

THE INTERSECTIONAL PULPIT: HOW RACE, GENDER, SEXUAL
ORIENTATION, ECONOMICS, AND ABILITY SHAPE THE
CHRISTOLOGY OF UNITED CHURCH CLERGY—
A QUALITATIVE STUDY

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Introduction

No one does theology in a vacuum. Our convictions are deeply influenced by the intersections of race, gender, sexuality, age, class, and ability. Just so the life experiences and contexts of United Church of Canada (UCC) clergy shape how they do theology and where and how they have understood God to be present in their lives. This paper draws on my qualitative doctoral study, in which I examined the Christology of UCC clergy ordained between 2000 and 2020.¹ Acknowledging that all theology is inherently subjective, this paper employs an intersectional approach. Accordingly, it rejects single-axis thinking, recognizing that life is inherently complex and messy and that people often occupy multiple positions simultaneously.² For example, one can be oppressed in one way and privileged in another.³

1. Macgregor, "How the Story of Jesus Is Aiding This Generation of UCC Clergy."

2. In this regard, Intersectionality is a very helpful tool. As Roberts ("I'm with Her") writes, "It interrogates how multiple structures of domination may be functioning within institutions and the persons affected by them."

3. Even Jesus, a Galilean Jew from the lowest socio-economic stratum, was aware of his own privilege as a man, as demonstrated in his dealings with a Syrophenician/Canaanite woman (Mark 7:24–30; Matt 15:21–28) (see Choi, "Case for Intersectional Theology," 80).

As an example, when I come into the theological sphere, I do so as an able-bodied, white, heterosexual, educated Canadian woman, who enjoys a steady source of income. While I have definitely experienced sexism in the church and now confront ageism on a more regular basis, I also derive a certain amount of respect based on the fact that I am a member of the ordained clergy. I therefore carry certain advantages that many immigrants, Indigenous people, people of colour, or low-income women do not. Moreover, I have never been bullied because of my sexual orientation or stopped and searched because of the colour of my skin. The fact that I was able to take the time to pursue a PhD is also a privilege denied to many who are just trying to survive. While these intersecting identities provide me with considerable privileges, they come with both advantages and disadvantages.⁴

The participants in this study⁵ (who are named here according to their chosen pseudonyms) were initially exposed to a Western colonial image of Jesus as a Caucasian male.⁶ In every case, this image was later deconstructed through diverse cultural exposure and graduate theological studies in post-colonial theory. Their experiences highlight that individuals can simultaneously hold positions of privilege and marginalization, underscoring the val-

4. To illustrate from my own life, there was a time when I suffered sexual harassment during the candidacy process. Moreover, I know for a fact that I have occasionally lost out on certain ministry positions because of my gender and, more recently, because of my age. But I also know that there was a time when I was hired over colleagues who were gay, just because I had a husband and four children. Thus, I have experienced both deep discrimination and enormous privilege.

5. In keeping with the Ethics Clearance received through Wilfrid Laurier University Research Ethics Board, participants were assured orally and in writing that “every effort will be made to maintain your confidentiality.” In addition, I shared orally and in writing, “While I may use some quotations from our interview, I will not use your name. Any identifying information will be disguised in order to protect your anonymity.”

6. This is what I describe as a kind of Nordic Ken doll image of Jesus with long hair and dressed in the garb of Woodstock.

ue of an intersectional theology that honours diverse ways of being and knowing.⁷

In what follows, I look at the stories of three clergy whose biographies show in clear relief the extent to which the intersections of their lives have made a difference to their Christology. The life of each individual has been privileged in a number of ways, especially through education; however, each has also known the deep suffering and pain born of patriarchy, racism, homophobia, and mentalism.⁸

Holy Strength: Erasing our Smiles

“Holy Strength” is the pseudonym for the first participant with whom I spoke. Her story details the steep, complex hurdles facing women in ministry within Southeast Asia, as well as the unique struggles Asian ministers encounter in Canada. She is very clear that Southeast Asian women’s life experience is one of *han*, which is defined as a profound, “unjust suffering,” or a “deep piercing of the heart” triggered by systemic inequality.⁹ She says that the resentment, indignation, sense of defeat, resignation, and nothingness in *han* make many Southeast Asian women “brokenhearted and physically sick.” This describes the profound sadness and suffering I sensed in Holy Strength during our in-person interview, both in terms of what she said and her body language.

Growing up as the fourth and youngest daughter in a family of five, Holy Strength says that she “was really loved” by her parents. The family enjoyed a comfortable, middle-class life where the importance of education was stressed. That said, the culture of her home was very different from that of her first

7. Kim and Shaw, *Intersectional Theology*, 43.

8. While qualitative findings are not generalizable, they are nevertheless valuable. By focusing on in-depth, nuanced, and subjective data, they provide rich, contextual descriptions that quantitative research is unable to provide. They therefore offer significant insights into contemporary ministerial experience. See Myers, “Qualitative Research.”

9. Kim and Shaw, *Intersectional Theology*, 35.

church. Rooted in the hierarchal teachings of Confucianism, with its focus on obedience to one's elders, she felt that there was less freedom to be who she really was. "At home, I must behave. At church I can breathe! I can say many things!" Confucianism, notes Holy Strength, is fiercely patriarchal with rigid social hierarchies in the family and in society at large. Children are to honour and obey their parents, especially their father who oversees them and his wife.

Holy Strength notes that being a girl in a Korean family was complex for her.¹⁰ Women, she says, need to be able to navigate heavy burdens. They are often expected to manage all the household chores on top of outside employment, while the men are normally waited upon at home. These additional demands form a "double shift" that many Korean women navigate daily.¹¹

These demands could include care of one's in-laws, especially if one was married to the eldest son. In a funeral eulogy for an elderly Korean woman in her Canadian Korean congregation, Holy Strength highlights these extra demands. Describing the deceased wife, she notes that this woman "was so brave to become a wife of the first son who had eight younger siblings." Holy Strength viewed this as a testament to both the wife's courage and her profound love for husband. It was simply expected that she would see to her husband's every need, including the needs of his parents and the wider family. Her own needs came last.

Alas, this hierarchal structure came to dominate Holy Strength's later experience of church as well. Whereas her early memories of Sunday School were filled with "smiles," the "freedom to talk" and be oneself, and "warmth and kindness," the Southeast Asian church that she later sought to serve as an adult was filled with misogyny. While excelling at her studies and earning high praise from her professors, she nevertheless encountered a great deal of sexism in her home country. After serving successfully for a few years in a congregation where she was called to plant a children's ministry, she realized that she would always be limited in what she could accomplish in that suffocat-

10. See Kim and Shaw, *Intersectional Theology*, 24.

11. See Kim and Shaw, *Intersectional Theology*, 24.

ing environment. She says, “I really couldn’t survive there because all of them, the ministers, were male . . . I was the only woman in the office” among “six male colleagues. It was hell!”

Men held all leadership and decision-making power while women were frequently restricted to roles seen as “supportive” or “nurturing,” such as children’s ministry or women’s fellowship groups. This systemic sexism was reinforced by a patriarchal theology that exclusively utilized masculine language for God.

The challenge of living and working in a patriarchal system is something that Holy Strength has wrestled with for many years. Informed by this struggle, her Christology emphasizes that Christians should utilize the full range of biblical names and metaphors for Jesus in the New Testament rather than restricting themselves solely to male imagery. To use only male images, she says, leads to the “distortion of the symbol of Christ” and “legitimizes hierarchical relationships in the church.”

When Holy Strength left Southeast Asia to pursue her studies and vocation in ministry, first in the US and then in Canada, she did so in the belief that she would find a church home and educational opportunities where she would be free. This did not happen. Now another “ism” raised its ugly head—racism. She says,

I came to Canada to live in liberty. I want to find healing. That’s the reason I came to Canada. And now I realized what really happened in this land and then what you are doing here. I truly understand residential schools and what happened. Maybe it’s not the same as what I experienced, but the spirit could be the same. So, those kinds of experiences totally and permanently change who I am. In Southeast Asia, because of my gender, my sexuality, because I’m a woman, I suffered. I was suffering out of sexism, but I am in the middle class and then upper class. I graduated from very prestigious schools in my academic degrees . . . In Canadian society, my unique experiences totally made me different.

Holy Strength talks about the discrimination she suffered while serving in UCC pastoral charges, and how people in her congregations were always trying to change her accent or send her for English language lessons. She notes that her ministry colleagues were competitive rather than supportive. She also de-

scribes a profound sense of betrayal after her work was allegedly plagiarized at a United Church theological college.

So deep has her suffering been that Holy Strength compares it to Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Survivors of PTSD often find it difficult to talk about what they have been through. They experience problems with trust, closeness, and communication. For Holy Strength, the suffering she has endured in her new home has left her feeling confused, deeply wounded, and unable to trust others. She says, “I really did not know what is going on in terms of racial discrimination before I came to North America. And now I realize people are dying and this is actual toxic discrimination . . . [which] is killing people. It is erasing our smiles.” The agony she sustained even obstructed her ability to breathe.¹² “What they did to me and what I have experienced in [the] United Church of Canada and the institutions and the churches” makes her realize that it is only because of God that she has been able to survive.

In the face of this world which has erased so many smiles through discrimination and oppression, Holy Strength draws sustenance from the Jesus she meets in the Gospels. In Luke, she encounters Jesus as a “very strong healer . . . he is not so much masculine but very soft and very tender and embracing people who are weak and ill, and even whoever has been very aggressive to him.” This Jesus she describes by words like “kindness, tenderness, and soft attitude . . . His behaviours and then his actions are very meek but very strong and very healing.” From John 15 where Jesus calls his disciples “friends,” she has discovered Jesus who “is a very good friend for me” and says that “even though I am alone, I believe Jesus is always with me.” She emphasizes that it is this Jesus who helps her persevere in the face of sexism and racism. His example and his presence encourage her to remain strong, enabling her to be a model for others

12. This recalls to mind the tragic story of George Floyd (Minneapolis, May 2020). Floyd’s repeated cry of “I can’t breathe” while being restrained by police became a powerful symbol of his struggle and the brutality he and many people of colour continue to face.

who suffer. Thus, in spite of all she has been through, she still “really wants to follow Jesus and live with Jesus. And Jesus is Christ for me and friend, and also my Saviour and protector.” She adds that Jesus is also her “Partner” and “Lover.”

There is no question that the suffering that Holy Strength has endured and continues to endure because of the twin evils of misogyny and racism has shaped her theology and in particular, her understanding of who Jesus is. He is the one who suffers with her and alongside her and other hurting women. Moreover, it is this same Jesus—friend, partner, healer, and lover—who empowers her to remain steadfast, acting as a model of perseverance and courage to all whose smiles have been erased.

Thomas: Unlocking the Gates to the Garden

The second person I interviewed was Thomas, a gay man who grew up in a very white Anglo-Saxon neighbourhood and United Church congregation. His father was a scientist and a deist; his mother later became involved in feminist issues. It was she who took the children to Sunday School every week. The home Thomas shared with his parents and siblings was happy, loving, and supportive.

But problems developed during early adolescence, when Thomas was about age fourteen or fifteen. The straight, heterosexual culture in which he lived and went to school did not take kindly to people who were different, in Thomas’s case, to one who was gay. Remembering this period of his life, Thomas confesses, “I was a horribly abused young gay person.” On one occasion, some of his classmates beat him up and threw him under a bridge in the Humber River. Yet, even in that experience, Thomas says he felt that Christ was present and calling to him: “Jesus was beside me and Jesus was supporting me and . . . you know, even though the eyes of the world thought I was an abomination, Jesus loved me.”

Thomas admits that for a young lad growing up surrounded by such anti-homosexual violence and vitriol, life was not easy. But because he came to see Jesus as his comforter, this led him not to a place of bitterness or revenge, but rather to a new under-

standing of how Jesus was calling him to help and comfort others. He says, “My earliest experience was that Jesus was a comforter.”

In light of Thomas’s caring, compassionate side as well as his notable intellect, one of the ministers at his church visited his family home to recommend that he pursue ordained ministry. Thomas distinctly recalls that his parents immediately opposed the idea. This was in the 1970s—well before the United Church of Canada’s historic 1988 decision to ordain gay and lesbian clergy.¹³ At the time, his parents’ opposition was rooted simply in a protective desire to shield him from heartbreak and societal backlash.¹⁴

Thomas’s experiences as a teenager were formative. For example, his early sensitivity to and compassion for others stayed with him. Caring for others also led to his own salvation.

I would say that, in high school, and even in public school, I became aware that there were other people who were suffering, as I was suffering, and who were not being given opportunities, and who were being taken advantage of, and hurt and belittled. And I became aware that because Jesus loves me and comforts me . . . it’s not just about making me feel good. There’s some hard work that needs to be done to make things, all things, better. So, Jesus sort of, you know, always has been a little bit like a warm blanket that comforts me but also, I realize that Jesus is a goad or a little thorn, as Paul sort of talks about, asking me to go out and comfort others. Then I became aware that only when I started reaching out and comforting others that I actually find the community and find some love and find the support that I actually needed. So, Jesus wasn’t just saying you’re all right the way you are, don’t worry about anything, Jesus was also saying, the whole world is not all right, and I love you, and you can help me.

Thomas also had a fine mind and therefore was among a selected group of high school students chosen to attend a series of

13. “Moving toward Full Inclusion.”

14. Thomas’s parents’ predictions came true when many years later he took up his first pastoral charge and suffered abuse from several of its members, an experience he still finds difficult to discuss today.

lectures by Northrup Fry. During this series, he was introduced to William Blake's *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience*, which he found very illuminating. In *Songs of Innocence*, Thomas experienced a strong focus on the beauty of creation. In this world people played together happily and lived lives of abundance in and around the churchyard. However, transitioning to *Songs of Experience*, Thomas discovered how those same beautiful perspectives could actually turn harmful. Now "the doors to the churchyard were locked, and the gates were barred, and the garden was shriveled."

Today, Thomas's ministry is about unlocking those gates and opening the garden up to everyone, a garden that is lush and diverse and beautiful. This means helping people to see for whom it is that Jesus is calling them to suffer. Thomas believes that "Jesus calls us to make a choice of what we're going to suffer for in life." He says that this is what Jesus is really asking when he poses the question, "Who do you say I am?" He says, "And actually I think when Jesus asks you, 'Who do you say that I am?' he is really asking, 'OK, I suffered for all of you. Who are you going to suffer for?' Is it going to be for black women? Is it going to be for methamphetamine users? Is it going to be for middle-class wealthy people who don't really know Jesus?"

While Thomas acknowledges that the doors to the garden must be open to everyone, he also adds that each one of us can only choose one or two things for which to suffer: "You have to choose, you cannot do it for everyone." Thomas notes that "Jesus is the person on the cross, . . . who is like a mirror, and he shows us our brokenness in love and causes us to work, to mend things, and to build a kingdom." Jesus is the great healer and mender of broken hearts.

In a reference to Blake, Thomas talks about "taking off the manacles" and "the blinkers" that our culture puts on all of us. "When we meet Jesus, Jesus takes our forged manacles off and shows us a whole new world." He says, "Our culture tells us that beauty is something that we buy, beauty is a commodity. You're lucky if you have love . . . There is no meaning, there is really no purpose, except to get the most . . . All of our culture tells us so many lies." But then Jesus comes along and lifts the caliginous

fog that blinds us. Thomas says that this is what he is trying to do, very softly and benignly, in his weekly sermons. “Like Paul talks about the scales falling from his eyes, I try in a gentle way to show that there is a better example.”

Thomas’s experience reveals the multi-faceted nature of life. On the one hand, he describes himself as a “mostly abled” white male born into a middle or upper middle class Anglo-Saxon home. He is also well-educated. All of the former place him in the dominant class of Canadian society. Intersecting this largely privileged identity is his homosexuality. His lived experiences as one who has known considerable privilege in life while at the same time experiencing horrible abuse as a gay person have together shaped his understanding of Jesus, the one who suffers for us, and how Jesus calls us to suffer for others—even for straight people or “wealthy white Christians.” His life and ministry thus point to the ways in which lived experience and contextual location intersect to shape theology.

Leoba: Being Part of Christ’s Community

In my third interview, I spoke with Leoba, a clergyperson who lives with a chronic mental disability. Like many people who live with physical or mental disabilities, she also suffers from ableism, a form of discrimination against people with disabilities, which favours those with typical abilities. However, unlike many who suffer from physical diseases, there is a troubling double standard when it comes to talking about individuals with mental illnesses. As noted by practical theologian John Swinton, society frequently reduces individuals with mental illness to their condition—a dehumanizing practice we would never apply to those suffering from physical ailments like cancer or heart disease.¹⁵ While most do not intend to discriminate against those with disabilities, nevertheless the result is that too often people are treated as “less than” because of their disabilities. They are ignored or ostracized, resulting in exclusion and alienation. Moreover, living with a mental disability can compound oppres-

15. “Episode 1.”

sion, especially when combined with one or more forms of discrimination, such as racism, misogyny, homophobia, transphobia, and economic disadvantage.¹⁶

Although Leoba does not talk about whether her gender has made things worse for her, she does make some interesting comments on how “low income” or “underemployment” can exacerbate mental health issues. This is a special concern for her as a United Church clergy person. For example, as she notes, the current poverty line in Canada (based on data from Statistics Canada in 2020) is defined as \$26,570 for a single person and \$46,021 for a family of three. In 2022, the full-time salary for a newly ordained UCC minister was \$49,548 per year. While this does place clergy slightly above the poverty line, what it fails to emphasize is that more and more clergy positions have gone from full-time to part-time. As Leoba observed in my interview with her, from 2008 to 2016, the number of full-time positions in the United Church of Canada fell from 1,600 to 1,200, while the number of part-time positions stayed relatively static at 600. These numbers mean that the percentage of part-time positions rose from 27 to 33 percent, which is hardly an insignificant increase. Additionally, based on predictions, the percentage of part-time versus full-time positions is only going to continue rising in the next decade, rising to 45 percent by 2030. As someone who is under forty, Leoba worries about whether she will even have a job ten to fifteen years from now. This worry places added stress on her and compounds the mental disability from which she already suffers.

Understandably, then, this combination of poor mental health with a genuine concern over rising income insecurity, really complicates Leoba’s personal situation and her own suffering in-

16. The last few years have given me a tiny inkling (and I mean “tiny”) into what it is like to live with a disability, in my case, a gradual but worsening decline in physical mobility followed by two knee surgeries. At times, the physical pain and exhaustion led to feelings of depression or at least profound discouragement. What differentiates my situation from the vast majority of people who live with disabilities is that my health has improved and my pain has subsided greatly. Theirs is chronic and hence also unrelenting.

tensifies as a result. Her experience also shapes her Christology. Continually drawn to the healing stories of Jesus, she believes that Jesus is right there with those who suffer from depression or bipolar disorder. To the mentally ill person, “Jesus’ words of transformation and healing lead people back into community.” For ultimately true healing comes when people are brought back from the margins to live in community with others,¹⁷ as in the case of the healing of the Gerasene demonic and the woman with the twelve-year flow of blood. Leoba says,

I concluded that Jesus’ commission to the demon possessed man in Luke 8:26–39 to “declare how much God has done for you” is the call not just to that man, but to all who minister in the midst of suffering . . . no matter what demon confronts you, you are still called to ministry. Clergy who experience mental health challenges are called to preach the good news, to declare how much God has done for them, and to spread God’s love in the world just as much as clergy who do not experience mental health challenges, or mental illnesses . . . even during those times, when they believe themselves to be inadequate, or when part of them thinks, they would be better off dead, or when their inner monologue tells them that they are spreading lies, while comforting the sick, or when their mental picture of themselves doesn’t seem to match their reality. Even in the midst of suffering, these clergy are still called to ministry . . . Regardless of the suffering we have or are experiencing, we are still called to preach and teach in a world filled to the brim with suffering and with hope.

The strength of the church for Leoba lies in community. And the strength of Jesus’ healing is that it welcomes us back into community. Leoba knows that her life is in some ways very privileged. A white, well-educated, married, cisgender person of dominant western European background, she enjoys privileges that many minorities do not. At the same time, intersecting her

17. Swinton (*Becoming Friends of Time*, 115–29) emphasizes that every individual, including people living with depression, has a God-given vocation. Rather than defining people solely by their medical condition, he advocates for creating inclusive communities where their unique gifts are valued, arguing that every person is called to participate meaningfully in the body of Christ.

places of privilege are her poor mental health combined with income insecurity. She says,

I am someone with chronic illnesses, and so I am never going to be made whole, if you want to use that sort of language. It's not possible. But there's something in the idea of still being fully part of a community, still being fully welcomed, still being fully active, as much as one can be under the circumstances, that Jesus allows for and encourages and facilitates. That I find compelling.

Concluding Thoughts

The above shows how our life stories are contextualized within our larger stories of family, nationality, faith, and “within social institutions that situate us in different relationships to power.”¹⁸ Holy Strength, Thomas, and Leoba all carry a certain amount of power and privilege based on their family background and education, but each suffers from various forms of discrimination and abuse. Holy Strength wrestles every day with the twin evils of misogyny and racism. Thomas has suffered unconscionable abuse as a gay person. Leoba wrestles with her demons too, in this case, the pain of poor mental health and the fear that one day she may no longer have full employment in the church. These experiences have shaped, and continue to shape, how they understand Christ and how he calls them to serve him in the world. They recall to mind Emmy Kegler's “hermeneutic of the hip,” in which she felt challenged to find meaning in her woundedness and new perspectives for living in the midst of pain and suffering.¹⁹

For Holy Strength, this means that Jesus is the one who suffers with her and enables her to be a model of strength and perseverance for others who suffer. For Thomas, Jesus is the one who suffered for all of us, who now calls us to do the same by suffering for others today. For Leoba, Jesus is the one who heals the Gerasene demoniac and all who suffer from mental illness, whose healing not only brings us back into community when we have

18. Kim and Shaw, *Intersectional Theology*, 39.

19. Kegler, “Bruised and Blessed.”

been marginalized but also calls us to serve, thereby providing us with meaning and purpose.

The intersectional approach employed in this paper reminds us that, as Clint Schnekloth writes, “Salvation is worked out in flesh and blood, not just in ideas.”²⁰ The stories of those discussed here invite us to shift theological reflection from abstract, universalized doctrines to the concrete, lived experiences of individual clergy, particularly those who have suffered discrimination and abuse. Looking at multiple forms of oppression—such as racism, sexism, homophobia, ableism and classism—and how they collide helps us see past theological blind spots. It also inspires a more robust Christology and a more faithful, justice-informed presence in our world.

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