

Review:***Circle of Hope: A Reckoning with Love, Power, and Justice in an American Church***

by Eliza Griswold (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2024)

Eliza Griswold opens her most recent book, *Circle of Hope: A Reckoning with Love, Power, and Justice in an American Church*, with a caveat. “Immersion journalism is unruly,” she writes. “It’s like going up to a stranger’s car, and asking to climb into the back seat and ride along for a while.” In 2019, Griswold embedded with Circle of Hope — a Protestant “unchurch” founded by two Boomer contrarians from California — and followed its leaders and members as the church unraveled in the wake of the COVID pandemic and the racial reckoning that followed George Floyd’s murder.

I began my journey into this story as uncertain as Griswold. I had put my own experience as one of Circle of Hope’s earliest members almost completely out of my mind until a few months ago, when a friend sent me an [excerpt of Griswold’s book](#) from *The New Yorker*. As I pulled the article up on my phone, I felt, at first, the flush of a kind of shame I hadn’t felt in almost 30 years. Even those closest to me don’t know much about my eight months with Circle of Hope. There’s nothing quite as fundamentally unmooring as failing at Church — capital C — and, by extension, failing *God*.

I’m embarrassed to admit my shame was quickly replaced by anger, a metaphorical pitchfork and torch. I wanted to read something that left me feeling vindicated for the mess Circle of Hope had made of my life in 1996, when my then-husband and I moved with our two very young children to Philadelphia from its suburbs to live with the church’s founders, Rod and Gwen White, and help establish the congregation. “At last, the truth will be out!” I thought sanctimoniously, while also filled with wonder that the subject had attracted the attention of a Pulitzer-Prize-winning journalist.

It is a tribute to Griswold's insightful reporting — and to the magic of immersion journalism — that I finished the book having expunged most of my shame. My anger? Transformed into something more nuanced and, I dare say, more compassionate.

Griswold weaves her story through her perspectives of the four pastors — Ben White, Julie Hoke, Rachel Sensenig, and Jonny Rashid — who led Circle of Hope's four "cells" (congregations) after Rod and Gwen White stepped back from leadership. She traces the church's spiraling trajectory, one that mirrored the one so many white progressives experienced as Donald Trump rose to power and the pandemic and aggressive policing took more Black lives than white, and we began to understand that we are, in fact, *not* living in a post-racial society.

Without taking sides, she grapples with the cult of personalities that so often plagues organized bodies of faith. You cannot separate humans from the church, and therein lies its promise and its peril. Human beings with a vision and a passion for social justice inspire and motivate. But that passion, when entangled with faith, can also turn into a battle of egos. How does one argue with God, ever? Griswold examines what it means to be white, a person of faith, and to claim anti-racism. As she follows the four young pastors, the Whites hover in the background, still, and she asks, implicitly: What does it mean to share and cede power, particularly when it means letting go of something you created?

While immersion journalism has its perils — of course, people behave differently under observation — it infuses *Circle of Hope* with nuance and grace. Grisold observes, but she doesn't stand apart. The daughter of an Episcopalian bishop, she writes with credibility in a world all too willing to dismiss organized religion.

As Griswold closes her book, the four pastors have moved on and continue to wrestle with the fallout. Jonny Rashid — who had been the most vocal in calling for a racial reckoning

in the church — becomes pastor at West Philadelphia Mennonite Fellowship, where I myself fled years earlier after my young family moved on from Circle of Hope.

There are no tidy endings here — for me or for Griswold. She passes no judgment, and the book closes with a glimpse of the compassion she herself sees at work in the church, when Rachel Sensenig attends Griswold's father's funeral. I walked away with gratitude for having seen, through her eyes, the lives Circle of Hope changed over the years. I also glimpsed Rod and Gwen White in a new light, one that was both more merciless and more forgiving. I was forced to examine my humanity in the life of the church, as well as my own complicity in the gentrification of West Philadelphia. It helped me unpack and ultimately defuse the shame I felt at failing the church. It reminded me that the larger church failed *me*, as my first marriage dissolved, and I had the audacity to date and then marry a Republican — anathema in the Christian social justice circles in which I moved. People of faith isolated me and dismissed me. “Almost every religious community has to contend with a leaky roof,” Griswold reminds us. “Inevitably, the outside world bears down.”

If you were raised in a faith tradition and have found yourself adrift, Griswold's book is for you. If you have ever wondered about organized religion — and if it has any power to do good in our world — this book is also for you. You won't find simple or easy answers here, and that's why it works so well.