

THE ROAD AHEAD



We have spent the past 15 months in this now familiar pandemic reality. We have adapted and we have learned. We long for a return to what we miss so much – potluck meals shared in person, hugs, in-person worship, visits in one another’s homes – to name but a few. In this time of discernment, there is one thing that is sure from my perspective. There are two probable paths for the road ahead: communities of faith that will thrive into the future and communities of faith that won’t. In fact, there are three emerging divides that I believe will contribute to our well-being as I ponder the road ahead.

Online Optional versus Fully Hybrid

The disruption of this pandemic has catapulted every church fully into the digital age whether they wanted to go there or not. While it was a practical pivot so we could continue to worship, to meet and to gather, it forced communities of faith like ours to consider our future. Some of us see the digital realm as a necessary evil, as an unfortunate necessity or as an optional service we offer. The thinking goes that it will be a relief when we can go back to the old normal, shrugging into our old church housecoat once the pandemic is over. Then we can relax and rest.



However, what is our mission as a faith community? Is it as the prophet Micah states, “to seek justice, to love kindness and to walk humbly with our God?”¹ What is our vision for vibrant ministry in a post-pandemic world? Is it as simple as Jesus saying, “...love God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind..., and the second is like it: You shall love your neighbour as yourself?”² What is our model for being church in answer to God’s mission and Jesus’ vision? I believe that we already know the answer. We need to weave the digital together with the familiar physical in-person practices of the past – a hybrid church, if you will. We must continue to embrace what we have learned.

¹ Micah 6:8.

² Matthew 22:37, 39.

Our vitality will be achieved by reaching people who already live hybrid lives. We cannot fall into the trap of inflexibility for then we become fossilized.



“Inflexibility is the indicator that it is the time for reformation.... Inflexibility that calls to and for reformation is when we become so concretized and solidified and super-glued to what it is that we do and how we do what we do. Then a wind of the spirit comes through and blows something completely different. We who are the most capable overnight become the least capable, and the least capable overnight become the most capable. And the last shall be first and the first shall be last.” – Bishop Yvette Flunder, Co-Founder of The Fellowship of Affirming Ministries.³

Bringing People Back versus Moving People Forward

As the post-pandemic world beckons from over the horizon, many church leaders seem hyper-focused on getting people back to church. On the one hand, I get it. It's been a long, exhausting season time of isolation and of languishing while we wait. We all long for what was once our normal – and I do too. However, bringing people back isn't a vision. I believe that moving people **forward** is a vision that follows God's mission as outlined by Micah.

It's hard to move ourselves forward as a faith community if we are all obsessed with getting back to what we experienced as normal 15 months ago. Increasingly, one of the divides that will happen over the coming year is between churches which are focused on recreating, reviving and restoring familiar approaches to ministry. For example, here are three comments I have heard repeatedly during this pandemic:

- “If we could just get people to come back once public health protocols are over, everything will be okay.”
- “I wish we could just see the church facility being used again, worshipping in person without just pictures taped to the pews, enjoying the camaraderie of fundraising meals and welcoming community groups back into the building.”
- “We really need to get back to where we were in January 2020 and then we can feel whole once more.”



³ From the Courageous Church Online Summit I attended this past week.



Churches which focus on moving people **forward**, however, instead of just focusing on bringing people back, will have a much better future. This is an unfamiliar path for our congregation, but it can take us to the best places. One thing I have discovered in conversations with people is that connection is certainly important. However, what has surprised me is the yearning people have expressed for **spiritual** connection, for spaces within which meaning and purpose can be discovered. Folks have told me that without the entertainment distractions of the past – like meals out, national and international travel, live sporting events, live concerts and live theatre, or crowding into a movie theatre with strangers – without those distractions they wonder about life’s meaning and their own purpose in life. Mourning the church we once knew and loved is beside the point. Instead, to what new thing is God calling us?

“Infrastructure tends to become institutionalized. It’s the movement trying to perpetuate itself for the good that they’ve discovered so that it stands when they are gone. I just wish that we could discern more faithfully when the spirit is calling us to something new and treating the loss of this institution less as a death to be mourned than as a birthing moment to be celebrated on the other side.” – John Dorhauer, United Church of Christ General Minister and President.⁴



We would be wise, then, to die to church as it was to allow the birth of healthy spiritual spaces. Those spaces should be dedicated to teaching us about wisdom, presence and kindness. Our faith community should be laser focused on deepening our self-awareness and connecting our story to a larger Story – the Christian story – serving the common good. Without that larger story, we perpetuate patterns that fall into the trap of only serving those of us who are considered part of the family. The larger story, however, calls us to create spaces for those who are not on the “inside” yet.

For our spiritual awakening to be authentic, we must begin such spiritual work from within. Who we are becomes the source for what we create. How we love ourselves fuels how we love others. How bravely we accept who we are becoming determines how compassionately we love others.

⁴ From the Courageous Church Online Summit I attended this past week.

Churches that Embrace versus Churches that Judge

A final divide centres on the attitudes some communities of faith have toward the community they're trying to reach. Have you judged anyone lately? Perhaps it was



someone who didn't wear a mask inside, or someone who squeezed past you in the grocery aisle without leaving a safe two metres, or someone who is reluctant to get a vaccination shot. Hmm. I just described myself, and that's dismaying.

After all, it's so easy to judge. In fact, judgement is the basis of racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia and almost every other 'ism' you can experience. Churches that embrace the people they're trying to reach will have a much better future than churches that judge them. In fact, survey after survey demonstrates that public perceptions of church people claims we are judgemental and hypocritical.⁵ I would say that my default to judgment is fundamentally incompatible with authentic Christian faith.

Jesus said Christians should be known for how deeply we love. Sadly, in the eyes of many non-Christians – the people we are called to reach by Jesus - we're known for how deeply we judge, not for how deeply we love. The problem in many cases is not that unchurched people don't know any Christians. The problem is that they do and they don't like us for that reason.

*“There is a constant in the cosmos that was embodied in the person of Jesus. And that constant is compassion. That constant is love. ... To write a book called Freeing Jesus while you're in pandemic lockdown, you learn a thing or two about what real freedom is, and you learn a thing or two about what really matters. And for me, it was coming to that one point, that distillation of everything, from my experience, from what I knew from church, my hopes, dreams, fears, wisdom, and hope, all combined. That compassion is everything.” – Diana Butler Bass, author and professor of history.*⁶



⁵ The United Church of Canada commissioned a survey in 2004 which found that non-worshipping Canadians viewed Christians generally as judgmental and hypocritical, particularly citing the difference between what Christians said and what they did. See a similar result from a survey by the Barna Group in the United States: [Christians: More Like Jesus or Pharisees? - Barna Group](#)

⁶ From the Courageous Church Online Summit I attended this past week. Diana is working on her next book tentatively titled “Freeing Jesus.”

I believe that communities of faith like ours that wish to thrive, need to embrace a fully hybrid practice for our ministry, an ethos that works at moving all of us forward and a family of faith that welcomes and celebrates all people as part of the amazing diversity of God's good Creation. We are being called into something new, something daunting but something so wonderful that we, too, will be changed – transformed to make a difference in the unfolding future. It starts with each of us while growing within our congregation. Then, when we approach the wider world, we sew seeds of compassionate love in action.