

“What’s a Church For?”  
October 13, 2024

Ephesians 2:19-23  
Matthew 28:16-20

Samuel Wells, the vicar of St. Martin in the Fields, the Anglican church in London, recently said: “It’s widely rumored that organized religion is going down the drain.”

He’s not so sure about this—and neither am I. Still, there’s that uneasy feeling I get when looking at all the people passing by out front, on this or any given Sunday morning, on their way to any number of options and avoiding our doors.

What’s a church for?

Many ask that question and don’t come up with much of an answer.

Lately there’s been a lot of hand wringing about “Christian Nationalism.” And, yes, the voices of the Christian right continue to be amplified.

The real problem is that many have forgotten about—or never knew about—the long and ongoing expressions of Christian faith that grow from a liberal understanding of faith and life. Our congregation and our denomination are descendants of the great Protestant reformers who challenged both church *and* state, recovering the freedom of faith for individuals and congregations.

We are descendants of the Puritans, who, as Marilynne told us in that surprising essay, “Puritans and Prigs,” were not so, well, *puritanical*. “By the standards of the period in which they flourished, American Puritans were not harsh or intolerant,” she wrote. But we rarely judge them by those standards.

For many decades now, even as many have made a very concerted effort to cast Christianity in a conservative—and even authoritarian—image, our liberal Protestant tradition has brought a grace-filled and tolerant (in the best sense of those words) approach to such issues as racism and civil rights, the protection of the environment, the rights of gays and lesbians, including the right to marry, and hunger and homelessness and poverty in America.

We take seriously, not our own sufferings alone, but the suffering of God in the world, seen in our neighbors near and far. We pray for the poor, the hungry, the homeless, the victims of disasters. We also find ourselves helping to rebuild cities; we find ourselves welcoming the homeless, feeding the hungry, and working for policies and practices that would lessen poverty in Iowa City and around the globe.

We *believe* that God’s love extends to all people. And we act on what believe.

We can embrace this tradition with joy. We can speak of it with pride. Out of our liberal Protestant tradition we faithfully bring the good news of God's love *to* the world rather than being shaped into what other's think we *should* be.

What's a church for?

Yes, we are a puzzle to many. Here we are—as we have been for over 150 years. But we're not the University. We're not the Downtown. We are a singular thing. And we can seem like such a small thing in the face of larger forces and institutions—although that smallness points toward our strength and our purpose.

We stand as a mediating presence between individuals and those larger forces and institutions, offering a place of belonging. At a time when great power and great wealth are concentrated in the hands of very few, we are able to join with one another as a place where individuals—often with little power on their own—can find power, the ability to act, as we come *together* for positive ends.

We listen as the risen Christ says to his followers: “Go. Bring others into this community. Teach them.”

Along with the early Christians in Ephesus, we hear the good news that in places of anonymity and alienation—in Iowa City, at the University—we are no longer strangers. We are known by one another. Together we gather to worship, we work with each other in mission, we study in groups, we bear one another's burdens, and we talk and laugh together over coffee.

We are growing together into the very dwelling place of God.

What's a church for?

The good vicar Wells encourages churches—and congregations such as ours, “to identify the things missing from contemporary culture and offer them in absorbing and attractive ways, making them readily available and reducing their strangeness. It's not hard to see,” he says, “what's missing in our self-actualizing culture: deep contemplation, true companionship, sincere dialogue across difference, an identity beyond self-expression, tangible and profound belonging. All such things have a significant place in historic Christianity, and many people are at least somewhat aware that their lives are impoverished without them.”<sup>1</sup>

All lives might be enriched as we discover, reclaim, and share these aspects of our liberal Christian faith together.

Together we announce and show the good news of God's love when disasters strike, when refugees are demonized, when students are lonely, when children are hungry.

Together we learn not only the ancient stories of scripture but also our own stories of faith and doubt, love and fear, and how to discern the living God in the midst of daily life.

We grow—together—through the work we do—together—at our best producing signs and wonders for all to see.

Think about it: much of what we value, we learn together.

We learn sports on teams.

People come from across our nation, from around the world, to this town where they learn to write, to sing, to perform, with others.

We learn from others how to act with civility, how to love.

In the same way, we learn to be Christian from other faithful people within a community. Because this particular community is healthy, we become healthy, faithful people ourselves.

In faith, we would affirm that God created us for life in community. In difficult times a community can sustain you—you know that. You know, as well, that when life is good you find yourself giving back and enriching the communities to which you belong.

As one person put it: “We benefit from being part of an open, inclusive group, encouraging our own best instincts toward warm, welcoming community.”<sup>ii</sup>

As with so many other things, generosity, as well, is not learned in isolation. We learn to be generous ourselves by being around people who give, by receiving the gifts of a community.

What’s a church for?

Community is a gift—and we are all *stewards* of that gift. As you study, as you work, as you raise your family, as you enjoy retirement this community is here for you—and really, it’s what is needed by so many who pass by here unknowing.

The poet Kathleen Norris, reflecting on her experience in her South Dakota congregation, writes: “I have only to look at the congregation I know best, the one I belong to. We are not individuals who have come together because we are like minded. That is not a church, but a political party. We are like most healthy churches, I think, in that we can do pretty well when it comes to loving and serving God, each other, and the world; but God help us if we have to agree about things. . . . Christians fuss and fume and struggle. It may look awful from the outside, and it can feel awful on the inside, but it is simply the cost of Christian discipleship.

“The church is like the Incarnation itself, a shaky proposition. It is a human institution, full of ordinary people, sinners like me, who say and do cruel, stupid things. But it is also a divinely inspired institution, full of good purpose, which partakes of a unity far greater than the sum of its parts.”<sup>iii</sup>

Generosity, of course, is a defining characteristic of this congregation. This generosity—in how we give, in how we act—helps us grow in faith and in human character. Because we are people who give *together* and grow *together*, this congregation actually welcomes it when we are challenged to increased generosity. We share a joyful spirit of giving—a giving of time, a sharing of abilities, and, yes, a joyful giving of money. We give freely to support the work that happens in this place, this community.

When we have learned generosity and practiced generosity it seems to stay with us.

Liberality—generous giving—is a foundational part of our heritage, built upon the knowledge that each person is made in the image of God. Out of this deep faith, we call on our political and religious institutions to be generous. Out of this deep faith, we call each of us as individuals to the same generosity.

So, yes, together we seek to be generous people. When we are not, we confess this, well, this *sin*, seek forgiveness and pray that God will continue to work in our lives. In this way, we keep discovering that the God of surprising generosity puts a fresh heart within us.

Which is why it is so important for each of us individually and all of us as congregation to seek to continue to grow in generosity.

We who have learned to be generous have the responsibility—or I might say we have the *calling*—to share this tradition with others.

A liberal spirit will be generous with all things—with love and patience, with sweat and effort, with prayer and companionship. And yes, with money as well.

What's a church for?

In community we can let the generosity of others inspire our own. In community, we can let the concern of others inspire our own. In community, we can let the sense of mission and the deep compassion of others lead us forward with faithfulness.

How did the author of Ephesians put it? “Bonded together and growing into a holy temple.” Religious words, yes. But they get at the reality that we sense in a community such as this.

We are no longer strangers but members of the household of God. Together we discover sharing and caring, reconciliation and wholeness, openness and community. With the amazing richness of this community, we become our best true selves. We become whole, healthy persons—that we might better show God's love to the world.

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<sup>1</sup>Samuel Wells, “Three Responses to Church Decline,” *Christian Century*, October 2024.  
[https://www.christiancentury.org/voices/three-responses-church-decline?code=jFEkxYjXOZJqHqSGYm04&utm\\_source=Christian+Century+Newsletter&utm\\_campaign=f a6bc8327f-EMAIL\\_CAMPAIGN\\_DEEPER\\_2024-10-02&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_term=0 - cb6a0e7463-%5BLIST\\_EMAIL\\_ID%5D](https://www.christiancentury.org/voices/three-responses-church-decline?code=jFEkxYjXOZJqHqSGYm04&utm_source=Christian+Century+Newsletter&utm_campaign=f a6bc8327f-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_DEEPER_2024-10-02&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0 - cb6a0e7463-%5BLIST_EMAIL_ID%5D)

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<sup>ii</sup> Callahan, *12 Keys for Living*, pg. 56

<sup>iii</sup> Kathleen Norris, *Amazing Grace*, pg. 272.