



## Chapter 2

### God

*We believe in one living God who meets us in the testimony of Israel, is revealed in Jesus Christ, and moves through all creation as the Holy Spirit. We affirm the Trinity—God who is a community of three persons. All things that exist owe their being to God: mystery beyond understanding and love beyond imagination. This God alone is worthy of our worship.*

#### Introduction

From beginning to end, our Christian faith centers on the inexhaustible mystery of God. Human beings in every age have caught hints of this mystery: in the glories of nature and the depths of experience. But the church confesses God's existence and nature first by means of scripture's witness. God's self-revelation as affirmed by the testimony of the Hebrew Scriptures and the witness of the New Testament to Jesus Christ is where Christian theology starts. These same scriptures speak of God as Spirit, active in nature, history, and human experience. Thus, as we turn to the sacred story to begin our reflections on the church's faith, we find the mystery that confronts, calls, and transforms us is a threefold reality: God, Christ, Spirit.

The Basic Beliefs statement is a confession of faith. To "confess" in this sense is to declare something that one holds to be true. The church in this statement is proclaiming that in which it has placed its corporate trust. Faith, both in the biblical tradition and in our experience, is not what is popularly called "blind faith": a naïve belief in impossible things without evidence. Nor is faith about doggedly holding a list of obscure

ideas otherwise irrelevant to life. Rather, “to believe,” as the statement uses the term, means to entrust ourselves to One who has invited us and awakened in us that trust. We believe in God because, to use the imagery of twentieth-century theologian Paul Tillich, we have been grasped by that which is Ultimate. Or in the words of contemporary theologian John Haught, when we say we believe in God, we are pointing to what lies beyond and within human experiences of depth, future, freedom, beauty, and truth.<sup>1</sup>

More specifically, Christian faith is born in us as we find ourselves grasped by the message about Jesus Christ in such a way that we “believe into” this story and “into him.” Theology is the attempt to explain both how we have come to entrust ourselves to God so revealed, and what our faith in this God entails.

God is known through what God does. The Bible tells stories about those who met God through various events and experiences. They came to know something of God’s nature from God’s actions, and so do we. When we confess our faith in a living God, we mean that God is always acting, always present, always seeking the best for the world. A story from the book of Exodus portrays God as the One who causes to be (Exodus 3:1–15). Where there was nothing now there is something. In other words, God’s good, creative work is always to make space for what is other. This gift of life preconditions all other gifts. God creates, and creation is a gift.

Creation is a language that only God can speak. To create, in the sense that many biblical texts intend, is an act of divine freedom. God wills something other than God to be. All that is receives its being from God’s own goodness and wisdom. The creation is the theater of God’s glory, the place where God is at work. We should therefore delight in the beauty and goodness of the world. That is because the good creation displays God’s sustaining and transforming purpose: “[persons] are, that they might have joy” (II Nephi 1:115).

God lovingly upholds the unfolding creation in time and space. When some theologians refer to God as the “ground of existence,” they partly mean that all that is depends on something deeper than itself for its being. This ordered existence is for good and productive ends (Acts 17:28, Colossians 1:17, Hebrews 1:3). God guides the creation in providential care. And yet within the good creation, suffering and injustice still abound. The church’s faith and experience of God affirm that this is not

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<sup>1</sup> John F. Haught, *What Is God? How to Think about the Divine* (New York: Paulist, 1986), 1–10.

God's will. Our hope, grounded in the story of Jesus, insists that God will ultimately overcome suffering, sin, and evil. The God who creates also works to heal and transform. The church believes this because in Christ and by the Holy Spirit we experience God as both a "mystery beyond understanding" but at the same time as intimately close to us.

In love God seeks our response, encouraging and motivating us to embrace the divine vision of a renewed creation. God saves! As our true source, center, and end, God takes the initiative in loving us and redirecting our lives toward this goal: "When the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us..." (Titus 3:4, 5). By the presence and activity of the Holy Spirit God continually acts in all creation, moving us to seek what Jesus called "the reign of God."

The church is called to think about what it proclaims. This is the task of theology. Part of this task is to make clear what the Christian faith means when it speaks of "God." To be faithful to its story, the church must describe in its own terms its particular experience of God. In our contemporary world speaking of God has for many reasons become problematic. Part of this difficulty is the fault of Christians themselves. Many Christians have developed uncritical or authoritarian habits of the mind: they try to impose answers on others without careful thought or compassionate listening. Others are overwhelmed by the problems of massive suffering and the apparent dominance of evil in so many places. Still others associate the God Christians speak of with hatred, intolerance, and oppression. So, the church must keep asking: who is the God we speak of and how should the community of faith worship and proclaim this God in a struggling world? These questions demand careful consideration. Daniel L. Migliore has written:

While it is true that everyone begins an inquiry about the reality and identity of God with some prior ideas or unexpressed assumptions, a Christian theology should not uncritically adopt these often general and inchoate notions about God and should certainly not attempt to make them normative. Christian faith and theology do not speak of God in a general and indefinite way; they speak of God concretely and specifically.<sup>2</sup>

Images of God have great power to enhance or distort life. The church must therefore be deeply thoughtful whenever it speaks of God.

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<sup>2</sup> Daniel L. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co, 2014), 68.

## Biblical Foundations

Both the Bible and the long traditions of the Christian church speak of God as “the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.” This brief phrase declares something vital about God’s nature and identity. God is triune: “God in three persons, blessed trinity,” as the hymn<sup>3</sup> goes, conveying that the one God’s very being is to exist in an eternal threefold unity.

Affirming that God is a trinity of persons<sup>4</sup> is at the heart of Christian experience. The four Gospels of the New Testament all speak of God in this way. Centuries of Christian experience affirm that the church ever encounters God *in Christ by* the Holy Spirit. Indeed, we also baptize in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The triunity of God is not an afterthought; it is central to the story we proclaim.

God’s essence is infinite and beyond human understanding. So, the doctrine of the Trinity places us before the depth of the divine mystery. However, we indeed glimpse this mystery in the witness of scripture, and it is scripture that first gives us God’s name as “Father, Son, and Spirit.” This name points to the inexpressible love of God which the first disciples experienced in Jesus’ words and actions. It points to the one whose power the early church celebrated in worship. It also identifies the source of their profound experience of community. That is why the Apostle Paul blessed the Corinthian church with these words: “the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you” (2 Corinthians 13:13).

Some dismiss belief in the Trinity as empty opinion or speculation. But this position ignores an understanding of God that originates from and is consistent with an informed reading of scripture. “The doctrine of the Trinity is the church’s effort to give coherent expression to this mystery of God’s free grace announced in the gospel and experienced in Christian faith.”<sup>5</sup>

The doctrine of the Trinity does not come from a few biblical proof texts.<sup>6</sup> Rather, it arises from careful attention to a much larger pattern in

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<sup>3</sup> See the last line of “Holy, Holy, Holy! Lord God Almighty,” *Community of Christ Sings* (Independence, MO: Herald Publishing House, 2013), hymn 52.

<sup>4</sup> More will be said later in this chapter about the term “person” referring to the Trinity.

<sup>5</sup> Migliore, 69.

<sup>6</sup> “Proof texts” are individual passages of scripture used without regard for their literary or historical contexts or intended meaning as evidence for an argument or idea. Though popular in some forms of Christianity, this approach to the Bible is deficient in many ways, including its disregard for the fact that the Bible is a library of books, whose authors wrote not passages but works of literature.

the Old and New Testaments (as well as the Book of Mormon and Doctrine and Covenants). The Scriptures do not speak of three gods, but of the one God's three eternal ways of being. Scripture points to God's creative and reconciling activity in the world in Jesus Christ and speaks of how God brings into being a new creation by the power of the Holy Spirit. Scripture never treats believing in Christ or experiencing the Holy Spirit as anything other than an experience of God. In the language of Paul, by baptism the Holy Spirit joins us to Christ's Body. We are thence united to Christ and receive adoption as children of God (Galatians 4:4-7). This sums up God's renewing work in the world. God—Christ—Spirit: this is the consistent witness of the New Testament (2 Corinthians 5:18-20; 2 Corinthians 13:13; Romans 5:1-5; Ephesians 1:3-14; Revelation 1:4-6).

Passages associated with worship and prayer also express the early church's growing understanding of God's triunity (Romans 8:9-30 and Galatians 4:4-7). In prayer, the Spirit unites Christians with Christ and draws them ever deeper into the life of God. In mission the church then becomes the means God uses to extend the love of Jesus by the power of the Spirit for the sake of the world.

"Father—Son—Spirit": mutuality is God's very nature. Community of Christ's faith in this God of love known through Jesus and experienced in the Spirit is founded on the witness of our scriptures. In the sacred story we encounter God the eternal community of three persons.

### **Tradition**

The belief that the one God exists as Eternal Source, as Living Word, and as Life-giving Spirit seems obscure to many people. Yet it sums up the distinctive Christian experience of God. As Augustine (a North African theologian from the fourth to fifth centuries) knew, the church must speak about the Trinity, not because we are able fully to comprehend what we perceive, but because we cannot keep silent on the heart of our faith.<sup>7</sup> With Augustine and centuries of Christian witnesses, we simply do our best to understand and express the mystery that continually transforms us.

Most Christians meet the language of the Trinity in baptism. As mentioned earlier, Christians are baptized in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (Matthew 28:19; Doctrine and Covenants 17:21c). This formula has been integral to baptism since the first century. But the ancient church had to answer a question its culture raised: how can you

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<sup>7</sup> Augustine of Hippo, "On the Trinity," I, 2, 3, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 1, III, 18.

still believe in one God when you think of Father, Son, and Spirit as each divine? Does that not mean you worship three gods? It took time for the church to find language adequate enough to express its faith in one God in three co-equal persons. The most important events in this journey of understanding were two church councils held in the fourth century. The first was the Council of Nicaea in 325 C.E. and the second was the Council of Constantinople in 381 C.E. The statements of faith these two councils created remain standards of reference for the global Christian community to this day. These councils affirmed that Christians believe in one eternal God, whose singular nature is to exist eternally as Father, Son, and Spirit. As Gregory of Nazianzus (a great ancient theologian) wrote, "When I say God, I mean Father, Son and Holy Ghost."<sup>8</sup> Father, Son, and Spirit are the way that God is God.

The term "person" when used in trinitarian language has a distinctive meaning. Unfortunately, in many modern cultures, "person" has come to mean an isolated individual, disconnected and independent from other individuals. That understanding does not apply well to what Christian faith means when it speaks of God in three persons. "Person" in a trinitarian context refers to the three eternal distinctions in God's one nature. To use the traditional language, "Father," "Son," and "Spirit" names the real, substantial diversity within the all-embracing unity of God's being. "Person" refers here to the "other in relationship to": God the Source, God the Creative Word, and God the Life-giving Spirit.<sup>9</sup> The relations are real, not stage-play or mere masks, or human perceptions. God is ever Godself three ways, as the theologian Karl Barth remarked. The persons of the tri-personal God are what they are always in relation to one another. One crucial and much-needed lesson trinitarian language about persons can teach us is that personhood exists always in the form of relationships. This insight was one of the great theological breakthroughs of the Creed of Constantinople in 381, mentioned above, and especially in the rich theological and spiritual reflection that surrounded it.

Community of Christ does not officially use these creeds. But these traditions still inform us today. We remain committed to the doctrine of God they affirm. As early as 1833 Joseph Smith Jr. declared that the "Father, Son, and Holy Ghost are one God, infinite and eternal, without end" (Doctrine and Covenants 17.5h). More recently our 1968 statement of

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<sup>8</sup>Gregory Nazianzen, "Oration 38," *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 2, VII, 347.

<sup>9</sup> See Leonardo Boff, *Holy Trinity, Perfect Community*, trans. Phillip Berryman (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2000), 32–35.

faith borrowed language from the Nicene Creed to make clear that our church aligns with other Christian churches in our belief in the Trinity. That statement held: “We believe in Jesus Christ, the Only Begotten Son of God, who is from everlasting to everlasting; through whom all things were made; who is God in the flesh, being incarnate by the Holy Spirit for the salvation of all humankind.”<sup>10</sup> Our current Basic Beliefs Statement also makes this amply clear. The doctrine of the Trinity summarizes what is most essential in the Christian tradition: who God is for us.

As noted earlier, the doctrine of the Trinity has roots in Christian experience. It emerged from the lived experience of early Christian communities, as believers thought about how their encounter with Jesus of Nazareth and the Holy Spirit related to their belief in the one God of the Hebrew Bible. Jesus, they knew, did not merely teach about God. Rather, he struck them as intimately connected to the God of whom he spoke. Indeed, they addressed both Jesus and the Holy Spirit (see 2 Corinthians 3) with the same title they used for God: “Lord.” In this way the earliest church expressed its faith that God was present in Jesus’ ministry in the fullest possible way. In Jesus Christ they experienced not just a prophet pointing to God, but one who was *God with us*. From the first Christian communities onward, the church encountered the real presence of God in Jesus. Therefore, over the centuries Christian tradition has consistently held that Jesus is not just “part” of God, or similar to God, but is in the fullest sense “true God”<sup>11</sup> (John 17:3; I John 5:20; Revelation 3:7; see also Mosiah 8:28–35).

The mystery of God’s nature as Trinity is beyond the comprehension of our limited reason. It stretches our imagination and our language. For example, we use the traditional term “person” for Father, Son, and Spirit. But we do not mean three isolated individuals, two of whom are “male,” nor do we mean three separate divine beings. Christian theology at its best has always known that the images of “Father” and “Son” were analogies, and not literal descriptions. Further, following centuries of Christian tradition and reflection, we use “person” to express that while God is one essence, God’s essence is always to exist in three distinct ways. God, according to the tradition always is the Father, always is the Son, and always is the Holy Spirit. God does not cease being the

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<sup>10</sup> Alan D. Tyree, ed., *Exploring the Faith*, rev. ed. (Independence, MO: Herald House, 1987), 28. For the earlier version of the same affirmation, see *Exploring the Faith* (Independence, MO: Herald House, 1970), 30.

<sup>11</sup> Irenaeus, “Against Heresies,” III. 9, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, III, 422.

Father when God is the Son,<sup>12</sup> nor are these distinctions temporary roles. This mystery of God's triunity challenges surface comprehension but is not beyond the ken of our spiritual experience or the power of poetry to express its deep truth. In the words of Ruth Duck's hymn, "Womb of Life and Source of Being":

Mother, Brother, holy Partner; Father, Spirit, Only Son:

we would praise your name forever, one-in-three, and three-in-one.

We would share your life, your passion, share your word of world made new,  
ever singing, ever praising, one with all, and one with you.<sup>13</sup>

In Christ we know a God who loves and accepts us and indwells the totality of creation. By the Spirit we find divine power to live out this love and acceptance in new ways we couldn't have imagined. And yet there is a unity to these experiences so that we can properly say of each of them, God has encountered us. As we both listen to tradition and think about our present experience of God, we continue to affirm the Trinity—God who is a community of three persons.

The doctrine of the Trinity includes two very important aspects: unity and distinction. God is one eternal essence in three distinct ways of being. The Son is nothing less than the eternal God<sup>14</sup> (Mosiah 8:28–31). The Spirit as Lord serves the mission of the Son on behalf of God the Source (John 16:13, 14). God's personal revelation in Christ shows that there is distinction in God between the Sender and the Sent.<sup>15</sup> At the same time, what is known in Christ is not less than God's very own self. The three are one God; the one God exists in a threefold way. Throughout the history of the church, Christian teaching has thus found trinitarian language necessary for expressing the distinctive understanding of Christian monotheism.

### **Application for Discipleship**

Believing in God as Trinity, far from being speculation, is central to the experience of Christian faith. This belief remains pivotal to ecumenical relationships among Christian churches. And personally, we regularly touch the reality of the Trinity in our daily Christian lives. When we pray to God in the name of Jesus for guidance from the Spirit, we are offering a trinitarian prayer. When a scripture or a sermon moves our hearts or

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<sup>12</sup> Dionysius, "Against the Sabellians," *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, VII, 365, 366.

<sup>13</sup> *Community of Christ Sings* (Independence, MO: Herald Publishing House, 2013), 62.

<sup>14</sup> Hilary of Poitiers, *Trinity IX 39, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 2, IX, 168.

<sup>15</sup> Augustine of Hippo, "On the Trinity," 1, 11–13, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 1 III, 29–36.

minds, the threefold reality of God–Spirit–Word is present. We sing this doctrine in hymns and campfire songs. Our communion prayers<sup>16</sup> remind us of it. Trinitarian language naturally appears when we celebrate other sacraments, too. We also encounter the Trinity in the traditions of spiritual practice we rely on. In the simple joys of Christian community—for example, potlucks, camps, conferences, and retreats—we know the Holy Spirit as God present in Christ’s body. Our convictions about unity in diversity and the blessings of community are grounded in God’s own communal being. The doctrine of the Trinity turns out to be very practical and much closer to our actual practice than we usually imagine. Indeed, it is indispensable to the church.

The Trinity communicates the distinctively Christian understanding of God. However, all our knowledge of God is expressed in human language. This implies many limitations, as noted above. The contemporary church has become aware that an exclusive use of masculine language for God limits God and makes God inaccessible to many people. Traditional trinitarian language—Father, Son, and Spirit—raises important questions about whether this male imagery is adequate. To avoid the problems, should we speak of God in impersonal metaphors? Or should we speak of the Spirit in language that is feminine? Can we use masculine and feminine images for each member of the Trinity? How do we preserve the vital theological claims connected to the doctrine of the Trinity, but not be imprisoned by only one set of metaphors for God? These and other questions abound.

Recognizing that scripture depicts God with a diversity of images, including as both mother and father, can help. Sometimes scripture portrays God as a father who cares and protects his chosen people (1 Chronicles 22:10; Psalms 103:13; Matthew 6:6–9) but also as a mother who gives birth to, feeds, and comforts her children (Isaiah 49:15; 66:12–13). In Matthew’s Gospel Jesus describes himself as acting on behalf of God to gather the people like a hen would gather her brood of chicks under her wings (Matthew 23:37). Further, we enter the reign of God by being born of the Spirit, which is suggestive of a woman’s labor during the process of childbirth (John 3:5–6). And the Hebrew text of the first creation story in

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<sup>16</sup> Doctrine and Covenants 17:22d, 23b. Also see *Community of Christ Sings* (front).

Genesis imagines the *ruach* (wind or Spirit) of God as a mother bird hovering over its nest (Genesis 1:2).<sup>17</sup>

Traditional language can still provide an important baseline for speaking of the Trinity. At the same time new images, particularly images born of the Judeo-Christian tradition, can complement rather than replace the traditional trinitarian language. Our language about God should increasingly reflect the shared life of the persons of the Trinity who live mutually together in eternal co-unity of the divine being.

Our language about God should work to affirm this relational character of God's life. The inner divine life is social. The three persons of the Trinity coexist in an eternal communion of love, which some ancient theologians thought of as a kind of dance.<sup>18</sup> This relationship establishes their personal identity. From the perspective of our faith, God is therefore the source and energy for community among humankind. When we seek the reign of God, which Jesus preached, and when we struggle to create a community that reflects the mutual love of God's own being, we are living in alignment with God's nature.

The Trinity of love stands in opposition to isolation, selfishness, conflict, violence, and death-dealing imperialism. To believe in God is to speak of the Eternal One, Maker of Heaven and earth, the Source and Center of all that is, the Origin of all things. To speak of this God, as our Basic Beliefs do, is to believe in an eternal community of persons concerned about a just sharing of the resources of creation and about relationships that actively seek the flourishing of all life. To speak of God–Christ–Spirit is to affirm that the divine life is in essence self-giving and always seeks to make space for the other. As feminist theologian Elizabeth Johnson so beautifully states it, "Speaking about the Trinity expresses belief in one God who is not a solitary God but a communion in love marked by overflowing life."<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Genesis 1:2 uses the Hebrew verb רָחַף (*raḥaf*), which can mean to "hover over" (as in Deuteronomy 32:11: "As an eagle stirs up its nest, and hovers over its young...." See Frances Brown, S.R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1979), s.v. רָחַף, 934.

<sup>18</sup> The Greek technical term for this inter-relationality was *perichōrēsis*, which literally conveys the image of partners in an interweaving dance step. For a recent hymn that uses this image, see Mary Louise Bringle's "The Play of the Godhead," *Community of Christ Sings*, 56.

<sup>19</sup> Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 222.

Triune love is divine vulnerability on behalf of the whole creation. The life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ decisively reveal this boundless, vulnerable love. The church looks to the triune God as the eternal source of compassion and generosity, the source and center of all love and life and truth. As our belief statement affirms, "All things that exist owe their being to God: mystery beyond understanding and love beyond imagination. This God alone is worthy of our worship."

### **Conclusion**

"Be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us" (Ephesians 5:1–2). How we imagine God shapes how we live. It makes a difference to believe in God as an eternal communion of mutuality and love: as Source, Living Word, and Life-giving Spirit. If we live and act from this faith, our communities may become havens of inclusion and mercy. We will not only sing "For everyone born, a place at the table" (*Community of Christ Sings*, 285) but also work to realize this vision, because it reflects what Christian faith can imagine as God's own nature. We will support those causes that uphold the dignity of all persons and speak out against any forces that oppose Jesus' vision of God's reign. We will treat all of creation with reverence in recognition of God's limitless generosity. We will recognize that God, whose nature is love, calls us to reflect divine love in all our relationships. Above all, we will embrace life in Christian community as the place where "the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit" are especially at work (2 Corinthians 13:13). In this way our faith in God will bear fruit in the world for the establishment of shalom.

### **For Further Reading**

Leonardo Boff, *Holy Trinity, Perfect Community*, trans. Phillip Berryman (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2000).

Douglas John Hall, *Professing the Faith: Christian Theology in a North American Context* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993).

Bradley C. Hanson, *Introduction to Christian Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1997), chapter 2: "God," 19–42.

John F. Haught: *What Is God? How to Think about the Divine* (New York: Paulist, 1986).

- Peter C. Hodgson, *Winds of the Spirit: A Constructive Christian Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994), chapter 11: "The Triune Figuration of God: The One Who Loves in Freedom," 151–72.
- Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1992).
- Daniel L. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 2014), chapter 4: "The Triune God," 66–95.
- William C. Placher and Derek R. Nelson, *A History of Christian Theology*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 2013).
- Nicole Slee, *Faith and Feminism: An Introduction to Christian Feminist Theology* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2003).

### **Testimony by Larry McGuire**

She often came into the activities and services late and always wrestling with her two small children. People offered to help her with the children but the kids were not very willing to be far from their mother. She looked exhausted most of the time but did her best to be engaged with the activities in classes and worship.

During one of the worship services, we were invited to share in groups of three about a hymn text that we felt reflected our journey with God. She was part of my group and listened to what was being shared about the hymn I selected, "The Love of God," number 210 in *Community of Christ Sings*. The hymn reflects what I want to believe about God; however, my experience was often different. My experience has been more of a disruptive and unsettling God, a God that I want to keep contained in a box that I can control. But God continues to push beyond the confines of my box. I noticed tears began to roll down her face and she simply nodded her head in agreement. As she shared about her hymn, she asked us the question: "How do I know I can trust what God is nudging me to do?"

After the worship was over, she asked if she could talk with me. I sat and listened to her story of her journey of faith and how she was wrestling with decisions to leave her community of faith and join

Community of Christ. Her question kept coming to my mind as she shared her journey: "How do I know I can trust what God is nudging me to do?" As I listened, I kept remembering about my grandfather's car and the compass that was mounted on the dash. He always trusted the compass was pointing him in the correct direction even as he made turns and changes in direction.

I offered my prayerful support for her journey and bore my testimony that there were times I didn't trust my compass but that it wasn't because God wasn't present. I shared that I needed to keep asking, "Am I pointing myself in what I sense through the Spirit to be the right direction?" "Am I continually orienting myself toward God?" Those are compass questions and they are grounded in my belief that God is always present even when I wasn't trusting the compass.

As we closed our conversation, she shared her appreciation for the opportunity to ask questions and explore what it means to follow God even when you aren't sure where you are being led. She closed by saying, "I know what I'm being asked to do so I will trust where I'm being led." She left that experience and two days later sent me a text that she had decided to join Community of Christ.

"We long for freedom where our truest being is given hope and courage to unfold. We seek in freedom space and scope for dreaming, and look for ground where trees and plants can grow" (stanza 2, "The Love of God," by Fred Kaan, *Community of Christ Sings*, 210). God's presence was made real in the simple phrases of a hymn and the affirmation that you can trust the compass of God's love even when you do not know where it will lead.

### **Spiritual Practice: Exploring God Images**

Spend time journaling or prayerfully reflecting: When you think of God, what image comes to mind? (Perhaps this is the image you use most frequently when you address God in prayer.) How has this image helped you grow in your relationship with God? How might this image be restricting God's invitation to continue to grow in relationship?

Practice writing a prayer to a different image of God than what you normally would use. Allow an image to emerge that is calling to you, or consider the following list:

- Creator/Creating God (Genesis 1:1, 26)
- Divine Breath (Job 27:3, 33:4; Isaiah 30:33, 40:7)
- Source of Life (1 Corinthians 1:30)

- Liberator (Isaiah 49:9, 61:1; Luke 4:18–19)
- Darkness (Isaiah 45:3)
- Light (Psalms 27:1; Isaiah 60:20; John 1:5)
- Love (1 John 4:8)
- Silence (1 Kings 19:12)
- Hiddenness (1 Corinthians 2:7)
- Rock (Genesis 49:24; Deuteronomy 32:15; 2 Samuel 22:2–3)
- Holy One (1 Samuel 2:2)
- Life-Giving God (Job 33:4; Psalms 119:154, 156; 1 Timothy 6:13)
- Eternal Presence (Psalms 139)
- I AM (Exodus 3:13–14)
- Searcher of Hearts (Psalm 139:1; 1 Chronicles 28:9; Romans 8:27; Revelation 2:23)
- Anchor (Hebrews 6:19)
- Fountain, Water of Life (Jeremiah 17:13; Revelation 21:6)
- Wisdom (Proverbs 3, 8; 1 Corinthians 2:6–8)
- Reconciler (Colossians 1:20; 2 Corinthians 5:18)
- Sustainer (Psalms 55:22; 1 Corinthians 1:8)

What was your experience of exploring a different image of God in prayer? How is the God beyond all images inviting you to continue to grow in relationship?

### **Questions for Reflection and Discussion**

1. How has this chapter helped you better understand the three persons of the Trinity? What examples can you give of how you have experienced each person in your life journey?
2. What descriptive words do you find most meaningful to apply to God?
3. In what aspects of creation do you find God the creator most meaningfully manifest?