

# “It is in Giving that We Receive”: Adapting Christian Liturgy for Antiracist Rhetorical Work

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**Abstract:** This article examines liturgy through a responsiveness-oriented rhetorical analysis. Responsiveness is an emerging conception of rhetoric that brings focus to how people change their own habits. For Christians, this article finds that liturgical call-and-response can develop people’s rhetorical responsiveness because the scriptedness of responding simplifies what people should do/say, putting more emphasis on people’s participation and their willingness to be drawn in. These findings are then extended through examining two moments in a larger project, which show that liturgy can be adapted for antiracist rhetorical work outside of worship services, in that liturgy allows people to listen, participate without dominating, and subordinate themselves to a common spiritual goal. Overall, this article contributes to work on religious rhetoric, race, and rhetorical theory.

## Introduction

What is the rhetorical work that liturgy does? Little scholarship exists on this question of everyday Christian practice. Liturgy is of course performative, “not simply showing and telling the ideological content of theology; it is a doing of new things in relation to old ones” (Ward 18). As for the possibilities of this performance, Annie Kelvie’s recent work demonstrates how congregants can be invited to enter into new beliefs and expressions through joining scripted liturgical responses. In her study, members of a progressive United Church of Christ church who were part of a book study on US mass incarceration ended up writing liturgy for the whole congregation to perform together. In part, their liturgy reflected what they had themselves been learning through their reading and discussion. For instance, their prayer of confession was tailored to the injustices of our incarceration systems: “[Book study member acting as leader:] Who can hold someone down until they cannot breathe? Who can imprison another spirit in poverty or in discrimination? Congregation: We can. We did. If only by our silence, we do” (126). However, this liturgy wasn’t just for the participants in the book study. Kelvie notes with reference to this prayer of confession that this mass-incarceration-themed description of sin (“imprison”) and shared responsibility (“if only by our silence, we do”), especially as racially inflected in the US, would be challenging for the mostly white congregants to enter into (126-127). In other words, in Kelvie’s study, liturgy in church is not just a reflection of the writer(s)’ existing beliefs; liturgy can also provide an invitation for congregants to enter into new beliefs and expressions through joining the scripted responses. Kelvie, then, begins to show how rhetorically complex and powerful liturgy can sometimes be.

From Kelvie’s work, we can also see that the functions of liturgy go against the grain of some rhetorical scholarship. In part, this is because liturgy complicates the traditional opposition of speaker *versus* audience. For instance, in his survey of early Christian rhetoric, George Kennedy focuses on types of preaching rather than on modes of congregant participation (155-157). The features of Jesus’ preaching as represented in Mark, moreover, include “the importance of testimony up to and including the example of martyrdom; the fact that no special eloquence is required, for as in Exodus God will

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provide the words; and an apparent assumption that the disciples cannot expect to persuade their judges of the righteousness of their cause: that is God's work, and as with Pharaoh, he seems to intend to harden their hearts" (145). While not directly addressing liturgy, then, Kennedy would likely consider its participatory nature and receptive emphasis opposed to a traditional rhetorical perspective: "All of this is contrary to the assumptions of the classical orator, who expected to use his eloquence to overcome opposition to his ideas" (145).

Liturgy also invites controversy over who it serves. For Ray, rituals are often designed to benefit those already in power. In the political ritual of voting during Reconstruction, people voted in a display that excluded women and glorified political power; her interest, then, is in the extent to which suffragists could undercut and appropriate the voting ritual in protest. Similarly, in a religious context, Ommen reads Catholic instructions on congregants' bodily comportment during liturgy through a Foucauldian lens. Individuals' choice to attend mass is, from this perspective, overshadowed by how the Catholic authorities use liturgical instructions to control congregants and impose uniformity on them. Rituals like liturgy, then, are portrayed as the brainwashing communitarian foil to rhetoric's more rational illumination.

And liturgy is sometimes viewed skeptically within Christian practice as a mindless activity. For instance, *Common Prayer: A Liturgy for Ordinary Radicals* introduces liturgy to evangelical readers by rebutting hesitations about the setting ("doesn't have to take place in a big group" [10]), participation ("more than attending a service or a prayer meeting" [11]), "not that others pray for us or that their voices replace our voices" [20]), role of belief ("not about getting indoctrinated" [11]), "not about learning facts and memorizing phrases" [11]), and automaticity ("not a magic formula" [21]) involved in liturgical practice.

Thus, taking liturgy seriously requires a counterintuitive rhetorical analysis focused on how people *respond* to others. This article conducts a responsiveness-oriented rhetorical analysis to understand liturgy as call-and-response that has up to four additional features. Thus conceived, liturgy is a practice that can develop people's rhetorical responsiveness by allowing participants to speak their way into receiving/being open to God and others. Moreover, because rhetorical responsiveness is needed to carry out antiracist work, liturgy is then examined in two situations outside of church (both drawn from a larger participatory project) to see how liturgical call-and-response might cultivate participants' budding antiracist habits. In the first situation, the fixedness of a responsive prayer *enacted* white participants' desire to receive wisdom from people of color from a neighboring church, and the narrative element of the prayer *prepared* them for a challenging meeting structure to talk about race. In the second situation, a responsive prayer structure helped scaffold people at a prayer meeting into *speaking more fluidly* about race through a communally authored and seasonal liturgy design. Together, these results suggest that call-and-response can allow white people to listen, to participate without dominating, to subordinate themselves to a common spiritual goal, and to develop rhetorical responsiveness. Overall, studying liturgy as a responsive rhetorical practice thereby contributes to our understanding of embodied rhetoric and materiality, race and habit, and religious rhetoric.

### Christian liturgy's embeddedness in race and racism

In order to consider liturgy's potential for antiracist rhetorical action, we must preliminarily attend to Christianity's close connection with racism, especially in the U.S. Christianity is not uniform as doctrine or practice; nor is racism uniform in how it operates (Omi and Winant). The relationship between Christianity and racism is correspondingly complex and contested. Thus, from a certain perspective, the liturgy of any church (insofar as Christ's body and bride is constituted in a church) might be said to already contain within it what is necessary for all corporate life (Hopko), including the antiracism that is demanded of contemporary U.S. white people. In this mentality, no adaptation of liturgy for antiracism is needed. At the other extreme, for scholars in the tradition of James Cone, for whom "Jesus is black," white Christian practices are so permeated by racism (Lloyd, see especially the chapter "For What Are Whites To Hope?"; Lloyd and Prevot) it might be oxymoronic to "adapt" liturgies for antiracism that were authorized by white institutions, a contradiction in terms. I am sympathetic to both stances toward liturgy. As a way of navigating the first perspective, this article is focused on congregants who, like in Kelvie's study, were developing antiracist desires that spilled out into new liturgical expression outside of church. In other words, liturgy *was* being adapted and transformed for antiracist use, and this is open to being taken as a critique of traditional liturgies' ability to cultivate antiracist desire or as an extension of it.

In terms of the second perspective that liturgy is too tainted by racism to be adapted for antiracism, this article strongly keeps in view the fact that at no point in the modern era has Christian theology and practice been unaffected by race and racism. Carter's analysis of Enlightenment-era formalizations of modern race and racism centers on how racism was not just a political development in Europe, but was a theological deformation as well. Thus, he applies antiracist attention to even black liberation theologies. Analyzing further back, to how Spain's traumatic encounter with the new world was also a theological development, Jennings diagnoses a "diseased" Christian imagination (6) that has permeated Christian thinking to this day. From today's perspective outside the U.S., the South African *Kairos Document* names "state theology" as "the theological justification of the status quo with its racism, capitalism and totalitarianism. It blesses injustice, canonises the will of the powerful and reduces the poor to passivity, obedience and apathy" (Section 2, paragraph 1). Similarly, Wadsworth observes that "theological racism," or interpreting the Bible in racist ways, continues to shape today's U.S. evangelical churches. As a matter of practice, Christian thinkers themselves have lamented that many common ways white American Christians develop social programs are patronizing and harmful to both them and program participants (Corbett and Fikkert), are blind to real need (Reed in Perkins), and treat people instrumentally as numbers (Stone). At an empirical level, Hall, Matz, and Wood's meta-analysis in 2010 of 55 religion and social sciences articles since the U.S. 1964 Civil Rights Act find that, counterintuitively, the more a person in the U.S. identifies religiously, the *more likely* they are to hold racist attitudes (although this correlation has diminished somewhat for more recent studies). And of course, these should impact how we view liturgy: "Liturgical actions lose their authenticity when those who participate in the liturgy do not practice and struggle for justice" (Wolterstorff 43).

This is not to gainsay how some Christians and Christian congregations have been at the center of civil rights and social justice work in the U.S., from the

Reconstruction era (Johnson, *The Forgotten Prophet*), to the Civil Rights movement of the 50s and 60s (see Houck and Dixon's anthology); to even the recent Black Lives Matter movement (Edgar and Johnson, Chapter 3; for a study of the sociological conditions linking black churches and political protest, see Fitzgerald and Spohn; McDaniel). And white Christians have participated in these as well (Lechtreck). Rather, these close linkages between (white people's) Christianity and racism means that this article does not treat liturgy as an unadulterated or pristine rhetorical tool for white people to draw on. As Yancy notes, given how embedded people are in systems of oppression, the term "white antiracist" is an oxymoron (*Backlash* 98), but that does not reduce the call white people have toward working against racism. Similarly, developing "antiracist liturgy" may be a contradictory, imperfect device, but that should not stop us from discerning how it might be helpful.

These tensions reflect wider challenges within rhetorical study. For rhetoric and composition scholars, Christian rhetoric is sometimes reduced to fundamentalist and/or evangelical rhetoric and positioned as a *problem* in need of a rhetorical intervention: a problem in public discourse (Crowley), a problem in the composition classroom (see Ringer, "Working"), and especially a problem on the topic of race (Harris and Steiner; Althouse and Anderson). Yet, as several edited volumes attest (DePalma and Ringer; Vander Lei et al.; Jost and Olmsted), religious rhetoric in general can be a productive "rhetorical resource" for people to integrate their personal experience/beliefs with dialogic inquiries of public concern (DePalma, "Re-envisioning"; see also Lynch and Miller's extensive bibliography). Adapting liturgy to antiracist use would join other work, then, that seeks a *rapprochement* between rhetoric and religion. And the recent special issue of *Journal of Communication and Religion* edited by House and Johnson shows that we need to attend to the interplay between race and religious rhetoric specifically: "the analysis, the examination, the critical engagement of race—and how race functions in religion and how we communicate race[—]has been a missing element" in rhetorical research (House and Johnson 5).

### **Toward a responsiveness-oriented rhetorical analysis**

Responsiveness is an emerging direction for theorizing rhetoric that destabilizes our attention to impacting/persuading others. Rather, responsiveness emphasizes that being impacted ourselves is a rhetorical art in which we can develop skills. A review of scholarly work in rhetorical responsiveness outlines what a responsiveness-oriented rhetorical analysis of liturgy involves.

An early movement toward responsiveness comes from Kenneth Burke, who emphasizes a *mutuality* that de-centers the rhetor as speaker. His famous formulation of rhetoric as "the Scramble, the Wrangle of the Market Place, the flurries and flare-ups of the Human Barnyard, the Give and Take, the wavering line of pressure and counterpressure, the Logomachy, the onus of ownership, the War of Nerves, the War" (23) not only expands what counts as rhetoric, but also explains a core aspect of responsiveness: that people are intertwined with each other, both affecting and being affected.

A more thoroughgoing exploration of responsiveness as rhetorical comes from a controversial 1995 article by Foss and Griffin, as well as a follow-up article several years later by Bone, Griffin, and Scholz. *Invitational* rhetoric (Foss and Griffin) affirms the feminist values of equality, immanent value, and self-determination. Rhetorical

responsiveness means developing one's own "openness" (6) and "willingness to yield" (7), so that people can listen well to others' diverse perspectives and offer their own perspective without giving in to patriarchal persuasive tactics.

Krista Ratcliffe's work on *rhetorical listening* helpfully brings responsiveness into conversation with gender and race. Because racial and gender privilege blinds people, rhetorical listening is designed in part for people to "contemplate the existence of that-which-they-cannot-see and even of that-which-they-cannot-hear" (75). This requires a stance of openness (1; opposed to denial, dismissal, indifferent compliance, and defensiveness, 138) and an understanding that the past is also in the present (110).

Finally, a recent philosophically rigorous approach to rhetoric has gone far past mutuality between speaker and audience—and has even gone past Ratcliffe's "listening" that parallels "speaking"—to suggest that rhetoric itself is primarily about the speaker's ability to be affected by others. Diane Davis and Thomas Rickert are illustrative of this strand of research which, although operating from a variety of theoretical positions and with a variety of analytic ends, nevertheless together characterizes persuading others as just a special type of a more general understanding of rhetoric, in which there is no "speaker" before there is a community, and there is no shaping others before being-shaped. Davis' exposition of "rhetoricity" puts our ability to be affected by others as a primary and inescapable condition for persuading others: "The goal is to expose an originary (or preoriginary) rhetoricity—an *affectability* or *persuadability*—that is the condition for symbolic action" (Davis 2, emphasis in original). In a new materialist vein, Rickert draws on Heidegger to argue that we need to be attentive to the ways that non-living things have an energy, a fittingness within the whole, a persuasive aspect. "Rhetoric is a responsive way of revealing the world for others" (162, emphasis in original).

These ontological arguments about who we are have recently been extended to more embodied considerations about how we *develop* our responsiveness, e.g. with regard to conducting research (Penman). A responsiveness-oriented rhetorical analysis, then, will investigate both *how* and *the extent to which* liturgy can be a discursive structure for developing our responsiveness to (God and) others.

### **Liturgy as building responsiveness: call-and-response with up to four features**

In line with a responsiveness-oriented conception of rhetoric itself, this article takes up liturgy as a call-and-response structure of talking. On one hand, this is a narrowly discursive conception, related to a kind of exchange that happens in certain types of worship services. But it is also a broad definition in that liturgical call-and-response extends beyond church settings and even beyond Christian speakers, paving the way for out-of-church antiracist applications of liturgy and yet capturing many important theological aspects.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This article's usage of liturgy overlaps with how theologians understand "liturgy." At its narrowest, liturgy can mean a particular fixed progression, or "shape," of a church's worship (Dix; Ross). This narrow understanding of liturgy is its most common meaning: a fixed progression of speech that structures certain kinds of church services, especially Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Anglican, and some mainline Protestant services. This progression begins with a call to worship; moves to greetings, song, confession and assurance of pardon, baptism, creed, and prayer; then moves through sermon, Eucharist, offering, and being sent out (Smith Chapter 5). Many of these elements use call-and-response, in which the leader initiates some call (e.g. "The peace of the Lord be with you") and congregants respond (e.g. "And also with you"). It is against this structure that evangelical church services are often contrasted (Ross). Scholars have examined these

As call-and-response, liturgy is interactive, pulling people in. In church, liturgical call-and-response takes place when people have intentionally taken on the possibility of being exposed, of being called and drawn into what God and others have for them. Call-and-response thus provides a model in which a person is shaped through a speaking community. (In this sense it is much different than the “conversation” metaphor of interracial interaction, which suggests a back-and-forth). As people in this project put it (loosely quoting popular theologian Richard Rohr), this is “acting your way into a new way of thinking.” Liturgical call-and-response trains people to say yes to the liturgist’s call before they have a completely developed cognitive picture of its implications. By engaging in liturgy, congregants can be theorized to be developing rhetorical responsiveness. This rhetorical responsiveness is valuable for Christians who want God (and others) to lead them deeper into God’s redemption. For people writing liturgy, liturgy can thus be explicitly conceived of as a persuasive device for the congregation (Kelvie 127); this article suggests that congregants can themselves use a liturgy to intentionally *be persuaded*.

More than simple calling and responding, though, liturgical call-and-response has up to four additional features that help us understand how liturgy can shape people. First, liturgical call-and-response is *fixed*; in practice, this often means it’s written down and then read out, unlike the spontaneous and contextual oral call-and-response characteristic of African American church and everyday culture (Draper; Foster, “Pay Leon”; Foster, “Cookin Now”; Britt; Ramsby II and Whiteside; Smitherman; see Haldeman 8 on how European and African-American church traditions have been largely separate since the Civil War).

Second, liturgical call-and-response is *communally authored*, meaning that the liturgy is an articulation of what the community itself believes. This takes different forms depending on the tradition: Orthodox churches take up Eucharistic call-and-response from St. John of Chrysostom (5<sup>th</sup> century), and people in this project draw on the “Prayer of St. Francis” (which despite its referent to the 12<sup>th</sup> century monk dates to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century [Renoux]) as well as prayers from trusted Christian writers of today. Some of these were originally call-and-responses; others were converted into responsive prayers for the occasion. The original author of these call-and-responses is less important than

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parts individually to see how they have developed through time (Berger; Spinks). While different liturgical traditions have small differences, Melanie Ross observes that liturgical scholars have emphasized a “deep structure” which revolves around the four symbols of Scripture, baptism, communion, and prayer. These “take on meaning in action” (6), meaning that liturgy is an embodied activity, something that must be participated in rather than just observed.

Liturgy can also be expanded to refer to the shape of any church’s worship (Haldeman), and expanded again to include where people sit in church, who is admitted and when, who is allowed to talk and when, etc. (Berger). At its most expansive, liturgy can simply mean habit, any and all “formative practices” (Smith 24).

The responsiveness identified here as being cultivated by liturgical call-and-response may be seen in “non-liturgical” services. After all, by showing up to church, congregants open themselves to God’s call for which there is no way not to respond; even silence or rejection is a kind of answer. Theologically, this might be said to be true of church in general. For instance, Ward argues that any church service is a set of opportunities for the Spirit’s “breaking and entering,” in which “participants might encounter Divine Presence at any number of meeting places within the order or they might not encounter It at all” (Ward 21). Rhetorically, though, liturgical churches are a helpful starting point to understand how Christians develop their rhetorical responsiveness because the practice of formal call-and-response makes this abstract Call somewhat observable.

the fact that the community of people have chosen to take it up in continuity with liturgies that came before it (Spinks).

Third, liturgical call-and-response is often *narrative*, meaning that it has a progression within itself or functions as one part of a larger set of discursive actions (Smith; Haldeman). Greetings, for instance, do different discursive work than confession does, and thus the order of particular calls and responses can be significant. This also means that there is a significant amount of self-enactment in liturgical call-and-response; the narrative that is created by considering the service as a whole is also a straightforward description of the gospel message itself (Smith).<sup>2</sup>

Finally, liturgical call-and-response is often *seasonal*, meaning that certain parts are variable and adaptable to multiple situations. This seasonality is multimodal and embodied; each “season” in the church year has a set time, a Biblical occasion, certain personal and corporate spiritual practices to accompany it, certain Bible passages that are read during the service, and a color. Liturgy’s seasonality is a counterbalance to its fixedness: although deliberate, liturgy attends both to kairoic moments and to anticipated rhythms (like celebrating God’s provision of the Messiah at Christmastide, or God’s outpouring of the Spirit during Pentecost).

Although rooted in Christian practice, then, a responsiveness-oriented rhetorical analysis reveals that liturgical call-and-response is defined less by a certain view of God than it is by a certain view of what language can do. Liturgy is primarily characterized by people’s willingness to be exposed to a call from God and others, a call that is unable to be ignored. Whether people in church repeat back the scripted lines or not, they are exposed and vulnerable. Their belief is called forth rather than presumed, a new chance to speak their way into being like Christ in response to God’s call, and to view God as fundamentally relational (i.e. as one who also listens, joins, offers, responds). Congregants may be called beyond their intention in showing up: they have chosen to attend, but may not have foreseen exactly how they would emerge; they are speaking to God and each other, but may be themselves partly affected. Overall, then, while people joining in may have a formative impact on other congregants, they are also speaking in church in a way so as to be formed (to be “persuaded,” when viewed in terms of belief). People who engage in liturgy, in other words, yield control of what is said to the community, remaining exposed and vulnerable to whatever that might enact and the impacts that might have on their subsequent habits and actions. What remains for the following section is to show how liturgy can cultivate this responsiveness specifically regarding antiracism.

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<sup>2</sup> The congregation first declares that humankind turned/turns its back on God and needed/needs redemption (confession). But God has promised salvation to his people (assurance of pardon), which came/has come through Christ’s perfect life and sacrificial death, the hope of which is evidenced in his resurrection (communion prayer and communion itself). As a result of following Jesus, congregants’ lives in general will transform and will lead to new ways to live (post-communion prayer). The service itself provides an interpretation of the important plot points of the Christian faith. Call-and-response (re)enacts these. This helps us understand allusions and quotations to Scripture in the service, which are plentiful: where the Bible expresses redemption, congregants express redemption; where it expresses pain, congregants express pain; where it expresses thankfulness, congregants express thankfulness.

### Liturgy adapted for antiracist rhetorical work

Crucially, the task of developing rhetorical responsiveness has also been connected to white people's antiracist action. Coates observes that "it is so easy to look away" (8)—that is, for white people to deflect a call, to try not to respond. Philosopher George Yancy similarly suggests that white people should be "nurturing a disposition to be un-sutured, to crack, re-crack, and crack again the calcified operations of the white gaze" (*Black Bodies* 14). This idea, that white people's intransigence and unwillingness to be persuaded is intimately connected to (anti)racism, has been expressed for decades. In a speech during Martin Luther King's late "prophetic pessimism" phase (Johnson and Stone), King characterizes America's lack of progress on civil rights as an inability for white people to hear:

And what is it that America has failed to hear? It has failed to hear that the plight of the Negro poor has worsened over the last few years. It has failed to hear that the promises of freedom and justice have not been met. And it has failed to hear that large segments of white society are more concerned about tranquility and the status quo than about justice, equality, and humanity. (*The Other America*)

Hearing, vulnerability, exposure, mutuality, listening, rhetoricity, openness, susceptibility—these speak to a view of rhetoric that carries a disconcerting sense of vertigo amidst possibilities for change. Rhetorical responsiveness positions us to consider receiving as an action—and a challenging action at that, when seen in terms of white people's cultural history of not hearing the voices of people of color. The ability of liturgy to cultivate people's responsiveness, then, plays out powerfully when people adapt it for antiracist use. In that case, liturgy's training in saying "yes" is also valuable for white people who desire for God (and others) to lead them deeper into enacting racial justice.

This section extends a responsiveness-oriented rhetorical analysis by examining the role that liturgy played in two moments for a group of Christians who were seeking to act against racism outside of church. These moments are part of a larger project that I conducted from 2015-2017 using "participatory critical rhetoric" (Middleton et al.). A participatory critical rhetoric method treats the researcher's participation *with* a group as central to an embodied, contextual analysis of how that group communicates (unlike a standard observational approach in which the researcher's involvement is figured as contaminating the data). In what follows, then, I not only recorded and later transcribed video and audio, but also participated with that group as a white Christian engaging in antiracist liturgical call-and-response myself.

The project overall involved congregants at Second Presbyterian Church of Splitsville (i.e. "Second Pres"; all names are pseudonyms chosen by the participants themselves). Second Pres is an almost all-white congregation that was gradually trying to encounter and undo the ways racism acts within and around them. In my work with them, we especially focused on people's transition into becoming aware of systemic racism and their/our consequent feeling of being overwhelmed or "stuck" at how to act out the new understanding that racism permeates our daily lives. Broadly, then, the participants in this study were looking to move out of their ingrained habits, to be drawn in and *responsive* to new antiracist possibilities. My work with them was out of church;



what grounds this analysis is that in church, Second Pres loosely drew on a liturgical “shape” for their services.<sup>3</sup>

During the project with Second Pres, I observed two times that participants adapted liturgical call-and-response toward antiracist efforts outside of a church service. Neither of these call-and-response prayers were accompanied by great fanfare or even mentioned as being out of the ordinary; these relatively unselfconscious adaptations of liturgy thereby contrast with the intentional “participatory” (Middleton et al.) efforts that I was undertaking with Second Pres overall to act against racism. In the first case, Aviva had participants in a meeting about race pray responsively before a challenging meeting structure, in which black participants from a neighboring church would have the floor for the whole meeting to tell their stories, while white participants would be quiet for the whole meeting in order to enact the listening and relationship they wanted to have. For white participants, I suggest, the fixed nature of the call-and-response helpfully simplified antiracism for that moment, and the narrative aspect of beginning the time by articulating loving inversion prepared them to responsively listen in the meeting.

In the second case, Gwen structured a prayer meeting about race with a liturgical progression that moved through set prayers, song, and Scripture. I interpret this use of call-and-response as partly related to the challenge of praying about race as white people: adapting liturgy in this antiracism setting drew people into new ways of speaking who might otherwise have been stuck. Communally authored liturgy created a sense of being *authorized* to pray about a difficult topic, and a liturgy that was seasonal to Donald Trump’s 2016 election provided an opportunity to be kairotic, responsive to the moment.

Thus, conceiving of liturgy as fixed, communally authored, narrative, seasonal call-and-response gives us a set of features to examine that can be observed with Christians outside a church service. Overall, these situations are suggestive of liturgical call-and-response being one way for people to speak so as to be responsive themselves, including in antiracist rhetorical action.

#### *Adaptation 1: “Truth tellers and active listeners”*

In 2015 people from Second Pres arranged a set of four interchurch meetings with the nearby, mostly black church of First Church. These were not just talks *about* racism; they also *enacted* an approach toward antiracism simply to the extent that people in the U.S. are racialized beings. Thus we can analyze the responsive rhetorical work of one meeting’s liturgical call-and-response in relation to white people doing interracial interaction well.

The context of the meeting helps understand the role that liturgy played. Because of the location and timing, Aviva, Ms. Di (the planner from Second Pres), and I anticipated that there would be a lot more white people present than black people.

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<sup>3</sup> On Sundays during this project, Second Pres worshiped as a congregation of about 70 people (including children). They sat and stood in three wings oriented around a communion table, in a building that they shared with several non-profits, so the chairs and all of Second Pres’ supplies were set up before each service and then torn down after the service was over. At nearly every step of their services, the congregation participated in ways that took discursive action, thanking, confessing, forgiving, worshiping, and proclaiming. Liturgical responses were often creative and embodied, making use of multiple senses and allowing flexibility for the leader to adapt to the moment, such as asking congregants to stand during a particular part, or hold hands during the benediction.

(This was accurate: there ended up being 16 white people, 1 Asian person, and 6 African Americans.) Aviva's plan for the meeting, then, would communicate something about how white people from Second Pres wanted to interact as the numerical majority.

Aviva suggested to me and Ms. Di that the white people not say anything, in order to listen to the stories of the black attendees. If the white people did not say anything during the meeting, it would be in itself a gesture of reception, honor, respect, and even love. Not that this would be sufficient, but it would be significant. It would be an affirmation that God gives us all that we need, rejecting a scarcity mind-set that could be present in white attendees trying to get in all of their own thoughts. Ms. Di and I thought it was a fine idea.

For the white participants, this was a demanding rhetorical task of being silent and receptive. In her introduction to the afternoon, Aviva anticipated that people might have a difficult time being willing to let go of a designated opportunity to talk. While I was getting the video camera set up and people were pulling their chairs into a circle in the main area at Second Pres (torn down already from its set-up for worship earlier in the day; very hot, with fans being arranged to blow onto us), Aviva acknowledged that "we all have something to say, and we all should be heard." Yet she asserted a collective willingness for people of color to be the "truth tellers" and the white people present to be the "active listeners": "we want you to be the truth tellers, we really want to hear from you, um. And white folks: we want to be active listeners."

And sure enough, during the meeting the white people from Second Pres really did stay quiet. There were no outbursts, no interjections, no storming out, no arms folded in skepticism, no defensive qualifications that one might expect (Anderson). Ms. Di helped the order of the meeting by calling on the next black person in the circle after she told her own story. This created a pattern in which the black attendees from First Church told their life stories with race one after another. Once all the black participants from First Church had shared, Aviva opened the floor for a few minutes, and a white guy from Second Pres did say one sentence. I personally experienced listening together as a beautiful, humbling act.

Thus it was in the midst of this challenging rhetorical task of receiving people's stories that Aviva opened and closed our time with liturgical call-and-response. Like in church, this was a *fixed* and *communally authored* prayer that functioned as part of the *narrative* or progression of our meeting. For people from Second Pres, using a liturgical prayer in this context right after the Sunday service connected rhetorical responsiveness they were developing in church to out-of-church antiracist use.

The fixed nature of the call-and-response simplified antiracism for that moment. All it required was for people to join in together with the African Americans in the room. Liturgy here functioned for the white participants as a way to enact a difficult antiracist action of speaking receptiveness. This fixedness is what some people deride as ritualistic about liturgy, but here, fixed responses can helpfully create certainty and the opportunity for repetition over time.

The narrative aspect of the liturgy also prompted people to articulate and commit to antiracist beliefs in preparation for the meeting time. The Prayer of St. Francis that Aviva selected for us to open the meeting is paradoxical, emphasizing requests for reversal. Aviva read the call: "Draw us into your love, Oh Lord." Then we all read in response:

*And deliver us from fear.  
 Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.  
 Where there is hatred, let me bring love;  
 where there is injury, pardon;  
 where there is doubt, faith;  
 where there is despair, hope;  
 where there is darkness, light;  
 where there is sadness, joy.*

In this excerpt, attendees' scripted responses commit them to counterintuitive, others-centered action: bringing love, pardon, faith, hope, light, and joy when it is least expected. The prayer goes on to give an explanation for seeking these reversals by reference to the ultimate Christian paradox: "for it is in giving that we receive; it is in pardoning that we are pardoned; it is in dying that we are born again to eternal life."

As the narrative opening for the meeting about race, these affirmations took on new meaning. Did the white participants *really* believe that they needed to "bring love"? Or that they needed to "pardon" or be pardoned? In the meeting, bringing love meant being quiet, as a small corrective to society's unequal racial treatment. The liturgy prompted people to acknowledge this interpretation of love and pardon, and enter into it during the main meeting time.

This meeting structure was memorable to those present, indicating that it led some people to ongoing responsiveness. Months later, in early 2016, Mark brought it up to me as an example of not having a savior mentality. He recalled the lunch as a time when "the people from First Church had the floor to talk, and we were just supposed to learn and listen. I think that was sort of like an exercise in showing humility, and you know, active—active demonstration that, we wanna walk the walk or something." Here he claims that (not) speaking is itself a kind of action ("showing humility," overall an "active demonstration") and names the fruit of rhetorical responsiveness ("learn and listen"). Similarly, more than a year after that, his wife Lena brought it up in a group as "the one where white people were not supposed to talk, and we said, 'We're just gonna sit.'" Notable in this recollection is Lena's inclusive "we said" that figures the effort as collaborative among all the white people. For Lena, liturgy and corresponding silence were not inert, but drew her in as a collaborator.

#### *Adaptation 2: Praying about race as a white person*

A second time that people from Second Pres adapted call-and-response for antiracist work involved speaking more fluidly about race. One finding in my research to that point was that many of the white participants were hesitant to talk about race, fearing that they would say the wrong thing. This analysis of liturgy especially attends to this possibility and how liturgy can help authorize certain speech, and do so at the right time.

In late 2016, a year after the interchurch meetings, Gwen, Lena, and I decided to get together several times to pray about race. Gwen was a trained "spiritual director" who met with people monthly to be a companion with them on their spiritual journey. At our first prayer meeting, Gwen guided our prayer through a liturgy she had curated, which she titled "Prayer Liturgy for Racial Reconciliation." Except for an unstructured section for "intercessory prayers," each section featured call-and-responses that were *fixed*, fully scripted specifically to race. For instance, in the prayer of confession the leader role articulated a set of truths (e.g. "You created us in divine likeness, diverse and

beautiful: In every person, every race is your image”), with everyone joining in to confess failure (e.g. “But too often we fail to recognize your image in all: Forgive us.”) Gwen’s liturgy was also *narrative*, moving from a call to worship, to a prayer of confession, to words of assurance, to a prayer of response, to intercessory prayers, to a closing prayer. (This usage of liturgy follows Haldeman in meaning any narrative progression of worship, rather than necessarily centering on Eucharist.) And, importantly for this usage, it was *communally authored*; Gwen included citations for the authors of the prayer of confession and the closing communal prayer. This authorized the prayers in a way that let us not have to worry about whether we as white people were saying things the “right” way.

In that first meeting, despite our “damned if you do, damned if you don’t” feeling of stuckness, the communally authored liturgy allowed our antiracist desire to take discursive shape, in that the call-and-response segments had us directly take up and affirm the words of people of color. Part of the closing prayer, for instance, had the leader initiate with a quote: “Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote: ‘The cross we bear precedes the crown we wear [...]’” The response, then, responded to this image: “Grant us the strength to bear whatever crosses are in our lives and the grace to know our losses, grief, and pain as part of the mystery of your love for us.” Here King’s words were an authorized template that structured the prayers of the white participants in our group. Our antiracism, then, was responsive to people of color.

The second meeting Gwen organized shows a more developed version of how communally authored and *seasonal* liturgy can scaffold people’s new speech. This meeting had a kairotic context: it took place in November 2016, only a few days after Trump had been elected over Hillary Clinton, which we all viewed with shock and dismay (although this shock can itself be critiqued as an outcome of white privilege [[@absurdistwords](#) “I’m Talking To You”]). Several people from Second Pres were in attendance and we had hoped that people from First Church would also attend. Gwen’s liturgy, then, was designed with the expectation that people from Second Pres would be praying about race as white people in an interracial setting.

In one section of this liturgy, one person would read a verse from Psalm 12, then after a pause, anyone could say a prayer. That is, the call was fixed and communally authored from the Bible, and people’s responses were spontaneous. This allowed more freedom than the first meeting, while giving people an authorized template on which to base their speech. In analyzing what people said, participants did base their prayers on the psalm’s language. For instance, Arianna was the leader for the seventh verse, reading out loud, “The LORD will keep the needy safe and will protect us forever from the wicked” (Ps 12:7). After a pause, Jane prayed by drawing on this language, adopting two positions. First, she prayed as someone who is wicked: “Just help us to see the wickedness in our own hearts.” Then she shifted to identify with the psalmist and ask God to protect “us,” with allusions to Trump: “Um, and I do pray that you would protect us from those who seek to harm, to create even more fear, and to stir up even more distrust.” That is, the personal address form of the psalm allowed for multiperspectival prayers that acknowledged both our antiracist failures and our efforts. Here, communally authored call-and-response provided Jane with a language to talk (about) race more fluidly than she might have otherwise.

The *seasonality* of Gwen’s liturgy also provided an opportunity for metadiscursive commentary on liturgical prayer and rhetorical responsiveness. Gwen hooked up a

speaker at the kitchen table where we were all seated in order to play a song for us to listen to, and she instructed us in what our silence during the song would be doing: “[The song’s] called Sacred Darkness, and I feel like our country’s in a dark time. So, it just talks about sitting in the darkness and learning from the darkness.” Liturgical silence is thus a “learning” opportunity. After the song, she elaborated on the connections between listening to God and listening to people of color. Like Aviva the year before, she admitted that as white people who want justice, “we do want to speak.” But she qualified this in light of how “the earth is still trembling from this earthquake” of the election. Ultimately, then, we should “be attentive to God and attentive to our sisters and brothers of color.” Here our willingness to be responsive through the liturgy is kairotic as well as spiritually and politically healing.

Overall, Aviva’s call-and-response drew on fixedness and narrative to help people be quiet, and Gwen adapted call-and-response with attention to its communally authored and seasonal attributes to help draw people into new speech that was about race and also was enacting responsiveness.

### Conclusion

Liturgy draws people in, giving them experience responding to a call in a way that prefigures and instantiates the Call from God and from others to step into what we have not yet known. That is, God’s call to people (and people of colors’ call to white Americans) demands that we change, and understanding/acting on that change requires a responsiveness-oriented rhetorical analysis of self-directed formation (being persuaded) as the humble counterpart to drawing others in (persuading others). By conceptualizing liturgy as call-and-response that is *fixed*, *communally authored*, and often *narrative* and *seasonal*, liturgy can be applied beyond a church setting (and perhaps even beyond a Christian setting). Liturgy can also be adapted to other areas where rhetorical responsiveness is in need, such as new antiracist discursive action. In two moments in a larger project, participants adapted liturgy to prepare themselves to listen (when culturally they might feel tempted to interject and be defensive), and to scaffold themselves into more fluid talk about race using authorized models. These showed the ways that fixedness, communal authoring, narration, and seasonality can all contribute to developing rhetorical responsiveness. By examining elements such as Christian liturgy that have unique origins in religious rhetoric, we can support people who want to grow in their rhetorical abilities.

Although this article takes a narrow view of liturgy as specialized call-and-response, a broad view of liturgy is helpful for suggesting directions for future research. For James K. A. Smith, liturgy is much broader than church-based call-and-response. Liturgy is habit—this is still about responsiveness, but conceived in terms of our responsiveness over time. In this view, non-religious activities like regularly going to the mall are just as liturgical as a church service because they form people, shaping them to be certain kinds of people (e.g. capitalistic, hungry for fashionable objects) who desire certain material things (e.g. a new sweater).<sup>4</sup> Smith applies liturgy to activities that seem

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<sup>4</sup> To emphasize this, Smith playfully uses religious terminology to re-read going to the mall. Buying a sweater is a “transformative experience.” The sweater is a “relic,” our payment a “sacrifice” and “donation,” and the design of it expresses the “colors and symbols of the saints and the season” (22). For his reading of who this shapes people to be, see the section “Worship at the Mall” (93-103). From a rhetorical perspective, Smith conflates what *can* be formative with what *is* formative, promoting an objectivistic analysis of how

disconnected from religious life because, in shaping our desires, any habit also shapes what/who we **love** (25), and thereby also what/who we **worship** (25). Liturgy, then, means a habit that should be evaluated.

Three insights for future research follow from this attention to liturgy and habit. First, the two *moments* of liturgical intervention in this study can be extended to help people develop a *lifestyle* of antiracist work. In Smith's understanding, the power of liturgy is not in forcing us to respond to an individual call, but in the patterns we develop over time in response to such calls. We can ask, then, how is liturgy in church under/re-writing whiteness, especially outside of church? And vice versa: are our work, family, and recreational habits likewise preparing us for church on Sunday? This suggests that we might design antiracist liturgical call-and-responses in and out of church in ways that are meant for repetition rather than one-off instantiation.

Second, research can continue to examine how rhetorical responsiveness is involved in changing our habits. For Smith, our habits are ontological: "That's the kind of animals we are, first and foremost: loving, desiring, affective, liturgical animals who, for the most part, don't inhabit the world as thinkers or cognitive machines" (34). Involved in this is a rejection of the idea that Christian faith is about simply cognitive belief; rather, "we pray *before* we believe" (34, emphasis in original). As liturgical animals, then, we are always engaged in liturgies (habits) of race. Rhetorically, what that does for us is call our bodies sites of persuasion. Changing our own habits—undoing the ways our bodies have been persuaded of certain ways of seeing, hearing, talking, avoiding—is rhetorical work. And examining people's responsiveness means attending to the practiced, embodied ways of moving through the world.

Consequently, and finally, responsiveness-oriented rhetorical analysis turns our attention to the agentive, active role that people can have in shaping their racial habits (both positively and negatively). For Smith, this means responsively directing our bodies and our actions toward God's redemption and liberation. Applied to antiracism, the task of developing responsiveness may give hope for people who have grown up embedded in white ways of knowing and acting.

Other extensions of this article's arguments are possible as well. Scholars of communication and religion can examine what other Christian practices besides liturgy have the possibility to add to rhetorical theory and practice. This would help move beyond a common deficit model of Christianity and rhetoric.

There may also be classroom implications for liturgy. However, people's choice to attend church or an antiracist activity is what makes the call that they hear one of peace and it is unclear to what degree students make a similar choice to be exposed. There may also be practical obstacles. For instance, one time during a classroom game that involved call-and-response, one of my students jokingly compared the activity to a cult. His comment seems to draw on the trope that liturgical call-and-response means abandoning critical thinking, an argument that this article is responding to at length. Future research and pedagogy can investigate how and to what extent we might use not-necessarily-religious liturgical call-and-response with our students.

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experiences shape people. A rhetorical view centered on people's responsiveness views this process with more mystery—i.e. as a contextual, unpredictable set of opportunities for people to be shaped; our response is in part a reflection of our rhetorical sophistication.

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