HDS 2412—Theologies of the Body
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On Ministry:

> No calling calleth for more abilities or a larger measure of humane knowledge than the ministry.
> — John Norton, New England, 1658[1]

Ministry can be a demanding profession. In some contexts, a single pastor is expected to deal not only with weekly preaching and the coordinating of worship, but also the faith formation of its members, including facilitating small group discussions on topics ranging from the Trinity to Communion to Baptism; from science and religion to immigration and refugee crises, Islam, Judaism, gender, sexuality, race, class, and disability—to name just a few topics a community might undertake. Then there are regular pastoral care visits—from siting with those who are spiritually and intellectually curious, to those needing marital counseling or dealing with an addiction, to the hospital bedside with a recovering or dying patient and their family. There are also the funerals and weddings, for those with whom you've formed a deep bond and those you've never known at all. And sometimes—more often than anyone would like—the pastor even becomes the plumber, fixing up small odds-and-ends around the aging church building. Pastoral ministry is varied and complex. Because it is often engaged in some of the most intimate aspects of people's lives, a theological poetics of embodied ministry is crucial.

People live and move and have their being in relation to images, stories, symbols, and concepts that permeate their minds and bodies, both consciously and, largely, unconsciously. Those that permeate the imagination and the perception of both pastors and church communities matter profoundly—they materialize in the embodied practice of ecclesial ministry, which further shape the bodies of pastors and those with whom they are in relation. Through boundless repetition they become habitual, "shaping knowledge about self and the world in ways that

[1] E. Brooks Holifield, *God's Ambassadors: A History of The Christian Clergy in America* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007), 54.

appear neutral, self-evident."[2] Such normalization effectively limits "the possibilities I can imagine and embody—constraining the ways I engage the world, enticing me to act in some ways and deterring me from others."[3] The preeminent symbol of the pastor since the early Christian church has been that of a "shepherd" who rules over, guides, serves, and tends "his" flock. This image comes from scriptural depictions both of God throughout the Old Testament and Jesus in the New Testament. "I am the good shepherd," Jesus says repeatedly in John 10. "I know my own and my own know me." "The shepherd of the sheep…calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. They will not follow a stranger…" (John 10:2–5, NRSV). This imagery, of course, did not appear *ex nihilo*; it permeated the ancient Israelite imagination of God and thus had deep valence for the early Christian community. Perhaps most famously within Christianity is the shepherd imagery of Psalm 23 (vv. 1–4):

> "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.
> He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters.
> He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.
> Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me." (KJV)

Unsurprisingly, in the Old Testament, it also not uncommon for sheep and shepherd to be used as symbols for the people Israel and their rulers. This imaginary has strong connections to the young David, a shepherd, who was chosen to rule over Israel, and the messianic hope for another King/Shepherd like David that developed throughout Second Temple Judaism. As Elizabeth Johnson has famously and incisively written: "The symbol of God functions."[4] We perceive and act within rigidly regulated systems of embodiment that compel particular

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[2] Mayra Rivera, *Poetics of the Flesh* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 139.
[3] Ibid., 143.
[4] Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad), 1992.

fabrications of, for example, gender and race, and punish others."[5] This is no less the case for the embodiment of ministry and ministers. The image of shepherd has deep ties to one who is set apart and above the flock as a ruler—even if a merciful and generous ruler. I don't necessarily wish to abolish the image of God as shepherd and those passages in Scripture that employ it from the Christian imagination. However, it is crucial to realize the implications and limits of our images of God, for our symbols of God make and unmake worlds. Indeed, the symbol of clergy as shepherds over flocks has been instrumental throughout Christian history.

This history cannot be illustrated without mentioning the influence of Gregory the Great, the reluctant 6th -7th century pope. In a treatise to a friend, John, the archbishop of Ravenna, Gregory explained his reluctance to accept becoming the bishop of Rome as being due to the burdensome office of ruling over the entire Church as the shepherd of the flock of God. The flock is to "follow the teaching and conduct of its shepherd," an immense responsibility, he wrote.[6] To be sure, the symbol contains aspects of love, mercy, and generosity. However, it is fundamentally conceived as one who is above, leading those below; it is a one-way transaction: the shepherd gives and the flock receives.

This treatise, published in English as *Pastoral Care*, but referred to by Gregory as *Liber Regulae Pastoralis*—the Book of Pastoral Rule—became widely distributed and influential among bishops—including secular clergy, where it even came to influence the political theory of the age. Shortly after it was written, the archbishop of Seville distributed it to all the churches of Spain.[7] By the close of the ninth century, King Alfred the Great had it translated into West Saxon. Hoping to initiate a reform of both clergy and laity, he sought to get a copy of this text, which he titled the *Shepherd's Book*, into the hands of every bishop in England. Even more, in

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[5] Rivera, *Poetics of the Flesh*, 143.

[6] St. Gregory the Great, *Pastoral Care*, trans. Henry Davis, Ancient Christian Writers, (New York: Newman Press), 48.

[7] Henry Davis, "Introduction," in St. Gregory the Great, *Pastoral Care*, Ancient Christian Writers (New York: Newman Press,), 10-11.

the ninth century Charlemagne made the study of *Pastoral Care* obligatory for all bishops.[8] It is not too bold a claim to say that through its influence on bishops and parish priests, Gregory's writing in *Pastoral Care* shaped the forming of nations. From the local congregation to the larger structuring of society, the image of the priest as a shepherd who rules over the souls of his flock shaped the individual and the social body.

For Gregory the association of shepherds as those who ruled over subjects as well as the animalization of these subjects goes much deeper. In a section entitled, "The Life of the Pastor," he writes:

> "[I]t is clear that nature brought forth all men in equality, while guilt has placed some below others…. This diversity…is a dispensation of divine judgment, much as one man must be ruled by another, since all men cannot be on an equal footing. Wherefore, all who are superiors …should find their joy not in ruling over men, but in helping them. For our ancient fathers are recorded to have been not kings of men, but shepherds of flocks. … *By nature a man is made superior to the beasts, but not to other men; it is, therefore, said to him that he is to be feared by beasts, but not by men*. … *Yet it is necessary that rulers should be feared by subjects, when they see that the latter do not fear God*. Lacking fear of God's judgments, these must at least fear sin out of human respect. It is not at all a case of exhibiting pride when superiors seek to inspire fear, whereby they do not seek personal glory, but the righteousness of their subjects. In fact, *in inspiring fear in those who lead evil lives, superiors lord it, as it were, over beasts, not over men, because, in so far as their subjects are beasts, they ought also to be subjugated by fear*."[9]

That is, having emphasized that all people, by nature, are equal in God's eyes, Gregory asserts that humans are lords over animals. Having solidified this hierarchical ontology, Gregory explains how a lack of proper fear of God on the part of the ruled subject, as determined by the ruler himself, effectively lowers a human subject to the level of the animal. In fact, subjects are in perpetual danger of falling down the ontological latter and becoming the sheep they symbolically already are. The theological symbolic structure is thus firmly set in place thereby ensuring a shepherd's orderly control of "his" flock.[10]

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[8] Ibid., 11.

[9] St. Gregory the Great, *Pastoral Care*, 60-61; emphasis mine.

[10] The emphasis with which I point out this language and division between the human and the animal in Gregory is underscored by Giorgio Agamben in *The Open: Man and Animal*, trans. Kevin Attell (Stanford, CA:

While the average pastor may not consciously or explicitly take their theology of this symbolic structure to the level that Gregory does, this hierarchical framework remains in many ways, at least unconsciously, in place. Ministers are still granted a certain level of institutional and cultural authority simply for occupying their position—a position that also grants them access to some of the most private and vulnerable spaces of people's lives.[11] As such, there remains a crucial need to check, balance, and expand the theological imagination regarding symbols of "the pastor." Since the symbol of God functions to shape the formation and practice of ministers and their relationships with their communities it is crucial to expand the imagination of what pastoral ministry is and how it may be embodied. In the remainder of this paper, I will focus on the image of midwifery—which appears in Scripture as a way of imagining God's ministrations to the people of Israel—as a way of re-conceiving pastoral ministry in particular and relationality more generally.[12]

Rupturing Symbols of God: God as Midwife in Isaiah 66 and Psalm 22

Divine Breath:
Each genesis daunts us;
Each sunrise rekindles us.
We cross thresholds into young stories.
One step brings hope, the other shouts doubt.
O God, midwife us into our beginnings.

Stanford University Press, 2004): "What is man, if he is always the place—and at the same time, the result—of ceaseless divisions and caesurae? It is more urgent to work on these divisions, to ask in what way—within man—has man been separated from non-man, and the animal from the human, than it is to take positions on the great issues, on so-called human rights and values. And perhaps even the most luminous sphere of our relations with the divine depends, in some way, on that darker one which separates us from the animal," 16. See especially chapter 9, "Anthropological Machine."

[11] While working in a hospital as a young, white, male chaplain covering a "general medical" unit, maternity and birthing units, and the adult psychiatry unit, I quickly learned that introducing myself as the chaplain either wrought such deep comfort that individuals whom I had never previously met—or had not visited more than once or twice before—would open up to me about some of the most intimate and personal details of their lives, or, my title would cause a similarly visceral reaction in the opposing direction followed by a quick dismissal of my presence.

[12] While it was not uncommon for prominent orthodox Christian theologians from the early church through medieval Christianity—such as Ambrose of Milan, Augustine, Gregory of Nyssa, and Bernard of Clairveaux, to name just a few—to speak of God in maternal terms, the imagery of God as midwife has largely been absent in the traditional Christian imagination.

We long for familiarities;
We recognize possibilities.
Rowing between tides of transformation
and resistance.
O God, midwife us into our beginnings.

Our roots stretch tender into this new soil;
Our fabrics are patterned with colored strands.
This unknown country will reveal itself
one heartbeat at a time.
O God, midwife us in all our beginnings.

—Keri Wehlander, "Beginnings"

As the prophetic book of Isaiah comes to a close, it returns to an image and a hope with which it began: "they will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain"—for before the people even call out, God will answer. God is thus described as one who is present, attentive, and available to God's people. After this statement, the poet-prophet bespeaks a radical reordering not just of Jerusalem but all of creation, a "newness [that] does not wait until the end, but according to the Isaiah tradition is being given all along the way."[13] For the Isaiah tradition, this newness is not a flight from reality into fantastical imagination. It is a future intimately tied to and flowing out of the past without being reduced to its mere repetition or confined to tamed notions of possibility. Indeed, the future is already present, in some small way; brokenness and wholeness are not cleanly separated with the latter superficially superseding the former, but intertwined, weaving a dynamic dialectic that refuses to be stilled. In a crucial moment, the poet-prophet, struggling with the limits of his received collective imagination, reaches for a new or nascent metaphor to describe the relationship between God and Israel that will bring about this newness: a God who acts as midwife:

> "Before she [Zion] was in labor
> she gave birth;
> before her pain came upon her
> she delivered a son.
> Who has heard of such a thing?
> Who has seen such things?
> Shall a land be born in one day?

[13] Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 40-66*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 250.

Shall a nation be delivered in one moment?
Yet as soon as Zion was in labor
she delivered her children.
Shall I open the womb and not deliver?
says the Lord;
shall I, the one who delivers, shut the womb?
says your God."

This God promises to send "peace [*shalom*] like a river" toward Zion so that her babies

"may nurse and be satisfied
from her consoling breast;
that [they] may drink deeply with delight
from her glorious bosom."

God's ministrations toward mother Zion and her vulnerable, nursing babes are like that of a midwife tending to a mother who quickly and unexpectedly found herself going from labor to delivery. "As any mother who has experienced the birth process can tell you," Nechama Rubinstein writes, "the transition from labor to delivery is always the most intense" part of the birthing process.[14] While Isaiah may seem on first glance to betray this reality, anesthetizing and idealizing women's bodies so as to create an image more comfortable for the patriarchal imagination ("before her pain came upon her, she delivered a son"), the metaphor may be more capacious after all. Contextually, this imagery of unanticipated delivery seems to refer to the way in which the Babylonian exile is unexpectedly brought to an in 539 BCE end and those carried off from their destroyed homeland are suddenly, through the decree of Persia's Cyrus the Great, the new imperial ruler, allowed to return home to Jerusalem. This excitement, however, is met by the difficult reality of rebuilding the Temple and society alongside those who had been left behind during the Babylonian exile. Isaiah's vision in chapter 66 and his image of God as midwifing Zion and her babies, therefore, emphatically depicts the vulnerable cry of a people and a land in a moment of social precarity. This vulnerability becomes clearer when the image is

[14] Nechama Rubinstein, "The Untold Story of the Hebrew Midwives and the Exodus," http://www.chabad.org/ theJewishWoman/article_cdo/aid/1465248/jewish/The-Untold-Story-of-the-Hebrew-Midwives-and-the-Exodus.htm, *Chabad.org*.

understood within its ancient context as a moment where the fragility of life—mother and child—is inescapably on display: life and death potentially gathered in the same sacred space. While the delivery happened quickly and unexpectedly, vulnerable Zion and her children need a God who can midwife them into this new and uncertain beginning; a God who tends attentively and nurturingly, birthing newness not simply as a teleological endpoint beyond vulnerability and hardship, but all along the way. As God's *ruach* hovered over the face of the deep and drew life from tehom's watery womb, so God is shown to work with us in the midst of chaos as vulnerable and fragile life is cooperatively delivered, drawn from the womb, and nurtured.[15] While this symbol remains underdeveloped throughout Scripture, the literality, singularity, precision and emphasis with which this poet-prophet chooses his words is undeniable.

God appears again as midwife in Psalm 22 where the psalmist cries out to God as one despised, mocked, and ridiculed by others and feeling deserted by God. In the depths of this agony, the psalmist clings to a God who "delivers" God's people. The vision is not one that denies, skirts around, or avoids pain and suffering. It is not a vision that seeks to anesthetize the body by making it lovely and romantic, but a vision that trusts out of its visceral, bodily depths—through personal experience and collective memory—the hands of one who has tenderly, through determined devotion, midwifed her utterly dependent and vulnerable body:

> "Yet it was you who took me from the womb;
> you kept me safe on my mother's breast.
> On you I was cast from my birth,

[15] This language of God drawing life out of chaos, which alludes to the creation story in Genesis 1, is further pointed to by L. Juliana M. Claassens in a comment on Psalm 71:6, which also uses the imagery of God as midwife drawing a baby from her mother's womb. In this verse, the important verb literally means "to cut off or sever," "suggesting," Claassen argues, "that God has 'cut' or 'severed' the infant from its mother's womb… [which] may explain the duties of a midwife who, in a situation where both mother and baby would otherwise die for certain, cuts open the mother's womb to free the baby. The reference to this harsh action captures the vulnerability of the speaker, who is in a life-threatening position." L. Juliana M. Claassens, *Mourner, Mother, Midwife: Reimagining God's Delivering Presence in the Old Testament* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), 75-76. Similarly, commenting on the psalmist's condition, James Crenshaw writes: "Trapped in the turbulent waters of the depths, the psalmist prays to be extracted from the jaws of death." James L. Crenshaw, "Life's Deepest Apprehension: Psalm 71," in James L. Crenshaw, *The Psalms: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eedrmans Publishing Co., 2001), 151, 153.

and since my mother bore me you have been my God.
Do not be far from me,
for trouble is near
and there is no one to help." (Psalm 22:9-10 NRSV)[16]

Especially in the ancient world, a midwife's skill and care could quite literally mean the difference between life and death for a mother and her baby.

This psalm and its imagery take on additional poignancy for Christians as its cry of desperation also appears on Jesus' parched lips as he breathes his last breaths, forsaken atop the place of the skull. I wonder why Jesus would have uttered these words—or, at least, why the writers of the Gospels of Matthew and Mark would have made sure to include them in their stories of Jesus' passion? Certainly, it is not hard to imagine that Jesus felt deserted: his closest friends and family had denied him, handed him over to the authorities, and deserted him. He was not just killed but humiliated in the process, made into a public spectacle, mocked, and cursed by the common passersby. Where was God in all of this? Perhaps flashing before Jesus' eyes in that moment was the same image of God that the psalmist had clung to: the God who had first drawn his fragile body from his mother's womb, cleaned him, and kept him safe upon his mother's breast. Perhaps on that god-forsaken hill, Jesus' cry of forsakenness also carried the plea: "Do not be far from me," o God, a plea for the only God that could make sense in such a moment: one who could midwife him through his final breaths of life and into that most uncertain of beginnings: death. While this symbol remains underdeveloped and in an embryonic state throughout the Bible, it is up to the living tradition to return to it, take it up, creatively reimagine it, deepen it and thereby enhance our capacity to relate and encounter not only God but also one another.

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[16] For a more detailed textual analysis of Psalm 22 and the place of the imagery of God as midwife in relation to other images of God's delivering presence, see L. Juliana M. Claassens, "Rupturing God-Language: The Metaphor of God as Midwife in Psalm 22," http://home.nwciowa.edu/wacome/ClaassensBakhtin2005.pdf.

Ministry as Midwifery

When the midwives Shifrah and Puah
Saved the children that Pharaoh ordered them to kill,
That was the beginning of the birth-time;
When Pharaoh's daughter joined with Miriam
To give a second birth to Moses from the waters,
She birthed herself anew into God's daughter, Bat-yah,
And our people turned to draw ourself toward life.
When God became our Midwife
And named us Her firstborn,
Though we were the smallest and youngest of the peoples,
The birthing began; When the waters of the Red Sea broke, We were delivered. So tonight it is our task to help the Midwife Who tonight is giving birth to two new peoples —
For tonight only Hagar can give a new birth to the children of Israel,
And only Sarah can give a new birth to the children of Ishmael.
Our lives are in each other's hands.
No Pharaoh can force us to kill.
—Rabbi Arthur Waskow, "The Passover of Peace: A Seder for the Children of Abraham, Hagar, and Sarah"[17]

In this paper, I have pointed to some of the onto(theo)logical underpinnings and disconcerting implications of the dominant symbol of the pastor as the shepherd over a flock. I have also opened up the possibility of imagining God's relation to creation—a creation marked by fragility, vulnerability, trauma, and uncertainty—as a midwife who tends to this space with graciousness, compassion and determined devotion. The God depicted above in Isaiah 66 and Psalm 22 is not a God who is separate from and above creation—like a ruler over "his" flock—but a God who is affected by the pathos and cry of Israel and creates newness in cooperation with mother and child. By looking to the image of midwifery, I am not attempting to merely reclaim a "feminine" image of God that is largely lost to the Christian imagination. Nor am I simply proposing "inclusive language," as if adding an "S" to the pronoun we use for God is the solution to our gender problems. Rather, as a pastor who is perceived and moves through the world as a cis-gender white Euro-American male, I am seeking to disrupt popular conceptions of (white) "masculinity," especially as it aligns with a position of institutional and cultural power,

[17] Arthur Waskow, "The Passover of Peace: A Seder for the Children of Abraham, Hagar, and Sarah," https://theshalomcenter.org/node/186. This poem forms part of an alternative "Seder for Peace" that "draws deeply on the Biblical and Quranic accounts of Hagar, Ishmael, Sarah, and Isaac, and includes as part of its 'Telling' eyewitness accounts of the sufferings of both Israelis and Palestinians, and their acts of peacemaking."

and thereby open it to alternative possibilities for embodiment and relationality. Masculinity has had and continues to have deep associations with the mind and rationality over-against the body, which is feminized and associated with the turbulence and unreliability of emotions. Therefore, I am explicitly seeking to reclaim the visceral image of midwifery simultaneously as a powerful conception of relationality and as a symbol that challenges, expands, deepens, and enhances the life-giving capacities of my particular embodiment of pastoral ministry as a white male. By exploring a poetics of ministry as midwifery, I am seeking not just to offer another symbol, but to use this symbol to both challenge and fundamentally reimagine the onto(theo)logical underpinnings of the minister and ministry. I do not, however, seek to make this symbol the One. Our images of God, ministry, and how we might relate must reflect the differences and different kinds of relations we enfold by likewise unfolding a multiplicity.

Life, one's own and collective life on earth at any given moment, is unavoidably, even if not solely, comprised of pain and loss, suffering and oppression. Creation is more fragile than we often like to admit, even if it is also more resilient than we typically recognize. As such, the church is in need of midwives who can offer steadfast companionship in the midst of the turbulence and uncertainty of the present moment, faithful and creative imagination to envision beyond it, and the capacity to empower communities in their becoming and bringing forth new life. The spirit of midwifery is neither solitary nor kept at arms length; it is messy, involved, and co-creative. It is less about mastery or perfection and more about partnership. While the midwife is present and supportive throughout the birthing process, the grueling labor is not hers to do. The goal is not bringing about the redemption or restoration of another's body but tending its needs, bearing witness to its struggle, and accompanying it along the way.

In a process where no single participant has total control, a midwife works cooperatively with one in labor and any other partners involved in the process. Together, they discern options,

possibilities, wishes, and needs. A midwife doesn't take the reigns of the process and lead the birthing mother from in front; a midwife comes alongside. Indeed, the word "midwife" literally means "woman-with," which provides a profoundly different beginning point than the shepherd who is conceived as the "ruler-over" or "man-apart." In midwifery, the relationship begins with an emphasis on the body and its needs, respecting boundaries, and listening to the input of the one undergoing labor. As my sister noted recently about the difference between her and her husband's relationship with their midwives versus medical doctors: "Relationship building is so different with a midwife. Instead of a 15-minute appointment with a doctor, our midwives regularly spend an hour with us. They also maintain a more holistic approach to the process, being concerned with both of our mental and emotional health." These concerns are understood as intimately connected to the embodied birthing experience, both prenatal and postpartum.

The transition from labor to delivery is often the most intense part of the birthing process. It is no wonder that when passages like Psalm 22 and Isaiah 66 use the explicit imagery of God as a midwife, it is at this point where the one giving birth feels most out of control, stuck, or afraid. As mentioned above, however, a midwife doesn't simply intervene in the process at this moment. Rather, because the midwife has been present throughout the entire gestational process—and perhaps for previous ones as well—there is a deep relationship grounded in trust and mutuality that helps one continue pushing through the pain, beyond what one feels they can endure, and what may well feel like an unending tunnel pressing in all around. Such a trust, like that which Sharon Betcher writes about, "is a way of abiding with our mortality, where sentience not only confirms the registration of pain, but bedews the body, baptizes it unto life." "Nothing can stabilize the risk in existence," she adds, yet "the equanimity of trust offers itself as wisdom for life. Trust offers proximity to divine potency, to the Spirit's presence to life."[18] Furthermore,

[18] Sharon V. Betcher, *Spirit and the Politics of Disablement* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2007), 204.

"Out of a more honest acquiescence with our sentient situation, we can reinstitute subjective economies that recognize that bodies have needs, that communities are woven together among people who need each other, that everyone has needs," not just specific communities whose bodies are uniquely associated with weakness and brokenness.[19] To be human as such is not to be an autonomous thinking individual; to be human is to belong to the web of creation; it is to be a part of communities wherein one finds oneself both in need and needed.

The ways that a relationality informed by the image of midwifery can differently shape the practice of pastoral ministry are myriad and deep. Ministers not only serve as midwives to the personal, but also to the social. Because they are welcomed into some of the most vulnerable and intimate spaces people inhabit, spaces that reveal the wounds that mark bodies and affect people's relations to the world around them, how pastors and societies imagine their role in that space matters profoundly—for it materializes in the interaction that takes place and further shapes flesh and bodies. The implications for the ways in which this image might differently shape the way and the process through which a minister writes liturgy, chooses music, preaches, and engages in broader social movements for equity and justice—that is, how one might shape and be shaped by the social flesh of the world—are profound.

Indeed, it would be misleading to speak of the sustained and faithful presence of a midwife as an individualized response of compassion and comfort. In Isaiah and Psalm 22, such presence has a liberating force. Like Shiphra and Puah whose actions were instrumental in the liberation of an entire people from bondage in Egypt (cf. Exod. 1:15-22), midwives also assist in birthing—bringing about the rebirth and renewal of—communities, nations, and the world. "God, prepare me to be a sanctuary," is the prayer of the pastor as midwife, as she struggles alongside others through moments of ecstatic joy and heartsick pain. Through such leadership,

[19] Ibid., 199.

the church offers a creation "groaning in labor pains" (Rom. 8:22) a uniquely holistic context in which to journey in beloved community through joys always tinged with loss and loss always tied to joy.

What the world needs, then, is not just ministers who can act as midwives, but entire communities of midwives—communities that are not ashamed of the body or repulsed by its needs, communities that tend like God the midwife to one another in their moments of deepest need and greatest joy. For, as Mayra Rivera writes:

> "Societies can strengthen or hinder our capacities to support each other's flourishing—affectively and carnally. The effects of the responses that others have to my body, and the responses that my body has to the other's reactions to my body, in turn affect my capacities to see, respond, and support others. … My capacity for empathy toward another human being echoes my own incarnation… These are capacities on which others depend for their ongoing incarnations."[20]

The capacity of such societies to strengthen the support of one another's flourishing lies in developing affirmative practices. As Rivera further writes, these practices "do not necessarily transform the operating norms of the broader society," *but* "it is hard to imagine the emergence of social movements without the communities that envisioned a different world in which their members could flourish." Similarly, while such affirmative practices do not protect us from the negative forces to which society differently subjects us, "the creative forces of affirmative practices may strengthen my capacities to survive negative forces, when possible, to analyze and challenge them, and to support the most vulnerable."[21] By ministering as midwives to those around us we are slowly disrupting imaginations, reconstructing life-enhancing possibilities for embodiment, and renewing creation. We are constituting "slow life" in defiance of the "slow death" of many dominant systems and ways of relating. Through the lived prayer "that our bodies may keep us open to others, to sense the entanglements of our carnal relations,"[22] and

[20] Rivera, *Poetics of the Flesh*, 146.
[21] Rivera, *Poetics of the Flesh*, 149.
[22] Ibid., 158.

facilitate the radically affirmative communities, we create fertile soils from which social movements may spring and be sustained. In this challenging, trans-generational endeavor: Blessed are the midwives, for they are drawing forth new life; where you find them, there, also, you shall find the *basileia* of God.