

Christians, Neo-Druidic Pagans, and TikTok:  
*How a Fictional Video Reveals Truths about Mission as Dialog and Reconciliation*  
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“Did your church really have *Pagans* worship in your *Sanctuary* on Sunday?”

This TikTok video begins with a blond woman, Karen<sup>1</sup>, interrupting me as I rush to get ready for worship. Not yet buttoned into my robe, viewers can read my t-shirt: “This is what clergy look like.” Despite Karen’s antagonism, I do my best to remain calm. “They wanted to celebrate Yule and they didn’t have a place of their own.” Karen glares at me, accusingly. “But *in the Sanctuary?*” Betraying some annoyance, I reply, “It *is* designed for spiritual services...”

The video features a fictional conversation between Karen and her pastor, but the story of Church of the Good Shepherd UCC in Albuquerque embarking on mission as dialog and reconciliation with a non-Christian partner is true. I chose to use the character of Karen to represent Christians who see interfaith dialog as a serious threat to the institutional church. As Donal Dorr notes in his opening chapter of *Mission in Today’s World*, “they are secretly afraid that their missionary enthusiasm would be weakened by engaging in religious dialogue.”<sup>2</sup>

Behind the scenes, church leadership and I were intentional about our choice to offer the sanctuary for the Yule service. We discussed, for example, that although the church bought the property in 1986, the building sits on land that was once stolen from the Tewa People.<sup>3</sup> The church also rests at the base of a mountain that has long been a sacred site for Indigenous people of the area. Dorr emphasizes the “prior presence of the spiritual values and of the Spirit of God

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<sup>1</sup> “Karen” is a “meme” of an entitled, judgmental white woman. I have mixed feelings about the newer trend of “Karen” to disparage women generally; however, I still find her to be a convenient shortcut in short videos.

<sup>2</sup> Donal Dorr, Chapter 1 “Dialogue”

<sup>3</sup> <http://npshistory.com/publications/rigr/nmgsg-35fc-283.pdf>

in those who have not yet heard the Gospel.”<sup>4</sup> Church leadership likewise noted that the Tewa gods were worshiped in Albuquerque long before Jesus was, and the Spirit of God was at work among them long before we arrived. Church leaders affirmed that the land was God’s sacred domain, and that the Spirit could work through non-Christian traditions there.

For better or worse, wearing clergy garb while making the claim that Neo-Druidic Pagans have spiritual gifts to share adds power to my statement. Robert de Nobili famously dressed as a Brahmin religious leader, and was able to inculturate himself into Indian society not only with language, but with the way he dressed.<sup>5</sup> For my primarily American audience, a robe and stole identify me as a Protestant clergy person connected to the institutional church.

The stole I wear in this video is red and includes the black comma, used by the United Church of Christ since 2005 to represent the slogan “God is still speaking.”<sup>6</sup> Red may be liturgically inappropriate in January, but it is thematically on target as a representation of the Holy Spirit spreading like fire to TikTok. As Bevans and Schroeder note, the church was not created in a single moment of time on Pentecost, but “as the disciples of Jesus gradually and painfully realize that they are called beyond themselves to all people.”<sup>7</sup> On TikTok, the movement of the Holy Spirit is ongoing and as Bevans and Schroeder put it, “alive in the proclamation of the Gospel.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Dorr, *Mission as Evangelization*, “Prior Presence of the Spirit.”

<sup>5</sup> Robert, Dana. *The Revitalization of the Catholic Missions*. Chapter 2, Vernaculars and Volunteers, 1450-

<sup>6</sup> The saying was part of a 2005 UCC ad campaign that used a Gracie Allen quote: “Never place a period where God has placed a comma.” The “God is still speaking” campaign emphasized that God was still revealing truth to the world in new ways. Many UCC churches, including COGS, continue to use the comma and “God is Still Speaking” materials.

<sup>7</sup> Bevans and Schroeder, Chapter 1, “Missionary by Its Very Nature,” *The Acts of the Apostles: The Church Emerging in Mission*

<sup>8</sup> Bevans and Schroeder, Chapter 1, “Missionary by Its Very Nature,” *The Acts of the Apostles: The Church Emerging in Mission*

While I may represent some aspect of the institutional church hierarchy for viewers, the congregation represents the larger Church. They are not pictured, yet they serve as a powerful reminder that it is not just one clergywoman, but also a body of Christians performing mission as reconciliation. In the video, Karen goes on to express shock that members of the church chose to attend the Yule service. I respond by explaining to her how the church participating embraces mission as dialog and reconciliation. “Remember our Christian ancestors are responsible for forced conversions, extreme violence, and cultural genocide against Pagan believers?” I say. “It took a *lot* for them to meet in a Christian church to begin with. If Neo-Druidic Pagans from my neighborhood want a place to hold a service, *of course*, we’ll offer our sanctuary as a tiny gesture of goodwill and reconciliation. And if they are courageous enough to open their sacred rituals to Christians who want to listen and learn, you better believe members of my church are going to show up to do just that.”

Bevans and Schroeder write, “The church only emerges as the church when it becomes aware of its boundary-breaking mission not just to Judaism but to all peoples.”<sup>9</sup> By mentioning the congregation’s participation in the Yule service, I invite the audience to witness a congregation becoming Church. Viewers get to celebrate a Christian community that “points beyond itself”<sup>10</sup> and is living into its mission, which includes both dialog and reconciliation.

Offering presence and space is a good start, a nod to Dorr’s concept of mission as dialog, but it is not the same as reconciliation. In his article “God’s Mission as Praxis for Healing and Reconciliation.” Paul John Isaac writes, “The activity of reconciliation is an ongoing process that combines, for example, witnessing and telling the truth, exposing the lie, healing memories,

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<sup>9</sup> Bevans and Schroeder, Introduction

<sup>10</sup> Bevans and Schroeder, Part I, Constants in Context: Biblical and Theological Foundations

justice, and forgiveness. Without these components, reconciliation is incomplete.” Dorr adds that in the case of unbalanced relationships, there must also be an acknowledgment that one group with more power victimized another. He writes, “[Reconciliation] calls for forgiveness and understanding on both sides. But there must also be a clear recognition by both sides that there has been a fundamental inequality and oppressiveness in the relationship...It has two stages: first the recognition of the injustice; and following that, the restoration of a good relationship between the former victim and the oppressor.” The video allowed me, as a stand-in for Christian leaders, to acknowledge the sins of the past and give viewers hurt by the church someone to confront in their work of healing and forgiveness.

Bevans and Schroeder note the close connection between mission and liturgy as well.<sup>11</sup> Off-screen, the Church Council understood that for reconciliation to begin, it was not enough to just show up and be present with our Pagan siblings. It was also important to acknowledge the history of abuse against Pagans by Christians. The decision was made to speak to that history in worship, in prayer, in an email to church members, and in a statement to members of the Neo-Druidic community.

Acknowledging the ugliness of Christians’ past actions has an impact on Karen in the video as well. Humbled, she takes a step down from her position of superiority and begins to listen.<sup>12</sup> She begins to model what David Bosch calls “bold humility,” which is “modeled after mission in Christ’s way of humility and self-emptying and bold proclamation of God’s ‘already’ and ‘not yet’ reign.”<sup>13</sup> This shift can be seen in almost all of my videos featuring Karen, so

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<sup>11</sup> Bevans and Shroeder, *Implications for the theology of mission today*, Chapter 3, *Mission in the Early Church*

<sup>12</sup> Dorr, Chapter 12, *Witness and Proclamation as Prophetic Dialog*, “Proclamation”

<sup>13</sup> Dorr, Part III, “Mission as Prophetic Dialog”

regular viewers will recognize this moment as the beginning of Karen's path toward her own healing and redemption. It is also an opportunity for viewers who began the video resonating with Karen's perspective to follow her example and find movement toward grace.

Karen's trajectory also gave me space to experience some personal reconciliation with God. While Bevan and Schroeder identify individual reconciliation with God primarily with Type A theology,<sup>14</sup> is still something I find helpful, especially if I can share my journey with others and inspire them to experience God's grace themselves. Karen represents the part of myself that grew up hearing Christian exclusivism and discrimination against Pagans. By playing both the role of the pastor and Karen in the video, I am forced to confront the parts of myself that continue to be closed off to the possibility of transformation through interfaith exchanges. Karen's character is therefore not only a foil for a more inclusive model of mission as dialog; she is also an opportunity for personal confession, repentance, and grace.

As she moves toward curiosity, Karen asks about the Yule service. "What was it like...?" "Incredibly meaningful," I say, "although I left with mixed feelings." I go on to express sadness that my Protestant tradition lacks a service honoring female saints of the church. In his discussion of religion as dialog, Dorr contends that "No religious believer has the right to say: 'Our religion is complete in itself, in the sense that we have nothing significant to learn from the others.'"<sup>15</sup> By discussing my takeaways from the Yule service, I echo his affirmation and point out that Christians can enrich their faith through dialog with others. I am also modeling that it is okay to be critical of the church, the hope being others will feel empowered to think critically, participate in theological reflection, and dive deeper into their faith. Bevan and Schroeder

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<sup>14</sup> Bevans and Schroeder, Chapter 2, You are Witnesses of these things, "Salvation in type A Theology"

<sup>15</sup> Dorr, Chapter 1, Dialog, "Each has a Gift"

capture the importance of empowering others when he writes, “Today it is clear among *all* the churches that churches are called to speak *to* and *for* the poor and marginalized, to empower them to speak with their own voice, and to be with them in an option of solidarity and praxis.”<sup>16</sup>

Bevans and Schroeder are clear that the goal of the church is not “recruiting new church members simply for the sake of the church,”<sup>17</sup> but by the end of the video, Karen is not quite free of her fears for the future of the institutional church. “So are you going to be a Pagan then?” she asks. I reassure her. “No. Christianity is still my tradition. But I mourn that so much of the divine feminine was systematically crushed in my tradition. And it made me think about how we might bring some of that of that back.”

As the writer, I now have the privilege of helping Karen grow in her understanding quickly. At the beginning of the video, Karen is a caricature of Christian anxiety, exclusivism, and judgment against people of other faiths. By the end, she is still worried about the institutional church, but she can also imagine how Pagans might enrich the Christian faith. She closes: “So Pagans worshipping other gods and honoring their ancestors in your church ironically brought you closer to some understanding of the Divine in your own tradition?” “Yeah,” I say. “That’s actually kinda cool,” she says.

The video is a fictional sketch, but the actions of the church in the real world and the dialog about the video itself had a much broader impact. Video comments reveal a collective sigh of relief alongside a deep sense of gratitude and genuine healing. One person writes, “When you hear ‘love thy neighbor’ this, this is what it should be. And it’s beautiful.” Another writes, “I am sobbing. This struck me so hard. Absolutely beautiful and how I wish things were everywhere.”

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<sup>16</sup> Chapter 12, Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation as Prophetic Dialog, “Justice”

<sup>17</sup> Bevans and Schroeder, Part I, “Constants in Context: Biblical and Theological Foundations”

Below that comment, a member of my church comments “Hopefully, this is just the beginning.” Someone else writes, “As a Pagan, I’d love to visit and share my thanks.” A church member replies “I’ll save you a seat! Watch out for Judith; she’ll try to get you on a committee!” That church member, fittingly named Grace, is Neo-Druidic Pagan who came to prove the church could not possibly be as loving as it claimed. The Spirit surprised her. She has since joined the church, where she attends Bible study, leads a small group, and serves in leadership.

This paper only begins to explore just one example of a community living into Christian mission as dialog and reconciliation. While reconciliation between particular communities and God is a beautiful beginning, it does not have to be the limit of God’s healing work. Observers may also be transformed when they witness Christian accountability and growth alongside the forgiveness and grace of historically oppressed groups. Bevan and Schroeder write that the point of the church “is to point beyond itself, to be a community that preaches, serves and *witnesses* to the reign of God.”<sup>18</sup> As witnesses to the story and participants in dialog about it online, the TikTok audience had the opportunity to continue in the work of mission. TikTok stories of local churches doing dialog and reconciliation are fertile ground for further exploration into the role of witnessing, storytelling, and testimony in Christian mission.

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<sup>18</sup> Bevan and Schroeder, Part I, “Biblical and Theological Foundations,” emphasis mine

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