

# 1001 NWC LEADER INTERVIEWS

Report from 2019 Perspectives Conference



**RESEARCH  
SERVICES**

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# Worship

## **Nontraditional but familiar**

Leaders discussed how they worship, as well as some issues and concerns that arise in the process of both designing and leading worship in their community

## Worship: Nontraditional but familiar

# Worship in new worshiping communities

NWC leaders continue to find new ways to do church, while negotiating challenges.

Worship in new worshiping communities continues to be non-traditional. This includes making meals central to the worship experience. It also includes avoiding a range of traditional worship elements: organs, worship bulletins, and sermons, Sunday morning worship, and worship in church sanctuaries.

These nontraditional approaches sometimes arise from necessity—like when NWCs don't have access to traditional spaces, times, or props. However, approaches can also be a calculated—like when NWCs are trying to create a safe space to heal from traumas, be they personal or Church-related.

Some of the challenges that leaders face include:

**Shaping and sacralizing their space:** New worshiping community leaders often lack control over their space, but they also find creative ways to exert influence on the spaces they inhabit.

**Decentralizing worship:** Leaders employ creative strategies to persuade other participants to help plan and lead worship. They work hard to include the voices of their participants in worship, to build leadership teams, and to teach disciples to make disciples. By doing so, leaders hope participants feel comfortable and have ownership of their community.

**Negotiating trauma:** Leaders also hope to facilitate healing from trauma. Many participants have experienced trauma—be it in their personal lives or inflicted by the Church itself.

## Worship: Nontraditional but familiar

# Breaking barriers

In this section, we cover the following ways NWCs are breaking down barriers and creating new ways of doing church:

**01** **Breaking tradition:** non-traditional worship and the role of conversation in worship

**02** **Breaking bread:** the role of food in worship and in bringing people together

**03** **Breaking out of the sanctuary:** non-traditional spaces and the relationship between space and culture

**04** **Breaking free:** surrendering control and decentralizing worship

**05** **Breaking down walls:** negotiating trauma; healing through worship

## Breaking traditions

# Non-traditional but familiar

Much of what we learned about the non-traditional character of worship in NWCs supports our previous research.

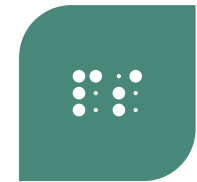
Worship is often paired with a meal; it breaks the bounds of the sanctuary and moves into homes, community centers, and fellowship halls; it breaks the bounds of Sunday morning, meeting at other times; there is often no bulletin, hymnals, or order of service; music rarely includes an organ, but is diverse beyond that; and instead of typical sermons, there are discussions and activities.



DISCUSSIONS  
INSTEAD OF  
SERMONS



WORSHIP IN NON-  
TRADITIONAL  
SPACES



EFFORTS TO  
SACRALIZE SPACES



NO BULLETIN,  
HYMNALS, OR  
ORDER OF WORSHIP



RANGE OF MUSICAL  
STYLES AND  
INSTRUMENTS



SHARING A MEAL AS  
A COMPONENT OF  
WORSHIP

## Breaking traditions

# Conversations instead of sermons

**“The discussions can be really robust at times, but it's always done with respect, always done with love. . . . They can discuss it back and forth, but they will do it in a way, because they love each other so much, they love being in the community so much they feel safe enough to challenge each other and still go out for drinks after church together.”**

***-Nathan Sobers: Stonewall Ministries***

Instead of rows of pews facing a pulpit, many NWCs worship by gathering around a table (or multiple tables if the community is large).

**Rarely is there a traditional sermon. Some leaders tried sermons but found that such an approach doesn't fit their needs.**

Leaders want to facilitate a culture in which there is less expectation that this is a place where the pastor disseminates information while the “audience” consumes their worship experience. Instead, the experience is shared collectively.

Instead of a sermon, there might be a short talk followed by discussion, or a shared spiritual practice. For example, at Gather Tacoma, they sometimes put out a fishbowl in which participants place their questions, then the group spends the evening pulling questions out to answer.

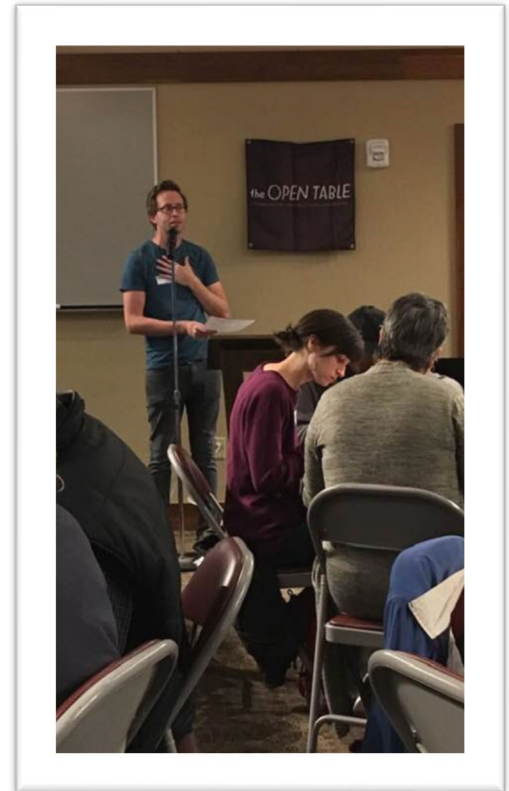
## Breaking bread

# Food and ritual

The idea of breaking bread is a strong recurring theme. Many NWCs have some type of meal together, whether it be breakfast, a potluck, serving open meals to the community, or “breaking bread” as a ritual. This is a commonly used practice to bring people together.

One neat thing is how in new worshiping communities, where many participants are inexperienced in traditional liturgy, new norms can emerge in an organic way. Because these norms emerged from the participants, they can sometimes carry more meaning, and give the participants a sense of ownership over worship.

For example, one NWC leader talks about their communion practice of “breaking the bread,” in which the leaders talk about breaking the bread, and then he raises and breaks the bread. Early on, not knowing what to do, everyone else at the table mimicked him and broke their bread along with him. So now it’s become a beautiful tradition where they all literally break the bread together.



## Breaking bread

# Breaking bread for justice

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“Jesus disrupted the political, economic and social order. And the state wasn't having it, so his body was broken. And we recognize that by breaking bread. It does a couple things. One, it brings us closer together. We might be swapping stories with folks we may not have otherwise known or run into. But secondly, it also provides an opportunity. We are a community of action and reflection. These nights are largely reflection, and the action has to happen outside of these walls. So we recognize that as we break bread together, it's a reminder that we are called to also have our bodies broken for the sake of justice, for the sake of humanity, for the sake of creation. Right?”

So that is the purpose of this meal.”

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**Nick Pickrell**

The Open Table



## Breaking out of the sanctuary

# The challenges of non-traditional space

Worship often takes place in non-traditional spaces.

Examples include homes, community centers, and church fellowship halls.

Some of these spaces are shared with other communities (which can pose challenges). Sometimes the communities undertake efforts to sacralize the non-traditional spaces.

From geographic location to the nature of their physical surroundings, space can have a mighty influence on a new worshiping community.

New worshiping communities don't always have much control over their space. Many NWCs worship in space provided by other congregations or have less-than-optimal rental situations. Others have decided that they don't want a space of their own and would prefer to meet in public places or people's homes.

Each of these setups have their own unique challenges.

Challenges that arise in borrowed space include not being able to control the setting, not having access to things you might prefer (like a screen), having to clean up immediately following worship, and not having control over what time you get to meet.

## Breaking out of the sanctuary

# Shaping and sacralizing their space

Although many NWCs struggle with control over their space, there are ways these communities still exert influence on the spaces they inhabit.

Many new worshiping community leaders make conscious choices about their use of space—choices that influence the culture and worship of their NWC.

Stonewall Ministries is another NWC that meets in another church's space, and—although they have access to the sanctuary—they make a conscious choice to worship in the church's fellowship hall instead.

But the shaping of space is not limited to just the worship area. Gather has the “front yard gardens project”—a front yard garden with the specific intent of creating space to foster interaction with the neighbors.

Another community, Isaiah's Table, has planted a vegetable garden outside of their new space, which is now on a busy corner in an area of urban blight. They are working to make their space feel more accessible to the people they are trying to reach, passing by on the street. But in order to do that, these communities must negotiate the spaces that are available to them, to do what they can to make them their own—even if the space is borrowed.

**“Because of the way we worship, the style, our liturgy, the style that we use in our worship, pews with everybody facing front isn't conducive to how we do worship.”**

***-Nathan Sobers: Stonewall Ministries***

## Breaking out of the sanctuary

# Space and culture

This lack of control over space can sometimes lead to a feeling of lacking control over the culture of an NWC.

**“There’s this whole other backstory to the space.”**

One leader describes some of the challenges their community has faced inhabiting a space with its own backstory.

**“We felt like we had to figure out how to adjust our church culture. We changed time, we changed neighborhood and we changed setting because we had to because the rent went up. And so a year into that somebody might've come in and had some very particular assumptions... based on their history of what spaces they had been in and where and why and all of that ended up forming the community... But then that started to also shape who they were because they were in a different kind of space that needed different things that the old neighborhood had.”**

## Breaking free

# Surrendering control and decentralizing worship

While NWC leaders are struggling to gain control of their space, they are learning to surrender control of worship.

NWC leaders are nurturing their participants into greater leadership and discipleship roles in varying ways.

Some leaders create leadership teams that they run in a manner similar to a session. They typically meet one or twice a month and discuss the business and planning matters of the church.

For example, one leader has a leadership team of about six, each of which are trained in specialties: treasurer, worship leader, secretary, etc.

At another NWC, elders and pastor alternate preaching each week.

Of course, getting participants in new worshiping communities to take on more active roles in worship can be challenging, as many are unchurched and are wary of traditional liturgy.

One leader who has faced challenges trying to involve her worshipers has found that asking people to help lead worship in the abstract does not work. So, a couple of weeks ago she left sheets of paper on each chair and whoever got that slip had to try it out – Call to worship, Call to Confession, etc. They needed some coaching, but still everyone tried it.

**Breaking free**

# Surrendering control

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We're discussing the Presbyterian Church and the fact that they're cool with this 1001 thing. Everybody's doing something weird and crazy with it and so they are giving up some of their control and, I mean, that's the way of the future.

This is going to define the Presbyterian church for the next 50 years, provided that they continue to do it, and these churches continue to grow, and they continue to support. It's going to define the church.

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**-Worshipping Community Participant**

## Breaking down walls

# Negotiating trauma

Leaders also hope to facilitate healing from trauma. Many participants have experienced trauma—be it in their personal lives or inflicted by the Church itself.

Multiple leaders spoke about their practices of making people feel comfortable and/or safe. This ranged from not using words like “church” or creating ways for members to be involved in the NWC in whatever way they felt most comfortable.

During the plenary, Becca Stevens of Thistle Farms shared a little bit about leading a community where “women could heal from years of trafficking, addiction, prostitution, and the violence of life on the streets.” Most addicts have past trauma, Stevens emphasizes the importance of being a host in a healing circle, rather than a hero. The job of the NWC leader is to facilitate healing, to help participants change their own lives. In order to do that, they must deal with their trauma.

Trauma came up often during interviews with NWC leaders. For example, Stonewall Ministries’ motto is “healing spiritual wounds.” Their purpose is to bridge the gap between gay and Christian. Other examples include NWCs working with religious refugees, those aiming to attract people who have been previously traumatized by the Church, and people who have traumatic past experiences.

**“The goal and the focus has been to heal those spiritual wounds and help folks bridge that divide between who a lot of the Church says they are, and who God says they are.”**

***-Nathan Sobers: Stonewall Ministries***

# Sustainability

## **A lofty goal**

What does it mean for a NWC to be sustainable? Leaders share their thoughts about that, and whether they have a goal of sustainability for their own community.

## Sustainability: A lofty goal

# Sustainability in new worshiping communities

NWC leaders continue to struggle to be financially self-sustaining.

New Worshiping Communities often rely on outside support in order to thrive. Many borrow space and pay their leaders from grant funding.

Some of these sustainability issues arise from the fact that the communities are too small to support a leader with only what is put in the offering plate. But also, due to the nature of many communities—which often are reaching populations that are economically disadvantaged—their participants don't have money to put in the offering plates.

In discussing issues surrounding sustainability with NWC leaders, the following main themes arose:

**Resources:** Some NWCs have the resources to pay staff leaders, but these communities often rely on donated space. Others cannot pay staff leaders much, and as a result, staff leaders are bi-vocational and may face economic hardship.

**Support:** NWC leaders welcome support for their communities from national PC(USA) agencies, presbyteries, and PC(USA) congregations. Support takes many forms: grants, in-kind assistance, sending people, and coaching/peer support.

**Self-sufficiency:** Expecting New Worshiping Communities to become self-sufficient in less than 10 years may not be realistic. Nevertheless, becoming self-sufficient even in 10 years may require hard work and creativity. This may include tithing by New Worshiping Community participants and external fund-raising (from outside of the New Worshiping and the wider church).



## Sustainability: A lofty goal

# Sustainability in new worshiping communities is a lofty goal

In this section, we cover the following ways NWCs are striving to be sustainable, and what sustainability means to them:

**01** **Money for leaders and space for free:** paying the leader a living wage and having a place to meet

**02** **Ambivalence about buildings:** some leaders dream of space, and a bicoastal real estate boom

**03** **Lean times:** NWC leaders, economic uncertainty, and bi-vocational ministry

**04** **Light offering plates:** small communities with a mission orientation towards participants

**05** **Unrealistic expectations and creative strategies:** how and when can NWCs be sustainable?

**06** **Sustainability resources:** leaders share some resources that have been helpful to them

## Sustainability: A lofty goal

# Money for leaders and space for free

Some New Worshiping Communities are economically stable – at least for a time - because they have raised enough money to pay their leader or staff and they do not have building costs.

This includes many NWCs that often meet in public spaces, houses, or in space provided freely by established churches.

Leaders of some of these NWCs do not even have the goal of obtaining space of their own. Some prefer their current arrangement on an ideological level (one leader describes her NWC as a “third place church”) or they prefer to use free space provided by others, saving on rent money in order to spend more on mission.

One NWC got a financial boost because an innercity church closed and opened the next day as a new worshiping community. Suddenly, however, a Southern Baptist offshoot wanted to buy the campus. Plus, they sold a very valuable Tiffany glass window and an organ and could live off the interest from a de facto endowment.

**“We pretty much have come to the conclusion that we don't want the building. It would be an expense that would take away from mission.”**

***-Nathan Sobers: Stonewall Ministries***

## Sustainability: A lofty goal

# Money for leaders

Being able to pay staff was the top example given for what makes a NWC sustainable.

However, of the leaders we met who were paid, few were paid in a sustainable way.

Many are surviving on grant money, and even among those, the grant money is not enough to provide a living wage.

As a result, many NWC leaders are bi-vocational. Sometimes their second job is aligned with ministry. For example, one leader who aspires to serve as a pastor full-time currently works as a part-time chaplain at two places in order to supplement his income.

However, some NWCs are sufficient. For example, we spoke to one leader who is able to raise enough money for her salary by operating on a modern sort of patronage system, where she generates donations from wealthy Christians around the country to support her ministry.

Many NWCs draw financial support or in-kind assistance from 1001.

In addition, some are also supported by grants or other assistance from their presbyteries or from partner congregations. In-kind assistance sometimes takes the form of space.

Assistance can also take the form of people power. For example, one presbytery provides a bookkeeper for all of its NWCs. Many leaders also praise the 1001 coaches as a valuable resource.

## Sustainability: A lofty goal

# Space for free

Although many leaders have no interest in their own space, others want or already have space of their own.

Using the space of others can be inconvenient, both for the NWC and the host.

In one NWC, the leader reports that there have been clashes with the host church, over lights supposedly left on and damage supposedly by children. As such, they would like to have their own space.

But space can be hard to find. New Worshiping Community leaders and their presbytery allies in large metropolitan areas – particularly on the Atlantic and Pacific coasts – note that real estate in their areas is extremely expensive. Obtaining a building, or land for a building, may be cost-prohibitive for these NWCS for quite a while.

**“We don't have our own space - that's under the surface there. We got really big dreams, you know, and not a lot of money and I guess that makes it tough.”**

## Sustainability: A lofty goal

# Light offering plates

Internally generated funds from pledges and offerings run the gamut, covering almost all to almost none of a NWC's costs. The latter is more prevalent.

Part of the reason leaders cite for light offering plates include having a community that is mostly in poverty, who are unaccustomed to the practice of church offerings, or is simply very small in number.

One NWC leader describes a creative solution to the problem of The leader explains that among their participants (millennials), cash or checks are rarely used. What she does is have a "time for generosity," in which the leader talks about generosity while providing a QR code so worshipers can get their phones out and give in that way. Sort of a digital offering plate.

Shared leadership and voluntarism within NWCs might help make up for financial shortfalls by limiting the amount of time the leader must spend in planning and other leadership responsibilities. NWC leaders, however, sometimes struggle to develop lay leaders and decentralize worship.



## Sustainability: A lofty goal

# Unrealistic expectations and creative strategies

### How and when can NWCs be sustainable?

Some NWC leaders believe that expectations that NWCs can be self-sufficient in anything less than 10 years are unrealistic.

However, PC(USA) partners are not likely to be able make up all the difference for all of that time. NWCs must adopt creative fund-raising strategies to help them make it to self-sufficiency.

Some strategies include:

1. Cultivating affluent individuals as donors
2. Securing outside grants
3. Encouraging tithing by all NWC participants
4. Seeking support from partner congregations

One leader describes the fundraising efforts her community took to fundraise. After getting all they could get from 1001, their presbytery, outside funders, their giving, and giving of those in the community, they still had a \$12k shortfall.

So, the leader and leadership team pushed themselves to personally go to friends, family, colleagues, businesses, and each raise a part of that money to cover the shortfall.

Finally, some NWCs that work with marginalized communities are unlikely to become self-sufficient. Many times, these are re-classified as “missions” by their presbyteries, which make them eligible for other kinds of support, including financial, and exempt them from any self-sufficiency clock, 10 years or otherwise.

## Sustainability: A lofty goal

# Sustainability resources

Leaders share some resources that have been helpful to them.

- ❖ Bridges, a non-profit leadership development organization
- ❖ Discovery Bible Study, a discipleship study program
- ❖ *Money, Possessions, and Eternity* by Randy Alcorn
- ❖ Ayudas litúrgicas, liturgical aids published in Spanish by the PC(USA)
- ❖ Personal finances budgeting apps: Mint, EveryDollar, and YNAB
- ❖ QR codes on worship bulletins, etc. so that people in worship can easily use their cell phones to make donations

# Presbytery relationships

## **A lofty goal**

What sort of relationships do NWC leaders have with their presbyteries? Do these relationships assist in making NWCs sustainable?



## Presbytery relations

# Presbytery relationships are varied



Some presbyteries are very helpful, and some are very unhelpful. Many provide some funding and/or in-kind assistance (especially buildings)



Many of the problems that do arise regarding NWC relationships with the presbytery are centered around issues of classification and understanding



Some presbyteries don't know what to make of NWCs, especially if they don't look like mini-congregations, and don't have infrastructure yet to support them



There was no clear evidence of the micro-management by presbyteries that was complained of by spring 2019 interviewees

# Classification and understanding

Some presbyteries struggle with how to classify NWCs—are they a church, a ministry, or a parachurch?

This struggle has led them to also have difficulty knowing what to do with an NWC. Some are still figuring out the relationship.

The struggle often comes from not fully understanding or being on board with the 1001 vision. They don't see how NWCs are different than outreach or mission efforts, or just smaller groups within their partner congregation. Despite this, leaders describe their presbytery as supportive in the sense of not setting up barriers.

Those leaders who have the best relationships with their presbytery tend to be the ones that are more closely connected to their presbytery, often through current or past status as a presbytery officer or committee chair.

Questions posed by presbytery executives include:

1. Do NWCs need to have a non-geographic niche, or can they just serve everyone in a geographic area?
2. Should presbyteries be primarily reactive in that they review applications for start-ups, or are they also proactive in that they see/find an opportunity and start the process?
3. Where do you draw the line between a worshipping community and a mission or outreach group?

# About this research

## **Research Strategy**

In this section we describe how and when the research was conducted, as well as who was involved.

## About this research

# Research strategy

This research was conducted in October of 2019 by Angie Andriot, PhD and Perry Chang, PhD.



Attended 1001 NWC/Vital Congregations *Perspectives* conference in Kansas City



Interviewed 17 NWC leaders and 5 presbytery leaders



Recruited and interviewed NWC leaders using 10-question interview guide



Attended four conference workshops and took notes of conversations at these



Transcribed notes or took audio recordings of interviews



Identified key themes in the notes and transcripts

## About this research

# Interview questions

### Worship

Characterize worship in your new worshipping community. Tell us about how long worship usually is, what usually comes up in what order, how you use music, and how you decide about all of this.

How did your new worshipping community decide when to start having worship services as part of your community's activities (if you do worship at all)?

How do you make decisions about worship, and what kind of resources – PC(USA) or otherwise – help support your community's worship?

### Sustainability

What kind of economic support do you receive and from what sources?

What are the costs of operating your new worshipping community? Do you rent or own any space?

Are economic challenges an impediment for growth?

What would a sustainable new worshipping community look like to you?

### Presbytery Relations

Characterize the relationship between your new worshipping community and your presbytery.

How does your relationship with your presbytery promote the vitality and sustainability of your new worshipping community? Does it hinder these in any ways?

## About this research

# List of NWCs and presbyteries whose comments informed this report

Arabic Christian Fellowship, Kansas City, MO

Burmese fellowship, Denver, CO

CAFÉ, northern New Jersey

Common Ground, Cincinnati, OH

Commonwealth of Oakland, Pittsburgh, PA

Denver Presbytery

Gather Tacoma, WA

Grace Presbytery LGBTQ outreach, Denton, TX

Greater Atlanta Presbytery

Isaiah's Table, Syracuse, NY

Los Ranchos Presbytery

Mizo, Greenwood, IN

Neema, Denver, CO

The Open Table, Kansas City, MO

Pine Ridge, Pine Ridge, WY

Putnam Memorial, Lake Mary, FL

Sacramento Presbytery

Solomon's Porch, Portland, OR

Stonewall Ministries, Cathedral City, CA

Telos, Nashville, TN