

Proposed Title: The Disparaged Prophetic Call: Reimagining Church Responses to Calls for Justice

Description of the Problem:

The Church is shaped not only through its mission, but also by its existence as an institution, with all of the strengths and weaknesses that history entails. Indeed, as perhaps one of the most enduring institutions in history, the Church has accumulated practices, understandings and traditions that support its stability and continuity, but do not necessarily respond quickly or adapt well to changing contexts, new paradigms, or certain kinds of events. The inability of the Church to quickly adapt to such changes means not only that there is an undesirable delay in providing assistance to those in need, but also that those who experience a prophetic call to do social justice work that pressures the Church to speed up are often misunderstood, disparaged, or mistrusted in their lifetimes.

Thesis Statement:

The biographies and writings of those who experience prophetic calls to justice work (often at great personal cost) may offer insight to offset the inevitable institutional tendency towards preserving the status quo.

Summary of the Project

The biographies and writings of Evelyn Underhill, Thomas Merton, and Óscar Romero will be examined to better situate their calls to specific social action, and the conflicts that emerged around them, in appropriate historical and political context. Underhill was disparaged partly because pacifism was unpopular in a nationalist Britain in WWII, but also because her position came about through a personal mysticism rather than the “corporate” church. Merton’s writings against nuclear weapons and the Cold War arms race were deemed “too controversial” or “inappropriate for a cloistered monk” and explicitly repressed, revealing institutional fears of the Church about its appearance. Romero’s advocacy for El Salvador’s poor and disenfranchised and his criticism of the right-wing government was perceived by some in the Church as “too political” because it pushed beyond the Church doors and the “purely spiritual” to address the material contexts that caused suffering. By understanding the historical contexts in which the Church has shied away from the political and material embodiment of Christian teachings—often to clearly embrace those same positions in later decades—this project seeks to provide leaders of the Episcopal Church with approaches for understanding today’s conflicts with a better understanding of how the prophetic call actually spurs change.

Project Purpose:

At the time of this writing in 2026, the U.S. and the world has come to face increased political instability and socio-economic changes that further widen disparities of wealth and power, essentially making the poor and disenfranchised even more so. While the Church is working to address these injustices through many avenues, like many institutions it may have difficulty identifying when established methods of working for change cease to be adequate; it is not easy to try to implement more vigorous work for racial justice, for example, in the context of a broad national shift toward concerns around immigration. In such a context, moderation is not irrational, and the challenges in “turning an aircraft carrier” may loom large. However, it is precisely in the context where practicality and feasibility seem to be most central that the prophetic call may become most important if the Church is to remain faithful to the meaning of vocation in the context of the teachings of Jesus. Through this study, I will show how the voice that sometimes seems too strident for a particular moment actually may presage the stance or response the Church later assumes. Accordingly, having models of such instances, collected and framed with the long view in mind, may prove useful to Church leaders in such moments of internal conflict.

Intended Audience:

This work is intended primarily for church leaders who are confronted with competing pressures of mission (i.e., caring for the poor or other social justice issues) on one hand, and unity or structural concerns that seem to require minimizing conflict on the other.

Learning Goals:

- To explore the prophetic call as distinct from a moral position
- To analyze situations where prophetic calls to social justice have come into conflict with other pressures on the Church, how these conflicts were manifested, and their ultimate outcomes.
- To evaluate what lessons such situations may offer for the contemporary Church.
- To provide approaches for the Episcopal Church to respond fruitfully to contemporary prophetic calls.

Sample Bibliography:

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Preliminary Outline:

- Introduction : Competing Pressures of Mission: Social Justice and Unity
- Chapter 1 : Evelyn Underhill: The Challenges of Mysticism
- Chapter 2 : Thomas Merton: "Too Controversial" A Call
- Chapter 3 : Óscar Romero: Justice and the Role of the Church
- Chapter 4 : Recontextualizing the Prophetic Voice in History
- Conclusion : Approaches for Understanding Prophetic Calls Today

Proposed schedule for the work: In summer 2026, I plan to begin reading. In fall 2026, I will take WRRE 600: Advanced Theological Research and Writing. In consultation with my advisor, I will produce a draft of the first chapter at the end of the course. In the fall semester, I will also focus on structure, research and reading toward my thesis. By the end of February 2027, I will complete the first full draft. A corrected full draft will be submitted to the reader at the end of March. I will complete my final edits by April 15.