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Review of Terri Hord Owens, *Staying at the Table: Being the Church We Say We Are*

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Terri Hord Owens. *Staying at the Table: Being the Church We Say We Are*. St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2025. Xiv + 110 Pages.

REVIEWED BY SANDHYA RANI JHA¹

Terri Hord Owens's new book *Staying at the Table: Being the Church We Say We Are* falls in some ways into the broader category of "revitalization," "renewal," or "congregational transformation," a theme the Disciples of Christ, among many mainline denominations, has sought to navigate for several decades now. What might compel an individual or congregation to pick up this volume is that it directly addresses the decline in institutional church membership that has been a recent trend in the US. Owens invites the church to take seriously what it means that a significant percentage of non-churchgoers cite either dislike of religious organizations or bad experiences with religious people as the reason they are not religiously affiliated. That is a challenging word for readers who love and are well served by the church as it is. However, that word is why the text is so important for people seeking to create a thriving church.

From the earliest pages of *Staying at the Table*, Owens's central claim is that being who God called us to be *IS* how we thrive as Christian community. Seeking church growth strategies, she notes, often unintentionally misses the core of the Gospel, which focuses not on building or preserving an institution but on creating vibrant communities of care oriented toward embodying God's limitless love. For a denomination whose most devoted members watch our attrition rates with fear and heartbreak, this can, in fact, be good news. The foundation of the text is the theological presupposition of an all-loving God: "The very moment that we, in our human arrogance, attempt to limit God, God is no longer God. I don't want a God who is bound by someone else's constraints and limited understanding or biases. A God of no limits must be understood through a

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lens sharpened by the belief that God's love includes all, that God is inclusive not exclusive, expansive not reductionist" (p.17).

In this short volume, Owens takes on several specific practices she believes are at the core of being exemplary Disciples in a vibrant and healthy church: (1) deep and serious engagement with scripture, (2) building out spiritual disciplines, (3) creating a table where all are welcome and where we remain to work out our differences, and (4) learning how to tell our stories in ways that lead us toward unity, justice, and imagination. While appropriate for a fully ecumenical audience, Owens writes from an explicitly Disciples location, sharing stories through the lens of our polity and practices. For example, she references and expounds on Alexander Campbell's principles for biblical interpretation as a tool she used in local parish ministry. The seven rules, in his book *Principles of Interpretation*, boil down to: read for historical context, read for the authors' and figures' social locations, use the same laws of interpretation as you would for other texts, use context clues to determine the specific meaning of words that have multiple potential meanings, look for familiar reference points when reading about unfamiliar contexts, don't stretch those familiar reference points past the breaking point, and finally, "For the salutary and sanctifying intelligence of the oracles of God, the following rule is indispensable: We must come within the understanding distance." On a personal note, re-encountering Campbell's methodology for biblical interpretation in this text reminded me of why I remain committed to the Disciples of Christ as a denomination, and Owens's interpretation of that methodology invited me back into a more intentional practice around scripture study, both on my own and in community.

Staying at the Table provides significantly fewer personal stories and anecdotes than many of the "church growth" or congregational identity books of the last two decades. However, the book heavily integrates scripture and the biblical stories we share as the stories by which we can make sense of our current context. In addition, a particular strength of the text is the practical guidance. In particular, the chapter "Let's Be the Church We Say We Are" includes specific practices, tools, and even courses that Owens has found useful in her own spiritual discipline. One chapter focuses on the experiences many churches and regions have had in the Disciples' current "Church Narrative Project," where they have found that by telling their stories in new ways, they have found ways to bridge differences, address conflict in healthy ways, and reconnect with their ministry purpose. This continues to be a resource that congregations can engage in their own work of being the church they seek to be.

Staying at the Table takes a firm stance on how practicing justice is inextricable from Christianity, and it includes a foreword by Disciples pastor and Poor People's Campaign leader Rev. Dr. William Barber II. It applies the late Walter Brueggemann's biblical

wisdom regarding “the prophetic imagination.” Owens, as the first African American woman elected head of a denomination, alludes to barriers she has faced and names the obstacles that many in our society face due to forces of oppression. She also talks about strategies for the church to address those injustices and provides illustrations from across our denominational life.

For the book to make sense, though, it is critical to note that Owens’s guidance around justice work, like all other elements addressed in the book, is consistently placed in the theological context of “God’s limitless love” as the lens through which all our acts as church should be viewed. This includes social service, social justice, biblical interpretation, and addressing conflict. This matters because Owens is clear about what should distinguish the church from secular charity, justice, or conflict-management organizations. As she says towards the end of the book, “People should want to be a part of our churches because they see among us something different, the transforming impact of Jesus that causes us to flout the norms of society that call for self-centeredness and acquisition of things and power” (p.100). *Staying at the Table* provides the tools for reflection that can help the church embody that something different.