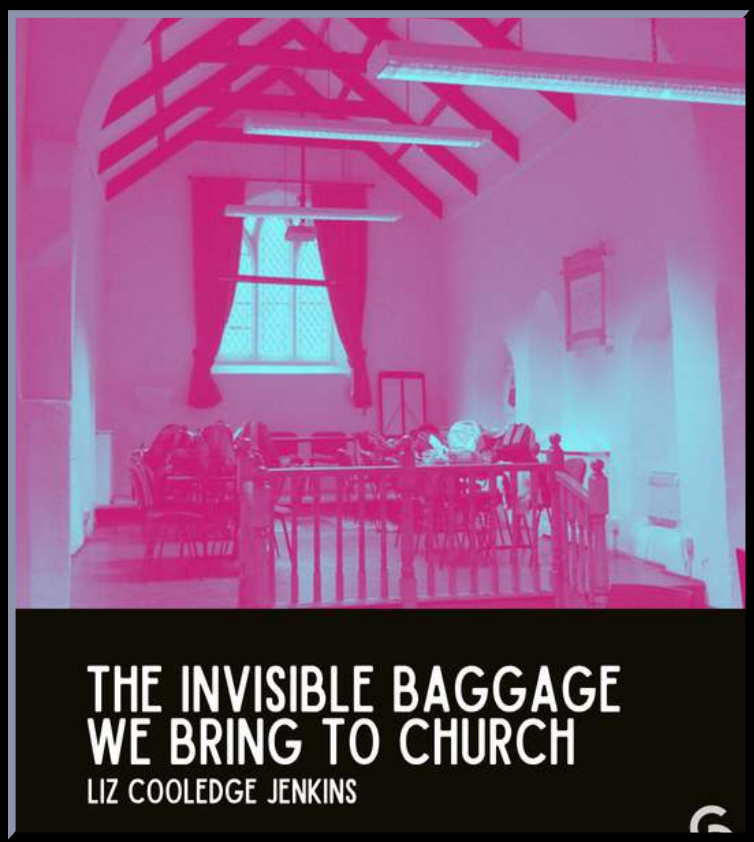

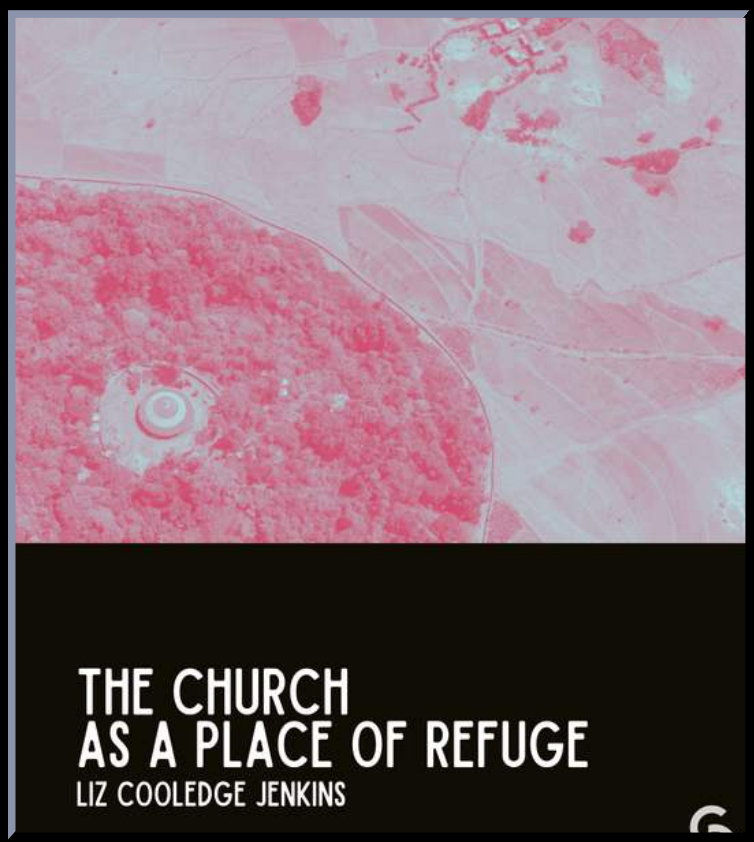

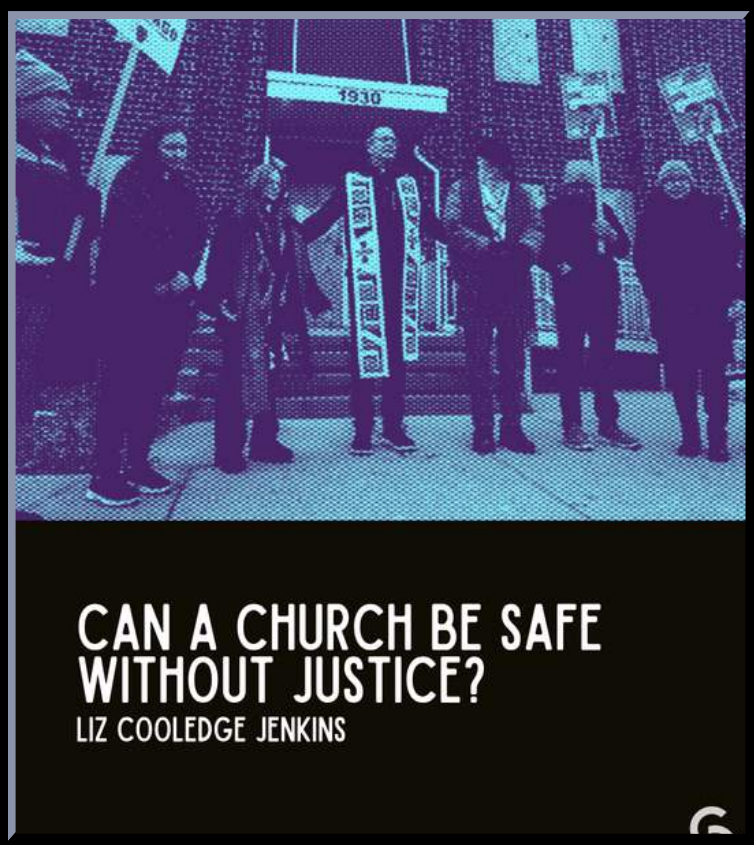

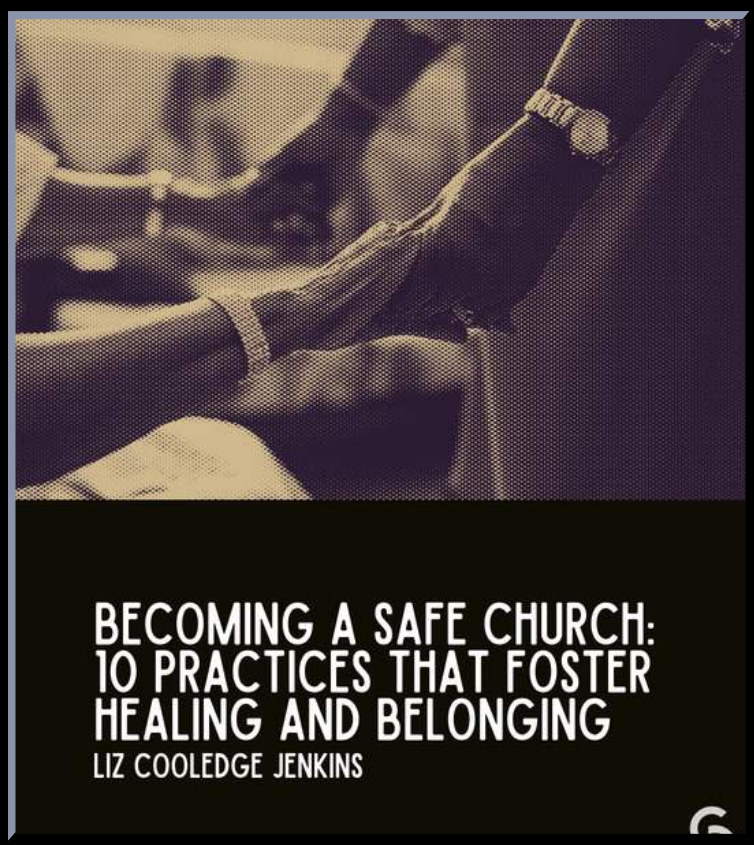

BECOMING A SAFE CHURCH: CULTIVATING COMMUNITIES OF HEALING, JUSTICE, AND BELONGING (A FOUR-PART SERIES)

A REFLECTION GUIDE

CHRISTIANS for SOCIAL ACTION

AUTHOR

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INTRODUCTION

Every person who walks into a church carries a story. Some arrive with hope. Others carry grief, exclusion, spiritual trauma, disappointment, or the lingering effects of communities that did not know how to hold their pain with care.

In this four-part series, Liz Cooledge Jenkins invites churches to ask a deeper question than How do we get people to come back? Instead, she asks what people experience when they do show up, and whether our churches are becoming places of healing, dignity, justice, and genuine belonging.

Drawing on personal stories, Scripture, church history, and practical wisdom, this series explores what safety means in a faith community. It challenges churches to recognize invisible wounds, recover the Christian tradition of refuge and hospitality, understand why justice is essential to safety, and consider concrete practices that build trust and foster healing.

Across the four parts, we'll consider:

- What are people carrying when they enter our churches?
- What can Jesus and the early church teach us about refuge, hospitality, and care?
- Why are safety and justice inseparable?
- What practices help churches become communities where people can heal and belong?

This guide is designed for individual reflection or use with churches, classrooms, and small groups. Our hope is that it helps faith communities listen more carefully, examine their practices honestly, and move toward becoming places where people are not simply welcomed through the door, but treated with dignity, protected from harm, and given room to flourish.

CHRISTIANS for SOCIAL ACTION

KEY THEMES

1. PEOPLE BRING INVISIBLE WOUNDS INTO CHURCH.

People enter faith communities carrying grief, exclusion, spiritual trauma, racism, sexism, economic hardship, abuse, and other forms of harm. Becoming a safe church begins with recognizing what people may be carrying.

2. SAFETY IS A LEGITIMATE SPIRITUAL NEED.

Scripture does not ask people to deny fear or ignore harm in the name of faith. The Psalms, the ministry of Jesus, and the witness of the early church affirm human needs for protection, dignity, rest, and freedom from harm.

3. JESUS MODELS DIGNITY, REFUGE, AND BELONGING.

Jesus consistently protects vulnerable people, refuses dehumanization, and restores dignity and agency. The early church carried this forward through radical hospitality and care for those most at risk.

4. SAFETY AND JUSTICE CANNOT BE SEPARATED.

A church cannot be truly safe for some while tolerating harm toward others. Faith communities build trust when they name injustice, stand with vulnerable people, and refuse silence in the face of oppression.

5. TRUST REQUIRES TRANSPARENCY AND ACCOUNTABILITY.

Safe churches do not pretend to be perfect. They name harm, hold people accountable, communicate openly, and resist secrecy or the protection of institutional power at the expense of those who have been wounded.

KEY THEMES

6. HEALING REQUIRES DIGNITY, AGENCY, AND HEALTHY BOUNDARIES.

People need freedom to participate, question, rest, say no, and engage spiritual practices without coercion or shame. Churches foster safety when they honor individual agency rather than pressure people toward conformity.

7. BECOMING A SAFE CHURCH IS AN ONGOING PRACTICE.

There is no checklist that makes a church permanently safe. Healing involves the whole person, and safety is cultivated through repeated choices to listen, pursue justice, welcome questions, honor boundaries, repair harm, and remain open to change.

PART 1

THE INVISIBLE BAGGAGE WE BRING TO CHURCH

THE STORIES, WOUNDS, AND QUESTIONS PEOPLE CARRY INTO FAITH COMMUNITIES

CHRISTIANS for SOCIAL ACTION

In Part 1, Liz Cooledge Jenkins shares the experiences of people who struggled to find safety and belonging in church. Liz challenges churches to recognize the invisible wounds people bring with them and to become communities of attention, empathy, care, and hope.

THE STORIES PEOPLE CARRY INTO CHURCH

“I was burnt out,” Grace[1] told me. “I don’t think I realized how burnt out I was.” Sometimes, she reflected, “you don’t realize how toxic a situation was until you’re out of it and you’ve had some time to heal.”

A Filipina-American woman now in her 30s, Grace was speaking of the many young adult years she spent in a Southern Baptist church, including in leadership there. The church was not talking about the “Black and Brown bodies being killed” — even though a large part of the congregation consisted of Black and Brown people. Her attempts to spark conversations around racial justice in the wake of George Floyd’s murder in 2020 were met with resistance from her fellow church council members.

At the same time, Grace was also carrying the extra burden of realizing her voice was not listened to with the same weight and respect as a man’s voice. “I was speaking out more,” she reflected. “I felt like I should, and I really did feel the Holy Spirit saying, ‘You need to speak out about this.’ But my husband would say the same things, and it would be more palatable to them.” The difference was undeniable. And it felt exhausting.

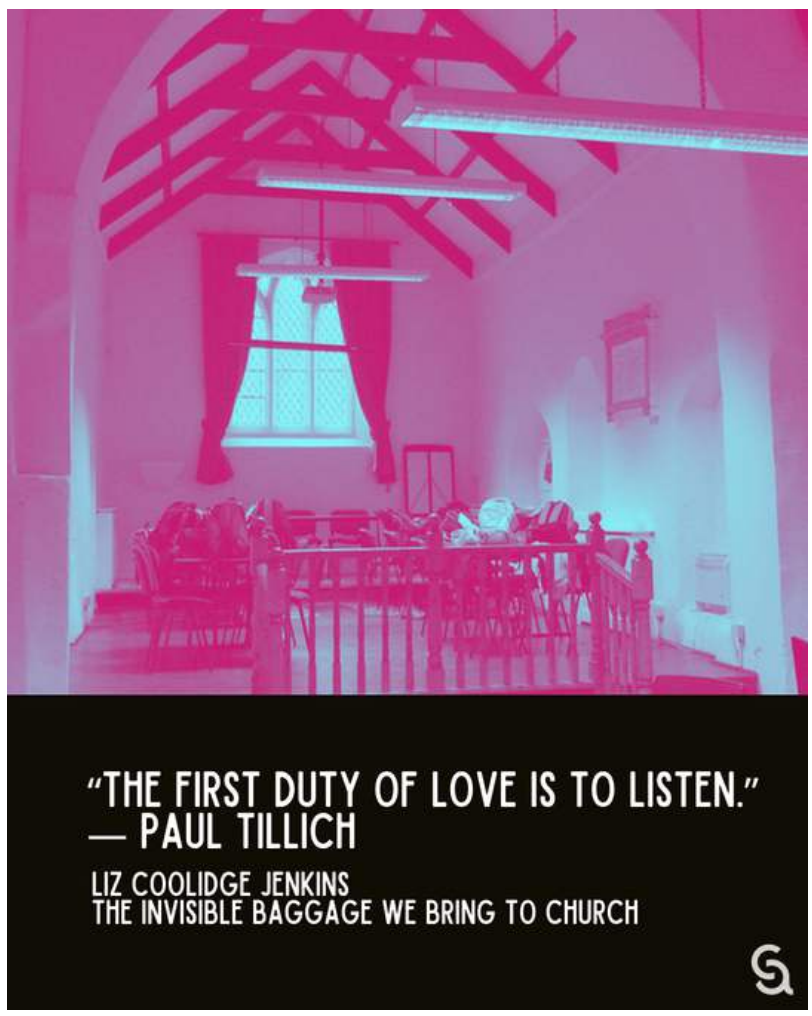
Michelle, a 30-something-year-old Black woman, remembered the days after Philando Castile was murdered in 2016. “I was so angry,” she told me. “Why are the police murdering people? Why are white people killing Black people?” In her distress, she recalled, “I made a video and posted it on social media. I was crying.”

Soon after, a white police officer in her congregation saw the video and approached her at church.

“He came up to me super aggressive,” Michelle remembered. “He said, ‘You just need to chill and wait until you get more information.’ His tone was very aggressive. I stood there in shock, wondering, Why are you angry that I was crying? What I said in the video was, Why can’t we all get along? What is happening? Why are the police doing this?” Being confronted by this man in this way, after Michelle had shared so vulnerably about her own pain, “didn’t feel safe.”

“I went through many churches trying to find community,” Aaron, a white man, told me — “literally a dozen churches, maybe more, over seven years.” One of the reasons he found it so hard to build community in all these different churches was that he “didn’t make enough money.” “People wouldn’t hang out with me,” he reflected, “because I couldn’t do the things they wanted to do. I was too poor to be Christian. It was really awkward.”

I thought about my own young adult years, working for a bootstrapped start-up and then for a parachurch organization where I fundraised my own salary. Going out to eat with friends from church, many of whom worked as engineers, I would intentionally order less expensive entrees and skip the drink menu while others ordered wine and cocktails. When the check came and people wanted to split it evenly, I wasn’t sure what to do. The feeling of not belonging in a faith community can show up in many different ways.



As younger generations continue to disaffiliate from churches at rates many Christians find alarming, church leaders might feel compelled to ask questions such as “Where have the young adults gone?” “Where have the Millennials gone?” Or some other version of “Why are our church numbers declining?”

These questions are understandable. After all, according to PRRI research, the percentage of Americans who do not regularly attend religious services has risen rapidly from 42% in 2013 to 53% in 2025.[2]

And while “the percentage of young men (ages 18-29) who identify as religiously unaffiliated has largely stayed the same since 2013,” the percentage of young women who identify as religiously unaffiliated has increased from 29% in 2013, to 40% in 2024, to 43% in 2025.[3] These are significant shifts. They might feel disconcerting. I wonder, though, if we can ask better questions as we ponder them.

Perhaps a more interesting, compassionate, humanizing set of questions sounds less like “How do we get more people in church?” and more like this: “What are people experiencing when they show up at our Sunday services?” “What feels safe or unsafe, hopeful or frustrating, healing or triggering?” “What baggage do people carry when they walk in?”

And, “Are we a genuinely safe place for people to set some burdens down, work through and process other burdens, and generally be fully themselves?”

CHURCHES MUST LEARN TO SEE INVISIBLE WOUNDS

I wonder if congregations are reflecting deeply enough on what it’s like to walk into a church — or to try to stay in a church — when so many of us are carrying so much hurt, so much baggage, often so much religious trauma. After all, as pastor and editor Jon Mathieu writes,

> “IT IS ALMOST A MIRACLE THAT SOME EX-VANGELICALS EVER STEP FOOT IN A CHURCH AGAIN.”[4]

We carry the weight of all sorts of difficult life experiences that often isolated or wounded us in previous faith communities that did not know how to walk with us through divorce, through infertility, through abuse, through illness, through disability, through depression or anxiety, through unemployment, through grief. We may have been made to feel guilty for experiencing these things. We may have been blamed. We may not have been supported well.

Some of us, like Aaron, carry the trauma of not fitting in. Of wanting to belong but finding it difficult. Of searching for community but unable to build it in a meaningful way.

Some of us have experienced faith communities that are homogenous racially or ethnically, and being in a racial minority there feels unsettling, like a hindrance to belonging. Sometimes homogeneity falls along other lines, like socioeconomic class or family situation. Some faith communities direct most of their efforts at support and community-building toward married couples or toward children's ministries, and people who are single or do not have children are made to feel out of place.

Some of us, like Grace, show up at church — if we still take the risk of showing up at all — carrying the exhaustion of attempting to effect change in previous faith communities. We hold disappointment from trying to initiate better conversations than these churches were willing to have. We carry the frustration of feeling like our efforts didn't go anywhere, perhaps because people in leadership did not want them to go anywhere. We wonder if our voices are wanted, if our views are considered important, if we could make a difference.

Some of us, like Michelle, when we walk into church, come from places where our trauma has been disregarded.

Where our pain has been met with callousness. Especially for people of color who have spent time in white-dominated congregations, the wounds run deep. It has felt like a profound betrayal.

"These people claimed to love me," Michelle reflected of a different previous church. But "I was seeing their true colors online. I thought they were welcoming me with open arms," she said. But eventually she realized, "Most of these people are Trump supporters and repeat talking points from Fox News. It's a cognitive dissonance."

In “Shoutin’ in the Fire,” Danté Stewart writes,

> “I BURNED WITH RAGE AS I THOUGHT OF THE MYRIAD WAYS THOSE AROUND ME TRIED TO MAKE ME FEEL THAT I WAS CRAZY ABOUT SPEAKING OUT AGAINST THE INJUSTICES VISITED UPON OUR BLACK BODIES, AND THE SUFFOCATING NATURE OF WHITE SUPREMACY THAT WE HAD TO LIVE IN.”[5]

So many people carry these wounds. They are looking for places that don’t feel suffocating, where they are not viewed with suspicion or made to feel that they are overreacting to injustice. We are looking for spaces where we might begin to heal.

From many years of embodiment coaching, working with people who have spent time in conservative streams of Christianity, Jamie Lee Finch writes, “people do not recognize that the evangelical power structure is churning out walking wounded at an alarming rate.” Many of the “refugees” of evangelical Christianity, she continues, “experience anxiety, depression, and panic that they aren’t able to explain, and they don’t feel the inner permission to own their emotions, trust themselves, find peace, or experience pleasure.”[6]

Faith communities can learn to acknowledge these realities, asking better questions that help them become places of healing rather than further wounding. Questions that center real humans and their real lives, gifts, and needs, not the perceived need of a church to refresh its membership numbers. Questions that acknowledge the gravity of what people have experienced in religious communities, that refuse to gloss over the ways church has often not been a healthy space in the past. And yet, church is a place where many of us still find value.

We hope to find communities that feel different, that feel safe. In “The Wisdom of Your Body,” psychologist Hillary McBride writes,

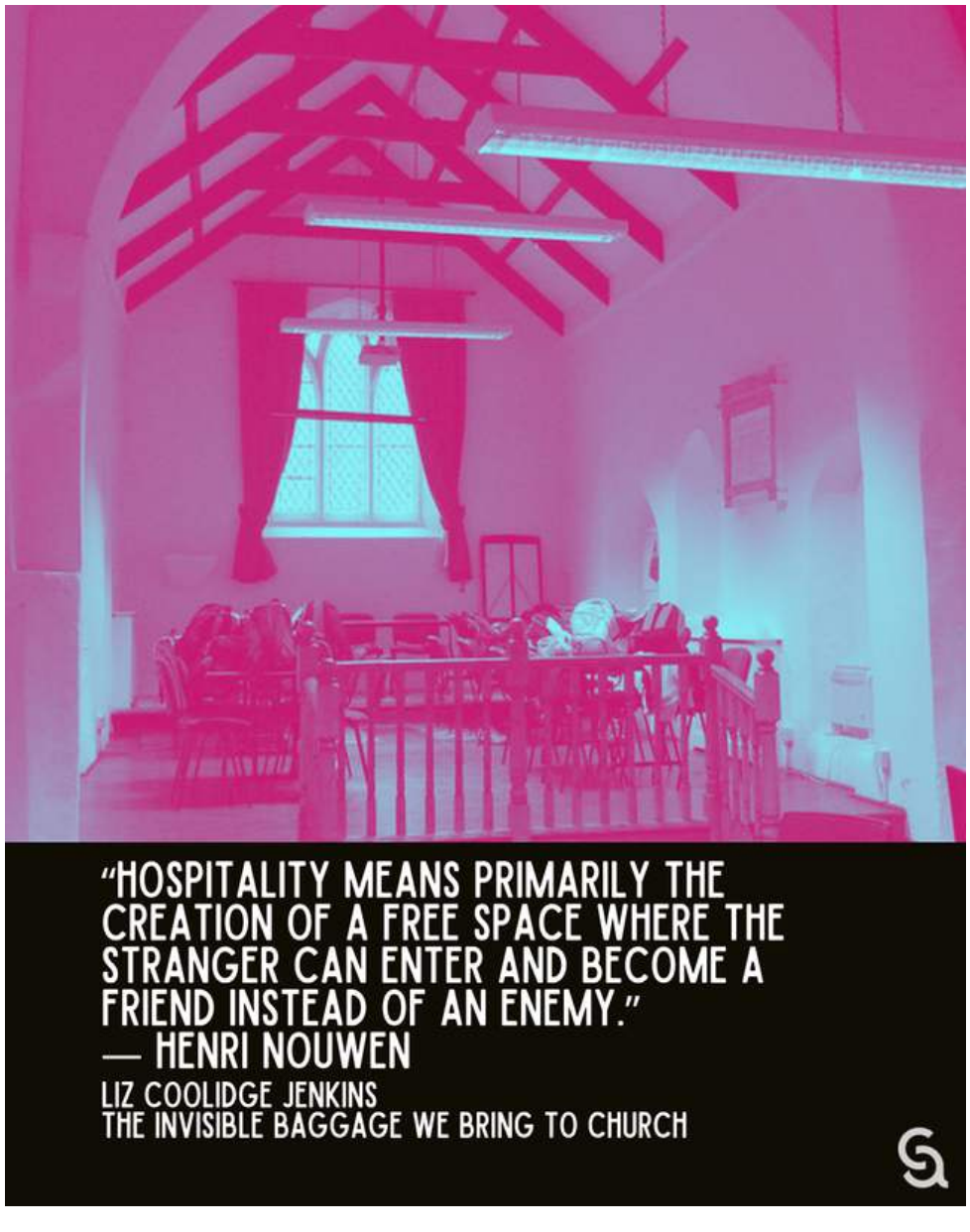
> “ALL FORMS OF OPPRESSION AFFECT THE BODY. FROM RESEARCH ABOUT THE BRAIN, ESPECIALLY THROUGH THE USE OF NEURO-IMAGING, WE KNOW THAT IT IS FACTUALLY INCORRECT TO SAY THAT PHYSICAL VIOLENCE IS THE MOST HURTFUL, AND THUS MOST VALID, FORM OF INJURY. OUR BRAINS AND NERVOUS SYSTEMS PROCESS VERBAL, SOCIAL, POLITICAL, AND PHYSICAL INJURY IN THE EXACT SAME WAY.”[7]

What would it look like for pastors and other church leaders to recognize this truth, to lead in light of it? If people were walking into our churches visibly physically wounded and bleeding, they would hopefully receive immediate attention and care.

But so many of us walk in with invisible wounds. We carry social, emotional, and spiritual traumas. We show up asking, Is this faith community safe? Will I be harmed in the ways I've been harmed in previous churches? Will I be harmed in different ways I haven't thought of yet?

Like Michelle, Grace, and Aaron, we might wonder: Will people at this church see and empathize with my pain, my trauma? Will they react negatively if I show up grieved over violence done to people who look like me? Will they care about this violence? Do they want to make things right? Or will I end up feeling betrayed? Will I end up burned out from pushing for change? Will my voice be heard and received? Can I belong here, just as I am? Is there room for me?

Churches can make room for these sorts of questions, and for the people carrying them.



Faith communities can focus on becoming safe places of healing, nourishment, and care, not caught up in numbers games but attending to the needs of each person and welcoming the perspectives and gifts each person brings.

We can turn our questions from What might attract more people? to What are people carrying when they walk in? And in this shift, we might find healing and hope. We might return to what the church was meant to be: a refuge for all people, not a toxic system that churns out wounded refugees.

ENDNOTES

1. Name changed for privacy.
2. 2025 PRRI Census of American Religion, April 15, 2026, https://prri.org/spotlight/2025-prri-census-of-american-religion/.
3. Ibid.
4.Jon Mathieu, “How Can Mainline Denominations Care for Ex-vangelicals?” in The Presbyterian Outlook, Jan 13, 2022, https://pres-outlook.org/2022/01/ex-vangelicals-are-coming-how-will-mainline-denominations-welcome-them/.
5. Danté Stewart, Shoutin’ in the Fire: An American Epistle (Convergent Books, 2021), 108-9.
6. Jamie Lee Finch, You Are Your Own: A Reckoning with the Religious Trauma of Evangelical Christianity (Independently published, 2019), 85.
7. Hillary McBride, The Wisdom of Your Body: Finding Healing, Wholeness, and Connection Through Embodied Living (Brazos, 2021), 160.

PART 1

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- What experiences — positive or painful — have shaped the way you enter a church community? What might you be carrying that others cannot immediately see?

- Liz invites churches to ask, “What are people experiencing when they show up?” How might that shift change the priorities or practices of a congregation?

- Think about people who may enter your church carrying wounds related to race, gender, economic status, grief, disability, mental health, family circumstances, or previous religious experiences. Whose experiences might your church understand well — and whose might be easier to overlook?

PART 2

THE CHURCH AS A PLACE OF REFUGE

HOW SCRIPTURE AND CHURCH HISTORY CALL US TO PROTECT DIGNITY AND WELCOME THE VULNERABLE

CHRISTIANS for SOCIAL ACTION

In Part 2, Liz looks to Jesus, the Psalms, the Early Church, and Christian history to explore the Church's calling to protect people from harm and restore dignity, agency, and belonging. She challenges spiritual language that dismisses legitimate fears or treats physical and emotional safety as evidence of weak faith.

JESUS RESTORES SAFETY, DIGNITY, AND BELONGING

In a story recorded in the Gospel of John (8:1-11), religious leaders interrupt Jesus in the middle of his teaching and force a woman to stand before the crowd who has gathered. They accuse the woman of adultery and ask Jesus what he says about applying the Mosaic law that she should be executed via stoning. With zero concern for the woman's physical safety — let alone her emotional, social, or spiritual safety — these (presumably male) leaders want to use her to test Jesus. They are trying to catch him in a trap, forcing him to say something condemnable.

Jesus, though, is having none of it. He refuses to speak.

Instead, he bends over and writes with his finger in the dirt. Perhaps he is defusing the religious leaders' hostility by buying time, hoping to de-escalate the situation on the woman's behalf. I picture his attention directed toward her, even when he is looking at the ground.

I imagine Jesus wondering: Is this woman okay? How can I serve her holistic well-being in this moment? How can I respond to this situation in a way that best honors her dignity and agency as a human being? What does she need from me? What actions can I take to advocate for her?

Such different questions from the ones the religious leaders seem to be asking: How can we villainize Jesus? How can we use this woman to our advantage, especially in her current state of physical and emotional vulnerability? How might she serve our goals?

But now she still stands humiliated and exposed in front of the crowd, and there is more work to be done. There is the restoration of her emotional safety, of her social status, of her sense of acceptance and belonging.

In front of everyone, once the men with murder on their minds have left, Jesus talks with the woman. He tells her, in the clear hearing of all who have witnessed this entire scene, that she is not condemned.

In many churches, safety is not regarded as a high value, if it is valued at all.

Christians are sometimes led to believe that if we truly trusted God to protect us, we wouldn't worry about our safety. If we were spiritually-minded enough, we wouldn't concern ourselves too much with earthly, bodily matters like getting sick, or getting others sick, or lacking access to healthcare, or being at risk of detention or deportation, or being at the mercy of an unjust justice system.

"Faith over fear," Christians sometimes say.

I remember when this phrase was used as an excuse not to abide by reasonable COVID-19 restrictions, not to wear masks or reduce indoor gathering sizes. People employ it now to justify not worrying too much about government policies that violently impact our lives or the lives of people in our communities — often immigrants, people of color, and materially poor people.

But the Christian scriptures and church history tell a different story. The biblical psalmists, for example, are actually deeply concerned with safety. One psalmist pleads,

"HIDE ME IN THE SHADOW OF YOUR WINGS, FROM THE WICKED WHO DESPOIL ME, FROM MY DEADLY ENEMIES WHO SURROUND ME." (17:8, NRSVUE)

Another prays fervently,

"DELIVER ME, O LORD, FROM EVILDOERS; PROTECT ME FROM THOSE WHO ARE VIOLENT, WHO PLAN EVIL THINGS IN THEIR MINDS." (PSALM 140:1-2, NRSVUE)

The Psalms bear witness to our very human, very valid fears. They don't ask for "faith over fear" or deny the reality of violence and oppression in our world. They ask for protection, for peace, for safety. For an end to harm.

This is what so many of us are looking for when we walk into faith communities. We need communities that acknowledge harm rather than spiritually bypassing it. We want sanctuaries of refuge from violence, and from those who perpetrate this violence. We are looking for places where a sense of trusting in God is not pitted against our legitimate needs for spaces that feel — and are — safe.

Spaces where people in positions of power do not abuse their power. Where people see and empathize with others' pain. Where people listen closely and with open minds to those who challenge their ways of doing things, who urge them to address the real and urgent justice issues impacting their communities. Where people do not stick to their own homogeneous friend groups and cause others to feel excluded, like they don't belong.

Protect me from those who plan evil things. Hide me. Keep me safe, we might join the psalmists in praying.

THE CHURCH HAS ALWAYS BEEN CALLED TO BE A REFUGE

While often sidelined in present-day, white-dominated, evangelical churches, social and emotional safety was central to the earliest Christian communities. In "A People's History of Christianity," historian Diana Butler Bass writes,

> "...TO ANCIENT CHRISTIANS HOSPITALITY WAS A VIRTUE, PART OF THE LOVE OF NEIGHBOR AND FUNDAMENTAL TO BEING A PERSON OF THE WAY. WHILE CONTEMPORARY CHRISTIANS TEND TO EQUATE MORALITY WITH SEXUAL ETHICS, OUR ANCESTORS DEFINED MORALITY AS WELCOMING THE STRANGER."[1]

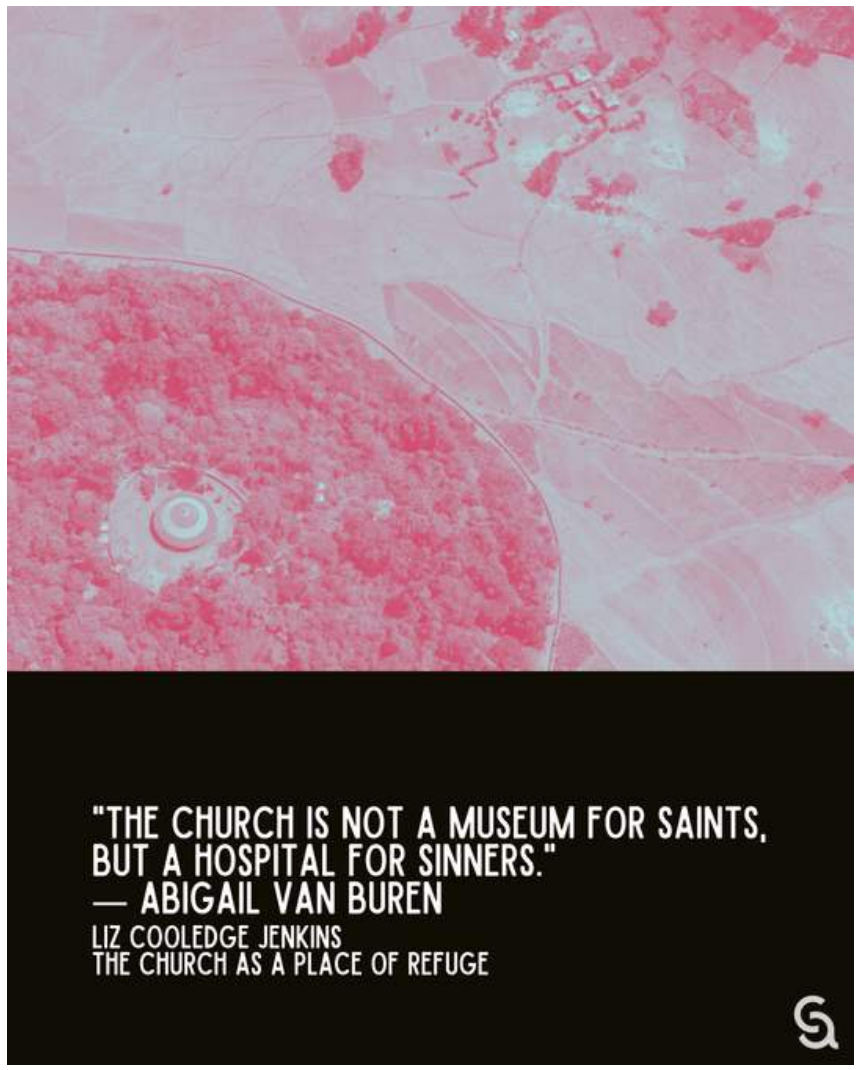
Many churches today articulate and enforce sexual ethics in ways that are laced with shame, which is antithetical to emotional safety. In stark contrast, the early church placed its focus on welcome, hospitality, belonging, and unconditional neighborly love — practices that honor each person's need for social safety.

What did early Christian practices of hospitality look like?

During the Plague of Galen in the second century, writes Butler Bass,

> "CHRISTIANS PROVED THEIR SPIRITUAL METTLE BY TENDING TO THE SICK. THEIR ACTS OF MERCY EXTENDED TO ALL THE SUFFERING REGARDLESS OF CLASS, TRIBE, OR RELIGION AND CREATED THE CONDITIONS IN WHICH OTHERS ACCEPTED THE FAITH."[2]

In contrast with manipulative uses of a "faith over fear" mantra — and here I think of the millennials I've spoken with who described feeling profoundly unsafe in churches that did not take COVID-19 seriously — this early Christian posture of mercy toward the sick takes human pain and distress with the utmost seriousness. It seeks to alleviate suffering where possible.



To Jesus and the early church, according to Butler Bass, hospitality meant that:

> "OUTSIDERS...ARE BROUGHT INTO THE CIRCLE OF PROTECTION AND CARE AS USUAL SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS ARE DISRUPTED OR REVERSED."[3]

In practical terms,

> "DOMESTIC HOSPITALITY INCLUDED OFFERING SHELTER FOR WIDOWS AND ORPHANS, PROVIDING ROOMS FOR ITINERANT MISSIONARIES AND PREACHERS, MAKING MEALS FOR THE POOR, AND HOSTING FAMILY FUNERAL BANQUETS AND OTHER RITUAL MEALS."[4]

With special attention to people who were especially marginalized or vulnerable, such as widows, orphans, and those without material wealth, early Christians sought to create communities marked by safety, provision, and care.

As the Gospel stories tell it, the religious leaders of Jesus' day once called out Jesus and his disciples for unlawfully picking grain on the Sabbath, the traditional day of rest. But Jesus challenged them back. He offered a historical example from the story of David and then argued from it: "The Sabbath was made for humankind and not humankind for the Sabbath." (Mark 2:23-28, NRSVUE)

The questions churches and church leaders ask often hold so much judgment. There can be such a strong assumption that pastors, elders, and others in authority know the right way to practice the Christian faith, and that they have the authority to determine whether others are engaging with the Christian tradition accurately, faithfully, and adequately. But really, church and all its structures — Sunday services, Bible study groups, prayer, service, and other spiritual practices like the Sabbath — all these were created on behalf of humankind. They are meant to serve us, not the other way around.

If we find ourselves asking why people are not participating, we might turn the question back around on ourselves: Who is served well by our current practices, and who is served poorly? What might better meet people's needs?

Even Sabbath rest itself serves as an example of God's care for people's spiritual, psychological, and emotional safety. As God rested on the seventh day, so we too are invited to rest (see Exod. 20:8-11). Tricia Hersey writes in "Rest Is Resistance,"

"RESTING OUR BODIES AND MINDS IS A FORM OF REVERENCE. WHEN WE HONOR OUR BODIES VIA REST, WE ARE CONNECTING TO THE DEEPEST PARTS OF OURSELVES. WE ARE FREEDOM-MAKING."[5]

God wants this for us: this reverence for our bodies and minds. This connection. This freedom. The security it takes to rest, and the security that comes from rest.

Historically speaking, safety in faith communities has never been a given.

Lisa Sharon Harper reflects on this in “Fortune: How Race Broke My Family and the World—and How to Repair It All,” examining the legacy of US chattel slavery and the faith leaders who supported it:

> **“THE FACT THAT PURITAN REVIVALIST JONATHAN EDWARDS NOT ONLY ENSLAVED PEOPLE BUT ALSO WROTE AN IMPASSIONED DEFENSE OF SLAVERY IN 1741 IS NEVER QUESTIONED. INSTEAD, WE ARE URGED TO THINK OF HIM AND OTHERS LIKE HIM AS PRODUCTS OF THEIR TIME. BUT IN THEIR TIME, HIDDEN IN PLAIN SIGHT, WERE WITNESSES OF THE TRUTH LIKE THE SOCIETY OF FRIENDS WHO BEGAN TO OPENLY PUSH BACK AGAINST SLAVERY AS EARLY AS THE 1680S.”[6]**

In every era of Christian history, there have existed faith communities of safety and faith communities of unsafety, particularly for oppressed and marginalized people. Christianity as a whole is not automatically collectively moving toward greater safety; rather, each community needs to make an intentional decision to move in that direction, and to keep moving.

Each generation is responsible for learning what safety means and how to embody it in our own time and place. And each community needs to center the safety of people of color, of women, of queer people, of people with disabilities, of materially impoverished people, as we do so.

As churches seek to ask better questions than “How do we get people back in church?” we might find ourselves asking: What kind of witness will today’s churches bear? Will we follow in the footsteps of the Quakers and other Christian abolitionists, who wanted a world of freedom and safety for all people? Will we follow the model of the early church’s hospitality, with special attention toward the needs of the most vulnerable people?

Will we learn from Jesus’ example of prioritizing safety, restoration, and belonging when those around us want to compete in religious debates that no one wins? Will we engage in spiritual practices that affirm human dignity, that serve people, that bring rest, comfort, and well-being?

Human bodies were never meant to be counted as numbers in pews to ease the anxiety of organizations that fear themselves to be shrinking or dying. Those pews are meant to seat us, to serve us.

To be places of hope and healing. Safety is not about avoiding difficult truths or never straying from our comfort zones. It's about pursuing dignity, honesty, and freedom from harm for all people. It's about being a space hospitable enough for people to be fully themselves, to breathe freely, to know they are loved and not judged.

The witness of Jesus and the historical church call us to settle for nothing less.

ENDNOTES

1. Diana Butler Bass, A People's History of Christianity: The Other Side of the Story (HarperOne 2009), 62.
2. Butler Bass, A People's History, 59, 60.
3. Butler Bass, A People's History, 61.
4. Butler Bass, A People's History, 62.
5. Tricia Hersey, Rest Is Resistance: A Manifesto (Little, Brown Spark 2022), 26.
6. Lisa Sharon Harper, Fortune: How Race Broke My Family and the World – And How to Repair It All (Brazos 2022), 182.

PART 2

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- In the story of the woman accused of adultery, Liz describes Jesus as attending first to her safety and then to her dignity and belonging. What does this story suggest about the kind of community Jesus creates around vulnerable people?

- Early Christians understood hospitality as bringing outsiders into a “circle of protection and care.” What would it mean for your church to understand hospitality as more than friendliness or welcome?

- Liz asks, “Who is served well by our current practices, and who is served poorly?” Consider your church’s worship, programs, leadership, expectations, and traditions. Who flourishes within them? Who might find participation difficult, exhausting, or unsafe?

PART 3

CAN A CHURCH BE SAFE WITHOUT JUSTICE?

WHY THE SAFETY OF ONE PERSON IS BOUND UP WITH THE SAFETY OF EVERYONE

CHRISTIANS for SOCIAL ACTION

A church may feel welcoming to some people while remaining unsafe for others. But can any community be genuinely safe when racism, misogyny, poverty, anti-LGBTQ+ exclusion, or violence against immigrants is ignored? In Part 3, Liz calls churches to move beyond silence, neutrality, and performative welcome. True safety requires a public and wholehearted commitment to justice.

"I HAVE LEARNED THAT MANY OF US HAVE NOT GIVEN UP ON FAITH, JUST THE WAY OUR FAITH HAS BEEN USED TO OPPRESS OTHERS. WE HAVE NOT GIVEN UP ON THE BIBLE, JUST THE WAY IT HAS BEEN USED TO MARGINALIZE OTHERS. WE HAVE NOT GIVEN UP ON JESUS, WE JUST KNOW HE AIN'T A BLUE-EYED WHITE REPUBLICAN. WE'RE NOT BECOMING LESS SPIRITUAL OR RELIGIOUS. IT'S JUST THAT WE HAVE LEARNED TO PUT UP WITH LESS, MUCH LESS."[1] -DANTÉ STEWART

When people have given up on church — or on a particular church, or a particular kind of church — we might learn to ask: What exactly have they given up on? What drove them away? Did something — perhaps, as Danté Stewart suggests, a way Christianity was used to marginalize, or an interpretation of the Bible that justified oppression, or an image of Jesus as a "blue-eyed white Republican" — feel deeply unsafe?

Many younger adults have indeed decided to put up with much less — for ourselves, and also on behalf of communities more vulnerable than our own, or differently vulnerable from our own.

Grace,[2] the Filipina-American woman we met in Part 1 of this series, reflected on her current church:

"I WOULD FEEL VERY COMFORTABLE BRINGING MY QUEER FRIEND HERE, OR MY GAY FRIEND" — OR THE YOUTH SHE USED TO WORK WITH, WHO ARE 'MAJORITY BLACK.'"

At a previous church, these youth were often subject to racial microaggressions. But at Grace's church now, she said,

"I FEEL LIKE I CAN INVITE ANYONE, AND THEY WON'T FEEL ASHAMED OR TRAUMATIZED. THEY WOULD NOT EXPERIENCE THAT."

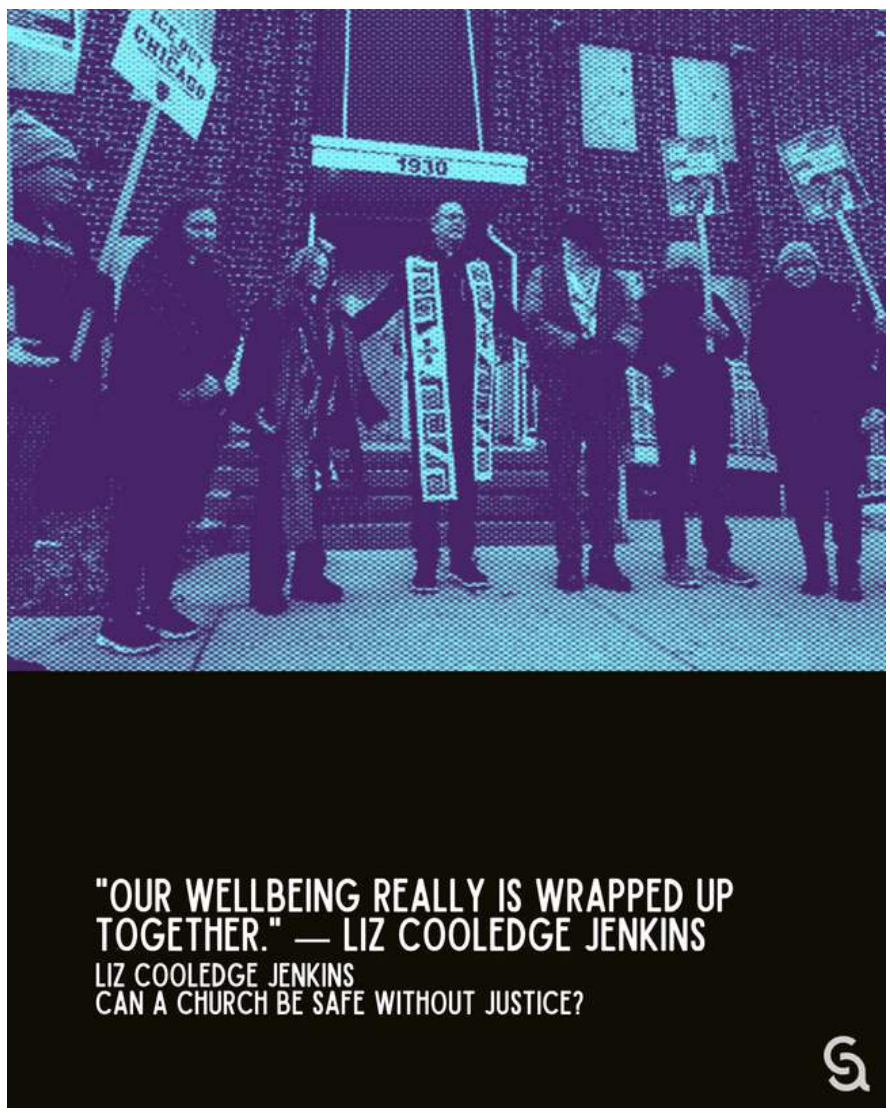
She implicitly connects her own sense of safety in church to that of Black young people, and of LGBTQ+ friends, even though she does not share these identities herself. If people she cares about aren't safe, nobody is truly safe.

I heard a similar thought process from other millennials I spoke with.

One white woman reflected on how disillusioning it was to attend a Christian conference where "the vibrant faith of queer Christians" was on full display — and then to go back to a church community where queer Christians were not "fully embraced and celebrated."

For her, it wasn't "even just churches not being affirming" that began to bother her deeply; it was "nonaffirming churches not taking any steps or thought of how to include queer people who have chosen to be celibate in their community." She saw how much faith communities are missing if they do not create space for queer people to show up as their authentic selves and belong fully.

Aaron, the white man we met in Part 1, was drawn to a previous faith community because of their ministry to those who are unhoused.



Although not homeless himself, he was moved by seeing that "there were homeless people who showed up at church and were treated like normal human beings instead of being offered a service." The church was "happy to feed you, give you a place to get out of the cold, and give you a place to interact with other people in a way that's not degrading."

We know we are safe in a church community not only if we don't feel personally degraded, but if we also see that no one is degraded. That everyone belongs.

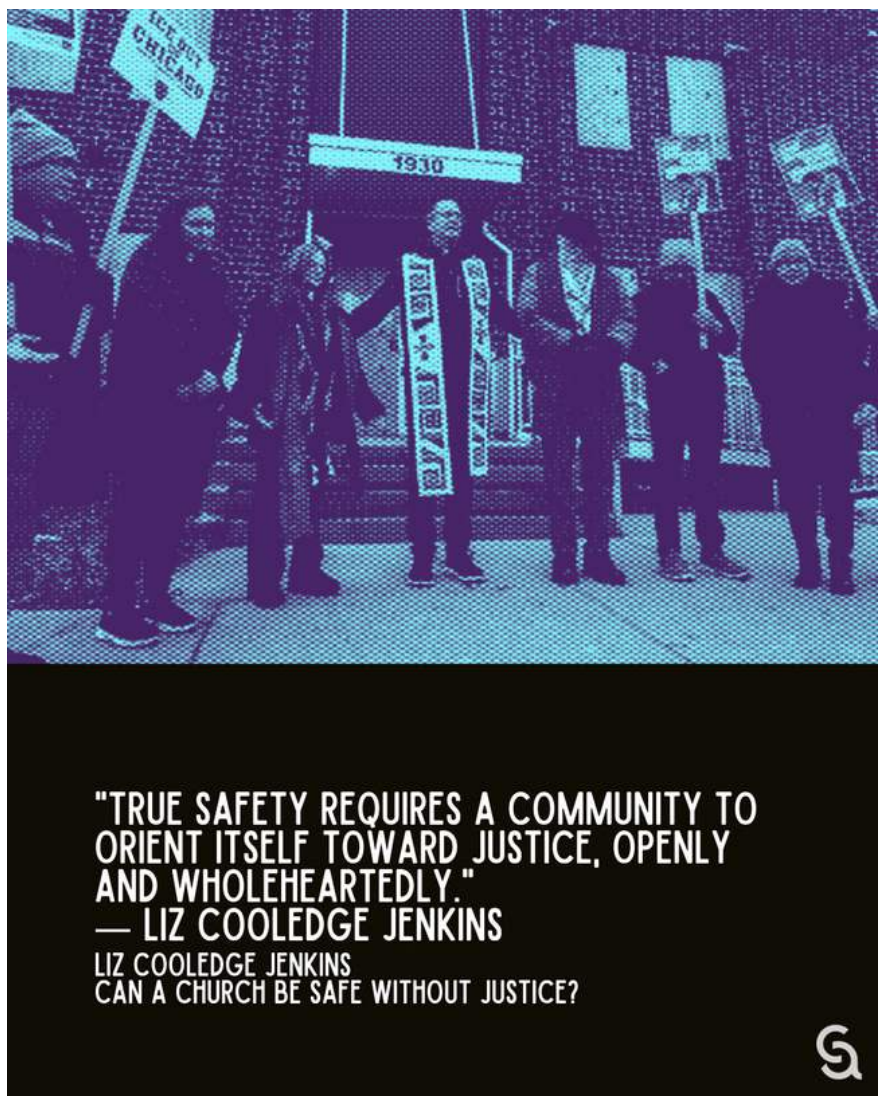
That the humanity and dignity of all people is supported fully. Whether we're looking at racial justice, queer affirmation, or full inclusion of unhoused people, churches that are actively pursuing a sense of equality and kinship among all people are churches that feel safe.

When we look for a sense of safety in church, we sense on some level, whether or not we would explicitly articulate it, that our safety is tied to the safety of others around us. Our well-being really is wrapped up together. As activist Lilla Watson put it famously, "Your liberation is bound up with mine."

In "I Won't Shut Up," Ally Henny writes,

> "FREEDOM THAT IS GAINED AT ANOTHER PERSON'S EXPENSE ISN'T FREEDOM; IT IS JUST DIVERTED OPPRESSION...WE DON'T GET FREE BY LORDING OUR POWER OVER OTHERS."[3]

As a white woman, I experience our world differently from the way Ally Henny does as a Black woman or Danté Stewart does as a Black man. But I share their interest in faith communities marked by a concern for justice, committed to a Jesus who is not color-blind or callous to the harm being done to marginalized communities.



If a church spiritually invests in me and my leadership or other giftings as a woman but is simultaneously excluding queer people or colluding with systems of white supremacy, I know I am not safe there, even if it might look that way. Nobody is safe there. I don't want to be grafted into the power-hoarding class in a community where some lord their power over others. I want to be part of communities where power is not hoarded or lorded over others at all.

I want to join Henny in "imagin[ing] a different world than the one we presently inhabit"—in "imagin[ing] freedom for all people."[4]

What does this look like in our current political reality?

Today's churches find themselves responding to a rapidly unfolding, ever-changing, interlocking set of crises in our country and our world. To consider one of these crises, one that impacts many of our cities and broader communities deeply, we might ask: How are churches responding to violence against immigrants, including the widespread kidnapping and unjust imprisonment of immigrants by US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) officers?

Appropriate responses differ depending on our contexts and communities. There is no one-size-fits-all right answer. But churches that serve as places of safety — following in the footsteps of Jesus and the Early Church's commitment to radical hospitality and welcome (see Part 2 of this series) — side with immigrants over immigration enforcement. They find ways to resist the cruelty of kidnappings off the street and new detention centers being built, in ways that make sense for their own specific communities. They speak out on behalf of the truth that immigrants make our communities stronger.

They also make room for all of the feelings many of us experience as we see ICE raids and violent arrests play out on the news, on social media, and sometimes in front of our own eyes.

Kaitlin B. Curtice writes that in her time in white-dominated evangelical churches, "people would pass by one another, their smiles plastered on for a few hours each Sunday morning, asking, How are you? We would answer one another, Oh, good! How are you? as we made our way to the worship service."[5]

Curtice wondered whether it was safe to share how she was really feeling:

> "I WONDERED IF I COULD SAY HOW ANGRY I WAS THAT ICE WAS IN OUR CITY, OR THAT OUR POLITICAL LEADERS HAD NO SENSE OF URGENCY TO CARE FOR THE LAND THAT WE LIVE ON. COULD I TELL THEM THAT I WAS GRIEVING THE DEATH OF A FRIEND OR THAT GOD FELT FAR AWAY AND STAINED BY THE COLONIALISM I FELT THROUGHOUT CHRISTIAN SPACES?"[6]

Curtice felt that her strong emotions about injustice would not be met with empathy, understanding, or spaciousness — that is, with safety. Her anger would not have been affirmed as valid, let alone shared.

So many of us are angry, and for good reasons. Are our churches places where that anger can be held, expressed, metabolized? Where we can let it clue us in to the ways our bodies are responding to injustice? Where we can work through it together and find the good it might inspire us to do in our world?

Church leaders may sometimes feel that it is safer to remain silent on issues that feel politically charged. But this is counterproductive. In a world full of injustice, Christians are called to side wholeheartedly with those who are impacted by injustice, not those who perpetrate it.

We gain nothing spiritually by attempting to remain in the middle so as not to offend those who might disagree. Rather, we bear witness to the truth and power of the Christian tradition when we take up its better instincts to struggle toward justice. One mixed-race millennial woman I spoke with reflected,

"A LOT OF THE CHURCHES I'D GONE TO DIDN'T TAKE AN ACTIVE STANCE IN POLITICS OR SOCIAL ISSUES. WHEN I WAS YOUNGER I WAS MORE OKAY WITH THAT, BUT AS I BECAME POST-COLLEGE I THOUGHT MORE ABOUT, WHAT DOES IT LOOK LIKE FOR THE CHURCH TO ENGAGE IN ISSUES? WHAT SHOULD THE ROLE OF THE CHURCH BE? NEUTRAL, OR INVOLVED?"

At one previous church, she recalled, a staff member:

"WANTED TO TAKE A MORE PUBLIC AND ACTIVE STANCE ON RACIAL ISSUES IN AMERICA, BUT HE ENDED UP LEAVING THE CHURCH OVER IT BECAUSE THERE WASN'T ALIGNMENT WITH THE REST OF THE STAFF. THINGS LIKE THAT MADE ME QUESTION, WHY AREN'T WE DOING MORE? WHY ARE WE CHOOSING TO NOT BE MORE INVOLVED IN THESE TYPES OF ISSUES WHEN THEY SEEM SO PROMINENT AND IMPORTANT IN OUR SOCIETY RIGHT NOW?"

Churches' attempts at neutrality no longer felt good enough.

Danté Stewart reflects on the church he was a part of in 2016 when Alton Sterling was shot and killed by police:

"THE WEEK AFTER ALTON WAS MURDERED, OUR SERMON SERIES BEGAN TO EXPLORE MARRIAGE. WEEK AFTER WEEK, WE HEARD ABOUT WHAT GOD WANTED US TO DO IN OUR SINGLENESS, AND WHAT GOD WANTED US TO DO IN OUR MARRIAGES, AND THE GRACE OF GOD FOR OUR SINS, AND THE FORGIVENESS OF GOD FOR OUR FAILURES. NOT ONCE DURING ANY OF THOSE SUNDAYS —OR ANY SUNDAYS THEREAFTER—WAS THERE ANY MENTION OF ALTON'S NAME."[7]

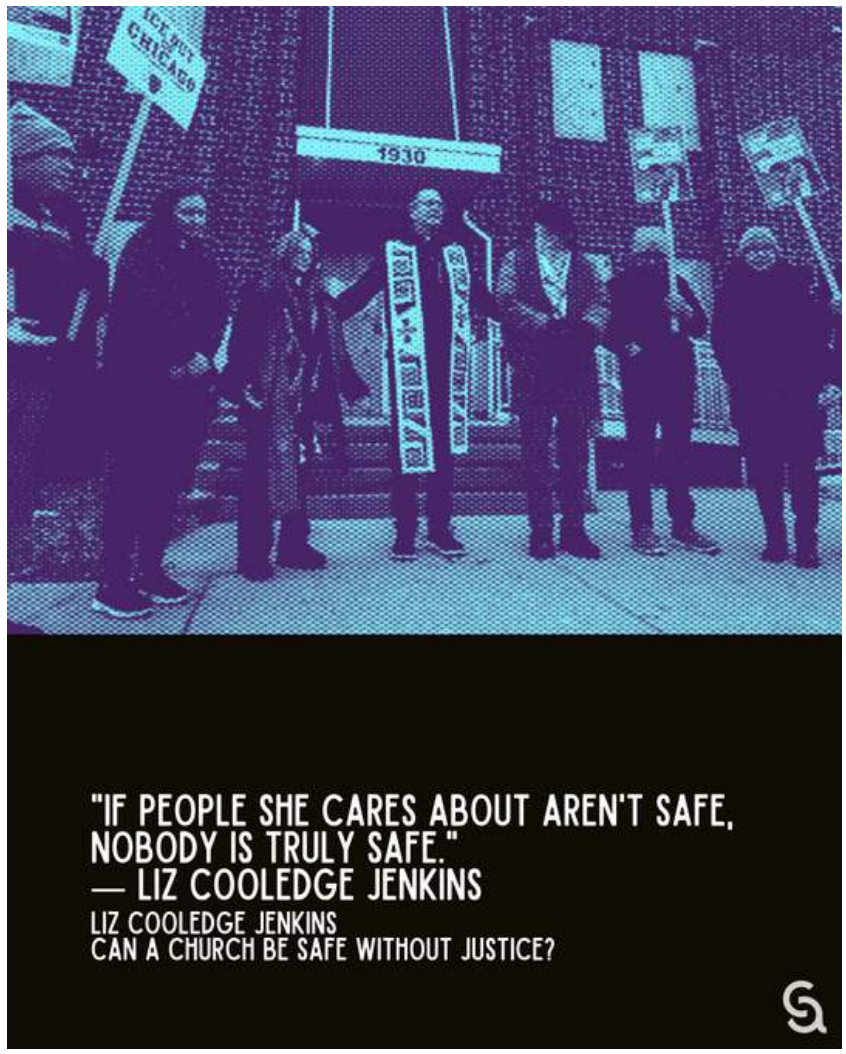
The church's silence felt like betrayal. It was a refusal to seriously explore what a Jesus-following tradition of justice might have to say about our country and our world today. "We were being taught, week in, and week out, how to be Christian," Stewart reflects. "But we were not taught how to live in America."[8]

When people walk into church coming from these kinds of backgrounds and carrying these kinds of experiences, we're assessing the safety of a new church environment — at least in part — by asking whether a church is clear about God's care for the vulnerable.

Can we talk about police killings, about systemic racism, about misogyny and reproductive justice and queer rights, about the terrors immigrant communities are facing and how we might respond? Or is a church silent on these matters? If the latter, we see it as a reason not to trust, an indication that a church is perpetuating harm.

We are looking for places of holistic healing — for ourselves and people like us, and for people unlike us as well. And as Prentis Hemphill writes,

"IT'S HARD TO HEAL WHEN YOU'RE STILL BEING HURT."[9]



I would add that it's also hard to heal — or at least hard to heal well — in an environment where others are still being hurt.

When we look for safe spaces where we can heal, we are looking for places where the biblical prophets' calls toward justice are taken seriously. Where the mission of the community lines up with the mission of Jesus: to bring holistic good news to the poor, the kind that actually meets the needs of people experiencing poverty; to proclaim release to the captives, working with oppressed people toward liberation because we know we're all bound up together (see Luke 4:18-19).

We have lost patience with communities that approach issues of justice with silence, ambiguity, doubling down and refusing to change, or refusing to engage at all. True safety requires a community to orient itself toward justice, openly and wholeheartedly. We no longer want to put up with anything less.

ENDNOTES

1. Danté Stewart, Shoutin' in the Fire: An American Epistle (Convergent Books, 2021), 123.
2. Name changed for privacy
3. Ally Henny, I Won't Shut Up: Finding Your Voice When the World Tries to Silence You (Baker Books, 2023), 207.
4. Ibid., 207-8.
5. Kaitlin B. Curtice, Living Resistance: An Indigenous Vision for Seeking Wholeness Every Day (Brazos Press, 2023), 108.
6. Ibid.
7. Stewart, Shoutin' in the Fire, 66.
8. Ibid.
9. Prentis Hemphill, What It Takes to Heal: How Transforming Ourselves Can Change the World (Random House, 2024), xvi.

PART 3

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- Liz argues that our sense of safety is connected to the safety of others around us. Have you ever felt differently about a community because of how you saw it treat someone else?

- Churches sometimes remain silent about injustice because leaders fear becoming “too political” or creating division. When might silence itself communicate something — particularly to people directly affected by an injustice?

- What issues affecting vulnerable people in your community are difficult to talk about in your church? What might it look like to engage those realities with greater honesty, courage, and compassion?

PART 4

BECOMING A SAFE CHURCH

10 PRACTICES THAT FOSTER HEALING, TRUST, AND BELONGING

CHRISTIANS for SOCIAL ACTION

How can churches put these ideas into practice? In Part 4, Liz offers 10 concrete ways faith communities can become safer and more healing. These practices include naming harm and holding perpetrators accountable, exercising transparency, dismantling white supremacy, welcoming voices that speak up for justice, affirming healthy boundaries, engaging the body in healing, and making room for questions and deconstruction.

In this series, we've explored the different kinds of baggage people carry when they walk into church. We've looked to the Bible and church history to find models of individual and communal healing through a consistent focus on acceptance, hospitality, and affirmation of the dignity and agency of all people. And we've seen why a wholehearted pursuit of justice is essential in any faith community that wants to be a place of safety.

Given all this, we might wonder: How, specifically, can churches put these ideas about safety into practice? What might we change? What might we reconsider, think more deeply about, or do differently? What spiritual practices can we pursue together that might lead to personal and communal healing?

PRACTICES THAT BUILD TRUST

Of course, any list of such things will be incomplete. But I'd like to offer a few thoughts. In order to become safer churches, here are 10 things we can do:

1. NAME THE HARM AND HOLD PERPETRATORS ACCOUNTABLE.

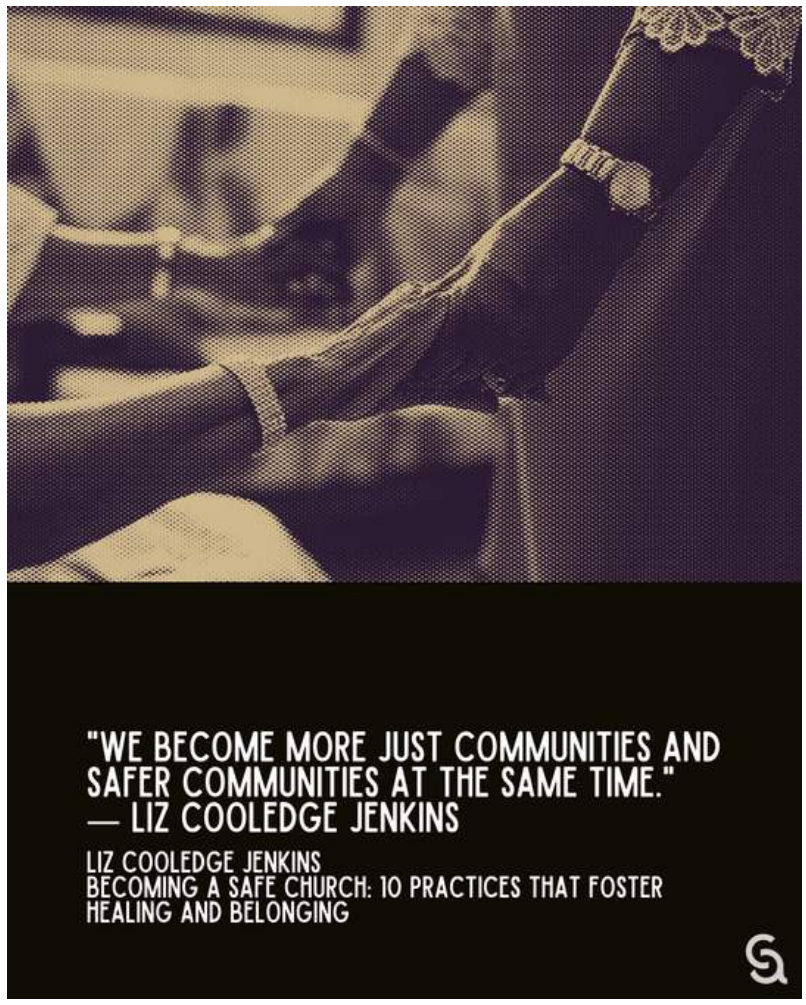
For several of the millennials I spoke with, a church's willingness to name the harms of racist justice systems, genocide, restrictions on women's autonomy, and immigration systems that oppress rather than welcome went a long way toward helping them feel safe in a religious community. Silence on these matters felt like violence. From the pulpit to Bible study groups to community gatherings, churches and their leaders can clearly name the violence being done in our world.

And where harm is perpetrated within a community, churches can name this too, holding its perpetrators accountable. We can take seriously the need for repentance and repair. The practice of naming harm might ruffle some feathers, but it can also open up much-needed conversations. It can help churches become places that feel safe—for people directly impacted by the harm, for people who care about those who are impacted, and ultimately for us all.

2. EXERCISE TRANSPARENCY.

Groups of humans who engage deeply with one another will always have moments of tension, mistakes that need to be grappled with, and differences of opinion. There does not need to be any shame or secrecy around any of these things—or any other issues a church might be wrestling with.

Those of us who have experienced spiritual trauma are often especially perceptive of the secrets a faith community or its leaders hold. We do not expect church communities to be perfect or conflict-free; when a church and its leaders address issues with openness, this helps us know that they can be trusted. It might seem easier to try to keep some things quiet or cover them up. But if secrets are exposed—as they often are—the attempt at hiding them may break people's trust in a way that will be difficult to repair.



3. ACTIVELY WORK TO DISMANTLE WHITE SUPREMACY AS IT SHOWS UP IN OUR COMMUNITIES.

For white-dominated or multiracial churches, becoming a safe community for all people means that we are actively working to uproot racism in all the forms it might take, including among us and within us. This includes intentionally listening to and learning from Black theologians and other Black thinkers. As Ally Henny writes, "Racism is some white Jesus nonsense. For centuries, Black people have chosen to worship a God who promises freedom from oppression."[1]

Non-Black Christians can learn from the Black Christian tradition's historical commitment to justice.

As individuals and as communities, we can deliberately engage in what therapist and trauma specialist Resmaa Menakem calls the process of "separating whiteness from supremacy."[2] Menakem explains,

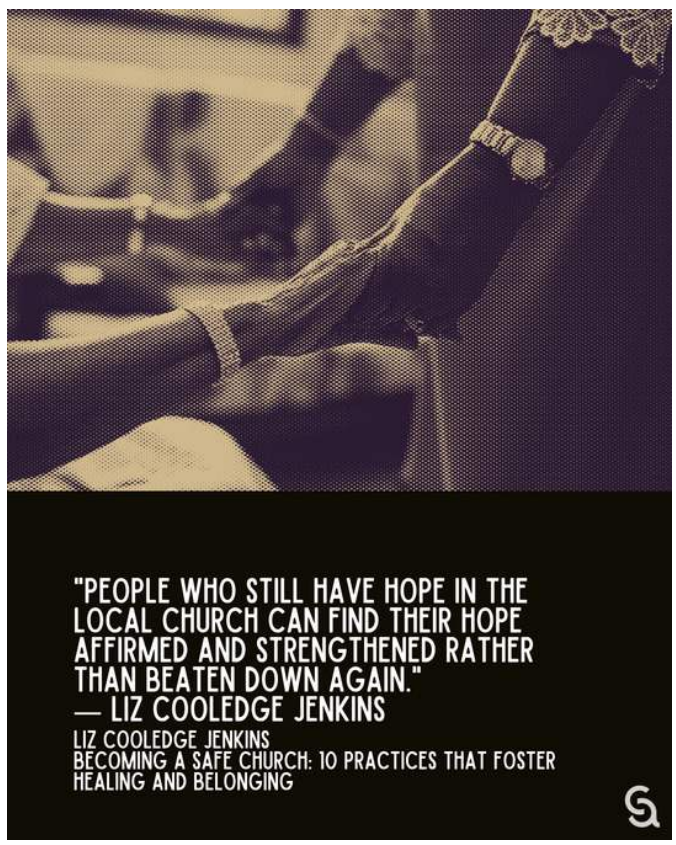
> "YOU HAVE THE POWER TO STOP INTERGENERATIONAL AND HISTORICAL TRAUMA IN ITS TRACKS, AND TO KEEP IT FROM SPREADING FROM YOUR BODY INTO OTHERS. ABOVE ALL, YOU HAVE THE POWER TO HEAL. BUT FIRST YOU HAVE TO CHOOSE TO HEAL."[3]

White supremacy is not going away on its own. It takes sustained unpacking, examination, repentance, change, and healing. Without these things, we continue to pass on our own wounds, especially from white people to people of color, and our communities are not safe.

4. WELCOME THOSE WHO SPEAK UP FOR JUSTICE.

Kathy Khang writes,

> "THERE IS A CHANCE THAT YOUR COMMUNITY WILL EXPERIENCE TENSION AND CONFUSION AS YOU EXPERIMENT WITH RAISING YOUR VOICE." BUT, SHE CONTINUES, "SPEAKING UP DOESN'T INCREASE DIVISION. IT BRINGS INJUSTICE AND SIN TO THE FOREFRONT. SPEAKING UP CAN BE AN AVENUE OF TRUTH AND HEALING."[4]



Churches that are safe spaces to grow and heal recognize this. They make it a habit to listen to the voices speaking up among them — and in their broader communities — on behalf of justice.

They choose not to be threatened by these voices, but to welcome the chance to learn and grow. For those who, like some of the people we met in Part 1, have spoken up in previous faith communities but found themselves dismissed, belittled, or edged out of positions of influence, a church that humbly learns from critique can feel like a healing balm.

5. TAKE A NUANCED VIEW OF FORGIVENESS.

The Christian practice of giving and receiving forgiveness can be beautiful and life-giving. But if it is practiced without centering the emotional and psychological needs of those who have been harmed, it can feel like another weapon aimed against already-oppressed people.

People who have experienced harm in religious settings might find Emily Joy Allison's words healing:

> "WHEN AND IF YOU FORGIVE IS UP TO YOU. IT IS A GIFT YOU GIVE TO YOURSELF, NOT A TAX YOU PAY FOR BEING ABUSED IN A CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY."[5]

Forgiveness should never be forced, coerced, or expected. Churches can support people in forgiving if or when they are ready to do so and offer acceptance and non-judgment when they are not.

Taking a more nuanced view of forgiveness—one that focuses on the safety of those harmed—helps create an environment where everyone knows that everyone's dignity is honored.

PRACTICES THAT FOSTER HEALING

6. REEXAMINE HOW WE TALK ABOUT GOD.

When it comes to making a faith community feels safe, the language and images we use to talk about God matter. As Christena Cleveland writes,

> "OUR IDEA OF GOD DETERMINES WHO IS SACRED AND WHO IS PROFANE, WHOSE LIFE MATTERS AND WHOSE DOES NOT, WHOSE TESTIMONY IS BELIEVABLE AND WHOSE IS NOT, WHO IS A FUGITIVE AND WHO IS NOT, AND WHO IS SAFE AND WHO IS NOT."[6]

If we want all people to feel safe in our churches, we can practice speaking of God in expansive ways, intentionally bringing God-talk and God-images into our church services that challenge any implicit idea of God's maleness or whiteness.

In doing so, we make room for people of all genders and races to know that God identifies with them and is for them, to know that their safety matters to God and to the community, to be recognized as God's image-bearers fully.

7. ENGAGE IN EMBODIMENT PRACTICES.

We carry trauma in our bodies, and in order to heal, we need to engage our whole beings. As Prentis Hemphill writes,

> "FOR HEALING TO TAKE PLACE, FOR IT TO BE FELT, FOR IT TO ROOT, REMAKE, AND REARRANGE US, IT HAS TO HAPPEN NOT ONLY IN THE REALM OF OUR THINKING, BUT IN THE SOIL OF OUR BODIES. HEALING HAS TO BE EMBODIED."[7]

Churches can make space for this and lead in practices that help us do this. We can engage, for example, in creative activities together, encouraging people to make art and share it with the community. We can engage in practices of rest, like those Tricia Hersey leads in her Nap Ministry and writes about in "Rest Is Resistance."

We can engage in collective grief practices, opening up doors toward healing. We can engage in practices that reconnect us with Earth — "a consistently proven way to soothe the effects of trauma on our minds and bodies,"[8] as Shannon K. Evans writes.

Churches that make room for embodiment practices live out their commitment to being places of transformation, healing, safety, and care.

8. AVOID LANGUAGE THAT PRESSURES CONFORMITY.

One pastor I talked with said,

> "I TRY TO USE THE LANGUAGE OF INVITATION AS MUCH AS I CAN—BECAUSE I AM NOT GOING TO FORCE A MEDITATION PRACTICE, COMMUNION, OR ANY OTHER RITUAL ON SOMEONE."

Language that uses any sort of control, coercion, pressure, or shame to try to get people to do particular things (or avoid other things) does not create an environment of safety.

For all of us, and especially for those who have been harmed by overly-controlling faith communities in the past, we need communities who can encourage and accompany us as we seek God in ways that resonate with us—ways that might look very different for each person. Churches can make room for all the different ways people are wired, all the different ways we connect with God and one another. Safe communities embrace this diversity as a great strength rather than trying to squeeze people into one particular mold of what it looks like to follow Jesus.

9. ENCOURAGE AND AFFIRM HEALTHY BOUNDARIES.

The first time my current pastor asked if I wanted to lead a small group, I said, "No, thank you; that feels more stressful than life-giving to me right now." I remember feeling unsure how this would be received. And I remember how much it meant to me when my pastor immediately and unhesitatingly accepted my "no." She did not want me to engage in church in any way that did not feel life-giving.

This is what safety looks like. Faith communities that serve as places of safety offer a variety of opportunities for people to connect, engage, or serve in different ways, but those opportunities never feel required or expected. Whatever churches invite people to consider, try, or do, it is crucial that each person feels completely free to opt in or out as they choose.

Church communities can be places where healthy boundaries are affirmed, not crossed or challenged or bent at every possible point, as they sometimes are.

10. WELCOME THE QUESTIONS, WELCOME THE DECONSTRUCTION.

Kaitlin B. Curtice reflects,

> "EVERY FEW YEARS, IT SEEMS THERE ARE FOLKS WITHIN CHRISTIANITY WHO RISE UP AND DECLARE THAT DECONSTRUCTION IS HARMFUL AND ONLY LEADS PEOPLE AWAY FROM THEIR CHURCHES INTO AN UNSAFE WORLD."

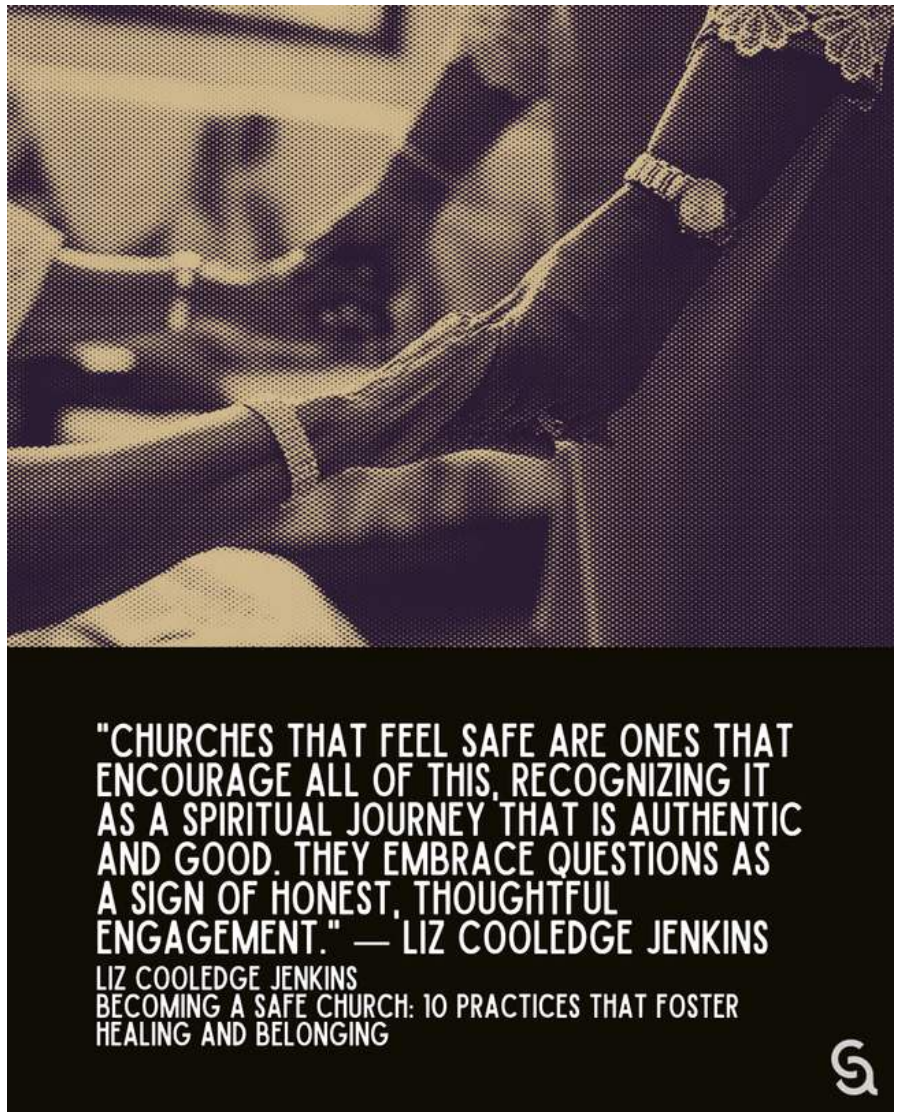
But, she continues,

> "FOLKS WHO SAY THIS HAVE LITTLE FAITH IN THOSE OF US WHO HAVE LEFT THE INSTITUTIONAL CHURCH TO FIND CREATOR WHERE CREATOR HAS ALWAYS BEEN — EVERYWHERE, ESPECIALLY IN THE PLACES THE CHURCH TOLD US GOD WAS NOT.[9]"

Many of us in my generation resonate with this. If we want to be involved in faith communities, still, we want to be involved in faith communities that welcome the deconstruction process: the seeking, the searching, the unraveling. The questions, the transformation, the sorting, the keeping, the uprooting. The finding God wherever God might be found.

Churches that feel safe are ones that encourage all of this, recognizing it as a spiritual journey that is authentic and good. They embrace questions as a sign of honest, thoughtful engagement. Safe churches are places where we all encourage one another to find our Creator everywhere, places where this is seen as a beautiful thing.

With these practices in mind, churches can become places where wounds are healed rather than deepened, trauma is addressed rather than denied or minimized, and people who carry all sorts of baggage from previous faith communities can set down their burdens and find rest.



People who still have hope in the local church can find their hope affirmed and strengthened rather than beaten down again. And church leaders or members who want to sustain and grow a vibrant community can refocus on what matters most: following faithfully in the tradition of the prophets, Jesus, the Early Church, and the streams of the church that have pursued justice and well-being for all people through the ages.

We become more just communities and safer communities at the same time.

ENDNOTES

1.Ally Henny, I Won't Shut Up: Finding Your Voice When the World Tries to Silence You (Baker Books, 2023), 84.
2. Resmaa Menakem, My Grandmother's Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending Our Hearts and Bodies (Central Recovery Press, 2017), 271.
3.Ibid., 212.
4.Kathy Khang, Raise Your Voice: Why We Stay Silent and How to Speak Up (IVP, 2018), 66.
5.Emily Joy Allison, #ChurchToo: How Purity Culture Upholds Abuse and How to Find Healing (Broadleaf Books, 2021), 176-7.
6.Christena Cleveland, God Is a Black Woman (HarperOne, 2022), 15.
7.Prentis Hemphill, What It Takes to Heal: How Transforming Ourselves Can Change the World (Random House, 2024), 48.
8.Shannon K. Evans, The Mystics Would Like a Word: Six Women Who Met God and Found a Spirituality for Today (Convergent, 2024), 73.
9.Kaitlin B. Curtice, Living Resistance: An Indigenous Vision for Seeking Wholeness Every Day (Brazos Press, 2023), 29.

PART 4

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- Of the ten practices Liz identifies, which does your church already practice well? Which one most needs attention?

- Safe churches make room for honesty, questions, healthy boundaries, and even disagreement without resorting to coercion or shame. Where might your church unintentionally communicate, “There is a right way to belong here”?

- Liz writes about churches becoming places where wounds are healed rather than deepened. If someone who had experienced spiritual harm came to your church, what might help that person begin to trust the community? What might make trust more difficult?

WAYS TO TAKE ACTION

LISTEN TO WHAT PEOPLE ARE CARRYING

Create opportunities to hear honestly from people in your congregation — especially those who have experienced exclusion, marginalization, or harm in church settings. Ask what helps them feel safe and what makes belonging difficult. Listen without immediately explaining, defending, or trying to fix what you hear.

EXAMINE WHERE POWER LIVES

Look at who makes decisions, whose perspectives shape worship and teaching, and whose concerns receive attention. Consider whether your structures protect those who are vulnerable or primarily protect leaders and institutions when conflict or harm occurs.

MAKE ROOM FOR HONESTY

Cultivate spaces where people can express grief, anger, doubt, disagreement, and questions without fear of shame or rejection. Practice transparency when mistakes or conflicts arise, and be willing to name harm rather than hide it.

HONOR BOUNDARIES AND AGENCY

Pay attention to the ways people are invited to participate, serve, give, worship, or engage in spiritual practices. Make “no” an acceptable answer. Replace pressure and obligation with genuine invitation, allowing people to discern what is healthy and life-giving for them.

WAYS TO TAKE ACTION, CONT.

CONNECT SAFETY WITH JUSTICE

Ask whose safety may be threatened within your congregation or broader community. Pay attention to racism, sexism, poverty, immigration injustice, exclusion, and other forms of oppression. Consider where your church can speak clearly, offer tangible support, and stand alongside people experiencing harm.

PRACTICE HEALING TOGETHER

Make room for practices that care for the whole person — rest, lament, creativity, time in nature, embodied prayer, shared meals, and other forms of connection. Healing does not happen only through sermons or intellectual understanding.

CHOOSE ONE PLACE TO BEGIN

Gather a small group of leaders or members and ask: What is one change we could make in the next 30 days that would help our church become a safer, more healing community?

Choose something concrete. Decide who will take responsibility, listen to those most affected, and return to the conversation to consider what you are learning.

A safe church is not one that never gets anything wrong. It is one willing to listen, tell the truth, repair harm, pursue justice, and keep learning how to love people well.

WAYS TO TAKE ACTION, CONT.

PARTNER (JOIN WHAT IS ALREADY HAPPENING)

- Identify and support organizations working for peace, reconciliation, and human rights in Israel and Palestine.
- Explore opportunities to learn from or engage with ministries connected to the region, including educational programs, pilgrimages, or conferences.
- Consider how your church might build ongoing relationships with organizations committed to justice and peacemaking.

PRACTICE PEACE (LIVE IT WHERE YOU ARE)

- Reflect on how fear, division, or dehumanization show up in your own context — and how you are called to respond differently.
- Cultivate practices of neighbor-love, especially toward those you might perceive as “other.”
- Remember that peacemaking is not only global work; it begins in the relationships, communities, and systems closest to you.

REPAIR (COMMIT FOR THE LONG TERM)

- Move beyond one-time engagement toward sustained attention, learning, and action.
- Encourage your church or community to integrate justice, peacemaking, and global awareness into its ongoing life and teaching.
- Ask what it might mean — personally and collectively — to become “repairers of the breach” in a world marked by division and harm.

A PRAYER FOR SAFE AND HEALING CHURCHES

GOD OF REFUGE AND HEALING,

YOU SEE EVERY PERSON WHO ENTERS OUR CHURCHES —

THE STORIES THEY CARRY,
THE WOUNDS OTHERS CANNOT SEE,
THE QUESTIONS THEY ARE AFRAID TO ASK,
AND THE HOPE THAT BRINGS THEM THROUGH THE DOOR.

TEACH US TO SEE ONE ANOTHER WITH THAT SAME CARE.
WHERE OUR CHURCHES HAVE CAUSED HARM,
GIVE US COURAGE TO TELL THE TRUTH AND SEEK REPAIR.

WHERE WE HAVE PROTECTED INSTITUTIONS INSTEAD OF PEOPLE,
LEAD US TOWARD REPENTANCE.
WHERE WE HAVE REMAINED SILENT IN THE FACE OF INJUSTICE,
GIVE US COURAGE TO SPEAK AND ACT.

MAKE US COMMUNITIES WHERE BOUNDARIES ARE HONORED,
QUESTIONS ARE WELCOMED,
POWER IS HELD WITH HUMILITY,
AND THOSE WHO HAVE BEEN PUSHED ASIDE ARE HEARD.

HELP US CREATE SPACES WHERE PEOPLE CAN REST,
GRIEVE, HEAL, BELONG, AND ENCOUNTER YOU
WITHOUT FEAR, COERCION, OR SHAME.

SHAPE YOUR CHURCH INTO A PLACE OF REFUGE —
WHERE DIGNITY IS PROTECTED,
JUSTICE IS PURSUED,
AND EVERY PERSON KNOWS THEY ARE WORTHY
OF CARE AND BELONGING.

A PRAYER FOR SAFE AND HEALING CHURCHES, CONT.

TEACH US TO KEEP LISTENING,
KEEP LEARNING,
AND KEEP BECOMING COMMUNITIES
THAT REFLECT THE WELCOMING HEART OF CHRIST.

AMEN.

WHERE CHRISTIAN IMAGINATION MEETS FAITHFUL ACTION.

STAY CONNECTED WITH US.

CHRISTIANS for SOCIAL ACTION

christiansforsocialaction.org