

Lancaster Theological Seminary

**Won't you be my neighbor? Creating an Interconnected
Onsite and Online Christian Community**

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by

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Won't you be my neighbor? Creating an Interconnected Onsite and Online Christian Community
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Abstract

“All are welcome” church signs, banners, and marketing literature suggest churches welcome and include all, but is this completely true? Those who choose to worship remotely using the internet are often marginalized in an increasingly technological world where more and more Americans spend more and more time online. This qualitative project addresses this disconnect by evaluating the obstacles of bringing an onsite and online church community together in one “space”—where the virtual and the physical become one. Published at the height of the COVID19 pandemic with all the research and writing completed before the outbreak, this work examines how (and where) American church communities can gather as guided by our continually Creating Creator. The outcome of this project proposes that dynamic church websites can reach, welcome and include the communities surrounding existing churches, thus enabling the church to be a people far more than a place.

Dedication

I dedicate this work to those who love
Lancaster Theological Seminary,
and, of course, I dedicate this to my friend, colleague,
and the best P2 the class of 2020 ever had,
Colie Bettivia

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Won't you be my neighbor? Creating an Interconnected Onsite and Online Christian Community

Chapter one: All are welcome, aren't they?

Those God calls to build the “church” without blocks, bricks, or boards are no longer lonely, ignored, sidelined dreamers of some far-off tomorrow. Today, these sought-after frontline voices speak plainly and passionately to the number of people who either are (or someday soon could be) present to Spirit-fed and led online worship communities. Never before has the church had both the opportunity and the ability to reach beyond its walls to truly be the church, the ecclesia, whereby the practice of being the assembly no longer rests in a place but as it has always been intended, and that is with the people—specifically, the people on the move who are online more and more with each passing year.

Blocks, bricks and boards have nothing to do with this latest migration. Churches that may have struggled to exist beyond a set location suddenly moved online en masse as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. For many in the establishment, the move wasn't welcomed, per se; a great amount of scrambling, prayer, awkwardness, fret and initial failure happened, likely in that exact order. Nevertheless, it happened, and by the presence or the even pressure of God, our Creating Creator, this continues to happen.

Online worship is not new. However, when physical church space emptied by way of government decreed stay at home ordinances, a new way of gathering became a norm. Within

days if not hours, pastors and church leaders rallied. Cell phone cameras and Zoom and other internet gathering sessions started to roll. This rolling is changing how and what “church” is. One change is the church, which is no longer set or stationary, is now being experienced by greater numbers. I am a fulltime pastor of a rural UCC church in northeastern Pennsylvania, and the immediate data I have on this change is how many have watched our online worship services since we’ve had to go solely online. That number has doubled. I can share that twice the number of people watched our Palm Sunday service than had it only taken place Sunday morning at 11 AM. Over 200 clicked on our Easter service, up from an average of 100 people being physically present in recent years.

Some have concern about what “watch” and “click” mean. For example, did a viewer watch the Palm Sunday service for less than a minute? If this is the case, or as this is the case, what we need to remember is we never know where the Spirit leads, what godly seeds are sown and in what soil, or, to extend the metaphor of seed and soil, how someone’s faith formation literally grows. That one minute may trigger more thought, question, and response in the immediate or distant future.

The same argument moves to those in church pews as well. We know the following to be true. Thoughts have strayed during a sermon that, for whatever reason, didn’t resonate with the listener. During other parts of a worship service as they have been traditionally known, such as a call to worship or a confession, minds have also wandered. Grocery store lists have been made in the margins of a bulletin. Thoughts about the upcoming game on TV played out during a confession, a hymn, or prayerful moments of silence. What it means to be present is questionable and never fully measurable. Yet measurements—numbers—are important. Unfortunately, the statistics to prove that many congregations are experiencing the same or higher numbers during

the pandemic are not available as this work goes to print in April of 2020, which, according to the CDC, is the peak of the COVID-19 crisis where churches are closed due to public safety. However, it is clear that, as a result of the pandemic, the online movement has never been more imperative. Pastors and church leaders now actively close the gap between what has been two distinct yet interrelated communities: those who prefer to worship in physical space (the church itself) and those who find online worship from a physically-based church surprisingly and beautifully inclusive, inspiring, engaging, and even welcoming.

Inclusivity and the church are nothing new, especially when it comes inspiring, engaging and welcoming others. Yet there are challenges. Technology itself is not foolproof. Problems with livestreaming and equipment happen far too often with worship-minded people who want to praise God, not find another way to plug in to some gizmo that worked yesterday and is now deficient or defunct for any number of known and unknown reasons today. Plus, we Christians still struggle with how a Christian community is defined. The majority of us actually want to meet in person, not through a camera on a desktop computer or a handheld device. This deeply-seated desire happened long before social distancing became a new norm.

Yet something is happening through God's design. It's as if the ALL ARE WELCOME banner marketing ploy from an era now gone is actually being challenged. Are all welcome?

Interestingly, when it comes to the established church, all *are* welcome—at least in theory. To the United Church of Christ, which is known as the broad-based liberal denomination on the block, this welcome on exterior signs, printed literature, and in an increasing number of churches actively using the internet through such means as interactive websites is in keeping with Jesus' inclusivity of women, children, lepers, and tax collectors. This welcome extends to the physically ill, the handicapped, the demon-possessed, the ritually unclean, and *all* "sinners,"

including those who profess and practice what is called an alternative lifestyle—a term that is disdained by some and rejected by others. This same inclusivity does—or it should—also welcome those who choose to “visit church” via the internet, not in person. After all, the bedrock of this liberal denomination which lifts and extends Jesus’ liberal love is not just for some but everyone. This love for everyone continues the pronouncement Jesus made when he called the weary and burdened to himself (Matthew 11:28-30)¹ with no specificity other than a willingness to be present to this itinerate preacher and teacher, this self-professed Son of God. Jesus never said *where* to be present to him; he only said *how* to be present to him. And Jesus, we should all remember, never stayed still. While people did flock to him during certain times of his ministry [this carpenter’s son was known as a healer], this refugee from a nowhere place was never stationary. Instead, he went to the people. It can be argued that the internet goes to the people. The global information highway is the fastest, easiest, and most commonly acceptable means to connect people and the church today.

An important note about a welcome and inclusion needs to be made here. The practice of both welcoming and inclusion exists not only in the United Church of Christ but also in every mainline Protestant church in this nation today for this single reason. Church attendance is down.

On the subject of church attendance, Barna and Kinnaman, the leaders of Barna Group, have statistics to share. The two report there is not a single demographic for which the number of people in American churches today is on the increase. While a few denominations have demonstrated relative stability in church attendance levels over the past two decades, most religious sects in the United States show declines in church attendance. Because young adults

¹ It is important to remember that Jesus could also be exclusive toward religious leaders and others who chose not to receive the Kingdom of God with the humility and openness of a child. Jesus himself could be divisive (Matthew 7:22-23, Luke 10:34, 12:51) to those who would not see him as the Son of God.

have the highest levels of church avoidance, their children are less likely to attend church, increasing the likelihood that they, too, will avoid churches in adulthood.²

Inclusive practices such as front yard signs and promotional literature have been a longstanding part of our Christian typography, especially since each generation from the time of Christ here on earth brings its own cultural and adaptive challenges to the landscape of the church. Today, for example, even with the tech hiccups already mentioned, social media technology does make it easier and easier for people to meet and stay connected with speeds and convenience never before actualized in human history, yet, as we will explore this reality over these four chapters, many pastors and church leaders are reluctant to enter into this technology's possibilities, its new and exciting virtual horizons. Even the forerunners you will read of in this work who advocate the advantages of social media technology in the church generally agree that more prayer, information, and discernment are necessary when it comes to the gains and the losses this new technology provides a worshipful world without walls.

Specifically, when we look at how interactive church websites can be inclusive in the theology of welcoming all, questions rise. Are online viewers (or participants?) as welcome as those who are literally present at the church site, or are those watching remotely marginalized or considered to be less than welcome? Is a single camera livestreaming a service in the back of the sanctuary supporting the "All are welcome" Christian message, or are overworked, overextended, and likely overtired pastors and worship leaders intentionally and unintentionally sidelining whole groups of people because in the days before the pandemic it was just one more thing to do in an already pressed schedule?

² George Barna and Barna Group, eds., *Churchless: Understanding Today's Unchurched and How to Connect with Them: Based on Surveys by Barna Group* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc, 2014), 9.

When it comes to welcome and inclusion, even more questions follow. What message of inclusivity and unity is sent to regular worshippers who are away on vacation? How about those who are shut-in temporarily or long-term? What about people who identify as being agoraphobic or have an equally crippling social hardship? What about active duty soldiers overseas who would rely on home church connections if such connections were possible?

Speaking again of women and children, what about the parent who is home on a Sunday morning with an ill child? Where is inclusion to teenagers who, low on the employment totem pole, have to work late Saturday nights and early Sunday mornings? In regard to the work front, we should also consider a new socio-economic trend: more and more Americans work more and more hours away from the home and even in the home. How is the church welcoming all by acknowledging today's realities in this digital age where greater and greater amounts of time are spent on our portable electronic devices?

To fill pews during worship, pastors and church leaders are stretched and often stressed. More and more questions circle. In this rapidly changing transformative age, what old measures can be continued, or reintroduced? What new ideas can be presented? When it comes to inclusion, what has worked partially in the past that, with modifications, improvements, tweaks, or greater understanding and implementation, can revitalize Christ's bride, the church itself?

All of these questions will be addressed throughout this work. First, however, let me speak to the last question raised, especially since Christians are called to go and make disciples in the world (Matthew 28:19). To make, encourage, and educate disciples in the world (not just in the pews nearest a worshipper), most American churches today have their own individual website³ or have considered one. Others know their website, basically untouched since it came

³ <https://djchuang.com/2011/how-many-churches-have-websites-in-america/> This link gives info on the number of churches that have websites in 2011.

about, should be updated so that it can more actively enter the digital age. Many pastors and church leaders recognize the need for inclusive websites that provide community outreach opportunities as well as community centeredness and mindfulness. This awareness came long before the COVID-19 pandemic. The potential to gather online *is* arguably and recognizably is now a reality. Not-so futuristic websites that can bond near and far members and non-members are a promising reality, not a pipedream. Community-based worship is now more possible when we consider sacred and secular space are now far more intertwined than ever because a single click or swipe can transform something considered unholy to something holy in seconds. We are at the start of a new roaring twenties.

The start of the roaring twenties: churches and their websites too often miss (not hit)
World-renowned artist Pablo Picasso has been attributed to saying, “Everything you can imagine is real.”

As we holding what we can imagine closely, the start of this new decade will likely bring about significant technological advancements over the next ten years. The advancement of the internet (and here I include websites as well as social media outlets) will likely increase exponentially because the days of the pandemic when churches could only be present to the people via the internet will not and should not be forgotten. Instead, God is giving us a whole new way to look at how church is church. Even more specifically, God is showing us through technology how the church can be the church, the assembly, in these roaring twenties.

Rather than start a conversation with language itself being technology, or delve into the success of the Pauline Epistles where the technology of papyrus⁴ used as paper which carried the

⁴ In *Rewired: how using today's technology can bring you back to deeper relationships, real conversations and powerful ways to share God's love*, Brandon Cox shares that papyrus changed how culture moved from an oral to a

gospel message not in person (as Jesus himself had done) was achieved across great distances, or recap radio and television and their impacts on Christianity today, let's focus these four chapters on interactive websites. A good place to begin is at the beginning. Specifically, I'd like to start at the point when church's first launched their own individual websites, which should unarguably be a positive step toward inclusion and information because a whole new forum was tapped into for the first time. In addition to telephone books which were still the norm in those days, these first websites provided with ease more than print ads could do. Many pictures could be posted at once. Basic information could be shared. Updates could be made. Special events with colorful photos or primitive graphics could be included with little effort on a seemingly low-cost advertising budget. Aha! The church in the year 2000 had arrived! Pastors could identify themselves on a page, and church calendars, which had always been mailed via the US Post Office, could be seen and easily checked by anyone, not just existing church members. Of course, the question of whether or not to opt into a church website buzzed (and buzzed) around church consistory or council meetings. When we look back now, however, this move into this technology was no mistake. In fact, this outreach (and the original websites were just that—outreach) put the church's overall presence in a good place. Churches were present where people were not only looking but also spending time, and that was on this new, accessible world wide web.

This new “good news” lasted for a while, then the world did what it does: it moved even more quickly and, for the most part, left these original websites, which have not advanced in

written one, which, in turn, created a demand for more scrolls of knowledge. In progression, the printing press made written material assessable to common people. Soon after, common people demanded more and better books. The television exposed far-away cultures and, as such, the demand on technology for better and better TVs has not plateaued but continues to increase. Cox argues that when technology is made available to people, the desire for people to want it advance it is clear. Advanced, interactive websites should be no different (53).

twenty years, on the margins. If we look at the potential of gathering individuals into collectives such as Facebook and Instagram do seamlessly, then these now antiquated websites are glorified billboards. They are, in fact, flat signs on the speedy internet because they barely show the happenings in the life of the church. But along with others cited in this work, I am no prophet of gloom and doom. What if that website of yesterday became dynamic and interactive today? Imagine. Dare to dream of a church website that hosts forums of interaction and prayer, community building and faith sharing. These improved, social media-based websites could provide their members *and all others* with ways of interconnectivity not just once a week during worship, or at the occasional or monthly meeting, but seven days a week.

Keep imagining. To make these twenties potentially roar, today's pastors and church leaders can step further into both theology and technology so that worship options and pastor care extends. Here is just one example. With the right perimeters set that kept participants safe, many voices could gather like a sit-around-the-table Bible study in the pastor's office of yesterday. In the company of a pastor or curriculum teacher just clicks away, these new participants neighborhoods or nations away could weigh in to discuss sacred text via Skype, Zoom, or other similar technologies.

Yes, the social aspects of getting out to a Bible study are not only important but also healthy in terms of social interaction, especially to the extroverted. This cannot change. However, what does person to person mean as we look into the next ten years? Consider senior citizens who do not drive at night, or those who fear leaving their home during inclement weather. A tech aide could come to the homes of those just mentioned not only with in-person tutorials but also could be present—actually *should be* present—when hiccups, hang ups and glitches occur.

Additionally, thought should be given to once nuclear families who, because of the job market, interests, marriage/attachments, or life itself, now have members of their household living in different regions of the country or the world. A single sermon or a sermon series heard intergenerationally and geographically can open dialogue, discovery and discipleship across many, many miles, cultures and other seen and unseen barriers. Given today's social media technologies, envision both a physical church and an online church being *one* church where interconnectivity between the virtual and the real world have people meeting in person *and* on a website as a community where “welcoming all” literally means welcoming all—all the time.

When it comes to welcoming all, great challenges face this postmodern, digital age. According to a 2015 Pew Research Center survey, 64% of American adults now own a smartphone of some kind, up from 35% in the spring of 2011. This trend continues to rise with Smartphone ownership increasing among younger Americans with relatively higher income and education levels.⁵ A 2019 Pew Research Center Survey reports that 95% of U.S. teens say they have access to a smartphone, and 45% say they are “almost constantly” on the internet.⁶ More data supports this trend. When it comes to Internet use,

a 2018 Pew Research Center survey reveals that roughly three-quarters of Facebook users – and around six-in-ten Snapchat and Instagram users – visit each site daily. Facebook users also visit the site with high levels of frequency. Fully 74% of Facebook users say they visit the site daily. 51% say they check the site several times a day. The share of Facebook users who visit the site on a daily basis is statistically unchanged compared with 2016, when 76% of Facebook users reported they visited the site daily. With the exception of those 65 and older, Facebook is used by a majority of Americans across a wide range of demographic groups.⁷

⁵ <https://www.pewinternet.org/2015/04/01/us- A-smartphone-use-in-2015/>

⁶ <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/08/23/most-u-s-teens-who-use-cellphones-do-it-to-pass-time-connect-with-others-learn-new-things/>

⁷ <https://www.pewinternet.org/2018/03/01/social-media-use-in-2018/>

One challenge that can be seen as a blessing not as a detriment to pastors and worship leaders is the increasing amount of time Americans spend on the internet. With online gaming and social interactions always available, traditional worship times compete with rising online use. This has been the pastor's and worship leader's lament. This diametric pull—church or culture—remains in great tension. Barna and Kinnaman speak to our pace and priorities today. They reveal that people are more likely than ever to claim overly crammed schedules. In fact, most Americans Barna and Kinnaman polled share they have more online and offline activities than ever before. According to the twosome, most Americans are overbooked and over-scheduled.⁸ Instead of having a roaring twenties, perhaps the following should be the cause of our roar, at least for some of us. The duo also share that, given the influx of rapid-fire information we receive through our handheld devices in addition to more news blurbs and flashes in public areas like restaurants, gas station pumps and medical office waiting rooms, we, the moving targets of twenty-first century consumerism, have shorter attention spans than we've had in decades past.⁹

Couple these facts with an increasing indifference toward the church and it is no wonder pastors and church leaders experience a greater and greater distance with those who do not think they have time—or even interest—in the church and interestingly, distance is the greatest grumble or lament when it comes to why online worshippers are not joining onsite worshippers. “What is this onsite/online malarkey?” Traditionalists wonder, “Why can't they join us where we are?”

Yet facts are facts. Datum is datum. Harried schedules and brain overloads reveal that pastors and church leaders have less frequent face time to reach the churchless where worldviews

⁸ <https://www.pewinternet.org/2018/03/01/social-media-use-in-2018/>

⁹ <https://www.pewinternet.org/2018/03/01/social-media-use-in-2018/>

of the church can be addressed.¹⁰ This is not the end, however. To those who seek and listen to our God of opportunity and motion, pastors and church leaders still have an option, even when presented with less and less face time in this upcoming, likely time-crunched decade. These options may not be very welcome by pastors and church leaders who grew up loving the people of God not with newfangled, cosmic, outer-space gadgetry requiring a tech savvy skillset and an “strong” password with an unforgettable combination of ten letters, numbers, and punctuation symbols, but in a church—a real, tangible, single, around the block from home location. The option, painful as it is to some, is to meet people where they are, which, according to research here, is on the internet. Recognizing a gradual change to permanency in our evolving culture naturally takes time; the internet, for example, didn’t just happen overnight; but when we pastors and church leaders recognize our ever-changing world by responding not reacting to this compiled datum on Americans and their rising internet usage, then updated or new, interactive websites in this new decade can hit, not miss, and, in so doing, begin to bring together both onsite and online worship communities.

Before moving on to the next section, I have a note. The words onsite and online are used throughout this work. These words can seem divisive, as is the word traditionalist, which I just used. To move forward in this work and in this world, a reminder here is necessary. No matter where we are placed in God’s Kingdom, or, specifically, *when* we are placed in God’s Kingdom (or timeline), our common goal throughout the millennia remains unchanged: we are called to reach and teach both the church and the unchurched about this carpenter’s son I mentioned earlier.

¹⁰ Barna and Barna Group, *Churchless*, 18.

So, we just plug in? That's it?

Even with passwords requiring a combination of ten letters, numbers, and punctuation symbols, Douglas Estes is a strong proponent of the church reaching its potential through the internet as a means for all people to feel welcome. When speaking to what can happen online through the church's presence on websites and other forms of social media such as Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat and Twitter, Estes sees the church reimagining, reinventing and redefining itself. In plugging in, or in continuing to plug into the internet, he notes that

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the church is beginning to be different not just in style, venue, feel, or volume but in the world in which it exists. A new gathering of believers is emerging, a church not in the real world of bricks and mortar but in the virtual world of IP addresses and shared experiences. This type of church is unlike any church the world has ever seen. It has the power to break down social barriers, unite believers all over the world, and build the kingdom of God with a widow's mite of financing.¹¹

The effectiveness of breaking down barriers and reaching people all over the world at a fraction of the cost of communication systems such as radio and TV includes Queen Elizabeth, who pioneered her own YouTube channel in 2007. In early 2020, "The Royal Family" has 595,000 subscribers.

Pope John Paul II also recognizes the significance of technology's interface with the church. In 2005, he redefined digital media as "pathways to intensify communion," which is a far different message from a 2002 Vatican document in which he stated, "The virtual reality of cyberspace cannot substitute for real interpersonal community, the incarnational reality of the sacraments and the liturgy, or the immediate and direct proclamation of the gospel."¹²

¹¹ Estes, SimChurch. Page 18

¹²The Church and Internet (2002), #5, at

www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/pccs/documents/rc_pc_pccs_dpc_2002228_church-internet_en.html

Pope John Paul II's earlier reaction and later realization of the power of the internet mirrors many concerns and the reluctant acceptance of the internet and the church today.¹³ "No one here is really opposed to the internet," one of my congregation members said in an unplanned conversation about interactive websites and the church moving further into social media technology. This seventy-something paused and then added reflectively what sums up a general feeling with many seniors within the church community I pastor and, I imagine, beyond my congregation. "I just don't want to embrace it, let alone see what it can do, or, sadly, will change."¹⁴

The understandable lament is heavy on the hearts of many devoted followers of Christ Jesus. This pain is twofold. First, church life today, at least in regard to pews being filled on a Sunday, is a ghost of what was. Here I am not merely talking about attendance. As we look at the nation, the church itself is not the American priority it was at the time this seventy-something, then a man of twenty, fully committed his life not only to Christ, but also to religion. This is a loss, and all losses need to be grieved.

Second, a lament for many is the physical invasion of technology itself as it began to appear in churches around ten to fifteen years ago. Computer-generated images, hymn lyrics, sermon bullet points, congregational announcements and other information on very large, wide screens mounted to sanctuary walls flanking the revered pulpit were immediately welcomed by

¹³Allow me to speak about another Pope for a moment. Teresa Berger, author of *At Worship*, had an interesting experience with Pope Francis using Missiobot. [According to Monica Yehle, director of communications and outreach for the Pontifical Mission Society of the United States, Missiobot is digital technology using Facebook Messenger which simulates 'conversations' to tell about the lifesaving work of Catholic missionaries around the world.] Even though Berger knew that behind this conversation was a software application that runs automated, repetitive scripts over the internet, she found her chat with "Pope Francis" strangely touching (p.17).

¹⁴ This conversation was not planned, yet happened as the two of us were leaving a church council meeting in April, 2018. At our August 2019 meeting, she quipped to a committee chairperson who staunchly defends that she chooses to live in the Victorian Era, what many in this project will also share (including David Kinnaman in *Churchless*) which is that face-to-face communication is still preferred over online communication.

some, yes, but not all. Add now a digital camera on a tripod in the back of the sanctuary which is livestreaming a worship service and the loss this grief perpetuates is not just understandable, it's palpable.

Let me share another comment from someone else in the congregation I serve. A sixty-something member had a visceral reaction when I announced in worship at the end of my first year in the doctoral program at Lancaster Theological Seminary what my major project was about, which I said at the time would be the study of how the church can use social media technology to build an online community. Interestingly, this member boasts she successfully uses a Weight Watchers online program¹⁵ but literally groaned at my news of future study. In addition to her faithfulness in her online diet program, this member regularly connects with her children and young grandchild via Skype, yet the idea of interactive websites and social media technology reaching into her longstanding faith tradition is something she can accept to an extent, but not embrace fully. This member of my church reminds me of Pope John Paul II in 2002. I repeat his words shared earlier. "The virtual reality of cyberspace cannot substitute for real interpersonal community."

In addition to grief, a generational rift is—and is not—at work here. It is not completely accurate to apply ageism to social media technology and the church because Assistant Professor of Communication at Texas A&M University professor Heidi Campbell, who teaches in the areas of New Media and Popular Culture and Religion, explains that people of all ages take part in online church experiences because this participation makes them feel more connected to the church at large. This should make us all question what an interpersonal community actually is,

¹⁵ Leith Anderson, *A Church for the 21st Century* (Minneapolis, Minn: Bethany House Publishers, 1992), 35. Commercial enterprises have recognized the power and even the profit from small groups targeting special needs and niches. Weight Watchers and NutriSystem use small support groups to bring people together for fellowship and weight control.

or, specifically, what an interpersonal community is becoming or, in light of future data from the COVID-19 pandemic, could become.

Campbell addresses this community, at least in part. In a chapter called “*Living as the Networked People of God*,” in *Voices of the Virtual World: Participative Technology and the Ecclesial Revolution*, Campbell suggests that an interconnected church is not just necessary in this new decade, it is significant because an interconnected church “provides the ability to extend their interactions with fellow believers and create a deeper awareness of what it means to be a part of the global Body of Christ.”¹⁶ This interconnected (and welcoming) church can extend interactions beyond the post-worship/parking lot time where, with the proper format, conversations can bond people together not just once a week but throughout the week.

For example, let me mention a third member of my congregation, a woman in her mid-seventies. She is an active part of Facebook and shares on the social media site occasional pictures of her life. Recipes are a common thread on her page. A second is flowers, particularly garden flowers. A third is photos, memories, or continued sorrow over her late grandchild who passed away suddenly and tragically. These posts aren’t meant to any one in particular. Yes, she is sending these communications and photos to her online friends, but no friend specifically gets her latest posts unless she sends the post directly to them. As a Facebook member, she, like all Facebook members, generates posts to all. Once a post is “out there,” it is well known and even practiced that anyone on Facebook can copy and share her material. In catching her recipes, flower pictures, and memories of her great and lasting loss, this wider network she participates in is more connected to this cook, gardener and grandmother than ever before imagined in our

¹⁶ Len Hjalmarson and John La Grou, *Voices of the Virtual World: Participative Technology & the Ecclesial Revolution* (United States: Wikiklesia Press, 2007), 48.

existing offline social networks. Along with other Facebook users, she is, in fact, interconnected in profound, significant ways. Words of appreciation and comfort find and support her regularly.

Since this is true for everyday posts about such events as family outings, nature walks, guys' nights out, graduations, hockey practice and politics, imagine what intentional posts, pictures and video clips centered on scripture, a sermon, the mission movement, or an ongoing church conversation can do? To connect and make more people feel more welcome, included and involved even when they've missed worship for a week, a month, a season or a year, a solution is simple. They can plug into an interactive church website.

There is one more note about posts I'd like to share. The church I serve was hit by a significant, powerful hail storm in May, 2018. Damage from the storm broke all eight large windows that flank one side of the sanctuary. Shards of glass scattered over forty feet. All eight window shades were tattered, and many pews, Bibles, and hymnals took on so much water damage that they had to be replaced.

Using the video function on my cell phone, I film a vlog each week. This vlog is a one- to two-minute video clip about the upcoming scripture we, the congregation, will engage on Sunday. I film vlogs everywhere—outdoors, in front of my fireplace at home, exteriors of churches, the front of a retail store in mid-December, and even the county library. I usually get between 120 and 180 vlog views a week (and I'm blessed if half that number attends worship on a Sunday). Some of these vlogs are reposted on other people's pages. When this happens, even more viewers see and hear my work, my ministry through the internet.

The day after the May 2018 hail storm, I filmed the weekly vlog in the sanctuary. Over 950 viewers caught that post because it had been shared many times. Yes, many viewers were onlookers passing by the scene of an interstate motor vehicle accident, but the interconnected

potential to reach and unite so many people within and beyond the walls of the church is something that needs to be addressed, not ignored.

Gibbs and Bolger address the global body of Christ, this extension beyond the walls of the church to where people live, eat, and breathe. In *Emerging Communities: creating Christian Community in postmodern cultures*, they postulate a church which, by their definition, is not a performance-based gathering, but a welcoming, free-flowing, interconnected and continual group. In fact, the two believe “church” is not about meeting at all; rather, church is an inclusive community, not a pitstop on the journey of life. They see that yes, churches have meetings, but these meetings do not define church. They argue these meetings help the church grow. Gibbs and Bolger mean the word “meetings’ literally, like a trustee’s meeting Tuesday night or a foodbank meeting Friday morning before weekend distribution. I consider these “meetings” can also be worship times. They say, “These meetings are scheduled to support or to flow out of the community, but do not create the community.”¹⁷ I believe that worship does create community, or at least opens the possibility for community to be actualized within and beyond sanctuary walls. The two kick it up one more notch when they add, “Church is not an occasion or a periodic event.”¹⁸

Maybe Gibbs and Bolger are using the term “church” when they could mean the word “Christian.” Church, as many traditionalists know it, is a once or twice a week event. It begins. It ends. The term “Christian” however, is a complete lifestyle, a chosen way to live each day. When we exchange the word ‘church’ for ‘the Christian life’, their sentence reads this way: The Christian life is not an occasion or a periodic event. Since the Christian life is not an occasion or

¹⁷ Eddie Gibbs and Ryan K. Bolger, *Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Community in Postmodern Cultures* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Academic, 2005), 102.

¹⁸ Gibbs and Bolger, 102.

a periodic event, or *as* the Christian life is not an occasion or a periodic event, then sustaining the Christian life each day is not arbitrary but ongoing.

A December 10, 2014 online article published by Barna Group called “Ten Facts about America’s Churchless” speaks to the “church” not being the “church.” The article nuances the word church in juxtaposition to the word “de-churched” and claims,

Very few of America’s unchurched adults are purely unchurched—most of them, rather, are de-churched. Only about one-quarter of unchurched adults (23%) has never attended a Christian church at any time in his or her life, other than for a special service such as a wedding or funeral ceremony (though this number is on the rise; in 1993, only 15% of unchurched adults had never been connected to a church). The majority of unchurched individuals (76%) have firsthand experience with one or more Christian churches and, based on that sampling, have decided they can better use their time in other ways.¹⁹

Based on what this Barna article says, the de-churched were welcome, at least somewhat, but a pastor preaching while all others sit and watch may be a key reason those who were welcomed by the church’s front yard sign and the “Welcome All” pamphlet in the pew didn’t work. Interconnectedness, at least as it is depicted here, didn’t exist to the extent the de-churched wanted, or found meaningful. It is accurate to say that this form of interconnectedness is failing more and more each year. Watching isn’t something the de-churched want to do. While opportunities in ministry are always ongoing in the fact that volunteers are always encouraged and needed in so many ways in so many capacities, there remains a disconnect. “Church” is one thing, “life” is another. When church life doesn’t connect with the secular life, then church does not succeed. Said differently, church and life cannot be distinct. Intwined, they must be one.

Twentysomethings tend to be specific as to why people who were once churchd are now de-churched. According to George Barna and David Kinnaman in *Churchless: Understanding*

¹⁹ From <https://www.barna.com/research/10-facts-about-americas-churchless/> Articles in Faith and Christianity, December 10, 2014

Today's Unchurched and How to Connect with Them, twentysomething church dropouts share these six points as to why church isn't working for them. First, churches seem restrictive and overprotective. Second, Christianity as practiced is too shallow. Third, churches seem antagonistic to science. Fourth, churches are judgmental and rigid about sexuality. Fifth, the exclusivity of Christianity is a turnoff, and finally, churches are unfriendly to those who doubt.²⁰ These six reasons can seem daunting if not depressing for many pastors and church leaders today until we consider an underpin to what has been said here. The twentysomethings polled are sharing why church isn't working for them, which may seem obvious, but interestingly, rather than not answering this poll which is always an option, they are engaging what isn't working. In turn, they hint to what could work for them, which is an engagement they long to experience. Said specifically, this engagement isn't happening in the church experiences they have had or, in defense of pastors and church leaders open and willing to listen to twentysomethings, these twentysomethings have felt they couldn't participate. There is a single voice coming from the six points this demographic group mentions—the church. As they say that Christianity as practice is too shallow, I hear an invitation to the church to practice Christianity more openly, deeply and inclusively. How this practice of 365/24/7 total life engagement can happen means that churches that are well-established in their physical locations, can be fully present to where twentysomethings (and so many others) spend a great deal of their time, and that is on the internet.

To answer the question asked at the beginning of this section, “So, do we just plug in and go?”, the short answer is yes. (The long answer continues to unfold in this work.) We go where we are called, where we are comfortable, and, in the echoing words of the Apostle Paul in

²⁰ Barna and Barna Group, *Churchless*, 20.

Philippians 3:14, we continue to press on to win the prize set before us. We press on even when—and especially where—we are uncomfortable because interconnectivity means something entirely different than it did ten to twenty years ago. It is a new world. It’s certainly a new decade. We are not called to be a part of this world (John 15:19, John 18:36, Romans 12:1-2), but the opportunities to share with others God in this world have never been more present.

You do you: learning on (and with) the net

The internet is the new super information highway. With an audible question posed to Alexa or with just a few words tapped into a Google search bar, vast resources are immediately available. Scripture passages, quotes on Christian faith, wisdom from renowned theologians, insights from pop preachers (and this terminology is not an insult), in-depth commentary on lectionary passages, and insights to characters within the Bible are readily accessible through the web. This information can be false and subsequently very damaging. Nevertheless, this new technology adds to the hallmark of postmodernism, which is self-guided knowledge. Self-guided knowledge doesn’t happen in a vacuum. Rather, it is assessible and communal in that, in this digital age, we are self-seeking, self-guided learners. As we Americans begin to move into this new decade, a prevailing mindset (or mantra) becomes even more clear: we like what we like, and we do what we do. The age of individualism is here.

In *Spiritual Conversations in the Digital Age*, a Barna Report produced in partnership with Lutheran Hour Ministries, Kurt S. Buchholz, President and CEO of Lutheran Hour Ministries, agrees. Buchholz asserts that “People today are seeking what works for their life, with less concern for whether these beliefs and practices are rooted in a universal truth—and

whether anyone agrees with them.”²¹ In other words, the trend of the twentysomethings I just spoke of permeates intergenerationally. Across our nation today, Buchholz argues that individuality and self-actualized knowledge is coveted over established structure and unifying beliefs.

In the Barna report just mentioned, Barna Group Editor and Chief Roxanne Stone shares more about our appreciation for individuality and our objection to unifying beliefs. She sums up what she calls a now common, self-guiding, self-illuminating three-word phrase, “You do you.” Stone states this phrase “neatly sums up one of the more pervasive ideas of this second decade in the twenty first century.”²² With the following question, Stone captures a prevailing mindset shared by more than just twentysomethings. “Who am I to judge what you do with your life?” This question, according to Stone, is a sentiment rooted in both individuality and relativism. She adds that Americans have long celebrated the sovereignty of the individual when it comes to personal decisions and lifestyle. However, as belief in objective truth claims (outside of scientific evidence) have waned, the individual’s domain has expanded to include adjudication of moral truth as well. A few examples from recent Barna studies include

- 35% of Americans agree that moral truth is absolute (44% say it’s relative; 21% admit to never having thought about it).
- 91% say the best way to find yourself is by looking within yourself.
- 79% say people can believe whatever they want, as long as those beliefs don’t affect society.
- 57% say whatever is right in your life or works best for you is the only truth you can know.²³

The percentages above speak to the growing number who not only dismiss the relevance of church, but also would not value an inclusive welcome from a church. So,

²¹ Barna Group and Lutheran Hour Ministries, *Spiritual Conversations in the Digital Age: How Christians’ Approach to Sharing Their Faith Has Changed in 25 Years*, 2018, 10.

²² Barna Group and Lutheran Hour Ministries, 9.

²³ Barna Group and Lutheran Hour Ministries, 9.

the “Welcome All” sign in the church’s front yard and the well-placed literature within the church itself are doing little—or nothing at all—to reach those who listen to and practice the permeating cultural mantra, “You do you.”

According to this Barna report, the gospel venue isn’t working as it has been. George Barna and David Kinnaman recognize what faces churches today and suggest churches add to what they are doing now with focus and energy, which is to reach out digitally to the widest “community” possible through their website, podcasts, vlogs, and social media platforms. The two encourage faith communities who are considering how to channel their digital resources toward equipping young Christians in how to connect with their fellow digital natives.²⁴ To empower not abandon young Christians among their peers using what their peers engage with is vital; no pastor or church leader should argue this; but I think Barna and Kinnaman need to look at and speak to Baby Boomers, Gen Xers, and Millennials who use technology secularly without giving it much opportunity to reach their peers spiritually. Every generation has the potential to reach and teach their friends, family, and colleagues, classmates, and acquaintances, so to have a place for them to add their faith stories and struggles, questions, support and love would be remarkable. As of the first quarter in 2019, Facebook had 2.41 billion monthly active users worldwide.²⁵ Imagine if Facebook were to start a Christian organization using the same format it uses today.

To share the success of Facebook has with the congregation I serve, our average weekly attendance in worship on a Sunday is between 55-65. Adding newcomers to our

²⁴ Barna and Barna Group, *Churchless*, 19–20.

²⁵ <https://www.statista.com/statistics/264810/number-of-monthly-active-facebook-users-worldwide/>

membership has been a challenge since I became the pastor nearly 12 years ago. People just don't want to join. However, we have almost 294 active Facebook members. What this says is people will commit to this congregation far more through social media technology than they will in person. In the case of this congregation, spiritual learning and interconnectivity happen as much (if not more) on the internet than in person. Online worship cannot replace onsite worship in part because technology is not yet advanced enough to unite people, but online connections certainly enhance the worship experiences this congregation enjoys.

It is impossible to know how our attendance numbers would change if the congregation stopped using Facebook as a form of learning and sharing. Perhaps our average weekly attendance would increase if there was no form of electronic communication throughout the week. I don't find this likely. While it is easier to click on a worship service itself (which is recorded live and is then available to all our members all of the time) than it is to be physically present in church on a Sunday, I think our weekly attendance would drop even more if nothing was posted. The need for the congregation to connect to each other through the week via the internet is growing, not shrinking. If what is posted on the internet actually draws people further to Christ and to each other, and, as a visionary, I do see this happening, then our future in the faith is not as dim as our forecasters say it is.

This being said, electronic connections are not as significant as connections made in church itself. Given where technology is today (and seeing how too many pastors, church leaders and congregations do and do not want to use technology today), I can speak for my congregation and share that there is no way an online experience can

compare to an onsite one. Therefore, online experiences are not replacing onsite experiences, but online experiences are enhancing the Christian walk.

I remain hopeful that tomorrow truly is a new day and that, given enough time and prayer, our in-person attendance will rise to where it was twenty years ago. Unless a migration of more career opportunities and people move into this economically repressed area, this attendance rise is unlikely. Additionally, a hard reality is that a great number of the 294 active Facebook members this congregation has now will not come to church through the doors, but yes, I argue that an electronic church experience is better than no church experience at all. If this UCC church is going to make it through the next fifteen to thirty years, our hope is in what the internet will do. I am not speaking to my congregation alone, of course. Our call as pastors and church leaders is to make the internet do what it has the potential to do—and that's draw people to Christ. The days of theology being distant to technology are over. Theology can no longer afford to accept half-heartedly what technology does five to ten years after technology advances. Theology now needs to push technology forward.

Tech it up: why we should welcome *and engage* all (even when we'd rather not)
Some in the church think that the "Welcome All" front lawn sign and the literature should be enough to say what we mean. If the sign out front or the pamphlets in the pews are not enough, then many think the socially adept in the congregation will welcome newcomers with graciousness or awkwardness, or some combination therein, "because that's what they do," or "they're better at 'being nice' to newcomers than others." When the newcomer is *different enough*, however, a too familiar fate invariably erodes inclusivity. When the "new" in the word newcomer is too far from the center after "checking out the church for a couple of Sundays,"

then that fresh face is not sought after or sincerely missed. If the potential individual or family doesn't gel with the status quo, the rationale goes like this: "Their being here just wasn't a fit."

If congregations continue to engage potential new members with similarities and disengage those who do not, the 2014 Barna report revealing the estimated number of people in the United States defined as "churchless"²⁶ at 114 million will continue to grow. Add to this the number roughly 42 million children and teenagers who are unchurched and we arrive at a total of 156 million U.S. residents who are not engaged with a Christian church.²⁷ This doesn't mean the churchless aren't talking about faith, or find faith or the church insignificant. In fact, a surprising number value the church. When asked to identify their faith beliefs,

62% of unchurched adults consider themselves Christians. Most of the churchless in America—contrary to what one might believe—do not disdain Christianity nor desire to belittle it or tear it down. Many of them remain culturally tied to Christianity and are significantly interested in it. More than 34%, for example, would describe themselves as "deeply spiritual." 41% "strongly agree" that their religious faith is very important in their life today. 51% are actively seeking something better spiritually than they have experienced to date. 33% say they have an active relationship with God that influences their life and are most likely to describe that relationship as "important to me."²⁸

If this number of people have an active and important relationship with God, how this relationship sustains itself becomes a prescient question. If these individuals are without a church, they must be finding and experiencing God on their own. Perhaps they are creating their own personalized religion or are finding inspiration in others. What may be fair to say is that

²⁶ As defined by Barna, churchless means anyone who has not attended a church service, other than a special event such as a wedding or a funeral, at any time during the past six months.

²⁷ These statistics come from <https://www.barna.com/research/10-facts-about-americas-churchless/> Articles in Faith and Christianity, December 10, 2014 To put 156 million people in context, says Barna, if all those unchurched people lived in a separate nation, it would be the eighth most populous country in the world, trailing only China, India, Indonesia, Brazil, Pakistan, Bangladesh and the remaining church public of the US (159 million).

²⁸ From <https://www.barna.com/research/10-facts-about-americas-churchless/> Articles in Faith and Christianity, December 10, 2014

they're living with an intentional or unintentional construction of piecemeal theology cobbled loosely or intentionally together which, in this multifaceted, pluralistic age, (much like multifaceted, pluralistic ages in the past) happens—or has happened—to those who also profess to being churchied. Since the interest is there, a means for them to connect to others must be there, too. Something pops up in the above citation. The two-word phrase I find most interesting is “culturally tied.” The question, “What does that mean?” may be clear enough. The question, “How does this play out with individuals?” is not clear, or not clear enough. What does it mean for unchurched adults to be culturally tied speaks to a loose relationship with a church without ever setting foot in the sanctuary.²⁹ An interesting note needs to be shared about websites that engage, rather than remain static. While millions of American adults make a conscious decision to keep the Christian church at arm's length, “there are more than 40 million unchurched adults in the United States who are significantly interested in Christianity—not just as a religious system, but as a values code, a moral standard, a relational base, and a way of life.”³⁰ This interest and possible investment isn't arbitrary; four out of five people not involved with a church want to contribute to the good of their community.³¹ Options for involvement include humanitarian-based organizations, volunteer fire and ambulance companies, local schools, parks, and churches. If millions of American adults are not in a church and are not currently interested in a church yet seek godly connections and relationships as a way of life, an interactive church website may be an answer.

²⁹ This phenomenon is something I've experienced with several individuals who know I am the pastor of the local church which they honestly, earnestly claim to be a part of, even though they literally never participate or contribute to the church in any way. One thirty-something shared with me in a nearby grocery store that, “I'm there, even though you don't see me.” Others find the traditional icon of the church's towering, stark white steeple in town to be the only connection they need to “feel involved” with congregational life.

³⁰ Barna and Barna Group, *Churchless*, 41.

³¹ Barna and Barna Group, 42.

When it comes to answers, the possibility for shared learning and engagement happens best where most people congregate, which isn't in a church or church parking lot after a worship service per se, but online. The church that engages those online becomes relevant not with a focus on a nostalgic longing for what was, a yesteryear dream of the church returning to its being a vital, sustainable, valuable hub of life from a single location, but in meeting people where culture is today. Barna and Kinnaman speak to where Americans are.

As a culture on the run, heavily invested in technology and saturated with media messages, we [Americans] form lasting perceptions based on ten-second video clips, 140-character tweets, fifteen-second sound bites, Instagram snapshots with short captions, and thirty-second commercials....When asked to discuss the most significant issues of the day, most of us demonstrate only superficial knowledge of—or interest in—world-shaping matters. Yet, armed with minimal depth and concern, we form thousands of enduring impressions that serve as the basis for our daily decision making in most areas of our lives.³²

Superficial knowledge is dangerous. Shared information, however, can inspire more and greater learning, especially in world-shaping matters. Online technologies such as Vimeo, BuzzFeed and Reddit enable culturally savvy individuals to gather, interpret, and respond to information that advance their causes, passions and interests. To instantly add a personal image, idea, or opinion to the digital mix online speaks to this self-actualized era where one maxim is clear: more and more choose to contribute not consume.³³ This notion of self-expression (and self-promotion) continues to trend online. More and more individuals build their own platforms, intentionally and otherwise, using social media. This is the case of my fictional novel, *Jesus Cloned*, which was published out of pocket by Archway Publishers in 2017. Archway, along

³² Barna and Barna Group, 47.

³³ Churchless, 43. Barna and Kinnaman point out what to many outside the church find obvious: in worship, one person does a lot of talking while all others sit and listen/consume. If you consider how must churches deliver content—appointing one person as the authority and encouraging everyone else to sit quietly while he or she speaks—it is easy to see how that delivery system may come into conflict with changing cultural expectations. Churchless / George Barna and David Kinnaman 19

with other outside media consultants, advised me to create my “author’s voice” online because publishing has changed significantly over the past fifteen to twenty years from traditional publishing contracts to print on demand—especially if the author is new. Savvy marketeers are at the quick in other businesses beyond publishing. Said simply (and I believe brashly), if you want your product out there, you pedal your own wares.

When it comes to worship, many pastors and church leaders pedaling alongside a consumer-driven Christian market where church shopping for convenience, music, and a message is the norm, yet as we listen to Barna, Kinnaman and others, this now familiar forecast can change. As I speak again of the self-promotion piece which easily and obviously includes the promotion of Christianity, my research indicated that the voice of the people—not the voice of the one leader—is becoming more admissible, especially since cell phones have easy-to-use technology that instantaneously reaches worldwide. Consider, for example, a sudden news event. TV station crews are naturally not the first on the scene, bystanders are. What are they doing? They’re recording the event. Who uses the recorded event on the air? The answer is TV stations. Even though many choose to post new findings on social media only, look at newscasts these days. There you will see that more and more film footage is shot through a cell phone camera, not a TV camera. As a result of social media technology, for better and for worse, eyewitnesses and amateurs have become photojournalists, analysts and commentators. Pastors and church leaders who stay silent in this arena are not equipping the culture with a Christian lens to see and make sense of the current events unfolding around them each day.

The inception of the Smartphone in 2009 revolutionized the world as we know it, even to the technically illiterate. Until this time, traditional worship in traditional worship settings was an oasis in an oppressive, desert land. The weekly church service not only lifted but also sustained

congregants throughout the week. The sentence, “I come to church to be fed,” could be heard from church members across theological spectrums. The need for corporate prayer was obvious, too. Immediate numbers mattered. The more people a prayer warrior could commune with the better the prayer.

Times have changed. An example of how prayer has transformed with technology and how technology is used to engage people just happened in the congregation I serve. An 84-year-old great-grandmother who adamantly refuses social media technology, called our church administrator on Labor Day to ask for prayers to be sent out electronically for her granddaughter who was scheduled for a very difficult caesarian section the following morning. [We had established an email prayer list ten years ago.] The situation between this mom and newborn came about suddenly. The great-grandmother, who had been in church on Sunday of Labor Day weekend, didn’t know of the situation until Monday. She didn’t hesitate to reach for prayer through technology. In fact, after the birth of a healthy baby girl, the great-grandmother spoke with deep gratitude for the email prayer.

As with the case of the 84-year-old great-grandmother, technology continues to be transformative. Brian Wurzell, worship pastor at Hillside Community Church in Rancho Cucamonga, California, believes, “We’ve got to get better at engaging/investing in technology. The speed of technological advancement has required the church to either stay with it or lose its ground. Churches that are choosing to embrace technology as a medium for the message tend to be the churches thriving.”³⁴

Technology for technology’s sake can gain ground on the religious front, even to those who initially reject it as a theological tool. What do gigabytes, consumer rate optimization

³⁴ Barna and Barna Group, *Churchless*, 43.

(CRO), and pixels per inch have to do with the love of God? It turns out, the answer to the question is quite a lot. When social media technology is used not for its own sake but to engage others in the situations around them, as is the case with the email prayer request from the great-grandmother, Christians connections change completely. Let me speak again about the great-grandmother for a moment. This Christian grew up in an age where telephone prayer chains were the norm. When telephones were new and party lines were very common, extended conversations never took place on this new piece of social technology. The telephone was used for short messages only. Interestingly, or I want to say sadly, the telephone wasn't invented for phone prayer chains. It doesn't take much imagination to construct a conversation a consistory or church council belabored over why on earth their congregation would need such a thing as a phone in the church. To use it to promote Christianity, congregational happenings and community events likely wasn't thought of—at least at first—because an economy-driven inventor created the telephone, not an evangelically passionate pastor.

This being said, when Christian evangelism enters the secular world of social media technology, there are far less bumps from secularists than many may expect. In fact,

Unchurched people have little quarrel with the notion of faith. Two-thirds say they are spiritual people and more than half (57 percent) say their religious faith is very important in their life today. About half also claim to be actively seeking something better spiritually than they have experienced to date. Forty percent of young unchurched adults talk about faith matters with friends and family during a typical week.³⁵

Since forty percent of young unchurched adults talk about faith matters with friends and family during the week, imagine the amount of welcome and engagement specific websites can bolster in a churchless world. Consider the construction of the word churchless—which literally means less church. Today, church can be less—less walls, less immobility, less cost, less

³⁵ Barna and Barna Group, 48.

distance, less infrastructure, and less barriers so that “the welcome all” isn’t a welcome to a place but a welcome to a lifestyle, a way of being.

The realities of America’s relationship with the church today cannot be ignored, nor can the increasing amount of time Americans spend on personal devices that connect them to the internet be dismissed, downplayed, held in mystery, looked at with disdain, or remain an underutilized tool of evangelism. Sobering truths about a society with “less church” continue. “The fact remains,” says Kinnaman,

“that more Americans than ever are not attending church. Most of them did at some point and, for one reason or another, decided not to continue. This fact should motivate church leaders and attenders to examine how to make appropriate changes—not for the sake of enhancing attendance numbers but to address the lack of life transformation that would attract more people to remain an active part.”³⁶

Attracting people to remain—or become—an active part of an active church-less culture means the church, as it is, needs to be in more places than it has been, rather than remaining only in a physical building. Physical church buildings should not be diminished in the least. I am not suggesting this, nor are those whose research was compiled for this work. The continuation of the church as we know it today is a must. In addition, traditional or established websites are a great start, but are underutilized if not advanced. Engaging others in addition to welcoming those who seek a deeper, richer, more inclusive relationship with God and with others in community with God means we truly have to consider what church-less means not negatively but positively.

In the next chapter, we will explore how churches (pastors, church leaders and congregations themselves) can use their website or upgrade their current website to be more

³⁶ This quote is from David Kinnaman from this site <https://www.barna.com/research/10-facts-about-americas-churchless/>

church-less or building-less in order to reach and engage those who have an interest, curiosity or passion for God and godly connections who may or may not be affiliated with a congregation but use social media technology at least once a day. I will also speak to those who see social media technology negatively. Downsides and unknowns to this technology need to be addressed as this chapter looks further into the actuality of an onsite/online community becoming one community.

In the third chapter, we'll continue to explore this building-less concept. To do so, we'll look at the theological underpinnings of Judeo-Christian community being a people, not a place. I will argue that our Old Testament narrative, which includes the resting place of the Arc of the Covenant in the Temple, exemplifies a people of God who, while worshipful, are never truly stationary. Change is always constant, and, as history proves, those who experience God cannot be sedentary. I will also speak to the teachings of Jesus Christ and substantiate that this Son of God is the literal embodiment of the temple.

The fourth chapter speaks to the possibilities that have been explored and will continue to be explored in years to come over just what this still relatively new technology can do for congregations—and I even suggest denominations—that feel the godly tugs of reaching people in ways never imagined at the close of the twentieth century. Advocates for technology merging into the experience of Christ through other people will speak clearly from their passionate, persuasive places. According to these visionaries that I consider myself to be a part of, the future of the Christian faith is very promising.

To conclude this first chapter, many can feel distraught or overwhelmed at the diminishing place church has in culture these days. “Welcoming all” is a genuine attempt to bring newcomers and those who were once involved but have opted out of the traditional church experience into the fold. The challenges here are great. At times, the statistics are overwhelming.

Once filled now empty pews are vexing to say the least. Shrinking congregations are painful to watch, and the Great Hope that people will return in time to “the church that is” gets quieter and further away as time passes. Pastors and church leaders wonder how to discern God’s direction which, as always, requires hanging on and also letting go. What is held is the assurance of scripture itself, that our God never leaves us. This same God also keeps us moving. Sometimes moving is comfortable, even exciting; sometimes being led by God can be frightening when we love a past more than we love the possibilities of the future.

I return to how this chapter began, and that is with signage. Is glossy literature and church’s front yard “Welcome All!” sign enough? I argue it is not. A welcome that includes engagement far outweighs the front lawn church sign or high-glossed printed material within the church or sanctuary that reads “All are welcome.” Welcoming is not something to say. Welcoming is something to do. This welcoming by way of interaction shouldn’t happen with churchgoers reaching non-churchgoers insomuch as this communication, regardless of location, can and should find its place for all to participate in as they are inspired, where they are inspired, and how they are inspired.

My research encourages us to consider engaging people more so than welcoming them. The welcome is still important, yes. In fact, it’s necessary. In our postmodern age, however, I have shared that more and more people are finding they want to know, not necessarily learn. [Learning comes, or is assimilated, as people in faith engage.] Barna and Kinnaman substantiate this when speaking of the churchless. They argue,

The type of spiritual experience and community churchless people are seeking has a decidedly postmodern slant. For example, these are not individuals prone to seeking the “one right way” or absolute moral truth; four out of five admit they are very open to considering moral views different from their own.³⁷

³⁷ Barna and Barna Group, *Churchless*, 42.

In other words, these four out of five are looking *and* longing for a godly connection here in the new roaring twenties are most interested not in a single source. Rather, the churchless (and I argue many in the pews today) seek hands-on, interactive learning from the collective, rather than hearing the pastor at the front of the church speaking to the whole group, no matter how good that sermon is. That pastor or church leader—that voice—is still important because that voice encourages other voices to be heard which makes self-applications and public activism both known and shown, not merely discussed. As we are to share the gospel to each generation (Psalm 78:6), we need to be open to how people—particularly the people of God—want to learn.

In *Mustard Seed verses McWorld*, Tom Sine mentions Christian scholar Kenneth Boulding who shares sage direction and a solid future for the church without specifically mentioning the church. Boulding insists, “No people, society, or organization can long exist without a compelling image of the better future that calls us forward into tomorrow.”³⁸ This compelling image of the better future may appear only in glimpses and with hesitation, reluctance, or curiosity by some, but through a mirror dimly we will one day see clearly where and how pastors and church leaders can continue the messages and the love of Jesus Christ in this digital age.

³⁸ Mustard Seed vs. McWorld, Tom Sins, 145.

Chapter Two: Less church for the churchless: defining the Christian community beyond a building

The church isn't the only organization that wrestles with the viability of adding virtual space to their existing physical space. Out of the necessity in a changing world that will be significantly affected for decades following the COVID-19 pandemic, for profit and non-profit organizations are considering what never would have been an option before: replacing their existing physical space with a more cost effective and accessibility-based option, internet real estate. Driven by overhead, practicality, and the fact that more and more Americans shop online not in person, some businesses have moved from a physical to a virtual space all together.

If (or perhaps as) this continues to become a trend in these upcoming roaring twenties, the church may need to consider this option or opportunity to move to where more "foot traffic" happens. While this trajectory is understandably heartbreaking to some because the majority of churchgoers today would rather hear the click of a church door opening rather than a computer keyboard clicking to achieve an entrance into holy ground, this move to cyberspace may not be a gloom and doom prophecy, at least completely. True, the church should always stand out from the world it is a part of, just as the Christian is called to do the same. What is also true is that shelters will always be needed. The shelter, which could and should be the church as a sanctuary, will always be needed in our culture in general and in our local communities specifically. Neighbors will always welcome, demand or create places to gather should a need or a disaster arise. The too often marginalized church today can become more mainstream because it, unlike her neighborhood businesses opting only for the internet, keeps her street address. If commercialism continues to turn more of its lights off in the years to come as it continues its

move into cyberspace, then churches, which intentionally meet people onsite and online, will shine brighter in quieter retail districts.

Speaking to brightness, it needs to be said that the church itself is much more than worship alone. This holy space, the sanctuary I have been mentioning, is also (and without question) the gathering place where Spirit-led mission work takes place in the world the Christian serves. Disaster kits, Christmas gifts for those in need, senior care, child care, and ongoing free or reduced cost food stations are just some of the many ministries the onsite/online church will continue to call us to do as one community because something obvious needs to be shared: these love projects and care programs cannot exist in cyberspace. While it's unarguable that retaining physical church space is necessary for the embodiment of Christ (because Christians do, in fact, need not only a place to go but also need a place from which to serve), I offer a firsthand experience with a local business completely shifting from its existing physical location to an online presence only.

Gannon Associates, my home insurance agency, sent me a letter by email on July 31, 2019. In it, regional sales manager Matthew Tavani makes it clear that the company actively looks forward to being a part of the community for years to come. To be integral to the community, and this company realizes the seismic shift in where (and how) "community" is being defined these days, the business moved to where its customers are. Tavani writes, "As we all transition to doing more business online, visits to our office have dropped significantly. With this in mind, we've made the decision to close our physical office in Montrose [Pennsylvania] as of September 30th, 2019." To reassure every client through this transition, Tavani continues. "Janet is only a phone call or email away, and if you need to meet with a staff member face-to-

face, we will schedule a time and place that will accommodate your busy schedule. Just call Janet and you will get the customer service you deserve and expect!”³⁹

If an insurance company recognizes the transition in business from in-person visits to online connections, and then subsequently closes its physical space to accommodate busy schedules and minimize overhead costs, the church may want to rethink the location of at least some their face-to-face meeting times as well. We’ll talk about the theology of the church being a people not a place in the third chapter. There we will consider that Jesus, who was deeply rooted in the synagogue, became the fulfillment of the Old Testament law which was actualized when he met people not in “a” place but rather where the people were, such as their homes and public gathering places. Until then, three realities are important to consider. First, an insurance company and a church hold to vastly different infrastructures—at least at first glance. After all, one is secular. It survives long-term from a lucrative product or service. The other is sacred. It thrives long-term when love is both the product and the service. The two are distinct, correct? I argue differently, and this provides the groundwork for my argument of church and community actually being one community not two because the sacred cannot be sacred without the secular. Like Moses and the burning bush, we enter the sacred from the secular. Yes, there is the sacred and there is the secular, yet we experience and take on the identity of the sacred, at least in part, when we acknowledge the secular (or non-sacred) among us. God is good not just because God is good. God is good because we are not good. When a preacher sermonizes, for example, he or she does not speak only of the holy; the speaker raises the tarnished, painful, and sinful parts of our lives like Paul does when addressing the congregations on his missionary tours. Just as we cannot understand light without darkness or hunger without knowing what it means to be

³⁹ Gannon Associates Insurance can be found online at <https://gannonassociates.com/>

satiated, we cannot distinguish the sacred without the secular. This symbiotic relationship is necessary. A “secular” and “sacred” community cannot be divorced of one another. This understanding enables the two to be entwined, not separated.

Second, while differences are obvious, similarities can also be drawn in that both are in the professional care industry. Customers who frequent businesses and congregants who attend church do have packed schedules. Equally, both are familiar with and use the internet to save time and energy.

Third, the internet has become and continues to become an established, reliable and practical “meeting ground” for important, private, and personal matters. Especially as we look at generations born into widespread internet use, our digital spaces are our new sounding boards, public service bulletin boards and townhall gathering places.

The cyber move is significant. Insurance companies likely won’t be the only businesses to shut down physical spaces in the future. Online publishers who professionally blog, small business artisans who ship their products, and travel agencies that are only a click away are three more examples of industries that cater to clients who regularly look to the internet to conduct important business. Even Lancaster Theological Seminary has gone into cyberspace. If the seminary had kept its Doctor of Ministry program to its physical campus only rather than engage doctoral students in a digital hybrid program where both an online and onsite participation are seamlessly woven into the degree, I would not have considered the seminary for doctoral work because the physical distance between the school and the church I serve are too great. The commute never would have worked. I am a Pennsylvanian speaking of a seminary in the Commonwealth. What supports online distance learning and successful connections is that one of my cohorts resides in Wisconsin. A second lives in California.

What is working in this digital age needs to be considered carefully. I return to the insurance company as an example because the shift from a physical to an online presence should be approached judiciously.⁴⁰ In his email letter, Tavani demonstrates what pastors and church leaders should remember and implement. The regional sales manager makes it clear that, in transition, aspects of what ‘was’ will continue into what ‘is’. Past practices are not gone. If anything, they are made easier or more convenient because technology these days makes so many of our daily transactions easier and more assessable. Tavani says,

Since change can be difficult, we would like to mention that some things will stay the same. Someone will always be there to answer your call. You will still have access to live customer service from our 24/7 service center. You can access our online client portal via www.gannonassociates.com under the Client Portal tab, [or] if you’re not currently using the portal, give Janet a call. She can help.

I’m not sure why Janet does not have a last name, title, or phone number included in this email letter (other than to say sexism is not dead), but what can be said about this business and the “business” of the church is noteworthy. First, the recognition of change is important yet, as Travani’s communication points out, even with change some familiarity is necessary. Second, someone always “being there to answer your call” keeps vital human contact and connection where it needs to be, which is upfront and obvious. Third, accessibility is key. An insurance claim, much like a pastoral emergency, can happen day or night. Waiting can cause anxiety. In our age of rapid service in some areas of life (i.e. airport self-check-ins and credit card tallying

⁴⁰ As I share in Chapter One, those whose research I’ve gathered are not advocating that churches actively pursue closing their physical space like Gannon Associates did with an office in Montrose, Pennsylvania. Rather, they are seeing a need to expand into a new online community. Of the businesses I just briefly mentioned, I did not mention modernized grocery stores seeking a wider clientele by reaching customers who shop online. A comparison between a grocery store and a church needs to be made. Grocery stores themselves, with their aisles and aisles of enticingly food products, are far from going to an online format only. Simply put, we need grocery stores—at least for now. While some twenty-first century churches exist in digital space only and claim to be successful in that their holding active participants, one being First United Church of Christ Second Life at <http://firstuccsl.org>, the need for a physical church, much like the physical grocery store, remains.

devices such as Easy Passes during highway travel), we want our connection to our 365/24/7 insurance agent, even when disaster doesn't strike. That agent is God. Taking this further, if God is always present to us, then making God always present to us is a service the church can provide when we make church less about a building and more about a relational community that, like a Gannon Insurance agent, can make godly and spiritually bonding connections literally anywhere at any time.

In *Braving the Future*, an apt title for the work of embracing the onsite/online church quagmire in front of pastors and church leaders, Douglas Estes shares the obvious: change is not easy. Estes then gets specific and personal. "Some people don't like the future. Probably a better way to say it is that they don't like change... Technology represents change, and change is uncomfortable"⁴¹ While I agree with Estes' insight, I argue over his use of the word "some," as in some do like technology and some do not. A stronger, far more inclusive argument to be made is that change is not easy for any of us. It may be true that some of us embrace change more easily than others, but then, this being said, it depends on what the change is. An eighty-year-old retired music teacher may welcome—perhaps even long for—advanced technological changes in social media technology where he strongly advocates churches acquire more and more high tech. He does not welcome change, however, in facing the fact that he is a sudden widower after forty-nine years of a loving, faithful marriage.

If change means moving in a welcome direction, then change itself is welcomed or even embraced. If change challenges what has been loving and faithful, and these two adjectives can easily describe how someone feels about the church they've been a part of for more years than the loving, faithful marriage just mentioned, then a rub occurs.

⁴¹ Douglas Estes, *Braving the Future: Christian Faith in a World of Limitless Tech* (Harrisonburg, Virginia: Herald Press, 2018), 121.

As a futurist, Estes examines the rub. To those for and to those against the church moving into virtual space where one onsite and online community can be established interactively, Estes suggests wisdom that is neither for nor against this merger of theology and new technology. Estes contends that, “If we resist future tech, we need to make sure we are resisting because it is wrong, not just because it is uncomfortable. We need to make sure that if we choose to be left behind, we won’t be left out from the ways that God can use his people in the world.”⁴²

Like Estes, John Alexander doesn’t want the church to be left behind. A proponent for using social media technology to “brave the future” in order to reinvent and revitalize the church today and in years to come, Alexander aligns with Estes. He espouses that social media technology enlightens, inspires and infuses God’s people to the Word of God, to each other, and to the world. Alexander doesn’t argue this outright in his book, *Being Church*, but asserts that pastors and church leaders today can use social media technology to move the churchless into church by actually creating less church through less infrastructure, less bureaucracy, less rule-making, and less power hoarding principles and policies. Passionately and practically, he claims,

We have to turn church into the crossroad of life.... We have to reinvent ways to connect with each other so that we give to each other the gifts that we are... Church isn’t the sort of thing you can go to. You can be the church, you can become the church, you can even do church, but you can’t go to church... You’re the church whenever you’re with other Christians in such a way that you depend on each other enough that to do it you have to die to yourself. In that situation and almost only in that situation, can you love each other, serve each other, live in unity.... This sort of life doesn’t happen mostly in buildings with steeples but in

⁴² Estes isn’t alone in expressing watchfulness when adopting something new for the sake of it being new. David Kinnaman, who was mentioned in Chapter One, John Alexander, who is about to be introduced in this chapter, and Heidi Campbell, who will be mentioned later in this chapter, express that technology should be not be used *cautiously* to advance Christendom, for there is, as FDR’s adage goes, nothing to fear but fear itself, but all three, along with others whose voices are quieter here, advocate that pastors and church leaders proceed *carefully*. The three agree that a faithful focus is necessary as the effects of social media technology are being made new each day.

the street, at home, at work, in the creation of art, on the telephone, while you babysit, change people's oil or eat together.⁴³

Speaking to the crossroads just mentioned and to the potential for new crossroads to be made, Alexander sees the church today at a pivotal intersection. He hears a new generation dissatisfied with modern church forms and the fruit they produce.⁴⁴ Alexander doesn't define what modern church is. Perhaps it is something from the 1950s, or what is available now. He does, however, allude to an inactivity and an irrelevance regarding the fruit being produced in a "there" environment, which is the church proper, to a "here" environment, which is ministry, outpouring, and Christian vitality not contained—or restrained—within a one-hour Sunday morning worship service only.

Alexander points out what is obvious, frustrating and painful to many when he reports, "So much of what gets proclaimed as good news in America's churches seems hollow and irrelevant."⁴⁵ To me, what makes these proclamations hollow and irrelevant is twofold: one, the living, informing and transforming gospel isn't effectively updated to meet and inspire new generations because two, the existing paradigm of one pastor or church leader speaking *the* truth from one pulpit at one time is challenged if not all out rejected by postmodernists who seek collaborative learning through shared experiences.

Alexander does not elaborate on what gets proclaimed as hollow and irrelevant but argues that relevance rarely comes from a single voice or perspective in this digitally savvy, informational overload age. Instead, he argues relevance is shared not by one but by many.

⁴³ John F. Alexander and Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, *Being Church: Reflections on How to Live as the People of God*, NML: New Monastic Library : Resources for Radical Discipleship, v. 9 (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2012), 30–31.

⁴⁴ Alexander and Wilson-Hartgrove, vii.

⁴⁵ Alexander and Wilson-Hartgrove, vii.

Many voices, one place

I spoke of postmodernism in Chapter One. I return to it because this relevance or reluctance—or at least the questioning—of a voice or single authority can create perilous times for pastors and church leaders today. Rather than seek one source for information—or even one church for faith formation—postmodernists assert that truth (even biblical truth in an irrefutable, fundamental sense) has become debatable or malleable, an action far more interesting to Gen Xers and younger generations. A malleable truth becomes an applicable faith which can be fueled, inspired, or at least be influenced by the contemporary adage, “It’s not about religion, it’s about a relationship.”

We are nation that wants to speak. Millions of Facebook, Twitter or Instagram feeds on well-traveled topics such as homosexuality, birth control, gun control, Hollywood news, and President Donald Trump fill our lives each week, whether we deliberately tune in or not. The people behind these posts may be enlightened, undereducated, motivating, captivating, inspiring, draining, damaging, or just plain wrong, but a cultural phenomenon continues in that while pastoral professionals “in the know” may offer insight and intelligent theological, ontological epistemological arguments, who wants to hear a one-time-only dated pastor stationed solely in a church with one weekly message (which, incidentally, may or may not “be good”) when live, on-the-ground conversations are immediate, relevant, and likely to at least be thought provoking?

In the October 2019 debut of *Church Growth magazine*, a publication based solely online, Brian Boyd, who contributed an article called “Three C’s of Social Media Success: Use Social Media to communicate, connect and convert,” speaks to a time he worked with a global publisher based in New York City and Nashville. The publisher posted the following. “If you were to write a book, what would it be about?” Boyd reports that an incredible number answered the question. He adds, “More people interacted with this post than any other that entire year

[because] it really got people thinking and responding. The publisher was then able to interact with them.”⁴⁶ This need for interactive public speaking and sharing is by no means detrimental to pastors and church leaders. It is, in fact, the opposite. The wise today who summarize, guide, and live in the organic, cyber world of co-teaching are not absolute informants, rather, effective pastors and church leaders enter social media technology willfully to create conversation and partnerships with naturally inquisitive fellow learners.⁴⁷

I agree with Alexander who describes the church as being in what he calls institutional inertia, which is the opposite of inquisitiveness, openness and flexibility. Alexander argues that churches take on a narrowing life perspective of their own. This life has a way of perpetuating itself so much so that the word ‘life’ actually means a slow and certain death. Alexander, who has written about the church for more than eleven years, keeps his sights short and hopes grounded. “Creativity and imagination tend to be resisted,” he says when it comes to programming, risk, and daring new ideas. “Change is looked at askance, and security rules. Anything that rocks the boat, especially the economic boat, is rebuffed.”⁴⁸ This is not unfortunate. Instead, this is all the more reason more people should be more involved in the radical, rock-the-boat ministry Jesus inspires with the philosophy that one person can do much. Many can do even more.

⁴⁶ <https://churchgrowth.foleon.com/cmgy/september2019/three-cs-of-social-media-success/>

⁴⁷ My thoughts here are inspired by many authors I’ve encountered through this research who have spoken generally to the trend of shared learning. Specifically, Jason Ballard, a millennial pastor in Vancouver, shared during a September 10, 2019 webinar presented by Barna Group called “Faith for the Future!” that millennials and Gen Z, inundated in the information age, long for an experience beyond information itself. Sam Collier, an Atlanta native, fellow millennial and colleague of Ballard, asserts that “community is now sacred” in these two lonely generations. Both Ballard and Collier speak to the need for not only young people—but all people—to be seen *and* heard. A link to the three-hour webinar can be found at <https://www.barna.com/faithforthefuture/>.

⁴⁸ Alexander and Wilson-Hartgrove, *Being Church*, 22.

A pragmatist will likely say that today's postmodernists will not be returning to the existing church. However, a churchless church centralized not in a building per se but in today's meeting place—the internet—may be possible. A collective, centering “place” that fosters viewpoints, experiences, questions, challenges, successes, losses has potential in that independently and interdependently the Spirit can move people who welcome the stranger, feed the hungry, clothe the naked and bring relief to the imprisoned and the sick. To this possible new way of congregating, Alexander speaks sociologically. He points out we are created by God, and that deep down, “We need to belong. We know it. Or at least, we act on it. So, without a churchless church, people join groups or emphasize those they're naturally part of: nation, ethnic group, country club, gang...”⁴⁹ Without the church being a lamplight in a darkening world, or as the church is ignored as a lamplight in a darkening world, Alexander argues that these groups he mentions become substitute churches with their own plans of salvation.⁵⁰

Postmodernists are still in the business of creating church, or, more specifically, a church community, even if it's a substitute. This tells me there is still a desire for a church, just not the one that exists. To substantiate my point, consider parents today with young children, and I'll use theater as an example. Parents who tote their want-to-be Broadway star to endless (and expensive) lessons that hopefully lead to auditions and five to six nights a week of two, three or four-hour rehearsals propel their child's passion (or theirs). With today's parents who embrace each production as a community in and of itself, is the church today missing something? If so, what is missed? My question now becomes prescient. What is missing? My answer is clear. The passions for the arts, math, science, nature, travel and all sports all convening with ease in an

⁴⁹ Alexander and Wilson-Hartgrove, 59.

⁵⁰ Alexander and Wilson-Hartgrove, 59.

open 365/24/7 is a new kind of mobile church—a life-on-the-go, “meet us where we are” churchless church.

George Barna and David Kinnaman return from the first chapter with more information. Their findings on the alarmingly growing group of on-the-go, unchurched Americans reveals the churchless are not lost to the Word of God necessarily. In fact, the Bible has been and continues to be assessable to them. They are, however, disconnected to the ways institutionalized religion does, and, more than likely, does not reach them. The Barna researchers say that

While unchurched Americans are likely to own a Bible and have spent some time reading it, they are generally not attracted to or compelled by what they have been exposed to in God’s Word. For some this is due to a lack of tools for interpreting the content. Maybe they are confused about different interpretations they have heard in various churches. Perhaps they own a translation that is hard to understand. Some of them simply ignore the Bible because they have not been exposed to practical applications.... The bottom line is, the Bible is generally accepted as legitimate religious literature but not as a useful life resource.⁵¹

Barna and Kinnaman wouldn’t argue that a useful life resource is the very device you see in the hands of nearly everyone these days, the cell phone. The unchurched Americans Barna and Kinnaman just spoke of are not using their cell phone to engage in spiritual content, even though spiritual content including blogs, posts, and inspirational material can be found online. Instead of tapping into this content, the unchurched are texting friends, family or others that, if spiritual in nature, could be more so if a church’s website is active daily (if not hourly), not weekly or monthly. In our bundled, pre-packaged world, church websites that bond onsite and online community together proactively through apps targeted to specific need groups—family, teens, seniors, the grieving, etc.—can bring church through the cell phone. The parents with young children I just mentioned are Googling fast and easy meal preps or are ordering food from a

⁵¹ George Barna and Barna Group, eds., *Churchless: Understanding Today’s Unchurched and How to Connect with Them: Based on Surveys by Barna Group* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc, 2014), 59.

restaurant which is on their way home after what has been a long day. They are also using social media technology to help their children reach their goals while also keeping up with what is going on in their close and wider circles. Imagine a world where these same families, teens, seniors, and those grieving connected online and in person through a church website that was only a swipe away. As internet dating has become an acceptable norm for singles to meet, the internet church should not be far behind. In fact, internet church, that is, interactive church websites, should be leading (or at least present to) our secular world, not circling it ineffectively from afar.

Let me speak to connections. When acquaintances learn of this major project, I ask, “If you knew you were receiving a message or call from someone in your immediate circle, would you answer it?” Every person answered affirmatively without hesitation. This allegiance happening with family and friends can be extended. If, in fact, we stop our hectic-paced worlds for a moment or two with a loved one via the technology of a cell phone or handheld device, then the churchless church, much like those groups Alexander mentioned, can reach and bond with people in new ways.

Tom Sine, who was also mentioned in the first chapter, speaks to what is new. He believes, “The church at its best is called to be a new community centered in the worship of the living God, offering a glimpse of the character of the great homecoming of God, and sharing life and resources as would a large extended family.”⁵² This something new, he contends, aligns with Estes who is convinced that a thoughtful Christian witness is needed to speak into the use of future tech as it arrives.⁵³ Neither pastors nor church leaders need to be pessimistic or even

⁵² Mustard seed versus McWorld / Tom Sine 205

⁵³ Estes, *Braving the Future*, 202.

fearful of what is literally in front of us. Estes asserts that “A cautious optimism will give Christians the best voice to speak truth to tech.”⁵⁴

In *Emerging Communities*, Gibbs and Bolger also see what is in front of us, which is a future church not tethered to a physical building space only. They revisit the argument I made earlier about the sacred and the secular by stating,

When church is equated with a meeting that meets in a building at a particular time, it implicitly leads to a split between church life and the rest of life, thereby creating a sacred/secular divide. Directly and indirectly, Christians can be led into thinking that the church meeting is the primary spiritual activity of their lives, thus creating a secular sphere.⁵⁵

Consider what a wall does. It divides. What happens when the wall or the sphere between the secular and sacred is removed? What if churches literally didn’t have walls which kept the secular and the sacred life divided? Imagine this further. What if the established church supported a system where its essence, outreach and presence wasn’t just in its physical structure, but was continually accessible by means of the internet? Gibbs and Bolger speak to defining a church community with a building and also a building beyond a building when they share, “Traditional churches exhort their members to be consistent and articulate witnesses in their workplaces, communities, and other social networks [or workplaces, communities and other social networks could be called the universe], but they have no support structure to facilitate such outreach.”⁵⁶ This support structure is possible when we envision the church keeping its physical location. As I’ve shared before, I am not advocating churches becoming building-less completely. A physical presence needs to remain for tangible reasons, one being a gathering place for local, national and international mission projects (which I have mentioned), a second

⁵⁴ Estes, 202.

⁵⁵ Eddie Gibbs and Ryan K. Bolger, *Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Community in Postmodern Cultures* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Academic, 2005), 101.

⁵⁶ Gibbs and Bolger, 107.

being a resource center and general location of spiritual gatherings (and let's not forget that the church is not dead); but Gibbs and Bolger mention Si Johnson, the pastor and church innovator of headspace, London. Johnson sees the internet as a way to connect people all the time, not just once a week during worship. When speaking of headspace, Johnson maintains, "We are most definitely not just a set of meetings. Sure, they happen, but they're just a part of the spectrum. Meetings have a place, but they are not the church."⁵⁷

What's unfortunate about Johnson's comment is the meaning of the word meeting. He likely means a business meeting, such as a council or consistory meeting. If he suggests meeting in its broadest sense, which would be a place and space to gather, I think a professional with a job title that includes church innovator is progressive enough to consider meeting virtually in addition to meeting in real space at a real (set) time. Either way, Johnson has some challenges in front of him, according to Mark Palmer, the pastor at Landing Place, Columbus Ohio.

Palmer agrees with how difficult it is to convince people that the church is a way of life, not a meeting.⁵⁸ To any follower of Christ, this way of life is not a once a week engagement or an occasional commitment; rather, it is a complete commitment. In Chapter Three, we will discuss what *is* church as a way of living each day in this digital age. And, speaking of word meanings, we will look into the trappings of how many think 'church' is a building, a noun, when Jesus taught and practiced 'church' as a verb, *ἐκκλησία (ekklesia)*, to arrive at a conclusion that church is a people, not a place.

Before then, it is time to talk about struggles of a different kind. As we continue to consider less church by defining the Christian community beyond a building, time needs to be given to those who look at a church, particularly *their* church, moving into digital space with

⁵⁷ Gibbs and Bolger, 101.

⁵⁸ Gibbs and Bolger, 101.

difficulty, discomfort, concern, and even alarm. There are reservations to this digital age. Those who are against or are unwelcoming to this new era of online worship need to be heard.

God came in the flesh, not in a gigabyte

Who is the man behind the green curtain, the famous foursome on film wonder as they stand with fear before this great and powerful Oz. To their disappointment, Dorothy and her friends soon discover the illusion behind the great aura. Interestingly, the spectacle appearing before them is actually enabled by technology. Had the man behind the green curtain not been exposed by Toto, a curious dog, the adventuresome friends would never have had contact with an opportunistic balloonist, who, at the end of the film, used that same technology of the balloon to move forward in his life and, in so doing, make new connections.

Fiction is a window into reality and, this being said, it is the lack of human contact and connection that is the greatest lament to this bold invasion of social media-based technology through interactive websites. Yet Jesus Christ, while divine, was also human. According to his own words, he *is* the only and ultimate connection between ourselves and Father God. And Jesus met people face-to-face 365/24/7. I will share more of the Son of God in the next chapter, but a relational point needs to be made here. Through the Advocate, the one sent after him, Jesus was, is, and will be the quintessential connector. He called those he spotted down from trees, met skeptics on the street, felt the ritually unclean touch the hem of his robe, and met the unloved outcast in the noonday sun at public wells. He broke bread and dined with unfavorable people privately in their homes. His literal touch brought healing. With the exception of commanding two disciples to fetch a colt for him to ride into the celebration of Passover in Jerusalem, Jesus did not reach and teach people via satellites thousands of miles from the earth's surface. He did

not “beam” into living rooms via Wi-Fi, he came to people in person. His *body* was broken for the sins of the world. His *blood* washed those sins away.

When it comes to social media technology today, the greatest problem isn’t the unchanging message and meaning behind body and the blood of Jesus Christ; I suspect that, as a whole, Christians are now *too* comfortable. We have become too familiar with too many pews being empty on a Sunday morning. Consider what we don’t hear as much as what we do. Less people say, “Well, I hope they come back next week,” as if the Gospel message of Jesus Christ is supposed to limp along, not thrive.

I suggest Christians just aren’t used to what technology beyond what a hot air balloon can—and should—do for and with faith formation today. A 2,000-year-old faith being transformed into a viable, digital platform in less than twenty years is far too much for many Christians over the age of twenty. To substantiate my point, a seventy-eight-year-old who periodically has issues with how the church I serve operates its budget has bowed out of weekly attendance because, since the summer of 2019, I allow parishioners to text me questions or comments about the sermon during worship. This individual has left the church before, but this is the first time he’s left over a worship-related matter. This is a clear example of those who oppose social media technology during worship. It is painful to experience this soul’s pulling away. It is also heartbreaking to me and to the closely connected congregation to see him noticeably absent on the specific issue of technology and online and onsite relationship building during worship.

Of course, others have reservations or rejections, too. In his chapter, *Religion and Cyberspace*, Lorne Dawson speaks of Jay Kinney, a student of Gnosticism. Kinney shares his reservations about the religion and the internet. He believes the internet is not very compatible with the demands for solitary contemplation and social disengagement most religious traditions

prescribe for spiritual development. Kinney believes the World Wide Web inculcates a strong and almost reflex-like preference for heightened visual stimuli and rapid changes in subject matter.⁵⁹ This rapid pace concerns both Kinney and Dawson. Neither say it outright, but the two are not alone in the thought (or the fear) of a church experience being *anything* comparable to video gaming. While many find worship online as they enjoy the serenity of the woods, the open water⁶⁰, or with a cityscape vista before them tranquil, refreshing, and deeply spiritual, the internet offers an obvious downside. The thought of Jesus being engaged, let alone worshipped, in an arena next to pop-up ads is nothing less than sacrilegious. Consider a deeply moving passage of scripture right beside a provocative advertisement for men's or women's cologne or poses with sexually charged underwear or lingerie models.

External distractions are another matter, too. Suppose someone does connect to a church online during their daily commute on a subway. Unwelcome sights and sounds can ruin a prayer or reflective moment. For instance, imagine a commuter, grateful to use time wisely to experience a divine connection or revelatory moment only to be yanked in one jarring moment from a sacred encounter with God to a secular blare from a couple's argument over botched dinner plans. As the commuter stares at the back of the headrest on the seat in front of him as the couples' argument spikes and eventually wanes, he may wonder what Dawson and Kinney have already considered: is what he experienced on his tablet actual worship, or entertainment?

Dawson references a column in the *Sydney Morning Herald* by Chris McGillion. McGillion drives home a point about the ineffectiveness of online church connections when he

⁵⁹ Morten T. Højsgaard and Margit Warburg, eds., *Religion and Cyberspace*, 1st ed (New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2005), 18.

⁶⁰ Our church administrator Judy Mitchell, while vacationing on a cruise ship along the Eastern Canadian waterways, texted me two hours after our October 13, 2019 online worship service to share how much she enjoyed the sermon that day.

states, “Internet-generated images...invite reaction not reflection, and [the images] invite this reaction at the speed of instinctive, rather than considered, responses. What we gain in information we lose in insight and, over time, perhaps, in the capacity even to think insightfully.”⁶¹ McGillion’s point about reacting rather than reflecting is considerable. In this digital age, Dawson agrees with McGillion. Information comes faster and faster with greater and greater ease. How and when people have time to absorb, reflect, appreciate, and live into their relationship to God remains a concern.

Another concern about the internet and online church connections is raised by Brenda Brasher in her book, *Give me that online religion*. Brasher sees the internet as “a fantasy universe that stimulates the imagination but ignores the rest of the body.”⁶² Brasher contends that the internet is separate and apart from real-world experiences like hunger, loss, and fear because the internet doesn’t hold your hand or connect you in the moment to another soul who occupies your space. She says the internet, “is a non-environment that sucks attention away from the immediate surroundings in which most traditional life occurs.”⁶³ Regardless of what McGillion says of internet worship being reactive not reflective, and a question can be asked as to what is a traditional life, Brasher points out that online worship has an even greater failure because it is void of the body experience.

Admitting that variances in religious practices vary from tradition to tradition (and even between groups within different traditions), Dawson goes further than Brasher. He points out, “[t]he internet may be ill-suited to the mediation of religious experience because it is a too

⁶¹ Højsgaard and Warburg, *Religion and Cyberspace*, 18.

⁶² Brenda E. Brasher, *Give Me That Online Religion* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001), 43.

⁶³ Brasher, 45.

exclusively ocular, image-driven, textual, change-oriented, individualistic, detached and disembodied medium.”⁶⁴

Dawson aligns with Stephen O’Leary who also has a chapter in the book *Religion and Cyberspace*. Alongside Dawson and McGillion, O’Leary argues that online rituals are marked by a heightened degree of reflexivity—at the levels of self, group, and social identity. Both agree that cyber-rituals contribute to the restructuring and reintegration of the minds and emotions of their participants, however Dawson, McGillion, and O’Leary, like most others, are uncertain of the long-range effects of internet religion. *Religion and Cyberspace* was published in 2005. Of course, more studies have been and will be compiled on the long-range effects of online church communities especially in our post COVID-19 age. In their defense however, a theological and sociological question surfaces. How long are long-range effects? Twenty years, forty years, an entire generation, or, if we consider the impact of Gutenberg’s printing press, several generations? While the discussion for and against online worship communities remains, and, honestly, should remain in the forefront, O’Leary’s words, now almost fifteen years-old, need to be heard and remain an active part of the debate. “In the end,” he writes about the definite cons of online rituals, “we seem to be left with reflexivity for reflexivity’s sake, and this seems to be incompatible with ‘authentic’ religious activity.”⁶⁵

The word authentic holds considerable weight and bearing when it comes to computer gadgetry that sometimes works and sometimes doesn’t. When a cell phone isn’t charged or a tech glitch happens—and they do—the frustrating sensation of wanting worship yet not experiencing it would be just like going to a real-time church only to find all the lights off and the doors

⁶⁴ Højsgaard and Warburg, *Religion and Cyberspace*, 19.

⁶⁵ Højsgaard and Warburg, 19.

locked, even though the worship time is clearly posted for the time you are there. Technology may be fine when it works; it's an expensive paperweight when it doesn't.

Advocates not in favor of online religion also have history on their side because the following *is* true: we have always done it this way. Authenticity comes because our past knows only one tradition: religion is meant to be shared not in space but in person—face-to-face, heart to heart, and hand in hand. If a website is not interactive, relationships cannot exist when a worshipper turns off his or her device. There is no place for interconnectivity. However, when an onsite worshipper walks out the sanctuary door into the vestibule, meanders down a corridor and out to the sidewalk or parking area, the chance for authentic encounters which lead to relationship building does happen.

Additionally, advocates against onsite church communities may find those schlepping at home in their pajamas to be merely remote spectators to the art and practice of what O'Leary calls religious activity. I can almost overhear this icy comment in the sanctuary about someone they know who has joined the service remotely. "What, they can't even come to church?"

Not coming to church—yet still "watching" church at home in your pajamas—isn't new. Just after radio, television can be considered an online Christian community's older cousin. Authentic community bonding never happened beyond those present with the TV evangelist and the onsite worshipper who couldn't avoid the baby giraffe-sized cameras that TV viewers never see.

In *Reaching Out Without Dumbing Down*, Marva Dawn does not speak directly to TV evangelism yet is decisively against television because she claims that technology, which caters to crowds craving entertainment, has corrupted our brains. Dawn's concern needs to be heard because it's accurate. When speaking about online technology today, she laments that "[w]e are

left with a world loaded with “information” that is meaningless because it has no context, can lead to no response, and has no connection to everything else in our arsenal of “facts.” A turn toward becoming a people consumed by entertainment was almost inevitable...[because] what do you do with all the information?”⁶⁶

Dawn quotes Neil Postman who mentions the peek-a-boo world of self-contained, non-participatory entertainment. Postman rolls back the clock before the birth of radio and television and asserts

Each of the media that entered the electronic conversation in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries followed the lead of the telegraph and the photograph, and amplified their biases... Together, this ensemble of electronic techniques called into being a new world—a peek-a-boo world, where now this event, not that, pops into view for a moment, then vanishes again. It is a world without much coherence or sense; a world that does not ask us, indeed, does not permit us to do anything; a world that is, like the child’s game of peek-a-boo, entirely self-contained. But like peek-a-boo it is also endlessly entertaining.⁶⁷

This entertainment-themed sensationalism is heartbreaking to those who love and value the literal gathering of the fold. Dawn extends this grief beyond the church because the dismantling of social values and ethics continues to erode. Her lament beyond the church is clear when she writes, “Instead of riding on buses or trains, which provide opportunity for genial conversation and social connections, most commuters in our culture take their personal automobiles [as the primary means of transportation].”⁶⁸ In this grief process, Dawn also speaks of backyard patios. She sees these private, backyard areas detrimental whereas front porches enable greater socialization.⁶⁹

⁶⁶ Marva J. Dawn, *Reaching out without Dumbing down: A Theology of Worship for the Turn-of-the-Century Culture* (Grand Rapids, Mich: W.B. Eerdmans, 1995), 22.

⁶⁷ Dawn, 23.

⁶⁸ Dawn, 26.

⁶⁹ Dawn, 26.

It is important to note that Dawn emphasizes she herself is not a cranky pessimist opposed to technological innovations. In fact, she sees technology bringing many advantages. The advantages, however, are always coupled with profound losses—primarily the loss of community.⁷⁰ Dawn extends this loss of community to a heartbreaking and troublesome reality—the loss of intimacy. She says,

Our culture's loss of intimacy has led to serious consequences. One is that many people desperately turn to genital intimacy because their needs for social intercourse are never met. Another result is vicarious living. Talk shows publicly discuss intimate, private matters. People unable to risk open vulnerability with those closest to them instead listen to, or participate in, programs that allows them to speak without revealing themselves or being held accountable to others who love them. Technological factors that reduce skills of intimacy keep many from knowing how to relate to their family and friends.⁷¹

Like Brasher and O'Leary, Dawn speaks to the fast-paced world marked by the strong desire for convenience. In addition to the loss of intimacy, this present-day convenience invades the church. To Dawn, today's onsite church experiences can be so streamlined that online church communities, if there could be such a thing, would be an oxymoron or a joke. Dawn looks critically at onsite church experiences and suggests many musicians in this hyper age think the only way to make hymns interesting is to play them faster. To that end, she makes note there is no time for hymns of repentance or mourning dirges for our crucified Savior. Even in onsite worship, Dawn points out that fellowship time is also reduced to coffee and cookies in the narthex between events. She says, "We talk about the weather and the latest ball scores, but we don't understand each other as if we belonged to each other, and we don't really want to know the answer to 'How are you?'"⁷²

⁷⁰ Dawn, 27.

⁷¹ Dawn, 27.

⁷² Dawn, 43.

Understanding, or the lack of it, is crucial. Dawn would agree to what I call “texting a conversation” (which is using only text as a form of communication) is not actually “talking in a conversation.” This twist of words may have twisted too much. What I mean to say is that without adding the voice, our way of communicating through online interactions can be problematic. In the Barna report called *Spiritual Conversations in a Digital Age*, the Barna Group explains this communication barrier more fully by stating that

An in-person conversation is immediate, reciprocal and informed by physical presence and body language. An online interaction is often much more terse, may or may not be two-sided and likely occurs while each person is engaged in other bits of conversations. Additionally, it’s much harder to translate tone, intent and context from an online interaction than an in-person conversation.”⁷³

There are greater barriers, heartbreak and loss when it comes to onsite/online communication over what can be considered as merely conversation. The strongest and clearest reason why online worship technology has its faults is truly alarming and tragic. I am now speaking of how Facebook, one of the primary servers of social media technology, was horrifically misused to showcase the massacre on March 15, 2019 at Christchurch in New Zealand.

Facebook was not able to remove the video before it had been captured by viewers. The livestream was taken down about twenty minutes after it was posted, according to timestamped archives of the Facebook page seen by NBC News. Facebook had removed the profile associated with the livestream about an hour and a half after the video first started streaming. However, the video had already spread around the internet, including on YouTube and Twitter.⁷⁴ Countless

⁷³ Barna Group and Lutheran Hour Ministries, *Spiritual Conversations in the Digital Age: How Christians’ Approach to Sharing Their Faith Has Changed in 25 Years*, 2018, 43.

⁷⁴ <https://www.npr.org/2019/03/19/704690054/facebook-admits-mosque-shooting-video-was-viewed-at-least-4-000-times>

more views occurred in the hours afterward, as copies of the video proliferated more quickly than online platforms like Facebook could remove them.⁷⁵

This mass shooting will remain a timeless reminder that even what is intended for good can be used by evil. In support of those who oppose or struggle with an online presence in Christian communities, and their reasons are solid and justified, the best way to end this section on the pitfalls of social media technology is by never forgetting those lost that day at Christchurch.

Interactive Websites build communities

Hate crimes and massacres like the one at Christchurch will sadly continue with or without social media's presence, especially if Jesus' radical message of love remains muted. As we remember Christchurch and the painful amount of other mass shootings here in our own nation and the world, safety precautions must always be in place. Unfortunately, these precautions and safety measures most often happen after a tragedy, not before. For example, I had *just* started my master of divinity program at Boston University's School of the Theology in early September, 2001. I remember facing the Boston skyline in its full glory on my way to class with this thought: who could imagine a passenger airplane would become a torpedo and a skyscraper a target?

As we continue to remember those lost to senseless violence, the only way to combat darkness is with light. As a columnist for a local, weekly newspaper, I discussed safety not with more locks, bolts, safety glass and security cameras. While all of these measures are wise, I wrote a column in 2019 of how we are *really* safe. Yes, a SRO (school resource officer) relieves

⁷⁵ <https://www.npr.org/2019/03/19/704690054/facebook-admits-mosque-shooting-video-was-viewed-at-least-4-000-times>

worries and stress in academic settings, for example. Ultimately, this Christian truth needs to be shared more often and more freely, regardless the medium. Our safety comes in knowing our Savior. Based on all the research I've collected here, what I am about to share is alarming, not surprising. Fewer and fewer people know our Savior.

We are here in a digital age, like it or not. The technology the church has available can and should be used positively, not ignored or looked at from a distance with disdain. I will take this further. Theology should push technology forward toward a safer, inclusive, healthier world. Rather than being reactive to technology, theology should be proactive with technology. As a vehicle can be beneficial and, as we have seen, used as a weapon, interactive websites can—and should—be used not just neutrally, but with the goal of sharing Christ's love intentionally.

Berger, who was cited in the last section, speaks proactively to technology and the body of Christ today. Asserting what opponents of social media technology may not have considered, she says,

Because Christian worship's foundational materiality is the bodies of worshippers, these misgivings must not be taken lightly. A first step in responding to them is to point out that in fact no digital world can be entered, no website accessed, and no app installed without a body. Thus, digitally mediated practices too are bodily practices.⁷⁶

A professional who has devoted her well-established published life to digitally mediated practices and the emergence of social media technology in the church is Heidi Campbell, a professor of Communication and a member in the Religious Studies Interdisciplinary Program at Texas A&M. Along with Mia Lövhelm, a professor of the Sociology of Religion with a research specialization in new media technology at Uppsala University in Uppsala, Sweden, Campbell

⁷⁶ Teresa Berger, @ *Worship: Liturgical Practices in Digital Worlds*, Liturgy, Worship and Society Series (London ; New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2018), 18.

writes of the seamlessness experienced between the online and offline world so many live in today. In fact, Campbell and Lövheim share that

No longer are the online and offline seen as completely distinct fields of practice, as for many they are integrated spheres of interaction: the internet constitutes the space where individuals and groups live out their social and spiritual lives, and offline boundaries and relations often inform the online sphere. At the heart of the intersection of the online—offline social world is the important issue of the relationship between new media technology and religious change.⁷⁷

In his chapter in *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds*, Christopher Helland, a theorist of online rituals, aligns with Campbell and Lövheim on the interconnectedness of a digital life in relationship with religious change. On the issue of the relationship between technology and its user, he observes, “Many people using the internet no longer distinguish between life-online and life-offline—rather, being ‘online’ has become part of their daily life and social existence.”⁷⁸ Daily living, in other words, is digitally infused.

Helland concurs. He argues that over the last thirty years, revolutionary changes have happened in the way we go online. In fact, he says the things we do with social media technology link an internet user seamlessly to the world. He adds, “Checking e-mail, searching for information, maintaining friendships and social networks are part of the everyday routine for a vast majority of the population.”⁷⁹

Brandon Cox, author of *Rewired*, agrees to the routine Helland speaks to, and then goes further. He contends, “Social media isn’t an escape from the real world. It is the real world,

⁷⁷ Heidi A. Campbell and Mia Lövheim (2011) INTRODUCTION, *Information, Communication & Society*, 14:8, 1083-1096, DOI: [10.1080/1369118X.2011.597416](https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2011.597416), 1083

⁷⁸ Berger, @ *Worship*, 17.

⁷⁹ Heidi Campbell, ed., *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds* (Abingdon, Oxon ; New York: Routledge, 2012), 25.

whether we are ready for it or not.”⁸⁰ Cox raises a point. Actually, he speaks to the divide between people who do—and people who do not—admit to a connectedness to the online and offline life Helland mentions. What is clear is the divide between the church and unchurched, and social media technology is—or can be—a change agent that has the potential to unite the church and the unchurched.

In the current split between the church and unchurched, no single reason explains why the most currently unchurched people have left religion. The call and the challenge, therefore, is to understand the causes of these rifts gently, patiently and lovingly. While some unchurched people can specifically cite when and why they left the church, others are vague or unable to cite a single incident, crime, or tragedy. Armed with research, Barna and Kinnaman delve into this church/unchurched divide more deeply to show where and how separation can possibly dissolve. Their findings are vital if bridgework is to take place with the unifying goal that two communities can become one.⁸¹

In an attempt to resolve the divide, Barna and Kinnaman look at why a divide exists in the first place. Their studies reveal that 24 percent of the unchurched believe the typical church

⁸⁰ Brandon Cox, *Rewired: How Using Today's Technology Can Bring You Back to Deeper Relationships, Real Conversations, and Powerful Ways to Share God's Love*, 2014, xv, <https://www.overdrive.com/search?q=F26C0DD5-4B0F-4B8F-8F38-968A89F2313B>.

⁸¹ Barna and Kinnaman are clear that there is no “one size fits all” fix as to why people have left the church. Why they have left, however, may hold answers. Some unchurched depart from a once existing church life due to a felt need for a more extensive spiritual formation. Others leave in order to redefine the space where the culture and their faith intersect (Churchless, page 92). In my experience, these two points intersect in an unappreciated and unwelcomed chasm between the sacred and secular. By this I mean to say that ‘church’ is literally in one place, and ‘life’ is in another. This separation predates Paul, but in contrast to the problems Paul addresses in his New Testament letters, what is now different is the speed and ease of instantly sharing online what existed long before Paul’s day, which is truly a cobbled syncretism. This multicultural, multireligious smorgasbord should not be quieted or hidden but opened in a needed and necessary space. I’ll share a relatively homogeneous bible study I facilitated about ten years ago as an example. These wonderful, thoughtful students were *all over* the place in their theological discourse—and discord—yet they looked to and leaned on each other appreciatively. Shared learning is not just possible, it is valued. Multiply that group at one table to the world the internet gives in just one click. What is needed today is the table which isn’t in a pastor’s study, but found online.

experience is boring or tiresome. In addition, they share that those who have opted out of church—or never meaningfully attended church in their lifetime—don’t see a physical church site and its people extending or enhancing the community beyond its doors, which are essentially closed during the week. Churchless people are about 40 percent more likely to say that church services feel like a group sharing the same space at a public event such as a worship service. They add that the churched are not a group of people that connect to each other—or to the community—in any real way.⁸²

When the unchurched are asked to identify what churches can do to contribute to the community’s wellbeing, they do not mention the three activities most churches spend most of their energy, which is teaching, worship, and evangelizing. Instead, the unchurched look for (and are often disappointed by) ways churches does not more actively contribute to filling immediate and local needs, such as feeding the most vulnerable in their nearby neighborhoods (30 percent), providing housing for the homeless (18 percent), keeping school-aged youth engaged positively and off the streets (11 percent), establishing counseling and support groups (11 percent) and providing clothing to the poor (11 percent).⁸³

Since the unchurched aren’t coming to church, how the two communities of churchgoers and nonchurchgoers can connect may be answered in what both the church and non-churched share a passion for or at least an interest in doing. Barna and Kinnaman speak here, too.

While many unchurched cannot name a positive impact of which they are already aware [that the church is doing locally, regionally, nationally, or internationally], there are a number of contributions they would like to see from local churches, including helping serve the poor and disadvantaged in the community (25 percent); serving youth, families, and the elderly in their area (14 percent;

⁸² Barna and Barna Group, *Churchless*, 51.

⁸³ Barna and Barna Group, *Churchless*, 51-52.

cultivating biblical values (10 percent); and assisting those in recovery (8 percent).⁸⁴

The space to connect these two communities must have common “ground” which can only be found where both communities exist, or, actually, coexist. Of course, the ministries just mentioned must take place in real time in real, physical locations, which are the literal neighborhoods where the ministries must take place. For these ministries to happen, they must begin where the two communities first meet. If pastors and church leaders are honest, unassuming, humble, forward-thinking and willing agents of God, this meeting won’t take place on the steps of the church, in the fellowship hall, or at a consistory or council meeting. It can take place online. The church and unchurched meeting place that sparks ideas, generates conversations and enables community-wide activism is no longer around the pulpit but through the various platforms used on social media technology today.

Consider for a moment not only how and but also where Jesus taught his lessons through parables. His message began where Jesus was, which most often was not near the temple but where the people gathered (or followed him). His message held merit and meaning because of what was happening within this impromptu community at the time the message was given. In other words, Jesus didn’t read a preplanned, eight-page, double-spaced manuscript he’d been polishing at his desk in the pastor’s study for a week on a topic of general interest; he found and shared his message while with the people. Their presence shaped his message. Using this as a model, today’s “sermon” has the opportunity to not be a single voice at a pulpit, but a well-designed, interactive gathering—a website—that reaches, welcomes, and engages all into one community not two.

⁸⁴ Barna and Barna Group, *Churchless*, 25.

For good reason, Marva Dawn, who is mentioned earlier in this chapter, doesn't see the union between the church and non-church melding into one community as easily as just described because there is not enough of a community component to worship as is most often practiced. She would agree that the single voice from the single authority (the pastor) defines the essence of worship. The community is invited to hear this single authority and then respond with Christian action. This is Christianity 101. Perhaps it is time for Christianity 102 where, through an interactive church website, both the community onsite and the community online can organically address the issues within the people. Rather than it being an "inward out" ministry, the potential for a shared collective of love, care, concern and action among all the participants is more than probable. It's likely.

Let me back up and share a bit more about Christianity 101 which is my own terminology here, not Dawn's. Dawn would agree that, to date, if many pastors and church leaders looked at their current church websites, they may guess that their online ministry presence, as is, does an effective job at promoting the church. These pastors and church leaders are correct, at least to an extent. After all, a handful of somewhat current photos, last month's deacon and trustee minutes, the church calendar and a cutesy invitation to an upcoming Christian Education event do share inspiration and information. To Dawn, isn't that what church is?

I disagree. The goal of bringing one community together where two existed is missed, however, or is seen as too distant, difficult, or perhaps unlikely when a website paradigm is as limited as just described. Maybe it's the next pastor's problem, or, as Dawn would point out, something too far out (or away) from what should be, which is the centralized church of yesterday being the hub of mission work today. Where I argue technology can bring us together, Dawn cites technology as the reason church has lost its churchliness. She insists,

“The technological society’s push for efficiency has robbed most congregations of the Sabbath rhythm, the setting a part of one day in every seven for ceasing, resting, embracing, and feasting, a whole day set apart for God and for each other, a day of delight and healing. Consequently, Christians mimic the frantic lifestyle of the world around them and have no understanding that God has designed a wonderful rhythm of rest and work, of refreshment and then response.”⁸⁵

I believe she is right about how the church arrived where it is today. Technology led us to entertainment and entertainment and the pursuit of other activities has pulled us from Sunday morning church experiences. But what drove us away can, in fact, bring us together. In the next chapter, we look at how we Christians are in the world and not of it, which, according to Dawn, is not happening as Christians are far too involved in the world today. I will argue in chapter three that the only way to evangelize in the world today is to enter the frantic lifestyle of the world so that the Christian message—and, in turn, we Christians ourselves—are relatable. More so, by being in the frantic world through interactive websites, we Christians are assessible.

To conclude this chapter, the pace of the tech world can indeed be fast, but the right website to the right population is more than stimulating; it can actually be refreshing. More than refreshing, it’s communal. Today’s churchless seek less church which, to them, and even to many practicing “church Christians,” is a part from life rather than integrated into it. To define church without a building is what a dynamic website can offer. As for the pace of technology? Everything can be slowed down when done with intentionality. Then, too, has anything ever been done at one pace?

Brandon Cox points out a truth. “We are split seconds away from communicating with anyone on the planet, and there are more ways to meet more new people than ever before, but we

⁸⁵ Dawn, *Reaching out without Dumbing Down*, 47.

are lonelier than ever, and our isolationist ways have left millions struggling through life without friends, without partners, and without a forever family.”⁸⁶

Because technology is seen as fast doesn’t mean it has to be fast. Because technology is isolating does not mean it has to stay as a great tool for human division. It is time theology stepped closer to technology and looked to and leaned on our God who is the Creator of all things including the internet.

The need for two communities becoming one cannot be greater. In *The Connected Church*, Natachi Lazarus points out that many of the top posts on social media today are quotes and stories of hope. Lazarus realizes what we all realize or should realize. People face many problems and challenges in their daily lives. Out of the chaos, or perhaps within the chaos, both the church and the unchurched—two currently disconnected communities—are looking for hope, encouragement, motivation and practical advice. Lazarus says we are all looking for truths that will allow us to move forward.”⁸⁷ So, let’s move forward not in fear but with faith.

⁸⁶ Cox, *Rewired*, 35.

⁸⁷ Natachi Lazarus, Mark W Schaefer, and Sam P Chelladurai, *The Connected Church: A Social Media Communication Strategy Guide for Churches, Nonprofits and Individuals in Ministry* (Miejsce nieznanne: Natachi Muthu Lazarus, 2017), 59.

Chapter Three:

The only constant is change—*our change*; God stays constant in our perpetual motion

We may want consistency in our pious, upstanding faith practices; we may crave an unwavering vision of “how things should be” because “it’s always been that way”; we may even fool ourselves into thinking our worship of the Great I AM never changes; we may revere tradition as the sacred honoring of our Father God because without our past we have no present; and yes, all of these anchors cannot nor should not be dismissed, yet, in the very same breath of the Spirit among and through us, this truth should set us free: we are constantly building up and tearing down in front of our Creator who, in the ongoing process of creating, always meets us where we are—and that’s on the move. In fact, God’s people have always been, as this chapter will prove, in a perpetual state of motion. This motion is our constant and our guide. Like the people of Israel who followed Joshua across the dry Jordan River, we, too, will continue to set memorials along our journey as we keep moving into the promises, hope, and deliverance of God into new space, which, some argue, is the internet itself.

Proverbs 29:18 directs us into this new space. The verse reads, “Where there is no vision, the people perish (KJV).” The singularity of the word ‘vision’ is important. As pastors and church leaders continue to navigate (and equally negotiate) their way into this new Promised Land, a conundrum may stop us in our tracks. Particularly in the United Church of Christ, where our polity uplifts and upholds diversity, how do we, a people crossing dry ground, arrive at *a* vision when many visions are valued?

I agree with Solomon, the attributed author of this proverb. Without a vision, the people will perish.⁸⁸ I have a theory how one vision can sync with many visions, however. Imagine that a singular vision included the input of all. Reverend Dr. Elizabeth King, my polity professor at Harvard Divinity School, shared in class what I've held closely for 15 years. When discussing vision and forward movement with any congregation, our professor wisely advised her master's level students and the people they will serve "to love the mess." King meant that seeking *a* vision is never easy because *all* should have input in that vision, or (and I fast forward to what Rev. Dr. David Mellott, then Dean of Lancaster Theological Seminary, who taught my first-year doctoral level strategic planning course said that King would agree with completely), there is no buy-in. People are never invested if they're told what to care for, or what to do. If, however, they have a voice in the vision, then they demonstrate not only investment but also follow through. Additionally, a multi-dimensional vision is generally richer and fuller than a singular vision.

Solomon surely knew of the benefits of a multi-dimensional vision, yet writes of a singular vision. Why? The answer shouldn't come as a surprise. Just as we have open-ended questions, it is wise to have an open-ended vision whereby all who provide input are not spectators but contributors. Whether specifically or in general, that vision should ideally be discussed at each gathering.

⁸⁸ It is one thing to read and read about church closings as a pastor and doctoral student. It's quite another to experience one firsthand. I speak of Grace United Church of Christ, located on a sprawling corner lot at the busy intersection Route 715 and Camelback Road in Tannersville, Pennsylvania. After 111 years of faithfulness, Grace United Church of Christ, ideally situated within the community, closed on October 27, 2019. A public sale of church items brought me to this church in mid-November. I am certain after my heartbreaking experience in the cold, mostly vacant sanctuary that yes, even once vibrant worship spaces can smell like death. The church had this mission statement, this vision: "We are a growing church with a compelling mission to Welcome All into the Grace of God's love and fellowship in Christ and serve the Community." A simple yet sturdy wooden cross sits at my writing desk as a reminder that fellowship in Christ and service to the community does require a vision to look back into scripture, which I will do in this chapter, in order to move forward to meet the needs of the community today.

I imagine at this point that a pastor or church leader will want to roll their eyes, especially if strategic planning feels like a bureaucratic nightmare, which it is not. Pastors and church leaders inspire. They motivate. An open-ended vision is what scripture does when it is read and discussed (sermonized) in a public gathering like church. By its singular essence—the sacred text itself—many interpretations or personal applications are perceived and then (hopefully) set into positive practice. If so, then maybe Solomon is speaking to *the* vision (singular) having many inroads and perhaps just as many outcomes.

The greater question isn't how do we get this vision. The greater question to ask in an age of declining gatherings over the Word of God is how can these many inroads and outcomes refract and stimulate, encourage and build “the people” as both a loose and specific community?

To begin to answer, I consider the Greek word *laos*, which means the whole people of God. Of course, “people” is plural, and the vision begins with seeing where the people are. Let me speak to the specifics of this project now. What soccer team, for example, doesn't have its own social media page or chat group when in season? What dance instructor is remiss in not having a website promoting the studio and upcoming recitals? Consider festivals, fairs, and town-centered events which all reside in internet space to some extent. Even the hamlet of Harford, Pennsylvania, which is truly the small village nestled around the church I serve, has its own Facebook page which shares the events of the community with its members. I share this because this technology allows us to see where the people are, what we are doing, where we are achieving and struggling, and how we can gather not absent or void of technology (which has always been a part of our topography) but with it.

The concept of communal midrash comes to mind. In scripture, the root *d-r-sh* [דרש] is used to mean inquiring into any matter, including to seek out God's word. According to Heidi

Campbell, who is discussed in the last chapter and will continue to have contributions in the following chapter, communal midrash responds to contemporary problems and crafts new stories.⁸⁹ In a specific religious sense, a communal midrash makes connections between new realities and the unchanging biblical text. Campbell suggests that this practice of connecting visions, contemporary problems, new stories and people shouldn't be compartmentalized or what I see as sequestered to one limb on the tree of religion. Instead, inquiring into any matter, including the Word of God, should be a communal event. Individualism is always necessary; Jesus himself went off to pray to God alone; but the community component to worship is necessary and too often missing in church/community relations today.

For many, communal events are tricky these days, especially when they continually shift in part because of technology. Remember the gentleman I mentioned in the last chapter who left the congregation I serve because I introduced cell phone use during worship. Like this gentleman, people leave their communities—their congregations—for any number of reasons, some specific and some vague.

In this chapter, I argue for a vision of the future church that, in its plurality, is not divisive. This vision of the “future church” isn't digital space in a space-age cyber Neverland; this future church is actually the church as it has always been. I'll point to the Hebrew scriptures, Solomon's Temple and two contemporary temples, the gospels, Acts, where I give a very brief nod to Stephen, and Paul's New Testament writings to arrive at this theological conclusion: the worship of God centers not from a place, but within the people of God and suggest that God never changes; those who follow God do. That change is continual. To explore this continual change, the essence of God is not the gathering of people in a building as much as it is building a

⁸⁹ Heidi Campbell, *When Religion Meets New Media* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 89.

gathering of people to worship God wherever God is, and God, according to any theologian worth reading, is everywhere. Since God is everywhere, His people are called to be everywhere. One obvious outcome of God's people being everywhere is an open-ended vision that includes all of God's people, not just some.

One theologian speaking to God's omnipresence is Nate Frambach, a Lutheran pastor, author, and a professor of Pastoral Theology at Wartburg Theological Seminary. Frambach mentions the banner on his cell phone which reads, "God is here." A progressive steeped in emergent theology and its practice, Frambach envisions a far more mobile and far less encumbered church evolving now and into the near future. He admits this banner on his cell phone serves as a daily reminder that "wherever he goes, there is God." He adds to the notion of God calling his people to be everywhere when he says, "[even] though there might be places that feel or appear to be God-forsaken, there are no God-less places... There is no space beyond the reach of the transformational power and love of God in Christ Jesus."⁹⁰

Encouraging the church today to become both missional and mobile through technology in ways pastors and church leaders are beginning to imagine, he continues by speaking to there being no space beyond the reach of the transformational power and love of God in Christ Jesus. He asserts his claim refuses to remain a theological abstraction because he supports the grassroots movement of Christianity being just that—a movement—not a sedimentary practice in one set place. Frambach supposes that too many Christians today practice their faith in theory more than in actuality, and, as such, he suggests Christianity is in danger of becoming a one-room only event. That room is an open-to-the-public church sanctuary which, too often removed from the public specifically because of its meeting time and singular location, faces a grave

⁹⁰ Nathan C. P. Frambach, *Emerging Ministry: Being Church Today*, Lutheran Voices (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2007), 62.

future. Rather than Christianity being a lifetime event with real world accountability and interactions, Frambach notes too many Christians today stay still for too long on cushioned pews that are literally and metaphorically too comfortable, familiar and stationary.

John Alexander, who is mentioned in the previous chapter, aligns with Frambach. Alexander also speaks of his dad, a pastor who was devoted his career in fulltime ministry. Picking up on Frambach's notion of Christian comfort and immobility these days, Alexander speaks of discomfort in a subtle, roundabout way. He shares that, "My father used to say that the secret of the Christian life is that there is no secret. We just have to keep putting one foot in front of the other trying to be faithful to God. There are no magic bullets. No quick solutions. No easy answers."⁹¹ Alexander's father postulates that the Christian life, in essence, is less and less about success and more and more about the struggle. As a preacher's kid who has had an informative pathway of looking at the toils fulltime ministry can bring to congregations and well as pastors, he is clear to echo his dad's practical Christian mantra: "It's a matter of slogging out our discipleship day after day, year after year, decade after decade."⁹²

In *Worship for the Whole People of God*, Ruth Duck sees the challenges of ongoing ministry differently than Alexander or his father. An ordained UCC pastor who is also a liturgical theologian and retired professor of worship who taught for 27 years at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary, Duck doesn't frame the Christian pursuit in terms of slogging. Instead, she offers ingenuity, flexibility and hope when she forecasts what to her can be a bright future in the church day after day, year after year, and decade after decade. She presents vision and vitality when stating, "The church must hand down tradition in new ways that address

⁹¹ John F. Alexander and Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, *Being Church: Reflections on How to Live as the People of God*, NML: New Monastic Library : Resources for Radical Discipleship, v. 9 (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2012), 10.

⁹² Alexander and Wilson-Hartgrove, 10.

the challenges of being faithful in each new day and context.”⁹³ To Duck, handing down Christian faithfulness isn’t a “one and done” deal where, for example, winners and losers are not left in distant pews after council or consistory meetings where, after heated debate, such things as contemporary music in worship has been decided upon; rather, Duck reminds me of Rev. Dr. Elizabeth King because Duck views the process of living into Christian faithfulness as a never stymied process. “Tradition,” she maintains, “is not an unchanging heritage but a never-ending process of passing on faith in ever-changing ways.”⁹⁴

To pass on faith in ever-changing ways, Duck alludes to the verse that opened this chapter, “Where there is no vision, the people perish.” She moves her argument out of the church into mainstream culture where, with vision, she sees what many see who have their eyes wide open: a natural rub or a rift between the church and its surrounding culture. As pastors and church leaders envision the church immersed in rather than separated from culture, she believes,

[D]eep questions arise when we consider that faithful worship is also always in tension with culture. [Contemplating these questions] leads us to ask what might best communicate faith and praise in our particular cultural connect, not what elements of worship best express our culture.⁹⁵

Duck invites a cultural immersion process by first challenging and then charging pastors and church leaders to see and meet the values and mores around their own communities not through the lenses of existing worship practices. Rather, she opens conversation on what the church’s neighbors need. How, when, and where these needs can be expressed and then met not as two communities—church and neighborhood—but one united and uniting neighborhood community is the conversation to have, and Duck advocates that the basis of worship, specifically the loci of

⁹³Ruth C. Duck, *Worship for the Whole People of God: Vital Worship for the 21st Century*, First edition (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013), 265.

⁹⁴ Duck, 265.

⁹⁵ Duck, 270.

worship itself, is situated not in the immediate culture of the church, but in *and with* the prevailing mindset of the culture around the church, which, to many in and out of the pews, is too isolated from the world today.

Christian Education Specialist Delia Halverson continues the conversation on the interconnectivity between the church and the community. Like Duck, Halverson speaks to the church's orientation centered not in itself but in its surrounding culture. From a slightly different perspective, Halverson speaks specifically to the integral components of a culture. According to Halverson, culture cannot exist without the infrastructure of multi-tiered relationships. She suggests that our cultural relationships are not anthropocentric, which many might affirm when looking at the rise of churchless Americans in our culture. Instead, Halverson looks into the deepest facets of the human psyche and insists culturally-based relationships are indeed theological. She posits that

We are [all] wired with some sort of yearning for our creator, for our connection with that which is above and beyond us, that which is greater than even our comprehension. A part of that yearning involves the intrigue with the mystery, with the sense of craving for relationship with something so powerful that it goes beyond anything we encounter. A part of the yearning engages an awe we do not know... Mystery, awe and relationship—all of this leads to worship.⁹⁶

As defined in this context, the term worship can be secularized. After all, we can yearn for and certainly worship many things such as our possessions, status, family, and even our own selves. While Halverson speaks to Christian worship engaging mystery, awe, and a relationship with Jesus Christ, a fundamental point Halverson makes cannot be overlooked: each of us is wired with a yearning for our creator. Halverson asserts that all of us seek a relationship with the divine. Agnostics and atheists may have determined that the relationship is uncertain or non-existent, but the universality in the word relationship suggests each of us shares a desire to be

⁹⁶ Delia Halverson, *What's in Worship?* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2009), 1.

connected. We long to not only understand our origin but also live into the construct that supports our understanding of our origin, whether that construct be God-led and divinely inspired, or something else entirely. If we all yearn for our creator, then church and culture cannot remain apart. Furthermore, the two cannot remain static.

Relationships form and can be supported everywhere, including social media platforms like websites that I shared in the last two chapters. The remainder of this chapter looks at relationships through the Judeo-Christian perspective. The covenantal relationship between YHWH and the people of Israel in the Old Testament and the early Christian faith in the New Testament. In light of the mystery, awe and relationships Halverson mentions, the historic, controversial, and often polarizing Jesus Christ will take center stage. First however, I argue that our Old Testament narrative, which includes the resting place of the Arc of the Covenant in the Temple, exemplifies a people of God who, while worshipful, are never truly stationary. Change is always constant, and, as history proves, those who experience God cannot be sedentary. Next, I will speak to the teachings of Jesus Christ, an itinerant preacher from a nowhere border town like Nazareth, and substantiate that this Son of God is the literal embodiment of the temple. I'll establish (or reestablish) that Christianity is a relational institution that is not located in buildings or in a place, but simply and entirely in Jesus Christ, who, unlike the Christian church built after him, never stayed still.⁹⁷ Finally, I will conclude with Luke, the author of Acts, and the Pauline letters to show, since its infancy, that this “new church” established the Christian faith in unexpected, unlikely, and unfriendly places.

⁹⁷ In *Engaging with God*, Peterson quotes H.W. Turner in his work, *From Temple to Meeting House: The Phenomenology and Theology of Places of Worship, Religion and Society*, (The Hague, Paris and New York: Mouton, 1979), p.134. Peterson begins my argument that the people of God are just that—a people—not a place. Those who follow Jesus are attached not to a building but to a God who walked on earth. Yes, Jesus did teach in the temple, but he also reached people in everyday life when he went to them, not when they necessarily went to him. Zacchaeus and the woman at the well are two examples of Jesus' mobile ministry.

The Old Testament: the people of God on the move

One of the greatest arguments for worship being in a set place (and even at a set time) may begin with ritualism. We are, after all, the sum of our history. If we ignore or dismiss the ritualistic practices of those who have passed on our faith traditions through irradicable, ritualistic practices over millennia, then wisdom and knowledge is lost. We are lost, too. Without our rituals, we run into the certainty of forgetting our forebearers collective story, which, in turn, becomes our story because the guiding and grounding faith principles of struggle, loss and gain from our past do connect us to our present through what we have done—and continue to do—by rote. Said simply and metaphorically, history is the compass of religion, not the anchor of it. Consider a sermon. Reflect on a hymn. Recall a past communion. Yes, God does create new things⁹⁸, but we also look to past practices, like the verse I just referenced, to see our present and our future.

I am reminded of Jaroslav Pelikan who once said, [“Tradition is the living faith of dead people to which we must add our chapter while we have the gift of life.”](#) Furthering the argument of what I’ll call living faith, Pelikan continues. [“Traditionalism is the dead faith of living people who fear that if anything changes, the whole enterprise will crumble.”](#)

What we misconstrue, each of us, is the notion that living faith is only repetitive. We’ve always stayed the same. The past is set. The dust has settled. However, what we forget to realize, let alone actualize, is that the past wasn’t set. The dust actually had to settle. This means that at one time the dust was in motion just as the people of God were in motion.

⁹⁸ Revelation 21:5a.

An example here is helpful. When we think of the temple David passed along to Solomon to build and the once perpetually mobile Arc of the Covenant finally came to rest in the earthly palace of our God, we, who love the church as the church (building), consciously and unconsciously put our hearts into *a* place. If God was present *in* the temple in Solomon's time, then it's right to venerate religious space, whether that religious space is simple, such as a single religious icon on a table in a nondenominational hospital chapel, grandiose like a three-story church sitting majestically on the corner of a busy city street, or somewhere in between, like an understated church that at maximum capacity seats 120 people. Perhaps a residual thought from the modern age exists in the spoken and unspoken paradigm that loving, worshipping, and speaking to God outside a church building is fine; it may even be expected to a certain extent depending on your family's religious upbringing; but a truly faithful person experiences God best not in the woods, on the beach or during a car ride where the typically bickering kids are surprisingly harmonious and kindhearted, but in church. Since a church's doors, windows, fonts, statues, steps, altar tables, chancel furnishings, lighting fixtures and ceilings comprise God's house, these items cannot be a common, builder's grade. When we consider Solomon's temple was raised from great stones, cedar beams and other precious woods overlaid with gold by 30,000 Israelites, 150,000 Canaanites, Phoenician artists and craftsmen from Tyre, and the 18 million dollars collected to construct the Crystal Cathedral⁹⁹, which was paid in full in 1980, a clear message is sent: cost is of no (or little) concern when it comes to God's house.

⁹⁹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IQ4mDo2w0Xk> March 16, 2012. CBS Brain Rooney. When asked if the church went to big, Robert Schuller's daughter, Sheila Schuller Coleman, answered, "No, I think I'd rather grow too big and implode than not try to reach all those people... I think the era is coming quickly to a close in terms of television. But you can get a message and put it on the web, and I think that's the future." In 2019, here is her church's website. <https://hopecenteroc.org/>

Neither Solomon's Temple nor The Crystal Cathedral are alone in having a lesson for us about how humankind puts God in a church. Much can be learned from a current example. I am speaking to what happened during and certainly following the burning of Notre-Dame de Paris cathedral on April 15, 2019.

As a raging fire engulfed this architectural masterpiece and historical monument, many suddenly experienced in their hearts that this sacred place was far more than stained glass, historic timber, stone, metal and marble. Whether under the influence of the adage "absence makes the heart grow fonder" or not, it is not an exaggeration for some to claim that this sacred landmark was a place where God lived. Much like the Arc of the Covenant, this Paris cathedral housed the divine.

Alexandra Kiely, a blogger covering the fire as it happened, describes her feelings of sudden loss and angst. She writes, "At the time of writing this, I really don't know what's going to happen—whether the building is going to survive at all, and if so in what condition. I'm really heartbroken, and I'm so grateful that I had the chance to visit this icon of Gothic architecture back in 2011."¹⁰⁰ Kiely speaks to the devastation as much as she speaks from her soul, which should make us wonder if the cathedral is simply an icon to Gothic architecture, or something far more. If a desecrated cathedral elicits such emotion, and a great sense of loss did occur at the sight of those towering flames, racing fire trucks, and the permeating smell from those ashes, then a point can be made that, at least for some, an affixed sacredness—and a sentimentality—is put on worship buildings. More specifically, perhaps this sacredness and sentimentality is put *in* worship buildings. Of course, the Christian says God is in the ocean waves, the breeze through a forest, the decision to serve apple or pumpkin pie at the harvest dinner (or both?) and all else, but

¹⁰⁰ Alexandra Kiely, "Notre-Dame Is Burning Down." DailyArt Magazine Newsletter, April 15, 2019, accessed June 22, 2019. <https://www.dailyartmagazine.com/notre-dame-is-burning-down/>

what isn't said, at least outright, or what may be misconstrued for emotional purposes, is that God is in a building. Specifically, God is in the church. To prove it, in less than two days following the fire, one billion dollars in pledges was received with absolutely no organized capital campaign launched within those 48-hours.

Let me illustrate this love of God in a building without a monetary amount, but with just as much heart. It is not difficult to imagine how a senior who spent her formative years in her family's church "feels" about the wood and nails of the "building" her great, great-grandfather helped build. These old cornerstones house the godly area where she was baptized, confirmed and married. In addition to countless other services, the funerals of her husband, son, daughter, and two grandchildren also happened here. Through watery eyes that have stared through the stained glassed windows where her grief meets what to her is no divine mystery, she knows this sacred space of comfort and divine presence is not a building. God is here.

Anderson agrees. In fact, he may have met or even interviewed individuals like the one I just mentioned. In gaining an understanding of what I suggest might be called the theology of a building, he offers,

[A] building can be as strong or stronger than denomination. Churches can become very attached to their facility. Pioneers sacrificed their savings and their skills to turn a dream into an edifice. The walls and halls have become sacred, filled with precious memories of weddings and funerals, baptisms and confirmations, plus ten thousand other attachments.¹⁰¹

If God is here in this senior's church, and I certainly wouldn't argue this point with her as her faith and proximity to God should be admired and emulated not questioned, we can get a sense of motion happening. Even as we ponder Notre-Dame de Paris, a sense of motion does happen in the form of a timeline. When it comes to the information gleaned from timelines,

¹⁰¹ Leith Anderson, *A Church for the 21st Century* (Minneapolis, Minn: Bethany House Publishers, 1992), 188.

Solomon's Temple, which was mentioned just a moment ago, depicts our God as mobile, not stationary. Recall the First Temple was finished 939 BC. 400 years later, it was destroyed by the Babylonians, reconstructed in 516 BC, and destroyed again by Rome's Pompey in 62 BC. Its history doesn't stop there. It was rebuilt by Herod the Great in 20 BC, finished in 64 AD, and destroyed a third time in 70 AD by the Romans.

If that motion is not enough, consider more recent history such as churches built in North America before the United States became a nation. If those relics are still standing, repairs and replacements, additions, updated heating and cooling systems and zaps of electricity running through these sanctuaries established long before Benjamin Franklin first flew a kite with a key have all experienced this commonality: change. While the rate and the desirability of change happens within each of us depending on the subject or perhaps even the moment, as people of God, we are changing, too.

But worship stays the same, right?

According to Halverson, Duck and Peterson, the word *worship* was originally *weorthscripe*, which then became *worthship*, the recognized importance of God in our lives. Duck adds to the definition of worship by saying *worthship* ascribes worth to someone. While our God of all times has not changed, our *worthship* of Him over time has. In fact, the only constant of worship is that it is never purely set. Like us, it, too, is in motion.

The Old Testament does not give an exact blueprint of the worship of ancient Israel, but the scriptures do contain important principles that help us understand worship. In the online article "Worship in the Old Testament," Phillip McMillion, a Pepperdine University professor,

shares that worship must always focus on God.¹⁰² This would answer the question that worship throughout the ages is consistent. Yet this focus changes over time because people and situations change over times. McMillion points out that while God stays the same, people do not.

McMillion also argues that when we consider Old Testament times, “worship” becomes a slight misnomer. When describing worship practices, it is more accurate to speak of the general term “religious practice” or the specific term “cultic practice.” What is important to realize is that, much like religious buildings have changed over time, so has the practice of religious expression. This change, according to McMillion, is not a linear progression. The pattern is there is no pattern. Some of the earliest practices remained common through the centuries whereas other practices, based on the mobility of the culture, were brought back after centuries of dormancy. Since there were two distinct countries shortly after the construction of the Temple in Jerusalem, McMillion asserts that any attempted understanding of the topic must include two locations, the royal Temple cult of Jerusalem and the localized worship in populous Israel. These two locations become problematic because where people worship influences how they worship. This, of course, opens the conversation further on online worship, which I’ll speak to in the next chapter. What remains clear is that past religious practices which seem consistent from our modern-day lens, are anything but consistent, or steadfast. If one fact is clear from professors like McMillion, history repeats itself. This means we are who we were, a people in flux finding God around us in new and sometimes very challenging situations. The challenges are not a means to an end, even though I say this in the face of more and more church closings each month

¹⁰² McMillion, Phillip (1998) "Worship in the Old Testament," *Leaven*: Vol. 6: Issue 1, Article 4, January 1, 1998, accessed October 19, 2019.
<http://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1735&context=leaven>, 11-12.

here in the United States; rather, these challenges are a means to rely even more so on our God of transformation.

The Synagogue, a place of faith in flux

As we consider transformations, specifically our transformations as finite beings in relationship to our infinite Creator, we should realize that God has been present to His people through every change we've ever made. We cannot dismiss our punitive God from our Old Testament mega story during the times we have gone astray, yet we also experience a perpetual God of grace who keeps meeting us where we are. If there is a constant, it's this: God remains ever-faithful to an unfaithful people. This three-pronged symbiotic relationship between Yahweh, the sacred, and everyday life should not just be remembered but uplifted because God, being God, keeps availing Himself to us, no matter where we are. To put this into specifics, once the Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed and the people of Judah were carted off into exile in Babylon, a new approach to the relationship with God, worship, and everyday life became necessary. God met us His people there. In fact, God meets His people in everyday life, which is a point Peterson makes when speaking of the infrastructure of the synagogue which was far different than the worship the people experienced in the temple before the diaspora. Peterson says,

Unlike the temple [prior to 586 BC], synagogues were lay led, with a president and a caretaker, and a group of elders were in charge of their affairs... The primary object of the synagogue was instruction in the law of God, which meant the study of scripture, together with the oral law, which in the Talmud and Midrash, finally became written down. An endeavor was made to educate the whole community in this faith, applying the words of God to every area of life...¹⁰³

¹⁰³ David Peterson, *Engaging with God: A Biblical Theology of Worship*, 1st North American ed (Grand Rapids, Mich: W.B. Eerdmans, 1993), 112.

During this post-exilic period of applying the words of God to every area of life, the synagogue became the central gathering place for all affairs, not just religious practice.¹⁰⁴ In addition to where the Torah was read and prayers were said or sung to God, commerce emerged and the needs of the community were met in and around this centralized hub where every day and religiosity flowed like brackish water. McMillion shares the possibility that a lectionary was developed during this period that would take the congregation through the Torah in one year. After the exile, a three-year lectionary was developed. Both were in use within Judaism, and the early church in imitation of Jewish tradition developed one- and three-year lectionaries as well. The psalms became the backbone of the prayers both in the temple and in the synagogues.

If the psalms are indeed the backbone of the temple and the synagogue, and if we were to extend the metaphor of the body, Keifert confirms that the welcoming of the stranger is the heart of the worship experience. Keifert, who is currently President and Director of Research of Church Innovations Institute, a church related non-profit seeking to “innovate your church's capacities to be missional,” speaks to the quintessential outreach within the faith itself by saying,

Over a period of 1,500 years, no matter where the people of Israel were located, their worship was focused on the stranger; indeed, the prophets were critical of Israel whenever it failed to reserve a place for the stranger....From its nomadic period onward, Israel remembered that God's will was revealed for Abraham and Sarah when they were hospitable to three mysterious guests (Genesis 18-1-21). Israel's captivity in Egypt was described in the image of the stranger as well “When an alien [RSV: stranger] resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God (Leviticus 19:33-34).”¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁴ Alexander reminds us of the Jewish temples in the days of Jesus weren't where priests performed sacred or magical rituals. Rather, they were centers for the Jewish community: part place of prayer, part school, part social-gathering point, part market, and part place for community elders to judge and make decisions (*Being Church*), 23.

¹⁰⁵ Patrick R. Keifert, *Welcoming the Stranger: A Public Theology of Worship and Evangelism* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 59.

According to Keifert, if there is a constant to worship through the millennia, it is not where one worships, but with whom one worships. Keifert is clear that worship *is* worship because of the stranger. Specifically, worship is worship of God because of the inclusion of the stranger.

Keifert even twists this when he states, “Israel’s status as stranger reminded the people that in public worship, Israel was the guest of the Lord.”¹⁰⁶ This realization forever reminds all those who worship God who is the actual host, and it isn’t any human. Keifert notes that the reserved places for the stranger truly embraces all of us because what we need to orient ourselves to, particularly as we consider Yahweh’s relationship with his people and their relationship to him, is that worship depends upon God’s presence first. Keifert observes, “Through God was free to be present elsewhere, God promised to be present in Israel’s worship. Through this promise, God inherited Israel’s worship.”¹⁰⁷ Keifert proposes that if worship is to be godly worship, then God is the host, and God can show up how—and even where—God chooses. When this is considered fully, a phrase such as “this is how we worship here at our church,” is a misconception because that way of thinking—that onus of hosting—is not on the church and its location; it is on God and God’s gathering, wherever that may be. Although the relationship of the Old Testament to the New Testament is one of the most contentious issues in Christian theology, it seems clear we can learn from Old Covenant worship that the emphasis is never on “where” one worships, but on with whom worships, which, for the Christian, is Jesus Christ.

¹⁰⁶ Keifert, 59.

¹⁰⁷ Keifert, 60.

Remembering the question, “What would Jesus do?”

Starting around twenty years ago, a popular question began to travel by way of rubber bracelets released during times like Vacation Bible School. Stamped on these colorful wristbands were the letters W W J D, what would Jesus do? When we look at Jesus’ worship practices, the gospels tell us explicitly that Jesus attended worship in the synagogues. He celebrated the Jewish Feasts. It is reasonable to assume that he prayed the Amidah three times per day since not doing so was considered a sin, and even His most serious opponents never faulted him on his prayer life. He also gave alms and sang hymns such as the Psalms that were sung at the end of the Passover. In short, Jesus followed the worship traditions and practices of observant Jews of his day. This returns to the previous section about tradition and the realization that God is host. Peterson picks up the Old Testament theology and repositions it into New Testament thinking when he states,

The Bible tells us that God must draw us into relationship with himself before we can respond to him acceptably. The worship provisions of the Old Testament are presented as an expression of the covenant relationship established by God between himself and Israel. Similarly, in the New Testament, worship theology is intimately connected with the establishment and outworking of the new covenant. Acceptable worship under both covenants is a matter of responding to God’s initiative in salvation and revelation, and doing so in the way that he requires.... Of special significance ...is the Old Testament teaching about God drawing near to Israel so that his people might draw near to him. The New Testament points to the fulfilment of these ideas in the person and work of Jesus Christ.”¹⁰⁸

Jesus’ New Testament fulfillment prophecy to be the temple has as much significance today as it did when he first spoke them. After all, the temple was considered the dwelling place of God (1 Chronicles 6:2; 7:2). Further, the temple contained the Ark of the Covenant (1 Chronicles 6:11). By calling himself the temple, Jesus makes a magnificent shift when he

¹⁰⁸ Peterson, *Engaging with God*, 19.

transfers the imagery of the temple, with all its significance and symbolism, upon himself. Jesus uniquely reveals the Father and becomes the point where humans come into contact and into relationship with the Father. Jesus is the place where God meets humanity whereby he reveals the presence, character, and nature of God not in a building or set place, but in an itinerant preacher who, by nature, is mobile not for the sake of motion itself; he didn't move just because he could; rather, he made himself present to where the people gathered in their homes, their streets, and their public and private places of contact. In all of these locations, he speaks plainly, though his message is difficult to hear. When you see Jesus, he declares, you see the Father. When you are with Jesus, you are with the Father.

This goes further. Jesus becomes the place where atonement is complete. As the temple of the living God, Jesus delivers, blesses, and provides for God's people. He is the source where mercy is found. Jesus not only cleanses the physical temple but also replaces it, thereby fulfilling its purposes. Jesus declares himself to be the temple of God, the only center of true worship (Matthew 12:6, John 2:18-22). Within three days of his death and burial, Jesus, who would rise from the dead, becomes the place where God is revealed and where God's forgiveness and renewal are known. The fellowship with God is no longer experienced and forever maintained in a building. It is with Jesus.

Peterson speaks to this when he espouses,

“The presence of God, which was more fully manifested in the person of Jesus than it had even been in the tabernacle or temple, would eventually be linked with those whom he had gathered to himself... Jesus replaces the temple of Jerusalem as the source of life and renewal for the world and as the center of the ingathering of nations.”¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁹ Peterson, 101.

Peterson continues. He shares Christian dogma when he asserts that unbelievers become ‘true worshippers’ only when they recognize who Jesus really is, turn to him as Savior and Lord, and receive from him the life that he offers.¹¹⁰ Peterson offers more. He says God brings people to himself as they come to know his Son through the proclamation of the gospel. In knowing the text and yielding themselves to him through the Holy Spirit, the advocate of Jesus for all times to come, people see and experience God in every facet of their daily lives.¹¹¹ A burnt offering at the temple was a purification rite in the past. Now forgiveness can happen anywhere at any time. In fact, Peterson asserts that “... the gospels indicate that the temple has been replaced by the person and work of Jesus and that the messianic salvation has been accomplished by his death and resurrection, the implication is that a new covenant has been inaugurated.”¹¹²

According to Peterson who sites Luke 14:18-21, Jesus’ own preaching makes it clear that the self-professed Son of God sought to establish a new center for Israel. This new center could be found only in himself and in the salvation he proclaimed, rather than in the synagogue, the temple, the law or the inherited customs of his people.¹¹³ In fact, and perhaps unsurprisingly, Peterson sees a God in control of the movement. Jesus’ “practice of eating with the outcasts of Jewish society (Mt. 9:10-13) and the way he interprets the law of his disciples (12:1-8), suggest that, through Jesus, God is working in a new way to draw people in relationship with himself.”¹¹⁴

Framback enters the conversation. Because we are created in the image of God, he insists our destiny is communal. As individuals, he suggests we are created for life together. He extends this to churches, too, which are called to be open to “the other”, which aligns with what Kiefert

¹¹⁰ Peterson, 102.

¹¹¹ Peterson, 102.

¹¹² Peterson, 108.

¹¹³ Peterson, 112–13.

¹¹⁴ Peterson, 115–16.

said earlier about welcoming the stranger. Frambach also hears that churches, which exist in egocentric/exocentric tension, are called to the world around them, and ultimately to God. This call extinguishes the family metaphor which is an appealing siren song that can lull a congregation into valuing privacy and intimacy above all else. When this happens, it is tempting for church people to turn in on ourselves and become a private enclave. Rather than a public meeting place where there is great passion and compassion for the outsider, the stranger, the marginalized, and the newcomer,¹¹⁵ churches become dormant domiciles, cold rocks on street corners that offer no conversation, let alone compassion, to its neighbors, the world.

Frambach adds a piece about the family metaphor. This familial mindset, while warm and gentle (or may seem warm and gentle depending on an individual's own family dynamics which may be healthy or otherwise), has significant drawbacks when pastors and church leaders consider following Jesus' ministry on the move.

Congregations that desire chiefly to be like a family can all too easily value privacy and intimacy above all else....This family mentality has a sneaky way of undermining—often without anyone realizing it—a congregation's larger sense of hospitality, public witness, and vision service to the world.”

Unlike Frambach, Harold Best approaches the living, moving church of Jesus Christ from a personal point of view, not a corporate one. Best speaks from his own experience and shares his personal thoughts.

“Knowing *about* the Bible does not guarantee that I can think biblically—in the Bible.... Going further, my knowing *about* Jesus does not necessarily mean that I am *in* Jesus. I am not even sure that *knowing* Jesus is the same as being *in* Jesus.”
49 “This entering-and-staying word *in* assures these glories: Christ *in* us; we *in* Christ; God *in* Christ as Christ is *in* us...there is no division between Christ seated in the heavenlies and Christ in us even as we are seated in the heavenlies *in* and with him.”¹¹⁶

¹¹⁵ Frambach, *Emerging Ministry*, 28–29.

¹¹⁶ Harold M. Best, *Unceasing Worship: Biblical Perspectives on Worship and the Arts* (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 50.

Unlike the family imagery Frambach struggles with, Best suggests we are members of one another when we are in Christ. Best's argument emphasizes that we are literally in Christ. We Christians serve and participate together, but, according to Best, there's more. We do so as one with each other, even in each other.¹¹⁷ Best is quick to point out the spiritual, not literal, overtones here. Using himself as an example, he explains,

Because of the profound reaches of faith, hope and love, I am enabled to enter deeply into and live within—even for a spiritual moment—the lives of brother and sister, so as to weep, to mourn, to rejoice, to identify with, to intercede for, to uphold, to support, even to correct.”¹¹⁸

Keifert would agree with and support Best because this connection—even for a spiritual moment—eliminates the stranger. Best goes further, stating, “Christ in us demands that each of us seek out who the rest of us are.”¹¹⁹ When people are not in church, the demand to reach them where they are heightens, or should heighten. One place people gather is on social media sites and on webpages.

Charles Duffert agrees. Faith isn't a practice in a vacuum; faith is an expression in everyday life. As we have seen from Barna Group in chapter two, the expression of everyday life is regularly found on the internet. In his aptly-titled book, *Lean Ministry: Implementing Change in the 21st Century*, Duffert speaks of a post-noeticentric gospel which affirms the goal of the Christian existence encompasses more than just the accumulation of knowledge. He states, “A post-noeticentric Christian gospel emphasizes the relevance of **faith** for **every dimension of life**. It refuses to allow commitment to Christ to remain merely an intellectual endeavor, a matter

¹¹⁷ Best, 52.

¹¹⁸ Best, 52.

¹¹⁹ Best, 62.

solely of assent to orthodox propositions.”¹²⁰ Instead, the commitment to Christ means that Christ’s followers do what Christ himself did, which is meet the people where they are. Many people today are found online.

To embrace the concept of lean ministry, Duffert continues. He challenges the Christians when he says,

We should not be under the illusion that knowledge, even biblical knowledge, is inherently good, unless it results in some positive change... Commitment to Christ cannot remain intellectual but must take lodging in the heart.¹²¹

In other words, for biblical knowledge to be inherently good, embraced, practiced and seen, the lodging of God is not in a building, per se; it is in the heart. This concept aligns with what Best argues when he says we find God in each other, or, as I like to think, *where* we find God in each other is in our hearts.

Literally speaking, where we find each other is everywhere. The fact that the early temple was more than a hub for religious activity but a centering place for the whole community is a concept lean ministry embraces. Duffert continues this realization when he insists that “the church must go to the people it hopes to reach rather than expect them to come to us—demonstrated by the use of the word “Go” in Jesus’ Great Commission (Matthew 28:18-20).”¹²²

As I brought up the early temple, Peterson returns to this conversation with hope and direction. When he speaks of lean ministry in his own way, he contends that “Old Testament worship was not false, as Samaritan worship was false, but it was, in effect, only ‘a shadow of the good things to come’ (Hebrews 10:1 RSV).”¹²³

¹²⁰ Duffert, Charles, *Lean Ministry: Implementing Change in the 21st Century* (St. Charles, IL: ChurchSmart Resources, 2011), 47–48.

¹²¹ Duffert, 48.

¹²² Duffert, 48

¹²³ Peterson, *Engaging with God*, 98.

Sine is one to inspire us when he sees the past and the present and speaks of good things to come in the future. He maintains what I experience in my own ministry which has drawn me to this major project. He both challenges and inspires pastors and church leaders when he says, “The future will require that we radically recreate how we, as disciples of Jesus Christ, live our lives, raise our young, and form our communities.”¹²⁴

Jesus exemplified lean ministry. When asked, “What would Jesus do?” we have an answer. Jesus fulfills Old Testament prophecy as well as Old Testament ministry practices, which means that he never stayed still, like the religion itself. When we consider the temple Solomon built, the faithful did “house” God for a time, but God has never stayed stationary because God’s people, constantly in flux, never stay stationary.

The Apostolic Age: Diversity, and the desire to expand

The adage, “You are the sum of your history,” may be true for the Christian faith in that fear to move ahead is in our collective DNA. I argue this because the first formation and practice of Christianity in one designated place without Jesus being physically present began with Jesus’ closest coterie frightened in a locked upper room. Thomas, one of chosen, was a no show. Was Thomas abducted, a captive, or on his way to be killed like Jesus? In the midst of all the uncertainty, Jesus’ teachings didn’t matter at that point. The world had proven itself hard, even cruel.

We cannot forget this beginning because it repeats itself. We, too, have “a thing for doors,” and heavens, they should be locked. Theft these days! I know of a church nearby

¹²⁴ Tom Sine, *Mustard Seed vs. McWorld: Reinventing Life and Faith for the Future* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Books, 1999), 195.

custodian whose great job it is to lock “her church” doors to the extent that parishioners, still chatting after worship, have been locked inside.

Far more than faith, fear slips into our conversations. Plans to move forward into the world are thwarted, confusing, conflicting, or seem too challenging. Moving into a computer-generated future seems absurd, even dangerous, yet scripture illuminates. From our less than auspicious start, the following description of the Apostolic Age in Jerusalem under the apostles (Acts 2:42, 46-47) guides and grounds us. “And they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, the breaking of bread and the prayers.... And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people....” (ESV).

Those early Christians attended worship in the Temple daily. Worship was something you went to, rather than lived out in all aspects of your life. Additionally, tradition is far easier than to try something new. Then, like now, people don’t worship God over a neighborhood meal or in the marketplace. Goodness no! That’s not sacred. The thinking then, like now goes something like this: a fulltime religious leader is better than the butcher, baker, or sheep farmer when it comes to exegeting scripture. Forget that the disciples weren’t formally trained; for worship to be worship it had to be in a place. Specifically, that place was the synagogue.

R. Kent Hughes, author and Senior Pastor Emeritus of College Church in Wheaton, Illinois, speaks to this fact. He states that “these earlier followers did not separate themselves from the Jewish community and, like Jesus, continued following Jewish worship traditions, including liturgical prayers recited in the synagogue.”¹²⁵ Along with worshiping in the Temple, the faithful to Jesus continued to participate in synagogue worship as well, at least until the

¹²⁵ R. Kent Hughes, *Acts: The Church Afire*, ESV edition, Preaching the Word (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Books, 2014), 25.

Amidah prayers were modified to include a condemnation of Christians. The formation of the Christian faith was neither immediate nor distinct. Hughes reports that, for the first few centuries, Christians seem to have continued to celebrate the Jewish feasts, seeing in them divine promises that were fulfilled in Christ.¹²⁶

¹²⁷ Along with the sabbath worship at the synagogue, the early Christians also met to worship on the first day of the week. Several reasons account for this: Jesus was raised from the dead on the first day of the week; the Holy Spirit was poured out on the church on the first day of the week; as the “Eighth Day” it also represented the beginning of the New Creation.” Hughes points out 1 Corinthians 16:2, which states the Gentile churches gathered on the first day of the week. The Lord’s Supper was celebrated at this service since it would be impossible to do so on the Sabbath with the general Jewish community.¹²⁸ In short, diversity was becoming more and more necessary. The early Christians tried to amalgamate the rich and lasting heritage of the faith Jesus practiced because Christianity couldn’t be built from scratch. The new religion came from an existing one. However, Christianity couldn’t maintain the established Jewish faith practices Jesus challenged (or was challenged on by the Pharisees and teachers of religious law). More than doors in upper rooms needed to be unlocked. Following Jesus meant bold action in dangerous times. A move needed to be made.

Less Structured Worship

Truer words may never have been said: breaking up is hard to do. I mentioned brackish water earlier in this chapter. The early followers of Jesus didn’t have history on their side, unless,

¹²⁶ Hughes, 27–29.

¹²⁷ Hughes, 41.

¹²⁸ Hughes, 41–42.

of course, it was Judaism which did—and clearly did not—represent a model for them to follow. The imagery of brackish water comes into play because these followers were, and equally were not, Jewish. How to step forward yet maintain some established traditions was the question.

According to I. Howard Marshall, professor emeritus professor of New Testament at the University of Aberdeen in Scotland, the early church followed worship models based on the synagogue liturgies with some specifically Christian additions. For example, 1 Corinthians 12-14 suggests that a far more spontaneous, charismatically-driven approach to worship was in place in at least some churches, most likely in predominantly Gentile regions. Marshall argues that

There seems to be a diversity of approaches to worship, including worship in the Temple, synagogue-based liturgies, spontaneous, charismatic worship, and probably blends of these. This in turn suggests that we should expect and allow for a diversity in liturgical practices in different regions and from different cultural backgrounds today.¹²⁹

Along with these worship activities, Marshall suggests the New Testament introduced a number of important changes to the way both Jews and Gentiles approached worship. For Gentiles, worship for the most part involved sacrifices and formal prayers to acknowledge the god's authority over her or his sphere of influence, but little came in the way of actual devotion: the gods were feared, not loved. Holiness was conceived in terms of ritual purity; it did not involve behavior, ethical or moral considerations.

Both Hughes and Marshall agree that the Jews shared some elements of this concept of worship, but with some significant differences. Like Gentiles, sacrifice was an important component of worship. In addition to morning and evening sacrifices, New Moon and regular festival sacrifices happened to recognize God's authority in all areas of life. There were also sin offerings, and all of these sacrifices could only be performed in one place—the Temple in

¹²⁹ I. Howard Marshall, *Acts: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, v. 5 (Downers Grove, Ill: IVP Academic, 2008), 111.

Jerusalem. Even though most Jews did not live in Jerusalem and worshiped primarily in synagogues, the Temple remained the center of Jewish worship as the one place where God had chosen to be especially present.¹³⁰

In addition to restricting the location of sacrifices, there were also restrictions on who could participate in worship: only priests, who were in principle descendants of Aaron, could perform sacrifices; only descendants of Levi could join the priests in leading worship; only Jews were admitted into the Temple, and only men could pass a certain point. To those who studied Jesus, however, everything continued to upend.

In John 4, Jesus tells the woman at the well that the time will come when the location of worship won't matter. Jerusalem and its Temple were being replaced as the center of worship, and instead people would worship in Spirit and in truth. Since after Pentecost, the Holy Spirit dwells within believers, God's presence is in us. We are individually Temples of the Holy Spirit, and when the church meets, it is God's Temple as well.

Those who could participate in public worship also changed dramatically, but this took time. F.F. Bruce, Rylands Professor of Biblical Criticism and Exegesis at the University of Manchester in England, returns to the idea of the door. He states that

In the gospel, the door is open for all people to come to salvation and to become part of God's covenant people. Once we enter into the New Covenant, 1 Peter 2:5 and 9 tell us that we are all priests—we all have direct access to God through Christ, and we are thus fit to participate fully in the worship of God, whatever our ancestry, gender, or social status.¹³¹

Holiness has also been redefined. Bruce says it is no longer about ritual or ceremonial purity at all. Instead, holiness is grounded in our inner life and expressed in outward action.

¹³⁰ Marshall, 133–35.

¹³¹ F. F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, Rev. ed.. [Nachdr.], The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans, 2008), 204.

What we do matters, of course, but our habitual actions flow from within us, and thus our hearts need to be clean if we are to live a holy life.¹³² The hope of a clean heart, a heart given over to obedience to God and to love of God and neighbor, was the great hope of the prophet Ezekiel (Ezekiel 36:25-27) and is the heart of Jeremiah's prophecy of the New Covenant (Jeremiah 31:31-34).

Let me return to the door imagery one last time and share that the Apostle Paul experienced many doors in his lifetime. Perhaps the church today can be both illuminated and guided by what Paul wrote to the church in Corinth. "Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy that person. For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple 1 Corinthians 3:16-17 (NRSV)."

For us to be the temple, Alexander speaks to how the Christian journey during Paul's day lead to the expansion not the demise of the new and fragile church that experienced great struggles. Like Paul, Alexander speaks of the struggles and conflicts that may inspire us today.

When the Christian Jews got into too many conflicts in the local synagogue, they started meeting in the home of one of the wealthier Christians. This limited their size to no more than those who could fit into the largest room of a large house. When they got too big (as they apparently did in Rome), they would divide and start meeting in different houses.¹³³

Alexander's notation that the faithful met in different houses has direct implications—and invitations—today. In addition to church sanctuaries, today's "churched" can *and should* gather in houses, public and convenient gathering places (such as parks, community events, restaurants, etc.) not only for historic reasons but also because it just makes sense. If people aren't coming to church, then the church should go to the people. As Jesus embodied the

¹³² Bruce, 88..

¹³³ Alexander and Wilson-Hartgrove, *Being Church*, 23.

church,¹³⁴ those who follow him should embody the very places he traveled, such as public squares, open areas, waterfronts, and peoples' homes. When today's Christians redefine "church" not a place but as a people, then we, too, embrace the plight the early Christians faced and, from their struggles, find guidance in our own.

When it comes to guidance, Paul is an example that we can live into our faith as Christians outside of the church building itself. Peterson points out that while "Paul received an important vision in the temple, this experience actually led him away from the temple (Acts 22:17-21) so that he could preach the resurrected Christ as the center of true worship for the nations (e.g. 17:16-33)."¹³⁵

Referencing R.J. Banks in his work *Paul's Idea of Community* on page 92, Peterson suggests that the New Testament knows no holy persons who substitutionally perform the service of God for the whole people of God. Peterson highlights Paul who states that no holy places, holy acts or seasons should create a distance between the culture and the life of every day and every place. In fact, according to Paul in Romans 5:2, everyone in the faith has access to God and all share in the Holy Spirit. As Peterson considers Paul's theology, he is clear to advocate that all of life is service to God. There is no 'profane' area."¹³⁶

Peterson also mentions R.J. McKelvey, who in *The New Temple* on page 84 exclaims, "The author of Acts is concerned simply to show how the temple of Jerusalem plays its predicted

¹³⁴ According to Keifert, while Jesus is connected to the temple through his purification (Luke 2:22-24), through strangers Simeon and Anna (vv.25-38) and during an annual Passover visit by his parents and family where he engages in his public ministry (vv.41-50), Jesus himself is not the physical manifestation of the temple itself; he himself is the temple.

¹³⁵ Peterson, *Engaging with God*, 138.

¹³⁶ Peterson, 219.

role as the venue of the eschatological fulfillment and then gave way to the new salvation which is not confined to a particular topographical location.”¹³⁷

Keifert adds that the “church” should be free from a topographical location. In addition to “church” not being in a set place only, Keifert insists that Paul is equally clear about the importance of hospitality to the stranger.¹³⁸ To help my point, consider a guest during a Sunday morning service who invariably sits in so-and so’s established place in a pew. There’s a reshuffling there, a new order. Sometimes this welcome is refreshing. So-and-so can, in fact, find another nearby pew. Keifert does not use this imagery of worship seating, but indirectly suggests this new order opens worshippers to far more than familiarity. We sit with the divine when, with the stranger, we gather in internet space and time.

Like Keifert, Alexander sees Paul’s liberation from a building. Alexander suggests that Paul’s revolutionary idea in Ephesians is the central idea not just in Ephesians or the New Testament, but the whole Bible. He believes Paul’s theology of God gathering together groups to love one another, to die to self, and to become one is centralized in all scripture.¹³⁹ Through Paul’s writing, Alexander argues that Christian groups don’t exist for themselves so they can feel warm and fuzzy. Instead, they have a purpose. That purpose is to gather the whole word into groups that are in unity with God and therefore with one another. And these groups attract others largely by their unity with one another and their love for each other.”¹⁴⁰

¹³⁷ Peterson (159) also point out that the temple in Acts continues to function as a center of revelation and prayer for the early Christians, until their preaching about Jesus leads to expulsion. The doctrine of the new temple is not enunciated in Luke’s work, though it is clear from the apostolic preaching that Christ fulfills the ideal of the new temple...”

¹³⁸ Keifert, *Welcoming the Stranger*, 68.

¹³⁹ Alexander and Wilson-Hartgrove, *Being Church*, 19–20.

¹⁴⁰ Alexander and Wilson-Hartgrove, 20.

In addition to Peterson, Kiefert and Alexander, Best also speaks of Paul. Beyond the common need for people to be together, and alongside the work of the Holy Spirit which pulls the church into each other's company, Best insists that we are given instruction to be together through what Paul writes in Hebrews 10:25. According to Paul, corporate gatherings should be mainstreamed, regular, and common occurrences. Specific activities can take place in these common occurrences such as fellowship (another meaning of *koinonia*), praise, instruction and edification. Best argues, "In no place in the epistles are these gatherings described specifically as worship times, nor is worship mentioned as the singular, all-encompassing act, much less the reason for gathering."¹⁴¹

Speaking to continuous worship being overshadowed or even ignored to the formality and perhaps rigidity of worship being segregated to set times and places, Best continues his argument, stating

Too much of today's worship talk...overlooks the comprehensive meaning of continuous worship. I believe that our overemphasis on time/place/ music worship might partly come from a failure to account for the final dimensions of worship that a New Testament theology can bring to us.¹⁴²

Best speaks to a principle that undergirds the whole of New Testament thought. In Matthew 5 and 19, he says we read Jesus' words which he loosely translates as "It was of old, but now I say to you..." Jesus is indicating the law of Moses where Best says Jesus doesn't tear them away but finishes them completely, the culmination being Jesus' dying words on his cross: it is finished.

What is finished? Best argues that the relentless protocol in the presence of God in overly or exclusive worship has—or should—come to an end. Best suggests that

...the relationship between time and place and Spirit and truth is completely reversed in the New Testament, with nothing of the former canceled out. Time

¹⁴¹ Best, *Unceasing Worship*, 63.

¹⁴² Best, 45.

and place are not swept aside but are swept up in Spirit and truth, in continuous worship, in living sacrifice and in the verities of faith, love and hope. When we posit a theology of worship on any other concept, we might be running the risk...of legalizing the subject of worship and, by implication, neglecting the finish that New Testament thought puts to the old. Once we understand that, in Christ, authentic worship is a continuous outpouring summed up in personal holiness...¹⁴³
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Peterson aligns with Best. He declares that people who emphasize that they are ‘going to church to worship God’ tend to disregard what the New Testament says about the purpose of the Christian assembly. He says if Christians are meant to worship God in every sphere of life, then it cannot be worship as such that brings them to church; it must be the freeform willingness and mindfulness of being *in* community *for* community.¹⁴⁵

In addition to Paul, Peterson also mentions Stephen. He suggests that some scholars argue that Stephen’s speech is an attack on the building of the temple itself. They argue that, for Stephen, the erection of the temple was a declension from God. Stephen’s speech has a very important function in the narrative of Acts. It shows that the expulsion of the earliest Christians from Jerusalem and the temple was the result of their preaching of Christ, which raised fundamental questions about the permanence of the institutions of Judaism. Furthermore, it provides a theological introduction to Luke’s narrative of the Gentile mission, by affirming that the Lord of heaven and earth cannot be tied to a single place (Acts 7:48-50 citing Isaiah 66:1-2.)¹⁴⁶

¹⁴³ Best, 47.

¹⁴⁴ Duffert, Charles, *Lean Ministry: Implementing Change in the 21st Century*, 47–48.

¹⁴⁵ Peterson, *Engaging with God*, 219.

¹⁴⁶ Peterson, 141.

What does all this mean?

I have established that, while immersed in Jewish tradition, our early “churches” didn’t have buildings, per se; the earliest followers of Jesus met in homes. This led to a flexibility in worship mixed seamlessly with home life. People’s lives presumably overlapped, not just for a few hours on a Sunday, but also at work, in the market, and on the street. When Christians are together during their daily lives, it’s clear how they can use their gifts for each other.

As we look at the New Testament, we can glean elements of worship practices from the example and teaching of Jesus and the apostles. More significantly, we also see a refocusing of the principles underlying worship toward the total person, a unification of the inner life with our outer life, incorporating all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength.

For the Christian, the future will never be free of scripture. A Christ-centered verse to consider before moving on to the Apostle Paul in the next section, is Colossians 1:18. “Christ is also the head of the church, which is the body (NLT). This verse means that the church is a body, not a building.

I argue for a vision of the future church that is as communally based as the first house churches that were, in part, based on the inclusivity of the Old Testament Temple where both secular and sacred activities happened within the same proximity. Given our culture and our time, I believe sacred and secular practices can no longer be distinct when people today have access to almost anything if they’re holding a cell phone or another internet-based portable device. Based on my findings here, I suggest a vision of the “future church” isn’t detached in digital space only; instead, this future church is actually the church as it has always been—a place where people gather, where the stranger is welcome, and God is not lifted by one person for many, it’s a community of people with similarities and differences lifting God in what they do, how they think, and where they respond in making disciples of themselves and others.

The main point of this chapter is that the people of God have always been on the move. We may desire to keep God in a building, but even before Jesus Christ fulfilled the Old Testament scriptures, God was on the move and, as the Creator of the expanding cosmos, *is* on the move. The Arc of the Covenant may tell us differently; that God was to be in a building; but as followers of God we must do precisely that—follow. Of course, we love our buildings, our places where we find God in familiar worship, much like the senior I mentioned earlier in this chapter who found comfort in her family’s church through her many painful losses in life. Just like all the other places we come to commune with God including nature scenes, low-income housing facilities, playgrounds, parks, family gatherings or hospital chapels, the building (the place) itself is always invaluable, even necessary. This point I am not arguing. I share here that God doesn’t stay still among us because we never stay still. We may long for—or believe we long for—consistency in our faith practices and faith places. We may think that our faith practices are set, or we may want our faith practices to be set for the sake of familiarity, consistency, ease, or comfort. After all, invention and reinvention take hard work and time which produces stress. We may fool ourselves into thinking our worship of the Great I AM never changes; but this truth should set us free: we are constantly building up and tearing down in front of our God who always meets us where we are—and that’s on the move.

Chapter 4: So, what *is* next?

Divisions in the church are common. The opening chapter in 1 Corinthians speaks to divisiveness, for example. In his letter to the people of Corinth, Paul addresses the necessity of unity by appealing to the people in this particular church to live in harmony with each another under the authority of our Lord Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 1:10). An elementary knowledge in music reveals that harmony is not achieved with a single note, but many notes. Unity, therefore, is collective, not singular. For unity to happen, a *single* thought doesn't prevail or triumph; many thoughts contribute to the whole. This is seen in this work in regard to onsite and online worship communities becoming one community. Divisiveness can be seen as stressful, and stress can seem unhealthy, but division and stress are necessary for growth to occur. Here in this final chapter, I'll reveal that growth—unity—is happening as the church, under the authority of our Lord Jesus Christ, continues to find its way forward through division and stress to reveal what is next, which is a stronger interconnectivity between onsite and online worship communities.

For some, interconnectivity between onsite and online communities by way of dynamic, interactive websites should have happened years ago, or should be fast-forwarded today. Others, in the span of my lifetime, will never see the point or value to worshipping online. To see the unity taking place in what appears to be a split between onsite and online worshippers forming one community, let me return to harmony and music. I'll use the organ and the piano, two instruments known for harmony, to make a point about how division and stress actually are beneficial.

While the organ did become the church's primary instrument in the late 1880s, its presence in worship around 900 CE originally met with raised brows and arguments because it was, after all, *new*. The arguments over the inclusion of the organ dimmed when the lowly piano,

situated in sinful homes and worse, secular establishments that served alcohol, began to enter the conversation of worship. A piano? Many considered this instrument of the devil to be an unfit instrument for church. However, when revivalists including R. A. Torrey, Billy Sunday, and Charles Alexander began to see the value of the piano in their services, the fate of the parlor instrument began to change. The change was neither easy nor obvious, and this is my point. With all its starts and stops, its collusions and collaborations, both instruments, in their time, became amazing additions to the worship of our Lord Jesus Christ.

When we look at both the careful and the clumsy steps forward with the organ and then the piano into worship spaces and compare these starts, stops, collusions and collaborations in regard to dynamic, interactive websites and social media technology today, the argument doesn't need to perpetuate, but significantly shift. The rift isn't over the technology itself; it's over whether or not the church needs to be revived. R. A. Torrey, Billy Sunday, Charles Alexander and others saw a need when they considered the potential the piano could bring to worship. The question is the same one that existed since Christian worship began, and will continue as long as we worship God. Whether it is over men and women sitting apart or together in worship, the duration of worship itself, which version of the bible to use, who should pastor and why, purchasing new hymnals with inclusive language, hanging wall-mounted video screens above the new drum set where the recently removed organ once rested, or engaging interactive websites that enable offsite worship capabilities, the following question is profound, divisive, problematic and wonderful. Does the church need reviving?

The answer is yes. The answer is yes because each week the church needs reviving, reinventing, and reimagining. While some argue that tradition not progression honors God, and to this end I found a website that says all musical instruments in worship do not honor God

because any instrument played during worship is not scripturally grounded¹⁴⁷, I revisit the numbers that I shared in the first chapter. Churches are in decline, or in great decline. Revival is necessary.

Revival these days should mirror the revivals of the evangelists mentioned in that bringing the Word of God to the people is as it has always been, paramount. Whether we find ourselves traditionalist lovers or not when it comes to the word revival, the crux of our work as Christians is clear: bringing the Word of God to the people does not simply mean inviting them to church, as I proved in the first chapter where a church's front lawn "Welcome" sign does little or nothing. Engaging people *where they are* in the Word is lifechanging.

The division brought on by any technological advancement is a clear example of something far deeper than the outward discussion and division of the people of God. The examples I have mentioned here in this chapter center and then weigh on what is quieter and closer to the heart, which is how we honor God in worship. Let me explain. Whenever we in the know (and I define the phrase "in the know" to mean those who have been faithfully practicing a worship of God for a length of time from a few years to a lifetime) feel that God is being dishonored or disrespected by the advancement of any new or encroaching technology, we find offense. This offense is the underpinning to the well-heard phrase every longstanding church member has heard and perhaps said: "But we've always done it this way." When something new invokes this battle cry, then how God is being dishonored is heard clearly and often loudly. The upset isn't really over how God is being dishonored, it's how tradition is being challenged and upset which, in turn, pokes directly and indirectly at the question of whether or not the church needs to be revived.

¹⁴⁷ <http://www.letgodbetrue.com/bible/church/musical-instruments-in-the-church.php>

I am speaking to an us/them division. The problem with technology of any means is not how *we* worship God; it is how others worship God. To take one side, which is the point I am making, *we* who represent the Establishment are never wrong; it's always others (that is, newcomers) who suggest something new which may likely be outlandish or, dare some of the blue-haired whisper unsacred. In other words, what *they're* doing, seeking, offering, proposing or experimenting with, from a singular vantage point, is wrong. For example, how dare upstarts consider a new alternative to church attendance? Online worship? Egad! The age-old argument is that technology has never served the church well when, in truth, what hasn't served the church well is its members' inability to look toward new ways of bringing the ageless messages from scripture to life.

In contrast to what I just shared about the Establishment and newcomers, we Christians respond favorably to someone from a different location who inspires in us something new and wonderful about the life and the promises of our Lord Jesus Christ. For the Christian who desires to learn more and more about God, clearer understandings of God through other Christians is absolutely well and good. It's a true gift. This means the influence of other Christians enhances our relationship not only with God but also with others, specifically, all others. There's more to this, though. That "someone else" can be tough on any of us, whether we consider ourselves established or not, or even greater learners about Christ. By this I mean there is a piece that is tough to deny: a "someone else" gets all of us sooner or later. I call this Someone Else Syndrome which manifests itself when someone else rocks what we value in worship. A simple example of Someone Else Syndrome is a youth wearing a 1960's miniskirt when conservative dress was the norm, or, to move this syndrome into this century, particularly this past few years, how dare that

kid in worship pull out her cell phone *and use it* when everyone should be looking at the preacher not the screen during a sermon.

When we see that “someone else” is blasphemous (at least in our eyes, anyway), we experience Someone Else Syndrome. This division I mention at the start of this final chapter isn’t “out there”; it rests within each of us, and this is the key to this work. What I am saying is technology itself isn’t the issue, nor is it that we argue a lot as in the case the Apostle Paul lays out in 1 Corinthians; our root cause of angst with *any* advancement is Someone Else Syndrome. This goes back to the front yard church sign I mention in the first chapter. We say we welcome all, and we may (or may not) intend to do so, but our angst and our anxiety rests when someone else messes with, realigns, or disrupts what we deem sacred. Yes, we have and we will powerfully, persistently and passionately argue over the advancement of technology in our Christian lives. Beyond arguing, or, said even more precisely, *under* the arguing itself, when we look at “someone else” and invariably struggle, where does authority speak when authority in this postmodern age is intrinsically held in question? Is it scripture alone? Is it scripture coupled with the One Jesus sent for us, the Advocate? Is our guide and grounding in something else altogether that may be lumped in God’s divine mystery?

I answer as I think many United Church of Christ pastors and church leaders will answer, and that it is all of the above. To be specific, what I find both significant and telling about how we move forward with technology happened as I began to write the first draft of this chapter. As I began working on this intro to this chapter, I received a Facebook friend request from someone I do not know. As I have moved from being a single person to being a brand-new foster dad where the nearby birthparents continue questionable and dangerous actions to themselves and others, I now question more fully who will have access to my personal and professional

information which, while public, still makes me wonder how “public” public actually should be. *Do I accept someone else?* This is the perfect question to hold as pastors and church leaders of all affiliations continue to make the gospel public in an age where churches are now public grounds for mass shootings and perhaps other dangers.

The friend request turned out to be an excellent opportunity to connect with someone hungry for the gospel to be made public, not private, particular, or pressed into some cookie cutter form of currently branded or boxed religion. This new friend, whom I’ll call Sabrina here, has been looking for the Word to be shared without the baggage of Christian structure around it. Some will see this story of Sabrina as a loss, or some half-victory as we Christians march onward into battle (as the old hymn lyrics resonate) because Sabrina hasn’t joined in a traditional way. Attaching herself via Facebook only is not desired when we consider what the Establishment (of which I am a part) desires, which is live, in-person encounters not anywhere, but within the church proper.

Sabrina opens an interesting point for all of us. I join others in seeing that her “presence” online is far better than nothing. This is a start to something new not just for Sabrina, but for all of us fortunate enough to learn from and grow with her. Who knows, this growth may lead her to a pew someday. Whether it does or does not lead her to steady or even intermittent church attendance, what this technology is doing is enabling what Jesus himself sought and taught, which is a public and practiced gospel.

So, what *is* next? More questions, more answers, more discoveries, more truth finding, and more good love awaits us all as we further consider division not “out there” but within our own selves. Thanks to—or because of—interactive websites and social media technology, we are

forced to face Someone Else Syndrome like we never have before in our public and our practiced gospel.

Online Jesus surfing: hope for our public and practiced gospel

There is hope for our public and practiced gospel thanks to the surfing we can do online all of the time. As we move further into this chapter, I'll continue to look into what is next as we engage Christian authors whose zest for social media technology is contagious and inspiring. I'll look into the heterodoxy of the always forward-moving Christian faith that is paradoxically unchanging to make the point that we are always changing, always engaging, and always learning, as both our Old and New Testament texts reveal to us.

Speaking to our Old and New Testament texts, Meredith Gould, a well-known sociologist, culture critic, digital communications consultant and author, lifts the following scriptural conundrum. Ecclesiastes 1:9 states, "There is nothing new under the sun," whereas Revelation 21:5 reveals, "See, I am making all things new." In her book, *The Social Media Gospel: Sharing the Good News in New Ways*, Gould points out the juxtaposition of these two polarizing verses are not in tension with one another, but serve as a catalyst for Christians to be frontline advocates for the presence of Christ in a perpetually changing world.¹⁴⁸ Using present-day technology in an almost 17-minute video to make her point about her book, Gould begins a persuasive argument about faith and technology not as something new per se, but as something that is always ongoing. I transcribed the first two minutes of her video because it's as exciting to read about what she has to say about the social media gospel as much as it is to hear her speak about the social media gospel. She begins her video by stating,

¹⁴⁸ Meredith Gould, *The Social Media Gospel: Sharing the Good News in New Ways* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2013), xv.

We're in the most exciting time to be church, and the most exciting time to share the gospel and live the gospel—and social media is making that possible. What social media has done is made this far-flung world of people very, very intimate, very close, very accessible. My deepest hope and prayer is that people are really starting to get that.... We're at the point where people are understanding that this is a very valuable tool. It's here to stay.... The conversation I like to be in with people is [that social media presents us with] very valuable tools. How are we going to use them? How are *you* going to use them? How are you going to think strategically about who you're going to reach, and then how do you think tactically about how to reach them? The tools you plug in later.¹⁴⁹

Gould has a passion she hopes becomes contagious. She invites each of us to consider what has been true for her. When speaking about the positive, tactical effects of social media in her book published five years ago, Gould cites positive, personal and professional outcomes as a result of digital technology. What she shares then is still true because I have been able to follow some of her recent posts which verify that this far-flung world now has the capacity and capability to bring humanity an intimacy never experienced before. She admits,

After nearly six years of active, near-daily social media engagements in some form or another, I can honestly say that almost all of my closest friends, dearest colleagues, and most valued partners in ministry are in my life at this point thanks to digital technology.... Digital technology has made it possible for me to receive almost daily counsel, encouragement, and inspiration from dozens, if not hundreds, of people, many of whom I may never meet in person.¹⁵⁰

My own narrative supports Gould's reality. I'll share one recent example which substantiates what Gould speaks of here. Just yesterday, I received a friend request on Facebook from someone who lives in the Philippines. This request is in addition to the one I received from Sabrina, only Sabrina was somewhat local. Having no connection with anyone in this geographical area, I remembered Sabrina and, with prayer, accepted

¹⁴⁹ Meredith Gould: *Social Media Is a Tool for Evangelism*, <https://www.bing.com/videos/search?q=Meredith+Gould+&view=detail&mid=AC8F67576739256E12C2AC8F67576739256E12C2&FORM=VIRE> (The Episcopal Diocese of Texas, 2013).

¹⁵⁰ Gould, *The Social Media Gospel*, xviii–xix.

her request. Within two minutes, she thanked me and shared that she in a part of a United Church of Christ in her country. She shared that her love of Christ brought her to seek Him in and through the internet, and we've exchanged several supportive messages since yesterday.

If social media/digital technology seems so advantageous, as Gould and others are clear to not only point out but also promote, a question can be asked as to why this new wave hasn't reached more shores. Aside from what I have shared earlier in this chapter, Duffert speaks to why this technology remains a ship in the port. Duffert enters the argument of the advancement of digital technology and theology from a distance because distance provides perspective and perspective enables vantage points which, using negative language, can be seen as problems. The word "problem" seems to be the go-to word when it comes to what's created as a dichotomy between those for and those against this specific technology used in God's earthly realm. Whereas I use the phrase Someone Else Syndrome, Duffert uses the word problem to troubleshoot. He says, "To respond to a problem, one has to know what the problem is. This sounds simpler than it really is because often we identify only symptoms and not root causes."¹⁵¹ The root causes of theology and this specific technology are older than our nation, but Keifert speaks to a pivotal time in our US history, which was during its formation in the hands of our founding forebearers. Keifert speaks to the embedded ideology of our nation's religious track—or the perceived notion of our nation's religious track—when he mentions Thomas Jefferson's public remarks on our third president's very private life and private faith. Keifert points out that

¹⁵¹ Duffert, Charles, n.d., 31.

Founding Father Thomas Jefferson was reticent to speak about his private life [and] especially reluctant to reveal his religious beliefs. He was convinced that religion was essentially a private affair between each person and that person's God.... Christians have not taken Jefferson's position completely to heart."¹⁵²

The “problem” is there is still a tension between public and private faith in our nation today. In this public and private arena, Keifert speaks to what I call our pop culture Christian theology when he suggests that our American God has two faces where one face of is public, and the other is private. He argues, “At worst, we [Americans] claim that there are in effect two different Gods: the public god, God the Creator; and the private God, Jesus the Redeemer.”¹⁵³ Keifert suggests that our public god, reduced to “Nature’s god,” is identified with God the Father—the benign, distant, even absent Providence that is most cited by politicians invited into prayer at public, high profile functions. “This god,” Keifert explains, “creates and preserves us. This god is exceedingly abstract and distant.”¹⁵⁴ By contrast, the private god is the Jesus who is in our hearts or the Jesus in whose heart we find relief. This private god is intimate, warm, close and tender-hearted. According to Keifert, this private god is our personal Savior “who walks with me and talks with me and tells me I am his own... Unfortunately, these two gods seem to have little to do with one another, leaving [worshippers] to serve two gods, one public and one private in a somewhat schizophrenic fashion.”¹⁵⁵ In the end, Keifert asserts that faith, religion, and the church today continue to be engrained and experienced privately, therefore community worship being both public and private is another problem. Keifert explains this by using a second example of a prominent US president, Abraham Lincoln. Keifert speaks of the Emancipation Proclamation, a keynote speech in our American history which in great part determined our

¹⁵² Patrick R. Keifert, *Welcoming the Stranger: A Public Theology of Worship and Evangelism* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 34.

¹⁵³ Keifert, 34.

¹⁵⁴ Keifert, 34–35.

¹⁵⁵ Keifert, 35.

sixteenth president's legacy. On January 1, 1863, Lincoln announced that "from this day and henceforth, all those persons now in servitude in those states now in rebellion shall be free."¹⁵⁶ Keifert points out that Lincoln did not approach slaves individually, take their hand, become their friends and then announce their freedom. Their freedom did not depend upon an intimate relationship with Lincoln. This said, our announcement of the liberating presence of God today does not need to depend upon an intimate relationship with the one who makes the proclamation. Instead, it should be a public announcement.

Yet interestingly, the announcement, unlike the announcer, is also personal. The example of Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation helps here as well. Although the meaningfulness of Lincoln's words did not depend upon an intimate relationship with the speaker, the words themselves did have a profound personal significance for each slave.

This being said, the announcement of the gospel and the embodiment of the presence of the self-giving, self-sacrificing, liberating God in word and sacrament does not depend upon an intimate relationship with the pastor/s or church leaders within the congregation necessarily, but certainly can have a profound personal significance for each person in the congregation.¹⁵⁷

This awareness changes both the church and its neighbors significantly. When we Christians consider that the model of communication is simultaneously corporate *and* personal, then our global sharing of the gospel is not new. Therefore, social media technology, which may present itself as a new package to some, is actually not new since Christians have been called to share salvation's message to all the nations. Keifert points out that no specific requirements on how the message is to be shared is given scripturally. What this realization speaks directly to the two verses mentioned in this section. First, there is nothing new under the sun (Ecclesiastes 1:9).

¹⁵⁶ https://constitutioncenter.org/media/files/ep_miniposter.pdf

¹⁵⁷ Keifert, *Welcoming the Stranger*, 92.

The Christian message being spread has always relied on technology (paper, roads, boats, etc.). And second, God is making all things new (Revelation 21:5) through such gifts as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Vimeo, and even Moodle classrooms where students gather not in one room, but from literally any location where the internet reaches. Our world communication systems are both old and new. The more we realize the power and the joy in the godly polarity of these two verses, the more the Kingdom will come on earth as it is in heaven.

Our neighbor is closer than we think, and easier to connect with than we think “Us” and “them” thinking will always prevail until we understand our neighbors in this new digital age not as someone else, but as one of us. As the world is literally open and accessible to evangelism in profound ways each day because of this digital age, we who love our Lord Jesus Christ can now engage and embrace our neighbors like we’ve never been able to do before. Thanks to social media technology, the Kingdom on earth has wider potentials and greater possibilities than it has ever had in the history of humankind, which makes understanding our capacity of internet interconnectivity all the more important. Returning to the earlier conversation about the organ and the piano, this internet interconnectivity reminds me of the piano in worship, especially when evolution has moved the organ further off to the side, or out of modern church space all together. Transitions are a turn from the old to the new, yet, in fear of this enormous opportunity and challenge before us as Christians in this digital age, we who are called by Christ need to understand something simple: this turn is just that—a turn. It is not a stop. Nor is it a total rejection of the past or tradition. If it were, we would have to reinvent the gospel (and the canon) every generation.

This turn requires a grieving period, and grieving periods need space and time. Transitions are never easy; and since we have all lost something or someone significant in our

lives, including a house or style of worship we've held dear, we are all familiar with how slippery the unending grief process can be. I have not included the grieving process here in my research; it's a central subject for another work; but, in light of this project and bringing online and onsite communities together, I return again and again to what the Barna Group has to offer not only as a goal, but also as a gift of compassion. In addition to the facts and polls they represent, they also offer sage advice. As if we are standing in front of a locked door and desire or deny entry, consider Sabrina and my new friend from the Philippines when the researchers say, "The key, of course, is loving the churchless for who they are rather than for what they can offer our church."¹⁵⁸ When we consider these words from the Barna Group, I wonder if we are, in fact, standing in front of locked doors—those locked doors being our own. These doors are inside of us far more than they are in front of us, and these doors, which each of us fails to want to open, are called Fear. Specifically, they are fear of the future (and technology) because we have yet to let go of a past that we still love.

In my work here, I suggest there be no doors at all. Thanks to the internet, we now have greater—and perhaps easier—ways to love the churchless and create with them what I spoke to in the second chapter, which is less church. By less church, I spoke about less bureaucracy and infrastructure in the church history has handed us. I cannot repeat enough that I'm not advocating for the church to disappear physically (on site), but when we see that the church today is an empty shell 80% of the week, and this includes being cold and dark in the wintertime, serious plans for integrating religion into the digital age through social media technology cannot just be considered but implemented.

¹⁵⁸ George Barna and Barna Group, eds., *Churchless: Understanding Today's Unchurched and How to Connect with Them: Based on Surveys by Barna Group* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc, 2014).

Let me repeat a thought expressed in the first two chapters of this work. A downside to cell phone use is well-known: people get lost in their gadgets. The times we see groups of people in social situations not engaging with one another because they are face planted in their device is too common. I want to share now four college students I noticed in a nearby booth in a restaurant as an example. None of these early twentysomethings were talking. In fact, they were not even looking at each other. All four were using their phones simultaneously (and I seriously doubt they were texting each other!).

I cannot verify the source as I learned of this fact years ago, but I read where correctional facilities advocate cell phone use among inmates because the handheld devices keep the inmates much quieter, even detached. This substantiates the isolationism of the digital age, the detachment of the “real world” for what can be the addictive nature of the online world. The church can shun this action, perhaps declare it sinful, but the wiser move for the church is not to keep this technology in its isolating environment, but to use it to foster community.

When we consider those four college students and the inmates I just mentioned and extend this new wedded culture out into the widespread digital world, a new understanding of community and the church in the community is born. Frambach helps us understand. He says, “Churches are communities of human beings that exist in relationship to a larger community around them... They live in tension between being turned in and called and sent out.”¹⁵⁹ What Frambach means by the phrase “being turned in” is the love of worship many continue to experience in a church sanctuary. Worshipers are turned in toward God (and thereby leave the outside world) when they enter through the doors of a church and sit in a pew incredibly familiar or brand new to them. Church is still “church” because onsite worship is not only available, but

¹⁵⁹ Nathan C. P. Frambach, *Emerging Ministry: Being Church Today*, Lutheran Voices (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2007), 32.

also it still works so incredibly well! The feel of a pew cushion, the air in the sanctuary, the light through the windows, and the presence of religious icons and furniture cannot be replicated digitally, even though 3-D technology has arrived.

This fact is obvious yet needs to be explicit here. Some *thoroughly enjoy* the three-dimensional experience of the church as it was and as it is today. They cannot imagine or even consider a simulation through an online experience. To share in a laugh or prayer concern is vital. To smell the smoke of recently extinguished altar candles after a service sends a message to the soul that something vitally important just happened here, and, as a result of our physical time in what truly is a sanctuary, we who have been in attendance can move back into the world a changed and a charged people by Christ's presence in us. Shaking the pastor's hand after a service is not just a connection but a send-off the churched do not want to miss. Conversations in the parking lot with fellow worshippers carry us to our houses as we are basked in residual joy.

"Being turned out" has great meaning, too. Frambach explains. Those who follow Christ in weekly worship and daily meditation in the Word "have a strong desire to cultivate relationships and develop partnerships with other people, institutions, and organizations in order to work together for the health and well-being of the neighborhood."¹⁶⁰ No one who follows Christ, Frambach believes, is ever set with what is. The potential of what can be fills our minds and hearts with hope not just in today, but tomorrow.

Like Frambach, Best also speaks to the redefining of the Christian community in this new age in light of hope today and tomorrow. Best doesn't use the phrase "being turned out," but aligns with it as he engages the metaphor of fabric and seams. He suggests that

Being members one of another is not a mechanical arrangement, this part interlocking with another, the whole somehow greased up into smoothness.

¹⁶⁰ Frambach, 73.

Rather, being members of one another is organic. In a love-driven community of believers, no one should be able to find the seams.¹⁶¹

When churches consider themselves to be, or, more aptly, *allow* themselves to be seamless and organic, then constraints such as time and location become fluid, not set. The meeting ground changes. Availability becomes a norm, not an exception. Expression and intimacy open. After all, Best argues, “We are not created to live in compartments. People belong together. We must own up to this fact about humanity even before we consider the scriptural examples and instructions about Christians meeting together.”¹⁶² Best does more than hint at a reordering here. He suggests that this meeting ground put far more emphasis on meeting than ground, framework, or institutionalism.

Brandon Cox, author and founding pastor of Grace Hills Church in northwest Arkansas, agrees. He considers this conversation theologically when he states, “Since God, by His nature, is infinitely social, it stands to reason that when He began His creative work, He made a race of people that would reflect His relational ability.”¹⁶³ Cox goes even further into the conversation about social media technology and theology when he asserts that “Media has always been social, because the Creator of all things is social.”¹⁶⁴ This natural and wanted socialization aligns with what both Frambach and Best have just mentioned.

When it comes to socialization, Berger posits what Gould longs to hear, that media theorists are reimagining and reconsidering the authenticity of online communities. Berger argues

¹⁶¹ Harold M. Best, *Unceasing Worship: Biblical Perspectives on Worship and the Arts* (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 37.

¹⁶² Best, 62.

¹⁶³ Brandon Cox, *Rewired: How Using Today's Technology Can Bring You Back to Deeper Relationships, Real Conversations, and Powerful Ways to Share God's Love*, 2014, 5, <https://www.overdrive.com/search?q=F26C0DD5-4B0F-4B8F-8F38-968A89F2313B>.

¹⁶⁴ Cox, 3.

that online community formation no longer happens in isolated pockets, but is being understood in the context of broader cultural transformations. She points out that, “Especially in the study of online religious communities, scholars have moved from assorted suspicions and negative responses to increasingly nuanced ways of interpreting the religious social connections that have emerged in cyberspace.”¹⁶⁵ Berger reports that media theorists have a broader understanding of online involvement, and this involvement or development didn’t begin overnight. Instead, a cultural phenomenon slowly grew. The linking of one person to the other didn’t just happen with online chat groups or the first cell phone calls, nor through landline-based telephone calls. Written letters and telegraphs existed prior to cell and landline calls. Even translators of foreign languages have been humanmade inventions and interventions that have enhanced humankind’s ability to not just speak with one another over distances, but to deeply and tangibly connect with each other.¹⁶⁶

Connection is the key. Yes, the example of the four college students at a restaurant booth is all too familiar. Its impact seems painful—or is painful—to those born before this technology became a literal extension of people’s hands. Yet another cultural phenomenon continues to spread across America, which is the inclusion of pets into mainstream society. This new inclusion of ‘man’s best friend’ into our culture indicates a people who are isolated, lonely, or both. Beyond the rise of emotional support dogs, the sight of purse pooches is now a norm, and more and more dogs are seen in retail stores. Over the past ten years, hotels and motels have included pet-friendly rooms. These examples speak both directly and indirectly to our current era of systemic isolationism. Anderson notes this cultural shift, noting, “Due to death, divorce,

¹⁶⁵ Teresa Berger, *@ Worship: Liturgical Practices in Digital Worlds*, Liturgy, Worship and Society Series (London ; New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2018), 36.

¹⁶⁶ Berger, 40–45.

[relocation] or other tragic circumstances, many have no families. Isolation and loneliness are common. Consequently, the church is increasingly composed of individuals rather than families.”¹⁶⁷ This means “community” and how it is engaged today is radically different than it ever was before.

Speaking to church and community, authors Gibbs and Bolger return to the argument to share a report on Joe Boyd, an individual who offers insight into the argument of a radically different time we live in today. A late twentysomething, Boyd describes himself as a typical millennial. Boyd lives the communal aspects of faith as daily, ongoing environment rather than a formalized church gathering once a week. In speaking to perpetual interconnectivity without rigidity, Boyd admits, “Church for me consists of my twelve friends with whom I spend most of my time. Many of our relational committees engage in everyday life together. We operate as an extended organic family... [We] meet often but at no particular time.” Then Boyd lays down what he calls the key to “the whole specific yet loose infrastructure” when he adds, “We are not organized but rather completely decentralized.”¹⁶⁸

This decentralized model Boyd both welcomes and engages may seem less-than-sacred to some (or even most) in the Establishment that I mentioned earlier. After all, there is no formalized teacher or pastor. The weight of this educational role is distributed among this clearly defined congregation, which does not use either the words pastor or congregation. Boyd’s group consists in a fluidity of fellow teachers and care providers, leaders and followers, and sojourners collectively making their way through life with direct and holy attention on God and the Christian’s life response to God, which, if you look at the rubrics of church life as it has

¹⁶⁷ Leith Anderson, *A Church for the 21st Century* (Minneapolis, Minn: Bethany House Publishers, 1992), 35.

¹⁶⁸ Eddie Gibbs and Ryan K. Bolger, *Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Community in Postmodern Cultures* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Academic, 2005), 22.

existed—or tries to exist—and the structured yet non-structured discipleship Boyd and others are an integral part of, then we see very little, if any, difference between the two models. Yes, differences abound on the surface that are polar opposites; there is no sign denoting a pastor’s parking space near a prominent entrance to the church; acolytes don’t have scaled-down versions of ministerial robes; there may not even be candles; tithing in Boyd’s circle certainly doesn’t come about through little white envelopes in collection plates, but the life essence of “church” is lived out in both infrastructures by living into the world with Christian love, grace, justice and peace not idly but through communal activism.

Gibbs and Bolger report on a few others like Boyd. One innovative leader is Dwight Friesen who holds the title of pastor at Quest in Seattle, Washington. Friesen speaks more specifically than Boyd and the inherited role of small groups which his church debunks. He declares, “We deconstructed small groups. Who does ‘this or that’ felt artificial or orchestrated. Now, we hook up with a friend or two intentionally for conversations.”¹⁶⁹ These conversations become what Friesen calls “organic connecting” where “church happens” whenever two or three people gather with intention. Kester Brewin, a church leader of Vaux in London, England, agrees. According to Gibbs and Bolger, Brewin believes “church” is not a particular time or place. Instead, church is the connections that happen when followers come together. The location is never set; instead, God’s followers are where God calls them to be, which is everywhere.

Mark Scandrette from ReIMAGINE! San Francisco, speaks of the church not as church but as a “urban swarm” because to call the gathering his community experiences as a church would formalize their function and deaden the experience. He offers that

There is so much baggage from the idea of church, so I hesitate to call it that. At REIMAGINE!, there is no official gathering, but the community gets together quite often as people who participate in kingdom life together because there is a

¹⁶⁹ Gibbs and Bolger, 103.

strong antipathy toward a program approach to ministry... It didn't make sense to be intentional about spiritual things anymore. For some reason, we just needed to be real and be friends and to let something develop naturally. We share values, not just beliefs. We wanted integrity about how we are living.”¹⁷⁰

Karen Ward from the Church of the Apostles in Seattle, Washington, presents more theology behind this church idea. She sees the church is not about a building or strategies or programs. Instead, church is relationship in, with, and under God as Father, Son, and Spirit. “To be church is to participate in the Trinity/divine life of God. Because God is the source of all relationality, to focus on the church as relational is to be Christian to the core.”¹⁷¹ Ward speaks as though the word ‘church’ is no longer a noun, a building. Ward almost says what I believe, which is that church is a verb. To her and those recently mentioned, church isn't where Christians go; church is what Christians do. Taken further, the word building can mean something far different than the 120-year-old brick and mortar Presbyterian, Methodist, Baptist, or Universalist “building” on the corner of Front Street and Main in Anywhere, USA; “building” can be what Christians do to activate the Kingdom of God on earth.

The input from the individuals just mentioned and those who will soon follow can trigger great alarm for many current churchgoers, yet without new members from age groups other than Baby Boomers and some Gen Xers and traditionally-minded millennials and current teenagers, here's the white elephant in the room: the church, as it is known, is dying. As I continue to consider this, I wonder if the church is actually dying, or, if I can use a completely overused metaphor, is the church like the caterpillar? Maybe the cocoon the church is currently in is just a step in the process of freedom in future flight. The cocoon is completely closed. It has no interaction to the outside world other than the fact that it takes up space in it. Isn't this like many

¹⁷⁰ Gibbs and Bolger, 103.

¹⁷¹ Gibbs and Bolger, 102.

churches today, especially those listed in real estate offices that are for sale? Too many churches today aren't even museums to the past, they are just mammoth coffins.

In contrast to the museum or coffin imagery, Gibbs and Bolger offer that some see church as a rhythm rather than a routine. Spencer Burke, a Christian leader from Newport Beach, California, questions why Christians set aside a particular day for church. "Instead, why don't we ask what we are doing for church this week. How about church as rhythm, not as schedule?"¹⁷²

Anna Dodridge's community in Bournemouth, United Kingdom, stresses that Christianity isn't a once a week event you attend; it's something intentionally lived. She marks this intentionally with accountability, that this lifestyle isn't an activity that fits into the schedule when convenient. It's a commitment, which is a word that has not yet been heard in the conversations I have shared here. Speaking further to commitment and the Christian life, Dodridge says,

We see church as the people and the relationship we have with one another. So we identify with being committed to one another as church, but that extends....to being part of the church of the nation and the world in the long run. It's about being church every day, growing our relationships, supporting one another, helping one another learn, sharing with one another, and being accountable."¹⁷³

Gibbs and Bolger summarize Dodridge. They say that commitment and accountability—not attendance at a particular meeting—mark one's membership in the Christian community.

To conclude this section on Christian community, a reality cannot be ignored. Our neighbor is now anyone in the world who has internet capabilities. Churches today struggle to invite and include the neighbors on the other end of the block, or within the country mile in my proverbial neck of the woods. The actualization of an inner-world digital connection can seem daunting. To walk into God's presence in technology further, a look at what pastors and church

¹⁷² Gibbs and Bolger, 104.

¹⁷³ Gibbs and Bolger, 105.

leaders love, which is worship, will be looked at in the following section. What makes worship “worship”? How do we define a gathering today when family can hold gadgets that are literally mini movie screens? These screens show the physical space of someone they love as if they are so very close. For example, a grandparent in Bad Gottleuba-Berggießhübel, Germany, can watch his grandson being baptized in Grand Forks, Michigan, and later, on that same day, he can connect with his daughter “face to face” about the baptism. While he walks the German streets that night, he has this conversation as his daughter sits in the baby’s nursery with the toddler he can see. Here is my point. Intimate connections such as this can lead to intimate connection with worship, when we understand, or perhaps reconsider, what exactly is worship.

Hold up (that cell phone): worshipping in person meets a new definition
There is a question in this fast-paced, convenient, consumer-driven, pluralistic age of doubt, dismay and skepticism. This question comes at a time of clearly-defined divisions not just in American politics but across the pulpits of American churches today, especially among liberals and conservatives, mainliners and independents, shining mega churches with sprawling campuses and quiet congregations that whisper their faith into this new decade with less than 20 members. This question has no single answer. “What, exactly, *is* worship?”

Theorists and religion professors posit answers to this question with more or less of a universal appeal, at least in the classroom, and seminarians will continue to evaluate, debate, and write on this topic just as seminarians in the past have done, but what is taught, written about, and discussed about “worship” in the institution doesn’t necessarily mean the institution of religion is actually doing it. Worship is, after all, a preference, isn’t it?

To a discussion on worship, Dawn offers a starting point by drawing a distinction between the secular life and the sacred life. “Worship,” she proposes, “must convince us that we

gain there what cannot be found anywhere else.”¹⁷⁴ Dawn continues, speaking in generalities that she argues unite us. Without noting what this specifically looks, or, perhaps more importantly, feels like, she suggests

Worship will teach us that we are desperate sinners, enfold us in gracious forgiveness, and empower us to go back into the world changed, eager to share God’s transforming power with our neighbors and ready to do all we can to build justice and peace in the world.¹⁷⁵

Her thoughts here are beautiful, even motivational. Both gentleness and direction rest in the words she paints of what worship is. To this pastor who has spent 11 years at a single pulpit among hardworking, generous people of faith, who have seen the cost and the joys of letting go of some worship practices while tenaciously hanging on to others, Dawn’s words are, in fact, directional and inspirational. A church member hearing these words will find comfort, and even strength. If transforming power with our neighbors and building justice and peace in the world is worship, or is the outcome of worship, which is another argument in and of itself, then Dawn is successful here (if success is a word to be used). She is not practical, however. The world does not offer what we gain in worship and through worship, yes, but, different from the root of practical theology, which I define as the academic examination of religious practices in order to understand and apply theological theory to theological practices so that the practices themselves can more fully align, change, or improve the course of religion, I argue something different. I suggest that the world itself is as worshipful as this separate, sacred world that Dawn would like to keep distinct, perhaps even unblemished. Rather than pull away from the world to pray on the poverty or depravity in the world in some “sacred” space, I want to see worship *in* the world *with* poverty and depravity. How many preachers too focused on their God-given message don’t

¹⁷⁴ Marva J. Dawn, *Reaching out without Dumbing down: A Theology of Worship for the Turn-of-the-Century Culture* (Grand Rapids, Mich: W.B. Eerdmans, 1995), 289.

¹⁷⁵ Dawn, 289.

pause in their polished exegesis to say, “God Bless you” after someone very audibly sneezes? That’s a very small point to this larger one. How many fire, police and ambulance sirens are ignored during worship in urban areas? A four-alarm fire four doors down from a church meeting for its 11 AM Sunday worship would certainly disrupt worship, and it should. Academia can be known as the ivory tower, and Chris Schmidt, one of my Boston University School of Theology professors, was prone to use this two-word imagery in my seminary days. These days, I see what shouldn’t be seen, which is that “church” is this ivory tower—or, more specifically, it is at least an ivory house that, even with a house number, is not a part of the neighborhood.

Now I speak from one of my beloved Lancaster Theological Seminary professors, Lawrence Peers, when, with him, I agree that this separation is not right. In fact, it’s the fall of religion in the world today. Too many pastors want to hide at, or, more specifically, hide behind the pulpit because it still represents a place of power, at least for them. Perhaps a love of “worship” is the cause of this, too. “Robing up” is, for example, one of many physical ways of moving from the grime of the world to the glory of God above the world.

Then I think of robing up, I recall a painful Lenten experience that happened seven years ago. In the basement of a small church, we pastors, who were a part of an ecumenical Lenten service series, dressed in our long garment finery and enjoyed what pastors who get together enjoy doing—grumbling about our congregations and workloads. We were human in those moments, secular. We were guys being guys, yet we were robing to somehow be less of a person and more of a distinct agent of God, which may be one of the greatest oxymorons there is.

There were six of us, all men. We had to leave the basement of the church through an outside door. We made our way around a fieldstone sidewalk to make our big parade of champions down the center church aisle to indicate that Worship Had Started.

An elementary school playground turned community park sat just behind the church property. There was a prominent basketball court and, on it, about ten kids were playing an informal game. Easily overheard, they were just shooting hoops as they enjoyed the spirit and the fun of their small group. The line of ministers never spoke to them. I don't even know if any other pastor actually paused to see that they were there, and, if they did, did it matter?

My heart still pulls at the mistake I made. It crushes me to this day because I didn't break from the line and walk over and talk with, or, more importantly, play with, those kids. In doing so, we would have experienced the joy of Christian fellowship just as much as those in the sanctuary. It's easy to imagine the attendance on a Wednesday night ecumenical Lenten service in rural, northeastern Pennsylvania. There weren't ten kids in church that night. Making church sacred is not an option. "Church" was there on that basketball court—or it could have been.

Cox is one who supports my argument. He states, "While God is calling us to express our praise and our worship for *all* [emphasis mine] to hear and to speak the name of Jesus in every corner of the earth, our silence is direct disobedience to His command."¹⁷⁶ Our avoidance is in direct obedience, too.

Harper and Metzger agree. They assert that worship is not meant to be a corporate collection of individuals who face the same direction with closed eyes, missing out—or closing out—on the world as if the only persons in the room were the individuals around them and God. The two say that, in worship, we speak to one another as well as to God.¹⁷⁷

The duo takes this further. They remember Peter advocating that the church is the fulfillment of God's ancient desire for his people to be royal priesthood. For pastors and modern

¹⁷⁶ Cox, *Rewired*, 17.

¹⁷⁷ Brad Harper and Paul Louis Metzger, *Exploring Ecclesiology: An Evangelical and Ecumenical Introduction* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Brazos Press, 2009), 95.

worship leaders, this means that the pastor is not a priest any more than the other members of the church are. This loosely or specifically designated church leader does not represent God to the congregation or the congregation before God; rather, the leader or leaders within the congregation represent Christ to one another.¹⁷⁸ Leadership is shared. Collective knowledge is raised. Experiences beyond the traditional pastor's repertoire are shared, added to and valued. What happens then, if I can extend the well-known saying of a village raising a child is the village raises the village. One outcome of this model has already been discussed, which is that the world is no longer outside the house of worship; the world (and its people) are within worship.

On the subject of worship 'housed' in the community, Frambach backs me here. He says,

Worship in ...church communities [should] seek an authentic experience of God within the community. There is a reciprocal relationship between these two realities—worship and community life. In other words, the community—not just a select few—produces worship, and this process of communal worship production creates broad-based ownership and investment and generates community.... Community is understood on both a "macro" level, a corporate expression such as the worship gathering, and a "micro" level, as evidenced in the rise of and return to the house church approach.¹⁷⁹

White disagrees with this thinking. She returns to Dawn's argument that church is a set apart time and space. According to Dawn, Christian worship approximates the Kingdom on earth, and worship is prior to action. White notes that, "When we enter into Christian worship, we enter into a different dimension of time and space, a cosmic dimension, where we can gradually attune ourselves with the ceaseless praises of the heavenly hosts.... We step into heavenly geography."¹⁸⁰ I am not so sure "heavenly geography" is so distinct, however. To think

¹⁷⁸ Harper and Metzger, 95.

¹⁷⁹ Frambach, *Emerging Ministry*, 69.

¹⁸⁰ Susan J. White and Susan J. White, *Foundations of Christian Worship*, 1st U.S. ed., [American ed.] (Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 3.

that in one place we are in a heavenly place whereas in another we are far, far closer to hell creates for me a weak argument. Sure, much like Eden, we can all conjure images of a sun-streamed forest on a perfect weather afternoon. A gentle breeze lifts both plush foliage and our appreciative spirits. No bugs divebomb. No ants raid the nearby picnic area. Similarly, we can also conjure places of hell on earth. Addresses where sin and despair take a permanent home don't have to be imagined; they can be easily found. What separates these two places, and, in fact, should these places be separated? Or do bugs actually divebomb, ants raid, and scenic, tranquil vacation sites become tragic with a single shotgun and an angry soul seeking revenge at the wrong time in the wrong place? And this "other side of the tracks" address isn't all hell, not when love can prevail in small yet sure spaces. I have set just simple brush strokes on what can happen in heavenly or hellish places. Imaginations can go much further, yet to think that something is sacred and something is not is preposterous. To think that these two places can actually be separated creates for me a poor theology of what Jesus actually accomplished, which was eternal life and love in all places not some places.

I get the need for seclusion, peace of mind, rest, and regeneration. I get that spirituality, in its purist form, helps us achieve this euphoric, even angelic place and space, but when we, the church, pull away from the world (or certain parts of the world), where does it leave the world? I get—and even practice as a pastor—that we can cry out in prayer from the prettiest pulpits in chancels that rival the golden streets of heaven about the horrors of war, the ravages of abuse, and the injustices of the marginalized, and we who follow Jesus are certainly called back into the world to serve it, but why are we apart from it? Preaching about serving the poor is a hollow act when compared to serving the poor not in theory but in every day, face to face response and care. Yes, today's pastors and church leaders need to speak from cities on hills and be "Go tell it from

the mountain” cheerleaders. Voices that cry out from the wilderness and call out to celebrate God among us are as necessary now as they have always been (and will continue to be), but I argue that *where* these voices are heard needs to change. To say that this heavenly geography is untainted means that sin has a boundary, and it does not. To say that hell is in the bowels of the darkest street corners only ignores the corruption in these holy places. White and others want to gather in, lift, distinguish and separate. My point is clear. The sacred and the secular are not two independent places, but one intertwined place. The more we all acknowledge this, the more this geography has the realistic opportunity to reach the very world the internet reaches all the time.

Best understands. He advocates *completely inclusive* worship, regardless of any kind of spiritual or physical location. Best argues that worship consists among people who are ready for or already at “worship” itself which proposes that worship does not have an on/off switch, or specific GPS coordinates. Best suggests that what I now call “everywhere worship” is seamless, or, to use the examples just shared, in both the serene woods and in the sin-riddled recesses of America’s darkest corners (and all places in between). Best points out that we, pastors and church leaders, must come to this mutual, non-exclusive, heaven to hell (and hell to heaven) meeting ground because

... this is where the pure things of the Spirit mingle with the unevenness and impermanence of temporality. Here is where the things of sight and sense are ably guided in Spirit and truth, in faith, hope, and love. Here is where believers in any spiritual state are anointed together with singular Truth, are made one yet simultaneously are addressed [upheld and cherished] as individuals.¹⁸¹

White, who was just mentioned with the phrase “heavenly geography”, sees the value in my “everywhere worship” argument. She even understands Best when she says, “If we enter into worship fully, desiring only to praise God with all our heart and mind

¹⁸¹ Best, *Unceasing Worship*, 60.

and strength, then we will understand that time and space are not for us to use, selfishly and wantonly, but for God to use for the good of the world.”¹⁸² The key word White raises here is ‘if.’ *If* we enter into worship fully, that is, if we truly find, receive and share the sacred, then we can worship anywhere—even online through dynamic websites. This freedom from place has powerful and liberating ramifications. If we enter worship fully, or as we enter worship fully, then *where* we worship has little or no consequence. Rather, an emphasis then shifts to whom we worship.

Anderson takes this further. He speaks to building authentic community among worshippers when the word ‘worshippers’ may not even be a word used in secular environments. In drawing people from where they are to God, he asserts that

In an increasingly secular culture, we must be able to lead seekers to an authentic encounter with God, or they will look somewhere else. The old paradigm taught that if you have the right teaching, you will experience God. The new paradigm says that if you experience God, you will have the right teaching.¹⁸³

In this new paradigm of relationships and experiences taking precedence over location, Kapp defines worship as a community. To her, community is identified as community when those gathered are reminded of our need for each other and our need for our God, who meets not just individual but collective needs. In this public array, which is this space of both heaven and earth, those gathered are reminded again and again to be a bigger, broader, more generous presence than in current practice and place. To this, she adds that worshippers do not have the final say on who is—and is not—welcome since God welcomes all, regardless of appearance,

¹⁸² White and White, *Foundations of Christian Worship*, 6.

¹⁸³ E. Byron Anderson, ed., *Worship Matters: A United Methodist Guide to Ways to Worship* (Nashville, Tenn: Discipleship Resources, 1999), 20–21.

status, age, need, capacities or location.¹⁸⁴ Kapp also touches on the soul of resistance to everywhere worship when she adds, “In a variety of ways, as worship unfolds [and here she can mean as worship continues to unfold or evolve in God’s presence], worshipers confront the sometimes uncomfortable truth that God is building a community that brings people together who would rather stay apart.”¹⁸⁵

Kapp is right. Sometimes worshippers do confront the uncomfortable truth that God brings together those who would rather stay apart. But God is God, and the worship of the “I am” does amazing, miraculous things, like bring together the wolf and the lamb, and the leopard and the baby goat (Isaiah 12:6). The bold proposal of letting God be God does center on God and others with us in the company of God, no matter where that company is, or who that company is. In other words, while we may opt to worship apart from others (and I think again of the Establishment), when we do worship God, no distance is too great. We simply cannot stay apart.

From the inside out: the Church in trouble

No distance is too great. However, when we recall the Apostle Peter, we recall this disciple of our Lord Jesus Christ had difficulties accepting Gentile Christians (Galatians 2:11-21). This painful truth says that from some of its earliest days, the church, from the inside out, has had trouble accepting, melding, and moving forward. Even though we Christians know our troubling and problematic history, we somehow conveniently forget that historically we choose to divide what God has joined—and continues to join—together. Harper and Metzger remind us that

¹⁸⁴ Deborah J. Kapp, *Worship Frames: How We Shape and Interpret Our Experience of God*, Vital Worship, Healthy Congregations (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2008), 60.

¹⁸⁵ Kapp, 59.

As God's children, we are brothers and sisters of Christ and one another. Just as there is no division between God and us and Christ and us, there is to be no division between brothers and sisters as members of God's household. For we are God's family. This claim has a profound bearing on the church's approach to matters of ethnic, economic, and ecumenical diversity and divisions..."¹⁸⁶

This profound bearing on the church's approach to overcome diversity and divisions is always in need of attention and focus, according to Lazarus who sees and pangs and pains of church life and death that happen too frequently. He addresses the pulls and the problems directly when he says

Unfortunately, today we as the church have started operating as individual islands and segregated groups. We have created, invented and established many divisions, organizations, denominations, rules, orders, methods, regulations, structures and procedures that make it a serious challenge to stay connected as one body.¹⁸⁷

Lazarus suggests we churchgoing Christians redefine what it means to be one body—or stop being one body altogether, at least when it comes to maintaining a single church membership or address. This suggestion makes sense when he reminds us that the early church leaders did not consider any congregation their own. While this proved to be a challenge for the Apostle Peter, our challenges are worth engaging with great intention. To this end, Lazarus adds a unique caveat: social media technology enables us to return to that open model where people have the freedom to enjoy the gifts of various members of the Body of Christ not in one set location but universally.¹⁸⁸ After all, the Christian message is based on words. In the days before the term 'Christian' became popular, those who followed the teachings of Christ were known as the word people or people of the word. This still resonates with Christians today, or it should. All

¹⁸⁶ Harper and Metzger, *Exploring Ecclesiology*, 26.

¹⁸⁷ Natchi Lazarus, Mark W Schaefer, and Sam P Chelladurai, *The Connected Church: A Social Media Communication Strategy Guide for Churches, Nonprofits and Individuals in Ministry* (Miejsce nieznanne: Natchi Muthu Lazarus, 2017), 79.

¹⁸⁸ Lazarus, Schaefer, and Chelladurai, 52.

that we do as Christians both inside and around the church centers on the word of God. This has particular meaning because our Lord himself is ‘word made flesh.’¹⁸⁹

Speaking to how, when, and where words are used, Lazarus continues. Much like Jesus who used words in his storytelling and prophetic teaching, Lazarus reminds us that social media is also all about words. Consider how most Americans search for anything these days. We engage Google or Facebook which requires us to use a set or sets of words. Websites and social media content are intrinsically filled with sets of words. The blogs we write, the posts we share, the videos we make and the images we design are all based on words.¹⁹⁰

Anthony Cook is the Executive Directed of United States Ministries for Lutheran Hour Ministries, which is a Christian Outreach Ministry that, according to its website <https://www.lhm.org/>, spreads the Good News of Jesus Christ to over 50 countries through ministry centers on six continents using words—godly words—through its online network. Well beyond a church’s physical location and set meeting times, Cook asserts that when we inside and outside Christians are exposed to the salvation narrative continually through websites, blogs and other internet-based communications than that narrative becomes our own over time. He adds that the story of sharing salvation over time

...shapes our identity, values and ultimately [our] behaviors, giving us a new way to see ourselves and the world around us. This change in identity and perspective is further strengthened and solidified as we give voice to that narrative. In the end, the more we share our faith, the more we understand who we are and the more confident and eager we become as Christians.¹⁹¹

Charged by statements like Cook’s, Duffert believes that those embedded in the institution of church fail to respond to a world in flux in a way that the world finds

¹⁸⁹ Lazarus, Schaefer, and Chelladurai, 61.

¹⁹⁰ Lazarus, Schaefer, and Chelladurai, 61–62.

¹⁹¹ Barna and Barna Group, *Churchless*, 27.

acceptable. Said simply, we (the church) aren't using the right words. Duffert says our messages from the church remain as they have always been, which is steeped in gospel revelation, but laments that we Christians are using archaic methodologies to convey the revelation. We have developed behaviors resulting in problems of both form and function, which Duffert explains. The problem of form is that our behavior alienates us from the world we are commissioned to reach. The problem of function is that we cannot develop or deploy an adequate response when our individual worlds continue to drift apart. He says, "Those of us who live in the insular world of the traditional church may think [our forms and functions] is working but the facts say otherwise."¹⁹²

Duffert continues to define the problem which he sees as being one of motion. He states

The problem became a problem for us by the church becoming distant from the world around it. We didn't deliberately move away from the world. The world moved deliberately away from us. No matter. We are distance because we have denied the reality of that change. Even though our message has remained the same—and it should—our lack of effectiveness is an indictment... It is egocentric in the extreme to expect the world to overlook our inconsistencies when we refuse to overlook theirs.¹⁹³

Duffert continues, arguing what cannot be denied, that our American culture has transitioned away from an agrarian-based economic system with its center being the small town and the local church. Additionally, Duffert notes that, as a society continually moving from the modernism era, we who are plugged into technological gadgetry today have largely rejected the concept of ultimate truth and the behaviors this singular truth once welcomed and aligned. I have spoken to postmodernism in previous chapters. Here I add that, as a result of multiple ways to

¹⁹² Duffert, Charles, *Lean Ministry: Implementing Change in the 21st Century* (St. Charles, IL: ChurchSmart Resources, 2011), 32.

¹⁹³ Duffert, Charles, 33.

receive information (and I raise the example of conservative or liberally-based television networks jockeying for attention and a greater share of the market), each generation today continually sees the church, which often represents itself as a single, isolated source though it may be denominationally affiliated, as something dangerous. The word dangerous is Duffert's who adds that this perceived danger which is essentially this little mom and pop church on the corner of Main and Everywhere USA, threatens our individuality and freedom of choice.¹⁹⁴

Anderson takes a different tact to this argument yet arrives at a similar conclusion. He says, "We know that the church has survived and flourished for almost 2,000 years, but we know it looks a lot different than it did in A.D. 33."¹⁹⁵ Anderson's admission literally and metaphorically opens the door to more conversation about where and how the seemingly innocuous now threatening church has been so that, in recognizing its patterns, responses, behaviors, and what I call generational hurdles, can actually keep that door open, the lights on, and the message of Christ alive in an ever-changing world.

Like Anderson, Sine also sees the church responding differently to this ever-changing world. Sine speaks to a church of 35 members who bought several homes in a row in a financially stressed part of San Francisco. The goal of this church is to live and breathe into the community not intermittently, like a once a week church experience, but to actually live among the community 24/7/365. This model of church is not unlike what has been proposed here in my work in that "church" is continually assessible and ongoing. Sine suggests physical spaces, the San Francisco homes themselves, but I raise that there is, undoubtedly, the symbiotic concept of both church and home completely interwoven here. Sine suggests what I agree with, which is planting some new "churches" that are less

¹⁹⁴ Duffert, Charles, 35.

¹⁹⁵ Anderson, *Worship Matters*, 22.

buildings in which we worship once a week and developing more new human settlements in which we live seven days a week and in which we also happen to worship.¹⁹⁶ To me, these “settlements” are website-based churches that extend into the community flawlessly, simply and easily.

To get to the heart of my work, I wonder why settlements actually settle when we have the ability to roam and connect wherever we have the technology to do so. I agree with Sine who believes, “The church at its best is called to be a new community centered in the worship of the living God, offering a glimpse of the character of the great homecoming of God, and sharing life and resources as would a large extended family.”¹⁹⁷ But what does the word new mean? Sharing life and resources as a large extended family is not new to the church; in fact, this is the very DNA of the church through the millennia; but sharing life and resources through the internet not once a week but throughout the week is new to the church making church not a place you go to but the place in which you, the online participant, interact with seamlessly, as if all the homes that comprise the church are not just in a row but in a loop of ongoing connection.

Best aligns with this. He doesn’t see the church as a place, but as a people. He says, “For each person is the church, and it is the church that is to be at worship, individual to individual.”¹⁹⁸

“We do not go to church to worship,” Best continues. “But as continuing worshipers, we gather ourselves together to continue our worship...in the company of brothers and sisters.”¹⁹⁹ Today, this company doesn’t need to just go home after a Sunday worship where only some in

¹⁹⁶ Tom Sine, *Mustard Seed vs. McWorld: Reinventing Life and Faith for the Future* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Books, 1999), 206.

¹⁹⁷ Sine, 205.

¹⁹⁸ Best, *Unceasing Worship*, 60.

¹⁹⁹ Best, 47.

the congregation return throughout the week or month for a committee meeting or church function as has been the case in congregation I serve; rather, there can be a continuous flow, an outpouring of faith and deeply connected, spiritually-based relationships that don't stop at a church door or a church parking lot following a church service that notably bonds and embraces its participants one to the other. Social media technology today enables the participation of godly exchanges between brothers and sisters to happen whenever the Spirit of God moves among His people, which, if we experience the Spirit even remotely, means bonds and embraces are unceasing. The ongoing company of brothers and sisters is not a hardship, stretch, stress or strain. Bringing light to darkness and hope to despair, this ongoing company is a blessing of immense proportions.

Kurt Buchholz, a contributor in the book titled, *Spiritual Conversations in a Digital Age*, naturally takes this company further. He believes that “if we can learn how to plant the gospel seed effectively in our new digital world, we may not be so far from celebrating our own influx of new Christian brothers and sisters on a Sunday morning.”²⁰⁰

Roxanne Stone, another contributor in the book *Spiritual Conversations in a Digital Age*, reports that spiritual conversations like those Best mentions about brothers and sisters in company with one another is a beautiful sentiment and perfect goal and, according to scripture, we are to lift one another up (1 Thessalonians 5:11, Jude 1:20, Ephesians 4:12), but, in reality today, this does not happen—at least without social media technology. Her data may be surprising to hear, but she has learned that, “Three-quarters of self-identified U.S. Christians

²⁰⁰ Barna Group and Lutheran Hour Ministries, *Spiritual Conversations in the Digital Age: How Christians' Approach to Sharing Their Faith Has Changed in 25 Years*, 2018, 6.

are...having fewer than 10 spiritual conversations a year. In other words, for most Christians in the U.S., topics of faith come up *less than once a month*.”²⁰¹

Frambach is one who finds this not only surprising but also disheartening. Having experienced the church services where the participants do experience a bonding, emotional and spiritual connection to one another as brothers and sisters, Frambach shares what should seem obvious. “Because we are created in the image of God, our destiny is communal; we are created for life together... Churches, too, are called to be open to the other, to the world around them, and ultimately to God.”²⁰²

Best’s metaphor of brothers and sisters is favorable to Frambach; he certainly understands and sees its worth and potential; but he also keenly notes where this family imagery can become problematic by stating that “church families” live an egocentric/exocentric tension. By this he warns that

[t]he family metaphor is an appealing siren song that can lull a congregation into valuing privacy and intimacy above all else. When this happens, it is tempting for church people to turn in on ourselves and become a private enclave, rather than a public meeting place where there is great passion and compassion for the outsider, the stranger, the marginalized, and the newcomer.²⁰³

Frambach continues with what may appear to be a metaphor with limits. He speaks to the family of God language and metaphor in “Whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother” (Matt.12:50; cf. Luke 8:19-21; Mark 3:31-34) by sharing that, while he certainly sees the advantages of the metaphor opening and increasing our imaginations about what it means to be the church, he also believes that applying this metaphor potentially diminishes our imagination about what it means move and live beyond this confining social

²⁰¹ Barna Group and Lutheran Hour Ministries, 7.

²⁰² Frambach, *Emerging Ministry*, 28.

²⁰³ Frambach, 28–29.

infrastructure. He states, “I am amazed at how prevalent it has become to refer to a congregation as “our church family.” We have allowed this metaphor of family to sneak in and settle into the way we understand what it means to be church.”²⁰⁴

Perhaps the answer to the familial metaphor rests with Frambach. He shares the authenticity of worship and church community truly should seek an authentic experience of God within the community, not the family per se. I agree with Frambach who points out that there is a reciprocal relationship between the two realities of worship and community life. Here he means that the community—not just a select few—produce worship, and this process of communal worship production creates broad-base ownership and investment and generates community. Frambach says that when this community worship happens then the community is understood on both a “macro” level, a corporate expression such as the worship gathering, and a “micro” level, which to me means that interconnections happen not only generally but also on the individual, one-on-one level.²⁰⁵

I appreciate Frambach who brings the words church and community (particularly a secular community) together. Should the church and the community be distinct? Are they two entities, or can they finally be one? After all, the church is—or can be—in the community, and church participants live in the community. Why must one stop and another start? The greater question here is when will the phrase “go to church” stop? When we pull ourselves from community to enter church, then church and community remain at odds. The distance remains great when the distance doesn’t have to exist at all.

²⁰⁴ Frambach, 26–27.

²⁰⁵ Frambach, 69.

Ideological pluralism isn't included here, it's true. The whole community I speak of isn't Christian, but Christianity can and should continue to embrace the whole community with love, patience, understanding and grace.

I welcome and want a space where people can literally pastor others, generate content, share musings, and support one another in triumphs and in tragedies. Let there be a continuous world of community *and* church where all can pose questions and consider answers from others. Let's long for the day when more can experience "church" as they sit in their living rooms, bottle-feed the baby in the kitchen, recline at the beach, along the riverbank or while waiting for the hearse to lead the way to the cemetery. If our consumer-driven news stations now show footage from pedestrians or observers using their cell phones to record usable news footage, then the time has come to foster and encourage intentional space for God moments, blinks, hiccups, hang-ups and hurts. It's time for the church to be more than the church. It's time for the church to be the community.

Letting tech teach: what social media technology can do for both worship and church life
Brandon Cox speaks directly to tomorrow by mentioning a yesterday that Christians know too well—the Garden of Eden. What he adds to this familiar and familial narrative, however, is a theological insight that significantly closes the gap between those for and those against social media technology entering the church today. Cox argues that

The Garden of Eden was the very first social-networking arena, and the family God started creating that day was the very first social network. It was God's idea for information to be spread friend to friend. It was God who placed into humankind all of God's creative ingenuity, and it is by putting our creativity to use that we reflect the image of our Creator.²⁰⁶

²⁰⁶ Cox, *Rewired*, 6.

Images of our Creator being digitalized excites and infuses some. Equally, it sends others into a generational rift where statements such as “I guess this tech stuff is for younger people”, “I don’t want to be bothered by what I don’t know about,” and “This may be fine for some if it gets them to Christ, but as for me, I like church the way it was. A digital Jesus, in honesty, is not only unfathomable but also—to be honest—a bit frightening.”

What may be more frightening is if leaders like Cox, who are invested in religious technology, fail to continue to pursue the creativity that has been gifted to us so that humanity can continue to do what it has done, which is reflect the image of the Creator. Slowing down or all out stopping the advancement of this digitally-infused religious era is unfathomable to the contributors of this work who see—and want to continue to see—God at work in this unfolding digital design of Christ-centered worship via the internet.

New technology is never easy to embrace. History helps us see this clearly. Recall the days of horses and carriages in our American history when horseless carriages first arrived on the scene. Our primitive motor vehicles did not grace our newspapers or history books with instant and understandable success as much as these noisy, somewhat silly contraptions baffled or slightly amused onlookers who failed to see how clumsy, gas-powered engines could possibly enhance life. The same is true for the early years of aviation. “If God wanted us to fly,” someone surely said, “then He’d have given us wings.”

When considering vehicles and aircrafts today in light of what I just shared, the creativity of God in and through digital technology should be received not rejected. Digital technology should also be continually studied, especially as it relates to each generation. An example Gould brings to consideration is privacy which she argues is such a cherished that it has been written into the United States Constitution. Gould shares that Baby Boomers in particular expect their

personal lives to be free from intrusion and protected from public view and scrutiny. Speaking from her research, Gould shares that this generation expects to control what others know about them by deciding what to share as well as when, how, and with whom to share it.

Gould finds the rub here, stating that, at this point in history, these expectations are unrealistic. Thanks to younger generations, or as a consequence to younger generations, privacy has become completely transformed, which is to say it has become nearly devoid of meaning. Many GenXers, Millennials, and certainly GenZers, she argues, ignore long-recognized boundaries between public and private, often dismissing them as absurd and obstructionistic. Consider what is posted today. Many open up about things that make older generations cringe.”²⁰⁷

Berger agrees. She points out that, much like the increased abilities of vehicles and air travel each year, devices that allow scent to become a part of digital communication are beginning to be mass-produced. Additionally, wearable technology for mixing digital imagery and offline reality is reading for the mainstream. In short, human bodies are increasingly interfacing with a vast array of digital devices.²⁰⁸ As this interfacing becomes more and more prominent, the church continues to have two choices: one is to stay put, the other is to engage.

Lazarus confirms that internet connectivity is part of who we are today. He points out that from the moment many Americans wake up in the morning to the time we go to bed at night, our activities are centered around connectivity. He says we Americans, and this includes churchgoers, don’t just use our mobile devices to check email and make calls; we use our devices in almost all areas of our lives including bank transactions, shopping, catching up with friends and documenting important and not-so-important moments in our lives. These activities

²⁰⁷ *Meredith Gould: Social Media Is a Tool for Evangelism*, 126.

²⁰⁸ Berger, *@ Worship*, 19.

are done more and more through easily accessible and reliable technology. This accessible technology is also changing how we learn. Lazarus points out that with a few simple swipes from a handheld screen, people are investing hours and hours into the subjects and topics that interest them.²⁰⁹ Research is part of our lifestyle, and the church needs to not only know this, but join this.

Seeing how pastors and church leaders are catching the potential digital technology has to offer both the church and the unchurched in what he calls the connected audience, Lazarus shares a caution.

Even though [tech engaged Americans] are a wonderful audience to have, you [pastors and church leaders] cannot have them all to yourself. With this connected audience, your view of ministry or church membership needs to change. The connected like their freedom. They are free-spirited and interested in exploring multiple ministries, not because they are disloyal to you but because of their thirst for knowledge. They might be loyal and dedicated to your ministry, but that will not stop them from connecting to another ministry for some other purposes.”²¹⁰

Gould addresses what may seem to be disloyalty. Giving advice to pastors and church leaders who are considering expanding their social media platforms to include interactive websites among other technologies such as Instagram and Twitter, Gould encourages those who want to use social technology to reach people by getting back to basics. She encourages pastors and church leaders to develop the habit of consciously thinking about social media with a basic theological framework in order to build the church and deepen faith. She offers grounding advice. “Simply put, [pastors and church leaders today] need to know what they believe about God, as well as what they believe about God’s ongoing, eternal conversation with us.”²¹¹

²⁰⁹ Lazarus, Schaefer, and Chelladurai, *The Connected Church*, 44–49.

²¹⁰ Lazarus, Schaefer, and Chelladurai, 51.

²¹¹ *Meredith Gould: Social Media Is a Tool for Evangelism*, 8.

A thirst for knowledge coupled with an easy, accessible way of gaining theological insights from more than one online source became the norm for most Americans a few years ago. Where pastors and church leaders engage conversations about our three-in-one God has changed—and should change—as a result of the internet which will not be welcome by all at this time. However, at no other point in the history of humankind has the scripture “Go and make disciples of all the nations...” held more potential. History tells us that the twelve disciples could cover only certain geographic areas in their limited lifetimes. What appeals to the gospel being spread and shared today is the knowledge that Jesus was not making this evangelistic statement only to a group of disciples who were standing in front of him; he knew those twelve could only reach certain geographies. This truth both convicts and sets us free: Jesus also made that statement to the church today and the group of believers who would come later. Let’s let tech teach us. When we consider what the internet can do, the phrase “reaching the nations” sounds far less daunting now than it did 100 years ago.

Conclusion: can an onsite and online Christian community become one?

In 1 Corinthians chapter one, Paul speaks plainly to division saying that it shouldn’t exist. His message was and is necessary because division has and will continue to exist. We who follow Christ experience great challenges when it comes to being of one mind and body. One of the challenges is where we worship. “Who” we worship is hopefully obvious, but where we worship poses some interesting and ongoing conversations. In addition to who is around us when we praise and worship God, a more pressing question today is where are those who are worshipping with us? For example, when we Christians have considered World Wide Communion Sunday in the past, we conceptionally understand Jesus’ table is around the world and all those in the world has access to it. Enter the internet. Now this significant event has

literally changed. We can see—and interact with—the whole world at this one table. The theology of this one table has not changed. The global understanding of it has, however. Some Christians are charged by this. The thrill of a worldwide communion is exciting! Others choose not be bothered by a worldwide Christian opportunity even though they know the church today is not the church they remember from their youth. When it comes to increasing numbers in the church through social media technology, it is not surprising to hear a tactful curmudgeon weighing in with this thought: “Well, as long as we get ‘em, it doesn’t really matter.”

Actually, it does matter. How we “get ‘em” matters more now more than ever before because the interpersonal capabilities and responsibilities of sharing the Gospel of Jesus Christ has never been more present to us. Instantly, we can tell our faith stories not just to one person, but to throngs of people, especially when our message is copied and shared. The days of “the pastor doing it” have officially ended, and, as you recall the person who friended me on Facebook wanting build her faith without a church building anywhere near her, this may be a reason why there is resistance to individualized proselytizing and the internet. The onus of the Gospel doesn’t rest on clergy alone, not that it ever has, but now each day each of us who use social media are given endless opportunities to share who, where, how, when and why Christ is our Savior, and this is daunting to many of us. Rather than admit this is daunting, it is easier to reject how technology in our hands can benefit the Kingdom of God here on earth.

Another resistance to an onsite and online community forming one community is simply that this construct is relatively new. Nothing can replace live, face to face interactions in worship. Social media technology simply adds to the interactions. According to Anna Neumaier, who contributed the journal article entitled *Christian Online Communities: Insights for Qualitative and Quantitative Data*, “Most online faith communities do not exist online alone,

and, as studies have shown, the vast majority of worshippers do not leave brick-and-mortar churches behind for online sanctuaries but rather are active in more than one realm.”²¹² With this being said, an online presence doesn’t take away from an onsite presence, it merely adds to it.

Since an online presence enhances an onsite community, why are there difficulties? This depends on who you ask, but change is never easy for anyone. Lazarus sees the tension not only from the existing congregations themselves as I have expressed here, but also from pastors and church leaders who do not like when people split their time between worship experiences—let alone join worship from an off-site location such as a living room, nursing home, hiking trail, or vacation destination. Many pastors, according to Lazarus, want their congregations to stay put. “Staying put” means maintaining an ongoing, one church only experience. Lazarus reveals that

Many church leaders and ministers are frustrated when members of their congregations go to a different church even for one week. [However,] with technology and the internet, there is no way to stop someone from being part of any church and any denomination. In a way, I think it is something good and a much-needed transformation in the body of Christ. It truly makes us ONE BODY in Christ. We cannot operate on our own little islands anymore. Gone are the days when people grew up as a member of one church or denomination and continued to be that all their life. There is nothing wrong with that, but it is bigger joy to celebrate the differences that exist in different ministries and churches.²¹³

Lazarus and others report here the gain to many experiences of worship in many different ways from many different locations. Both frustrated and liberated, Lazarus admits what holds true for me, that it is time to stop worshipping a golden cow of yesteryear, a church where all gather once a week at one set time only. While social media technology and interactive websites should make each of us a bit uncomfortable because, if I may borrow a story from Jesus and his disciples, we’ve been fishing all night long, are tired, and are uncertain about casting our nets in a new direction the following morning. Jesus making

²¹² Anna Neumaier, “Christian Online Communities: Insights from Qualitative and Quantitative Data” 14 (2019): 22.

²¹³ Lazarus, Schaefer, and Chelladurai, *The Connected Church*, 52.

people uncomfortable or uncertain is really for *other people*, we think, not for us. After all, we've been fishing for people for generations. When what has worked in the past can certainly work again (at least somewhat), then to seriously consider social media technology and interactive websites as a viable means to build Christian faith among all is as outlandish as having well-seasoned disciples drop their nets where there are likely no fish. In the five stages of grief, which certainly applies here, I see the denial about the loss in traditional church attendance today prohibits too many from listening to Jesus and fishing in a new way, at a new time, and in a new direction.

Let me speak to a new direction for a moment. From its conceptualization to this final chapter here, this major project has now stretched over a year. There have been times over the past months when I questioned if what I am researching is cutting edge. I wonder, is what I'm doing here new? Does this work add to the argument, or is it simply summarizing what is already happening? I agree with Gould and others who say that this research is never done; therefore, this work is significant in that it opens the argument about what the internet has done to our world, and, specifically, to our churches which either join the online community or die in isolation. What I just shared may sound like an either/or statement: the church must become a presence online or die, but I argue that the church needs to *be* both online and onsite. Most churches have a website, but these websites are underachieving what is possible for the Kingdom of God on earth.

I began this chapter with a scriptural conundrum. Ecclesiastes 1:9 states, "There is nothing new under the sun," while Revelation 21:5 reveals a God making all things new. What can be considered constant—that is, nothing new under the sun—is the Gospel message itself. I have argued that this doesn't change. What is new under the sun, however, is each new day.

Each new day presents joys and challenges in how to reach, teach and preach this ageless message to a world that, much like each new ocean wave crashing and rolling over and against the sand, changes the typography of who we really are in comparison to who—and where—we have been.

This said, I come to the conclusion that it is change itself that causes resistance (not the development of an online community alongside an onsite community), and change needs to be considered closely and carefully. As Christians, we subconsciously rewrite our Judeo-Christian heritage (or ignore it) and arrive at this safe place where we ground ourselves into thinking that our religious past, our ancient history, was always set. Little changed. Tradition was passed down on stone tablets (and what seems like stone tablets) and it should never be questioned, challenged, or modified. After all, we muse, the sacred is not new. It can never be new. The sacred is somehow as old as creation itself, though we may never say this out loud. Tinkering with the present to make the Christian life trendy is a dangerous and unwelcome exercise, and interactive websites certainly mess with The Establishment.

However, I have proven in the third chapter that The Establishment has never fully been established, not in the sense that many of us think, or want to think. Our past is like our present. It continually changes. If our religious past has taught us one lesson, it is that change is inevitable.

Change, however, comes whether we like it or not. With interactive websites, we are, in fact, entering a new Promised Land, especially as we remember that the work of Kingdom is never to be one of comfort. Additional scholarship is needed to gain a more nuanced understanding and thorough appreciation of the challenges and possibilities of negotiating the Internet as a medium for religious practice. Our studies need to continue.

Our hope needs to continue as well. We Christians are not of this world, and to think that God has left us or refuses to move us forward is not the Christian way. While we will moan, groan and continue to find many ways to divide, God is God, and God will continue to bring us together.

An onsite and online community creating one community within the wider community using interactive websites is more than probable, it's a next step to advancing the Kingdom of God on earth. In one sense, this is extremely obvious. In another sense, we who love our God still wonder how this will, in time, all work out. Taking a "wait and see" approach will be the desired course for many, but for those who see the Kingdom advancing beyond walls and set worship times, tomorrow is an exciting day.

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