

Discussion Guide for *Sacred Resistance: A Practical Guide to Christian Witness and Dissent*

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Introduction

1. What images or activities come to mind when you hear the word “resistance?”
2. Where does the language of resistance appear in our Christian worship? (UMH p. 34)
3. *The word “politics” derives from the Greek word, polis, meaning “city” or “body of citizens” and therefore has to do with the ways humans live in community. The biblical story is the story of a God who from the very beginning is focused on the world and pays attention to the ways humans live in community, who cares about what we do and how we do it, who desires that we live in love, mutuality, and reverence for creation and for the dignity of all human life. (p. xviii)*
 - Who are some of those you can think of in scripture who engaged what we might call “politics” for the sake of God’s call and Reign?
4. What’s your congregation’s vibe when it comes to “politics in church?”
5. What makes resistance “sacred?” (pp. xx-xxiii)

Chapter 1

1. Read Matthew 6:14-16. Why, do you think, does the author begin with this scripture?
2. What difference does it make (if any) to say that sacred resistance is at the heart of our *being*, not just our *doing*.
3. What are the implications of the claim that “sacred resistance begins in the heart of God?”
4. *“Sacred resistance is anything—any word, deed, or stance—that actively counters the forces of hatred, cruelty, selfishness, greed, dehumanization, desolation, and disintegration in God’s beloved world.*

Sacred resistance takes shape in personal attitudes and in communal protest, in spiritual practices and in political advocacy, in how we spend our time and for whom we will risk our safety.”

- Where are you or your church called to engage sacred resistance right now?
5. What are the challenges to working together for a truly *common* good?

Chapter 2

1. What are the challenges to practicing humility and listening in your context?
2. How might you engage in these practices more intentionally?
3. Where do you personally struggle to see the human face of “issues?”
4. What are your thoughts or questions about the concept of “intersectionality?”
5. Keeping perspective involves
 - seeing the larger “frame” of current realities (history, context, scripture, community),
 - acknowledging the “levels” of needed engagement and what part you are called to play,
 - honest assessment of whether our intentions/actions have any real impact, and
 - looking for the good news in the world (there is a lot!)
 - Which of these are most prevalent in your spiritual practice?
 - Where do you struggle to keep perspective?
6. It is common in this moment of history for enemies to verbally demonize one another and even to advocate for harm. Where do you find yourself in the struggle to follow Jesus’s example of loving enemies and doing no harm?

Chapter 3

1. *“The extraordinary alternative is for Christian communities to claim primary citizenship not in America (or the nation in which they live) but in the Kin-dom of God. This alternative embodies the way of life in God’s Kin-dom in such a way that people holding very different political or cultural perspectives are both challenged and fully received.” P. 28-29*
 - What does it mean to identify as a citizen of the Kin-dom of God?
 - How might this adjusted citizenship identification affect relationships among and between persons of different perspectives, cultures, views?
 - What are some practices or ways in which you can imagine (or have experienced) this playing out?
2. *Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon describe a church that is “clearly visible to the world, in which people are faithful to their promises, love their enemies, tell the truth, honor the poor, suffer for righteousness, and thereby testify to the amazing community-creating power of God...This church can participate in*

secular movements against war, against, hunger, and against other forms of inhumanity, but it sees this as part of its necessary proclamatory action. This church knows that its most credible form of witness (and the most 'effective' thing it can do for the world) is the actual creation of a living, breathing, visible community of faith." P. 30

- What do you make of this vision and claim?
 - How might the creation and support of "a living, breathing, visible community of faith" be the "most effective" thing we can do for the world??
3. *"The stubborn love of God is powerfully, painfully displayed on the cross. God resists abandoning us even to the point of death. The cross is both nonviolent protest against the death-dealing ways of empire and solidarity with 'the crucified people' of every age. The church of Jesus Christ, as a community of the cross, is inherently a community of sacred resistance. We can (and do) ignore, downplay, or misunderstand this core piece of the church's identity and responsibility out of weariness, fear, complacency or privilege. But it remains the case that following the crucified one connects us not to the powerful but to those who suffer, who 'hunger and thirst for righteousness,' who are downtrodden and alone. The cross is a constant reminder of and entry point into the deep pain of the world, pain caused in large part by those who abuse their privilege and power." P. 33*
- How do imagine most people think about the cross/death of Jesus?
 - What do you think it means to say the cross is an "entry point into the deep pain of the world?"
 - How might a person or congregation be "cross-shaped?"

Chapter 4

1. *"There is a sinister way in which ... human aversion to pain becomes systemically magnified in human societies. Walter Brueggemann describes this as empire, defined by oppressive "rule by a few, economic exploitation, and religious legitimation." And he says that this reality leads to a "numbed consciousness of denial." Brueggemann says, "Imperial economics is designed to keep people satiated so that they do not notice. Its politics is intended to block out the cries of the denied ones. Its religion is to be an opiate so that no one discerns misery alive in the heart of God." In other words, the imperial reality distracts, rationalizes, and drugs the populace so that the awareness of suffering and human pain won't get in the way of business as usual and a healthy bottom line for those in the top 1 percent." P. 44*
- How would you describe "rule by a few?" Is that a reality in our current society?
 - How do you understand "economic exploitation?" Who are the primary perpetrators?

- What is the connection between these other factors and “religious legitimation?” How does that dynamic play out?
 - What are the effects of this on daily human life? (See p. 39-40)
2. “Brueggemann suggests that a prophetic community is one in which ‘a long and available memory...sinks the present generation deep into an identifiable past that is available in song and story.’” P. 41
- Based on your reading of pages 41-43, how do you understand this part of the work of prophetic subcommunities?
 - How or why is being available “in song and story” important?
 - How does your community tell “the old, old story” not as nostalgia, but as a grounding, energizing shared history?
 - How might Christian hope keep us from falling asleep or capitulating to “the way things are?”
 - As you feel comfortable, share an experience where the “deep and available memory through story and song” touched your heart or provided encouragement or direction?
3. “*Brueggemann insists that part of what it means to be prophetic is to name the pain, to cry out in grief, to allow the realities of human suffering to disrupt the status quo.*” P. 44
- Why is “naming the pain” important to prophetic work/sacred resistance? What good does it do?
 - What are practical ways persons or communities can do this?
 - What are the biggest challenges to “naming the pain?”—for individuals? for churches?
 - Does your church regularly engage in acts of lament? If so, when, where, and how do those acts happen? If not, why not?
 - When you think about prophets in the Bible, which prophetic words or sign-acts do you find most powerful or challenging?
4. “*Brueggemann says ‘It is the vocation of the prophet to keep alive the ministry of imagination, to keep on conjuring and proposing’ alternative futures.*” P. 48
- How is *imagination* prophetic work?

- What is the connection between conjuring alternative futures and naming the pain?
 - How do the realities of empire affect our capacity to “conjure and propose” alternative futures—to imagine something truly different?
 - What does “an active practice of hope” look like?
 - Are there particular scripture passages that help you manage disappointment and despair and to claim hope? What is it that most challenges your ability to “let the world laugh at your hope?”
 - What spiritual practices are most helpful to hone your capacity to perceive God’s grace all around you?
5. *“Throughout the sacred story, God’s word empowers people to wake up with greater clarity, wisdom, and courage to stand up to the powers that be, to challenge the status quo, to take risks for the sake of love and in hope of new life. ‘It is the task of prophetic imagination and ministry to bring people to engage the promise of newness that is at work in our history with God.’ (Brueggemann)”*
P. 51
- Brueggemann speaks of an “effective mode of discourse.” What does this tell us about our “story and song?” What’s the goal?
 - Empower, energize, ignite, fuel, wake up, act out, stand, engage, embody, do something... These are some of the words that pop up in this section. (p. 49-52) What do these words conjure?
6. *“In the present we hope for the future because we know what God has done in the past.”* P. 53
- What are your thoughts about this statement? How does it connect with the conversation you’ve had already on this chapter?

Chapter 5

Read Isaiah 30:1-18

In --- We Trust

1. What is the central choice before us every day? (p. 57)
2. Why does the choice matter? (bottom of 57 and also Gerson quote on p. 58)
3. What are your thoughts about “current cultural religion”? What would you add to the list on p. 59?

4. *“In God we trust’ may be written on our money, but our money serves other gods.”* P. 60

- What are the other gods we serve?
- Where does sacred resistance enter into this?

Hear and See

1. *“In biblical terms, to “hear” God’s word means it is received not just as an intellectual assent or emotional response, but in such a way that what we receive adjusts the core of our being, changes our life from the inside out.”* P. 61

- How did the prophet Isaiah model this?
2. Why do we reject the words of God’s prophets?
 3. What answers would you add to the list and other thoughts in response to this question on pp. 62-64?
 4. What is the primary obstacle to God’s prophecy “adjusting the core of *your* being?”

Stop Speaking Smooth Things

1. What “smooth things” do you tend to want from church, your pastor/preacher, or the prophets among you?
2. What do you make of the statement that folks who are new or lapsed “come just looking for fraud”? Is that fair?
3. What is the alternative to “speaking smooth things” or *asking to receive* “smooth things?”
4. What can we do?

Disturbing the Peace

1. Why should it not surprise us when Jesus says, “Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!”?
2. Why are people so conflict averse? Churches?
3. Did Jesus create conflict? How? Why?
4. *“Writing from the Birmingham jail, [Martin Luther King, Jr] taught that discomfort was part of the point, saying nonviolent public actions seek to ‘establish such creative tension that a community that has consistently refused to negotiate is*

forced to confront the issue. It seeks so to dramatize the issue that it can no longer be ignored.” P. 73-4

- What are your thoughts on this? Where do we see this strategy at work in the world? In the church?
- What is your personal comfort level with such disruption?

Chapter 6

1. *“If being Christian means living in a peculiar way that truly mirrors the life and teachings of Jesus as citizens of the Kin-dom, then being Christian in America is difficult. Kin-dom values and ‘American’ values don’t always line up. And we can’t help but participate in systems of oppression, violence, and injustice as citizens of the United States.” P. 77*

- What is your response to these claims?
- Where do you or your church struggle to mirror Kin-dom values in a way that truly counters “American” values?

Discernment

2. How do you practice discernment?
3. What tools are most helpful for you in discerning what is truly life-giving or death-dealing?

Staying Informed

4. *“What is confirmation bias? One article lays it out in terms of our misconception and the truth:*

The Misconception: *Your opinions are the result of years of rational, objective analysis.*

The Truth: *Your opinions are the result of years of paying attention to information which confirmed what you believed while ignoring information which challenged your preconceived notions.”*

- Have you heard of “confirmation bias” before? What are your thoughts about it?
5. What are the ways you stay informed?
 6. How do you (or might you) guard against unconscious confirmation bias?

Overcoming Fear

7. *Perfect love casts out fear.* (1 John 4:18) How, exactly, do you think this works?

8. *“To follow Jesus means that personal safety is not our first priority.”* P. 84
 - What is the priority?
 - Why would we ever sacrifice safety?
9. What resources are most powerful for you in managing your anxieties and fears about engaging in sacred resistance?

What Do We Do?

10. How do you use your words to:
 - a. Speak of God’s love, mercy, justice, hope, and promise?
 - b. Name the pain you experience and see in and around you?
 - c. Unmask injustice?
 - d. Help others know how to love and to confess?
 - e. Give shape to hope?
11. *“We cannot control what others will say or how they will speak. Our responsibility is to give thought and care for our own words—the words we use in interpersonal relationships as well as the official words of our churches (or synagogues or mosques). Congregational words are shared—or can be—in a variety of ways: preaching, teaching, [prayers] and open “letters” or statements on issues or in response to events.”* P. 88
 - How does your Church intentionally speak to the issues of the day?
12. *“As with the decisions related to when and what to speak, choosing when and how to actively engage in the public square requires intentional discernment. I’ve emphasized study, engaged communal life, staying informed, guarding against confirmation bias, and prayer as tools for discernment. If you are discerning whether to take a personal action, whether to attend a rally or march, to sign a petition or open letter for example, these tools will be very important and helpful to self-monitor your motives, your integrity, your tolerance for risk, your level of commitment, and your hope.*

The same is true for discerning acts to be engaged by churches or faith communities. However, in addition, there are some other considerations that come into play in community. Not only will it be important to ground actions in more than a proof-text of scripture and the core values or mission of the congregation, but it will also be imperative to consider the implications of any action for the community over the long haul.” P. 96-97

- The author offers several questions for consideration in discerning actions within faith community (p. 98-104). Which of these questions have you engaged in your own contexts? What other key questions or resources would you add?

13. *“Our associations with others and general way of being say a lot about who we are and what we value. If the church is understood as “a body,” the position or “stance” of the body comprises what Douglas John Hall refers to as an “ecclesiastical body language.”ⁱⁱ*

In moments of acute crisis or tragedy, therefore, an important consideration has to do with your “stance” as an individual or community of faith. This involves not only attention given to what action you take, but also how you organize and with whom you choose to stand.”

- What is your response to the idea of our churches having an “ecclesiastical body language?”
- How does your faith community intentionally monitor and strengthen its *stance*?
- How can the life of Jesus help us clarify areas of focus for us in this work?

Chapter 7

Remember the Sabbath

Read Mark 6:30-34

1. How do you understand what a Sabbath practice is?
2. What are the biggest challenges for you to practice Sabbath?
3. What do you make of the idea of “compassion fatigue”?
4. *“The spiritual issue at play here is trust—trust that your work will not disappear if you take a break; trust that there are others who can manage in your absence; and, ultimately, trust that God is God and you’re not. This is the biggie, of course. But if Jesus—Jesus of all people!—knew that it was important to go away and rest, then who are we to think that the world will fall apart if we do? You don’t always have to be available. In fact, it is a good spiritual practice to intentionally make yourself unavailable in order to take a break and rest. When we haven’t had a real chunk of downtime for awhile, all the needs and demands of our lives—no matter how valid—become occasions for resentment and short-temper.”* P. 112
 - How do you understand trust a factor in the practice of Sabbath keeping?
5. Does Sabbath practice always have to be a whole day? Where does Sabbath fit in your life?

6. What are the critical practices of Sabbath for you? For all? (p. 113)

Laugh and Grow Strong

1. What is the challenge in “lightening up”?
2. Why is laughter an important part of “fueling the resistance?” (p. 115)
3. *“Anne Lamott describes humor and laughter as ‘carbonated holiness.’”* P. 116
 - This is a provocative image. What does it evoke in you?
 - Do any of Lamott’s words on p, 116 particularly resonate with you personally?
4. What practices do you engage that help you “laugh and grow strong?”

Notice the Way the World Is

1. *“Life emerging in unexpected places always strikes me. For example, I delight at the sight of a tuft of grass or a single flower creeping up through a tiny crack in a sea of concrete pavement. For me, that very small thing points to a very large truth: the power of life, fueled by the love and presence of an endlessly creative God, is stubborn and determined. Life and love will always, ultimately prevail. There are visions and reminders of this truth everywhere in creation.”* P. 118-119
 - How do you practice “noticing” the signs of God’s life and love around you?
 - Many traditions have spiritual practices of “mindfulness.” Is this part of your spiritual discipline?
 - How might this practice provide “fuel” for the long journey of sacred resistance?

Receive Some Good News

1. *“Feeding ourselves only bad news will make us sick.”* (p. 121)
 - What do you think of that statement?
2. What do you make of the suggestion that *“the most important way of guarding against the negative effects of the news is to “get conscious”?* p. 122.
 - a. How might you “adapt” your news consumption habits?
3. Where do you partake of good news?

Hold On to Each Other

1. *“Two are better than one...for if they fall, one will lift up the other; but woe to one who is alone and falls and does not have another to help. Again, if two lie together, they keep warm; but how can one keep warm alone?”* (Ecc 4:9-11) *In other words, we need one another. Trying to “go it alone” is a pretty daunting*

task and, even if we can persevere for a while, there will come a time when we just can't do what we need to do without the help of another person. We are created to be in relationship and, regardless of the shape, size, or make-up of our family and circle of friends, the primary relationships in our lives are a profound source of sustenance. Sometimes we let other things in our lives—work, bad habits, or emotional baggage—get in the way of nurturing and fully receiving the gifts of those relationships.” P. 124

- How do you think work, bad habits, or emotional baggage get in the way of receiving the gifts of our relationships?
- In our work of sacred resistance, where can we inadvertently do damage to relationships?
- Do you find it difficult to “*Hold on to one another and trust that God is holding on to us*”? If so, how? If not, what helps you?

Find Your Strength In Quietness and Trust

1. “*To trust and rest in God is an orientation of the heart, mind and soul that keeps us humble and open.*” P. 126
 - How does trusting and resting in God keep us humble and open?
2. What does it mean to “follow Jesus into his rest?”
3. Have you ever experienced a time when you were in the midst of conflict, danger, or chaos and were able to “rest in God?” What was that like? What is it that allowed you to have that experience?

i David McRaney, “Confirmation Bias,” <https://youarenotsmart.com/2010/06/23/confirmation-bias/>

ii Douglas John Hall, p. 395.