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Mindfulness, masculinity and liturgy: a conversation between Bill Paterson and Léon Van Ommen

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ABSTRACT

Bill Paterson and Léon Van Ommen were participants in an online conference in 2021 entitled, *Responding to the Sacred: Liturgy and Gender in Conversation*. These two papers encapsulate something of the dialogue that took place between Paterson and Van Ommen on that occasion. Whilst many people may now be more aware of how women and girls are implicated in liturgical language liturgy, reflecting patriarchal attitudes, Paterson and Van Ommen took on the task of discussing the implications of such gendered language for men. Paterson reflects on the ways in which the carefully structured practices of mindfulness reflect a purpose not unlike that of the Church's liturgy in seeking to provide a 'blue-print for change'. In response, as a teacher and author of work on Church liturgy – especially as this impacts on marginalised groups -Van Ommen highlights ways in which his approach to the liturgy both conforms with and differs from Paterson's practices.

KEYWORDS

Toxic masculinity; gender; liturgy; mindfulness

Bill Paterson: 'a blue-print for change': exploring masculinity with men completing mindfulness and compassion training

Dedicated to bell hooks: RIP 2021

Before the pandemic, I was invited to participate in the conference, *Responding to the Sacred*, that eventually took place on line in April 2021. My contribution was an account, based on many personal and professional experiences, of a form of liturgy that I think provides men with a 'blueprint for change'. Although this conference was set up to address liturgical revision within the Scottish Episcopal Church, the form of liturgy I described, comes from long-term involvement in the mindfulness and compassion training of the Mindfulness Association (MA).[1] Liturgy has been described as a set of 'particular structured actions' to connect to God,[2] whilst others use the term: rituals that enable human beings to connect to their inherent wisdom.[3] For me the 'particular

[1]The Mindfulness Association is the largest mindfulness training organisation in Scotland https://www.mindfulnessassociation.net/ (accessed August 22, 2022).

[2]The Liturgical Commission of the Church of England in its report Transforming Worship stated 'In this report, the words worship and liturgy are used in precisely distinct senses. If worship is the deepest response of redeemed humankind to God's loving purpose, then liturgy is the set of particular structured actions in which worship is expressed and by which worship is released. Liturgy is the occasion of worship' https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2018-10/gs1651-transforming%20worship%3A%20living%20the%20new%20creation.pdf (accessed August 22, 2022).

[3]Campbell, *The Wisdom of Joseph Campbell*.

structured actions' of this mindfulness and compassion training facilitate connection to the innate wisdom of self-awareness; phenomena appearing in the mind; the principle of impermanence; the innate attitude of compassion and respect for interbeing (the connection shared by all sentient beings).[4] As such, for me it is a liturgy for connecting to a secular spirituality. This can be defined as 'the adherence to a spiritual philosophy without the advocation of a religious framework; it considers one's relationship with the self, others, nature, and whatever else one considers to be the ultimate'.[5] As a practitioner (over 11 years), teacher (7 years), supervisor (3 years) and researcher into men's experiences of the MA's mindfulness and compassion training, my view of this set of structured actions links them to the values of autonomy, belonging, equality, interdependence, limited hierarchy, impermanence, curiosity in not knowing, and the co-creation of understanding, where the language is gender neutral.[6] I have a PhD in Philosophy and for sixteen years I wove critical perspectives, such as feminist and Gramscian approaches, into my research and all the undergraduate and postgraduate courses I taught in universities across Scotland. This involved using concepts of gender[7] and patriarchy[8] to empower students to look at their lived experience and ask the 'cardinal question of political life concerning power and rule, namely: who rules, in whose interests, by what means and for what ends?'[9] But also it encouraged them to consider how these power relations were being contested: what was the potential for transition or transformation and towards what?

Equipped in this way, I joined the Conference conversation about gender and liturgy. I now invite readers to hear how this mindfulness liturgy has impacted on my sense of being/ acting as a man, and how this is echoed in many of the preliminary findings from a research project with men with which I am involved.[10] These findings provide some evidence that this form of mindfulness liturgy enables men to become more open and curious, emotionally aware and emotionally literate. They are helped to develop awareness of their vulnerability and the intimacy necessary for developing loving relationships with the self and others. It is for these reasons I have come to view this as a 'blueprint for change' for men who want to embody healthier and more harmonious forms of masculinity. The paper is structured in the following manner: I begin with bell hooks' discussion of love and masculinity to tease out a framework for connecting emotions, health and masculinities in men. This allows me to make sense of my own lived experience of one type of masculinity, its difficulties and why I started mindfulness and compassion training. I then explain a little of how this liturgy opened the way for exploring other parts of myself, the emotional and loving parts of my masculinity that can connect to

[4]Nhat Hanh, *The Insight of Interbeing*.
[5]Elkin, 'Toward a Humanistic-Phenomenological Spirituality.'
[6]See McCowan, Reibel and Micozzi, *Teaching Mindfulness*; Santorelli, *Heal Thy Self*; and Segal, Williams, and Teasdale, *Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy for Depression*.
[7]I understand gender as 'not referring to the biological difference between men and women but to social constructed masculine and feminine roles and norms, and ideas of masculinity and femininity; the term applies to gays and transexuals and the gender roles which society assigns them or denies them'. See Goodwin, *Using Political Ideas*, 218.
[8]'Patriarch as a political structure seeks to control and subjugate women so that their possibilities for making choices about their sexuality, childbearing, mothering, loving and labour are curtailed. Patriarchy, as a system of oppression, recognises the potential power of women and actual power of men. Its purpose is to destroy women's consciousness about her potential power, which derives from the necessity of society to reproduce itself'. See Goodwin, *Using Political Ideas*, 225.
[9]Held and McGrew, *Globalization/Anti-Globalization*, 58.
[10]See Appendix F.

men as caring brothers. This provides a platform for me to describe, finally, the rationale and inspiration for a masculinity research project I have been working on with a colleague, Dr Kirsty Alexander, formerly of Strathclyde University. I include some preliminary findings. Perhaps the reader will be inspired or enabled, in response, to ask new questions about the liturgy of their own institutions, specifically in this case, the Scottish Episcopal Church. To what extent does it provide men with 'a blueprint for change', and change to what?

Framing men's healthy and unhealthy masculinities around LOVE

As we will see below, an important outcome for men learning mindfulness and compassion is that it impacts positively on their health and well-being. This is in contrast to forms of masculinity that have been identified as causing physical and mental ill-health, which create unhealthy social relations in the public and private spheres of life. Whilst I am aware that there are many ways to conceptualise masculinities, such as using a moral framework (good or bad masculinity), while some more recent work in 'masculinity studies has criticized this essentialist thinking, arguing that masculinity takes a multiplicity of forms and arises out of social interaction, not biology'.[11] In other words, regardless of genitalia, individuals can be free to express how they conceive of their own masculinities as a creative force rather than masculinity being defined in relation to biology by society.[12] It still comes as a revelation to some that there is not one but many forms of masculinity that are enabled or limited by social relations. Acknowledging these important points, I want to focus on what happens to men's health when lived through two specific forms of masculinity, because it relates to my experience of masculinity and the men I have interviewed.

I think that the great feminist writer and activist, bell hooks' work on love and masculinity is very helpful and I will draw on her work here to give a framework for thinking about men's emotions, masculinities and health.[13] Given that hooks died last year (2021), I want to draw on parts of her work that have really touched me, indeed inspired me to write this paper around her call for a 'blueprint for change'.[14] I think it is beyond dispute that the institutions that govern a great deal of our lives, have established values, identities and ways of being that have evolved in response to the needs of men or have been informed, historically, by male ideas. I'm talking here about everything from the institutions of education, family, marriage, corporations, government, to unions and international relations i.e. global politics. I've always thought Simone de Beauvoir really captured this when she wrote '[r]epresentation of the world, like the world itself, is the work of men; they describe it from their own point of view, which they confuse with the absolute truth'.[15] In my opinion, feminist writers gifted us with the concept of patriarchy so that we might have tools to ask critical questions of these institutions managing power relations, and to offer alternatives. For example, it is often argued that many institutions have naturalised and normalised ways of being for men,[16] such that women and children have

[11]See Gray, 'Masculinities,' 107–112.
[12]See McDonald, 'Conceptualizing an Ethology of Masculinities.'
[13]Hooks, *All About Love*.
[14]Hooks, *The Will to Change*.
[15]de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*.
[16]Krook and Mackay, *Gender, Politics and Institutions*.

experienced aggressive, violent and/or emotionally closed fathers, brothers, husbands, partners and strangers.[17]

In response to campaigns illustrating the inequality and suffering perpetuated by patriarchy, many have debated the depth or extent of liberation that can be achieved as a result of limited reforms in the public sphere. hooks however draws our attention to significant issues in the private sphere of life that remain largely untouched. She argues (2004) that in patriarchal cultures men have responded to feminist demands

> in the workplace and sexual world by making room, by sharing the sphere of power. The place where men have refused to change – believing themselves unable to change – was in their emotional lives.[18]

It is this focus on men's emotional lives that I find fascinating and helpful because it represents a very real bridge connecting the individual's relationship with the self and the ability to create relationships, and the quality of these relationships. Rather than asserting that men are evil by nature, there is an acknowledgement of the fluid nature of identities and the role of social norms in creating the conditions for particular masculinities to emerge and change. hooks argues that so many women have experience of men who are emotionally closed, emotionally unaware and emotionally illiterate, that they are unable to love them. It really hit hard the first time I read that sentence. Why? Because being emotionally closed, emotionally unaware and emotionally illiterate stands in the way of intimacy. By its very nature intimacy requires acceptance of vulnerability or allowing 'uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure', and shared vulnerability is key to developing loving relationships.[19] An incapacity for intimacy may be due to past experiences or learned behaviours that have prohibited the individual from consciously connecting to the rainbow of emotions they are capable of experiencing. If an individual has experienced trauma, his/her/other autonomic nervous system might be trapped in the mode of fight, flight or freeze.[20] Consequently, they might not be able to feel safe enough to become familiar with their own feelings, never mind let someone else in to know these feelings.[21]

I feel that men being emotionally closed, unaware and illiterate, fearing intimacy and struggling to create loving relationships with the self and other, dovetails with the term toxic masculinity. Tim Lomas, Cartwright, Edginton and Ridge (2016) define this term in

[17]Violence against women and girls is one of the most prevalent human rights violations globally, directly affecting around one in three women and girls around the world (ActionAid, 2020). In 2018–19, Police Scotland recorded around 61,000 incidents of domestic abuse in Scotland. More than 4 in 5 incidents (82%) involved a female victim and a male accused (Scottish Government, 2020a). The Scottish Crime and Justice Survey (SCJS) 2016/18 reported 3% of respondents who had a partner, or had contact with an ex-partner, reporting partner abuse (either psychological or physical) in the previous 12 months. Overall, 16% had experienced either psychological or physical abuse at some time since the age of 16 with psychological abuse being more commonly reported than physical abuse; 14% reporting ever having experienced psychological abuse from a partner, 10% ever having experienced physical abuse and 8% having reported experiencing both psychological and physical abuse (Scottish Government, 2019b). https://www.gov.scot/publications/scottish-social-attitudes-survey-2019-attitudes-violence-against-women-scotland/pages/2/.

[18]Hooks, *All About Love*.

[19]Brown, *Atlas of the Heart*, 65.

[20]'Autonomic nervous system is the part of the nervous system that supplies the internal organs, including the blood vessels, stomach, intestine, liver, kidneys, bladder, genitals, lungs, pupils, heart, and sweat, salivary, and digestive glands [. . .] The nerves in the sympathetic nervous system help to prepare the body for something happening within the environment and expend energy' see Guy-Evans, 'Autonomic Nervous System (ANS) Division and Functions', and Dana, *The Polyvagal Theory in Therapy*.

[21]Van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*.

relation to unhealthy masculinities and this opens a way to identifying qualities that promote a healthy masculinity.[22]

> Toxic masculinities are identified with attitudes and practices that impact negatively on physical and mental health: 'unemotional, independent, non-nurturing, aggressive and dispassionate … denial of weakness or vulnerability … health-risk behaviours and a reluctance to seek help.'

It is well documented that a life displaying these qualities can create levels of anxiety, depression and stress that inform poor health outcomes. For example, '[s]tress is also associated with abnormal patterns of brain development in key areas, including the prefrontal cortex, hippocampus and amygdala. These are important for learning, decision-making, memory, stress regulation and emotional arousal'.[23] One need only reflect on the recent figures on male suicide[24] and the average life expectancy of men in Scotland[25] and on male violence against women and children, to see the point of this.[26] In sum one could argue that these toxic effects on male health inform the quality of many of the social relations in which men engage, and are reflected in many of the points raised by feminists (that men are, typically, aggressive, violent and emotionally closed). All of this creates barriers to loving oneself, loving others, being loved by others, and promoting good health and a good quality of life for men.

hooks observes that men who are unable to be vulnerable, and in this way, cannot develop intimate loving relationships, are also unhappy because '[l]ove is vital to maleness, to the spiritual and emotional wholeness men seek'. Even though men are unhappy, bell hooks argues, many men do not know how to change because they

> cannot change if there are no blueprints for change. Men cannot love if they are not taught the art of loving. Love is vital to maleness, to the spiritual and emotional wholeness men seek.[27]

What could provide a blueprint for change? I think it can be found in bell hooks' (2000) definition of love in which are identified, the qualities necessary for good health, ways of being and social relations. She defines love as

> the will to extend one's self for the purpose of nurturing one's own or another's spiritual growth … To truly love we must learn to mix various ingredients – care, affection, recognition, respect, commitment, and trust, as well as honest and open communication […] Love and abuse cannot coexist. Abuse and neglect are, by definition, the opposite of nurture and care[28]

hooks argues that when we are given such a clear definition of love, it can raise difficult issues about the word itself. Many people are brought up in circumstances where shaming, verbal and/or physical abuse, and emotional neglect are present, but where they are still told they are loved. She argues that because of this, many people find it hard

[22]Lomas, Cartwright, Edginton and Ridge, 'New Ways of Being a Man.'
[23]Burns, 'Social Failure, Not Lifestyle, Has Made Scots Sick.'
[24]There were 784 probable suicides registered in Scotland in 2018. Male deaths were 581 and female deaths 203 respectively. The highest rate of suicide occurs in the 35–44 age group for men and the 45–54 age group for women.
[25]In Scotland in 2017–2019, life expectancy at birth was 77.1 years for males and 81.1 years for females. The lowest in Europe.
[26]See footnote 15.
[27]Hooks, *The Will to Change*, xvii.
[28]See Hooks, *All About Love*.

to talk about love. This is evidenced by the literature that has evolved in recent years, relating to the widespread suffering of trauma and Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs),[29] that impacts and often emanates from family dynamics. Research over the last thirty years has asserted that human history has both legitimised and normalised violence, such that trauma is widespread in western society.[30]

hooks definition of love promoting spiritual growth, also motivates us to reflect on our purpose and meaning, values and connection with the world or universe. Drawing from Erich Fromm, Martin Luther King and Thomas Merton, she argues that 'loving practice is not aimed at simply giving an individual greater life satisfaction; it is extolled as the primary way we end domination and oppression'.[31] She further elaborates:

> [s]piritual life is first and foremost about the commitment to a way of thinking and behaving those honours principles of inter-being and interconnectedness. When I speak of the spiritual, I refer to the recognition within everyone that there is a place of mystery in our lives where forces that are beyond human desire or will, alter circumstances and/or guide and direct us. I call these forces divine spirit. Some people call this presence the soul, God, the Beloved, higher consciousness, or higher power. Still others say that this force is what it is because it cannot be named.[32]

In mindfulness we call this spirituality awareness or recognition of the awareness that connects all sentient beings – without beginning, without middle or end. It is the life force that generates and connects all life. This has been called interbeing.[33] And it is important to note that this belief in being connected to something far greater than the self, can take the form of secular spiritual philosophy without the advocation of a religious framework. Such a secular view considers 'one's relationship with the self, others, nature, and whatever else one considers to be the ultimate'.[34] A commitment to interbeing is also a commitment to end domination and oppression because all life is interdependent and has value simply by being alive.

In this section, I have tried to explain that whilst some feminists argue that men have been responsible for the creation of social and cultural institutions and for their adverse impacts on women and children, hooks does not condemn all men. Rather, she invites us to understand men through some consideration of their emotional lives including a typical inability to create loving relationships. I think linking this to characteristics associated with toxic masculinities can be helpful, reflecting harm to men's health and to others resulting from men's (toxic) behaviour. More importantly, hooks' definition of love reminds us that none of this is fixed. She enables us to consider that loving relationships could help men to become more emotionally open, aware and literate when they create safe spaces. Below I will argue that these safe places can be based on care, affection, recognition, respect, commitment, and trust, as well as honest and open

[29]'ACEs are traumatic events that occur before a child reaches the age of 18. ACEs include all types of abuse and neglect, such as parental substance use, incarceration, and domestic violence', see NHS (2021). Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and Attachment. [online] Royal Manchester Children's Hospital. Available at: https://mft.nhs.uk/rmch/services/camhs/young-people/adverse-childhood-experiences-aces-and-attachment/ (accessed August 21, 2022).
[30]90% of the population has been exposed to traumatic events and between 8% – 20% of this resulting in PTSD, see footnote 21.
[31]Hooks, *All About Love*, 76.
[32]Hooks, *All About Love*, 77.
[33]See Nhat Hanh, *Interbeing*; and Tariki Trust, 'Interbeing'.
[34]Elkin, Toward a Humanistic-Phenomenological Spirituality.

communication for the self and between men. I'm inclined to see the potential in these criteria for love, for creating the conditions for change and for developing loving relationships with the self and other, not based on domination, abuse, or oppression, but towards spiritual growth of the self and other. It then seems important to consider what would provide a 'blue print for change' allowing men to experience such emotional awareness, self-love, loving others, being loved by others, and connection with the spirituality of the cosmos and all sentient beings.

Personal experience of masculinity

I consider the liturgy or rituals of the MA's mindfulness and compassion training to provide one 'blue-print for change', though there may be many others. In this section I want to provide a personal account of why and how I experienced this training and became interested in researching men's perception of masculinity after mindfulness and compassion training. This is not least because I recognise many toxic or unhealthy qualities were once part of my own public and private life. I grew up in a housing estate in Fife where this particular form of masculinity was dominant. From a very young age, I was confronted with aggression and violence. Indeed, it seemed violence was the answer to most things inside and outside of my home. This was particularly evident during my time in school where street fighting and fighting in school was the accepted norm: 'boys will be boys'. It was naturalised and normalised by parents, teachers and peers. At that time corporal punishment was a socially acceptable form of discipline, and I remember receiving over 100 lashes of the belt over the course of my second year. Given the prevalence of these norms, it was little surprise that my employment at the HM Naval Dockyard, Rosyth was also an experience of a male dominated environment, where alcohol and aggression were rife, whilst working on warships and nuclear submarines. Bored and frustrated by male resentment of the workplace, I left for the glamour of being a hairdresser in Edinburgh. Even in hairdressing there were still a male hierarchy, and aggression amongst men was still evident. Here men would flirt with women while sexual harassment was still normalised and naturalised; men would touch women without permission. Again, bored by this environment and work I left to cycle through France. On my return, I joined Her Majesty's Royal Marine Commandos and, as one would expect, once again it was dominated by male aggression, and women were seen as sexual objects or carers. These attitudes and practices were also evident in the Edinburgh bars and kitchens I worked in throughout the 1990s. Interestingly, even when I went to study at Stirling University, these attitudes towards women were still prevalent, although often challenged amongst students. It was not until I started to study feminist theory that I began to understand that the attitudes and practices that had been normalised and naturalised in my life were open to critique. I realised that unequal power relations were everywhere – not least amongst men and women.

What was also interesting was that in none of these places did I learn how to become emotionally aware, emotionally literate, emotionally vulnerable, or how to self-manage my strong emotional states. It is only on reflection that I realise that, whilst feminist writers I studied had highlighted patriarchy and called for equality between the sexes – equal division of labour in the home, equal childcare, equal pay, with less aggressive, less dominant, more emotionally available men – I was not aware of any blueprint for doing

this. So, by the time I was 32, I still did not know how to change, though it seemed like the right thing to do for my health. This is particularly interesting because my experience of academia was one fraught with anxiety and anger. After completing my PhD, I found that I was offered short term contracts and promised full time jobs that never materialised. I had a young family at the time and neither of my children slept for a full night until aged six. The anxiety created by insecure contracts was exacerbated by sleeplessness. I used exercise and martial arts to manage my powerful emotions, but I never spoke about them. I considered taking my own life to escape the overwhelming stress and exhaustion. On the outside I may have maintained the veneer of the successful academic, loving father and husband, who was athletic, but liked to drink, socialise, and party hard. However, underneath I felt out of control. Eventually my wife told me she could no longer continue to live with an angry man, and that I must change. It was in the midst of all these things, that I made a plea for help, and I was introduced to mindfulness by a friend.

Blueprint for change: the experience of the Ma's mindfulness & compassion training

In this section I want to explain a little about the experience of mindfulness and compassion training that changed or saved my life. Specifically, I want to illustrate how the training encourages participants to develop emotional openness, emotional awareness and emotional literacy, encouraging vulnerability and the intimacy necessary for loving relationships to develop towards self and others. It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss competing definitions of mindfulness or mindfulness training, but it is sufficient to state the following: mindfulness is sometimes defined as 'the awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally to the unfolding of experience moment by moment'.[35] Similarly the MA define mindfulness as 'knowing what is happening, whilst it is happening, without preference'.[36] Mindfulness training involves both specific techniques for experiencing the innate quality of awareness, and learning to develop an attitude of compassion towards the phenomena that pass through the awareness (thoughts, emotions, sensations and behaviour). This contrasts with the mind being driven by automatic and unhelpful habitual patterns of 'doing'. The training involves recognising and cultivating the awareness inherent in all sentient beings. Learning to anchor the awareness on the breath, sight, sound or sensation in meditations enables participants to witness their attention wandering from the present moment of experience, into thinking, stories and fantasies. Participants are encouraged to gently refrain from engaging with the thinking, but rather to observe and let the thoughts and stories go by. To be aware that thoughts are only mental process and are not facts, can help to separate individuals from powerful habitual emotional hijacking and identities of suffering. Similarly, practice helps them to identify and allow emotions and physical sensations to be present in the body without aversion or striving for other, seemingly preferable emotions and sensations.

Mindfulness training explicitly introduces self-compassion practices to develop an attitude of warmth, kindness, patience and non-judgment so that awareness of stories,

[35]Kabat-Zinn, 'Mindfulness-Based Interventions in Context.'
[36]Choden and Regan-Addis, *Mindfulness Based Living Course*, 9.

emotions and sensations are not met with problem-solving, rumination, self-criticism or self-loathing.[37] In this way participants are encouraged to acknowledge that we cause ourself greater suffering by pushing away our difficult thoughts, emotions and sensation, and this can lead to unskilful actions that cause suffering in those around us. By skilful I mean that we create less suffering for the self and others.[38] Participants are then invited to reflect that this is the human condition and that all other human beings suffer, wish they did not and often act unskilfully from ignorance. The key is learning self-management of thinking, emotions and sensations so that more skilful ways of being and living can evolve. A radical new way of relating to oneself, others and all sentient beings is promoted because it explicitly advocates being open, aware and curious about emotions. In addition, during the process of the group inquiry which is a standard part of the training process, participants are encouraged to describe what they are experiencing. There is therefore an invitation to become curious, vulnerable and to begin to develop a language for articulating emotions, physical sensations and mind states to the group. In my own and others' experience, this has created an openness to vulnerability and a warm, trusting relationship with the group. Perhaps the key ingredients for developing loving relationships.

The qualities of the mindfulness and compassion liturgy

In other words, to help develop these loving relationships, I would argue, that mindfulness and compassion training prepares participants through its emphasis on autonomy, belonging, equality, interdependence, impermanence, limited hierarchy, curiosity in not knowing, and the co-creation of understanding where the language is gender neutral. To me this is what is distinctive about the *liturgy* of the mindfulness training I have encountered, and why it is transformative. Here I will try to identify the qualities of the liturgy rationale, and specifically, to look at the idea of a structured action of enquiry in order to illustrate how this cultivates emotional curiosity, supports vulnerability, and provides space to explore a language to express these emotions.

I'll begin by acknowledging that the MA situates the Mindfulness Based Living Course (MBLC) within the secular mindfulness courses that have evolved from Buddhism.[39] Specifically, the MA describe the MBLC as a form of secular Buddhism. The book accompanying the course, assert that the MBLC is distinct from clinical models of mindfulness (MBSR and MBCT), specifically because (a) it explicitly includes a unique emphasis on both kindness and compassion, and (b) the MSc in Mindfulness at Aberdeen taught by the MA is situated in the social sciences and not clinical studies. The British Association of Mindfulness Based Approaches (BAMBA's) is the professional body that establishes the criteria for Best Practice for teaching mindfulness.[40] The MA is a member of BAMBA, and all MA teachers are required to abide by BAMBA's recommendations and Code of Conduct. Equality amongst participants and teachers is

[37]Choden and Gilbert, *Mindfulness Compassion*.
[38]See Meiklejohn, Phillips, Freedman, et al. 'Integrating Mindfulness Training into K-12 Education'; Saki Santorelli, *Heal Thy Self*; and Segal, Teasdale and Kabat-Zinn, *Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy for Depression*.
[39]Choden and Regan-Addis, *Mindfulness Based Living Course*, 16–18.
[40]BAMBA Best Practice. https://bamba.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/GPG-for-Teaching-Mindfulness-Based-Courses-BAMBA.pdf (accessed August 21, 2022).

demanded and practitioners must agree: 'I will not discriminate against people on any grounds. I will challenge colleagues/co-facilitators if I think they are discriminating against people'.[41] I would argue that this illustrates that equality is an essential quality woven throughout the liturgy. Membership of BAMBA is not determined by gender, but by being a human being meeting the criteria of a teacher.

There is also an absence of any gender criteria for access to the MA's year-long teacher training course, and the same values of autonomy, belonging, equality, interdependence, impermanence, limited hierarchy, curiosity in not knowing, and the co-creation of understanding are woven through it. By which I mean to show that 'particular structured actions' at each level of recruitment, training and participation, function to enable the participant to access and own their own unique experience and their own wisdom. The teacher does not speak on behalf of awareness with exclusive access, rather the teacher is more like a steward of the group. Whilst the teacher might be guiding the practice, holding the space for inquiry, the aim is to empower participants to develop recognition and nurturing of awareness of the phenomena appearing in the mind, the attitude of compassion and interbeing. Note the non-gendered language of referring to awareness. The teacher training culminates in a five-day retreat where participants are given sections of the MBLC to deliver to their peers. In this way the retreat invites participants to act as both a teacher and student in a way that is authentic to each. In addition, participants are also asked to provide constructive feedback via peer review of each other's teaching. This sets the scene for how I see the liturgy embodying the qualities of autonomy, belonging, equality, interdependence, limited hierarchy, curiosity in not knowing, and the co-creation of understanding where the language is gender neutral.

The MA provides all participants in teacher training with a Teaching Skills Manual (2013). Here there are clear instructions detailing processes for creating the environment and ways 'to be with' the participants with compassion and without judgment. This liturgy is also reinforced with key texts.[42] Here we see great importance placed on the forming of a circle with participants for the practice and teaching of mindfulness. Historically, this is a symbol of wholeness or completeness 'where the group are exploring mindfulness together'.[43] Sessions are not opportunities for didactic lectures, rather the participants are invited into a process where they are co-creators of knowledge and understanding about their experience. Here, again, the teacher is more of a facilitator engaged in stewardship of the group, encouraging each participant to engage in the practice of meditation, and then to share experiences of that practice. Collectively members are invited to participate in mindfulness meditation and engage in a specific form of dialogue (inquiry) interspersed with teaching points (didactic in part). After the practice, the teacher invites participants to be open and vulnerable by sharing their experience of the practice with the group. The teacher then inquires via open questions into thinking, emotions, sensations and attitudes related to the experience. This is intended to empower the participant to develop a deeper awareness of their unique experience. Respect is shown as the whole group has agreed to listen to each other within the silence, stillness and spaciousness created by the group. As McCowan, Reibel and

[41]BAMBA Code of Conduct https://bamba.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/BAMBA-Code-of-Conduct-V1-March-2019.pdf (accessed August 21, 2022).
[42]McCowan, Reibel and Micozzi, *Teaching Mindfulness*; and Kramer, *Insight Dialogue*.
[43]McCowan, Reibel and Micozzi, *Teaching Mindfulness*, 164.

Micozzi (2010) point out, this can cause a reordering of relationships and challenge preconceived social identities,

> as socioeconomic and educational attainment are revealed to be of little use in meeting the challenges of the curriculum. This intensifies the sense of liminality of the group, which is coming together for purposes of transformation, suggesting developments of *communitas* [. . .] Participants might become aware of and open to a more egalitarian, democratic perspective because . . . everyone in the class can become more aware of and open to their experience. This equal capacity runs counter to Western society. Second, as the work of exploring one's experience in the moment begins, words fail – for everyone . . . in the hands of the teacher as much as anyone else's . . . everyone is in the same boat".[44]

I feel this draws attention to the way the liturgy encourages participants to experience the impermanence of identities. In a safe and compassionate environment, identities and ways of being that are often taken on to protect ourselves from vulnerability and intimacy can become loosened. As trust is built in the group and with practices for the cultivation of kindness and compassion, it is possible to experience identities as not fixed but fluid with possibilities for choice and change. In sum, in this section I have tried to highlight the qualities woven through the liturgy of the MA's mindfulness and compassion training (autonomy, belonging, equality, interdependence, impermanence, limited hierarchy, curiosity in not knowing, and the co-creation of understanding that is gender neutral).

Masculinity research project

I was also very aware that many men around me felt the same way, and I experienced this through my mindfulness and compassion teaching. I've now been practicing mindfulness and compassion for over 11 years and I've been teaching mindfulness and compassion for about 7 years. I've worked at the frontline of mental health teaching Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy to populations of anxiety and depression in adults and young people. I've been working for the last four years with paramedics, the police and military veterans. In contrast to previously predominantly female classes, in these situations, more men have volunteered to participate. Working more with men made me realise that toxic forms of masculinity, lay behind a lot of the suffering they experienced. By chance, some years ago, I was at a festival where there was a Mankind Project (MKP) tent. Curious about what they were doing I went along to a morning check in. It was fascinating, inspiring and humbling to be in the presence of 40 men, taking it in turns to explain how they were feeling that day. This motivated me to sign up for the MKP Warrior Weekend (initiation into masculinity) in November 2018 with over 160 other men. Here I really felt that other men were like caring brothers and not competitors, critics or opponents. However, I also felt that MKP lacked tools practices or fully articulated intentions for letting go of the kind of learned qualities/identities that limit potential for kindness to the self and all other beings. In short it was missing the mindfulness and compassion training that I'd felt had opened my closed and contracted self. By opening in this way, I had realised that it is possible to witness the transient nature of limiting qualities and identities when they are accepted with kindness. And this opening had provided me with an opportunity to see/feel that all sentient beings are

[44]McCowan, Reibel and Micozzi, *Teaching Mindfulness*, 164.

interconnected as they do not want to suffer, be excluded or disliked. It made me want to explore whether other men had experienced this too.

I shared this experience of transforming masculine identities with a friend and research colleague specialising in gender studies – Dr Kirsty Alexander. Having completed the MBLC and CBLC she understood what I was saying. In light of debates around toxic masculinity, I'd long said that violence against women and children will never end until men are able to meet themselves and each other with kindness, respect and understanding We agreed that it would be a great research project to ask men with similar training, what had been the impact on their sense of being a 'man'. This gave birth to our research project in the Spring of 2019. We put out a call on the MA website for volunteers interested in answering questions about masculinity. Criteria for participation in the research was based on 1. self-identified as male, and 2. having completed MA mindfulness and compassion training. Within two weeks we had 10 participants.

The demographic characteristics of these men are interesting. Most of our participants are over fifty. Most identify themselves as white British. A few identified as white Scottish. All bar one have a postgraduate degree. All bar one, identify themselves politically as liberal or left wing. All of the men are either in full time employment or retired, and thus perhaps financially secure. Each man was interviewed twice in the space of 3 months. In the first round of interviews the men were asked about why they started mindfulness and compassion training, who supported them, what they had learned and what good health look like to them. Before the second round of interviews, we asked the men to read and consider two short paragraphs on masculinity (see Appendix A–C). During the interviews we then asked what had happened, if anything, when they had completed this reading. We then asked questions about what masculinity looked like to them, and if and how their perceptions of masculinity had changed through the mindfulness and compassion training. The interviews were conducted in the same manner as the mindfulness inquiry process described above; using moments of silence to create space, encouraged an open exploration of each question. Some of the men were moved to tears as they shared painful memories and experiences. Some spoke of being surprised by their own answers to the questions and of seeing something in themselves that was not there before the interview.

We acknowledge that our sample is a small and very specific group of men. Unfortunately, COVID restrictions and the commitments and changes that this created, resulted in real difficulties for us, holding up the process of transcribing all 30 hours of recorded interviews, coding and then evaluating them properly. Regardless, below are some overviews of the preliminary findings (Appendix D offers a selection of quotes from participants during the interviews that illustrate forms of masculinity that were damaging, and the impact of mindfulness practice).

Preliminary findings

Many of the men spoke of unhealthy ways of being, pre-mindfulness and compassion training. For some men this included anger, aggression, isolation, being emotionally closed and the use of drugs and alcohol to escape their suffering. For many there was a recognition of being in alpha-male encounters with men in the workplace, where being emotional or vulnerable was seen as a weakness; something never to be admitted or

shared. Through the mindfulness and compassion training, many of the men discussed their experiences of becoming emotionally aware, emotionally literate, emotionally vulnerable and of learning how to self-manage their emotional states. Nearly all of them felt they were learning care, affection, recognition, respect, commitment, and trust, as well as honest and open communication and that this had had a significant impact on their relationships with themselves, as well as friends and family – women and children.

Masculinity in the mindfulness community

In 2020, I was invited to deliver a session on masculinity to the Mindfulness Association's 10th Anniversary Members' Conference. As this was during lockdown over 400 members participated in the conference and almost 100 members of all genders took part in the workshop. I took notes of what emerged from the discussions and these are presented below.

For some, being a man or a woman had no relevance to mindfulness practice. They argued that what unites us all is that we are beings with awareness, and a focus on difference reinforces and reifies separation and division. For others, awareness is neutral but the body that experiences all things is not. Here there was an acknowledgement that the male/female/other body has been disciplined to only feel what social norms have dictated. Thus, gendering the body in this way can be a block to being open to the emotions and sensations that are going on as it is going on with great judgment and sometimes numbing. There can be a strong preference for only experiencing some thinking, emotions and sensation but not others because of social conditioning.

There was discussion of the internal critic that emerges in men because they have experienced relationships with other men as critical and aggressive. There was acknowledgement of a lack of emotional awareness, emotional vocabulary or emotional literacy amongst men. For some men, practicing mindfulness with women had enabled them to explore and to learn an emotional language for what they were experiencing. This was possible in a predominantly female environment because men were not threatened by men critical of emotional sensitivity.

However, there was also acknowledgement that a female dominated mindfulness group confined men to women's issues and experiences. This new language and vulnerability was hard for men to openly communicate and share with men outside of the meditation group. So, for some men there was a sense of isolation from other men and open expression and communication was limited to female dominated meditation groups. Other men spoke of being intimidated by meditating and sharing with other men – a great insight into the blocks to being open and present with others.

I've been asked 'how can we come together to make our world a better place, not just for us but for everyone and for generations to come?' One area I think worthy of attention is creating safe spaces for men to share experiences of meditation and be supported, respected, nourished, cared for and held without judgment by other men. These can be a context for identifying and accepting the fictions of unhelpful attitudes and identities that prevent compassion to all sentient beings, but if, and only if, they don't reify stories and identities of separation. For me even just discussing these issues is a form

of active hope as it creates the potential for better relationships amongst men, better relations in the community and a glimmer of hope for the generations to come.

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to offer the conference an example of a form of liturgy that I felt provided men with a blueprint for change. I've sought to explain that this is because the MA's mindfulness and compassion training incorporates the qualities of equality, interdependence, impermanence, limited hierarchy, curiosity in not knowing, and the co-creation of understanding where the language is gender neutral. My personal experience, to some degree shared by other men, is that these qualities enable men to become emotionally open and curious, emotionally aware and emotionally literate. Thereby developing vulnerability and the intimacy necessary for loving relationships for the self and others. It creates a safe environment where men can explore emotions, to love themselves and others with care, affection, recognition, respect, commitment, and trust, as well as honest and open communication. Thereby it has the potential to improve the health and well-being of men and create loving relationships with all sentient beings. With the best intentions, my invitation to the reader is to reflect on the liturgy they know and ask whether it provides men with 'a blueprint for change', and change to what?

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Appendix A. Question Guide for first interview

Mindfulness and compassion training

1. When did you start practicing mindfulness training?
2. How long have you practiced for?
3. Why did you start practicing mindfulness training?
4. Can you tell me more about how often you practice and how you practice? (for example, alone or in a community or group setting).
5. What motivated you to move onto compassion training?
6. Did anyone support you in starting mindfulness and compassion training?
   a. If so, can you tell me more about your relationship with them and why you think they supported you in this way?
   b. To what extent was/is your mindfulness teacher/s supportive in your training? Can you tell me more about your teacher/s?

Mindfulness, compassion and changing self

7. Did anything about your sense of self change as a result of mindfulness and compassion practice?

7a. If so, do you think any of the practices were responsible for change?

i. Can you explain why you think this? Can you give examples?

Impact of mindfulness and compassion training on emotions and care

8. Are you aware of your emotions?

8a. If so, are you more, less or the same emotionally aware before you started mindfulness training?

9. Are you able to articulate your experience of emotions to yourself, and to others?

9a. If so, who do share your emotions with? Why do you share your emotions with them?

10. As you know will know, practicing mindfulness and compassion with others is partly about learning that we are less in control than we may have thought. Can you tell me about your sense of this and how this has impacted on you?

11. How, if at all, has mindfulness training helped you better understand the nature of fear and your experiences of fear?

12. Do you sometimes feel vulnerable? Is this new?

13. Do you think you are able to look after yourself? Is this new?

13a. In what ways do you care for yourself?

14. Does the word 'nurture' relate to the way you look after yourself? If not, what words capture the way you care for yourself?

15. Have you experienced any barriers to expressing your emotions?

16. Have you experienced more, less or the same amount of aggression in your life?

16. Do you feel more or less connected to other people? In what ways?

17. Do you have purpose in your life? Can you explain what this is?

17a. If so, does this purpose give drive/energy to your life?

Mindfulness and compassion training and gender

18. Has the mindfulness and compassion training impacted on how you think of yourself as a man?

19. Has the mindfulness and compassion training impacted on how you relate to other men?

19a. Can you give examples from your life?

20. What activities would you associate with the term 'a healthy man'?

21. Has the training impacted on how you relate to women?

21. If so, can you explain in what ways this has changed?

Training and support for men who practice

22. Has anyone been supportive of you in continuing your mindfulness training?

22a. If so, can you tell me more about them and how they have supported you?

23. Can you tell me of any instances of people being unsupportive of changes you are trying to make in your life?

Appendix B. Quotations for Second Interview

Quote 1

"If boys are raised to be empathetic and strong; autonomous and connected, responsible to self, to family and friends, and to society; able to make community rooted in a recognition of inter-being, then the solid foundation is present and they will be able to love.

To make this solid foundation, men must set the example of daring to heal, by daring to do the work of relational recovery . . . men in the process of self-recovery usually begins by returning to boyhood and evaluating what they learned about masculinity and how they learned it. Many males find it useful to pinpoint the moments when they realised who they were, what they felt, then suppressed that knowledge because it was displeasing to others. Understanding the roots of male dis-ease helps many men begin the work of repairing the damage (Hooks 2003, p. 175).

Quote 2

"We face a crisis of masculine identity of vast proportions [. . .] more families display the sorry fact of the disappearing father, which disappears, through either emotional or physical abandonment, or both, wreaks psychological devastation on the children of both sexes [. . .] In the case of men, there are many who either had no initiation into manhood or who had pseudo-initiations that failed to evoke the needed transition into adulthood. We get the dominance of Boy psychology. Boy psychology is everywhere around us, and its marks are easy to see. Among them are abusive and violent acting-out behaviours against others, both men and women; passivity and weakness, the inability to act effectively and creatively in one's own life and to engender life and creativity in others (both men and women) [. . .] patriarchy is not the expression of deep and rooted masculinity, for deep and rooted masculinity is not abusive. Patriarchy is the expression of immature masculinity. It is the expression of Boy psychology (Moore & Gillette 1990: p. 2–4).

Appendix C. Second Interview Question Guide: Reflections on masculinities and training

1. We asked you to reflect on the two statements from Bell Hook and Robert Moore on men and masculinity.

[We will re-read this together in the interview]

Can you share any points of reflection about this statement?

- Does it resonate with experiences in your own life or the lives of others around you?
- Do you agree/disagree with Hook and/or Moore's statement? Can you explain why?

2. Reflecting on your training in mindfulness and compassion, do you think this training play a role in how you interpret these passages?

2a. Reflecting on your training in mindfulness and compassion, do you think these practices have the potential to positively impact on men?

2b. If yes/no, can you explain why you think this?

2c. If yes, what practices do you think are particularly helpful for men?

3. Reflecting on your training again, are there any positive role models for men, or famous figures, you are now aware of because of your training?

3a. If so, who are these role models?

3b. Why do you think they are positive role models for men?

Mindfulness and compassion training and gender

4. Has the mindfulness and compassion training impacted on how you think of yourself as a man?

4a. If so, can you explain how this has affected you?

5. Has the mindfulness and compassion training impacted on how you relate to other men?

5a. Can you give examples from your life?

6. What activities would you associate with the term 'a healthy man'?

7. Has the training impacted on how you relate to women?

7a. If so, can you explain in what ways this has changed?

7b. Have you heard of the term toxic masculinity? What does it mean to you?

Men and Compassion: Social change and societal norms

8. What do you think are the key elements of compassion?

9. Reflecting on your life experience, do you think compassion practice is a good activity for men?

9a. If yes/no, can you explain why this is?

10. Thinking of the present and the future, what positive social changes would you like to see for boys and men?

Appendix D. Sample of interviews with participants: Pre mindfulness and compassion

Participant: The realisation of how hard I am to myself. And how hard – because I am so critical of myself I guess I am also really critical of other people. It goes hand in glove. I am learning to soften that self-critic of me. The is biggest learning for me.

Participant: You cannot change without awareness. For me doing the mindfulness with compassion, has allowed me to become aware of me a lot more. I can catch myself before it grows into something bigger and I just stop and reflect. Okay let's not go to the reactive space. I want to stay here and respond to it. And this awareness is the first stage and mindfulness has given me this.

Interviewer: Are you more aware of your own emotions?

Participant: I think certainly since the journey start with Being Present. The first level is about being present with your emotions and where you are. That was kind of the starting for the journey. Being aware really started with Being present it started and I still do the RAIN practice. And this process sits well with a lot of the compassion. The RAIN practice is to say, I am feeling tired, I am feeling lonely. Come in loneliness. Come in hurt. I want to look at you. What do you want to tell me? That kind of thing. In the past I would have said I cannot handle this. It would have been easier to have a glass of wine.

Participant: Out in the oil industry . . . I call them alpha males because they were about ego and bravado. Often, I would not feel very comfortable in their company. Because a lot of my thinking and behaviour was not in harmony with theirs and vice versa. It was not an environment that allowed for people to open up – for men to open up. There was lots of cases of people under pressure and going under, but it was not talked about. If it was talked about it was a very superficial way. Not in a connecting sort of way – in a conversation. Anyone that shared their vulnerability what they were going through – were perceived at least in my understanding – was weak. It was something I could not show. My background. I was the eldest son in the family. I had responsibility from the day I was born. I certainly could not show emotions. I had to be strong. I had to be all those things a man has to be: I had to be responsible, I had to be a provider, I had lots of duties. This was the environment – not an environment for men to come out and say this how I feel.

Participant: I was unhappy. I genuinely noticed that there was an emptiness. That there was something missing. I don't know what it was. But I thought I could fill that void with controlling everything and that void would not be there anymore, and have everything perfect. But the more perfect I tried to make it – it took a lot of energy – the more exhausted I became the more unhappy I became. There was not a deep sense of satisfaction. It was the opposite it was eating me away. I was de-energised and felt exhausted.

Participant: I feel an uncomfortable talking about nurture. It always goes back to my childhood where I had felt that my nurturing was not very beneficial for me. There was a feeling of being rejected and ignored.

Sample of interviews with participants: Post mindfulness and compassion

Participant: It feels real. It feels like I am being authentic. I'm not pretending to be something else. I leave that at the door. And I can be vulnerable and I can say what might even be stupid . . . the mindfulness so far is having an impact on my on the thinking, emotions and behaviour. So in this normal environment I am a little more comfortable to be authentic. I don't care what other people think. This is me. I cannot say I do it all the time, but it is having an effect.

Participant: I don't feel as empty as I used to. I feel more happier with myself. I'm not struggling to get a better car or better home or better partner. I am not doing this.

Interviewer: So what has replaced the emptiness.

Participant: I am okay. I am okay. I am okay!!!

Participant: What I do know is that my experience of women is that they have been much more in touch with their feelings and emotions. And I always thought that these women were lucky to be able to do that. Where men were intentionally trained not trained to do this. As I become in touch more with my feelings, I like it. There is nothing soft or wish washy about this. In fact it is quite courageous to do this actually. I look at men now who are still in that space of the ego and macho and I feel sorry for them. Not pity but sorry for them. I personally think it is important for men to be in touch with their feelings.

Interviewer: Some of the wording in the 1st paragraph like 'daring to heal' and 'relational recovery' and 'that moment when we realise who we are'. Those kinds of phrases appear to be what you are talking about. Is that correct?

Participant: Absolutely 100%. Exactly what I thought. I mean daring to relational recovery, well you know . . . that is what I am doing. And it is a painful journey. And the process of self-recovery I did not realise it was returning to boyhood. I was in my head intellectualising it. I have done lots of fixing I can do that as well. It is wonderful. But it's not there yet [. . .] But now when someone talks to me about these things it touches me, and I am intrigued. I am curious and I want to know more.

Interviewer: Thank you for sharing. What did you find in the second quote?

Participant: The second quote did not have as much impact as the first. It touches again about the boy psychology and I look back at my life again and think of my father. He was a very kind person, but he was passive aggressive. He never said anything. I cannot think of a single occasion where he sat me down and taught me anything or explained something to me or just being with me. Not one single occasion in my entire life. That touched me when I read of the transition between boyhood and manhood that transition did not take place. So, although I became an adult. There was still a childness and a bravado in me that has not matured because it was not allowed to be exercised in the first place. Overall, without going into specifics. Then I thought if that is me well what is society like when I look around me. The men that I know in my life they are all practically the same. They may be adults but very few have the maturity of being a man. In those that do – there are moment of being mature and they flick back to the default of being childish.

Responding to the Sacred – Response to Bill Paterson

First, I would like to thank the organisers of this conference for this opportunity to be involved and for inviting me to respond to Bill Paterson's talk.

Second, as a disclaimer, I do not consider myself an expert on gender issues. That said, one feature that runs through much of my research on liturgy is the way in which liturgical or worshipping communities can exclude specific people or groups of people. Such exclusions can be due to conditions related to age, mental health, autism, disability or indeed, gender.

I would like to start my response, then, by thanking Bill for helping us to think through some pertinent issues related to masculinity and gender. I see my task as relating what Bill has said in the context of mindfulness and compassion training – as a kind of liturgical practice – to the formal liturgy of the Church, specifically within the context of the Scottish Episcopal Church.

This is not a straightforward task, and I consider my response as the start of a wider conversation that needs to be continued. I will not attempt to outline the similarities and dissimilarities

between mindfulness and mindfulness training on the one hand, as outlined by Bill, and liturgical practices as we know them in the Scottish Episcopal Church (and beyond) on the other hand. Therefore, I will not pick up on every possible strand from Bill's talk and reflect how that could work liturgically. It would be fascinating to do so, but I don't understand that as the task at hand. Rather, I interpret Bill's talk as pointing to pertinent issues surrounding masculinity, and I will try in this response to highlight a few issues that may bear on liturgy and the revision of liturgical texts and practices.[45]

Finding ourselves in God's story of love and judgment

The first issue to highlight – and in my view, this is one of the strengths of Bill's talk – is the deeply ingrained, socially constructed, patterns of masculinity that lead to unhealthy behaviour and self-assessment. Whilst we should always be careful about generalising, Bill points to patterns that will resonate with many men (and women as often on the receiving end of toxic masculinity). Underlying his observations and suggestions for change, is the question of what it means to be a man. His answer is that manhood does not lie in anger, aggression, alcohol, manipulative relationships and power abuse, but rather in self-compassion and an attitude of warmth, kindness, patience and non-judgment.

In the liturgy, the same question is asked, albeit implicitly. The liturgical gathering is an intensified meeting between God and people.[46] Liturgy tells the story of God, and good liturgy creates space to tell the stories of the people. These latter stories find their place in the story of God, and God is portrayed in the liturgy as good, benevolent, and almighty ('Grace and peace to you from God'). Connecting our stories in the liturgy to the story of God implies that we start perceiving our lives, our relationships, our being, in the light of God's story. In other words, we ask what it means to be human; and consequently, what does it mean to be a man, a woman (and perhaps even further, what does it mean to be transgender, a-gender, etc.) Who am I, and who are we? Who does God say I am/we are?

Another theme in Bill's talk is love. Love, self-compassion, and self-acceptance are central to mindfulness, and as such to Bill's search for a 'blueprint for change' – a blueprint for changing the destructive patterns of toxic masculinity and the disastrous elements this brings into relationships.

When we look closely at the Scottish Liturgy 1982, which the Scottish Episcopal Churches normally use for their Eucharistic celebrations, we find an emphasis on love as well; love from God for us, and love from people towards God, our neighbour and ourselves.[47] Love is right there at the beginning with the Collect for Purity, the liturgy's invocation of Jesus' summary of the law, and the introduction to the confession of sin (the latter reads, after the first letter of John: 'God is love and we are God's children. There is no room for fear in love. We love because God loved us first.') The words of the absolution again start with God's love; it is the God 'who is both power and love' who forgives and frees us from our sins, heals and strengthen us by God's spirit, and raises us to new life in Christ. Love, the failure of love, and the restoration of love and through love, marks the opening rites of the liturgy. The liturgy must have something to say in response to the quest for a blueprint for change.

Bill points to the emphasis in mindfulness on self-acceptance, and non-judgement. In the context of love I just sketched out, self-love is certainly part of that context. Nevertheless, the liturgy also speaks of judgement, in that confession of sin is seen as necessary, and forgiveness is extended. In a way, the Eucharist repeats this initial rite. I am not advocating unhealthy self-criticism, self-blame and self-judgement. However, this emphasis in mindfulness on self-acceptance and non-judgment raises a question of how this works out theologically. Let me offer a few brief thoughts. First, mindfulness and liturgy share the attitude or habit of becoming conscious of being loved (although the source of love, at least at a superficial level, is different, i.e. self or God). Second, it seems to me that an element of judgement, to use that strong word, is

[45]As this response was part of a conference organised in the context of the Scottish Episcopal Church, here I have specifically the liturgy of that church in mind. However, much of Bill's talk and my response will be applicable in the liturgy of other churches.

[46]One may comment that the meeting between believers and God is not limited to liturgical gatherings. That is true, but the liturgy intensifies, structures, and facilitates that meeting in particular ways.

[47]Scottish Episcopal Church, *Scottish Liturgy 1982*.

necessary if a moral framework is to be held up – but only as rooted in the previous point, i.e. the foundation of being loved. In other words, we start with love, only then do we speak about judgement. Does speaking about judgement contrast with the non-judgement and self-compassion of mindfulness? Not necessarily, if we follow how Bill describes non-judgement here.

Mindfulness helps 'to develop compassionate, non-judgmental acceptance of their perfectly imperfect selves,' free from 'powerful habitual emotional hijacking and identities of suffering.' Mindfulness makes one look at the situation without judgement first, thereby creating space to reflect on why one feels the way one feels, whether that is guilty, ashamed, joyous, etc. Subsequently, one can compare that to the religious or moral framework. To be clear, Christianity is not about morality in the first instance but about being loved by God, and loving our neighbour as ourself. Morality is part of that, but it would be wrong to make that Christianity's most distinct characteristic – although that seems to be done far too often. Third, setting this discussion in the context of the liturgy, we quickly see that judgement and morality is part of the liturgy, for example in the confession of sins and the entire Eucharistic prayer. However, it is also clear that this is set in the context of a benevolent and loving God.

judgment and morality in the liturgy are not meant to make us feel bad, but to become who we are meant to be – living for God's glory, in shalom.[48]

Initial Research Findings

In the next paragraphs, I would like to offer a brief response to some of Bill's preliminary research findings. I'll start with a question. It seems that mindfulness helps men to become more themselves, peeling away layers of anger, aggression, isolation, emotional closedness. As a liturgical theologian, I wonder how the liturgy might do something similar, or how can we integrate this finding in the liturgy? Perhaps going back to the foundation of being rooted in God's love, grace, acceptance, forgiveness should be the starting point. Knowing that we are loved by God may help us to see what makes us angry, aggressive, isolated, of emotionally closed.

Next, a very interesting finding, in the context of this conference on gender and liturgy, is that for some participants in Bill's research, mindfulness had not much to do with being either woman or man. 'A focus on difference reinforces and reifies separation and division,' Bill records. Two thoughts on this: first, the discussion about gender (in relation to liturgy or not) can result in feeling that one has to be politically correct and focus on difference, which might create an implicit antagonism. Such an atmosphere is unhelpful for an honest discussion about gender and liturgy and seems informed more by a particular strand of feminist activism or academic theory than by critical engagement with theology, Bible, and tradition. Second, difference and diversity should be seen as strengths and as something that reflects the image of God. When God created humankind in God's image, God created man and woman, i.e. diversity; apparently, diversity is needed to reflect something of God's image.

In the same paragraph Bill also reports that 'there was an acknowledgement that the male/female/other body has been disciplined to only feel what social norms have dictated. Thus, gendering the body in this way can be a block to being open to the emotions and sensations that are going on as it is going on with great judgment and sometimes numbing.' It seems to me that Christian communities should be places of acceptance. Time and again in Scripture we see that God's people are called to be conformed to the patterns of God – as laid down in the Torah and revealed in Jesus – and not to the patterns of this world. God invites us, our bodies, to be disciplined by God's norms instead of social norms.

Conclusion: A Blueprint for Change

The driving force for Bill's work in mindfulness and in his research is the need for a 'blueprint for change.' He believes that this can be found in mindfulness. There is nothing here I can disagree with, but I would hope that the liturgy of the Church was also able to provide a blueprint for change. Liturgical theologians like to argue that liturgy has this potential, for example, think about

[48]Elsewhere I have identified 'wholeness,' 'glorifying God/glory of God,' and 'living' as the three major storylines of the liturgy. van Ommen, *Suffering in Worship*; and van Ommen, Worship with Care.

the strong link between liturgy and ethics as highlighted by many.[49] The liturgy invites us into a story, the story of God and how God wants to relate to the people God has created, and indeed to all of creation. By participating in the liturgy, participants are saying that they want to be part of this story, and therefore necessarily want to be changed by this story.

Hence the confession right at the beginning of the liturgy saying that we have not loved the way God intended (yes, there is an element of judgement in liturgy) – but we repent, we want to do better. The question presents itself what blueprint for change the liturgy provides. The answer might be found in the major themes of the liturgy: living in wholeness, to the glory of God.

We will need to be critical though. Perhaps much of what Bill is advocating can be found already in the liturgy. Nevertheless, it is possible to sit through the liturgy (or more positively: participate in it) without peeling away those destructive layers of toxic masculinity. A profound understanding of love and of being beloved seems to be central for understanding the question what it means to be a man; what it means to be human. The task of liturgical revision, therefore, is perhaps not so much a task of writing new texts or revising them, but to look at our liturgical practices, and whether they are celebrated in a way, and in a communal context, that communicates God's love for people and that demonstrates that the way of love is fulfilling, and the antidote to toxic masculinity.

[49]To name just a few collections of essays that highlight this link, see Anderson and Morrill, *Liturgy and the Moral Self*; Hauerwas and Wells, *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics*; and Vos, *Liturgy and Ethics*.