Inside a church’s implosion

Eliza Griswold profiles a progressive evangelical church that sought to do things differently but fell prey to the usual problems.

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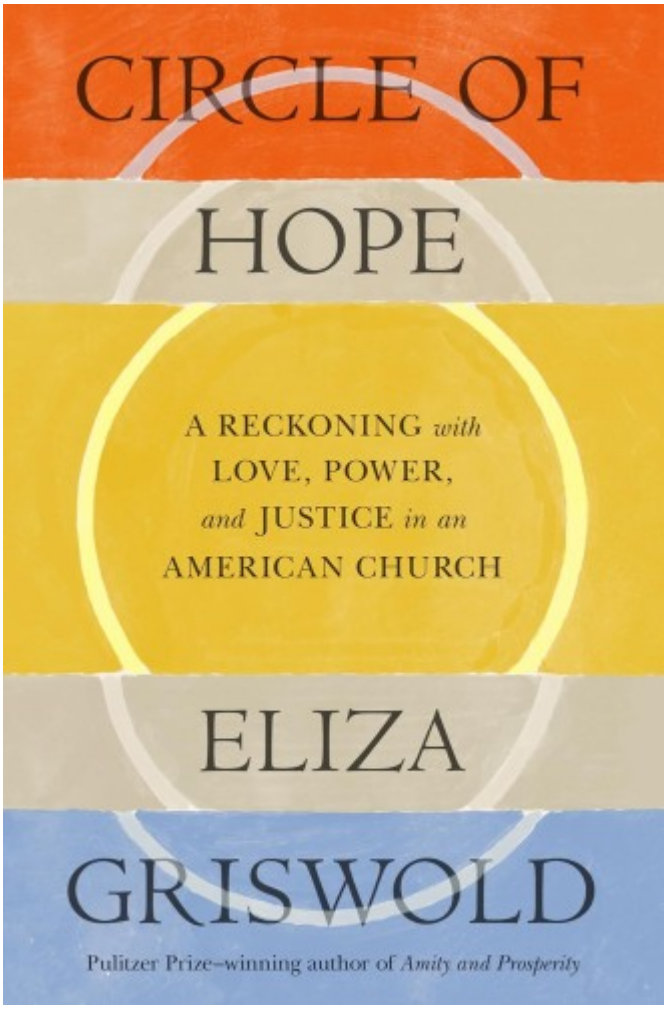

Circle of Hope

A Reckoning with Love, Power, and Justice in an American Church

By Eliza Griswold
Farrar, Straus and Giroux
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With all the attention on megachurches and the alliance of White evangelicals with the Republican Party, it was time someone examined the so-called religious left, a loose—very loose—network of progressive congregations united not so much by institutional bonds as by biblically informed perspectives on everything from poverty to sexual identity. Circle of Hope, a progressive evangelical church in greater Philadelphia, would provide a perspective on the movement, and if we were to engage a journalist to write such a book, we could do no better that Eliza Griswold, Pulitzer Prize–winning author of *Amity and Prosperity* and daughter of the late Frank Griswold, the irenic presiding bishop of the Episcopal Church from 1998 to 2006.

Griswold invokes her father in staking out the project. She remembers finding him in tears after long days of trying to reconcile competing factions in the Episcopal Church following the consecration of V. Gene Robinson, the openly gay bishop of New Hampshire. Ecclesiastical harmony is elusive, as the author finds at Circle of Hope.

Officially part of the Brethren in Christ, a small Anabaptist denomination, Circle of Hope was founded in 1996 by Rod and Gwen White, Jesus Movement émigrés from Southern California. They envisioned Circle of Hope as a rebellion “against all the coercion going on in the name of Jesus.” This church aspired, the author writes, “not only to reclaim the moral heart of evangelicalism but also to serve as Christianity’s last, best shot at remaining relevant.”

By the time Griswold arrived on the scene in 2019, Circle of Hope consisted of a community bank to fund start-up operations, a thrift store, and four congregations. Two pastors were women, and one male pastor was Egyptian American. Approximately 700 congregants populated the church—a diverse bunch, but most of them “Gen Xers and millennials who’d been hurt by organized religion or who rejected their parents’ Republican politics and rural churches, and were seeking more authentic ways to follow Jesus.”

Griswold tells of the ensuing struggles at Circle of Hope through the eyes of the principal characters, dimly analogous to the four Evangelists recounting the life of

Jesus. The church had no trouble affirming the pacifist scruples of its denomination, but advocating for the rights and equality of LGBT individuals placed them at odds with the Brethren in Christ, which controlled Circle of Hope's assets of several million dollars.

More combustible were individual dynamics, especially among the leadership cohort. The women struggled to be heard in pastoral meetings. The male pastor of color, who worried that he wasn't White enough to be considered a Christian, felt overshadowed by Rod and Gwen White, the founders, and maneuvered to oust them. The other male pastor, who is the founders' son, did not take kindly to the putsch.

The church that began with such promise soon dissolved into a cauldron of grievances and resentment. The image that comes to mind is the famous mound scene in *Bull Durham*, when the players gather to rehearse their troubles, everything from jammed eyelids and glove hexes to confusion about wedding gift etiquette. As Crash Davis (played by Kevin Costner) summarizes the situation, "there's a whole lot of shit we're trying to deal with."

Institutions may be necessary, but they are remarkably poor vessels for piety.

Indeed. The Egyptian American pastor who had forced the ouster of the founders discovered that he is demi-bisexual. The murder of George Floyd in 2020 focused new attention on the scourge of racism, both in society at large and at Circle of Hope. Although one of the founders insisted that "Circle of Hope has had anti-racism written into our DNA since we began," the pastors worried about structural racism and decided they needed to hire an outside anti-racism consultant, a Black woman who nevertheless struggled to command the attention of her clients.

Amid the infighting, church attendance dropped (abetted by the coronavirus). The people at Circle of Hope continued to do good things for the community, and many found a level of acceptance and spiritual sustenance there that had eluded them in other evangelical settings. But the downward spiral continued until Circle of Hope devolved into discrete congregations and officially dissolved on January 1, 2024. "Circle of Hope strove to be everything other than ordinary or, worse, evangelical," Griswold writes, "and yet that's what the church really was."

The author wisely allows the reader to draw lessons from the hot mess that Circle of Hope became. But there are lessons aplenty: the perils of founder's syndrome and the cult of personality, megalomania, the inevitability of routinization, the absence of ecclesiastical oversight, and the lure of success and material prosperity. Institutions may be necessary, but they are remarkably poor vessels for piety. "Despite their best intentions," Griswold writes about Circle of Hope and its principals, "they'd become rigid and institutionalized."

Frank Griswold, the author's father, understood that. The book concludes with a lovely "Benediction," an account that includes the bishop's death. "Churches are messy places where people seek many things," Eliza Griswold writes, "among them a common understanding of something larger than they are, of God." At their best, if only intermittently, churches provide that space. Circle of Hope evidently did so prior to its implosion.

One of the pastors at Circle of Hope adds his own postmortem. "I had this great idea for a church that was different," Ben White says, "and it turned out to be a pretty basic church in the end."