



Does the Church Still Matter? A Lutheran Perspective on the Church's Relevance Today

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Many people today do not think the church matters anymore. We live in a time when fewer and fewer people attend church, and an increasing number of people identify as “Nones” in terms of religious affiliation; that is, they choose not to affiliate with any religion. There are some “Nones” and “Dones” (those who are “done” with the church) who understand themselves to be “spiritual, but not religious” (SBNR). They are seeking spirituality, even a relationship with God, but not through the Christian church or any other “organized religion.” Linda Mercadante’s study of the SBNRs discovered that for those “who have left organized religion behind, the most often cited reason is that their theological questions were left unanswered or answered in simplistic ways,” claiming that “no one has ever given them the chance to learn and dialogue about theological concerns.”¹

¹ Linda A. Mercadante, “The seeker next door,” *Christian Century* 129, no. 11 (May 2012): 30. See also Linda A. Mercadante, *Belief without Borders: Inside the Minds of the Spiritual but Not Religious* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

Certainly our churches in America are voluntary organizations, but thinking about them this way might downplay the role of God’s calling Christians into community. Thinking of the church as an incarnational action of the Holy Spirit in the world might broaden our understanding of church and give it as a community new vitality.

The decrease in church attendance and religious affiliation does not mean a decrease in interest in spirituality. In fact, the contrary appears to be true.² Many of us in the church have seen people (even affiliated Christians) choosing many other options to meet their spiritual needs. Church consultant Reggie McNeal has provocatively suggested that mainline Protestant church culture is not “spiritual enough” to help many people with the questions they are asking about life and God. He writes, “The problem is that when people come to church, expecting to find God, they often encounter a religious club holding a meeting where God is conspicuously absent.”³ Indeed, I suspect that not a few active congregational members, lay leaders, and even some clergy will find them themselves asking, “Does the church still matter?”

When asking about the church’s relevance in the world today, it is too easy to focus on the church’s institutional identity. To be sure, the church is an institution, but it is not *only* an institution. I fear that in the US, the institutional and voluntarist aspects of the church are too central to discussions about the church. Many of our congregations are beholden to thinking of the church as a voluntary association that people choose to join and support, that meets their needs (until it does not!). I have proposed that we start any exploration of what it means to be the church with *who God is*, and *what God is doing* in and among God’s people through God’s Spirit, before we consider how to structure the institutional aspects of our life together.⁴

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One place to start is with the story of the church in the Bible. The Acts of the Apostles tells of a people whom the Holy Spirit transforms into a community of new life and witness. They receive power from on high to become witnesses of Jesus’s resurrection, tellers and doers of his story. In the “double movement” of the Spirit, the Spirit first calls and gathers God’s people to receive faith and new life through the word proclaimed and the sacrament of Holy Communion, in the worshipping assembly. The Spirit creates a community of believers, bringing

² Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity after Religion: The End of the Church and the Birth of a New Spiritual Awakening* (New York: HarperOne, 2012), and *Grounded: Finding God in the World—A Spiritual Revolution* (New York: HarperOne, 2015).

³ Reggie McNeal, *The Present Future: Six Tough Questions for the Church* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003), 59.

⁴ Cheryl Peterson, *Who Is the Church? An Ecclesiology for the Twenty-First Century* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013), Introduction.

individuals to faith in Jesus through the gospel's proclamation and creating of them a "spiritual community."

Historically, Protestants with Reformation roots have emphasized the Spirit's role in granting individual believers the "faith that justifies," but the Reformers also affirmed the Spirit's work in creating a spiritual community, or *koinonia*. While this Greek word is usually translated in English as "communion" or "fellowship," it actually has two levels of meaning. It refers first to the participation or sharing in a common thing (in this case, the new life of Christ), and second, it refers to the fellowship or community that results from that common participation. For example, in his *Large Catechism*, Luther writes about how the Spirit incorporates believers not only into Christ through faith, but also into the spiritual community of his body, to become "a part and member, a participant and co-partner in all the blessings it possesses."⁵ This spiritual community "possesses a variety of gifts" and fruit, which the Spirit produces. God's people are transformed by the Spirit's work through these gifts and this fruit, to build up the body of Christ and strengthen it for mission. At the heart of the Spirit's transforming work, or in Luther's words, the "primary blessing" received in the holy community is the "full forgiveness of sins." This blessing is not only received individually, but is lived out in relationships with others, in the ways that "we forgive, bear with, and aid one another."⁶

The second movement of the Spirit occurs when this holy people is sent out from worship and *koinonia* to be agents of God's transforming love and power in the world. At the end of his *Large Catechism*, Luther speaks of the church in what today we would call "missional" terms, because God still has more forgiving to do. He writes, "The Holy Spirit continues his work without ceasing until the last day, and for this purpose he has appointed a community on earth, through which he speaks and does all of his work. For he has not yet gathered together all of this Christian community, nor has he completed the granting of forgiveness."⁷ God called the church into being, inviting its members to participate in the mission of God in order to be transformed by the Holy Spirit as individuals and communities to incarnate the love of God as agents of transformation and hope for all.

This is why the church still matters.

It is one thing to affirm this truth, but it is quite another to live into it, to be open to the double movement of the Spirit. In the rest of this article, I offer twelve suggested shifts in thinking and acting for the church and its members. These build on the insights I have already drawn from Luther's catechisms, as well as from the story of the church as narrated in the Acts of the Apostles. I do not propose these shifts as means of receiving the Spirit (since the Spirit is already active in the church!), but rather to help remove obstacles that can get in the way of the Spirit's movement in and through Christ's body in the world.

⁵ Martin Luther, "The Large Catechism," *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 438.

⁶ BC, 438.

⁷ BC, 439.

First: This shift is one I have been discussing already: from thinking of the church as an institution to understanding it as a community, a spiritual people called into being by God to know God's love and to be empowered to share it with others. If we can begin to think of the church first as a spiritual community, rather than as an institution or a voluntary association, the other suggested shifts will be easier to make.

Second: The church needs to move out of survival mode and into revival mode. I am not suggesting that mainline Christians begin to hold tent meetings or that the concerns about revivalism (e.g., "decision theology," focus on individual salvation, emotionalism, and lack of good order and decorum) are unfounded. I am simply suggesting a retrieval of the idea of being revived, or brought back to life. The shift is from thinking about the church's survival (What can *we* do in order to keep the doors open?) to the church's revival (How is *the Spirit* at work, bringing about new life?). This shift creates an openness to what the Spirit may be doing in our midst already, and for what the Spirit may have in mind for the future.

Third: This shift is from fear to bold proclamation. At the beginning of Acts, the disciples are holed up in the upper room, waiting—or perhaps hiding, for fear of the authorities. Either way, they have not yet turned outward to others with the good news of Jesus. Suddenly, there is the sound of a rushing wind and God's Spirit fills the room, falling on them and appearing on them as tongues of fire, and soon they are speaking about God's wondrous deeds to all who can hear. Jesus had promised his disciples, "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). The same Spirit is poured out on all of Jesus's disciples in the sacrament of baptism, empowering them to be his witnesses.

To be a witness is to give a testimony, to tell someone what the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus mean to you. Too many mainline Christians prefer to keep their faith private. Many are afraid to speak publicly about their faith, even to close friends and neighbors. I heard once that the average Lutheran invites someone to church every twenty-three years. But how often does a Lutheran tell someone else about Jesus? Some congregants feel held back by a lack of knowledge about the Bible and the faith of the church. One does not need a seminary degree to share what God's love means to them. The Spirit enables this telling, opening up voices to share the good news, as well as the ears of others to hear it. The disciples could do nothing apart from the Spirit. Peter couldn't even admit he knew who Jesus was before he received the Spirit at Pentecost; then it seems he could not stop preaching about Jesus (Acts 2:14–36).

Fourth: We need to shift from planning to preparation.⁸ In the Acts of the Apostles, the Spirit of God is clearly directing God's mission. Had the disciples been in charge of planning the mission, it is unlikely they would have jumped to welcome "unclean" gentiles into the church. However, the disciples responded

⁸ I borrow this directly from McNeal, *The Present Future*, 92–96.

to the Spirit's urging, so that Peter and the others were able to affirm and bless the movement of the Spirit that, previously, they had not even thought possible. Too often, congregation leaders are so busy planning activities intended to bring people into the church (what McNeal calls the "If you build it, they will come" strategy) that they miss the Spirit's guidance.

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This requires prayerful discernment and an openness to the Spirit's movement, being willing to be led by the Spirit regarding how and to whom to reach out with the good news of Jesus. It starts by dwelling in the story of Scripture and listening to the needs of the local community. When I was a pastor in Milwaukee, it meant being open to an unexpected phone call from a Lao minister who was looking to start a new ministry and wanted to know if he could rent space in our church. We had been planning a variety of outreach ministries to the neighborhood, but a Lao ministry was not one of them. Yet, this was what God had in mind for us. Soon it became a ministry in which our whole congregation participated, leading to the development of a Lao-language worship service, Bible study, and other ministries.

Fifth: There needs to be a shift from attractional evangelism to incarnational evangelism.⁹ Instead of trying to attract people to our congregations through new programs, what if instead church members strove to attract people to Jesus (and the new life he makes possible!) by living out this new life incarnationally, in our relationships with each other and our communities? This new life is only possible through the Spirit's work; it is not something people manufacture through their own activity. At the same time, church members can be more intentional about how they embody the gospel's promise. How one lives is often a more powerful witness than what one professes. It was said of the early Christians, "Look how they love each other!"

Twelve-step recovery groups, such as Alcoholics Anonymous, have something to teach the church in this regard. One of the traditions of AA is that they do "public relations" in terms of "attraction rather than promotion." In 12-step recovery, people stick around not because they think AA is a "wonderful organization" with "great programs," but because they see people with changed lives as a result of being part of this fellowship. They see something they want to have for themselves—a sober, new life—and so they come back. For the church, this means

⁹ I am drawing again on McNeal, *The Present Future*. See also Cheryl M. Peterson, "The Next 500 Years—A Church Unleashed by the Spirit," *Word & World* 37, no. 4 (Fall 2017): 372–79.

all of the ways the Spirit is at work in the “spiritual community,” as Luther said, in the ways we “forgive, aid, and bear with one another,” bringing transformation that is a witness in itself.

Sixth: Many of us need to shift how we view our participation in community and fellowship, starting with how we view “belonging.” As God’s people, we belong first to God in Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit and, secondly, to one another. The basis for our belonging is our incorporation into the triune God in Holy Baptism. The Holy Spirit is the agent of our *koinonia*, or communion, together, which we live out in congregations and other gatherings. This has several implications. If Christians belong to Christ and to each other, then their primary belonging is not to a congregation or institution. That is where one *discovers* one’s belonging, but belonging is much more than membership in a single congregation.

Seventh: Related to this is a shift in how “membership” is defined. In voluntary associations, members pay “dues,” they hold meetings to plan activities they enjoy and to achieve common goals. In many ways, the church operates like a voluntary association, asking for pledges, and holding meetings to plan worship services, take care of the building, pay the bills, etc. However, the church needs to reclaim the biblical meaning of membership, drawing on the Pauline image of the body and the ways the Spirit equips individual members of the body with spiritual gifts in order to build up the body for God’s mission (1 Cor 12–14). Here membership is defined in relational, rather than institutional, terms. This is also reflected in the description of the first Christian gathering, where they hear the word, break the bread together, and share all things in common (Acts 2:42–44). A more biblical understanding of membership suggests eliminating the word *volunteer* whenever speaking about the church. Volunteers volunteer for voluntary associations. Disciples of Jesus open themselves to the movement and power of the Holy Spirit for the sake of God’s mission, offering their gifts for service to the same.

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Eighth: We must recognize that what binds members together in the body of Christ is the Holy Spirit—not our ethnic heritage or common zip code. A writer in the tradition of Paul attributes the *koinonia* experienced by the first Christians in Acts 2 and 4 to the Holy Spirit, in a greeting very similar to what many hear on Sunday mornings in worship: “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion [*koinonia*] of the Holy Spirit be with all of you” (2 Cor 13:13). The Acts of the Apostles narrates how the gospel broke through religious, socioeconomic, and, most significantly, racial/ethnic barriers to expand the people of God to include not only gentiles, but also Samaritans, and an Ethiopian

eunuch who was not only religiously and racially other but, as a sexual minority—a eunuch—was forbidden from entering the temple.

Lutheran congregations in North America in particular need to break out of their historical ethnic enclaves and tendency toward social and classist parochialism. The ELCA remains a largely white and middle-class denomination in the US.¹⁰ Lutherans continue to struggle with how to expand our belonging across racial/ethnic and socioeconomic lines.¹¹ To be truly an inclusive church requires first recognizing this parochialism and the many privileges that having white skin gives a person.¹² It means honestly acknowledging our country's racist heritage and the legacy and continuing impact of this heritage: from the violent taking of native people's lands, the slave trade and slavery, and Jim Crow and the lynching tree, to ongoing discrimination in housing, hiring practices, and the criminal justice system—what Michelle Alexander has called “the new Jim Crow.”¹³ It means committing to becoming an anti-racist church, working actively against systems and structures of racism.¹⁴

For many church members, it also means coming to terms with middle-class and heterosexual and cisgender privileges, and listening to those who experience prejudice, discrimination, and hatred because of who they are and whom they love. The church must stand with those who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and queer; speak truth to power that they are also created in God's image; and speak against anyone who would subject them to violence and discrimination for any reason.¹⁵

Ninth: It is important to shift our understanding of “fellowship.” This is the most common translation of the biblical word *koinonia*, but it can too easily lend itself to a human meaning. We need to remember that this fellowship is divinely given; it is a gift of the Holy Spirit. Many congregations use familial terms to speak of Christian fellowship. The first congregation I served used to say, “We are a family.” The difficulty there is that families can be closed sets (as opposed to open sets). This small-town congregation was not only “like” a family; most of the members were from three large, extended families. Nearly every member was related to someone else. This made it difficult for new members to fit in, and it made it difficult to talk about the need for social ministry in the community. When the St.

¹⁰ Pew Research Center, “Racial and Ethnic Composition among Mainline Protestants by Religious Denomination,” Pew Forum Religious Landscape Study, 2014, <https://tinyurl.com/r8hb86y>.

¹¹ Lenny Duncan, *Dear Church: A Love Letter from a Black Preacher to the Whitest Denomination in the U.S.* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2019).

¹² Peggy McIntosh, “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack” (1989). Available at <https://tinyurl.com/y7u82cmg>.

¹³ Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: New Press, 2010, 2020).

¹⁴ See Joseph Barndt, *Understanding and Dismantling Racism: The Twenty-First Century Challenge to White America* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007). The PBS series, “Race: The Power of an Illusion,” is another helpful resource: <https://tinyurl.com/yb8xg34h>.

¹⁵ Pamela Lightsey, *Our Lives Matter: A Womanist Queer Theology* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2015).

Vincent Society planned to start a soup kitchen in our town, the members of my congregation were dumbfounded: “Don’t they have families to take care of them?”

While *koinonia* can have family-like qualities, we need to be careful not to confuse it with the gift of human families, which have clearer and, at times, rigid boundaries. God’s family has boundaries too (one baptism and a common faith), but this family is always expanding its boundaries to include those who are deemed “other”—those who may not look like or sound like those already in the congregation, but who are also created in God’s image and loved deeply by God.

Tenth: Another way we need to rethink “fellowship” is how we live out that *koinonia* together. Too often, congregants think of fellowship in terms of potluck dinners and pleasantries. This leads to the attempt to avoid disagreements and conflicts, which is never a good thing because if conflicts are not directly addressed, they will come out in other, usually unhealthy and unhelpful ways.¹⁶ Church members are not immune from hurting one another; we are, after all, simultaneously justified and sinful. However, as Luther writes, as those whom God has forgiven, God’s people are invited to live into “full forgiveness of sins,” whereby we “forgive, bear with, and aid one another.” Too often members of Christ’s body do not live fully into this “full forgiveness” and reconciliation (and those outside the church take notice!).

Eleventh: This shift relates to the sixth one, above, in which our belonging is first to God. This means that while many church members experience the *koinonia* of the Spirit primarily in congregations, the *koinonia* of the Spirit is much broader than that. It includes a wide network of relationships within the body of Christ, through formal and informal ecumenical partnerships. The evangelist John’s preferred term for the Holy Spirit is *Paraclete*, which means “one who walks alongside of,” or “accompanier.” Christians walk together as members of synods (or districts or dioceses), accompanied by the *Paraclete*, the Spirit who is present always to guide and direct.

The Spirit empowers the disciples to move constantly beyond their comfort zones, crossing ethnic boundaries and lines of social class and wealth to create a new community. The church today must look to the pattern of Acts.

Twelfth: This final shift brings us full circle, in terms of “where” and “how” the Spirit sends the church out in mission. The *koinonia* described in Acts is a fellowship that is outward looking. After the Spirit falls on the disciples (Acts 2), we read how the Spirit leads them into new places, as the Spirit incorporates new

¹⁶ The ministry of Healthy Congregations offers resources to help leaders address church conflict by drawing on systems theory and the observation of emotional process to address the fear and anxiety in congregational systems. For more information, visit <http://www.healthycongregations.com>.

people into *koinonia*, including and especially those deemed “other.” The Spirit empowers the disciples to move constantly beyond their comfort zones, crossing ethnic boundaries and lines of social class and wealth to create a new community. The church today must look to the pattern of Acts, and shift from thinking only about ministry within the congregation, to ministry in neighborhoods, cities or townships, and all places of brokenness and hopelessness.

This builds on the shift I already introduced, from an attractional understanding of evangelism (“If you build it, they will come”) to a more incarnational model (in which Christians dwell with and accompany our neighbors in their struggles and joys). Like Jesus and the disciples, the call is to take the good news out of our homes and places of worship and to meet people “where they are.” I am not referring to “cold calling” by knocking on strangers’ doors, but simply learning who your neighbors are, and the needs of your wider community, through doing “one-on-ones” with local leaders and others.¹⁷ It begins with listening to the concerns, hopes, and dreams of those neighbors. This final shift suggests a change of direction. The focus is not on how to get other people to join one’s congregation, but on how congregation members might join their neighbors in the challenges, struggles, and joys they face, and live in solidarity with them, sharing with them the *koinonia* of the Spirit. ⊕

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¹⁷ A resource for doing one-on-ones can be found in Dennis A. Jacobsen, *Doing Justice: Congregations and Community Organizing*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2017).