts you grow the garden of your peace. For the mercies of the earth we give you thanks. For the lives that bring your bounty to our table we give thanks. For life renewed and bodies healed, we give you hearty thanks. For this table of your reconciling love we give you our continual thanks.

Thank you, God, Holy One

Thank you, God Creator,\* Thank you, God.

\*Redeemer, Great Spirit

\*

O, Abundant Womb of Mercy,

From the mystery of our birth you have fed us with the bounty of your land. With hands of promise you have lifted us from fears and pain to stand in song before your beauty. With tears and yearning you have walked our ways, suffered our deaths, empowered our hopes, healed our wounding of this earth. So with generations past and yet to come we sing our song of thanks and praise.

Thank you, God, Holy One, Thank you, God Creator,\*

Thank you, God.

\*Redeemer, Great Spirit

## **The Hope Prayer**

O Source of Life, You alone are holy.  
 Come and govern us in perfect peace.  
 Give us today all the food that we need.  
 Release us from sin as we release our enemies.  
 Save us in the trials of judgment.  
 Liberate us all from evil powers.  
 For in you is our justice,  
 Our constitution, and our peace. AMEN.

## **Words of Commitment**

In God's love, we will seek the path of reconciliation.  
 In God's power, we will walk the ways of peace.  
 In God's wisdom, we will struggle for God's justice in this world.  
 In God's mercy, we will seek to care for Earth, our home.

Amen, Amin, Ameyn

## **A Song of Thanks**

Musical notation for 'A Song of Thanks' in G major, 4/4 time. The first staff has a treble clef and a key signature of one sharp (F#). The notes are G4, A4, B4, G4, B4, A4. Chords above the staff are D, A, Bm, G, Bm, A. The second staff has a bass clef and the notes G3, A3, B3, G3, A3, G3. Chords below the staff are D, G, D, G, D, A, D. The lyrics are: Thank you, God, Ho - ly One. Thank you, God Cre-a-tor\*. Thank you, God.

## **Blessing**

Musical notation for 'Blessing' in G major, 4/4 time. The first staff has a treble clef and a key signature of one sharp (F#). The notes are G4, A4, B4, G4, A4, B4, G4, A4, B4, G4. Chords above the staff are C, F, G, G7, C, F, G. The lyrics are: Go now in peace. Bless-ing and blessed. Ground-ed in God. The second staff has a bass clef and the notes G3, A3, B3, G3, A3, G3, A3, G3. Chords below the staff are Em Am, G, D.C.2.Dm7, G7, C. The lyrics are: Heal-ing and whole. Filled with God's love.

## Appendix C: Resources

### Theological and Liturgical

McLure, John S. *The Roundtable Pulpit: Where Leadership and Preaching Meet* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995).

Thomas Porter, ed. *Conflict and Communion: Reconciliation and Restorative Justice and Christ's Table* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 2006).

Rose, Lucy Atkinson. *Sharing the Word: Preaching in the Roundtable Church* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1997).

Russell, Letty M. *Church in the Round: Feminist Interpretation of the Church* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1993).

### On Restorative Justice and Circle Processes

Christina Baldwin, *Calling the Circle* (Swan-Raven 1994).

Jean Shinoda Bolen, *The Millionth Circle – How to Change Ourselves and the World – The Essential Guide to Women's Circles* (Conari Press 1999).

Judie Bopp, Michael Bopp, Lee Brown & Phil Lane, *The Sacred Tree* (Lotus Light Pub. 1989).

Katie Day. *Difficult Conversations: Taking Risks, Acting with Integrity* (Washington, DC: Alban Institute, 2001).

Beverley Engel, *Women Circling The Earth: A Guide To Fostering Community, Healing And Empowerment* (Health Communications 2000).

Charles Garfield, Cindy Spring & Sedonia Cahill, *Wisdom Circles: A Guide to Self-Discovery and Community Building in Small Groups* (Hyperion 1998).

John Paul Lederach. *The Little Book of Conflict Transformation* (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 2003).

Thomas Porter. *The Spirit and Art of Conflict Transformation: Creating a Culture of JustPeace* (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 2010).

Kay Pranis, Barry Stuart & Mark Wedge, *Peacemaking Circles: From Crime To Community* (St. Paul: Living Justice Press, 2003).

Kay Pranis, *The Little Book of Circle Processes* ((Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 2005).

Rupert Ross. *Returning to the Teachings: Exploring Aboriginal Justice* (Toronto: Penguin, 2006).

Howard Zehr. *The Little Book of Restorative Justice* (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 2002).

Jack Zimmerman & Virginia Coyle, *The Way of Council* (Bramble Books 1996).

### **On the Web:**

Hamline University School of Law Dispute Resolution Institute. (With an ongoing wide-ranging bibliography on restorative justice). <http://law.hamline.edu>.

Harvard Negotiation Project on Difficult Conversations. Harvard Law School, Cambridge, MA 02138. [www.pon.harvard.edu](http://www.pon.harvard.edu).

JustPeace — the United Methodist Center for Mediation and Conflict Transformation. 100 Maryland Avenue NE, Washington, DC 20002. [www.justpeaceumc.org](http://www.justpeaceumc.org).

Public Conversations Project. 46 Kondazian St., Watertown, MA 02472. [www.publicconversations.org](http://www.publicconversations.org).

Real Justice: A Program of the International Institute for Restorative Practices. [www.realjustice.org](http://www.realjustice.org).

Everyday Democracy: Ideas and Tools for Community Change (Formerly the Study Circles Resource Center). [www.everyday-democracy.org](http://www.everyday-democracy.org).