

# Introduction

Dear Reader,

Shortly after General Convention in 2018, the United Thank Offering Board and Staff discussed the prominence of gratitude within social conversations and marketing. While we were thrilled that gratitude was rising in awareness, we were saddened to see that it continued to be distanced from the theological reality that *gratitude is a Christian virtue*. UTO was founded on the idea that everything is a gift from God and when we recognize those gifts and make thank offerings, our blessing become blessings for others. Since 1883 when the first thank offering was collected, UTO has collected over 145 million dollars, all of which has been given away as grants to support innovative mission and ministry. These thank offerings, to me at least, embody the idea that we are the gifts of God for the people of God. Our moments of rejoicing can become a powerful force of justice. For example, a thank offering given for the birth of child became a Neo Natal Intensive Care Unit (NICU) in Palestine. This grant meant that babies who would have died on the many hour journey to a NICU are now able to thrive. Gratitude connects us, changes us, and changes our world, but only when we practice it. We can't simply think about it, we must pray and act for gratitude to be realized. This belief that prayer and action are a necessary part of gratitude fueled the discussion around how to better teach gratitude.

When we approached the Anglican Theological Review, Bexley-Seabury, and Canon Chuck Robertson to help us with this task, we had no clue that we would be doing it in the midst of global pandemic. The original plan was to hold a gratitude conference in Chicago in the Spring of 2020. As you can imagine, we went from a small, in-person conference to a massive, online event. I still give thanks for the hundreds of people who gathered on Saturday on Zoom while sheltering at home to listen to the scholars' presentations. After the presentations, our work continued –

# STUDY GUIDE

For use with:

The United Thank Offering Scholars  
Conference Videos + Papers from the  
Anglican Theological Review

UNITED THANK OFFERING



# A theology of gratitude for rising generations

## Stephanie Townes

several of the scholars participated in virtual events to talk about gratitude, some have continued to promote gratitude through their other work, and some are continuing to work with UTO on furthering the discussion on gratitude as a theological practice. Finally, those presentations (along with poems and some wonderful additions from other scholars) became the 103rd volume of the Anglican Theological Review in August of 2021.

Now that the Volume on Gratitude is available in print, and the scholars' videos are still available on [unitedthankoffering.com/scholars-conference/](https://unitedthankoffering.com/scholars-conference/). We wanted to make an accessible study guide available to accompany the videos and papers. With the help of the scholars, we've put together the following guide to walk you through the materials presented, including a brief overview and a set of questions for reflection, journaling, or small group discussions. We hope that these questions will fuel your curiosity about gratitude and inspire you to either develop your own practice of gratitude (UTO has many other materials to support you in that work), or to consider writing about gratitude, either for publication or simply for your local church newsletters or on social media.

If you have any questions about the gratitude conference or the work of the United Thank Offering, please be in touch. In the meantime, thank you for all the ways that you practice gratitude, or are willing to deepen your practice of gratitude.

**With gratitude,**

**The Rev. Canon Heather Melton**  
**Staff Officer, The United Thank Offering**  
**Autumn 2021**

## Biography

Stephanie Townes (Missioner for Congregational Vitality: Youth & Young Adults for the Diocese of Texas) confronts head on the reality of a disconnect for Millennials and Gen Z with the institutional Church, and examines how a robust theology of gratitude—which she argues should be “second nature” for Episcopalians—can be a powerful attractor for these generations for whom the concept of gratitude is quite pervasive.

2. Are young people missing from your church context? Why do you think this is? Are the reasons in David Kinneman's *You Lost Me* for young people leaving the church similar or different from the reasons you listed?

# Foreword on gratitude

## Walter Brueggemann

### Biography

Walter Brueggemann (Ph.D.) is surely one of the most influential Bible interpreters of our time. He is the author of over one hundred books and numerous scholarly articles. Brueggemann attended Elmhurst College, graduating in 1955 with an A.B. He went on to Eden Theological Seminary, earning a B.D. (equivalent to today's M.Div.) in 1958. He completed his formal theological education at Union Theological Seminary in 1961, earning the Th.D. under the primary guidance of James Muilenburg. While teaching at Eden, he earned a Ph.D. in education at St. Louis University. He has been a highly sought-after speaker. Brueggemann has served as faculty at two institutions in his career: Eden Theological Seminary (1961-1986) and Columbia Theological Seminary (1986-2003). He is currently William Marcellus McPheeters professor emeritus of Old Testament at Columbia. Church leaders find a friend in Brueggemann, an ordained minister in the United Church of Christ. His work inspires, energizes, and convicts, and he often makes time to interact personally with those to whom he speaks at large events.

### Summary

In this foreword, Dr. Brueggemann talks about gratitude as the hallmark of Christian life. This short essay on gratitude presents foundational references to why Christians should not only practice gratitude as a lifestyle but embrace it through worship, and prayer.

- b. Can you think of times in your life when challenges or special events have caused you to look back with appreciative recognition toward your life partner, son or daughter, close friend, or other acquaintance
- c. At Pentecost, Peter receives boldness of speech and part of the Book of Acts records examples of his preaching thereafter. What do you think is meant when he said “This Jesus is the stone rejected by you the builders which has become the cornerstone.” (Acts 4:11)
- d. Share a time when your shift in perspective changed your experience or expression of gratitude.

### 2. Let's discuss how gratitude happens when we make commitments of responsibility toward others.

- a. Are there special times you can remember when you've helped others? or when they have helped you?
- b. In what ways—because of your work—do people depend on you?
- c. Can you think of instances when dependence or support between people has gotten unhealthy?
- d. Have you ever felt like you're being used?
- e. In *Death of a Salesman*, Willy Loman, who has given his life as a traveling salesman, is brought to the home office and let go. In anger he says: “You can't eat the orange and throw the peel away. A man is not a piece of fruit.” What do you make of that statement?

# Gratitude as a Performative

## Armand E. Larive

### Biography

indiscriminate gratitude apart from an understanding of justice and righteousness.” Armand E. Larive, PhD (retired pastor and Templeton Prize–winning professor at Washington State University) makes use of the phenomenological ethics of Emmanuel Levinas and Paul Ricoeur’s notion of reconnaissance to explore the openness that Christians can discover to value the Other through “performative acts of appreciative recognition.”

### Summary

This paper explores the aspect of gratitude that occurs when we give or receive appreciative recognition. Instead of presenting a general theory of gratitude, I looked at how gratitude is a human dynamic that involves ethical considerations and binds human beings together. Through this study guide to the paper, we will look at ways that gratitude is expressed, conveyed and developed throughout our lives and examine gratitude via relatable vignettes.

### Discussion Questions

#### 1. Let’s examine how a shift in perspective can affect our expressions of gratitude.

a. What did Mark Twain mean when he said: *When I was a boy of fourteen, my father was so ignorant I could hardly stand to have the old man around. But when I got to be twenty-one, I was astonished at how much he had learned in seven years.*

### Discussion Questions

1. While giving examples from the Psalms and from the Epistles, we see that scripture assures us that Gratitude is responding back to God’s limitless generosity. What are some moments from your past that help you remain mindful of God’s presence in your life?
2. If gratitude is the antidote to pride, how can this help us deal with brokenness in our society?
3. Reflecting on the hymn: Now ‘Thank We All Our God’” and the story behind its creation, how do you see or approach gratitude during difficult moments of your life?
4. How can the church be a better witness of the work of gratitude to offer a better way for the world?

# Benefaction, gratitude, and reciprocity within the Bible

## Douglas C. Mohrmann

### Biography

Douglas C. Mohrmann, PhD (independent scholar and author of a commentary on the Septuagint version of Deuteronomy) provides a broad overview of gratitude in the Bible, noting the strong connection of gift with the concepts of reciprocity and benefaction in the ancient world. A noteworthy aspect of this connection is how gratitude was less about an internal emotional response and more about “a complex set of actions and reactions” that expressed a sense of belonging within a relational system.

### Summary

This article looked at gratitude as a response to benefactions and how that shows up in Biblical narratives. It is important to note that to understand gratitude within scripture, we need to remember that it was situation within the public context (as opposed to private or psychological). There are four types of reciprocity: familial or how family members engage with one another, balanced reciprocity or between unrelated social equals, general reciprocity or reciprocity between unrelated social unequals, and negative reciprocity when one party exploits the other. The paper goes on to explore biblical stories of reciprocity and gratitude to the Divine Benefactor. Ultimately, we see in scripture that gratitude was a public action that bound people together. Gratitude expressed loyalty or love throughout the Bible.

### Discussion Questions

1. The author generates a working definition of Christian gratitude in the paper. Begin by constructing your own definition of gratitude both from a personal perspective and from a theological one (or from your experience as a Christian).
2. The paper shares that gratitude research makes a distinction between state gratitude and trait gratitude. State gratitude is the act of responding to an actual good, while trait gratitude is responding to the unmerited goodness around us. Share examples of each type of gratitude and how these might be understood from a Christian context.
3. Discuss Luke 18:9-14, what expressions of gratitude do you hear in the story and which more closely align with gratitude as a Christian expression?
4. How does practicing gratitude reflect the presence of God?

# For what shall we give thanks? On gratitude, justice, and the gospel of Christ

*K.D. Joyce*

## Biography

K.D. Joyce draws on a combination of textual word studies, secular gratitude research, and existing theological principles to develop a working definition of Christian gratitude and Editorial 267 the practical implications that emerge from it while carefully addressing the risk of “indiscriminate gratitude apart from an understanding of justice and righteousness.”

## Summary

While much is being said about gratitude these days, it appears that the conversation is struggling to become practice. For Christians, the idea of gratitude is rooted in scripture and expressed through the Eucharist. But what does it really mean for Christians to practice gratitude? This paper suggests that Christian gratitude “is to recognize goodness around and within us, acknowledge that all goodness is an unearned gift from God, and act accordingly”. This means that it is possible to be grateful during both easy and difficult circumstances. Finally, the paper dives into gratitude and justice, because our “Christian theology of gratitude invites us to critical ethical reflection on what is truly good in the eyes of God and calls us to generous response.”

## Discussion Questions

1. Discuss the four forms of reciprocity outlined in the text, where else do you see those in scripture and where do you experience them in the world today?
2. The paper outlines and connects gift and gratitude found in Paul’s 2nd Letter to the Corinthians (8-9). Paul is asking one part of the church to make an offering to support a different geographical region of the church in need of aid. Paul asks for this aid in terms of balanced reciprocity. Where do you see these kinds of requests for help in The Episcopal Church today? How does reciprocity connect the Church across vast geography?
3. Share a story of a time you received gratitude from someone, what did that do for your relationship? Think of time when a gift went unacknowledged, what did that do to your relationship? What form of reciprocity were you expecting, and did it shift the relationship from equal to unequal?

# Institutional justice and the virtue of gratitude

## Nathaniel A Warne

### Biography

Nathaniel A. Warne, PhD (Postdoctoral Research Associate in the Center for Social Concerns at the University of Notre Dame) taps into a medieval understanding of the virtue of gratitude, particularly in the works of Thomas Aquinas, which can provide a helpful lens through which to consider the interplay between gratitude, justice, and institutions today. The exploration into both formal and informal institutions addresses an oft-neglected area of theological study and leads to his assertion that there is “never a time when we are not indebted to someone or something.”

### Summary

This paper explored the relationship between justice and institutions and focused on Thomas’ account of the virtue of gratitude. I showed the role that both formal and informal institutions play in the development of virtues like justice and gratitude. The above understanding of institutions allows us to consider the relationship between gratitude and a number of important benefactor and beneficiary relationships within the hierarchy of virtues which make up the cardinal virtue of justice. For example, ancestry, traditions, communities of vocational practices, churches, or political entities. What this paper has hopefully shown is that, theologically speaking, there is never a time when we are not indebted to someone or something. Further, my hope is that this paper has sparked further questions about the relationship between gratitude and institutions. We have parents or guardians that developed us; we have political entities to protect us; we have churches that shape us and provide care.

### Discussion Questions

1. What stories and rituals from your ancestors have been passed down to you? How have they shaped your life?
2. What does “blood memory” look like in your life? Are there stories from your family that have been kept secret? Has generational trauma been part of your experience? What virtues were important in your family?
3. When have you felt truly grateful and how has that changed your experience of life?
4. Gratitude is shown to have amazing psychological and physical effects on a person. It has also been proven to be something that can be learned and improved. What are some ways you can increase your practice of gratitude? Are there gratitude rituals from your ancestors that you might like to explore?
5. How can your faith community help become places that share and foster gratitude? What rituals and/or practices would increase the way people can share their stories of where they see God working in their lives?

# Miigwech and blood memory: gratitude as a multi-lineage spiritual practice

## Hillary Raining

### Biography

Hillary D. Raining (Rector of St. Christopher's, Gladwyne, PA) calls on indigenous understandings of intergenerational “blood memory”—the guidance we find from our ancestors—to help the Church appropriate a transformative practice of gratitude in lieu of trauma and **worry as we move into the future**

### Summary

In “Miigwech & Blood Memory”, Raining sought to study the effect of gratitude as a deeply spiritual practice. She argued that gratitude changes not only those who practice it, but also the generations that follow. Her paper viewed gratitude through the lens of generational, psychological, and theological studies using the worldview and practices of the Ojibwa Native Americans as an entry point into the study of blood memory – a term that encompasses our ancestral multi-lineage effect on our lives. She also offered suggestions for church communities looking to reclaim gratitude as a spiritual practice in modern times drawing from the Church’s institutional “blood memory.”

### Discussion Questions

1. Taking these as a given, how is it that we can be grateful to institutions?
2. Do the institutions that we are currently a part of show gratitude well?
3. If institutions play a formal or informal role in forming our practices of gratitude or justice, where do you see that showing up in your own expressions of these practices? (Or causing you to not want to practice gratitude or justice?)

# Ingratitude is not an option: gratitude as imago Dei

## Thomas Bohache

### Biography

Thomas Bohache (retired pastor and author of *Christology from the Margins*) explores the discipline of gratitude in the midst of a pandemic by focusing on what it means to be the imago Dei. Drawing on an eclectic array of guides—from medieval mystics to contemporary often-marginalized voices—Bohache points to mutuality and compassion as the key ways in which we humans embody the image of God in ourselves.

### Summary

The thesis of this paper is that gratitude is “hard-wired” into the very fiber of our being. Humans were created in the image and likeness of God, and God was thankful for what God had created. Thus, if we are the imago Dei, we must feel gratitude as God did. The author suggests that one of the key components of the imago Dei is the Erotic, explaining that the Erotic is more than what we do sexually; on the contrary, it adds texture and fiber to every area of our lives, resulting in passion, com/passion, and mutuality. It inspires us to reach beyond ourselves to others, as Jesus directed his disciples to do when he said, “Love your neighbor as yourself,” and as he demonstrated with his inclusive, healing touch. Utilizing feminist and queer theology and biblical interpretation, Bohache demonstrates that the Other is our neighbor and that our gratitude must extend to those who are unlike ourselves. Often, marginalized or oppressed people have the ability to express gratitude in extraordinary ways, simply by virtue of what they have experienced as the Other. The author describes some paradigms that have been proposed for accessing gratitude and thus tapping into our imago Dei, concluding with how we might still empower gratitude, com/passion, and mutuality in the midst of a pandemic.

### Discussion Questions

1. How do you feel about the Erotic being used as a means of exploring the imago Dei? Does it make you uncomfortable? Why or why not? Had you considered the Erotic as going beyond the sexual?
2. Who is our neighbor? Why is it important theologically to consider as neighbor those who are unlike ourselves?
3. Do you agree that marginalized or oppressed people are able to access gratitude in a different way than the majority? How?
4. What do you think of the descriptions of “the fourfold path” of Meister Eckhart/Matthew Fox and the “Simple Abundance” principles of Sarah Ban Breathnach? Have you used them? Would you use them?
5. How do Bohache’s suggestions for expressing gratitude during the pandemic resonate with you? Are you able to think of other ways to do so when practicing social distancing?