

A Shared Hope in God's Shalom: Past, Present, and Future

Opening Plenary The Ekklesia Project Summer Gathering 2023

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If you've read the blurb about this session, you're aware we're taking a risk in trying something we've never done before (and which we may never do again). Since peace, peace-making, and shalom have been vital to the Ekklesia Project from the beginning, the planning team thought it would be helpful to offer some perspective on how EP has come to think about peace and shalom over time, what changes or shifts have taken place, and where there are areas for growth and important questions we need to be wrestling with together.

But the planning team also wisely thought it best not to have just one person speak for all of EP. So, we "crowd-sourced" the opening plenary by contacting a number of people to get their perspective and insights on a number of questions. We invited 30 people with more than a little history with EP to respond and two-thirds of them did. (A document with those initial questions and the names of the respondents can be found online via your Gathering documents link.) My task has been to work through these riches, which ran from a couple of pages from some respondents to 14-single spaced pages from our overachieving and ever-thoughtful Michael Cartwright, whose work alone actually could be the basis for Gatherings for the *next* quarter century.

We really were offered riches by our respondents, and you should know we're only offering you a portion of that today, but even if we offered you everything there's still no way it could be representative of the hundreds of people who are associated with EP. But our hope is that if you're relatively new to EP, you'll find it helpful to hear some stories of where we've been, of some of the shifts that have taken place over two decades, and some of the ways, by God's grace, we hope to continue to grow in our vision and practice of shalom. And if you're not new to EP, we hope you'll find something that resonates with your experience and also encourages you to make the most of the opportunities available over the next 48

hours to enrich both our vision and practice of shalom through our encounters with one another.

One final preliminary note: Our initial face-to-face gathering was in the summer of 1999, so this is our 25th Gathering. We certainly didn't have any idea where any of this was going back then, and in many ways we still don't; we still very much see through a glass darkly. But we still think it's vital to gather face-to-face to discern how we might modestly support the Church's role in God's mission, a mission which the opening chapter of Colossians names as the reconciliation of all things to God, in heaven and on earth, by making peace through the cross. So thank you for being here.

Part 1. The Shadow of 9/11 and the Dominance of Critique

No one lives into and out of a vision of shalom in a cultural vacuum, and EP is no exception. Many respondents were keen to note that 9/11 was a pivotal moment in EP's early sensibilities around peace and peacemaking. What would later become the EP began as a small group of mostly academics which was convened in the late 90s via an ancient platform call "listserv" by political scientist Mike Budde and philosopher Robert Brimlow. Our aim? To make common cause with one another to explore the divided allegiances and loyalties that marked so much of contemporary Christian life in the US. A suggestion was made that we meet face-to-face in Chicago, and so we did in the summer of 1999. Little did we know then that two years later the events of 9/11 and its aftermath would turn out to be the crucible in which this small group would begin to discern with some seriousness how their academic vocations might be of more direct service to the church.

Budde writes: "One of the most valuable things we did in the early years was to construct an impromptu [electronic] bulletin board immediately after the September 11, 2001 attacks. While the rest of the media world was thundering with calls for retribution and 'justice,' we provided a space for people to reflect and interact in another way altogether. We had short reflections, brief laments, texts of sermons and lectures, numerous back-and-forth discussions, and more – all on what it means to hold to gospel nonviolence in such a time. We found ourselves – or more accurately, people found us – providing something people

were not getting anywhere else. Hundreds of people... made their way to us and found alternative perspectives, support, and a place to think aloud with persons committed to something deeper than the larger culture.”

Stanley Hauerwas was part of the original group of online participants, but he was neither the organizer nor the leader, and those who were present for those first face-to-face meetings would acknowledge he did his best *not* to be the dominant voice in the room, but he was still Stanley Hauerwas, and so he was often the *loudest* voice in the room. As many of you will remember, the issue of Time magazine naming Hauerwas as America’s Best Theologian was officially dated Sept 17, 2001, but the United Methodist New Service put out a press release about Time’s choice five days earlier on the afternoon of Sept 12. Needless to say, it was a difficult but important time for committed advocates of gospel non-violence, and Hauerwas’s confident voice gave many of us the courage to speak up in our own contexts.

Victor Hinojosa writes: “[These] were the days of 9-11 and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan (and what I think historians may someday see as the height of American empire). In the midst of this war and militarism, we were a people who said “no”. . . . In some ways I feel like in the early days we were defined by what we were against (war and nationalism and empire). So shalom meant “not killing” and certainly “not war.” Our gatherings and conversations often engaged these national themes. . . . All of this was new to me—I was new to the Gospel of Peace, the Peace Church tradition, and to the notion that Christians could and should embrace non-violence. (I am from Texas after all.) It was a place I found community—a group of fellow believers who would help me on this new journey. And it was place [where those] who were in the minority in their churches [in] opposing these wars found community and solidarity and inspiration and also practices to take home.”

Kelly Johnson also helps name these early years: “Very broadly, I would say [that during] “the first few years of EP [we] articulated peace as the goal but mostly contributed to that goal through generating and sharing critiques. EP grew from a strong critical project, analyzing the falsehoods of liberal (capitalist, white, and mostly Christian) political theory to address the profound self-deception of US Christianity. In that way, EP has been about critiquing how Christian thinkers and

communities support, validate, [and] perpetuate the violence of this state and the culture and economy connected to it, its militarism, its protection of privilege, its alienation and sentimentality.”

Budde continues: “Except for [the early work already noted], over the years we have spent relatively little time obsessing about particular wars or emerging wars. Instead...we spent a great deal of time talking about the allegiances and loyalties that war-making presupposes. Our concern with ‘peace’ didn’t emerge simply when the tanks rolled or the jets took off, but instead we tried to draw attention to the violence that is nurtured, inculcated and legitimated during ‘peacetime’. I think we helped some people see that ‘peacetime’ itself is a misnomer, especially in an empire; we spent a great deal of effort trying to illustrate how the ‘peacetime’ matters of national allegiance and patriotism undermine the credibility of the church as a community tied to a savior who chose dying over killing.”

Stan Wilson, in his response, noted his gratitude for precisely this: “For me the conversations around shalom at EP started with questions of war and the nation, but expanded considerably from there. I think EP did help me think through our ecclesial witness regarding wars, but more than that, it has helped me explore and imagine what the life of the church looks like that resists wars and other forms of violence.”

2. A Provisional Living Parable

One of the ongoing challenges in the early years was finding the right balance between academic rigor, accessibility, and lived ecclesial practice. EP intentionally called its summer meetings “Gatherings” because it didn’t want to be just another academic conference, but it wasn’t always easy getting academics to put their scholarship into more direct service to the church, because this required moving beyond what they were trained by the academy to do, which is offer critique. Hence Kelly Johnson’s earlier comment about EP articulating peace as the goal but mostly doing so by generating and sharing critiques. Fortunately, EP had faithful and patient friends like Mark Lau Branson and Mike Bowling and others who kept pressing for conversations to move beyond theory and critique to the nitty gritty of why and how any of this might matter for the life of real congregations.

Assumed in several of the responses already read was the insistence, in the words of Jim McCoy, “that EP was not meant to be a surrogate church, but a network of friendships that encouraged and inspired us to return to our respective ecclesial traditions” [and that this]“was itself an expression of shalom.” But it’s also true that sending EP folks back to their congregations brought conflicts, frustrations, and new challenges.

As a result, EP was soon nudged toward a new and more intentionally constructive phase of its work. Nearly every summer at our gatherings several people would acknowledge that this vision of the church as a sign and foretaste of the reign of God made sense, but they were unsure how to help their congregations catch this vision and begin to live this out more faithfully in their life together. Could we help with that, they asked? It was such requests that encouraged EP to consider how it might partner with congregations in the work of formation. Thus began EP’s modest work through its Congregational Formation Initiative.

A number of respondents noted that this intentional shift toward congregational partnerships paralleled the shift to a more positive notion of shalom, one that moved beyond critique and what we were against toward a clearer vision of shalom that embraced what God was doing in the world. It was here that many within EP began to use more self-consciously the language of shalom, and this for at least two important reasons. First, the language of “peace” in much of US society is synonymous with “the absence of war or conflict,” which renders peace as a largely passive condition resulting from the absence of something. Second, the Hebrew word “shalom” is much richer precisely because it names the presence of something, namely wholeness, flourishing, total health, total welfare. And when the writers of the Greek New Testament use a word that in our English translations is almost always translated as “peace,” more times than not they are infusing this Greek word with the richer Hebrew connotations of shalom.

But we also see here an example of how the shalom-centered and church-centered commitments of EP clearly informed each other. If the church did have a unique vocation to be an embodied sign and foretaste of God’s reign—even an imperfect and flawed one-- then it seemed reasonable that congregations were called to be more than an embodied “no” to this or that, but also communities that by God’s grace lived_out an incomplete “yes” to what God desired for all

God's creation. This unique vocation of the church can, of course, be named in many ways, but one theologian, in reflecting on Gal 3 and 2 Cor 5, put it this way:

“The people of God is here depicted as the sign, the foretaste of a world transformed. It is to be a living parable of the new creation – a provisional and communal enactment of the peace offered and promised to all people, all life, and all things. This community, incorporated into the very one in whom the old is fulfilled and the new has come, has received a distinctive calling. . . . It is called forward into the realm of God's shalom. . . . It is called to manifest healing in the midst of brokenness, love in the face of alienation, and justice in active contradiction to oppression.”

What has been inspiring over 20 years is being in partnership with congregations who have been seeking to live out this vocation in various ways and in varied contexts, nearly all of whom had been seeking to live out this calling long before they were involved with EP. All of these congregations were deeply aware of their shortcomings and failures, and all of them were nervous when others looked to them as models or even for inspiration, since they knew full well that it was only by the Spirit's work in and through them that they could even in any provisional way serve as signposts to something beyond themselves.

If we had more time, we would point to some of the specific and very concrete ways these congregations sought to embody shalom locally by taking all kinds of risks, crossing racial and socio-economic boundaries, re-imagining economic relationships grounded in God's abundance rather than in scarcity, writing hymns about God's reign of shalom that gave God glory and praise and helped re-form a congregation's imagination, and by humbling themselves by partnering with and submitting themselves to people who have been in a neighborhood longer than they had. And so much more.

3. “The Hard Spiritual Work of Good Conflict”

This next section focuses primarily on a single more recent shift. Our respondents would likely agree that this shift is deeply significant for EP, but at least on the surface they appear to disagree about how to name and evaluate that significance. Some believe this shift is worrisome and undercuts some key

elements of EP's peace witness, while others believe this shift is a necessary corrective that has the potential to broaden EP's vision and practice of shalom. Whether and to what degree our brothers and sisters actually disagree would require us to engage in difficult and messy conversations. The challenge is that EP, like many congregations, has often been conflict averse. Even though we acknowledge theoretically that conflict is sometimes necessary, and even though we have certainly encouraged the practice of truth-telling in congregational life, I myself wonder how well we have lived out that practice as the EP itself.

Before we continue, let me pause to offer two reminders from long-time EP participants who have written on the role of conflict within healthy relationships. The first comes from Kyle Childress, whose plenary address about this very topic over 20 years ago was sent to me by Mike Budde so Kyle's voice could be part of our Gathering. What was the theme back in 2003 as EP gathered in person for only the fifth time? "Discipleship in a Divided Church." And the title of his address: "Conflict in the Local Congregation."

Here are some salient words from Kyle:

"The issue is: Will we deal with our conflict in a way that points to Jesus Christ or not? Will we be faithful in our conflict? And how can we become the kind of church that deals with conflict in cruciform ways? . . . Indeed, I am more and more convinced that the witness of the body of Christ is not simply our pronouncements and statements, but the process of discernment and discussion and debate and disagreement through which we go in reaching those statements. Our witness is not simply that we make a statement on peacemaking in a time of war, for example. Our witness is how the church deals with the conflict of making such a statement. How do we talk about peacemaking in a way that embodies the peace we know in Jesus? As a pastor, it is one thing to get up in the pulpit and preach a strong prophetic word about something controversial. But we really get down to the nitty-gritty of being the church when we do the hard but good work of talking and discerning as a community of Christ *about* that controversy."

The second reminder comes from Kelly Johnson's 2021 pamphlet, *Thanking God for Conflict: Lessons from Oscar Romero on Faithfulness in a Polarized Society*, a pamphlet that more than one respondent mentioned. Kelly ends her pamphlet with this powerful paragraph:

“What are the conflicts your community is avoiding for the sake of a false peace? What conflicts is [your community] grasping as a way of shutting other people out, drawing boundaries that eliminate the need to listen to challenge[s]? The call into conflict is a call to follow Christ in patience with each other, in dying to self, and in hope of a new life. We have often done it badly, but that does not mean we cannot do it well. St. Oscar Romero can help us to see that the call to be a community of mutual love is also a call to engage in the hard spiritual work of good conflict, in confidence that the peace of Christ which surpasses understanding will hold us all.”

So I’d like for us to assume that acknowledging this potential disagreement within EP might be part of what Kelly calls “the hard spiritual work of good conflict.” All we can do in this session is try to name this possible disagreement as a matter for much-needed further discussion with one another.

We begin with some concerns that cluster around noted recent shifts in how EP talks about shalom and some of the practices that accompany those shifts. I’d like to frame these concerns by enlisting a helpful distinction suggested by John Nugent between what he calls Shalom A and Shalom B, a distinction that brings into relief some of the changes he has noted over the years and why he believes some of them may be undermining EP’s peace witness.

Here’s John’s distinction:

Shalom A names EP’s commitment to pacifism/nonviolence/non-coercion especially when it comes to those situations when the wider Christian culture finds it acceptable to engage in violence – such as personal self-defense or war.

Shalom B names EP’s commitment to the seemingly growing Christian consensus that true peace/shalom involves reconciliation and right relationship between humans and God, humans and fellow humans, and humans and nonhuman creation (animals, the soil, the environment).

John goes on to say that he participates in EP and invites others to join him because EP stands out for attempting a radical commitment to both Shalom A & B and sees the local church as the primary context from which we express that commitment.

John then moves to his concerns:

“From my experience, which is unique like that of everyone else—conditioned by the workshops I’ve attended and conversations I’ve participated in—it seems that EP has turned down the volume of Shalom A and turned up the volume of Shalom B, albeit with less emphasis on ecclesially-tied practices and more on wider social-political activism.”

John then continues by naming his worries: “It is difficult to distinguish between EP and mainstream progressive Christianity. This is partly because the mainstream has caught up with EP and partly because we’ve muted or even diluted our commitment to Shalom A. Shalom A has weakened at EP as commitment to enemy love has weakened. A commitment to justice as framed in recent years has warped into the justification of selective enmity with fellow believers who do not pursue justice in the same way or from the same perspective or with less intensity. I feel like we’ve succumbed to the wider cultural binary of “us vs. them” rather than pursuing a third way that is neither conservative nor liberal. The new people I’ve invited over the past several years tend to see EP as clearly having chosen sides with progressivism. I first started coming because EP seemed to be equally critical of the left and right. I used to tell guests that this is the one place where they will be surrounded mostly by people who strive to transcend the traditional partisanship in the name of Jesus. But I can’t really do that anymore. That doesn’t mean they don’t learn all sorts of things that are helpful, but it’s a shift in our peace witness, our attempt at genuine impartiality regarding the politics of this world. This perceived shift/migration has muted our radical peace witness.”

Mike Bowling has also noted his worries that a wider emphasis on social and political activism with less emphasis on church practices makes it easier to “retreat into the ideal or reduce the subject to social justice ‘issues’ where we can identify ‘villains’ as scapegoats.”

Tim Otto, for his part, voices his gratitude for EP’s church-centered emphasis both for what it makes possible and for how it may help guard against certain ready temptations. He writes: “One of the gifts of the EP for us has been that of **centering** the church. It reminds us that our greatest contribution isn’t coming up with a peace plan for the world, but rather living in peace as a people. Given that we’ve had deep conflict here at Sojourners, there is an important humility in that. It also gives us a sense of agency to focus on the relationships around us and helps save us from the self-righteous posturing and virtue signaling that is such a temptation.”

This cluster of comments names some of the strengths of EP's church-centered focus, gives thanks for them, names some of the current pitfalls it may help protect against, and names some current harms that a shift away from it has engendered. Might we have the courage to listen deeply to these concerns, to match the courage it took to voice them, as an act of peacebuilding right here in our midst?

A different set of concerns likewise cluster around EP's commitment to being "church-centered," but do so from a much different angle. These voices wonder if it's possible both to acknowledge the church's unique vocation in the world and to also acknowledge (and perhaps confess) that EP may have at times too narrowly circumscribed what that vocation entails. And they also wonder if part of the reason we have done so is because we have inadequately acknowledged our own limited and largely privileged position from which we have addressed what it means to be the church?

Here are two respondents from two different sides of the country and very different contexts who in their own way had the courage to raise *these* difficult matters:

Chi-Ming Chien writes: "I think that our demographic composition is a place of inadequacy in [EP's] practice of shalom. As scholars, pastors, and laypeople who are oriented toward theological friendships, we represent a particular slice of the church. While by no means a necessary consequence, there have historically been racial/ethnic limitations to this slice and there is also, to a degree, a socioeconomic aspect to this slice."

Our friend Jim McCoy, who in his retirement has shifted the focus of his pastoral ministry from the congregational setting to the prison, echoes this concern about the socio-economic aspect, confessing that he has "some troubling concerns about the extent to which the ethos of the academy and mainstream church still shape me." Jim goes on to try to name this concern by referring to a passage in Richard Hays' commentary on First Corinthians. Since Jim sent me these two paragraphs I also been haunted by them and so I offer them here in full. If you need a quick reminder, 1 Cor 8 is dealing with the controversy within the church about meat sacrificed to idols:

Richard Hayes writes: "Paul does not confront this problem directly in I Corinthians 8, but by reading between the lines we have seen that the idol meat problem had a socioeconomic dimension. Having recognized this, we might look again at the disputes in our own congregations and denominations and ask whether there is also a similar economic substratum to our quarrels. If so, we might ponder the fact that Paul places the onus for flexibility on those with more education and economic resources. To the dismay of the 'strong' at Corinth, [Paul] refuses to take their side against the weak; instead, he calls the strong to surrender what they understand as their legitimate prerogatives for the sake of the weak. What would it mean for us to do likewise?"

Hayes continues: "Furthermore, this text calls Christians who have many possessions to beware of easy rationalizations that treat the world of everyday affairs as religiously neutral, thereby permitting them to continue enjoying their privileged lives. [Gerd] Theissen [a prominent German theologian and NT scholar] tellingly describes the position of the high-status Corinthians: 'The world is rejected in a theoretical way in order to profit from it in a practical way - the usual verbal radicalism of the affluent.'"

Like John Nugent's words previously, these are not easy words to hear, and our impulse is likely to be defensive. Is it possible that two truths may need to be held in tension here? The first, that EP was and is right to critique how many Christian thinkers and communities too often support and perpetuate the violence of the state and the culture and economy connected to it (Kelly); and the second, that EP may often have been too quick to say "no" to anything that might involve engagement with "the state" or its apparatus lest it give sanction or lend legitimacy to the state's violence? And is it possible to imagine that for many of our neighbors who live less privileged lives, EP's suspicion around voting may come across as an example of rejecting the world in a theoretical way in order to profit from it in a practical way, a form of radicalism of the affluent and the privileged?

Sharon Huey also wonders about this question of engagement, hinting that it may be time to have some hard conversations. "We need help to build skills for a long-term, human-to-human connection in the work of peace-making, work which is distinctly Christian and which also honors the fact that we live in communities that

are wondrously diverse. “Engagement” requires us to cross some borders. Without this piece, it could seem that the “way of non-violence” is the “way of non-participation”, as if the Church’s role is mostly to “talk among ourselves”, “remain neutral”, “stay above the fray”, and “keep our hands clean.” I’m concerned with how “non-violence” is misunderstood, even by the Church. It can be read as apathy or passivity; “non-violence” becomes our excuse to walk away from a conflict which may require our remaining. . . . How do we discern if we are being called into conflict? Are there fights worth having? And by “fights”, I’m picturing honest, respectful dialogue with those with whom we may disagree, and listening which is deep enough to be transforming.”

Sharon continues: “What might faithful, Cross-shaped engagement look like? Can we imagine a plethora of enfleshed responses to Christian peace-making or are we stuck on a few models (which is always the danger, I think, when particular churches are highlighted at EP)? How can the Church in its peacemaking become as the Ecuadorian theologian Rene Padilla put it, a ‘sacrament of the world’s possibility’?”

I have to say I love this question that Sharon poses for us: *How can the Church in its peacemaking become a sacrament of the world’s possibility?*

If we agree with Sharon, as she notes elsewhere in her response, that the work of shalom is God’s work before it is our work, are we willing to acknowledge that the Spirit can work through any number of different ways of practicing and embodying God’s shalom, while acknowledging that all of them are provisional and are nothing apart from the work of God’s Spirit, who alone can use them to point to something well beyond what we can ask or imagine?

And if we were able to acknowledge this, might this potentially change how EP discerns which visions, practices, and practitioners of shalom it’s willing to consider, engage, and learn from? And might we also find ourselves a little less like the disciple John who comes to Jesus, saying: “Teacher, we saw someone driving out demons in your name and we told him to stop, because he was not one of us” (Mark 9:38).

To make that question a bit more concrete, here are a few examples of varied and possible ways of practicing shalom that are already embraced among people

within EP but which may be seen by some as being contrary to typical EP sensibilities:

1. There are those in our midst who believe that community organizing can be an act of peacebuilding, seeing it as intrinsic to the church's work of shalom by exploring ways of being in material solidarity with our neighbors. Are we open to learning from those who are exploring these ways of living alongside their neighbors?

2. There are those in our midst who wonder if EP's "church-centered" commitment has inhibited it from openly acknowledging and supporting what seems to many to be God's work of shalom in movements such as the Poor People's Campaign led by William Barber and Liz Theoharis. Is there room for that conversation?

3. Since we've already mentioned EP and the matter of voting: There are those in our midst who are convicted that protecting and expanding the right to vote can be a practice of peacebuilding that honors the dignity of our neighbors and their humanity. Is there room for that conversation?

4. There are likewise people, not least many younger people in our midst, who believe other kinds of political and social activism on behalf of our vulnerable neighbors can also be understood as a practice of peacebuilding. Debra Murphy notes that in her capacity as point person on overhauling the EP website and overseeing the gathering planning team for 2024, she has worked and continues to work with some younger EP-identified persons whose lives of Christian discipleship are utterly intertwined with political advocacy on behalf of marginal communities. She writes: "They, like EP'ers of a generation before, see the futility of the liberal/conservative partisan divide, but, unlike their forbearers, they embrace a radical politics of engagement to the left of the liberal left." Such a suggestion is likely to raise some eyebrows, but in the past EP hosted a serious discussion on the abolition of war. Is it possible to imagine that contemporary abolitionist movements might be part of God's work of shalom, movements which seek to build up another world through "repair and restoration" in place of the broken and punitive systems of policing and incarceration? Is there room for that conversation?

4. “The beautiful, vexing, imperfect work of bearing witness to the non-violent way of the Cross”

This phrase, which appears on our new website, has resonated with a number of EP folks, and stands in for much else that is said there including our need to grieve in the midst of our hope. This feels to many as a small but perhaps not insignificant moment in EP’s history, one in continuity with our past but also one in which we more openly acknowledge the need for our own conversion, one in which we grieve for our own complicity in the state of the church and world, and one in which we continue to “trust the Spirit’s power to redeem and transform.”

But if we hope, by God’s grace, to live more fully into this revised vision of who EP is called to be, one that affirms our “shared hope in God’s shalom,” then we will surely need to be better practiced in the art of truth-telling, beginning with some vexing questions about ourselves. I raise them today not only because I think these are matters about which we need to lament, grieve, and repent, but also because we have invited people to be with us over these two days who may very well be able to help us discern what such lament, grief, and repentance might look like in the coming months and years.

I list only three matters for now, and I state them briefly as questions:

1. Why have we, as EP, remained silent for at least a decade once it became known that John Howard Yoder, the most significant intellectual and theological voice for Christian non-violence as many of us had come to understand it, was himself for many years a sexual predator?
2. Why have we, as EP, when inviting over the years our brothers and sisters of color to address us at our annual Gatherings, most often expected them to bend their contributions to align with our current sensibilities rather than invite them to question those sensibilities and potentially expose our blind spots?
3. Is it possible that we, as EP, have too often asked some of our partner congregations to bear too heavy a weight of responsibility for being “model” EP congregations, failing to say loud enough and often enough what they have always known: that they are provisional and flawed communities who are, by the grace of God, seeking more faithfully to point to something beyond themselves.

5. Final Wonderings

I want to close first by thanking once again all our respondents for sending along such thoughtful and generative reflections on the questions you were given. I have only been able to offer up a small portion of your contributions this afternoon, and so much more of what you have offered us deserves serious consideration and conversation. And I also want to thank all our speakers, preachers, workshop leaders, and musicians who have come to enrich and stretch our imaginations as we listen deeply to one another about various practices of peacebuilding.

Second, if you were here last year, you will likely remember how Sam Wells moved us in his plenary and workshop with his “wonderings.” So in the spirit of Sam Wells (and with apologies to him as well), I would like to close by offering three wonderings of my own that have preoccupied my spirit as I found myself immersed in these honest and sometimes plaintive reflections from of our EP friends.

1. I wonder what it might feel like not to have to defend one particular model of the church as more faithful than another, or one particular way of understanding and living out God’s shalom as more faithful than another?
2. I wonder what it might feel like to hold lightly the opportunities we are given to participate daily in God’s work of shalom, trusting that the Spirit will take our stumbling efforts and make of them what God will.
3. I wonder what it might feel like to be given eyes to see even a fraction of the beautiful work of God’s shalom that takes place around us every day.

And finally, to close, I’d like to give Sharon Huey the final word as she expresses one of her hopes for how we as the Ekklesia Project might grow in our vision of shalom in the years to come:

“I would love for EP to learn from our brothers and sisters in Christ *outside* of the American context. We need their prophetic voices to call our attention to what we can’t see—the blinders of wealth and privilege we wear, yes, but also, in this angry and divisive time, what it means to be a suffering Church. We need to see the beautiful courage of saints who live as peacemakers in extremely violent settings. Thankfully, God’s tent is wide and we can learn from these folks! Grace Fellowship

has a dear partner, Dr. Sunday Agang, provost of the Evangelical Church Winning All seminary in Jos, Nigeria, who has become such a truth-teller to us. Sunday comes from a setting in which Muslim extremists regularly clash with churches-- torching sanctuaries, kidnapping church leaders, even committing murder. Sunday's own cousin was killed by such an extremist, which compelled him towards "peace work". For him, this involves training pastors and congregations in the difficult work of conflict resolution and forgiveness. What I appreciate when I hear from Sunday is how much "peacemaking" is woven into his whole life; it's not abstract or optional. Even the heartbreaking parts of his work give witness to Christ. When I see Sunday, I see someone who carries difficult work with a kind of "lightness"; he trusts God to be at work because "peacemaking" is at the center of God's heart. It's God's work before it is ours. I would love for us to be that hopeful."

My prayer, and I hope yours as well, is that by God's grace we will be.

Amen.