

Emma Batman

Judson Memorial Church- Belonging, Ambiguity & Legacy

“Looking at the intersection of spirituality, arts, and social justice. And within that intersection, attempting to figure out how to be better human beings in the world and how to be better spiritual beings in the world...as a minister of the church...I’ve never seen us not do that. Sometimes we do things that seem to have no faith component to it, sometimes we do things that seem to be all about art and really have no justice component, but because they are all happening in this one hub, I kind of view it all as making church.” –Rev. Micah Bucey

Judson Memorial Church was established in 1892 on the south side of Washington Square Park in New York City’s neighborhood of Greenwich Village. The church was built in an architectural style that mimicked the cultural and aesthetic traditions of the heavily Italian immigrant community of the village and initially offered services in Italian. Both external representations were established deliberately to appeal to the large Italian community. These efforts were ultimately unfruitful, especially with the establishment of a Catholic Church a few blocks away on Bleecker and Carmine (McFarland 2001), but despite its failure to pull the Italian community into the Protestant faith, Judson Church grew to be of central importance in the service of the immigrant community of Greenwich Village for decades to come.

Today, the church operates under the dual denomination of American Baptists & The United Church of Christ and continues to hold a central position in Greenwich Village. Judson has maintained, to a certain extent, its legacy as a center for social and political issues as well as artistic expression and the experimental and avant-garde. Utilizing perspectives and opinions expressed through interviews with the church leadership, as well as secular members of the church staff, this paper will present an examination and cursory analysis of the current policy structures and programmatic philosophies of Judson Memorial Church in New York City’s Greenwich Village. The introductory section will act to establish the history and legacy of Judson to illustrate in context, the direction and changes within the church over the past 10-15 years and the potential challenges, philosophical barriers and disagreements that the church is currently facing. Subsequent sections will analyze the role of ambiguity, belonging, and intentional exclusion within policy and programmatic structures. The paper will also include a small

amount of additional speculation regarding potential outcomes to be defined by future direction and policy choices. This speculative analysis will be informed both by the voices of those interviewed, and writings pertaining to organizational knowledge theory, creative placemaking and concepts of belonging. The main figures interviewed in the process of writing this paper include current Senior Minister of Judson, the Rev. Donna Schaper, current Minister (Minister of the Arts) the Rev. Micah Bucey, and House/Facilities Manager Zachary Mosely. Each participant offered open and honest reflections on Judson's historical legacy, contemporary challenges, and opinions on the future direction of the church.

To understand the gravity and context of Judson Church as an institution and organizational figure in the community, it is important to provide, an overview of some of the programs and initiatives that Judson has contributed to the community, most especially since the pastorship of Reverend Howard Moody in the 1960s.

To begin, the establishment of the Judson Health Clinic by Dr. Eleanor A. Campbell, appointed by then pastor Rev. Dr. A Ray Petty (Dickason and Dickason 2000, 59), demonstrates both the establishment of Judson's legacy of service but also the impressive progressive and humanist character that continues to define the church and congregation to this day. The health center grew out of its home in the church basement and in 1921 it was moved to Judson House, a property located around the corner from the main church on West 3rd Street. Here the center provided women's health care, child care, psychiatric care and more until 1950 when damage to the building led to its condemnation and demolition (Dickason and Dickason 2000, 90).

The resources that Judson provided to the community from its inception firmly established the church as a social-justice center with a focus on creating place for underrepresented and severely underserved members of the neighborhood. The legacy of Judson as a center for the arts and avant-

garde expression developed in the early 60s with the ministry of Howard Moody and the employment of Al Carmines and Bud Scott. After a few years of experimental and hit-or miss arts programming, the church established the Judson Poet's Theater in 1966 (Moody 2009). In his book *A Voice in the Village*, Moody describes the unique relationship between the church and creative expression of the Poet's Theater, writing that

While it is true that other off-off-Broadway theaters were located in church buildings, Judson Poets' Theater was fairly unique in its direct relation to staff and programs of the church... This meant that the artists, rather than being left to their own devices (what Sargeant called "a free-for-all of artistic egos"), had an oversight committee with a concern for Judson Poets' Theater itself. As Sargeant put it, "a community was present" (Moody 2009, 122).

This expressed concept of community, in direct relation to and partnership with secular artists, demonstrates the unique connection between the mission of the church as a religious institution and the undergirding priority of placemaking, expression, and belonging for these artists. Even prior to the Poet's Theater, Judson had already contributed significantly to the artistic landscape of the time as the home of the Judson Dance Theater, a group of dance-makers and artists that defined, in many ways, the birth and direction of post-modern dance in America. Judson's relationship to the art-makers, received great attention and some scandal when two members, Yvonne Rainer and Robert Morris, performed their duet *Waterman Switch* in the nude. *The New York Times* review of the work ran the next day under the headline "Dance Program Offers Two Nudes" (Glueck 1965, 27), a headline which caught much attention from regional Baptist churches throughout the country. Al Carmines responded to the outcry in a letter:.

Somehow, we must be able to say to and with him, "God cares that you are who you are, that you are an artist, a creator." And one way we can say this is by saying, "...Here is our space—fill it with your creation because we believe your creation is not just some appurtenance of you but is you"... Are we as the church to say to him, "Stifle those questions if you want to be accepted here, buddy"? This is what Broadway and Hollywood are saying in a different way all the time. Are we just the theological version of the establishment? Must we also say to him, "Fit in or be damned! "? Can we not

rejoice that someone cares enough to question—indeed to blaspheme? (Moody 2009, 132).

It is this legacy of the arts and social justice at Judson that color any contemporary examinations of Judson as an institution and any discussion of current policy choices and direction. The topic warrants a volume in and of itself to outline all of the work that has happened in and around Judson both in connection to the arts and social justice. Howard Moody's efforts with women's health, abortion counseling, gay rights and the civil rights movement, all culminate into an almost oppressively impressive legacy (Moody 2009). It was the work of Howard Moody over these decades that solidified what Rev. Micah Bucey refers to as the "three legs of the Judson stool": Spirituality, Arts, Justice.

Ambiguity:

The charter of Judson, which was written around or about 1893, was described by Senior Minister Donna Schaper as "extremely minimalist...which basically says to proclaim Jesus." Reverend Schaper continued to describe the different interpretations of that charter over the decades, specifying that while she doesn't feel the verb "proclaim" to be appropriate for the contemporary work of the church, she instead offered the words "model" or "imitate" as more reflective of current approaches to fulfilling the church mission. In Howard Moody's book, he does reference an extremely brief moment where a committee of members put together a more codified covenant to be recited by the congregation. He writes that,

The reaction of the congregation was one of great ambivalence...there was still that abiding conviction that no expression of words, creedal or confessional, could define the beliefs of this company of believers and non-believers, either collectively or individually. It quickly became clear that making this covenant a part of the worshiping life of our people would be more divisive than unifying (Moody 2009, 35).

There is a common theme of intentional ambiguity expressed by Rev. Moody in the above reflection and even more so in Rev. Schaper's description of the interpretations of the very broad church charter.

While many religious institutions mold the structure of their congregation and worship practice into

repeated and specific rituals, it seems as if the mere hint of codified practice was disconcerting to the congregation of Judson. If one takes this ambiguity as an intentional precept of the church, then it should be reflected in ministerial and secular decisions regarding programming, projects and policies overall. We see elements of this idea in conversation with Rev. Micah Bucey regarding the current curation and platform for arts creation and workshops in the space:

At Judson the clarification is that yes, *I* think there is something spiritual and sacred happening because I am a *Minister of It*. But I don't need the content of the art to have an overtly religious theme, in fact I prefer that it not... when you have art that is coming at it from the side, that is actually just telling a story, we approach it and consider that story sacred, even if it's not an overtly sacred story... [The art] doesn't immediately say: 'you're experiencing this because we've decided that it is important, or [because it] celebrates religion' and I think that it leaves the interpretation more open, which I believe is more transformative.

Clive Gray writes in the article *Ambiguity and Cultural Policy* that “ambiguity as a matter of structural conditioning can be seen to arise in conditions where the degree of complexity that exists establishes circumstances where the creation of ambiguous policies is the only effective means to achieve any meaningful output” (Gray 2015, 6). As touched on briefly in the introduction, one of the challenges that faces Judson is not only about the future of the church, but about quantifying and qualifying the work that the church does to present the structures and mission to potential funders, donors, and congregants. This becomes a challenge when the organization lacks a codified mission or clean lines surrounding programming and practice. Gray argues that ambiguity, when recognized and utilized correctly, can be used as a tool for progress and collaboration, as well as a framework for describing and discussing policy decisions. However, Rev. Bucey discusses the problem of approaching funders with a “Look at all of the things that are happening here, in this space!” approach, but has not yet tied it to the challenge of embracing ambiguity as an intentional decision and policy. Gray suggests that “policy-makers may find that the production of an ambiguous policy would at least demonstrate a willingness to do *something* – even if nobody is entirely clear what that something is or should be (Gray 2015, 7). In Rev. Bucey's estimation, there is a lack of clarity in Judson's programming and space use

programs: “We need to show who comes into the space for several years in order to say to funders: ‘Look what happens here’...if we’re saying sometimes this group comes in and they pay what they can, and then this other group comes in and pays \$5000/ week- I think it’s information that doesn’t read. It’s inconsistent.” However, Gray may argue that ambiguity, when framed with intention, can in fact become a somewhat specific policy choice in and of itself. It is worth speculating that Judson is currently *unintentionally* ambiguous in the hodge-podge of rental and programmatic structures but seems very clearly *intentional* in its approach to openness and belonging through an ambiguous mission and definition of “what church is.” One challenge, therefore, may be in unifying these ambiguities into full intentionality versus accidental ones.

Intentional ambiguity as a policy and approach position, begins then to tie into heavier theories of organizational knowledge—how an organization learns and grows and develops. Ikujiro Nonaka examines organizational knowledge in part by looking at what he describes as “chaos” and “discontinuity” as a creative force that contributes to innovations, and the establishment of practical approaches that work within and throughout the community, providing continuity to its systems (Nonaka 1994). We will return to Nonaka later as the concepts are meaningful when looking at organizational analysis and potential avenues for development and restructuring or progress.

Belonging:

A connection emerges here between this idea of ambiguity and the concept of belonging. While many churches will project an inclusive ‘All are Welcome’ proclamation into the surrounding ether, it is rarely the case that membership and belonging to any structure come free of expectations or requirements. In this way, Judson is not so different. What *is* different about Judson, is that they are most interested in those who will not or have not found belonging elsewhere and are far *less* interested in those who are either part of the current hegemonic structures or can ‘fit in’ and find their own place

among the mainstream. In this way, as Rev. Schaper expressed it to me, Republicans (she made an exception for 'Rockefeller Republicans') would not find belonging—the interpretation there being that the foundational ideology of progressive and leftist thinking and the protection of space for the underrepresented or 'other' are paramount over considerations of universal acceptance and inclusivity.

Peter Block, in his book *Community: The structure of belonging*, offers one definition of belonging “as a longing to be. Being is our capacity to find our deeper purpose in all that we do. It is the capacity to be present and to discover our authenticity and whole selves. This is often thought of as an individual capacity, but it is also a community capacity” (Block 2009, xviii). Similarly, in a lecture from Roberto Bedoya on Creative Placemaking and Placekeeping he talks of the role of arts in belonging and also the concept of a civic and cultural “we” which he defines, not as the plural of I, but as the larger creation, through arts and other modalities, to a collective and unifying sense of belonging and place (Bedoya, 2004; Bedoya 2017). In this way, both Block and Bedoya speak of belonging not as contingent on or synonymous with a universal concept of inclusion, but rather as closely tied to shared ideology and the communal creation of a cultural identity. The United Church of Christ proclaims that “No matter who you are or where you are in life’s journey you are welcome here.” According to Rev. Schaper, that phrase “really means the more trouble you’re in, the more we want you to know that you could find a way in here.” This interpretation differs a bit from a fully inclusive statement of welcome. Bedoya connects the concepts of belonging with the cultural ‘we’ and also the larger anthropological and sociological concept of the social imaginary. This latter concept is generally explained based on the imagined ways in which cultures and communities build connections, commonalities and meanings from their lives. John Thompson wrote that “the imaginary accounts for the orientation of social institutions, for the constitution of motives and needs, for the existence of symbolism, tradition, and myth” (Thompson 1982, 664). While Bedoya’s work points to the arts as a tool for the broadening of the social imaginary through the development of a collective identity that pulls away from overtly commodified or

individualized value systems, Rev. Schaper's assertion that Judson is able to do the work that they do precisely because of what she refers to as a "*passive exclusion*," is not actually in conflict with or counter to Bedoya's calling for a broadening of existing systems. Bedoya asserts that it is through specifically focused projects and initiatives that identity and belonging are created in order to "build the commons...to engage in the life of the Civic We. Whether accidental or deliberate, these kinds of arts practice are critical to creating a sense of belonging" (Bedoya 2017). While Bedoya is speaking here of arts placemaking in particular, his concepts are applicable to ideas of belonging in a much broader sense.

Belonging in this way, for both Rev. Schaper and Rev. Bucey becomes contingent on providing safe spaces for artistic creation, and also for individual, *otherness* belonging. So, if, as Al Carmines expressed, the goal is to be *other* than the 'theological version of the establishment," there must be a counter-hegemonic aspect to the work of the institution, which arguably requires some of Rev. Schaper's *passive exclusion*.

Explicit Exclusion

It's worth introducing here, "the constitutive outside," a concept based in post-modern deconstructionism (always a messy terrain to enter) which is relevant to arguments in favor of specific and intentional levels of exclusion in relation to achieving belonging within a system or organization such as Judson. The idea hinges on a belief that "every inclusive 'we' must *exclude* a 'they' in order to exist" (Purcell 2009, 153). While this paper does not seek to engage in a deeper epistemological argument on this point, it is a valid perspective for the purposes of this conversation. When one acknowledges the existence of power and hegemonic structures, arguments for total and unapologetic *inclusion* come into question, especially if an organization's mission is tied to placemaking for the other and those who have been *excluded* in traditional structures. The counter-hegemony then becomes reliant on excluding to some degree, the contributors to the status quo, otherwise the space of safety

and freedom becomes constricted. Mark Purcell writes on this topic in the context of neoliberalization and argues that “agreement is not a successful neutralization of power or an intersubjective discovery of a creative win-win solution, however much advocates wish it (and narrate it) to be so” (Purcell 2009, 152). This is not only relevant to the choices of Judson in terms of the political leanings or individuals who find space and belonging within that community but is also relevant to the engagement and curation of the arts within the space. Admittedly, this becomes quite complicated in the context of current monetary and mission-based goals, which we will touch on a little later, but there is precedent for *not* participating in arts-based project dating back to Howard Moody’s time as pastor in which the church did not participate in a Village arts festival because, as Moody explained it, in “its level of consistent mediocrity it represents all that has oppressed and stifled the artists of this community rather than new and exciting ways of visual and technical artistry” (Moody 2009, 138). Similarly, Rev. Schaper told of a decision made not to continue a long-term theater rental to a production that in her words was too “plebeian” and “mainstream” which ultimately acted as a disqualifier despite the lucrative opportunity that the rental would have been.

Nadia Lovell writes of emplacement in relation to belonging, meaning the structure and/or physical space which allows for or creates a feeling of belonging. She states, “belonging to a place is viewed as instrumental in creating collective identities... they centre on how notions and feelings of collective belonging are mobilized at particular times, and on the instrumentality of such feelings in making explicit particular aspects of collective identities” (Lovell 1998, 12-13). It is the collective identity that is very much based in ideology which makes aspects of intentional and *passive exclusion* inevitable, and indeed as Rev. Schaper conveys, necessary. “We could have a daycare center, a senior center here. We could do those traditional things, but we don’t want to because we feel like 95% of the churches do that. There ought to be a place that welcomes people who aren’t going to be welcomed in those places. So, there is a sly curation towards not doing the things other people do.” In this way, belonging and safe

spaces are reliant on doing *other* than the status quo in a “sly” (to use Rev. Schaper’s word) counter-hegemony which at its nature requires the exclusion of members of the power structures that create *dis*-belonging in more traditional or establishment-driven spaces.

Changes in Economic and Programmatic Structures

The leaders and community of the church have not been without a level of discord and disagreement regarding curation of events in the space. This tension became especially prevalent in 2011 when the Gym (the space used by Judson Dance Theater, Poets theater and other artists over the years) was converted into an off-Broadway grade theater space, capable of staging full scale and high-quality theater productions. It was at that time that a separation was formalized (intentionally or not) between mission-based artistic work and commercial, income-driven space rentals. This is arguably at the center of Rev. Bucey’s discomfort with the inconsistent presentation of space use at the church. Curation for the Gym is handled quite exclusively in a secular sense and managed by the church administrator and space coordinator. While Rev. Schaper said that the church in general is lucky to have enough space inquiries as to be able, in many cases, to turn away groups that are mission-light, or significantly consumer-driven (Donna gave the example of liquor companies requesting space use for promotional events). She also was forthcoming in her speculation that if Judson did *not* have the high volume of requests, they would likely rent to whomever requested the space, relatively regardless of church mission.

In an attempt to balance the financially driven space rental needs of the church with the mission-based values of the organization, Donna formed a committee in the early years of her tenure, the results of which was the adoption of a written policy which is summarized as “Maximize Mission, Maximize Money.” The practical adoption of this policy means that every three months, Rev. Schaper reviews the groups that have been using the space, looking at who was turned away and whether they are on track to meet their annual rental revenue of \$300k/annually. She then makes recommendations

based on that history, to either focus more on money-driven rentals, or mission driven opportunities to grant space use and access.

In conversations with Rev. Bucey, it is apparent that this approach of relying on commercial space rentals for the budgeted income creates an inconsistency, in his view, within the organizational structure and also presents a confusing model to present to potential funders. Judson Arts Wednesdays (JAW), is the contemporary iteration of the legacy programming in the vein of Al Carmines and Howard Moody. Wednesday nights have been held for mission-based and clerically curated arts programming (meaning the GYM space is dark on these nights—an accommodation that was fought for in the early days of the GYM's makeover in 2011-2012). These performances are always presented free of charge, open to all, and typically include a free food element. Rev. Bucey argues that if Judson were to present this type of programming on a consistent basis and fully commit to free or heavily subsidized space offerings, that funding from other sources which Judson has struggled to secure in the past, would become attainable and ultimately replace the commercial income generated through Rev. Schaper's 'maximize money' concept. Both Rev. Schaper and Rev. Bucey acknowledge that creating a more profitable system of income for the church has inherently affected the culture and legacy of the organization. For Rev. Schaper it is a necessary aspect of ensuring the church not only survives but thrives-she is clear in her desire that Judson not stay small, but that the programs and footprint of Judson grow. Rev. Bucey expresses deeper concern for the identity of Judson itself in relation to these choices, asking larger questions about the line between the real economic concerns of financial solvency and the threat of evolving away from the free-space, avant-garde legacy into the mainstream of space rentals and commercial bookings.

Zachary Mosely, the House and Facilities Manager of the space and one of the secular members of the administration, spoke to the above point in the specific context of the conversion of the gym space: "Conversation of the gym confuses everything." He spoke of his ideal approach of programming

at the church as a “community structured space.” He used the example of wedding rentals, which the church never does with few exceptions to integral members of the community, staff, or congregation. “[It] has to have a certain amount of balance,” Mosely said. “People want to pay an extraordinary amount for Judson to have weddings and if we spent our time renting for fancy weddings, it would no longer be a community modeled space because the enterprise of weddings would disproportionately structure the use of space. You can’t let one voice, or activity, or genre monopolize the ecosystem. It has to balance.” He went on to express, in his view, the challenge in the current programming structures of Judson as to being stuck in a middle zone—a space that doesn’t rent enough to make a profit but doesn’t subsidize enough to be unique. Mosely speaks specifically of the challenges of running a space that, in many ways operates as an arts venue with dozens of programs and performances per month but is running structurally and philosophically as a church.

Churches hire people who know how to run churches...they’re stewards who have an authentic traditional faith practice and they have to let this secular space happen around it. But stewards don’t know how to run an arts and culture center and once that swarm of activity [gets] going on you have all [of these] logistics but the staffs are stripped down. Whenever a homeless person comes in during an activity you can’t just throw them out and get back to business, you have to work with them the way a church does. You have to meet the criteria for secular values and then exceed it.

Conclusion

The balance that Mosely speaks of above, does not feel disconnected from Rev. Schaper’s “Maximize Mission, Maximize Money” philosophy, and from our conversation, the assessments that she does on space rentals seem to be an attempt to maintain that balance. However, the ways in which the church creates a sense of belonging, decisions about inclusion vs exclusion, and the role of ambiguity as intentional vs. a problem to be rectified have not been adequately fleshed out amongst church leadership and administrative staff members. Ultimately, there seems to be a level of epistemological and philosophical differences amongst members of the power structure within the church. It is fair to view this as the natural, internal counter-hegemony that develops with the establishment of leadership

and organizational structures in all realms and environments. It is a struggle that most likely exhibits a healthy ecosystem to the level that dialogue and difference of opinion is clearly alive and well. It does leave to be determined the future programmatic, policy-driven and value determinations of the church.

To return briefly to Nonaka's writings on organizational knowledge, he writes that "A failure to build a dialogue between tacit and explicit knowledge can cause problems. A lack of commitment and neglect of the personal meaning of knowledge might mean that pure combination becomes a superficial interpretation of existing knowledge which has little to do with here-and-now reality" (Nonaka 1994, 20). From my conversations with Rev. Bucey, Rev. Schaper and Mr. Mosely, each of them demonstrate a level of the type of dialogue that Nonaka refers to here. From these three members of the church's organizational structure, each has a unique exposure to different elements and responsibilities within Judson. The resulting question however, is whether these conversations are being heard *within* those structures, and whether on all sides there are adequate challenges and considerations offered to each viewpoint and experience.

By its nature, there is no way to succinctly or summarily close the topic of this paper in a tidy or satisfying way. The reality is that the institution carries a strong and impressive legacy. In this examination, there has not even been time committed to current social and political programs such as the New Sanctuary Coalition which is housed out of the Judson offices and is one of the driving organizations behind immigration activism and support networks in the city, the founders of which have been systematically targeted by federal offices. Nor has it acknowledged the work that the congregation and community do for LGBTQ rights and visibility, Black Lives Matter, Occupy, sex workers, and more. However, an attempt has been made to peek, however shallowly, at some of the connections between the church's current policies, future potentials, and contemporary conversations and theories surrounding these topics.

Therefore, to conclude, I will offer two quotes, one from my conversation with Zachary Mosely, and the other from Rev. Micah Bucey. While also not providing any clear or concrete recommendation for the future of Judson, or the specific direction into which the church should focus—they each offer a unique perspective that encapsulates the conflict and challenges that face the institution both from the perspective of identity and also future policy.

“The Gym is the wedding business, it is an anchor that is dragging the place down. Once you have golden goose enterprise it becomes difficult to dislodge it from the institution because all of the financial planning is attached to that and it’s like pulling a knife out of your chest because you’ll bleed out.” -Zachary Mosely

“We’re in a different kind of spiritual awakening and I think it is inter-spiritual, I think it is larger than Christianity. But I think that Judson- in the way that it’s been forever- is primed to find itself squarely within that current groundswell...We need to figure out a way to speak the language of this new movement...and right now we’re not. Right now, we’re in this zone where we are still struggling to keep church alive, and maybe we need to die a little bit.”- Rev. Micah Bucey

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