

Best Practices for the Post-Pandemic Church

Co-Missioners,

In the seminary days that some of us remember, they called it “practical theology.” This was the curriculum’s how-to section, offering courses in everything that pastors were expected to do: preaching, teaching, counseling, evangelizing, managing a congregation, and the like. Some students thrived in this. Others opted for as few such classes as they could get away with, preferring to keep their noses buried in the arcana of Scriptural or theological studies. There is reason to pity the all-too-patient congregations on whom the latter were foisted.

Today’s guest contributor addresses a how-to issue that confronts us all in these strange days when the shape and patterns of congregational life are shifting under our feet, and the imperative of witness and outreach is more pressing than ever.

Paul G. Theiss is a retired ELCA pastor who grew up in a poor rural area and entered the University of California as an agnostic. There he experienced a conversion to Christ’s way—so he puts it—and a call to pastoral ministry. He began his studies at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis. On graduating from Seminex in 1974, he served parishes in San Francisco, Mariposa (near Yosemite), and Hayward, California. Subsequent calls took him to Northern Nevada and Arkansas. Along the way he has led community resistance to white racism and, lately, to ICE. He has also worked on disaster recovery, hunger, and fair housing issues. He and his wife, Nancy Satterford, live in Vallejo, California. They are blessed with three children and three grandchildren.

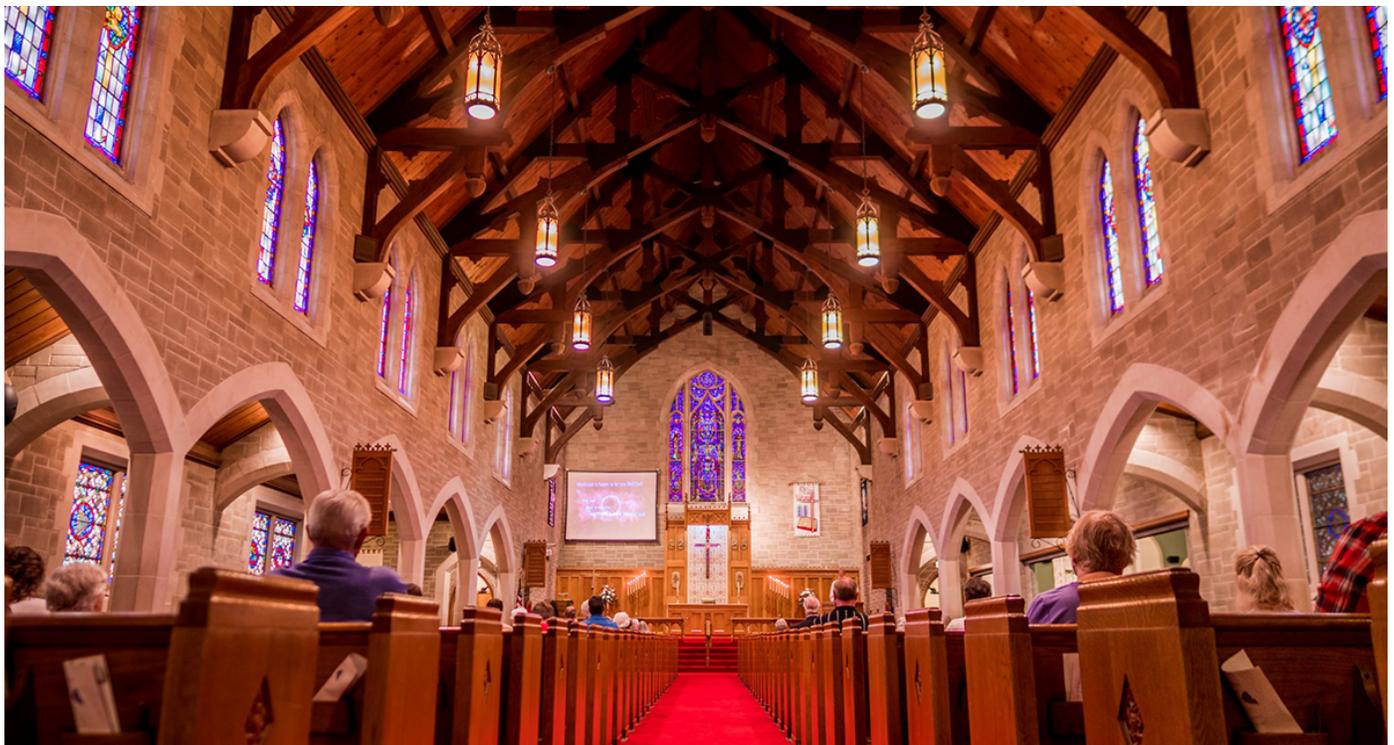
Paul sent us this essay this week. It came as an altogether unexpected gift. We are pleased indeed to share it with you. We trust you'll profit from its practicality, wise and faithful.

Peace and Joy,

The Crossings Community

The Post-Pandemic Church: Best Practices and Small Groups for Change

by Paul G. Theiss



When the solution is simple, God is answering. –Albert Einstein

During the COVID-19 pandemic, local congregations are doing what they do best: making pragmatic changes to reach people. My pastor switched to YouTube. Our Wednesday evening Bible study

gathers now on Zoom and includes new folks who aren't members of our church. A minister friend tells me that her church's offerings are greater than last year's because they took a simple step which stewardship experts have advocated for years: they asked their members to give.

Churches grow when they apply best practices to reach people. I learned that as the pastor of a new congregation. The regional church declined to fund it because only 10,000 folks lived within a half hour's drive. The area had more cows than people. Some local Christians started a denominational congregation there anyway with no outside subsidy. We reached out with simple best practices, and people came. Over 70% of that area was unchurched, and many had never encountered Jesus.

We got our strength from God's loving heart: the free grace of Jesus, preached as Law and Gospel, communicated through Word and Sacrament. Our fringe position pushed us to welcome whoever came through the door. Two of our simple best practices were welcoming newcomers early in the service, and following up with a personal greeting within a day or two. One visitor was surprised to receive a handwritten note from the pastor. She returned to worship, and stayed.

Almost every church has opportunities to grow, numerically as well as spiritually. In the most secular cities and sparsely populated rural areas, people make the effort to seek us out. Over forty-five years of ministry, every church I've pastored got visitors. No matter how remote the location or how gritty the surroundings, strangers miraculously arrived on Sunday mornings.

I learned, though, that best practices weren't enough. For lasting growth, there must be a congregational culture which welcomes the newcomers into a supportive community. New people

bring new problems, and older members with tenure sometimes have trouble making room for them. This is nothing new in the church: the New Testament story tells of post-Pentecost growing pains. The first Christ-followers remembered his Great Commission, and grew a welcoming church culture as they grew in numbers.



Dr. Atul Gawande reports in a recent *New Yorker* article [1] on the remarkable success of his hospital system, Mass General Brigham of Boston, in keeping its staff healthy during the pandemic. Their region is hard hit, yet their rate of staff infections is far lower than the surrounding population's. How do they do it? Best practices and a culture which accepts change. They apply distancing, hand washing, masks and screening: all simple best practices. But, Dr. Gawande says, these wouldn't work without a culture of caring. Employees of Mass General Brigham are there because they care: they want others to get well. They're willing to change their behavior to that end.

The medical world has dealt with this problem before. Twenty years ago, hospital-acquired infections were running rampant. Nasty bugs were newly resistant to antibiotics. So the health care industry returned to simple best practices, like hand washing and hand sanitizer, to stop the spread. But this wasn't enough: a culture of caring drove the change.

Turnaround took coordinated effort: multi-level synergy, an open flow of communication from bottom to top as well as top to bottom. Union reps advocated for their members' safety. Feedback bubbled up from floor supervisors to administrators, who listened and fine-tuned their policies. Accrediting boards followed the numbers. Insurers dealt out rewards and penalties. Targets were set and adjusted; problem areas identified. Slowly, steadily, the numbers turned around. When COVID-19 arrived, they were ready.

Contemporary church culture is ill equipped to treat the virus of conflict which often accompanies numerical growth. Reactionary groups within congregations may threaten to quit unless the church stops the process and ejects the pastor. Progressive lay leaders, hoping to keep everyone happy, are paralyzed by fear of losing members. Pastors may overreact, taking the criticism too personally and responding in kind. Even regional church executives may choose to placate the diehards rather than back the change agents.

So how to transform the culture? Some congregations are healthy enough to handle growth and change on their own. Like the Jerusalem church in Acts 6, they know how to deal with conflict constructively. Their clergy and lay leadership is far-sighted and flexible. But other congregations, like Corinth, are not so gifted. They need help. How to provide it?



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ated as “build up” or “edify,” describes a key driver of healthy change. It’s a growth dynamic in the household of faith, strengthening and enriching it, spiritually and numerically. Jesus “builds” his church (Matthew 16:18). Christians build by including more people (Ephesians 2:13-22), loving one another (1 Corinthians 8:1), supporting, encouraging (1 Corinthians 14:3-4, 1 Thessalonians 5:11), serving (Romans 14:19), leading (Ephesians 4:11-12), and even correcting one another (2 Corinthians 10:8, 13:10). The goal is for everyone to take part in *oikodomeo*, not as widgets in a bureaucratic machine but as vital organs in a living body (Ephesians 4:12-16). One way to know if a church is healthy is if its least prominent members are growing spiritually (1 Corinthians 12:22-26).

We the church are a household, an expanding network of relationships connecting Jesus to each one of us. Empowered by him, we build each other up. So the church grows, spiritually and numerically.

Sermons, papers, and convention speeches may promote *oikodomeo*, but for things to change, it needs a place to take root and grow. That place is a small group of leaders. Small groups

change church culture through face to face ministry in trusting relationships. Luther believed that small groups are foundational units of the Church: "Those who seriously want to be Christians and who profess the Gospel with hand and mouth should sign-in with their names and meet alone in a house to pray, to read... and to do other Christian works... Here one could... center everything on the Word, prayer, and love." [2]

Small groups for congregational change must have local lay leaders, parish pastors, and judicatory staff working together in *oikodomeo*. Leave out one of these leadership categories, and the chance of failure goes up. Posting a "Wash Your Hands!" notice from the CDC in the hospital cafeteria doesn't lower the infection rate. People at each level of the medical world become ready to do their part, to receive constructive criticism, and to support one another. Those concerned are involved, and those involved are concerned.

In a small group for change, lay leaders gain perspective, grounding their volunteer service in the church's mission. Pastors receive guidance in a supportive environment and backup when things go haywire. Regional executives discover a new set of co-workers in addition to their peers at the central office. When congregational stress increases and a backlash develops, they can understand the context and buy in. Management expert Peter Drucker writes,

One of the oldest techniques for keeping executives alive to the realities of implementing an organization's mission is for them to work... where service is delivered to the organization's clients. One well-trained medical bureaucrat I know was forced by a strike or some sudden epidemic... to work as a floor nurse for a week. Suddenly he was down where the heartbreaks and the successes are played out. It forced him to learn and, as he admitted to me, "It forced me to be

honest with myself.” Now the hospital’s rule (and it is one of the finest hospitals I know) is that he and all his administrators spend one week a year working on the floor with the people who take care of the patients. [3]

A small group for change supports best practices and builds a welcoming culture. Here’s how to make it happen.

1. The effort launches with the regional church, which publicly commits to this effort and devotes staff time to it.
2. Invitations to apply are extended to congregations which have adopted a mission plan in a healthy inclusive process, taking into account their own strengths and weaknesses and the challenges of their local environment. The regional church publicly endorses each qualifying plan.
3. Congregations and the regional church agree to delegate conflict resolution issues to the small group for the congregations which participate in it.
4. A group includes two or three congregations, each with a pastor and at least two elected lay leaders, plus a regional executive. The group numbers no more than a dozen or so. They agree to meet for three years, taking enough time at the beginning to bond with one another.
5. They prepare a written covenant that includes daily prayer for each other, one day spent together per quarter, and a promise to meet in emergency session if there’s a sudden crisis in any of the congregations.
6. The group’s only focus is the numerical growth of the congregations involved, through best practices. This narrow goal avoids lofty objectives, difficult to achieve and impossible to quantify. A focus on numerical growth lessens the possibility of divisive internal issues in the group.

7. Each congregation develops its own list of best practices. One size does not fit all. Each congregation agrees to involve its leadership and membership in implementing the list, and to receive regular feedback from the group.
8. A day together could look like this:
 1. Gathering worship of minds and hearts, deeper than a perfunctory opening prayer.
 2. Personal and congregational check-in around the circle, under a seal of confidentiality for this part of the meeting.
 3. A Bible study or other paper on growth and conflict.
 4. A case study from one of the congregations.
 5. Group business, including take-homes for congregations and responsibilities for the next meeting.
 6. Sending worship with prayer for each person and congregation.
 7. A meal together before departing.
9. Groups could network electronically across regions and denominations.
10. Parish pastors and/or spouses who desire a similar kind of group could form another one focused on mutual pastoral care. Groups like these have been life-savers for me.

Not every leader is ready for this level of humility and honesty. But small groups for change can give new life and hope to congregations in decline. They can learn from conflict rather than sweeping it under the rug. They can help build consensus in congregations and offset the power of reactionary cliques.

I remember my friend Mike from the Tenderloin District of San Francisco. As a gay man he'd been ejected from a profession that he'd trained for. Coming to the city for refuge, he found a job as the manager of a single room occupancy hotel. On Sunday mornings he cleaned up the



empty bottles and needles at the front door. Rounding the corner onto Eddy Street, he faced into a foggy wind mixed with the foul

smell of the gutter. The spires of our church rose ahead, welcoming him to worship at the top of the hill.

He told me that as he walked uphill toward the steeples rising into the grey clouds, he felt his spirit lift. He was rising into the person God blessed him to be. His church accepted him, and he was growing to accept himself. After worship he returned downhill into the Tenderloin, stronger to serve.

Arriving at that church as a pastor, I expected to set aside traditional programming and start a new alternative Christian community from scratch. Yet before I could do so, newcomers came through our creaky old doors! They thought our church was just fine, because we thought to make them welcome. Our congregations are almost never without seekers who come to the church as it is, when we accept them as they are.

That church in San Francisco suffered a powerful reaction against change. Sadly, it lost a third of its members in the conflict. But a congregational culture of mutual encouragement, of *oikodomeo*, supported simple best practices as it welcomed the people of its neighborhood.

People like Mike are all around us, from all ages and backgrounds. As the pandemic subsides, some of them will come through our doors again. God has given us the gifts to welcome them: best practices and supportive community.

Organized Christianity has always had community; it has always had leaders; it has always experienced internal conflict; and it has always been given opportunities to grow. Whatever shape it may take in the future, right now thousands of congregations and millions of believers gather every week. They have the powerful gifts of supportive community and the means to grow through best practices. They also face obstacles. Which will determine their future: the obstacles or the gifts God has given them?

Endnotes:

[1] Atul Gawande, "Amid the Coronavirus Crisis, a Regimen for Reentry," *The New Yorker* 96 (May 13, 2020),

<https://www.newyorker.com/science/medical-dispatch/amid-the-coronavirus-crisis-a-regimen-for-reentry>

[2] Luther, Martin, "The German Mass and the Order of the Liturgy," in *The Annotated Luther: Church and Sacraments* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2016) 141

[3] Drucker, Peter, *Managing the Non-Profit Organization* (New York: HarperCollins, 1990), 201.

Thursday Theology: that the benefits of Christ be put to use
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