

Kelsey Dallas
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Cornell Award

Want to change the way you worship? Change the space you worship in October 25, 2015

Sunday worship services felt a little less sacred last year at St. Vincent de Paul in Albany, New York, when a renovation project kept the sanctuary off-limits.

During the five-month construction period, members of the Roman Catholic Church worshipped in their building's parish hall, working through logistical frustrations like homeowners would do in a kitchen remodel.

"It was a tighter space, which made any movement (during worship) a bit awkward, said Betsy Rowe-Manning, who has served as St. Vincent de Paul's parish life director for the past eight years. The makeshift sanctuary in the hall "was like the caterpillar before the butterfly."

The butterfly, in this case, was a redesigned worship space that wedded traditional high ceilings and stained-glass windows with a less common, circular layout. The remodel has rejuvenated Sunday services, inspiring members to be more enthusiastic during songs and prayers because they're looking into each other's eyes, Rowe-Manning said.

St. Vincent de Paul's remodel illustrates that the "where" of worship can be as meaningful to faith communities as the "how" or "when." As religious communities struggle to pay for the upkeep of church buildings or consider nontraditional locations to attract younger members, faith leaders must acknowledge how sacred spaces shape the practice of faith, architecture experts said.

"All faith traditions are very much linked to their so-called sacred space, whether it's a synagogue or a church or a mosque," said Richard Vosko, who has been helping churches and synagogues redesign their houses of worship for 45 years. "It's an expression of who the people are who worship there and what they believe."

The where of worship

On a basic level, any space is suitable for worship, as long as it keeps believers dry and warm, Vosko said.

"There's a practical reason to worship in a building: it offers protection from the elements," he noted.

The earliest Christians worshipped God in people's homes, waiting to construct dedicated temples or churches when they outgrew their humble beginnings.

Over time, faith communities invested more and more in their houses of worship, building architectural masterpieces like Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris or St. Peter's Basilica in Vatican City. Sacred spaces, often among a town's most prominent buildings, are now a core part of a congregation's identity, eliciting emotional responses like treasured hymns or rituals, Vosko said.

"These are the holy places (where) people find a sense of safety, security and familiarity," he said.

As a sacred space planner, Vosko works closely with the faith communities who hire him to envision buildings that are both functional and meaningful. He asks questions like, "What do you expect when you go to worship?" and "How do you envision God?" in order to design sanctuaries that fit spacial and spiritual needs.

"Places of worship are designed to put us in touch with the past, present and future all at once," said Vosko, who is also an ordained Catholic priest and serves as one of St. Vincent de Paul's ministers.

When he helped his own parish plan its new sanctuary, he looked for ways to commemorate the congregation's past experiences while also driving members to look into the future. The new space includes art that has hung on the walls for decades, as well as a display of Catholic saints, like Dorothy Day, who inspire social justice activism.

The design process required a lot of soul-searching, according to Rowe-Manning.

"It was like birthing an elephant," as are most decisions that are made by committee, she said, highlighting the extensive survey process used to elicit ideas from the congregation.

But it was also rewarding, because it helped church leaders understand what people really wanted in a worship space and paved the way for Sunday services that now feel like family gatherings, Rowe-Manning added.

Spatial influence

In the past 45 years, Vosko has witnessed a variety of sacred space trends come and go. The current push is toward nontraditional spaces, as historic congregations give up buildings too costly to maintain. New faith communities choose to make homes out of repurposed stores and other groups host gatherings in restaurants or bars to attract younger members.

As Rowe-Manning noted, transitioning away from a traditional space — where parishioners sit in long rows of pews facing an elevated pulpit — changes the feeling of worship.

The circular arrangement keeps everyone close to the communion table. It's no longer possible to lay low in the back of the room, she said.

People returning to organized religion after time away often respond well to unique spaces because the shift feels like a breath of fresh air, said the Rev. Kit Novotny, associate minister at

First Congregational Church of Berkeley in Berkeley, California. She described how one 29-year-old church member used the church's casual Sunday service as a stepping stone back to personal faith.

"It was like a revelation. People wearing jeans and drinking coffee gave her the space to reconnect with God through the church," the Rev. Novotny said.

Worshipping in unique places like on the beach or in a park also helps people understand old rituals in new ways, she added.

For example, the Rev. Novotny recently attended a church retreat at a California campground. At the end of the trip, she had the opportunity to baptize one of the attendees outside, rather than at the front of the sanctuary in a normal service.

"Just being in a different space allowed people to experience this ancient ritual in a new way," she said. "It was really intense, and I wouldn't have done it any differently."

Value of tradition

Because of her love for innovative worship spaces, the Rev. Novotny now leads a weekly service for young adults in a small chapel that her church left unused for many years. She regularly rearranges the chairs, getting attendees out of their comfort zone.

However, the Rev. Novotny also recognizes the need for traditional sacred spaces, noting that she still attends her church's weekly service in the building's sanctuary, reveling in the beauty of the stained glass windows and the organ music.

"I love having both options," she said.

In the sanctuary, people feel "the weight of the liturgy," the Rev. Novotny added. "The solemn tone is estranging for some people. But for other people, it may be the only way they can access silence in a busy week."

Formal sanctuaries, with their tall ceilings and graceful design, have been shown to transport church visitors to a contemplative state, creating the same effect as meditation, said Julio Bermudez, director of the cultural studies and sacred space graduate concentration program at the Catholic University of America School of Architecture and Planning.

"When spaces are well-designed, people can find a connection to God," he said.

In a forthcoming study, Bermudez and his research partners at the University of Utah report that awe-inspiring spaces literally create the experience of awe. The team used brain scans to show that viewing pictures of "contemplative architecture" like the Chartres Cathedral in France quieted people's minds, which, in turn, reduces stress.

"In many churches, the environment will produce atmospheric conditions that propel you, invite you and nudge you into an alternative mental state," Bermudez said. In nontraditional sacred spaces, "you have to work a little harder to get that contemplative atmosphere."

Shifting spaces

Vosko acknowledges that every faith community is unique. Some will be best served by a formal sanctuary. Others thrive when they try something different and new.

What matters is for every church, synagogue or mosque leader to have a sense of his or her parishioners' needs and to plan sacred space accordingly, Vosko noted.

"It's important for all of us to keep in mind that the congregation matters more than the building," he said.

In November, members of St. Vincent de Paul will celebrate the first anniversary of unveiling the new sanctuary. Both Rowe-Manning and Vosko are pleased with how the congregation has acclimated, noting that the new space added vibrancy to weekly worship services.

"(Parishioners) sing better. They say the prayers better," Vosko said. "Everybody sounds better. It feels like we're a large family gathered around a table."

The circular layout also creates a sense of intimacy, making each of the more than 300 people who attend a typical service feel connected to the rituals taking place at the center of the room, according to Rowe-Manning.

"When the priest lifts up the chalice (which holds the wine during communion), he turns in a circle with it," she said. "I see reflected in that chalice all the people in the congregation. It's kind of a goose pimple experience."

The morality of playing God with your baby's DNA

March 29, 2015

Male or female? Brown eyes or green? Intelligent, athletic or both?

Most parents have some idea of who they would like their child to be — and someday science could let them decide.

"It seems like science fiction," said John Evans, a professor of sociology at the University of California, San Diego, describing the possibilities created through reproductive genetic technologies.

At one point, so did screening for genetic diseases or using in vitro fertilization. But over the last 25 years, scientists have refined a process called preimplantation genetic diagnosis (PGD), making it possible to test for disorders like Tay-Sachs disease or cystic fibrosis in embryos created in a lab. The procedure is widely praised for its ability to eliminate these sources of human suffering, as only healthy embryos are implanted in the woman's womb.

As with abortion and other reproductive issues, the ethics of PGD are murky, and they're bound to become even more complicated, Evans said, if and when geneticists isolate the genes that determine intelligence and other, more superficial traits. Already 50 percent of U.S. adults think using genetic modifications to reduce the risk of serious diseases in offspring represents "taking medical advances too far," and 83 percent say the same about making the baby more intelligent, according to a recent survey from Pew Research Center.

The potential for PGD to enhance an embryo is difficult to grasp, especially for the many Americans who are unaware of the reproductive technologies that already exist. Evans and other academics, as well as leaders of religious communities, are raising awareness of the issue, asking people to consider the ethics of a procedure that could eventually — and, for some, already does — feel like playing God.

"It's like, 'OK folks, let's take stock,'" said Ronald Cole-Turner, a Pittsburgh Theological Seminary professor and ordained minister in the United Church of Christ. PGD can't yet produce a more intelligent or athletic child, "but it seems to be where we're going."

The process of PGD

Reproductive genetic technologies steadily advanced during the 20th century, evolving from genetic counseling that identified an individual's risk of passing on disorders to techniques like PGD that mitigated that risk through selective implantation.

Karen Litwack, senior adviser for national and educational initiatives at the Center for Jewish Genetics, remembers being tested for the enzymes associated with Tay-Sachs disease in the mid-1970s. The disorder progressively destroys neurons in the brain and spinal cord, often leading to death during childhood. Although rare, Tay-Sachs disease disproportionately affects Ashkenazi Jews, or Jews whose ancestors lived in central and eastern Europe.

At the time of Litwack's test, the goal was to determine who was a carrier of the disorder, with no options for future reproductive decisions beyond using birth control or having a partner tested as well. Couples might quietly break up if they both tested positive for the enzymes, but the ethical guidelines for making reproductive decisions were foggy.

"It really stayed that way, to the best of my knowledge, until about the 1990s," Litwack said. "Then, there were breakthroughs in finding the genes for disorders like Tay-Sachs," which allowed geneticists to create new possibilities for affected couples to reproduce with a reduced risk of passing on disorders.

In PGD, a couple turns over egg and sperm samples to a lab. Fertilization happens outside of the woman's body so that doctors can isolate embryos that don't carry the disease.

"As long as the problematic trait is recessive — and many of these diseases are — only a quarter of the embryos will express the disease," Evans said, calling to mind high school biology lessons on Gregor Mendel. "Half will be carriers and a quarter of them won't be affected at all."

The procedure is no more invasive than IVF, but it involves the destruction of at least three-quarters of the embryos. Evans said that's why some religions, including Catholicism, would reject PGD at face-value, because their official teaching is that all embryos represent human life.

However, for many people, PGD inhabits a moral grey area. Its ability to avoid the suffering caused by genetic disorders is viewed by many as a cause for celebration, Evans said, including some religious people who might otherwise protest embryonic death.

"In contemporary society, human health and the reduction of suffering is really one of the most powerful ideas. It's quite hard to argue against," he said.

Healing vs. enhancement

Due to its high cost and the small size of the population impacted by the disorders it's able to address, PGD has maintained a low profile. Discussions on the ethics of its use generally stay in scientific or academic circles, Evans said, even though America has a history of fiercely debating reproductive issues like abortion.

"People haven't really been concerned about it, because it's still a bit abstract," he said.

This abstractness comes from the debate's focus on suffering, Cole-Turner said. Conversations about PGD grapple with what counts as a legitimate reason to intervene, a process that will become more and more complicated as geneticists isolate additional disease-linked genes.

"How do we know what is a disease versus what is a cultural taste or trend?" he asked. "By and large, people take Bible stories about Jesus healing the sick as authorization for us to use the latest (medical) technologies to ... somehow circumvent the symptoms of diseases. But what about enhancing people who aren't particularly sick?"

Cole-Turner offered the example of age-related dementia. For those who have experienced the pain of watching a family member struggle through Alzheimer's, the chance to avoid mental deterioration might seem like a godsend. But it could also be understood as a scientific overreach, one that would change the nature of being human, he said, or violate the first commandment by allowing the "god" of medicine to interfere with God's plan.

Because of its current focus on serious genetic disorders, Evans said most people of faith could think of PGD as "playing God as God would play God." It modifies the human body to address disease, just like vaccines and other widely accepted medical treatments.

Additionally, the healthy embryo selected for implantation is still a natural product of the pairing between the man and woman using PGD, even if a noncarrier of the disease would only be expected in 1 in 4 pregnancies, Evans noted.

He expects that a sustained outcry about PGD, from religious communities and others, will come only when the process enables couples to add genes to their embryos that could never have arrived there naturally, such as a gene that would boost intelligence.

Enhancing an embryo, unlike protecting it from an inherited genetic disorder, can be understood as an act of creation, an idea that makes many people uncomfortable, Evans said.

"I would argue that the moment someone creates the first synthetic human or really creates the ability to influence some genetic quality of children that's not currently defined under health, (we'll see protests)," he said.

However, there's already a community of people in the United States — again, mostly contained in the academic world — who not only predict the ability to enhance embryos, but also welcome it.

The movement is called transhumanism, and its members are well-versed in technologies like PGD, Evans said.

"Their basic premise is that we're inhabiting humanity 1.0 and our bodies don't work very well. They want to consciously create humanity 2.0," he said.

Raising awareness

The most helpful response to the debate about the ethics of PGD is to support better dialogue around it, said Cole-Turner, who wrote the book "Transhumanism and Transcendence: Christian Hope in an Age of Technological Advancement."

He speaks in congregations six to 10 times a year, helping church members grapple with how reproductive genetic technologies can be viewed through the lens of faith.

At the Center for Jewish Genetics, Litwack and her colleagues focus on education. The Jewish community is vulnerable to a variety of genetic disorders, and the organization was founded to ensure people had the resources they need to make the healthiest reproductive decisions.

The goal of genetic counseling isn't to push couples in any one direction, said Jason Rothstein, the center's director. Instead, it works to raise awareness, helping clients understand the blessing of being able to prepare for difficult situations.

"There are so many identified (genetic) issues in the Jewish community," making conversations about screening and technologies like PGD a priority for many in the religion, he said.

Although Cole-Turner would like more groups to be as proactive as the Jewish community, he said one benefit of the relatively limited scope of debates over PGD is that important advancements have happened free from the at-times unfair scrutiny that occurs when an issue is in the public eye.

"Once issues get swept up in the political vortex, it gets polarized and simplistic," he said.

But a lack of engagement on the issue of PGD cannot continue forever, especially as opportunities for genetic enhancement appear on the horizon, he said. The only way to create a healthy ethic around its use is to start conversations now with people of all backgrounds, including scientists, academics and people of faith.

"Incremental advancement is a very human phenomenon. It allows for adjustments, for reconceptualizing and reorienting," he said. "But it's true that it can lull you to sleep."

How religious pilgrimages feed mental, physical and spiritual health

April 19, 2015

An elderly couple rests against one another, quietly reciting prayers from books as wrinkled and worn as the hands holding them. Her lips are lined with bright pink lipstick; he looks like a tourist in his flowered shirt and brown fedora. But the golden crucifix around his neck reveals their journey's true purpose.

Peg and David are pilgrims. They've come to this place to visit God.

El Santuario de Chimayo, a church located about 30 miles north of Santa Fe, New Mexico, is the most popular pilgrimage site in America. During Holy Week, it welcomes up to 40,000 visitors, men and women who travel up to 100 miles on foot from nearby towns.

On this Good Friday, the pilgrims span miles and generations. They trek along crowded road shoulders, carrying babies and water bottles, walking dogs or using walkers.

Some, with stories of past miracles in mind, seek healing. Others, a story to tell.

Peg and David, who didn't want their last name used for reasons of privacy, speak of Chimayo like an old friend. They've come often over the last 15 years. Each visit is both ritual and routine, like reading prayers from their books.

They sit quietly in Chimayo's bustling courtyard, enjoying their view of other pilgrims.

"Nobody pays attention to us," said Peg, 77. She likes it that way. Since her breast cancer diagnosis in November and the chemo treatments that followed, she's been carefully watched by family and friends. But, in Chimayo, crutches, knee braces and oxygen tanks are more noticeable than her gray headscarf with silver threads that catch the sunshine.

"There's a spirituality that you feel here," said David, 80. "This place is special every year."

According to pilgrimage researchers, travelers often use words like "special" when they talk about their journeys. And each pilgrim has unique reasons to describe it that way, depending on where they went and what they were searching for.

"A pilgrimage is a journey away from that which is routine in search of something sacred," said Heather Warfield, an assistant professor at the University of Southern Queensland in Australia. The course can be a famous trail like El Camino de Santiago in Spain or a quiet journey to a place special to a single family.

Pilgrimages can deepen faith or transform lives, impacting people's minds, bodies and souls, Warfield said. They can also inspire more subtle changes, helping people feel more peaceful one step at a time.

Motives and open minds

Pilgrimages have existed for centuries. Religious texts in the Christian, Jewish and Islamic traditions all describe men and women called by a higher purpose across difficult terrain. The Quran teaches that all Muslims should participate at least once in their lifetime in the Hajj, a pilgrimage to Mecca in Saudi Arabia, and at least 2 million make the journey each year. The Ganges River, the city of Jerusalem and the spot where the Buddha is said to have achieved enlightenment also draw millions of pilgrims annually.

However, it wasn't until the 1990s that pilgrimage researchers turned their attention to individual pilgrims, Warfield said. Before then, studies focused on how the act of gathering together in a place like Chimayo can create a new community.

In contemporary research, "the whole idea is, 'I can't define your pilgrimage, and you can't define mine,' " she said. Her own work centers on people who take trips to regroup in the midst of career transitions, as well as men and women who visit their ancestral homelands. No two journeys are the same, but many people describe them in terms of their impact, remembering feeling lost and then found or returning home renewed and refreshed.

In a [2013 study](#) on El Camino de Santiago, a pilgrimage in northwestern Spain, researchers polled 126 pilgrims, asking them to list their reasons for making the trip. Two-thirds cited "seeking clarification" as their motivation, and 44 percent noted athletic inspiration, the study found. Spiritual (39 percent) and religious (31 percent) motives were slightly less common.

Although Chimayo is affiliated with Catholicism, its pilgrims represent a broad spectrum of believers, from men and women who attend church each week to curious people excited to observe the scene and snack on roasted corn.

Ray Romero, 62, who walked to Chimayo from Santa Cruz, has participated for 30 years, summarizing each annual walk as an opportunity for self-reflection.

"For me, (the Chimayo pilgrimage) is a day to think about what I'm doing right and what I could do better," he said. "It's kind of a selfish thing. I get out of my regular routine and walk and walk and walk."

He lets his mind sort through memories from the months since his last trip, trying to be open to wherever his mind wanders.

Warfield said the kind of mental openness Romero described is an essential part of any pilgrimage, no matter the traveler's motivation.

"It's been my experience that Americans tend to over-prepare. We want to know exactly what kind of gear to bring ... and become obsessed with the minutiae. We forget that it's important to go into it feeling that you're not prepared" and that stumbling upon unexpected experiences or ideas is one of the most intriguing parts of the journey, she noted.

On this year's walk, Romero said his mind turned to the many ways he fails to give time and attention to the people in his life. He thought about how to be more present with others, bringing a slower pace to everyday life.

"I want to stop walking past opportunities to engage with people," he said.

Sensing the journey

A few yards from the Chimayo gift shop, 9-year-old Diego Ortiz quietly snacks on the food offered by his godmother, Naomi. He's just finished walking a mile for each year of his life, from Nambe to Chimayo.

"It was a long walk," he said, a smile spreading under his sleepy eyes. "I prayed for our family." His grandfather's been sick.

Naomi Ortiz admitted that friends asked her to reconsider bringing Diego along on the pilgrimage because of his age, but she said it was important for her to pass on the tradition.

"It's a sacrifice," she said. "But it means so much to be in this holy place."

For many pilgrims, the aches and pains associated with the journey are as enlightening as the final destination. The act of pilgrimage is often physically demanding, awakening the senses in a way that rarely happens in everyday life, Warfield said.

"We bring our bodies to the site," she said. "You're soaking in the sounds, sights and smells."

Judy Schaffer, founder and president of [Heroes to Heroes Foundation](#), a nondenominational, nonprofit organization that brings combat veterans on pilgrimages to Israel, also noted the role physical sensations play in pilgrimage, highlighting the importance of touch in awakening personal transformation.

For many, feeling God's presence is a natural part of sitting in a church or synagogue and connecting with other people of faith, Schaffer said. But others, including many of the veterans who travel with Heroes to Heroes, benefit from physically touching something. They can feel the Western Wall or the stations of the cross with their hands, and use all five senses to experience Israel.

"We find ways to make spirituality physical," Schaffer said, noting that the trip involves not just visiting sacred sites, but also planting trees and picking broccoli for the poor. In Chimayo, many pilgrims won't rest until they touch the site's holy dirt, which is believed to have healing powers. They run it through their hands and say prayers for stronger knees or better lungs, and then collect it in Ziploc bags as a sacred souvenir.

Hillary Kaell, an assistant professor of religion at Concordia University in Montreal and author of "[Walking Where Jesus Walked: American Christians and Holy Land Pilgrimage](#)," said pilgrims often look for material objects to take back to everyday life as a reminder of their

journey. It's a way to continue feeling the mental, physical and spiritual changes that took place on the road.

"People are bringing back rocks, dirt, twigs, leaves (from the Holy Land). If you can break it off and bring it home in your suitcase, they're going to do it," she said. "By hanging those things in your home, you get a little jolt of remembrance every time you pass that wall."

Seeking something deeper

It's hard to miss Gerardo Garcia, even in Chimayo's bustling crowd. He's carrying an 8-foot wooden cross he built early that morning, resting it against his shoulder as he waits to see the sacred dirt.

"I made a promise to God when my wife was sick last year," said Garcia, 50, who is from Hobbs, New Mexico. "I told him I'd carry this cross today."

His 13-mile walk was intensely spiritual and centered on giving thanks for God's protection of his wife and family in the past year, rather than asking for some new miracle in the present. Like many other pilgrims, Garcia didn't come to Chimayo to seek transformation. Instead, he saw it as a recommitment to his faith.

Kaell said sensations like recommitment can get lost in pilgrimage folklore, which often preferences the stories of those who report incredible personal transformation. Through her research, she's learned to focus on more subtle changes.

"Sometimes I would try to use words like transformation (in interviews) and the pilgrims would stop me," she said. "It's a deepening. It's a recommitment. Those were the words they really liked to use."

Most people don't emerge from a pilgrimage with newly found religious faith or the desire to become a totally different person. Instead, like Garcia, they use the experience to express or reflect on their deepest spiritual concerns, reconnecting to parts of themselves often forgotten in the shuffle of busy lives.

"What we see is a renewal," Schaffer said. "Our pilgrims regain faith in themselves, in their fellow veterans, in what they have to offer to their families."

After walking through the church, Garcia makes his way to a semi-circle of benches surrounding a small gazebo, joining a prayer service led by Father Michael Sheehan, the Archbishop of Santa Fe. His wife, Emily, and two children have joined him, and they sit together to soak in the priest's message.

Let us give thanks to "a God who calls us from darkness into his marvelous light," Father Sheehan said. A God who takes people from sickness to health. And, in Garcia's case, from Pojoaque, where he began his walk, to Chimayo.

Forever a pilgrim

In her interviews with Christian pilgrims to Israel, Kaell learned that the spirit of pilgrimage lives on in pilgrims long after they've left the trail.

"All of the pilgrims impressed upon me that their stories are ongoing, that they don't have a finite beginning or a finite end. When I wanted to talk to them about the pilgrimage, they wanted to talk more broadly about how they viewed the trip beforehand and the way they'd integrate it into their everyday lives," she said.

Even if they don't come back a new person, the pilgrimage has reoriented their outlook on life, their relationship to their body or their faith in some way. Romero will work hard to be a better friend and colleague. Diego Ortiz will boast to friends about how far his legs carried him.

And Peg said this year's journey will empower her to put her cancer battle in perspective as she remembers how many other pilgrims walked — or limped — miles to experience the sacredness of Chimayo.

Under Chimayo's monument to pilgrims — a statue of a man with a large sun hat and walking stick — David and Peg have traded their prayer book for a plate of nachos, refueling and reflecting on their day and the difficult months of treatment they're ready to leave behind.

However, Peg said she wasn't letting her illness define the trip. Regardless of Chimayo's rumored healing powers, she came to offer prayers for others, not to dwell on her own struggles.

"I was anxious to come. Not so much for myself, but because I had so many people to pray for," Peg said, looking at her fingers as if to count.

"But don't get me wrong," she added, with a smile, "I'm praying for me, too."

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Why one family puts down cellphones, car keys and pens once a week

March 29, 2015

"Shabbat shalom" and "Good Shabbos" greetings ring out as men shed their coats and put on smiles, exchanging stories from the workweek and settling into chairs placed around a small room in a strip-mall synagogue.

In the back corner, two men talk hotel deals. Rabbi Avremi Zippel turns away from the crowd to his prayer book, and the sound of shuffling pages replaces the casual banter.

"I'll send you a link for a discount when Shabbos is over," one of the men says as they turn their attention to the service. The offer hangs over the scene as the rabbi calls the room to order, shepherding in a more solemn air.

It's 6 p.m. on a Friday at Chabad Lubavitch of Utah. Although men and women, young and old, are welcome, tonight's crowd is composed of around a dozen men. They will formally offer prayers for the start of the holy day while wives and mothers entertain guests and finish preparing food at home for the ceremonial meal to come.

The crowd begins its recitation, tripping at times over the prayers' Hebrew verses but forging on under the rabbi's guidance. At this worship service, the transformation is complete.

Out of small talk emerges the sacred, and the sabbath has arrived.

The fourth commandment, found in Exodus 20, directs believers to "remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy," completing all their work in six days and resting on the seventh. It's these verses, along with the story from Genesis of God resting on the seventh day of creation, that inspire the Friday service and all of Shabbat from sundown Friday to sundown Saturday.

For strict Sabbath observers like Rabbi Zippel and his family, following the commandment means spending a day without driving, flipping a light switch, checking a cellphone or running a dishwasher. In the modern world, however, many other believers engage with these words in a different way, carving out time for a two-hour church service on Saturday or Sunday and then moving on to different activities.

Rabbi Zippel, 23, the youth and program director at Chabad Lubavitch, said he understands modern resistance. For non-observers, Sabbath seems like an impossible sacrifice of time, requiring people to turn over a day's worth of potential productivity. And even for him and his family members, who have been abiding by Sabbath guidelines since birth, strict observance brings with it a kind of isolation. It dictates where they live and go to school and the friendships they sustain.

Although Sabbath-keeping is not easy, Rabbi Zippel calls it a blessing, an opportunity to reconnect with family and friends after a busy week and spend time in prayer and reflection.

"You can look at it as absence or as somebody making an active effort to rest, to relax, to put everything in perspective," he said.

Guidelines for Sabbath observance

On a recent Thursday night in Rabbi Zippel's quiet apartment, his wife, Sheina, 22, kneads and braids challah bread dough next to baking pans and salad bowls. The fruits of her labor won't be served until Friday, but everything has to be ready before Shabbat begins.

Jews who observe the Sabbath refrain from [39 categories of work](#), such as cooking and writing, during the holy day of rest. Each restriction is associated with the work required to build the tabernacle, a process described in the Old Testament.

Activities that break the "spirit of Shabbat," such as driving or playing on a smartphone, are also discouraged because the focus of the day is meant to be family and faith, Rabbi Zippel said.

Jewish Sabbath observance has changed slightly over the centuries due to technological advancements. For example, Chabad Lubavitch of Utah doesn't hold Shabbat services in the dark; lights left on before the Sabbath begins remain lit. Additionally, Sheina Zippel can keep food warm by leaving it on low heat.

However, for the most part, long-held traditions remain in place. The prayers and psalms read on Friday night and at a longer service on Saturday morning have been passed down for generations.

Although many Americans view Sunday as the day of rest, Saturday — or its equivalent on early calendars — was the Sabbath for Jews and early Christians, said Craig Harline, a professor of history at Brigham Young University. To distinguish their religion from Judaism, Christians shifted their focus to Sunday, scheduling special worship services and, eventually, adopting their own Sabbath practices, he said.

The rules and regulations of the Christian Sabbath changed dramatically whenever different sects came to power, Harline added. The Puritans, for example, had a very strict sense of the day, banning all sports and play. It's likely that some ongoing stereotypes about Sabbath observance, such as that practitioners must only read sacred texts, originate from their practices.

"There was always a tension between religious groups about what could be done" on the Sabbath, a situation that continues to this day with debates over what counts as a legitimate excuse to skip church, said Harline, who wrote the book "[Sunday: A History of the First Day from Babylonia to the Super Bowl](#)."

The Zippels' Sabbath activities vary depending on the season. There are always synagogue services to attend and meals with family, and in the summer they might take a walk, whereas the winter is better suited to reading or playing a board game.

Faithful isolation

Rabbi Zippel does not always lead Friday night prayers. Usually it's his father, who founded Chabad Lubavitch of Utah in the early 1990s.

The younger Rabbi Zippel moved back to Salt Lake City about two months ago. For the last 10 years, he had been away attending school, first a Chabad high school in Chicago, then college in London and, finally, a year of rabbinical studies in New Jersey.

It's common for Chabad members in cities with a small Jewish population to travel for school. The rabbi's younger sister, Sarah, 13, will depart for Chicago in the fall. Currently, she studies secular subjects like science and math at home with her mom and takes online classes to learn about her religion.

"We learn about the weekly Torah portion" and hear other traditional stories, Sarah said, noting that she's often asked to describe what she's learned each week during Shabbat meals.

Sarah talks about her family's Sabbath observance with the ease of someone who knows no other way. She's kept the day holy since she was born, just as her parents did, as well as her friends and the visitors invited to join her family for Friday night dinner.

To the Zippels, Shabbat is part of the lifeblood of their community and their faith. But the seriousness with which they approach the day can lead to isolation, making it harder to form friendships outside of the religion or join activities that aren't hosted by Chabad organizations.

Although she's Christian, the Rev. Lynne Baab said she's experienced firsthand the awkwardness that can exist between those who keep a Sabbath and those who don't. She and her husband have been observing their own version of a Sabbath since a stay in Israel from 1979 to 1980.

Currently, Monday is the Baabs' day of rest. Although the Rev. Baab might check her email, she puts aside freelance writing projects and other work and focuses on reconnecting with friends, going for walks or just sitting and talking with her husband.

"When we got back to Seattle, we encountered a lot of resistance from Christian friends who heard about our practice," said the Rev. Baab, who is ordained through the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and is the author of "[Sabbath Keeping: Finding Freedoms in the Rhythms of Rest.](#)" People thought they were being unnecessarily zealous because Sabbath-keeping had become so foreign to much of Christian practice.

The Rev. Baab said many Christians write off Sabbath observance as unnecessary legalism. They balk at the idea of having one less day to "keep up with the Joneses" and offer other biblical evidence to avoid the holy day, she said.

At Chabad Lubavitch of Utah, some members only observe a full Shabbat once a month. Others consider it enough to attend the Saturday service.

Rabbi Zippel acknowledged that Shabbat observance is a large commitment, one that seems overwhelming or intimidating to those not used to participating. But he believes accepting the challenge pays off in big ways.

"You really understand and appreciate the beauty of it while you're inside it," he said.

Celebration and sacrifice

Midway through the Friday night service, the men put aside their prayer books and join their voices in a joyful hymn to the Shabbat Queen, or the personified presence of the Sabbath. Chairs are pushed aside to make room for a fast-paced processional as claps and shouts circle the room with the chaotic crowd.

This moment encapsulates what non-observers misunderstand about the Sabbath, Rabbi Zippel said. Rather than a period of restriction or containment, he views Shabbat as a celebration and an opportunity to live out his faith fully and joyfully, free from the distractions of everyday life.

"The song compares the Shabbat to a bride and the Jewish people to a groom. ... It's a lively atmosphere and everybody's in a good mood," Rabbi Zippel said. "The central theme of the whole service is gratitude. We're giving thanks to God for granting us the gift of Shabbat."

It's not that Sabbath observance always feels easy and worth it, the Rev. Baab said. It's that people who regularly keep a day holy can understand the blessings and joy that comes from discipline and sacrifice.

She compared keeping the Sabbath to her regular trips to the gym. She may sometimes dread lifting weights or riding an exercise bike, but the habits are essential to maintaining her mental and physical health.

"To me, it's a myth that we can have good things without some element of sacrifice. They go together," the Rev. Baab said.

Similarly, the Zippels can all name times they felt tempted to break Shabbat. Sheina remembers her frustration, as a child, at having certain toys taken away, for example. But they offer many more examples of how their love of it grows as they get older.

"As my week becomes more packed and stressful, I appreciate that island of time more," Rabbi Zippel said. "And now that I'm married, I appreciate having time together with my wife. We catch up on our weeks."

Sheina echoed him, explaining that she's always been surprised by descriptions of Shabbat that emphasize restrictions.

"It's always been an exciting, beautiful day that we look forward to as a family," she said. "When you're at a Shabbat meal, you don't feel like, 'Don't do this. Don't do that.' You feel like, 'Come! Let's have fun. Let's talk together.' "

And even though Sarah's only stressors are homework assignments and Torah lessons, she nodded along with Sheina's description, saying she looks forward each week to Shabbat time spent with friends or reading her favorite mystery novels.

Welcoming the sacred

At Chabad Lubavitch of Utah, the service ends with announcements and a final moment of prayer. The men make their way outside, some bundling up for a walk home while other, less strict Sabbath observers head to their cars.

Around 24 hours from now, smartphones will be turned back on, hotel deals emailed. But in the meantime, there are more prayers to say and family time to enjoy, another Sabbath of sacrifice and celebration to live out together.

Why do religious people of color care so much about climate change?

January 17, 2015

The Rev. Charlotte Keys breathlessly talks about her involvement in climate change initiatives, both because of her passion for the issue and because of her busy afternoon driving around delivering free meals to volunteers.

Her predominantly black Protestant congregation in Columbia, Mississippi, is helping clean up fallen tree limbs and damaged properties in the wake of a recent tornado — an event she said is directly linked to climate change.

She said air and water pollution is affecting public health and property values throughout her county, and the Rev. Keys considers it her personal mission to empower her congregants and community members to speak up about the ways climate change is affecting them.

"This is a major issue of justice and concern for us because we are living it," said the Rev. Keys, the pastor in the Pentecostal Assemblies of the World denomination and founder and executive director of Jesus People Against Pollution, a grassroots environmental justice organization. "Our community is vulnerable."

Contrary to the prevailing perception that climate change is primarily a cause for upper-middle-class, highly educated white liberals, a 2014 survey from the Public Religion Research Institute shows the highest levels of concern for the issue can be found among black Protestants like the Rev. Keys, as well as Hispanic Catholics.

Compared with 50 percent of all Americans, 73 percent of Hispanic Catholics and 58 percent of black Protestants said they were "very concerned" or "somewhat concerned" about climate change, far surpassing the anxiety expressed by white mainline Protestants (43 percent), white evangelical Protestants (35 percent) and white Catholics (41 percent), PRRI reported.

Researchers, academics and members of each of the faith groups said the disparity in responses reveals how exposure to the affects of climate change through work, in everyday living conditions and from the lectern influences one's views on the issue.

Laurel Kearns, an associate professor of sociology, religion and environmental studies at Drew University, said heightened awareness among black Protestants and Hispanic Catholics is to be expected in a world where nonwhite communities bear a majority of climate change's burden.

"People of color and people who are poor are disproportionately affected" by this issue, she said.

A personal problem

Concerns about climate change within the Hispanic Catholic and black Protestant communities are inspired, in part, by a global consciousness, Kearns said.

Droughts in Africa or floods and hurricanes in South America "catch their attention," adding to the sense that climate change will impact people of color first and hit them the hardest, Kearns said.

As a map of 2012 disaster-induced displacement worldwide from The Guardian illustrates, extreme weather events like hurricanes and droughts are a part of life in countries like Cuba, the Philippines and Nigeria. Even tragedies like Hurricane Sandy in the U.S. tend to have a more lasting impact on minority communities, both financially and psychologically, Kearns said.

There's a prevailing sense among racial minorities that people in power aren't protecting their communities, noted Timothy Matovina, executive director of the Institute for Latino Studies at the University of Notre Dame.

"It doesn't surprise me that (these groups) would very much see that they're at a large disadvantage and that rich countries don't really care about that," he said.

But the major thrust of PRRI's survey was how Hispanic Catholics and black Protestants consider climate change a personal problem, said Daniel Cox, the organization's research director.

The survey showed that "Hispanic Catholics (43 percent) and black Protestants (36 percent) are more likely than white mainline Protestants (17 percent), white evangelical Protestants (16 percent), white Catholics (13 percent) and Jewish Americans (14 percent) to predict that they will personally experience substantial harm because of climate change."

These personal impacts result from the types of jobs held by Hispanic Catholics and black Protestants, as well as the places they live, Cox noted.

"They live in communities that are more likely to be adversely affected by climate change, places like Brooklyn or Red Hook that were hit hard by Hurricane Sandy," he said.

They are often in the neighborhoods known for environmental pollution, living by trash dumps or near factories.

Additionally, Latinos in particular tend to have agrarian-related jobs, experiencing firsthand the harms associated with soil pollution and drought, Cox said.

Correcting assumptions

Matovina said he was surprised by the PRRI data because Hispanic Catholics generally aren't associated with a strong stance on climate change.

"I more often hear (sermons) on immigration, the need to serve the poor in the community or moral issues during my visits to their parishes," he said.

Matovina thought the same struggles that Kearns and Cox credit with getting Hispanic Catholics and black Protestants interested in addressing climate change could actually prevent them from joining the movement.

"Many Spanish-speaking immigrants are worried about surviving from one week to the next. Going to the latest rally on climate change or writing letters to their local chamber of commerce about some environmental issue that sounds to me more like something a middle-class person would do with time on their hands," he said.

Although not doubting that Hispanic Catholics in particular feel strongly about the plight of men and women of color and the poor around the world, Matovina said he wasn't aware they associated those conditions with climate change or that they were conversing about it at an ideological or political level.

"People in local communities tend to think about local cause and effect, not the global problem," he noted.

Cox said that climate change means "a little something different to everyone" and noted that the survey was designed so people could let their own understanding of the issue drive their responses. He sensed that members of racial minority groups view climate change in broader terms than the more academic, ideological definition.

"Latinos are much more likely to see a connection between climate change and a whole host of environmental problems, such as droughts, severe wildfires and water shortages," he said. "Some of those same issues apply to the black community, who are much more likely to live in places with air pollution."

Skepticism about high levels of concern among racial minorities is likely a common reaction, Kearns said, because people rarely associate members of this group with the environmentalist movement in the United States.

"So many people, in the past, would say that environmentalism is a white issue," she said, referencing stereotypical labels such as "tree-huggers."

But when Kearns attends climate-related rallies, people of color passionately carry protest signs and chant alongside white, liberal activists.

Centered in the church

Cox and Kearns highlighted how central faith is to the climate concerns of black Protestants and Hispanic Catholics, noting that the groups reported they regularly hear about environmental issues from the pulpit.

As they did in measures of overall concern for climate change, Hispanic Catholics led the pack of religious groups in frequency of a clergy member discussing the issue. Seventy percent of

Hispanic Catholics said that they "often" or "sometimes" heard about climate change in a church service, compared with just 20 percent of white Catholics, the survey reported.

Black Protestants also stood out, especially compared to other Protestants, with 51 percent of the group reporting they heard about climate change from clergy members "often" or "sometimes." Only 30 percent of both white mainline Protestants and white evangelical Protestants could say the same, according to PRRI.

Kearns called the variations in frequency between religious groups "striking" because shared theological claims seemed to have no impact on the likelihood of a clergy member addressing climate change.

"Black Protestants look a lot like white evangelical Protestants, and so do Hispanic Catholics, on measures that many analysts have said are connected to evangelicals' position as climate change deniers or skeptics," she said, citing factors like belief in biblical literalism and the sense that science and religion are in conflict.

And yet racial differences inspire radically different responses to climate change.

As Deseret News National reported in October, pastors have a powerful role to play in increasing awareness about environmental issues. Climate change activists have said that the movement would be more successful if skeptics heard about it from church leaders on a regular basis.

But clergy members must be prepared to have their messages shaped by the needs of their communities, the Rev. Keys said, an idea that both explains why Hispanic Catholics and black Protestants are more likely to hear about climate change in church and illustrates the importance of ongoing discussions.

"The people in my church are receptive to (hearing messages about climate change) because they live it," she said. "And we have to keep talking about it until God blesses the people in power to understand what's going on."

Finding faith in an anatomy lab

March 25, 2015

The upper level of Brigham Young University's "Education in Zion" gallery houses a small, sunny room of pictures that were never meant to be art.

Spread across four green walls are drawings from "Gray's Anatomy," one of the most influential textbooks in anatomical science. The exhibit, called "Bodies Filled with Light," pairs black and white sketches of the body's systems, veins and bones with verses from the Bible and other Mormon scriptures.

For the neck and its complex muscle structure, Jeremiah 17:23: "But they obeyed not, neither inclined their ear, but made their neck stiff, that they might not hear, nor receive instruction."

For the blood vessels of the arm, Matthew 26:28: "For this is my blood of the new testament, which is shed for many for the remission of sins."

For the bones of the foot, Luke 24:39: "Behold my hands and my feet, that it is I myself: handle me, and see; for a spirit hath not flesh and bones, as ye see me have."

According to co-curator Jonathan Wisco, the goal of the exhibit is to display the miracle of the human body and remind casual visitors along with anatomy students who work with cadavers that the religion-body relationship involves more than varied teachings on what to eat, drink or do.

"We found over 9,000 references to anatomy in the scriptures," he said. "That's more than (the verses related to) agriculture and economics combined."

Although the connections are rarely highlighted, Wisco and other anatomists said religion and the study of anatomy inform one another. Both investigate the mysteries of and have a reverence for the human body, whether exemplified in sacred texts or in scientific labs.

They said their work has strengthened their faith, adding that religious beliefs have played a valuable role in the history of their field.

"Over hundreds and hundreds of years, anatomists have done wonderful things to push people to think, explore and expand their minds," said Jeffrey Laitman, a distinguished professor at the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai. "But sometimes, teachers have gone astray, and that's when the story of faith comes into the picture."

Religion and the body

As an exhibit plaque notes, religious leaders throughout the centuries have endlessly debated which part of the body holds the human soul.

At least in Western traditions, the purification of the soul, or spirit, is often understood as the focus of religious teachings, making the body seem more like something sinful to be cast aside after death.

Wisco cited these beliefs as part of the reason people fail to take note of the incredible extent to which the Bible addresses the human body. By getting caught up in details like proper diets, believers turn the relationship between religion and the body into a series of restrictions, instead of acknowledging that both the soul and body were blessed by God, he said.

"The body is so important to our spirit's ability to learn in this life," Wisco said. "There is no dichotomy. They are completely fused together."

David Morton, the gross anatomy course director at the University of Utah and a Mormon, said he's always wondered about people's tunnel vision when it comes to religious teachings on the body. After all, he sees plenty of precedent for building a larger principle out of individual instructions.

"Anyone in the Judeo-Christian world would agree that committing murder is not good, and being mean to people or hitting people" fall under the commandment, he said.

Morton said specific teachings on what to eat or how to use the body in worship all point to a unifying principle: Treating the body with respect.

It's that idea that links the study of anatomy with religion, he said. Both help people understand the miracles that exist in everything from miniscule cells to the skeletal system.

Laitman said the relationship between religion and anatomy also influences the ethical and moral guidelines that have shaped the study of the body over hundreds of years.

He said moments when morality was pushed aside in favor of scientific advancements are blemishes on the field, offering the example of a Nazi-era scientist who produced beautiful drawings of the body's systems but used cadavers from concentration camps.

Faith-based and other ethical systems serve as important correctives of such problematic practices, reasserting the inherent dignity of human life.

Moral teachings, whether they come from religious texts or moms and dads, "should be a major thing we stimulate our students to follow," Laitman said. "In the end, that's what keeps us pure."

The cadaver lab

Anatomy is one of the first subjects that must be mastered on the path to any number of careers in medicine. Students learn to speak the language of the body like they might learn Italian before taking a trip to Italy, Morton said.

"You don't learn anatomy to memorize the structures. The purpose is to have the knowledge to better yourself" as a person and a future doctor, he said.

And if anatomy is a seminal course, the cadaver lab is its seminal feature. Students learn through seeing and doing, working with bodies donated to the school by community members.

Both Morton and Laitman described the cadaver lab as a kind of embodiment of the ideological overlaps between religion and anatomy, demanding respect and inspiring awe.

Morton takes cadaver lab preparation seriously. He said he spends one to two weeks explaining the ground rules and discussing the altruism of donors, who remain anonymous to the students.

"In my opinion, cadaver lab is an extremely touching, reverent place," he said. "I tell students, 'When we're in there, we're in there to learn. You can talk to each other, but can never tell jokes at the expense of the cadaver,' " like you wouldn't tell jokes at the expense of a religious ritual in a house of worship.

Similarly, Laitman said he often refers to the cadaver lab as "sacred," reminding his students of the importance of appropriate behavior.

"Learning about the inner world of humans carries with it the obligation to do so with respect, with honor and always with appropriateness and care," he said.

At Mount Sinai, as well as many other medical schools, the anatomy department holds a service of thanks at the end of each semester for the men and women who donated their bodies. This past fall, nearly all of the 140 anatomy lab students took part, Laitman said.

He added that he's always amazed by the variety of religious texts his students draw upon when they plan the service. This year, Laitman heard Hindu prayers, excerpts from the Quran and passages from the New Testament.

"Instinctively, they tied (giving thanks) back to their own moral beliefs and their own inner codes," remembering the men and women who donated their bodies with the same language a pastor might use at a funeral, he said.

Laitman said he can understand the impulse to bring religious teachings into the service of thanks and the cadaver lab in general. After all, anatomy, and the study of medicine more broadly, brings with it many challenges, one of the greatest of which is being aware of your own mortality.

"Having some foundation in spiritual beliefs has been a very, very important part of my professional opportunities," said Laitman, who is Jewish.

Personal faith and professional duties

Unlike Laitman and Morton, who teach at secular schools, Wisco is able to openly incorporate faith into his anatomy assignments at BYU, which is owned by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. This year, he capitalized on "Bodies Filled with Light" by sending students in groups to see it and having them reflect on how their experiences in anatomy class informed their engagement with the religious passages on display.

He said the exhibit gives him the opportunity to share his own inspiration for studying anatomy, which derives from his understanding that the human body is endowed with holiness.

"If we were made in the image of God, that means that when we study ourselves, we are studying God," Wisco said.

That idea informs every aspect of the exhibit. Next to descriptions of the body part or system being depicted, Wisco and his colleagues printed questions about visitors' relationships to their physicality. The plaques include additional references to the Bible, as well as the Book of Mormon, the Doctrine and Covenants and the Pearl of Great Price.

They're surprisingly intimate prompts, tied to both spiritual and human concerns.

One wall reads, "How do you feel about your body now?," a question Wisco said applies to anatomy labs and religious communities alike.