
Protest as Worship

Amy Yoder McGloughlin

“With what shall I come before the Lord,
And bow myself before God on high?
Shall I come before God with burnt offering,
With calves a year old?
Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams,
With ten thousands of rivers of oil?
Shall I give my firstborn for my transgressions,
The fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?”
God has told you, O mortal, what is good;
And what does the Lord require of you
But to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with God.
(Micah 6:6–8 NRSV)

Christian worship, broadly defined, is an experience of reverence for God. This has, in many White Mennonite circles, been practiced in a tightly orchestrated worship service in the sanctuary, with a liturgy that flows seamlessly from praise to confession to proclamation, sharing, and prayer.

But worship can be expressed well beyond the liturgy and outside traditional worship spaces. And in the past several years, I’ve been stretched to understand public protest as an act of worship.

Preparing for Worship

In December 2015, leaders of the New Sanctuary Movement (NSM) of Philadelphia—an immigrant justice organization—asked me to participate in an act of civil disobedience.¹ The mayor of Philadelphia, Michael Nutter, was plan-

Amy Yoder McGloughlin’s relationship with activism began when she was serving as pastor of Germantown Mennonite Church in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, from 2010 to 2018. That relationship continues in her work in suburban Philadelphia with the folks at Frazer Mennonite Church.

1 Max Marin, “Anti-deportation Protest Gets Physical Outside City Hall,” *Al Día*, December 11, 2015, <https://aldianews.com/articles/politics/immigration/anti-deportation-protest-gets-physical-outside-city-hall/41461>.

ning to lift the sanctuary status of the city, a shocking reversal of his April 2014 decision. NSM, having exhausted all diplomatic means, decided that public action was the next important step to prevent the reversal.

Ending Philadelphia's sanctuary status would be dangerous for folks living in the city without legal documentation.² Undocumented immigrants could be handed over to US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) if they called the police to report a crime against themselves or were pulled over for a routine traffic stop. As a Christian, I believe this practice is in direct opposition to the basic call of scripture to "treat the alien among you as native born" (Lev 19:34) and to welcome the stranger (Matt 25:35).

I understood this request to participate in civil disobedience as one of accompaniment and solidarity. I took the request very seriously, especially because the organization's co-director, herself undocumented, asked me to risk arrest. I thought about it. I prayed for wisdom. I asked for my family's blessing, I asked for the blessing of my congregation, and I made plans for childcare and worship services later in the week, were I to be arrested and detained.

I don't like participating in acts of civil disobedience. I don't find them exciting or exhilarating. They are stressful. I worry about getting hurt or arrested. I worry about not having control over the circumstances around me. And I struggle with disobeying governing authorities, even when the cause is righteous. But, ultimately, participating was a public way to walk with undocumented folks and to use my power and privilege as a White citizen for the sake of the safety of others.

On the way to the protest, I began to worry about my safety, so I talked to Peter, the director of NSM. Peter listened compassionately. He heard my concerns and empathized. He didn't tell me what to do. The only wisdom he offered was, "Can you prayerfully channel your feelings into this work today?"

The question gave me permission to take my stress and anxiety and put it to use, channeling it to fuel my righteous indignation in this moment. This protest would be—for me—an embodied witness of my faith and an act of discipleship. Treating civil disobedience as an experience of reverence for God and God's beloveds gave me the inner fortitude to follow through, despite my fears.

After a few moments of deep breathing, prayer, and centering with the other participants in the action, I felt ready to be fully present. I was grateful for that time of centering because what we had expected would be simple arrests turned violent when security personnel dragged two protestors outside and threw them on top of the rest of us who were blocking the doors to City Hall. Our prayer and centering before the event carried us through as we continued to sing songs

² Human Rights Watch, "US: Immigrants 'Afraid to Call 911'; States Should Reject Corrosive 'Secure Communities' Program," May 14, 2014, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2014/05/14/us-immigrants-afraid-call-911>.

that drew on our collective spiritual histories, expressing reverence for God and God's people as we sang and sat in protest. We prayerfully adapted to the situation at hand when things did not go as planned.

Reframing Sanctuary

While my theological education had prepared me for worship within a sanctuary space, worship transgresses the boundaries of our buildings.

In 2016, NSM of Philadelphia developed a hotline for undocumented Philadelphians to call if there was a raid in their community.³ The hotline was set up to activate a large group of community allies to arrive on the scene, ready to shut down the streets in order to keep families safe from ICE detention and deportation. Every time NSM's supporters were activated, they were asked to enter the area of the raid in spiritual reverence, mindful of those whose lives and families were being threatened.

Church buildings are considered to be safe spaces from ICE.⁴ If NSM could gather around a home being raided by ICE and declare it a place of worship, it could pressure ICE to abandon the raid. Using prayer and spiritual songs to mark the street for worship, the space could be transformed from one of fear to one of sanctuary.

In other situations like this, if an ICE agent was threatening to arrest or detain an undocumented immigrant, protestors would be trained to draw attention to themselves and to the ICE agent. But this NSM action aimed instead to turn the street into worship, surrounding agents and families with love, prayer, and song, inviting all into our collective worship experience and inviting all present to turn toward God.

Ultimately, this model became difficult to implement. Hotline calls needed to be confirmed, and by the time folks were mobilized to a location, the arrests were over.

But just because something is not successful doesn't mean it's not instructive. New Sanctuary Movement redefined sanctuary by modeling public witness and protest as worship—where undocumented folks should be safe. And in our singing and praying in the streets, I understood my prayers and worship to be transformative for people's spirits as well as for structures that dehumanize.

3 Janell Ross, "Philadelphia Has a Hotline for Undocumented Immigrants Facing Raids," *Washington Post*, May 30, 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2016/05/30/philadelphia-has-a-hotline-for-undocumented-immigrants-facing-raids/>.

4 John Morton, "U.S. Immigration and Customs Memo to Field Directors, Special Agents in Charge, Chief Counsel," October 24, 2011, <https://www.ice.gov/doclib/ero-outreach/pdf/10029.2-policy.pdf>.

Preparing Ourselves for Worship

These days, the only way I have the strength to enter into marches or other acts of protest is if I see them as an act of worship. The tension of these events fills me with anxiety and dread. But today's political circumstances compel me out of comfort. Worship should also be moving us out of comfort into something bigger, into God's liberating work in our world.

In the summer of 2020, I brought my daughter and several of her friends to a Black Lives Matter protest in Philadelphia. Shortly before that, on May 25, George Floyd had been murdered in Minneapolis by (former) police officer Derek Chauvin. Handcuffed, Mr. Floyd had lain face down, pinned to the ground by Chauvin's knee on his neck for more than nine minutes while the life drained out of him. Outraged by this police violence, people joined organized protests in cities and towns all over the world. Likewise, we wanted to express our support for the Black community, while calling for a system that treats Black and Brown folks with dignity.

On the way to the rally we talked about ground rules: Stay together. Remember that this is not about you. If you are scared, tell someone. Make sure you always have your buddy with you. Stay hydrated. We talked about how we White folks should behave, and we agreed to defer to the Black leaders of this march. They were in charge, and we would follow their lead. We also talked about what to do if tear gas was used on protestors. I brought alcohol wipes for us to smell—to clear our sinuses—and asked the girls to bring scarves to cover their faces. Just in case. This conversation was a preparation for worship, an experience of reverence in a crowd of thousands. We weren't just showing up; we were bringing our full selves to this event and preparing ourselves for personal and collective transformation.

As we found a parking spot near the march, I asked my daughter and her friends to think about a word they each wanted to focus on during the march. What was the intention they wanted to set for the day? How would they stay centered in what could be a contentious march?

I wanted to make this march an act of worship, a time of reverence for God and hope for the world that God had created. My solidarity with the Black community would be a way to honor the presence of God in my Black friends. My chants would be to honor God's Black children. My presence would be to elevate the silenced voices of God's Black- and Brown-skinned images. This was not about me.

Learning from those events with the New Sanctuary Movement, I brought my worship mindset into the street. I brought my anger at an unjust system that murders Black and Brown folks, and I channeled that into a spirit-led presence at this event. I brought the worship space out into the street, ready to use prayer as a tool of transformation, and song as a cry for God's justice. This march was

answering a call to justice, a call that transgressed the walls of worship spaces and flowed like a rushing river out the doors of our sanctuaries.

Worship is more than the gathered community engaged in liturgy in a house of worship. It is not bound by a worship order, perfect words, or carefully orchestrated singing. Worship is in the streets, walking in solidarity, crying out for liberation, praying with our feet. Liturgy flows through the chants and rallying songs. We show our reverence for God and God's people through our cries and our actions for the world that Jesus came to build with us. And in the chaos of protest, God is present.