NEW WAY
THE PODCAST OF THE 1001 NEW WORSHIPING COMMUNITIES MOVEMENT

It Changes Everything:
A Conversation Between Nikki Collins and Karen Rohrer
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Transcript

Nikki Collins: I'm Nikki Collins with 1001 New Worshiping Communities, and today I am here with Karen Rohrer, who's one of the co-chairs of Mission Development Resource Committee, a body that is appointed by our General Assembly to award grants to new worshiping communities. So, Karen and I are going to try to talk through some of the demystifying of our grant process. So Karen, welcome.

Karen Rohrer: Thank you so much for having me. I'm excited to talk about the process.

Nikki: Tell a new leader the most important thing you want them to know as they start this process of applying for funding through 1001. What's the foundational thing that you want them to know?

Karen: I mean, there are a couple things that I really want to make sure that people address somewhere in their application and feel ready to talk about. Part of our process is you apply using the application and then members of the MDRC, and usually a staff reviewer, will reach out to talk with someone about their application. So, it's not only preparing the grant application, it's also being ready to talk with someone who knows maybe a little bit about new worshiping communities, but will want to hear particularly about what this looks like in your context. It's a two-part process in that way. On the application, we have the definition of “new”, |worshiping”, and “community” kind of laid out. We really want to make sure that those things are addressed.

Nikki: Karen, tell me about the word “new”.

Karen: Yeah. These can be broad definitions, right? A new community of new disciples; or a new community of folks who have various experiences of church but are gathering in a new way; a new to the Presbyterian church community; there are a lot of ways that we can get at “new”, but we want to make sure that we're addressing how this is new.

Nikki: And what about “worship”?

Karen: In terms of worship, people often get stuck on worship because they have a picture of worship that is, like, pews in a row; and, like, if you're not staring at the back of someone's head all lined up facing a preacher, like this is not worship. I think this movement has done a really good job of fleshing out all different kinds of worship. And so we really want to hear contextually how worship, how moments and spaces of encountering God live in the midst of the community.

Nikki: What about sacraments?

Karen: Sacraments are important, but sacraments can have a broad definition here. It's not so much that we want to make sure that everyone is wearing a Geneva robe and standing behind a table with particular words coming out of their mouth, but we want to make sure that the leadership team and the point leader are thinking about what it means for the people of God to experience the gifts of God. How do we experience God's presence together? What does it mean to know that God's body is present

among us? There are a lot of pieces of sacraments that are really important and can live out in a variety of ways.

Similarly, baptism: you know, a lot of our leaders in this movement aren't ordained, and in our particular polity, that makes sacraments complicated, but we want to have a conversation about that. We understand the limitations. We understand that baptism might be a strange thing in your community because you're still figuring out if membership makes sense. We understand that the polity pieces don't always fit in these contexts, but we really want to hear how the community is encountering the Spirit of God, how the community is naming God's presence in their midst in a way that's contextually appropriate and meets people where they are. For some communities, this means the first time they gather, they will be breaking bread and drinking Welch's grape juice in a tiny cup. For some communities, this means five years in, they're still wrestling with what communion could look like for them. But we want it to be addressed because we think it's really important that we have a conversation about the gifts of God for the people of God, and have some clarity about our role in sharing that as a community, acknowledging God's presence in our midst.

Nikki: How do you expect preaching to look in a new worshiping community?

Karen: How we think about proclamation looks totally different in this movement, but it matters that we are part of a story. And so how do we not only hold space for people to bring their stories, but tell the truth about who we are? I think sometimes in our desire to hold open space and welcome all folks, we don't tell the truth about who we are, and that can unintentionally feel like a bait and switch. So one of the things we're looking for is honesty in this movement. And so we love to see people writing applications that address these kinds of issues that are ready to name where they are honestly and wrestle with some of these questions. And that's really kind of what's behind worship.

Nikki: And what about the ways that community takes shape? What are you looking for?

Karen: Community, it's how do you gather? What does it mean to build deep relationships and share life together? People do this in different ways. Some people gather weekly, some people have different groups that gather at different times. We talk about sustainability and leadership sustainability and having a structure that can build community that's trustworthy and connected. This doesn't mean that we're building an institution that's going to last 200 years,

Nikki: (laughs)

Karen: but it does mean that we are responsible in the way that we connect people and we build a system that has enough communication pathways that we actually have the infrastructure to be honest, to be a community of mutual care, to have a particular identity and tell the truth about who we are. And so those three things – “new” and “worshiping” and “community” – being addressed openly and contextually by people who have really thought about and taken seriously the role of point leader, but also of a leadership team, is really important.

Nikki: You hint it some stuff. What do you think about talking about the hope and expectation for leadership development over the course of the cycle of grants? As the community continues to apply for next level grants, what are you hoping to see in the development of leadership around the original leader founder?

Karen: This is a great question, and we see this done in a lot of different ways. Oftentimes, communities start with one point leader, and that leader – in the beginning, probably has to over-function a little bit – is defining what the community will look like and who community is an awful lot in the beginning. And what we hope to see over the course of the grants is that, as the community begins to meet, that original vision becomes porous to the idea of others. And other people latch onto it, get excited about it.

In improv, they talk about "yes, and". The leadership team starts to "yes, and" the original vision, and all of a sudden, the vision that you have is taking a new shape because new people are joining it. So when we think about a leadership team as it grows, it's both people to start doing some of the logistics, people to start managing some of the things, but it's also people empowered to speak into the vision to start riffing on what the original goals were and to start broadening the original idea.

We hope to see leaders who are committed, and we hope to see point leaders who are inviting people in to collaborate, and asking for help. Asking for help in this work is really hard. Starting any kind of a new thing when everyone is busy feels like, "Oh, I couldn't possibly ask someone for support." But for these communities to work – not only for the community itself, but for the leader – that has to happen. And we know in this movement that our leaders are not disposable, and they need to be in ecosystems of mutual support. And that almost always takes a strong load-bearing leadership team. And so, as the grants go on, we like to hear more and more clarity about how the leadership team functions, what they've been invited into, how they know their roles, what they're contributing, and what they're excited about, and how the community has changed as a result.

Nikki: You mean, you really want to see towards later grant cycles that this vision has taken a new shape, and you're not holding this community accountable to what they wrote down three years ago that they said they wanted to be? (laughs)

Karen: Absolutely. And I want to say, I mean, it feels like you are in a grant process and you have no idea what happens in the grant room. Grant processes are funny this way in that your application is being read by a group of people, and we believe in discernment of the body. And sometimes it depends on who the first reader is, what they grab onto or what part of your vision they get excited about. But this is a group that is thinking deeply and wants to see that you're thinking deeply also. It is a group that is walking away as much as possible from rigid categories. And this movement has really led the MDRC into deeper discernment as we recognize places where our categories can grow. And so, we learn from a learning community. So when we say we want to see change, it is also because that change teaches us what is possible, and how to support the communities that are becoming in new ways.

Nikki: Is there a way that you can talk about what MDRC has learned about what the church is becoming? You've been a part of this movement yourself for a long time, and been on this grant body for a few years, so you've seen so much that is developing and taking shape. What do you see is happening in the PC(USA) through these new communities?

Karen: Oh, that's a great question. To start with, like, a really granular piece that I think we're all wrestling with post-COVID: when I first came to the MDRC, there were, like, real questions and conversations about what it means to be an online community. Can you be an entirely online community? And now those questions are much more in the weeds of what it means to be a leadership team online, and what connection looks like. And when we read applications that people have written about this, we get new ideas. We get excited about what's possible, and we're able to, you know, at the

seed grant level be like, “Oh, I could see this going in this direction. I wonder if they should talk to so-and-so who's already kind of walked this path.”

I mean, that's just one example. There are a lot of ways that this movement has expanded, really, our definition of what “new”, what “worshiping”, and what “community” is. All digital is one way to think about that, but there are also communities that have wrestled with and thought about sacraments in new ways. There are a lot of people who have trauma around church experience, trauma around sacraments, trauma around the rituals that they've seen and either been excluded from, or been hurt by. And when we watch new worshiping communities take seriously that the gifts of God are for the people of God, and also walk gently with those in their community that have experienced that trauma, we get a new sense of what's possible in engaging the idea of sacraments over the course of years and years in a way that is generative and formative for a community, and represents the courage to walk into a hard space.

Nikki: Yeah. Can you talk a little bit about the role of mid-councils in the support of new worshiping communities? It's the presbytery that actually signs the grant application with the new worshiping community, and the awards are first awarded to the presbytery, and then the presbytery determines how it's dispersed. What are you looking for in the relationship between the presbytery and the new worshiping community and the new worshiping community leader in the grant application?

Karen: Yeah, I really think, not only mutual understanding and evidence of mutual listening, but an open line of communication is really, really important here, especially for folks who come in and are new to Presbyterian world. One of the things that's true of Presbyterian world is that we value people being able to participate. Our governance is shared. We believe that the Holy Spirit is discerned in the body. And so, if we are not facilitating these communities to really be able to be fully enfranchised participants in our system, we miss the transformation that they bring. We miss the wisdom that they bring, and we also miss genuinely welcoming them. And I think it's a real missed opportunity.

I mean, to speak of my own evolution, when I first entered the movement, I thought, you know, “There's a lot of push for presbyteries to be involved, and there's a lot of push for presbyteries match funding. And what if you have a strong calling and a community identified and infrastructure in place and you're really called to do this thing and the presbytery doesn't have the infrastructure or the bandwidth? That's really a shame. That's a missed opportunity.” It still is a missed opportunity. But I also know that setting up a leader to not be able to be connected to the presbytery, to not be supported in some way…I mean, there are ways to get around a full match, right? It doesn't have to be that full financial commitment necessarily to reflect real investment, but you want to see investment commensurate with a presbytery’s capacity, or you will see a new worshiping community leader flounder, not be able to be connected to the broader body, and to really end up again, burning out, feeling burned, feeling alone, not having the benefit of the structure that we adhere to as Presbyterians. It’s really part of our identity. So it’s…it is a big loss. And one of the things that I think that MDRC has thought about a lot over time is being really sure that presbyteries are on board, and that there's a clear line of communication between the two parties, and that they're able to collaborate a little bit, Because otherwise, it's really, really hard to stay in the kind of relationship that fosters growth and support for a new worshiping community leader.

Nikki: So, Karen, you can't say “yes” to every new worshiping community that applies. What do you want people to know when you say, “not now”, or “no”?

Karen: We do often say ,“not now”, and that is because we can't evaluate or understand what's not quite there yet. And so often people will have a strong idea, maybe a strong collaborator or a community that they have identified that they want to serve, but one of the things we need to see is, like, ties to that community, inroads in a vision for how you might gather this group, a point leader's vision for their own role. “This is who I'm going to be. This is how I imagine myself engaging with the community. This is how we would gather.” And also, some theological thinking about what it means to gather in this particular way, what God might be up to in gathering this community.

We don't necessarily need to see, “Okay, we've been meeting regularly for five months, and this is what that looks like” in a first grant cycle. But we do want to see that there is some theological thinking going on, some consistent iterative processes. “Here's where I'd like to go. I can imagine this going this way. Here's how I think this is new in my particular community for my particular presbytery, for the particular group of people that I'm hoping to reach. Here's how we plan to think about worship, which is engaging God's presence in our midst. And here's what that will look like.” And that can be a really wide definition, but we do want people to think about it enough in those terms that they can articulate it theologically. And with community, we want to have a sense that you know who you're reaching out to, and that you would imagine communication structures within that community, practices within that community, a life together within that community. That could mean that people would know each other in an ongoing way, understand what they were a part of, be able to name what this is, and what it's doing in their lives. And I think it's important to feel like that thought is underway for a first grant cycle.

For a second grant cycle, a third grant cycle, we really want to see, “Okay, the community has been gathering. There are people who want to buy in as leaders. There are people who are willing to put skin in the game in a variety of ways, willing to ‘yes, and’ the vision, willing to give time, willing to identify themselves as a participant in an ongoing way.” So leadership is a big one, but the “new”, “worshiping”, and “community” as they continue to evolve are important over the cycles of the grants.

We also do really want to see presbytery investment, collaboration in the presbytery, and understanding across that line of who is up to what. One of the things that…it might not be a deal breaker for a grant, but it does give us pause, is if the presbytery hasn't done the work to have a conversation about what it is to be a new worshiping community in that presbytery, and what this might look like. We really want to see that new worshiping communities are availing themselves of the 1001 resources. So oftentimes our grants will name, “At this point, you should have done a DML at this point. We want to see that you've done an accelerator.” Those are really important things. And those are places where we know people get a sense of what this larger movement is about, and they are very key as well.

Nikki: So as you award funds, you know that in most cases these funds are not going to be enough to keep a community going, or even to fully fund it for the grant period that you're awarding for, maybe even with the match from the presbytery. What are you all looking for in terms of the development of financial sustainability as a community progresses through the grants?

Karen: I mean, here we are looking for…this is another question that I think really gets at load-bearing leaders. We want not only collaborators who are walking through this together, but a culture of people who understand that this will take something, cost something, take work, take money, and we want to see people honestly engaging the question of what things cost, what sustainability looks like long-term, where sources of funding outside of even 1001 grants and the matches, maybe partner churches, maybe individual donors, maybe revenue streams, maybe local businesses that you can partner with, or a lot of new worshiping communities join, like, broader community coalitions. A lot of communities think a lot

about mutual aid. This is important because things cost money, and that's another honesty question. It's also important because our leaders are not disposable and deserve, warrant, the investment of compensation in whatever form it takes, whatever form makes sense in the context, to be able to continue to do the work. And what we don't want to see is a community that is visioned in a way that is not plausible financially in the context.

Nikki: Yeah.

Karen: So we're looking for thoughtful plausibility. We're looking for a willingness to seek out funds, have hard conversations about funding, be honest about financial situations, undergo trainings. 1001 offers so many supports in this area. You know, when I started in the movement, it felt like there was very little. And now I hear about different trainings that people go to and the transformative ways that they're applied. And honestly, this is another place where I encourage people to be a part of the ecosystem, because there is wisdom out there. It's often the scariest part of this work to talk about fundraising. One of the things we want to see in these grant applications overall is that we have leaders who are not afraid of having hard conversations. If you are right out on the edge of people who have been hurt by church, you have to be ready to have hard conversations around all the issues that have caused complication. And money is a source of most of our trauma in life in capitalism,

Nikki: Yeah. Right.

Karen: and we have to be able to talk about that, or we're not going to be able to be faithful in the context we're in.

Nikki: I want people to remember that MDRC members are volunteers, that this is a gift to the church of your time and your intellect to make these decisions, to listen and learn about these communities. You're not staff. There's no compensation for doing this. This is you in your discipleship, offering yourself to the service of the church in this way. And I think it's really important for people to remember that that's who is serving in this way.

Karen: I mean, that's a really helpful framing, because it makes me think about the DML, Discerning Missional Leaders, which is, like, a leadership conversation. It’s one of my favorite parts of this movement, because it is something that you can get almost nowhere, which is a community of people turning their attention to you and looking to draw out your leadership, your wisdom, your particular gifts and charisms in community life. The grant process is much more brief than this. We don't have four days to sit and learn with these communities, but the heart of the MDRC is the same, in that we want to hear whatever you want to tell us. We want to draw out your best visioning, your best theological thinking, your most pastoral heart, your most exciting dreams. We want to draw those things out, so that we can equip them. And so, it really is of the people there, the reason that they do this volunteer work, is because they want to learn, celebrate, draw out, see, recognize the things that are happening all over the country in this movement, and to be a part of them.

So they are volunteers, and they get a lot of hope from this process. So there really is, like, a disposition to delight in what's happening. And we want to ask the right questions, because honesty in what is happening in this movement is important: honesty to the end user, the community members, the people that your new worshiping communities will touch, but also honesty within the system, and what this system is created to support, and how it is hoping to function, and how it's hoping to offer mutual and sustainable care to the people who have risked a whole lot to do this work.

Nikki: Do you want to talk about Jesus and how important Christian identity is in the discernment about what makes a new worshiping community in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)?

Karen: Yes. Okay. It turns out we have a particular story and particularity matters. I'm a big believer in particularity, like, there was one particular Palestinian guy in the first century that we think was pretty important in his particularity, in his particular body, in his particular calling, in his particular divine being and human being. That particularity matters. And that's part of why…you know, the *New Worshiping Community Handbook* is a great resource in this way. It invites you to imagine who Jesus is for your community, and that particularity really matters. And so, I mean, when we did this, I helped to lead a new worshiping community many years ago in Philadelphia. And when we did it, we imagined this person in specificity, sharing a lot in common with our neighbors in the neighborhood in a physical location. That specificity mattered. So, the specificity of who the literal Jesus was matters, and the specificity of imagining that kind of incarnation in your own community matters.

And I don't think pretending that we are not specific serves us, and I don't think it serves the people we encounter. It matters that we are Jesus people, and that we tell people that. People who are looking for something different may not find a home with us. People who are not sure that they want Jesus, but want belonging, may certainly find a home with us. People who know for sure they don't want Jesus may feel a bit bait and switched when they find out that on the other side of this is the PC(USA) with our particular cross logo, with our particular Jesus people identity. Honesty is important here. So, convening a broad group of people who can approach this story from all different places, who are not required to believe to belong, is incredibly important, and something that I think this movement unique gifts in.

And, we need to be able to tell the truth about who we are. And that's why we have conversations about worship and sacraments. That's why we have conversations about what it is to experience God's presence in our midst. There's a lot of different thinking about forming disciples, and what shape that takes. And we tend to worry, I guess, that when we form disciples, we might imagine those disciples to become more like us. And I think that's happened an awful lot in the American story, in the Anglo story, in the colonial story, that has happened a lot. What I hope that this movement can live into, instead, is that we continue to discover who Jesus is through the people that we encounter. And we recognize that people often bear God to us in ways we don't expect. And that is not a lack of specificity, but rather an understanding that God has already gone before us, and the Spirit of God is already dwelling with the people that we will reach. And they might articulate that totally differently than we do. We can only tell the story that we have, but if we listen well, our story might be transformed by the living God as well.

I mean, that's what I'm in it for if I'm honest. But we can't get there if we're not honest about the story that we carry within us, and genuinely willing to welcome a particular story from the people that we're drawing together into community or encountering out in the world.

Nikki: I don't think that we can have this conversation without naming the fact that this movement is fueled and funded by the generosity of people who came before us, and their vision and hope, that I believe this has exceeded their imagination, right? We've talked about that before, that this is so much more than we imagined ten or twelve years ago. So the people who invested money, their legacy, to fund what the church might become, it is a humbling opportunity to steward those gifts for the future of the Church. Can you talk about what that conversation is like among MDRC members, or in your own head and heart?

Karen: Yeah. I mean, I love thinking about this, and I'll frame it in two ways. The first way is, I take great comfort in knowing that my faith is held in community, because there are certainly days that I wake up and think, “Oh boy, this all seems like nonsense. The world is falling apart. And I just believe that one guy who got killed alone on a garbage dump and then came back to life in the first century is going to fix it?

Nikki: (laughs)

Karen: “Oh, okay. And that feels bananas.” And I know that people have lived and died and sung in jail cells and walked into perilous situations believing that to be true, and that gives me strength to hold onto that. And some of those people helped fund this movement, and I want to take seriously that witness and use that faithfully.

I also want to say, my husband and I have been talking about this. He preached a sermon where he started talking about how people can change. And where he got to in the sermon is that, even in death, people can change, because their legacy can change, the way that they're remembered can change. And one of the gifts that you can give people who are gone is letting them change. I don't know where all our money came from in the PC(USA). I bet some of it came from places that I don't feel very comfortable with. And, I hope that when I die, the things that are ambiguous and immoral about my own legacy are redeemed in whatever I have left behind, and that someone can leverage those things to heal some of the harms that I caused. There would be nothing better in my mind. And so, there is not only faithfulness to the people who came before me and the story that they trusted and believed in, there's also faithfulness to the people who will come after me, and how we can leverage what has been left beyond the imaginations of the people who left it to heal some of the things that they maybe weren't aware of. Or, let's not think too hard about it, we're aware of. Either way, they have left this money to the discernment of the body to pursue what is faithful. What a gift, to discern what is faithful in community now, with that legacy.

Nikki: It is always amazing to have a conversation with you, Karen. I ask you a question, and I imagine an answer about this big, and what you give back is so rich and beautiful, and we could walk around in all of the things that you just said for so much longer, but it's just a joy to get to hear you think. And I'm grateful for your service in this way.

Karen: Well, you're very generous. Serving on the MDRC as a delight. It really is a delightful group of people. And also, getting to encounter people in the midst of this work, doing the faithful work in all these different ways is really, really cool, really encouraging.

Nikki: Thank you. And share our gratitude with the committee for the work that they do and the hours that they invest in these communities. It changes everything for them.