



# The Future of Congregations: Cruciform Communities of Hope<sup>1</sup>

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I'm part of the sandwich generation. My days are filled with the joy of welcoming grandchildren into our family and the sacred trust of accompanying elders in their final days. This weekend, for example, I'm babysitting our granddaughter as well as attending a family funeral and discussing my parents' "End of Life" intentions. This beautiful journey is a wild and crazy rollercoaster of emotions and daily experiences. There are precious milestone moments, right alongside hard conversations. Some days are filled with wonder about the

<sup>1</sup> The ideas presented in this article are addressed in greater detail in Terri Elton, *Journeying in the Wilderness: Forming Faith in the 21st Century* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2020). More resources are also available at <https://journeyinginthewilderness.org/>

*Christians are formed and nourished in local congregations of faith, and given their identity as members of the body of Christ. Forming this faith means more than just gathering for worship, it also includes discovering a cruciform identity that Christians carry out into the world and into all the elements of their lives.*

future and other days focus on honoring the legacy of the past. Navigating possibilities with curiosity as well as naming the limitations of human finitude is complex. Most days I am unsure where to focus and devote my time. What does faithful accompaniment entail? What is the best way to invest in the future?

I sense many of today's church leaders would describe themselves as part of the sandwich generation. Certainly, some leaders are primarily walking with congregations, and congregants, in their final days and other leaders are solely focused on experimenting with new models of ministry for the future, but most leaders, I would argue, are juggling both. Being in the middle is hard, yet it also is a gift, with a unique perspective, call for action, and reflection that is imperative for this time in the church's history. So, if you find yourself "in the middle," then this article is for you.

## THE LOCAL CHURCH

Every Sunday, Christian communities make the radical claim that God is alive in their midst. Pastors name God's presence as they preach the gospel, make crosses on the foreheads of infants and adults gathered at baptismal fonts, and invite people to come and be fed at God's table. People of faith place their trust in God as they request prayers for friends and family, celebrate God's faithfulness in liturgy and song, and restore relationships as they forgive actual neighbors, spouses, and siblings. Christians dare to confess that the God who blessed Abraham and Sarah, called Mary and Joseph, and sent Peter, James and John is the same God present with them in worship, at their dinner tables, and in their daily life. These are bold claims, powerful declarations, and transformative assertions.

For centuries the local church has been central to God's ongoing presence in the world. The forms of the local church have, and will, change over time, yet the call remains the same. As 1 Corinthians says, we are "servants of Christ and stewards of God's mysteries" (1 Corinthians 4:1). In every era, and within the particularities of each age, God's church is called to share the peculiar story of Jesus Christ and steward the Christian witness. This call transcends any form of church and its viability is not bound to any institutional expression. As Rolf Jacobson points out, "each Christian congregation belongs to

God.”<sup>2</sup> God is the owner and “we are merely the stewards.”<sup>3</sup> Being a steward relies on people actually being in relationship with God and participating in loving the world as God does. This is the “Spirit-given vocation”<sup>4</sup> of the local church, and this is what every generation is called to steward in its time. We carry out this role because God’s love has and does transform lives, God’s grace and mercy does in fact heal and restore, and God’s Spirit continues to unite diverse, broken people into the beloved body of Christ. The world always needs love, unity, healing, and transformation and the witness of the Christian faith depends on each generation heeding this divine calling. Perhaps it is time that congregations rediscover their unique call to steward the future witness of the Christian faith.

The local church is a community located at the intersection of the past, present, and future. It is “an historic, tradition-bearing community of faith”<sup>5</sup> where “faith is expressed, transformed, and made meaningful.”<sup>6</sup> It is a community rooted in the resurrected Christ and formed by God’s enduring love. It is an incarnation of God’s beloved community where God promises to show up and where God’s promised future breaks into the world. Living in the present, connected to the past and with a vision of the future, God’s people live with hope in a world that is not yet as God imagined. Congregations clear about their unique calling and location are able to provide hope and meaning for people, communities, and the world as they accompany people in discovering a Christian way of life in the midst of their particular contextual realities.

## DISCOVERING A CHRISTIAN WAY OF LIFE

So, what does it mean to accompany people in discovering a Christian way of life? Just like the forms of local church change over

<sup>2</sup> Rolf Jacobson, “‘Stewards of God’s Mysteries’: Stewarding as a Model of Congregational Ministry” in *Word & World* 26, no. 3 (2006): 252. This article explores the biblical notion of stewarding as a model of congregational ministry and provides six ramifications for the church.

<sup>3</sup> Rolf Jacobson, “‘Stewards of God’s Mysteries,’” 252.

<sup>4</sup> Rolf Jacobson, “‘Stewards of God’s Mysteries,’” 249.

<sup>5</sup> John H. Westerhoff III, *Will Our Children Have Faith?* (New York: Morehouse, 2012), 20.

<sup>6</sup> Westerhoff III, *Will Our Children Have Faith?*, 20.

time, so do the ways the local church accompanies people. Discerning how to discover a Christian way of life within our twenty-first-century context is one of the biggest challenges facing congregations today. Luther Seminary's research identified that forming Christian identity and Christian community with members, members' children, and neighbors is the biggest struggle congregations face.<sup>7</sup> National studies show that the church's current approaches to forming faith have not cultivated lifelong followers of Jesus<sup>8</sup> or what Kendra Creasy Dean calls "a consequential faith."<sup>9</sup> This isn't overly surprising since current approaches to forming faith were designed for different conditions and contexts. Pivoting from a model of church focused on membership to a faith community calibrated around accompanying people in discovering a Christian way of life amidst current realities is one of the most significant shifts needed in the church today.<sup>10</sup>

A life of faith is ultimately not *about* us, how often we go to church, or what we know about God. Faith begins with God. God created all of life, and God gave *us* life. God loves the world, and God loves *us*. We are God's beloved creation, and, first and foremost, faith is God's gift to us, a living relationship with the Creator. Faith defines who we are and is the identity from which abundant life flows. Faith is a relationship God initiates and invites us into. It is God's grace and mercy that comes to us and transforms us. Martin Luther says it this way: faith "is God's work in us that changes us... our hearts, our spirits, our thoughts, and all our powers."<sup>11</sup> And faith becomes a compass for our lives as we love God and others as God does. Congregations

<sup>7</sup> Research that informed Luther Seminary's 2017 Vision statement. Luther's vision statement can be found here: <https://www.luthersem.edu/about/mission-and-vision/#:~:text=Community%20Oriented.,Vision%20Statement,in%20a%20rapidly%20changing%20world>.

<sup>8</sup> Some research includes: The National Study of Youth and Religion (Christian Smith, <http://youthandreligion.nd.edu/>), The Exemplar Youth Ministry Study (Spirit and Culture of Youth Ministry, 2010), Sticky Faith (Kara Powell, Fuller Youth Institute, <https://fulleryouthinstitute.org/stickyfaith>), and The Confirmation Project (Princeton, <https://theconfirmationproject.com/>).

<sup>9</sup> Kendra Creasy Dean, *Almost Christian: What the Faith of Our Teenagers Is Telling the American Church* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

<sup>10</sup> For more on the key pivots facing the church today see the Faith+Lead website: <https://faithlead.org/about/framework/four-key-pivots/>

<sup>11</sup> Martin Luther, "An Introduction to St. Paul's Letter to the Romans," in *Dr. Martin Luther's Vermischte Deutsche Schriften*, vol 63, trans. Robert E. Smith (Erlangen: Hayden & Zimmer, 1854), 124–125.

anchored in God's transformational love nurtures relationships that incarnate this creative and redemptive love.

Relationships in which people are known, seen, and able to be themselves are the primary means for discovering a Christian way of life. Relationships are central because love is relational and love is the core of faith. We, God's beloved children, are invited to participate in God's mission by loving others and caring for the world that God made. Participating in God's mission gives life purpose and makes us co-creators of the future. As we join God in loving the world, we, the subjects of God's love, become agents of God's love. This is what we were designed for and who God created us to be. Making meaning of life is theological work that happens as we reflect on our lived experiences and our understanding of God. A life of faith "refers to the patterns of being, doing, and thinking that... assign meaning."<sup>12</sup> As people develop their own way of seeing and living in the world, they discover an "alternative tradition, gospel, and life-style."<sup>13</sup> When the local church helps people interpret their lives, discern God's activity in their particular circumstances, and create a vision of living abundantly, they not only help them make spiritual sense of their lives, they also discover hope.

Past approaches to forming faith have focused almost exclusively on moments when Christians gather. This focus has resulted in a lack of attention and imagination to the ways God is present in the world and within our ordinary experiences. For example, Christians expect God to be present when gathered for worship or Bible study, but few anticipate God to be present while mowing the lawn, picking kids up from school, or while doing the laundry. Yet it is precisely in the moments when we are scattered in the world where questions of faith and meaning most often arise. Today, there is a growing number of people who can imagine a good life without God. This is a time when Christianity is not the dominant worldview and the Bible is not the ultimate authority. Within this context it is easy to question our Christian faith. It is hard to articulate the difference faith makes to people who are unfamiliar with the God made known the person of

<sup>12</sup> David I. Smith, *Learning from the Stranger: Christian Faith and Cultural Diversity* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009), 5.

<sup>13</sup> Douglas John Hall, *The Cross in Our Context: Jesus and the Suffering World* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 24.

Jesus or who do not know the biblical story. Accompanying people in discovering a Christian way of life within current realities requires a renewed attention to sharing our own faith stories, naming the difference Jesus makes in our lives and the world, and helping people experience God's transformational love.

Discovering a Christian way of life is an ongoing journey that happens as we encounter God, others, and the world. Our encounters with God, others, and the world form and shape how we understand ourselves as God's beloved and how we can love the world as God does. This ongoing journey is personal and communal, it will include navigating predictable and unpredictable life moments. Gathering as a local church is important for discovering a Christian way of life, but so are times scattered in the world. Twenty-first century faith formation approaches must recognize that faith is formed as much when we welcome strangers, hold hands with a dying friend or family member, or share a meal with someone with food insecurity, as when we worship on Sunday or attend a Bible study.

Forming a Christian way of life without cultural privilege, societal entitlement, and in a world where people can imagine good without God, needs new rhythms and practices. As leaders living "in the middle," it's time to shift our attention from attracting members, finding the best program, and improving management practices to cultivating cruciform communities of hope that help people discover Christianity as a way of life. Being a Christian has been primarily focused on "going to church," not as a way of living. It has been centered on Sunday worship, not on discovering what a 24/7 faith entails. When a Christian worldview normed society, the institutional church augmented faith practiced at home with worship, pastoral care, and teaching faith. The gathered community assumed people knew the biblical story and basic faith practices. Today pastors preach to people who are biblically illiterate and people of faith witness to a story that is strange and unfamiliar to many of their family and neighbors. Graciously loving others in response to God's creatively and redemptively for us is odd to many in our workplaces. Recognizing the gathering and scattering rhythm of the Christian life is imperative to a faithful Christian witness today and the local church must become a community of practice where faith connects the experience of persons and communities to God's creative and redeeming love every day, in all seasons of life, and in every circumstance.

Practices are easily applied and translated into various contexts and situations. Teach someone to pray, for example, and they can talk with God at any time, in any language, in any part of the world. Vincent Miller, a Roman Catholic theologian, believes that practices, as simple, ordinary actions, create meaning and can be repurposed.<sup>14</sup> Practices have the power to help people make meaning of their lives and adapt their behavior as necessary. For example, listening is a simple practice that has the power to enhance life and deepen relationships. Researchers Donella Caspersz and Ania Stasinska remind us that: “Listening is not the same as hearing.”<sup>15</sup> Hearing is a physical ability, while listening is “a conscious process.”<sup>16</sup> Studies show that most adults’ ability to listen is underdeveloped. (The average adult only listens at about 25 percent efficiency).<sup>17</sup> What if cultivating deep listening was a spiritual practice? Listening deeply shifts listeners’ focus from themselves to another; it connects the speaker and listener’s experiences, and it honors the speaker as a beloved child of God. Introducing listening as a spiritual practice to people in congregational gatherings allows them to become familiar with the practice, reflect on the impact it has on their life, and see how engaging in deep listening is a way of loving others. Listening is portable, versatile, and can be integrated into family relationships, situations at work, and/or connecting with one’s neighbors. Teaching listening as a spiritual practice and calling attention to God’s presence during the practice empowers people to be more attentive to God in their everyday life and become agents of God’s love in their everyday encounters.<sup>18</sup>

Faith practices have always been a vital way in which people are empowered and equipped to be “church.” Yet practices must be periodically assessed and reimagined to see if they are actually cultivating faith. Most churches today have underemphasized practices and overemphasized programs. Programs can be helpful for nurturing faith, especially when congregations are working with large numbers

<sup>14</sup> Vincent J. Miller, “Taking Consumer Culture Seriously,” *Horizons* 27, no. 2 (2000): 277.

<sup>15</sup> Donella Caspersz and Ania Stasinska, “Can We Teach Effective Listening? An Exploratory Study,” *Journal of University Teaching & Learning Practice* 12, no. 4 (2015): 1.

<sup>16</sup> Caspersz and Stasinska, “Can We Teach Effective Listening?,” 1.

<sup>17</sup> Scott Williams, “Listening Effectively,” Wright State University—Raj Soin College of Business, July 18, 2018. [www.wright.edu/~scott.williams/LeaderLetter/listening.htm](http://www.wright.edu/~scott.williams/LeaderLetter/listening.htm)

<sup>18</sup> For a free, downloadable practice guide on listening, see <https://journeyinginthewilderness.org/practices/>.

of people or creating opportunities to invite friends and neighbors into faith conversations, yet too much of faith formation has been reduced to programs like Sunday school, confirmation, VBS, and mission trips. An unintentional consequence of this approach is that faith becomes associated with activities offered by the church (often led by paid staff and held in the church building) and disconnected from everyday life. Practices may be woven into these programs, but they are often reduced to educational tools to make a point, not for the sake of living abundantly. Practices naturally embed values into life. The habit of praying before meals, for example, highlights gratitude for “the hands that have prepared it” and allows God to interrupt our day. While they can become rote, they can also be very meaningful. Focusing more on practices, than programs, provides scaffolding for discovering faith gathered in Christian community and scattered in the world. Practices are a GPS-like system for discovering a Christian way of life in all situations and circumstances.

## CRUCIFORM COMMUNITIES OF HOPE

A peculiar story makes the local church a cruciform community of hope—the story of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Practices centered on this peculiar story anchor and free God’s people to steward the Christian witness and discover a Christian way of life in the particularities of their context. The local church that incarnates God’s creative and redemptive love and empowers people to live in solidarity with the world with the hope of the resurrected Christ becomes a sign, foretaste, and an instrument of God’s mission in the world. Three types of practices cultivate this community: *sacramental*, or practices that nurture our relationship with God and transform human communities into the body of Christ; *incarnational*, or practices that foster relationships informed, formed, and transformed by God’s love; and *missional*, or practices that co-create God’s vision of abundant living in the world God made. Distinctive and overlapping, these practices provide scaffolding for cultivating Christian identity and community within twenty-first-century conditions.

The church has practices that are unique to the church; *sacramental practices* nurture our relationship with God and transform human communities into the body of Christ. These practices connect



us to God, and, frankly, they are the practices that make church the church. These holy practices are ancient, steadfast, and have stood the test of time. Sacramental practices connect people and communities to God, and they help humans discover the divine within the confines of language and the physical world. These holy practices are referred to as sacramental because they use earthly elements to make the divine present in the world and in our lives. Lutherans call them the means of grace. Here I am using sacramental in an expansive way to include not only the sacraments but also reading Scripture, singing Psalms, prayer practices like *lectio Divina*, and fasting. But what if we could imagine the sacraments as ongoing spiritual practices?

Baptism combines water with promises and claims us as God's children as we mark foreheads with the cross of Christ. This is a transformative, one-time event. How might we integrate a baptismal practice into our daily routine? Imagine what impact making a sign of the cross on the foreheads of each person in our household and reminding them they are God's beloved children of God each morning could have on our life. Or think about how meaningful it would be for a husband and wife in the final years of their life to end each day with this same practice. How might this physical marking of the cross and repetitive reminder that we are God's beloved child change the way we see ourselves? How might this simple practice convey a divine word of hope in us as we navigate a world that is not each as God intends? Communion, with ordinary bread and wine, blessed and distributed at a table God hosts, transforms human communities into the body of Christ. At God's table everyone gets a new start and everyone is welcome. How might God's welcome and mercy flow out of church sanctuaries into our lives? Imagine a diverse group of young adults gathered to share a meal when someone stands up and offers a radical welcome such as this:

Thank you for coming. Before we eat, I want you to let you know that you belong here. You belong here not because of your potential or because you have your life together. You belong here because a long time ago a man named Jesus gathered with his friends at a dinner like this. And at that dinner, he took bread and wine, blessed it and gave it to his friends to eat with this promise—you are always welcome at my table. At my table your sins are forgiven and your

wrongdoings are wiped. And when I am no longer here, continue to gather with friends, bring bread and wine and ask God's blessing so that you remember me and continue this welcome. So tonight we invite Jesus to be our host and we gather around his promise and welcome.

Holy, ancient practices illuminate who and whose we are; they liberate us from the things of this world that bind us and free us to love and live as the person God created us to be. The church has a rich library of practices for cultivating Christian community with sacramental practices. All we have to do is open our imagination beyond our church gatherings and become curious about how such practices might inhabit our lives when we are scattered in the world.

Relationships are the primary means for discovering a Christian way of life, so *incarnational practices* foster relationships informed, formed, and transformed by God's love. Many congregations make assumptions about relationships and Christian community. One primary assumption is that when people share physical space, they are creating Christian community. Just because people sit alongside each other in worship or talk during coffee hour does not mean that they are fostering relationships. Spiritual relationships do not just happen, they must be nurtured and tended. Cultivating Christian community has at least four elements: *engagement*, *embodiment*, *community care*, and *being open*.<sup>19</sup> Church leaders cannot force relationships, but we can create the conditions for creating and deepening them. We can set that stage for people to get to know each other, share stories of their lives, and risk telling others about their realities. Storytelling is one practice where people engage and become vulnerable with one another. Loving each other, on good days and hard ones, within the messiness of actual communities, allows people to experience the peculiarity of the Christian story in real time and circumstances. Praying for and forgiving each other are practices unique to Christian communities and they enhance abundant living. Caring for people is a practice that provides hope in times of grief, distress, sickness, and uncertainty. I have seen local churches witness to the mysteries of God as they come around people following surgeries, after an accident, in the midst of a long-term illness, or during a family crisis. I

<sup>19</sup> Elton, *Journeying in the Wilderness*, 195.

have personally experienced the comfort that comes from people of faith providing care and spiritual support in the days leading to my mother-in-law's death. Words do not do justice to the gratitude our family felt those days. And the local church is an open community because God created it that way. It is a community open to persons not yet present, open to difference, and open to God's Spirit stirring in their midst. Human nature is to turn inward and stay within what's comfortable and known. Yet to be a community formed by the peculiar story of Jesus is to open ourselves to the unexpected, to the stranger, to pain and injustice, and to the leading of the Spirit. Relational practices informed by these four elements are essential for discovering a Christian way of life. They enliven local churches and life in the communities in which we live and work.

The world is not yet as God intends. Injustice, suffering, and sin exist in the world and *missional practices* invite us to co-create God's vision of abundant living in the world. Faith is lived in the world; there is no other place. Each of us is located in a particular place, has a particular network of relationships, and is designed with particular gifts and passions. Discovering a Christian way of life celebrates our unique design and challenges us to be agents of God's love within our relationships and the places we find ourselves. Faith is not an "add-on," or extra set of activities, but a way of life within our current relationships and realities. Missional practices focus on faith in the world. If your time is spent visiting parents in an assisted living community, then imagine how God's love might be shared with people in that community. If you spend seasons of your life at the soccer field, how might you be in relationship with the people standing near you? How might your passion for music enliven others or your desire for affordable housing be directed for the well-being of the community? What if everyone and every workplace was an outpost of God's love? God's people are scattered throughout the world and everyone has opportunities to steward the future witness of the Christian faith in the particular places they find themselves.

We, God's beloved people, are formed by the peculiar story of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. We have hope, not because of any progress we see in the world or the vitality of the institutional church in our era, but because of God and what God has and is doing in and through us. We live in the paradox of God's promised future and a world that is not yet fully as God intends. We can lament what we do

not see and wish for living in a different moment in history or we can embrace living “in the middle” and steward the future of the Christian witness in this era. Rediscovering the local church’s unique calling and committing to accompanying people in discovering a Christian way of life in the midst of our context realities is a call for action with a unique perspective for navigating these complex days. We are people of hope stewarding the mysteries of God. ⊕

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