



TOOLKIT:

BUILDING SPACE FOR NON-PUNITIVE ACCOUNTABILITY IN CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES

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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.¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer describes Christian community as a “spiritual and not a psychic reality”—in other words, as a

¹ Ched Myers and Elaine Enns, *Ambassadors of Reconciliation, volume 1* (Orbis Books, 2009).

community of deeper reality grounded in the reality of God's call and love.² 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

² Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*. Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, vol. 5 (*Life Together* and *The Prayerbook of the Bible*), Fortress Press, 2005, p. 38.

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.

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.”⁴ Transformative justice and community accountability processes can take many forms. They

³ Connie Burk, “[Think. Re-think. Accountable Communities.](#)”

⁴ Mia Mingus, “[Transformative Justice: A Brief Description.](#)”

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."⁵

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.

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.

⁵ Danielle Sered, *Until We Reckon* (The New Press, 2018), Kindle edition, pp. 93–94.

⁶ James Samuel Logan, *Good Punishment? Christian Moral Practice and U.S. Imprisonment* (Eerdmans, 2008).

⁷ James Gilligan, *Violence: Reflections on a National Epidemic* (Vintage Books, 1997).

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.⁸ (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. 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.

⁸ “Why Punishment Pleases,” <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1462474517699814>

FOUNDATIONS FOR PRACTICING ACCOUNTABILITY IN CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES: THEOLOGY, SACRAMENTS, RELATIONSHIPS, AND MORE



WHAT IS ACCOUNTABILITY?

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.

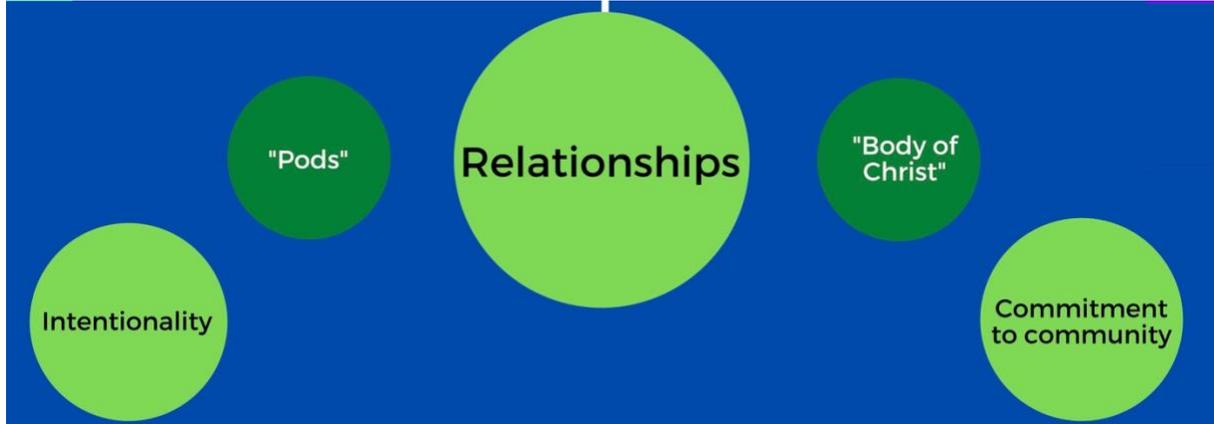
To build a culture of accountability, we need to practice, for ourselves, being radically honest. And we need to practice receiving others' honest confessions with compassion and accompaniment rather than harsh criticism, shaming, punishing, or “canceling.”

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.”⁹ 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.

⁹ [Community Accountability Fact Sheet](#)

ACCOUNTABILITY IS PRACTICED IN RELATIONSHIPS



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 clergy person; 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 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.

Again, accountability is about our honesty to ourselves and our fidelity to our own values. Commitment to community 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:



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.”¹⁰ 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.”¹¹

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.”¹² 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.

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.

¹⁰ Litz et al., “Moral injury and moral repair in war veterans: A preliminary model and intervention strategy,” *Clinical Psychology Review* 29 (2009), 695.

¹¹ Connie Burk, “[Think. Re-think. Accountable Communities.](#)”

¹² Walter Brueggemann, “The Costly Loss of Lament,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 36 (1986), 62.

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.”¹³ 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.”¹⁴

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.

¹³ Danielle Sered, *Until We Reckon* (The New Press, 2018), Kindle edition, p. 93.

¹⁴ 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:

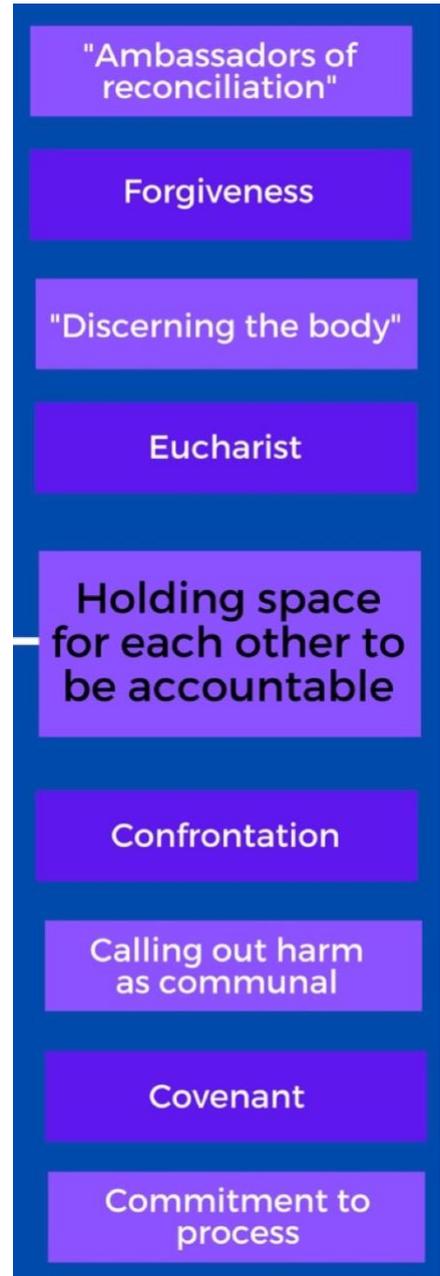
- Confrontation
- Eucharist
- Covenant
- Forgiveness

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. But our goal, in a culture of accountability, is always to treat them with dignity and to provide a pathway back into relationship and community life.



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 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 refusing to come to the table as long as those who harmed them are present and not taking accountability. 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.

Our commitment to supporting survivors over the long term is also an essential piece of our communal participation in accountability practices. 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 other's 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.

Ched Myers' and Elaine Enns' reliance on the centrality of the “ministry of reconciliation” (2 Corinthians 5:18) to Christian life is helpful here.¹⁵ 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.

¹⁵ Ched Myers and Elaine Enns, *Ambassadors of Reconciliation, volume 1* (Orbis Books, 2009).

FURTHER PRACTICAL STEPS AND CONSIDERATIONS

Here are some essential resources which address 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+ 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)
- [Generation Five: Ending Sexual Abuse: A Transformative Justice Handbook](#)

Transformative justice practitioner Mia Mingus 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 bring the values of restorative and transformative justice 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

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.