The New Testament tells us that “there is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love” (1 John 4:18). What does it mean for us to build Christian communities that respond to harm with perfect love, not with fear of punishment?

Modern penal theory uses the fear of punishment as a form of “deterrence.” The logic behind prisons and jails is that the fear of incarceration will function as either “specific deterrence”—causing an individual to decide not to take some illegal action because they might get caught—or “general deterrence”—as seeing others incarcerated causes people to decide not to risk breaking the law. Of course, psychologically these models of deterrence frequently fail! But more than that, in its reliance on the fear of punishment, penal theory has not reached perfection in love—but there are other conceptions of justice and other ways of addressing harm that are more in line with the biblical ethic of perfect love.

Restorative justice is a way of responding to harm by prioritizing the needs of the person harmed for healing and the needs of the person who did the harm to make amends, aimed at restoring the relationship between them and making the situation “as right as possible.” Transformative justice is the practice of responding to harm, including violence and abuse, with a focus on transforming the social conditions that led to the harm. Restorative and transformative justice practitioners emphasize accountability as central to the work of responding to harm, but they present a view of accountability that is not rooted in the fear of punishment.

Non-punitive accountability is a gospel value too. What does it look like to put it into practice in the context of the Christian tradition? What do Christian biblical and sacramental resources have to offer the practice of non-punitive accountability?

Accountability is an essential part of life in Christian community. Ched Myers and Elaine Enns describe being “ambassadors of reconciliation” as essential to Christian life. Dietrich Bonhoeffer describes Christian community as a “spiritual and not a psychic reality”—in other words, as a

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community of deeper reality grounded in the reality of God’s call and love. The ways we build relationships of accountability (understood non-punitively) with each other are how we respect that divine reality of the gathered church—what distinguishes true community from social gatherings. As we incorporate practices of mutual accountability into our relationships in deepening community, we find that accountability isn’t always sad or hard or frightening. It’s not always about responses to harm: instead, our practices of accountability become a source of joy, healing, vulnerability, honesty, and above all, love.

WHAT THIS DOCUMENT IS AND IS NOT

This document is a work of practical theology. It is intended to gather resources from a variety of restorative and transformative justice sources and present them within a Christian theological and sacramental context. Its goal is to introduce Christian communities to essential concepts and practices from restorative and transformative justice and to encourage experimentation, building on these practices with our own theological vocabulary and finding ways to build a culture of accountability starting from the small things. As transformative justice practitioner Mia Mingus says, if we can’t handle the small things between us, how will we ever handle the big things? We can practice non-punitive accountability in our everyday relationships, not think of it as something that only applies to criminal activity, violence, or sexual harm. This document is intended to offer ways to start practicing non-punitive accountability with the small things between us. It is intended to help build a theological imagination of what accountability can look like as a joyful source of healing. It let us build foundations for accountable community now.

Accountability is a skill we practice. This document is intended to help us learn how to take accountability as individuals and to build a culture where taking accountability is expected, encouraged, supported, and taught. It will help us learn how to hold space for each other to take accountability. It also recognizes that practicing and developing the skill of accountability will be easier for us when we draw on the theological and sacramental resources of our own Christian tradition. So it builds on what practicing accountability looks like informed by a specifically Christian context.

What this document is not is a comprehensive introduction to the topics of restorative and transformative justice, especially in the criminal justice context. It is also NOT a practical plan for developing a transformative justice process in response to serious harm. There are resources linked in this document that draw on the wisdom of experienced transformative justice practitioners for developing such processes, if you want to explore starting one in your community or situation, as well as sources and experts that you can seek out if you want assistance and accompaniment in facilitating such a process. But it’s important to recognize also that, as many activist organizations doing community accountability work, such as the Northwest Network of Bisexual, Trans, Lesbian, and Gay Survivors of Abuse (NW Network) have found, trying to “hold someone accountable” is often not effective at the level of process, without the underlying structures and culture supporting accountability. As restorative justice practitioner Danielle Sered says, accountability has to be taken, not imposed; what we can do is practice taking it and encouraging others to practice taking it too. NW

Network describes this as building “accountable communities” rather than focusing on “community accountability” processes.3

This document is an introduction. It lets us start doing the work, understanding the problems with punishment and our own responses, and building the foundations of a culture of non-punitive accountability in our communities. It provides ways to define the values that underlie our responses to harm, and to start building deeper relationships of accountability. It sparks our imagination and opens new theological, sacramental, and communal ways of thinking. There are further resources and experts included to reach out to as you go deeper in transformative justice practice in your own community.

This document is also a work in progress. Transformative justice and accountability are practices we improve as we explore and make use of them in concrete situations. You may disagree with some of the ideas here, and that’s ok! The goal is to provoke questions and future exploration. If you have questions or contributions for future versions of this toolkit, please email contact@christiansforabolition.org.

SOME KEY CONCEPTS

Punishment vs. accountability
The most important thing to understand is that taking accountability or being held accountable is not the same thing as suffering punishment. The essential nature of punishment is that it is the intentional infliction of suffering. Such suffering can be intended as retribution or it can be intended as a deterrent.

Taking accountability is challenging work. It can even be painful, as accountability can mean developing empathy for those we have harmed and sharing in the pain of having harmed them. But holding someone accountable is not about intending that they suffer, even for reasons of deterrence or behavior modification. The goal of accountability is empathy and transformation.

Restorative and transformative justice and community accountability
Restorative justice and transformative justice are both often offered as “alternatives” to punitive responses to harm. Restorative justice focuses on the needs of the person harmed and what the person responsible for the harm can do to meet those needs. Restorative justice processes often center on some sort of mediated conversation between the person harmed and the responsible party, in which the person harmed can describe the impact the harm had on them, get answers to their questions like “why me?” from the responsible party, hear the story of how the responsible party came to commit the harm, and express the needs they need the responsible party to meet. After the conversation, the parties mutually agree on a plan for the responsible party to make amends.

Transformative justice focuses on ending the systems of power and conditions that lead to harm. Transformative justice is about recognizing our “collective responsibility for violence” (Mia Mingus) and building practices in our communities that prevent and address violence and harm. This can mean, according to Mia Mingus, “(1) supporting survivors around their healing and/or safety and working with the person who has harmed to take accountability for the harm they’ve caused, (2) building community members’ capacities so that they can support the intervention, as well as heal and/or take

accountability for any harm they were complicit in, and (3) building skills to prevent violence from occurring, and supporting community members’ skills to interrupt violence while it is happening.” Transformative justice often includes community accountability processes, “where a few members of the community work directly with the person who harmed to take accountability for the harm they’ve caused.” Transformative justice and community accountability processes can take many forms. They generally focus on the role each one of us plays in building a culture of accountability, and communities that encourage and value accountability.

For more on transformative justice, see Transformative Justice: A Brief Description by Mia Mingus.

**Power taken away vs. power used to make amends**

Restorative justice practitioner Danielle Sered writes that the power dynamics of punishment mean that it can’t produce accountability: “That is in part because when we cause harm, we misuse our power, and accounting for harm therefore requires that we invert that misuse and put our power in service of repair. For all our fierce punitiveness as a nation, we do not require that of people. To the contrary: prison takes away the very power people should be obligated to use to make things right, thus rendering the possibility of repair nearly impossible.”

Abolitionist Mariame Kaba says that you can’t hold someone accountable, you can only provide a space in which they can take accountability. One role of the community is to provide a place where we can safely and without shame take accountability for doing harm.

This does not mean that those who have abused power over others should remain in power over them. Instead, it is essential for accountable spaces to provide equity in power and be aware of power dynamics that might warp the process. Often this means taking power away from a person who has abused their power, and giving the person harmed priority in determining how any accountability process will proceed. But such an equalizing change in power dynamics is different than the degrading powerlessness imposed by punishment, which removes not only power over others but also the agency required by human dignity and to make amends.

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4 Mia Mingus, “Transformative Justice: A Brief Description.”
Retributive degradation
Punishment, on the other hand, thrives on shame. Ethicist James Logan talks about the role of "retributive degradation" in our criminal justice systems. Retributive degradation means intentionally producing shame in someone as punishment.⁶ Punishment, the intentional infliction of suffering, is also often the intentional infliction of degrading treatment in opposition to inherent human dignity.

Punishment replaces guilt with shame
Psychiatrist James Gilligan explains why the shame produced by punishment is so toxic: Shame, which he describes as a lack of self-love, is a major psychological driver of violence. Extreme violence occurs from individuals who feel a deep sense of shame, and who don’t have strong feelings of love towards others or guilt over their potential actions to dissuade them from acting out of that shame. The role of guilt feelings is important, because, Gilligan explains, being punished for something we have done decreases our feelings of guilt while increasing feelings of shame. This means punishment can drive people closer toward extreme violence.⁷

But even at a less extreme level, the dynamics are important to understand: punishment decreases feelings of guilt while increasing feelings of shame. In other words, punishment replaces guilt with shame. Accountability, on the other hand, is a way of constructively addressing guilt feelings by making amends and seeking transformation of ourselves and the situations that lead to harm.

Moral regard and moral disregard
Samuel Pillsbury uses the concepts of “moral regard” and “moral disregard” to understand harm. Moral regard is an understanding of the other person’s humanity and a concern for their welfare. Moral disregard, which often leads to harm, is a failure to understand others’ needs and what their good requires.⁸ Moral disregard may be a failure of understanding, but it is a failure for which those who do harm are nonetheless responsible, because we have a responsibility of moral regard for one another. Moral regard, seeking the good of the other, even more than empathy, is the goal of transformation in accountability processes. Developing moral regard for those you have hurt is part of taking accountability.

At the same time, the cruelty and inhumanity of our criminal punishment system—its reliance on retributive degradation—is also a failure of moral regard for those who have done harm (as Pillsbury notes). Moral regard requires us to understand and consider their humanity and welfare as well.

Hostile solidarity
Why is degradation so prevalent in punishment? Why are our communities so punitive? Sociologists Anastasia Chamberlen and Henrique Carvalho use the concept of “hostile solidarity” to explain the collective dynamics of punishment: where people feel alienated from community, punishing others creates a surface-level feeling of solidarity without requiring that anyone dig deeper into the causes of their material or psychological alienation.⁹ (This is similar to anthropologist René Girard’s explanation of how “scapegoating” works.) This relates as well to Gilligan’s thesis that shame drives violence.

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Shame produced by social alienation causes communities to lash out, seeking solace in hostile solidarity against those they can punish.

Punishment only reinforces this cycle of shame, violence, and alienation. Part of the work of accountability and transformation is not just to take individual accountability, but for communities to take accountability to truly address the alienation within them, finding deeper and more compassionate solidarity rather than the hostile solidarity of punishment.
The most important thing to understand about accountability is that accountability is a skill that we practice individually and communally. Accountability isn’t something imposed by a group. It is something that we have to take responsibility for ourselves, and something that we can develop, with practice. As Danielle Sered puts it, accountability is using our power rightly to make amends. It is a form of agency that we can claim for ourselves. It is also a practice of integrity, of honesty and commitment to our values as we understand and develop them.

But accountability isn’t just an individual act. As we practice taking accountability, we will also see ways that accountability is always developed in intentional relationships. This section of this document is about exploring the nature of accountability, as integrity and in relationships.
ACCOUNTABILITY IS INTEGRITY

Accountability as a skill we can develop is about practicing integrity: integrity to our values and integrity in our actions.

One piece of this is honesty. Taking accountability is a practice of radical honesty. It means telling the truth about ourselves and to ourselves. Part of this honesty is recognizing when we do harm. The practice of accountability requires that we be honest with ourselves about the effects of our actions.

This is one reason that religious resources can be so useful to developing a practice of accountability. The practice of examination of conscience and confession of sins (whether privately in prayer or out loud in a trusted relationship) are practices that encourage us to develop radical honesty.

The honesty of accountability requires communication—that we be able to share with others our truth and the truth about our actions—and vulnerability. Shame is the enemy of accountability because shame over what we have done or left undone leaves us less able to be vulnerable. The fear of punishment also prevents the sort of vulnerability and honesty that are essential to practicing accountability.

To build a culture of accountability, we need to practice, for ourselves, being radically honest. And we need to practice receiving others’ honest confessions with compassion and accompaniment rather than harsh criticism, shaming, punishing, or “canceling.”

Accountability is also about integrity to our own values. A key element of accountability work and practice emphasized by various transformative justice practitioners is being clear about your values, individually and communally. Incite!, for instance, recommends that you “create and affirm values and practices that resist abuse and oppression and encourage safety, support, and accountability.” How does your community value compassion, mutuality, solidarity with marginalized people? Articulate and talk about those values.

Values are formed in community. One role of the church is to be a place to form values and moral imagination; to help us desire to work for the end of oppression and abuse. Consider how your preaching, education, organizational structures, and community practices are showing and developing values that will support individuals as they learn to live them out.

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10 [Community Accountability Fact Sheet](#)
Accountability isn’t practiced alone. Another essential tool for beginning a practice of accountability is building intentional relationships to support your practice.

Perhaps the most useful and important tool for such relationship building is the concept of “pods,” which comes from Mia Mingus and the Bay Area Transformative Justice Collective:

**Pod mapping** (Bay Area Transformative Justice Collective)

At their most basic, pods are relationships of trust for responding to harm. Pods, according to Mingus, are “the people that you would call on if violence, harm or abuse happened to you; or the people that you would call on if you wanted support in taking accountability for violence, harm or abuse that you’ve done; or if you witnessed violence or if someone you care about was being violent or being abused.” She adds that these might not be the same people. You might have one pod who you could call on for support if you are harmed, and another you could call on for support in taking accountability when you do harm.

Pods are an essential tool because they emphasize **intentionality of relationship**. Mingus notes that the concept of “community” is not always useful for accountability because communities can be too broad, and not based on deep relationships. Pods are about identifying and cultivating intentional relationships for responding to harm. For example, your pod for support if you’ve been harmed or for taking accountability if you’ve done harm might include a spouse or loved one; a confessor, spiritual director, or trusted clergyperson; a friend; a therapist.

Mapping pods in your own life helps you develop relationships to support your accountability. As Mingus notes, mapping pods can reveal that we have very few deep relationships to rely on. Intentionally cultivating such relationships within your community—for example, by building small groups or circles for support, or by starting a practice of sacramental confession or spiritual direction to build a deep relationship with a confessor or spiritual director—can provide you with resources for accountability work.

In crisis situations, pods can offer immediate support. For example, having identified a pod to support you if you are harmed means you would immediately know who to call if you feel your safety is at risk. Rather than being forced to call the police (who may or may not have immediate or compassionate
resources to help you) or seek legal recourse on your own, your pod provides immediate allies whose priority is meeting your needs. Similarly, if you have done harm to someone, the relationships in your pod offer an immediate place to turn for counsel as you try to figure out how to make amends. Or if you fear you are going to do harm to someone—for example, if you are struggling with a substance use disorder—your pod relationships are a place you can turn for an immediate intervention before harm occurs.

Pods are similar to a structure common in restorative justice practice of circles. Circles can be a response to harm or a longer-term form of intentional relationship building and support (for example, in the Circles of Support and Accountability model, which prioritizes ongoing “circles” to provide re-entry support for formerly incarcerated people). Circles, like pods, are another way of cultivating deep relationships with intentionality.

In the Christian context, it is also worth recognizing that the nature of the church as the “Body of Christ” offers another, broader sort of relationship of accountability. The theological reality of the church brings with it a responsibility to form a commitment to community and a commitment to remaining in relationship if possible. Accountability to the broader community certainly does not mean you should remain in relationship with those who are doing harm or violence to you if it risks your safety. But valuing a commitment to community can help us be accountable to ourselves, being honest about when we are trying to exclude someone based on disagreement or dislike as opposed to reasons of safety. A commitment to community helps us to distinguish between disagreement and diversity of opinions and actual danger.

The framework of “covenant relationships” can help us understand how to develop relationships intentionally, whether in pods or circles or in our commitment to broader communities. According to Frank Demazio, a covenant relationship:

- Begins with a spiritual act of being knit together, with mutual respect and mutual commitment to each other and the relationship.
• Grows by making and keeping covenant: the goal of defining the covenant relationship and our commitment to it is to make a relationship that is healthy, stable, and long-lasting
• Is characterized by a “generous soul” attitude that gives what honors the relationship, pouring out affirmation and encouragement and care for the other over oneself
• Stays healthy as we protect the relationship by being faithful in words, attitudes, and actions to the covenant we have made.

Again, accountability is about our honesty to ourselves and our fidelity to our own values. Commitment to community or covenant relationships is a way of living out the value we place on our communities and of being honest with ourselves about what violations require ending a relationship and what harm or disagreement can be worked out in relationship.

Our goal in practicing accountability is to build a culture that supports taking accountability, in small ways and large ones. We can build a foundation for such a culture of accountability through emphasizing integrity in honesty and values and intentionality in relationships and community. We can also help develop such a culture by deconstructing punitive theological narratives around sin, crime, and harm.

THEOLOGY OF ACCOUNTABILITY: SIN AND FORGIVENESS

The lens of accountability may seem unfamiliar to Christians because our ethical reasoning tends to focus so much on sin and forgiveness. “Sin” can be understood through the lens of harm, but is often expressed instead as a violation of a rule or law of God’s. “Repentance” usually means just stopping or rejecting the sin. “Forgiveness” is often used to express the absence of punishment. The language of forgiveness can be weaponized to undermine real accountability, as survivors are encouraged to forgive, and forgiveness is seen as erasing the harm or leaving it in the past.

The lens of accountability shows us to failures with this understanding. First, a view of forgiveness that presumes that punishment is the normal response to sin and harm misunderstands the power of accountability as something taken on that is entirely non-punitive. Second, because our understanding of sin is tied up with ideas of its punishment, forgiveness is assumed to be forgetting: we’re told that the only way to “forgive sinners” is to pretend the harm didn’t happen.

But a lens of accountability recognizes that the trauma of harm doesn’t go away, and that forgiveness doesn’t have to mean forgetting or ignoring harm done. At its base, forgiveness can be a gracious practice of compassion, an absolutely unearned recognizing of the humanity of those who have done harm. It can also be the result of a process of accountability on the part of the party responsible for the harm—an “earned” forgiveness.

A lens of accountability also reveals a deeper and more powerful meaning of repentance. Repentance is not just about saying sorry, feeling contrition, or even stopping the harm, but about doing all of those things. The “stairway of accountability” from the Creative Interventions toolkit (p. 316) illustrates this well:

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11 Description from robinjwilson.com/COSA/Appendix%20H-3%20Covenants%20in%20CoSA.PDF
The accountability process described here shows repentance not as a one-time activity but as an ongoing process of learning, changing, growing, and healing. This makes sense of Martin Luther’s famous statement that “the whole Christian life should be one of repentance.” The ongoing practice of accountability shows repentance to be an ongoing and joyful activity.

Recognizing accountability as a skill that we all need to develop and practice also helps us remember that repentance is not about feeling bad about ourselves but about the joyful process of growth. Doing harm doesn’t make us monstrous. Doing harm is an inescapable part of the human condition. Accountability is about how we respond when we do harm and how we grow in love and joy as we do so. Practicing accountability means taking the fear of punishment and the sense of shame out of the equation, so that we can honestly consider our actions and do better out of love rather than fear, shame, or guilt.

The forgiveness of sins is central to Christian theology and sacramental practice. Accountability practices offer a way to truthfully proclaim forgiveness—to truthfully proclaim that there need be no “punishment for sin”—without denying the reality of the ongoing work of recovering from harm, on the part of those harmed and those responsible. The lenses of harm and accountability offer depth and nuance to the binary truths of sin and forgiveness, building room for growth and renewed understanding into these foundational theological concepts.
PRACTICING ACCOUNTABILITY INDIVIDUALLY AND COMMUNALLY

Now that we have a clearer sense of what accountability is and of how we draw on honesty, values, and relationships to support our practice of it, we can turn to specific practices to help us take accountability and hold space for others to be accountable as well. Within the Christian tradition, spiritual practices offer resources for the practice of accountability in our communities.

HOW DO WE HOLD OURSELVES ACCOUNTABLE?

Spiritual practices can help us develop and practice the skill of accountability. Perhaps most helpful, as we consider accountability holistically as a practice of honesty worked out in and through community relationships, are the practices of:

- Confession
- Lament
- Prayer
- Making Amends

Confession

The practice of “examination of conscience” and confession of sins are helpful reframed in the language of accountability. Examination of conscience just means being honest with ourselves about where we have done harm. Resources for examination of conscience as part of a practice of accountability:

- From the US Conference of Catholic Bishops: A Brief Examination of Conscience Based on the Ten Commandments
- Reconciliation: Preparing for the Sacrament by Br. Curtis Almquist, SSJE (includes various possible structures for examination of conscience)
- It can also be useful to structure your examination of conscience around relationships in your life: how have you done harm to those closest to you? What about to others in your community/neighborhood? E.g. Family, friends, roommates, church members, students, coworkers, neighbors etc.

Confession of sins can be a form of private prayer and private accountability. But confession of sins to another person, sacramentally and in relationship, can be even more powerful. A ritual practice of confession is a way of developing intentional relationships of accountability. Confession, understood through a lens of accountability, is also not about “feeling guilty” but about honesty, healing, and unbinding. Confession of sins and harms is a practice of honesty. But through the honest telling of our truths, we also experience healing.

Sometimes what comes out in confession—in the honest telling of our whole truth—is not just an accounting of how we have done harm, but of other related traumas or spiritual injuries. The act of confessing and of hearing words of forgiveness can also be a source of healing or unbinding/liberation in the case of complex feelings of trauma, grief, and guilt.
One important such complex psychological phenomenon to understand is **moral injury**. Moral injury is defined as the psychological wound caused by “perpetrating, bearing witness to, failing to prevent, or learning about acts that transgress deeply held moral beliefs and expectations.”

The concept of moral injury provides a space for understanding the complexity of accountability in situations where our own role in the harm may not be clear—where we witnessed harm, where we feel complicit in it, or where we acted the best way we knew how in a complicated situation but still feel our actions contributed to harm. Confession is a way of healing from moral injury. Describing our role in the harm as honestly as possible—not minimizing it or taking on guilt we should not bear—is part of practicing accountability. Connie Burk writes that for survivors of abuse, being accountable to themselves is an essential part of reclaiming agency: recognizing that “even when actions are wholly justifiable in their context, folks who have remorse or grief about their actions can benefit from accountability.”

**Lament**
Related to the honest recounting of our complex stories that can come out in confession is the spiritual practice of lament. Walter Brueggemann describes lament as a central form of worship, one which is necessary for the church to “raise and legitimate questions of justice in terms of social goods, social access, and social power.” Lament is a form of honesty that doesn’t look at our own complicity in harm but rather names the conditions of oppression and harm that surround us. A practice of accountability, understood in community, includes the naming of conditions that lead to harm so that they can be transformed. Lament is a way of telling our whole truth and of looking honestly at the whole picture of oppression and abuse surrounding an incident of harm, to work together to change it.

Lament is also an important avenue of support for survivors. Lament can be a way for those who have been harmed to express that harm and to reclaim agency. Building comfort with the practice of lament can provide tools for survivors in their own healing.

**Prayer**
Another helpful spiritual practice as we develop accountability is prayer, and especially prayer understood as a practice of solidarity. Prayer can bring two emotions to our practice of accountability: compassion and contrition. Through praying for the needs of others, we develop compassion. Viewing the world with compassion provides a basis for us to see the ways we have done harm or failed to live out our values of compassion towards others. Prayer helps us develop the value of compassion.

Prayer can also be a place where we experience contrition—a sense of guilt or sadness for having done harm. Accountability is a practice, so contrition is not necessary or sufficient for accountability. It’s not enough to feel bad for the harm we’ve done—we have to make it better. And it’s not necessary to beat ourselves up with guilt feelings—instead, we should focus on making amends and living out our values. But contrition can be part of our process of learning to take accountability. As we see the effects of our actions on others, feelings of contrition can push us to the next steps in our practice of accountability.

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13 Connie Burk, “Think, Re-think, Accountable Communities.”
Making Amends
An essential part of our practice of accountability is trying to make amends, restoration, or reparation when we have harmed somebody. Confession and honesty or feelings of guilt and contrition are not sufficient. Accountability is a process, and as we learn about the effects our actions have had on others, we have a responsibility to try to make it right.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s concept of “the cost of discipleship” is useful in thinking about making amends as part of accountability work. As Danielle Sered puts it, when we have harmed someone, we “have an obligation to face that pain.”15 We do not have to earn our humanity or our right to be treated with compassion. But following the path of accountability—which is Christian discipleship—when we have done harm can be costly and difficult, because we have to take responsibility for what it might cost us to repair the harm.

Sered describes accountability as having five key components: “(1) acknowledging responsibility for one’s actions; (2) acknowledging the impact of one’s actions on others; (3) expressing genuine remorse; (4) taking actions to repair the harm to the degree possible, and guided when feasible by the people harmed, or “doing sorry”; and (5) no longer committing similar harm.”16

Confession can be a way of doing (1) and (2). Making amends is how we do (3) and (4). Amends can include apologies to the ones we have hurt as well as material or substantive restitution.

Mia Mingus offers great resources on how to apologize:
How to Give a Genuine Apology, Part 1
How to Give a Genuine Apology, Part 2

The question of restitution or restoration will depend very much on the nature of the harm and the needs of the people we have harmed. Our goal should always be to avoid doing further harm or crossing boundaries in our attempt to make amends; to meet the needs of the person we have harmed as much as possible, in ways that are also safe for us; and to be open to new possibilities of how we are being called to act to repair the harm as much as possible. Our “costly discipleship” is our openness to the process of trying to make things right.

Danielle Sered’s book Until We Reckon also offers in-depth examples of what restitution and restoration can look like in cases of serious violence, based on her experience as a restorative justice practitioner. Restitution and amends can take various forms, from material restitution to a commitment to sharing testimony or education, and more.

15 Danielle Sered, Until We Reckon (The New Press, 2018), Kindle edition, p. 93.
16 Danielle Sered, Until We Reckon (The New Press, 2018), Kindle edition, p. 96.
HOW DO WE HOLD SPACE FOR EACH OTHER TO BE ACCOUNTABLE?

Accountability must be taken, not imposed. We cannot, as a community, force someone to be accountable. But we can, and must, find ways to hold space for people to take accountability.

One way to do that, as discussed above, is by building a community where it is safe to take accountability, removing the fear of punishment and the carceral state. Clarifying that attempts to take accountability will be met with good faith engagement and not with punishment is one of the most important ways we can hold space.

However, we have other spiritual resources and practices we can draw on as well. Building a culture of accountability means building a culture where we are willing to communally confront and address harm, not allow it to continue to occur. Accountability, as a communal practice, requires us to consider ways we can respond to harm together. In Christian communities, considerations to guide such communal responses include:

- Confrontation
- Eucharist
- Covenant
- Forgiveness

**Confrontation**

What do we do if people don’t want to take accountability for the harm they have caused? Confrontation is one answer. Confrontation means our common responsibility to call out harm, recognizing that harm done in our communities has communal effects. Confrontation in the Christian context has scriptural support in passages like Matthew 18:15–20, which encourage those who have been harmed to seek justice and encourage other members of the community to support them in doing so, including through public confrontation.

Confrontation is an invitation to accountability. Confrontation should never be shame-inducing or punitive. Accountable communities act with compassion and respect for the basic human dignity of every individual, even those who are doing harm. Instead, confrontation is about bringing the tension or injustice into visibility so it can be discussed, approached, and healed.

Ultimately, for the sake of safety, if someone persists in doing harm we may have to use social pressure or force to ask them to leave a communal space. If they leave the community rather than take accountability (e.g. for another community or congregation) and present a risk to the safety of another community they are joining, we may even have to use public pressure to let others in the new or broader community know of the possible risk and to prevent further harm. This is all a valid form of confrontation! Nonetheless, our goal, in a culture of accountability, is always to treat those who have done harm with dignity and to provide a pathway back into relationship and community life if they are willing to take accountability.
Eucharist
The practice of the Eucharist or Lord’s Supper can be another place to make the communal nature of harm visible. Scriptural references for the relation of the Eucharist to so-called “church discipline” include references in 1 Corinthians 5:11 to “not even eat” with those who have done great harm and will not take accountability, and in 1 Corinthians 11:29 to “discern the body” in relation to participation in the Eucharist.

Discussions of Eucharistic discipline are challenging, because of the ways excommunication has been used in service of oppression and marginalization in the past. However, it does seem that the Eucharist plays a role in making harm visible within the community. Perhaps this “making harm visible” is part of what is meant by “discerning the body.” William Cavanaugh, in Torture and Eucharist, suggests that the Eucharist functions to make the church a visible social body capable of resisting oppression. In his study of political resistance in Chile, this “visibility” came about through excommunication combined with public protests.

There are a number of ways Eucharistic practice could relate to the practice of accountability. One possibility is the traditional one of excommunication (whereby those who have done harm are excluded from the sacrament until they agree to start a process of accountability). Excommunication of some form can be a valuable way to make visible the confrontation with harm and the need for the responsible party to engage in a process of taking accountability.

Excommunication runs the risk of punitiveness, however, in the ways it can purport to separate the person who has done harm from divine mercy. Another way of making harm visible in a community might be for those harmed or a group including those harmed and those in solidarity with them to refuse to come to the table (or to refuse to come to the table alongside those who harmed them) as long as those who harmed them are present and not taking accountability. Of course, it is essential that any such action not place an additional burden on survivors or deny them the consolations of the Eucharist if they desire it—the goal, in discerning if such an action might be appropriate, is instead to help survivors’ exercise agency in ways meaningful to them, and for allies and others in the community to take such a visible stand of protest or confrontation against the responsible parties as an act of solidarity with survivors. (This may, for example, be especially effective if leadership in the community are not willing to engage in other practices of confrontation or excommunication.) The goals and needs of survivors must always inform acts of confrontation, including those centered around the Eucharist.

The point is that when communal harm occurs, the table fellowship of the Eucharist can be a place for effective protest and confrontation to make that harm visible and provoke movement towards accountability. The unity of the Eucharistic meal can also provide a powerful symbol of return to community and support as the process of accountability continues in relationship.

Covenant
Another way we hold space for each other’s accountability is by ongoing commitment to the process of accountability—both when we have done harm and when we are supporting others in their accountability.

As Pastor Lenny Duncan points out, oppressed folks can’t “check out” from their oppression—so privileged folks shouldn’t check out of the process of reparations for oppression either.
The theological concept of covenant—such as God’s unbreakable covenant with Israel and with the whole world through Jesus—is a helpful way of framing this commitment. Our commitment to communal processes is related to our value of commitment to relationships in community/the Body of Christ. When we take on responsibility for accountability or take on roles of support in another’s accountability process, we are making a covenant. The value of such a covenant is that our mutual commitments to each other are also a recognition of their infinite human dignity. Our refusal to walk away from the work midway through is an act of respect for one another. Our commitment to processes of accountability provides a sense of safety for those taking accountability in the knowledge that we will not abandon the process or relationship with them as long as they are committed to making the harm right. The characteristics of covenant relationships, discussed above, are also useful to consider here.

Our commitment to supporting survivors over the long term is also an essential piece of our communal participation in accountability practices. We can’t force people to take accountability for doing harm, but we can always step up to support survivors, and communal support for survivors is a form of collective accountability for harm that has occurred. Recovery from trauma can be a long and complicated road. Our community covenant must include ongoing support for survivors and those harmed—even if their responses and recovery take longer than we might prefer, don’t always progress in linear fashion, or take forms that we don’t expect.

Forgiveness

The concept of forgiveness has been abused in Christian communities, to demand forgiveness from survivors whether they desire to give it or not, and to undercut the practice of meaningful accountability. At the same time, Jesus commands Christians to forgive (Matthew 18:21–35). What role does forgiveness play in our holding space for each others’ accountability?

One way of conceptualizing the role of forgiveness, or reconciliation, in a culture of accountability is in the communal responsibility to provide a path back into meaningful communal life for those who take accountability. Our cultures of accountability are fundamentally non-punitive. We should avoid vengeance and the desire to exclude people who have done harm—because we all do harm at some point. Safety may sometimes require that those who refuse to take accountability have their participation in communal life restricted in some ways, but in a culture of accountability, such exclusion should never be our goal, it should be as limited as possible, and it should not be permanent. Forgiveness means that from the start of an accountability process, we should be aiming to articulate what work would need to be done, what changes would need to be evident, and what steps would need to be taken to restore the responsible party to communal life. The process of returning to full participation in communal life should not be left mysterious or subject to change that keeps reconciliation always out of reach. Accountability work is hard, but the hope of returning to participation in communal life (with what that looks like discussed and discerned communally) is a key driver of the process.

However, it is important to recognize that the return to participation in communal life can never occur at the risk of safety or healing for survivors of harm. Our communal responsibility to hold space for each others’ accountability may include building alternate social spaces (e.g. additional services, small groups, or circles within a broader community) so that those who have been harmed and those who have harmed them can both participate in communal life without having to be in the same spaces. This is common in transformative justice processes in movement work, where those who have done harm may continue to be involved in the movement, but promise not to be in the same spaces as the
survivors. Providing alternative spaces allows us to provide pathways to communal life while also prioritizing the safety and healing of survivors.

Another element that underlies all our work of accountability is the necessity of beginning from a place of recognition of reconciliation as an eventual goal—what Miroslav Volf calls the “will to embrace.”¹⁷ This does not mean that reconciliation comes easily or immediately, but only that our openness to the humanity of those who have done harm and to the possibility of eventually returning them to participation in our communities is a commitment we must make at the beginning of accountability processes.

Ched Myers’ and Elaine Enns’ reliance on the centrality of the “ministry of reconciliation” (2 Corinthians 5:18) to Christian life is helpful here.¹⁸ Ultimately, the role of the Christian community in supporting accountability work is to hold space for reconciliation. The process of accountability is always aimed at reconciliation and restoration. Keeping that goal in mind—when we are making harm visible through confrontation or Eucharistic means and as we commit to ongoing accountability processes—helps assure that our emphasis on accountability remains focused on constructive change rather than the easier temptations of punishment, vengeance, or exclusion.

**Further Practical Steps and Considerations**

Here are some essential resources for putting community accountability into practice in cases of more serious harm, particularly addressing interpersonal violence (abuse, sexual assault and abuse, and intimate partner violence):

- **Creative Interventions Toolkit** — an essential 500+ page detailed guide to organizing a transformative justice/community accountability process for interpersonal violence
- **TransformHarm.org** — resource hub on transformative justice and community accountability. See especially the various transformative justice curricula available on their site
- **Bay Area Transformative Justice Collective** — includes various readings as well as case studies and worksheets for developing community accountability practice
- **Taking Risks: Implementing Grassroots Community Accountability Strategies (CARA)**
- **Community Accountability Fact Sheet** (from TransformHarm.org)

Transformative justice and accountability practitioners have developed their ideas and practices of accountability out of **real life experience addressing serious harm**. It is easy to see these strategies of accountability as naïve, failing to recognize the depth of harm that people can do to one another. I encourage you to go more deeply into the readings above which offer serious real-life examples which practitioners used to develop their theories and strategies about taking accountability. The commitment to transformative accountability arises from real encounters with harm in all its difficulty and complexity. We build processes as we begin to practice them and as we address challenges that arise.

Transformative justice practitioner Mia Mingus also talks about the importance of preparation, of building relationships and investing in trainings and accountability practice before serious harm occurs. Some of that investment can begin from these resources. But training is also important. Here are some resources for organizing trainings:

- **Bay Area Transformative Justice Collective**/Mia Mingus
- **Community Justice Center** (Fresno, CA)
- **Just Practice/Shira Hassan**
- **Vision Change Win**

Ultimately, these practices of accountability are about transforming how we see the world. How might you include the values and imagination of non-punitive accountability in trainings your community already practices? How can we interrogate the ways that anti-harassment and safeguarding trainings rely on fears of liability and cooperation with the criminal justice system, and bring the values of restorative and transformative justice system into the training we currently provide?

One way is to emphasize *values* and *relationships* taken from transformative justice practice. Some examples and resources focusing on values and relationships:

- **Transformative Justice workbook** (from the Virginia Anti-Violence Project and the Virginia Sexual & Domestic Violence Action Alliance) — focuses on values and the gap between values and actions
- “**Think. Re-Think. Accountable Communities**” by Connie Burk/NW Network — emphasizes the need to build “accountable communities” not just “community accountability” processes
• **Taking Risks: Implementing Grassroots Community Accountability Strategies (CARA)** — this document, which also provides examples of process, focuses on values and guidelines to guide whatever shape the process takes

• **Pod mapping** (Bay Area Transformative Justice Collective) — offers an essential focus on relationships to guide processes as they develop

Books for Further Reading:

• Danielle Sered, *Until We Reckon* (The New Press, 2018): this book is an essential primer on accountability, drawn from her work in restorative justice for cases of violence


• Samuel H. Pillsbury, *Imagining a Greater Justice: Criminal Violence, Punishment, and Relational Justice* (Routledge, 2019): an introduction to harms and causes of violence and broadening our responses to it
GETTING SPECIFIC: ACCOUNTABILITY FOR HARM AND SEXUAL MISCONDUCT IN THE CHURCH

This section will attempt to address a common question: what does non-punitive accountability have to teach us in the context of serious harm or sexual misconduct in the church?

As I mentioned above, this document is not a practical guide to starting an accountability process in cases of serious harm. Restorative and transformative justice and accountability processes remain hard, and even risky, work. As the church, we should embrace that hard and risky work, but we should do so making use of our collective wisdom, after further research, and drawing on the expertise of experienced facilitators, who have already made mistakes and learned from them. I am not such an experienced practitioner, and I do not have the expertise for you to base a process just on what you learn here. Please see above for resources to connect you with groups and individuals who can help arrange transformative-justice informed trainings.

I encourage you to view this document as a starting point, and I hope it will make you want to learn more as you begin to move into the practice of such accountability work. In that context, I think it is useful to consider the theory and theology of such accountability processes here— including what the guiding values and principles of transformative justice and community accountability might look in the context of serious harm in Christian communities.

It’s important to recognize that community accountability for serious harm grows out of the values we embody and the work we practice in less serious cases. In other words, building a culture and learning to live in a more deeply reconciled community is part of the work of preventing and responding to serious harm. A culture of community accountability allows us to intervene before misconduct occurs or worsens. The values we practice are the foundation that we build on in crisis work. Building relationships, such as by pod-mapping, gives individuals resources for taking accountability and addressing harm at early stages. Every step that your community takes towards a transformative mindset of communal accountability will help inform your processes for addressing crisis situations.

PUBLICLY ACCOUNTABLE PROCESSES AND THE ABOLITIONIST CHALLENGE TO THE CARCERAL STATE

An abolitionist mindset— a mindset that supports non-punitive accountability and the abolition of prisons and policing—does require that we ask difficult questions about the processes that we rely on to address serious harm.

How do we avoid complicity with the carceral state, while also avoiding defense of the institution of the church or religious community over the needs of survivors in it?

There are certainly resources for dealing with the bigger issues of serious harm in ways that help us reduce our reliance on the unjust and degrading systems of the carceral state.

Developing a community of accountability means that the church can’t rely entirely on mandatory reporting and cooperation with the state to address issues of sexual misconduct.

For one thing, mandatory reporting laws have problems. For those who are abused by people they care about—such as family members or members of their community—mandatory reporting laws can discourage them from seeking help. Often survivors, especially children, want the abuse to end but
do not want their abusers incarcerated. Mandatory reporting can actually take agency away from survivors. Our goal is always to be guided by and support survivors, reporting only if they want to.

Meanwhile, the threat of incarceration and retributive degradation makes it harder for those who have done harm, even sexual harm, to take accountability. Our communities cannot build spaces for those who have done harm to take accountability if those spaces are constantly under the threat of reporting to secular authorities and severe punishment.

In the church, which claims to have the power to forgive sins, the challenge is stark. If the only way for those who have done harm to be forgiven is for them to be reported to the state for punishment, then the church has abandoned its power to forgive sins. The reality of the tremendous harm and trauma produced by the carceral state—the retributive degradation of our systems of prisons and policing—means that the church cannot insist that repentance or accountability rely on these death-dealing institutions.

At the same time, any attempt to build in the church an alternative community of accountability must face the long and terrible history of churches and other major institutions using their power to facilitate abuse rather than face it head on.

While accountability processes can take steps to protect the confidentiality of those taking part in them, it is also essential that those processes for serious harm, like sexual abuse, be transparent and publicly accountable to the wider community. Whether or not the state criminal justice system is involved, the steps of the process and the actions being taken to prevent further harm, including removing those who have done harm from positions of power over others, must be publicly available to the affected community.

The reality that transformative justice practitioners know is that no process is perfect. Involving the state causes its own form of harm, yet state involvement can also at times occur alongside community accountability processes. Our building of an accountable community cannot and should not rely on state power, because of the harm done by systems of incarceration and policing—but sometimes the public accountability that we have to seek may lead to state involvement, or survivors may desire to pursue criminal justice solutions as well. That’s ok. The practice of accountability is messy. The tools offered here are intended to help us think through how to incorporate practices of non-punitive accountability, even in difficult situations, either as an alternative to or alongside state interventions. This is the work that Mariame Kaba and Shira Hassan call “Fumbling Towards Repair” in their book of the same name.
TRANSFORMATIVE JUSTICE VALUES AND PROCESSES IN THE CHURCH CONTEXT

A publicly accountable transformative justice process in cases of violence (including sexual harm and abuse) should at least include the following:

- Immediately stopping the abuse
- Commitment to avoid further abuse
- Reparations for past abuse

At each stage, the community should have a clear understanding of how to ensure safety for the survivor and the rest of the community. This might look like: restrictions on how the responsible party participates in community life (e.g. only with accompaniment/supervision in certain situations; requirements that the responsible party avoid the survivor; restrictions on what sorts of power or authority the responsible party can hold); requirements that the responsible party meet with a group from within the community to monitor their progress towards accountability and confront them if they are not keeping their commitment to avoid further abuse; collective decision-making, in conversation with the survivor, over what reparations for past abuse might look like and what the survivor needs, to ensure that reparations don’t retraumatize the survivor; restrictions on the responsible party’s participation in community life if they don’t participate in the accountability process. Again, while protecting the privacy of the survivor, and of the responsible party where possible, the steps in this process, including how the community will monitor the responsible party’s participation and what restrictions will be in place to protect the survivor and others in the community, should be transparent and public. The process itself is publicly accountable although the identities of the participants may be kept confidential.

Furthermore, the identity of the responsible party may not be kept confidential if identifying them more widely is necessary to community safety—e.g. if they refuse to participate in an accountability process and there is an ongoing risk to the safety of others in the community. It is also important to recognize that accountability processes can include processes for collectively deciding when confidentiality must be broken for reasons of safety during the process. The act of reporting or breaking confidentiality itself can and should be handled in a way that is accountable to the community or group engaging in the work of transformative justice.

It may also be helpful to consider certain tools developed for community accountability processes specifically in the church context:

For example, consider church-specific considerations related to the 10 principles of community accountability presented by CARA in Taking Risks: Implementing Grassroots Community Accountability Strategies (CARA). Read the linked description of the process first, then come back here for church-specific comments.

Possible church-specific considerations to the CARA principles:

1. **Recognize the humanity of everyone involved:** In a Christian community, this is grounded in the understanding of our common humanity created in the image of God. Dehumanizing the responsible party through narratives such as that of a “monster” or “predator” is incompatible with such a recognition of humanity.
2. **Prioritize the self-determination of the survivor:** As CARA notes, prioritizing the survivor's role and sense of self-determination in the process is essential to their healing and safety. This is one reason that mandatory reporting, if against the wishes of the survivor can be harmful. It also makes it essential for churches and Christian communities to avoid pressuring the survivor to forgive.

3. **Identify a simultaneous plan for safety and support for the survivor and others in the community:** In the church context, this is a place to look at restrictions upon where and how the responsible party is involved in communal life (although ideally, if the responsible party is willing to stop the harm, these restrictions will not entail complete exclusion from community life). For example, if the survivor does not want the responsible party at the same services or events they are at, how can a plan ensure that the responsible party will avoid those services, instead being part of the community in other ways? If the responsible party is clergy, this may require that the accountability process involve a suspension of their ministry at public services so that the survivor is safe to attend those services. (This should, however, be differentiated from removal from ministry intended as a punitive sanction.) In other cases, restrictions might take the form of accompaniment or supervision in situations where the responsible party could do further harm, for the sake of communal safety.

4. **Carefully consider the potential consequences of your strategy:** In addition to considerations of safety or retaliation as accountability work is pursued, one difficulty to doing transformative justice work in the church is that it requires questioning and perhaps upending cherished understandings of power and authority. Collective and often lay-led processes may run into resistance not only from the responsible party, but from others in the community, if the “transforming” part of transformative justice means, for example, preventatively building in accountability structures for those in positions of power, such as clergy. It is essential to have those difficult conversations openly and honestly.

5. **Organize collectively:** In the church context, this is another place to consider how responsibility and authority are delegated within your community. How can accountability be understood collectively, and how can power relations be shifted so that a variety of people within the community are involved and invested in the accountability process? Is accountability for clerical misconduct understood as something to be handled as a human-resources problem by designated denominational leaders or committees, and if so is there a way to build the process more organically among members of the local community?

6. **Make sure everyone in the accountability-seeking group is on the same page in their political analysis of sexual violence:** In churches, this means addressing seriously the underlying theology of sexuality in the community. To what extent do concerns about “purity” affect the way sexual violence is understood? How does the language of “sin” and “redemption” affect the way members of the group think about sexual harm? How have the ramifications of widespread clergy abuse scandals affected the way the group and community approach sexual harm?

7. **Be clear and specific about what your group wants from the aggressor in terms of accountability:** This includes reparations, always guided by the needs of survivors. Among other forms of restitution, such needs could include the need for the responsible party to stay away from survivors or out of their community or social spaces (including a service/congregation) indefinitely. In cases of clergy or church volunteer misconduct, this might also include specifics about what the process required for a return to some form of active ministry or contribution to the community might look like (whether in the same community or a different one and even if not in an ordained capacity), or if the survivors’ needs include the permanent removal of the responsible party from positions of power or
spiritual authority. How can the responsible party contribute to the broader community and make amends safely and without doing further harm to survivors?

8. **Let the aggressor know your analysis and your demands:** What is the congregational, community, or denominational process for making such communications? How can the communication of the community accountability process be decoupled, as much as possible, from liability and human resources concerns? How can the process and its communication remain a collective endeavor, and not be overtaken by bureaucracy or the need for institutional preservation or to avoid institutional liability?

9. **Consider help from the aggressor’s friends, family, and people close to them:** In the case of a church community, this has to do with engaging members of the community who might be most sympathetic to the responsible party. If the accountability process is not aimed at punishment or exclusion, bringing those “supporters” of the responsible party into a carefully-organized and theologically-framed accountability process might be effective. How could such engagement help address the need for communal healing in the wake of abuse or misconduct by a trusted authority figure as well?

10. **Prepare to be engaged in the process for the long haul:** What is the church or community’s plan for maintaining the process? What is the community’s plan to provide ongoing support for survivors in their healing and ongoing commitments to their safety? If the responsible party is a clergyperson and the accountability or safety plan involves the suspension of their active ministry, who is going to provide worship services and spiritual support for the community in the meantime? Long-term planning also includes being clear on the ultimate goals of the accountability process, including, in the case of abuse by clergy, whether a return to some form of ministry is a goal of the process, and, if so, what a return to exercise of gifts for ministry in some capacity for the good of a community might look like (whether ordained ministry or not, in the same religious community or in a different one for survivors’ healing), and what steps and work would be required of the responsible party to make reaching that goal safely possible.
The Creative Interventions “staircase of accountability” is also a useful tool:

Image is from the Creative Interventions Toolkit, page 316. Please see the toolkit in its entirety for valuable further discussion of what accountability processes can hope to accomplish and how to put them into practice. Here are some church-specific considerations related to the steps on the staircase of accountability:

**Stop the immediate violence:** The priority must always be safety for the survivor and the community. There can’t be accountability until the violence is stopped. This must always take priority over concern for the reputation or stability of the institution, and even over the desire to be forgiving and compassionate in the accountability process. Because accountability can only be taken, not imposed, the first step has to be for the responsible party to stop doing harm. The community can use pressure or force to intervene and stop the violence, and doing so is an essential part of holding space for the responsible party to start the work of accountability.

**Recognize the violence:** The responsible party must understand why their actions did harm. In the church context, and especially in cases of harassment or misconduct that don’t rise to the level of criminal activity, this may require additional education about the importance of boundaries and attitudes given the weight of spiritual authority held by clergy and ministers. Also, in a community that is “the body of Christ,” the harm is not only to the direct survivor but to the Christian community as a whole. The responsible party must recognize the harm done to the spiritual fabric of the whole community.

**Recognize the consequences of violence without excuses, even if unintended:** In the church context, and especially in cases of clergy misconduct, this means considering not only the psychological effects of the harm but also its spiritual effects. What effect has the abuse of clerical authority had on the spiritual life and practice of the survivors?

**Make repairs for the harm:** The question of restoration, repair, or restitution depends greatly on the needs of the survivor. But it is worth recognizing that in a community that is “the body of Christ,” the harm is not only to the direct survivor but to the Christian community as a whole. What might it
look like to make repairs to the community as a whole? What can the responsible party do to help the community as a whole heal?

**Change harmful attitudes and behaviors so that the harm is not repeated:** In the church context, it is essential to consider not only cultural but also theological attitudes that may have contributed to the harm. How does your community’s theology about sex and gender affect what happened? What theological attitudes about the role, authority, and power of clergy might have been at play? How is spiritual intimacy understood and taught in healthy or unhealthy ways within your community and tradition?

**Become a healthy member of your community:** The goal of an accountability process is healthy participation in the communal life of the church or community in some capacity, not exclusion. It is also worth recognizing that healthy participation includes participation in ministry to one another and the exercise of spiritual gifts. This does not mean that clergy responsible for misconduct should ever remain in ministry if doing so would risk the safety of survivors or the community. Nor does it mean that clergy should be returned to ministry in the same congregations or social spaces as those they have harmed if the survivors’ needs preclude it. But it does mean that a plan for accountability might consider what sorts of ministry (even if perhaps not ordained ministry) and what sorts of exercise of gifts and vocation could be appropriate, even after doing harm, and what work would need to be done by the responsible party for them to safely be able to engage in that ministry again. The ability to contribute to the ministry of the church in some way is an important part of participation in Christian community and should be considered as a possible goal of an accountability process.

The authors at Creative Interventions also remind us of the important fact that the staircase of accountability is not a linear process—responsible parties may remain stuck at one stage for a long time, or may even regress to an earlier stage sometimes. Accompaniment over the long term is essential to engaging in such processes in our communities.

The above examples are intended to raise critical questions and encourage creative thinking about transformative responses to harm and abuse in the church context. They certainly don’t answer all the questions!

Talking about alternatives to state responses to abuse in the Christian context is hard because of the unconscionable and poisonous harmful responses taken by churches and Christian communities in the past to preserve institutional power. At the root of all of our transformative work is the goal of becoming communities that truly value accountability, which includes dismantling the cherished idols of power and privilege within our communities. What we can do, before harm is done and alongside other responses to harm when it occurs, is undo undue power and consistently name accountability, especially on the part of the powerful, as a value in our communities. Building structures that promote accountability and transparency and dismantle power and influence on the part of particular individuals is part of making Christian communities accountable and safe.

Perhaps the most important first step that we can take towards making church-disciplinary processes more transformative is to focus intentionally on smaller values and practices. The more we create a culture where personal accountability is valued, and where we interrogate and develop values of compassion and safety together, and the more we practice the difficult skill of taking accountability, the better foundation we will have for addressing the harder questions tied up in these difficult processes. Ultimately, community accountability, as Connie Burk and the NW Network remind us, comes from accountable communities. Building accountable communities is how we take steps toward preventing and addressing violence, harm, and misconduct.
CONCLUSION

The practice of accountability is complex, multifaceted, and requires each of us to take responsibility for developing our own skills. Ultimately, accountability can offer new perspectives on essential elements of Christian practice:

- on how we understand sin, the harm we do, and our complicity in harm occurring in our communities
- on the nature of forgiveness, and how it can coexist with demands for accountability in relationship
- on grace and mercy, and what it means to commit ourselves to an understanding of the world in which punishment is never required for justice to be accomplished
- on repentance, and how we can understand it not just as the cessation of harm, but as an ongoing individual practice of learning, growing, changing, and “doing sorry;” and also how we can see repentance occurring communally as we support one another in taking accountability
- on what it means to be in Christian community, as we build deep intentional relationships and commit ourselves to accompanying one another in the practice of accountability

At the same time, Christian spiritual practices can offer resources to help us build the skill of taking accountability:

- through confession, lament, and the ways we tell our complicated stories and develop radical honesty
- through the discussion and discernment of our key values in community
- through confrontation of harm in our communities and making harm visible so it can be addressed
- through our commitment to developing the church as an alternative to the punitive, carceral structures of the world

Taking accountability is an essential part of life in Christian communities. Replacing our narratives of guilt and punishment with accountability and reconciliation is a practical image of the gospel. Our small steps toward accountability in our Christian life are a participation in the way God is continually turning the world upside down, in the revolutionary life of the coming reign of God.