

Gather at the River by Lori Stewart

August 2023

The Mississippi River has a captivating mythology that brought together Biblical water imagery and our DOTAC gathering within blocks of that mighty river in Minneapolis. Our first liturgical action of the event invited us to name Biblical water stories and to dip our hands in a bowl of water as a remembrance of our baptism. As members of the family of God and of diakonia we said, “By water and the Spirit, we are called, claimed, and commissioned.”

Two themes flowed through the DOTAC Gathering for me.

One was connection with diaconal community. The table groups helped begin the process of getting to know more about the expressions of diaconal service in different traditions. It also helped break the ice and open up ways to engage in conversation with one another. Here were a few people that I knew and could talk to easily outside of the meeting space.

- Cindy shared a powerful land acknowledgement on the first night. When I asked her about it, she told me about a process for writing personal land acknowledgements presented by the Minnesota Hopeful Earthkeepers [<https://mnsource.org/2023/03/30/transformational-journey-towards-land-acknowledgement-agreements/>]
- Jessica told of recently leaving an organization where she was involved in environmental activism. We talked more over lunch about how she felt burned out and needed a time of healing before taking on anything new.
- Eliakao, an ecumenical visitor from Kenya, sat beside me. She shared how her Heart to Heart ministry to children was struggling after losing a large funder. It matters because she, like these children, came from the slums and she knows how important education is for improving their opportunities.

Of course there were opportunities to meet and share with old friends and DUCC members too—one of the benefits of having attended diaconal gatherings before.

The second theme was Lament and Joy. Joe Davis spoke twice [<https://www.joedavispoetry.com/>]. He names himself an *apocaloptimist*, which he says means he “knows the world is ending but we are going to be all right”. He spoke to us about the “*struggle bus*” naming all the things that are going on in the world that we lament. But he reminded us that a deep capacity to feel sorrow deepens our capacity to feel joy. Joe invited us to seek joy as a radical practice in the midst of struggle. The two are not mutually exclusive.

I found this theme through the whole week. We reflected on struggle and joy as we created an art piece together led by Angela Two Stars [<http://www.angelatwostars.com/index.html>]. Heart and tear drop shapes became a river full of our heart's longings/laments and tears of joy.

This theme emerged in our site visits to George Floyd's memorial where community members met us and told how they had organized in the wake of his death. With some DUCC members we walked the "cemetery" where cardboard tombstones recorded people who had died at the hands of police. It was a moving lament as we said the names out loud.

I visited San Pablo/St. Paul's, a Lutheran church in an area of Minneapolis with a large Mexican immigrant population. Pastor Hierald and Pastor Christine shared some of the laments for their community and how the church is actively engaged with people in the neighbourhood, particularly through arts programming to promote belonging.

Bible Study was offered two times. Each time we reflected on Psalm 46 and looked at the same pictures taken by photojournalists of news stories. The first time focused on lament and the second time, on joy. "God is our refuge and strength. As we encounter huge challenges—pandemic, war, poverty, gender and racial discrimination, modern slavery, our global village groaning with the threat of climate change—You are a God who is with us to provide ways forward." (The Most Rev Dr Winston Halpue, WCC)

As we gathered at the river, we lamented what is wrong in our world, claimed healing for our planet, and its inhabitants, and moved toward holy joy in our work for justice.

- *Reflection by Lori Stewart*