



Reimagining “Church”

JOHN STROMMEN

People in our neighborhoods have gone from asking, “Which church shall I attend?” to asking, “Why church?” That trend is accelerating with each new generation. Wrestling with the challenge of reaching millennials, the late Christopher Nelson, pastor of Bethlehem Lutheran in Minneapolis, mused with me about the rich theological heritage we have as Lutherans—a heritage we both believed was criminally under-utilized.

We noted that many millennials view the local church as irrelevant to their everyday lives and world, its God too parochial, its tone too judgmental, its Jesus too exclusive, its teaching of substitutionary atonement too horrifying. And yet, Chris and I agreed, Lutheran teachings address many of their critiques with surgical precision. The God described in the theology of the cross and in vocational theology is in the world in a way most people do not expect but are yearning for. With a note of optimism in his voice, Chris eventually said, “Millennials are Lutherans and they don’t know it.” I added, “And not only millennials, but disaffected Gen Xers and boomers as well.”

Indeed, people of all generations are asking a profound and basic question: “Why church?” This is a fair question, and one many church leaders are under-prepared to answer. The accompanying question is, “Who is the God you believe in?” My conversation with Chris emboldened me to utilize Lutheran theology to

This is a time of profound dislocation for many people. The Christian tradition has answers to the questions of many, but in its current shape, the church does not do a good job of addressing needs. The church must be reshaped in order to hear the concerns of a new age, and to speak the gospel to people in a powerful way.

engage the curiosity of millennials, Gen Xers, and baby boomers who have given up on organized religion, but not on God.

We who are leaders in the church have an opportunity to reclaim for a new time what the church already is at its very core: *a new humanity that God has gathered at the foot of the cross*. This gathering is not limited to those who gather in our local congregations but is found at the intersection of the embodied Christ and the real world that we know. At this intersection, the boundaries we've always assumed for God are crossed: from loftiness to real-life crucibles, from "religious" acts to everyday ones, from "church events" to neighborhood life, from an exclusive group to an inclusive community. In this new community we are reconnected to God and one another while joining God at work in the real world. The church, in its essence, offers deep and abiding connection, meaning in everyday life, and a God not tethered to an institution but loose in the world and in human lives!

OBSTACLES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Sadly, powerful cultural presuppositions hinder the church's work and message, and those presuppositions are in our congregations as well. These assumptions only exacerbate the existential crises that many in our culture experience—crises the church has an incredible opportunity to address. For those who do not look to their local church for guidance, however, there is a growing lack of confidence that we in the church can meaningfully address the challenges of life today. That is why we need church: for connection, for meaning, and for the awareness that God is loose in our lives.

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First, most people—church members included—no longer imagine that God is in their everyday world. As children of the Enlightenment, we have rendered God either abstract or absent. As an abstraction, God is not a living, acting being but is reduced to an idea or a set of propositions. As absent, God gets assigned to the sacred "god box" of organized religion but is far removed from the 24/7 world we know. Occasionally, we might allow God to show up for beautiful sunsets or the birth of a baby or something, but for the most part, no. One might call this the sacred/secular split, a way of thought that sets aside the "religious" realm from the secular, objective world of facts.

Despite the fact that God created the "secular world," we lack the imagination to place God in it. Indeed, the church itself has fallen prey to the sacred/secular

split. Church Innovations Institute discovered that 90 percent of American Christians (and church-goers), when interviewed about their faith life, fail to mention God as the subject of a verb in their narrative. In other words, the imaginations of American Christians do not make room for God to be a living, willing, purposeful presence acting in their lives. This doesn’t mean that God is *not* a living force in their lives, of course—only that they are less aware, open, and receptive to what God is doing because of the limits of their imaginations and presuppositions. This reflects our culture at large where God-talk is frowned upon.

The church has forgotten what it is. The people who *are* the church have forgotten what business they are in. Many church-goers have reduced Christianity to institutionalism, either conflating God with the local church or locating God primarily in a building and mediated through professional clergy. Within this understanding, professional clergy are seen as the primary actors of Christian faith and church members inevitably become *less aware of and more disconnected from* God’s ongoing work in them through the Holy Spirit. Here it becomes all too easy for church members to “play” church by keeping the institution going as they plan social events, do charity, and let the professionals perform the acts of faith. The natural by-product of such a view is people believing like Christians but living like atheists, unable to incorporate God into their imaginations as an active presence in their daily lives. What also follows is a discomfort with talking about God and faith and seeing Christian faith as less a relationship and more a body of information that few are qualified to address.

Ironically, Lutheran theology counters such a view of church. Church, as the gathered body, names, celebrates, and explores the fact that God, by the power of the Holy Spirit, has chosen to be with us in the person of Jesus Christ. No abstraction. No absentee God. A God who shows up in our world! The embodiment of God in the Son is nothing less than a new creation and a new community bursting forth from the life of God, filled with the Holy Spirit. In fact, the radical immanence of God in Jesus is a natural extension of the *panentheistic* creation theology espoused by Martin Luther, where the triune God is already present and at work in the created world prior to Jesus of Nazareth. This was evident for Luther when a centerpiece of his witness was in reclaiming the mundane, everyday world of the sixteenth century as the very arena where God calls people to do God’s work. In truth, we can safely say, the whole of God’s created realm is sacred, filled with spiritual import. Contrary to popular belief, God is present in the world and in our lives, and it’s time we recognized this reality.

Second, we have inadequate and far too limiting doctrines of the incarnation. As I talk to many people, both inside and outside the church, it’s clear to me that Jesus has become a stumbling block to a vibrant Christian faith. In the understandable desire to be inclusive and affirming of other faiths and traditions, the particularity of salvation through Jesus the Christ is jarring to some and off-putting to others. Our culture’s default theology asserts that Jesus took our place and paid a penalty to his father in order to satisfy God’s righteousness; this understanding is offensive to many and is perhaps one of the reasons people today find

it hard to visualize God's presence with us. It suggests less "God with us" and more of a transaction demanded by a sadistic God. Even many pastors with whom I've spoken want to move away from atonement theories and salvation talk. This substitutionary theory of atonement is, of course, only one metaphor for how to understand salvation, so we should not hesitate to entertain other ways in which Scripture, tradition, and experience imagine God's salvation of us.

Some atonement theories take context seriously. Luther's is one. He wrote, preached, and taught about "the joyful exchange" as his understanding of the saving work of Christ Jesus. It is light-years from the substitutionary theory of atonement and speaks powerfully to the contemporary cynicism about "savior" language. In the first movement of the exchange, we find a God who has chosen through embodiment to bear the weight of our brokenness—for us and with us—even unto death. Indeed, it is a conviction of profound consequence that God is with us in the most broken chapters of our lives. Luther's "theology of the cross" is nothing less than good news because it means that our darkest chapters need not be confirmation of our unworthiness or of God's indifference, but rather an occasion for God's solidarity with us. God shows up for us and carries us. This view counters the default cultural theologies that carry high levels of shame and an understanding of a God who only loves the winners in this world.

In the second movement of the joyful exchange, God has chosen to share the life of God with us as sheer unconditional gift, immediately justifying our lives and restoring our relationship with God. To trust the giver of this gift is to be made whole. Luther famously called this "justification by grace through faith." The giftedness of life is not limited to the joyful exchange. It is already given by our creator through creation itself, with an abundance of gifts we experience on a daily basis, given freely without our merit. God's action viewed through this atonement theory has a different tone and focus.

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God's justification of us is more relevant today than ever, when people struggle mightily with the impossible task of making value out of (justifying) their lives. Whether it's economic or achievement oriented, religious or ethical, justifying our existence by creating our own value is a doomed pursuit, leading only to despair. Contemporary culture is littered with people struggling to justify themselves, struggling to bear a weight they cannot bear. To be justified by inclusion in the life of God frees one to live and love in a way not imaginable through our own striving, no matter how diligent we might be. God coming to earth in flesh and blood matters!

Third, many today live with a profound isolation and loneliness, and there is a growing sense that the local church is not helpful. It counts as a great irony that in a time when the internet and social media have connected us more than ever, we are, nonetheless, lonelier. Our digitally *connected world* is a mile wide and an inch deep. So, all the hundreds of Facebook friends one might have do not make up for the fact that one may lack quality, sustaining relationships and the experience of an authentic community. The church has a vital calling to help people experience belonging as the culture shifts.

And yet, as our neighbors search for authentic community and struggle with loneliness and depression, the church is increasingly not seen as a helpful resource. There are many reasons for this, I suspect, but I’ll mention two. First, a growing number of people feel that their neighborhood church is kind of an exclusive club governed by “insider” rules and not particularly interested in finding out who they—their neighbors—are. The exception to this rule is when “the club” objectifies them as potential donors, as a number to add to their rolls. Our neighbors, however, are *subjects*. So, while most churches do a fairly good job promoting themselves and their events, this is not the case when it comes to listening to their neighbors’ questions, hopes, and fears. We who speak of *agape* love do not always walk the walk with those around us. How can we love our neighbors if we don’t listen to them?

Compounding the disconnect we have with our neighbors, many of them believe the local church to be a bit antiquated in its views and practices, irrelevant to one’s own spiritual journey, and perhaps more interested in judging than loving those on the outside. While it is certainly the case that most churches want to attract neighbors, it is a significant challenge when those neighbors of diverse backgrounds suspect they will feel more shamed than encouraged if they participate. Martin Luther King made the observation that the most segregated hour in America is from 11 to 12 on Sunday morning. Perhaps that segregation has only increased to now include not only racial segregation, but generational, social, political, and creedal.

One of the most powerful dimensions of the life of God into which we are invited is its communal character. This is turning out to be one of the greatest gifts of God’s life to us. The church is a gathered people around the *perichoretic* community of the triune God. *Perichoresis* is an Eastern Orthodox understanding of the Holy Trinity that emphasizes the interrelationship of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as dynamic community. The community of God is also mutually supportive, interdependent, and open. This community is extended to all people. It is not limited to a building or a congregation and may become embodied anytime, anywhere, and in anyone. This means God’s love is an unconditional promise of belonging, even in places one least expects. Imagine if the work in our churches actually brought diverse people together in a spirit of common purpose and hope rather than dividing them into *us* and *them*.

Fourth, one of the most prominent forms human brokenness takes today is the haunting sense of meaninglessness. And if faith has little to do with daily

life, the church can do little to address it. Our days are often like Sisyphus, toiling without a clear sense of broader context or consequence. The pervasive sense of meaninglessness is on two fronts: First, and referenced earlier, is the demoralizing realization that one cannot create meaning for one's own life. One cannot justify oneself. Whether we experience this as the weight of shame or simply an exhausting pursuit, it doesn't matter. The promise of God lifts this weight because, with the gift of justification from our creator, we have been declared to be of *great value*. We have been freed from the burden of having to prove ourselves and live much of life preoccupied with self. We have been given, unconditionally, the gift of participation in the life of God. Therefore, to be justified is not simply to be "saved"; it is to *freed for* other things, like loving one's neighbor and caring for creation.

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The second way we struggle with meaninglessness is the experience of work and activity without an accompanying sense of value. We want to make a meaningful difference in the world. And those who are unchurched are no exception. The church—as those gathered at the foot of the cross—reminds us that we don't have to worry about ourselves (even though we will). Rather, we have been freed to love our neighbor. And so, this new creation—this new community—is formed for meaningful work in partnership with God. Here God is at work in the mundane, secular, and public dimensions of our lives (Luther). God, through the Holy Spirit, is at work in all believers, calling them to join God at work in the world. Whatever work we do in the institutional church is only a small part of God's work. The church is much broader than the institution.

Church is relevant and needed, but it must be *re-formed* to become more fully what it already is: not a community gathered around a pastor in a building, but a community gathered around Christ in the world (which sometimes might be in a building with a pastor). What must change is reclaiming *who* the primary actors are, *where* God is present and at work, and *what* God is now up to in the world. Scripture promises that God is at work doing "a new thing." Therefore, we must watch, listen, learn, and discern.

WHAT WILL "CHURCH" LOOK LIKE NOW?

Putting People First: Design Thinking

The essence of church does not change, but the forms will. *Why* we still need the church should be evident, but what will church look like moving forward?

Congregations must discover what practices and forms best embody the essence of church. Such practices and boundaries are reminiscent of the early church, and they will also need to be shaped by what people today are learning in other disciplines.

Tim Brown, the author of *Change by Design*, reminds the church of one of God’s core convictions: put people first. Brown, one of the leading teachers of “design thinking,” believes human needs drive design. Not only are the needs of users front and center, but through ongoing participation, users are co-creators of the design. Design thinking is a collaborative process where the designer forms a relationship with the user in order to create a design that addresses a felt need. This relationship is guided by a process of listening, imagining, experimenting, discerning, and acting. What if, rather than racking our brains to create just the right ministry or program to turn things around, we took Brown’s advice and *put people first*? What if we dared to think that the key to the future is found in what is stirring in the hearts and minds of the people we serve—and the ones we’re missing? As many of us in Christian leadership know all too well, we are facing a challenging time as we watch our churches dwindle in numbers. But listening to people and co-creating new forms of church could grow out of the process of design thinking.

If design thinking is useful for a human-centered, non-theistic context, imagine how powerful it might be for those of us who believe the Holy Spirit is loose and among us, speaking to us through each other, deepening our conversations, and sharpening our insights. What if we let the people we serve design the ministries of tomorrow with us? That means the most important skill required for the church moving forward is probably listening. *Deep listening*. Listening to our neighbors, listening to each other, and listening to God in order to discern. After all, while the substance of God’s work remains constant, its shape and expression are constantly changing to address a changing world. The Christian God is a God of context and embodiment.

Let me offer an example. Recently, I wrote and taught a course on gift identification and Lutheran vocational theology, entitled “GPS—Finding Direction for One’s Faith and Life Journey.” Because of deep listening, the course ended up being very different from how it began. As I asked for feedback and suggestions, then listened and reflected on the ongoing experience of participants, their feedback led to four major in-course corrections. All four corrections had the same theme: increasing communal conversation about gifts and callings. Engagement and relational connection—not membership or attendance—were what was vitally important. Putting people first and listening are at the heart of such engagement.

Listening, however, is not something the church does well. We in the church have tended to believe that we have the answers and that the world must come to us to receive those answers while we crank out religious “product.” But answers must be responses to the actual questions that are being asked. To love our neighbors dictates that we learn more about who they are, their fears, their pains, their hopes and dreams. From these conversations, the Holy Spirit is at work identifying the

brokenness so we can begin to imagine what God's kingdom looks like in this context, in this time, and so we might proclaim God's good news. As design thinking would suggest, this happens in the communal dance of love, listening, discerning, and experimenting. This is nothing less than the perichoretic community of God calling us into new expressions of community. The perichoretic community summons us to listen to our brothers and sisters not only inside the church walls but outside as well. Through such listening, the Holy Spirit is at work, directing, innovating, and birthing new creations. The Holy Spirit is at work in all who are a part of God's new creation in Christ. That means that people in our churches and neighborhoods are not only potential hands and feet for God's work; they are co-creators and innovators who may very well uncover the new ministry that works in the neighborhood.

The Infinity Loop: Practicing the Presence and Movement of God

How do we get started? The new rhythm we must learn in the church looks and moves like the symbol for the infinity loop (∞). It has two sides to it: listening and action. The listening side on the left incorporates the act of listening to God and our neighbor, learning from a variety of sources, reflecting on what we've heard and learned, and imagining future possibilities. But our listening, reflecting, and imagining must always give way to discernment and action. Given what we've heard and what we've learned, what is God leading us to do in partnership with God? How might we be agents of co-creating with God a more trustworthy and hopeful world? This will often be just an experiment and it may fail, but that's okay. That's part of the learning process. After some sort of action has been tried, it's back to listening/reflecting again. What have we learned? What have we heard? What's next?

Listening, Reflecting, Imagining, Discerning, Experimenting, Acting

I would like to suggest that this rhythm of the infinity loop is the movement of the triune God among us, forming Christian community and a missional identity in a never-ending flow. This will keep Christian communities agile, open, and moving forward. It will help us reform the church by learning to focus less on the institution and more on what God is up to. Three critical areas come into play with this rhythm:

- We are active *agents* of God's Holy Spirit, called to use our giftedness in partnership with God.
- We cultivate habitual *faith practices* that keep us centered in Christ's presence.
- We experience a Christian community that is far more *porous* than we previously thought, sending us out into the neighborhood and world and back again.

Let me explore each of these. First, we must be committed to tapping our gifts in order to join God in *meaningful* work in the world. Martin Luther is famous for having coined the term “priesthood of all believers,” an audacious idea that suggests that all baptized believers have callings from God that are as important and sacred as those of clergy. To the extent that churches are too dependent on clergy to be the primary actors in church life, the *priesthood of all believers* means the church must become less clergy-centric and invite everyone into this meaningful work. The Holy Spirit is on the loose in all who believe—and probably in some who don’t! The gathered community empowers everyone, not just the professionals. We must recapture this sense that God’s callings to us are far more expansive and inclusive than we imagined. This means we all have agency within the movement of God in the world.

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Over the years I have observed time and again how frequently people see no relation between their own life’s work and God’s work in the world. The result is often a disconnect between faith and life. And yet, Luther wrote passionately about the work of farmers, businesspeople, mothers, and fathers as *God’s work*, *God’s callings*. So it behooves us in Christian leadership to help our people embrace their individual callings. This was my primary motivation for developing a course on vocational theology. “GPS” is a thorough study of the gifts God has graciously given to each of us—for our own delight, as gift to our neighbor, and for our work as the corporate body of Christ. It incorporates the gifts inventory workbook “Discover Who You Are” to identify participants’ natural abilities, spiritual gifts, passions, values, and personality, but also includes the gifts of one’s life story, one’s places (stations) in life, baptismal recreation, the freedom of the gospel, Christian community, and the gift of others. All these gifts are explored as clues to what God is up to in each person and how God is inviting us into partnership with God’s own self.

The priesthood of all believers is not only about individual callings, however, but also about *communal* ones. The work we do in the body of Christ is work we do together—clergy, staff, and laity. Since God is at work in all of us, lay members are not just the foot soldiers for staff-led plans. As we share the work of the church, all baptized believers will be instrumental in finding new directions and innovating old ones. They are the ones who often know better than we as clergy whether something will work. Therefore, *listen to them*. The work of the church is *shared work*.

From the pastor’s point of view, leadership moves from being *in control* to being *a curator* of people gathered for conversation. This is a conversation about

God's preferred future for us, and what it means to be co-creators with God of that future. As curator, we give over control to others, serve as their coach, and liberate the vision that's stirring within our members. Call it design thinking for the church—trusting in the power of the Holy Spirit to create through us a community. As a result of this type of thinking, the experience of the “GPS” course was transformed, because it went from *my* creation to *our* creation.

Second, a robust expression of the priesthood of all believers will depend on *faith practices*. Common faith practices would include dwelling in the Word, discernment, prayer, and the “mutual conversation and consolation of the saints”—an expression of Christian community Luther coined and held in exceedingly high regard. Faith practices anchor a congregation and help them transition from *institutionalism* to *movement*—from *maintaining* “church” to *engaging* with God in the infinity loop, God's work in the world. Hence, while members of a faith community may benefit (and should!) from the teaching of a pastor or another religious professional, they ought not be dependent on such persons to experience “church.” God has already set them free to gather and do the basic work of the church: *people on a faith journey together who listen, reflect, imagine, discern, and act upon what God is up to in them*. Faith practices, then, constitute nothing less than reclaiming what it means to *be church*, for the very heart of these practices is to gather together around the living Christ and ask the questions “What is God up to among us?”; “How am I/are we a part of it?”; “How goes it with each of our daily faith journeys?” Faith practices allow us to remember what business we're in—the *God, faith, and mission* business. In so doing, faith practices establish a clear center and identity—namely, Jesus. They also firmly place us in the infinity loop of listening, reflecting, discerning, acting.

When I taught the “GPS” course, I discovered that what people desired most was not absorbing content and taking notes, but communal conversation. Put another way, they learned to value *the mutual conversation and consolation of the saints*—in a word, faith practices. Hence, during our discussions, we spent time telling our faith stories, claiming our God given giftedness and affirming each other's, praying, dwelling in the Word, wondering about what God was up to in our lives. As we were busy *being the church*, we were also feeding folks who were hungry for community and purpose.

And third, as a corollary to a clear center, we must engage the world, and this requires porous boundaries between church and community. The community that Christ gathers at the foot of the cross are people inside and outside the institutional church. As people learn to *be church*, rather than *going to church*, Christian community can be formed anywhere. And it needs to be! God, through the crucified and risen Christ and by the power of the Holy Spirit, is loose in the neighborhood. That means the church immediately becomes less institution-centric. For instance, those of us formed by the institutional church—we who are the products of Christendom—imagine mission as taking God out into the distant world (usually a foreign land). Reforming church must envision God already at work in the neighborhood, just as Luke 10 suggests. And we are called not merely to proclaim

God to those in the neighborhood (which we certainly are), but to discern God’s presence and work there and form community around the living and working Christ. What this community looks like may be very different from the formulas and rules we have come to assume about church and church membership.

This is a community that is living out of the infinity loop and born out of impulses found in design thinking. We are back to the importance of listening, being open, and finding new partners in perichoretic communion with God. The Lutheran emphasis on the twin pillars of *justification* and *vocation* positions us beautifully to encounter the God who is loose in the neighborhood. What is often misunderstood about the statement *justification by grace through faith* is that justification is not merely God’s way of saving us human creatures who are unable to justify ourselves (though it *is* that). More than that, God justifies us *in order that* we can be free to love our neighbor. In a very real sense, justification is for the sake of the neighbor, not just me, the one justified. The implications of this are huge: Love your neighbor not because you need the credit in heaven. Love your neighbor because your neighbor needs love. And if we are to truly love anyone in this world, love always demands that we get to know our neighbor, listen to him or her, have empathy, see things from our neighbor’s point of view.

From a pastor’s point of view, this means we are called to listen, attend, and empower—whether it is our fellow priests or simply our neighbor who has hopes, dreams, and anxieties. It’s about love, to be sure, but it’s also about loving our neighbors by attending to what is going on in their lives.

From a pastor’s point of view, this means we are called to listen, attend, and empower—whether it is our fellow *priests* or simply our neighbor who has hopes, dreams, and anxieties. It’s about love, to be sure, but it’s also about loving our neighbors by attending to what is going on in their lives. As Herring and Elton ask, what if congregations flipped their understanding of themselves from being dispensers of information to being platforms for collective learning? As the Christian youth outreach organization Young Life has taught its leaders for years, one has to earn the right to be heard (leadership that empowers). When people believe you have their best interests at heart, they will listen to you. So, if we listen deeply to our people and refuse to obsess about the numbers, we will be better positioned to address declining numbers in the church. And if we listen deeply to our neighbors who are unchurched, form community with them, and find common cause and mission, then we will be living into the new church for a new time.

Shakespeare wrote, “Life is not a tale told by an idiot, a brief candle . . . signifying nothing; it is participation in the life of God.” One church member who took the “GPS” course later wrote that this Shakespeare quote summarized for him the experience of the course: *participation in the life of God*. And what exactly does

that look like? *A new humanity that God has gathered at the foot of the cross.* It's time for the church to reclaim more fully what it actually is, and to discover, again and again what it means to practice the presence and movement of God. ⊕

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