

SURVIVING THE STORM:

CHURCH ONLINE 24/7

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ABSTRACT
SURVIVING THE STORM:
CHURCH ONLINE 24/7

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This dissertation is about the construction of an online church as a tool for evangelism in the 21st Century. John1:14 says that the Word moved flesh and blood into the neighborhood and I feel that is the call for the Church at a time when fewer people are attending. It is time to leave the building and seek the welfare of our neighbors. churchtogether.today is an online church website that seeks to do just that, in partnership with St. John's United Methodist Church in Rohnert Park, CA, in an effort to serve our neighbors in a new way. With an online venue our neighborhood loses geographic boundaries and our outreach becomes global.

Leonard Sweet believes that the church has entered a "perfect storm" of post-Modernity, post-Christendom and post-Scale. With fewer people coming to the church to feed their spiritual hunger it is up to the church to find new and innovative ways to spread the Good News of Jesus Christ.

There are five main elements to our online church: Home Page with links to our social media, other site pages, ways to donate and the story of how we came to be; Daily Chapel which offers inspirational readings, Bible studies, and YouTubes with messages and music; Last Week Today with a filmed one hour Methodist Church worship service

as well as a variety of church music; an opportunity to meet face-to-face with other churchtogether.today family members on our Get Involved page; and a way to donate to the site and other causes through PayPal on our Collection Plate page.

Our results have been positive but we have struggled with finding ways to market the site and to plan and execute face-to-face meet ups. Our main need is finding committed lay and Clergy to keep our content fresh, and finding a source for funding. We have many followers on our social media and the website is slowly reaching more and more people. We will continue to try new ways to market the site as we endeavor to make new disciples for Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

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INTRODUCTION

*...and when the ship was caught in it and could not face the wind, we gave way to it
and let ourselves be driven along.
~Acts 27:15~*



Figure 1. *A Stormy Baltic Sea*, Digital Image, *Dark Roasted Blend*, Ochevidec.net, 2015, Web, accessed Feb 10, 2016.

Sometimes when the storm comes it's okay to let go and see where it will take you. Though we, at St. John's United Methodist Church, in Rohnert Park, CA, knew we were in the midst of a storm, our vision was clouded and we couldn't see where we were headed. We were drifting and we longed for direction.

One Saturday morning the men's group of St. John's asked me to come and join them for their breakfast gathering so we could discuss what it would mean to be a reconciling congregation. A reconciling congregation is one that has a mission statement regarding its openness to all, including and naming the LGBTQ community. Being a reconciling congregation means being put into a registry so that anyone looking for a

church where they can feel safe and accepted, whether a member of the LGBTQ community or an ally, can go online and find one. St. John's felt this was an important thing so that LGBTQ Sonoma State University students could find a safe and open church when they came to that campus, which is only about ¼ mile away from St. John's. We had a lively discussion going and then Steve (the son of one of our regulars) said something to me I will never forget. He said, "You churches all care so much about being welcoming to the LGBTQ folks but what about soccer families? You have completely shut us out of our faith communities." (I suppose I should have pointed out, at that moment, that some LGBTQ families *are* soccer families!) He explained to me that he and his family had been regulars at St. John's and they loved the church, but when his daughters got to the age of playing in sports they were forced to choose between soccer and church. They felt soccer was a positive thing for their girls. It taught good life lessons and values and relationships – things that were important to all of them. He said all the church ever said to them was, "Get your priorities straight."

I felt ashamed because I have had those very thoughts myself.

This had been on my mind since that conversation and if St. John's was considering ways to serve her neighbors then this was something the church had to consider: there are a lot of other things happening on Sunday mornings and church isn't even in the running for most folks. I believe that St. John's still pictured her neighbors as folks who wanted to go to church but were just too busy, when in reality her neighbors, for the most part, had never been in a church and didn't consider it an activity of interest for Sunday morning. According to a 2014 Barna study, 156 million U.S. citizens are not engaged with any Christian church, except to attend weddings and funerals. The study

also pointed out that the area of the U.S. with the fewest church attenders is the Pacific Coast states.¹

So how would this small suburban church, in Northern California, find a way to serve soccer families, and others who work on Sunday or work every other day of the week, and just want to sleep in and have a family day on Sunday? How would we serve folks who don't know anything about church? I entered this project with a sense that, somewhere along the way, St. John's had lost its deep connection to the place and culture that surrounded the church.

In the Gospel of John, chapter 1, vs. 14 (The Message) says, "The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood." That's exactly what we needed to do: be the flesh and blood Word to the neighborhood. We needed to get to know our neighbors and get real about what they need/want/desire. Jeremiah 29:7 says, "But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare." It became the mission of St. John's to seek the welfare of the neighborhood.

In seeking to serve St. John's neighbors, the church members and the members of the Local Advisory Committee (doctoral committee for this project) knew that the first step would be to get to know them. We decided to hold some events that would invite our neighbors onto our property without asking them to come into the church. Our first event was an Easter Egg Hunt. The Outreach Committee of the church did a wonderful job advertising with door hangers and signs around the neighborhood, as well as a banner in

¹David Kinnamon, "10 Facts About America's Churchless," Barna Group. December 09, 2014, accessed February 18, 2016, <https://www.barna.org/barna-update/culture/698-10-facts-about-america-s-churchless#.VsYgUJMrJsN>.

the field facing the main street. We had around 100 adults and children come. They had fun and went home with lots of goodies along with a flyer announcing our next event, a Fourth of July block party. The block party was also a big success and folks came from all over the neighborhood with their favorite picnic foods to share. The kids enjoyed the Bounce House we had rented and we all sat and chatted away the whole afternoon. We may not have been in the church but we were being the church, gathered in His name and reaching out to our neighbors. Both events were on Saturday. We, of course, mentioned we had a worship service the next day and gently invited them to come. Not one new person came either Sunday, not even on Easter!

It seemed clear that if St. John's was going to serve her neighbors it wasn't going to be in our sanctuary on Sunday mornings so what could we do that would serve them (seek their welfare) in a way that worked with their busy lives? What were they looking for that St. John's might be able to provide?

An article on *Exponential.org* named, "5 Things Millennials Wish the Church Would Be," revealed New Barna Research that lists the questions the church should be asking in order to effectively engage young adults. It was helpful in understanding what our neighbors might be looking for in a church experience. In the article Drew Dyck, managing editor of *Leadership Journal* says that though young people have a dim view of the church, and are skeptical of religion, they are still hungry for transcendence. They are looking for authenticity. They are looking for a holy and loving God, not praise music and programs.

Millennials want visual clarity. They want space that is welcoming and not confusing, something that feels familiar, not mysterious. Because today's culture is

frenetic and fragmented, Barna President David Kinnamen points out, young people aren't looking for more busyness. They are looking to be, not to do. They love nature and having a landscape feature in the worshipping space is comforting because they are looking for holy quiet – places to reflect and regroup. They are looking for Jesus in the midst of quiet, casual community – respite.²

My Local Advisory Committee (LAC) for this project was made up of a wonderful group of folks from St. John's along with a retired United Methodist Pastor. We had lots of fun together discovering how much we didn't know! Our journey of discovery was a meaningful one of joy, learning, deepening, trusting. We were made up of men and women ages 55-75, with varied skills and technical aptitudes, but with a shared sense that we were being called to discover something new for our church.

The LAC and I pondered and prayed and met many times, in many meetings, brainstorming ideas as to what we might do to serve the neighbors of St. John's. When I flew back to Drew University in New Jersey for my summer doctoral classes I had no idea what my doctoral project would be. As time passed and I met with my amazing instructors and classmates I had an idea. What about an online church? How could that work- a church that had the potential for a neighborhood without geographic limitations? If we used an online site for our church, with mobile capabilities, we could create an opportunity for folks to worship no matter where they were or when they wanted to worship. They could find their own quiet space, experience nature, and meet up with groups from the website for community and service. I was excited at the idea.

²Marian Liataud, "5 Things Millennials Wish the Church Would Be | Exponential," Exponential, October 15, 2014, accessed February 18, 2016, <https://exponential.org/5-things-millennials-wish-the-church-would-be/>.

I was staying with my son Nick, and his wife Brett, while I was in New Jersey and I took the idea home to discuss it with them. They are both Millennials and not particularly interested in church. They had lots of great ideas and advice about the kind of online church the LAC and I should create – about not being too wordy and finding an aesthetic that would draw people in once they were on the website.

After I flew home there were still many questions in my mind. The main question that came up for me, and others with whom I've discussed this idea, was, What about the community part of worship? How could an online church deal with the fact that part of what is important to Christians is fellowship and community – face to face connections? How is the world dealing with employees who work from home and never have a chance to gather around the water cooler for a little chitchat? We (the LAC and I) would have to create, as home workers have, situations for folks to meet up. By using a meet-up style connection space on our website, people would be able to have local get-togethers for conversation and service opportunities.

Members of the LAC all had computers, some laptops and tablets, all had some form of cell phone, though not all had a smart phone. When we first discussed the idea of an online church there was tangible fear in the room. The idea was good but what did any of us know about making it happen? A few of us were on Facebook, none were using Twitter or Instagram. None of us knew how to build a website, or even what would be involved.

We turned to some experts – my four sons, Ian, Nick, Kyle and Colby. They were all in their 20s and 30s and were all techy, as folks that age tend to be. They became our consultants, encouragers, motivators.

Our LAC, along with my oldest son, Ian, and his best friend, Colin, identified many opportunities presented by an online worship experience. When coming to discuss this idea with me, Colin came with a document he had prepared that listed the opportunities he felt an online church could provide:

Capture hearts, minds and souls at any time and when needed most

- Break free from tradition. By ‘tradition’, in this case, I mean the “handed-over” assumption that church can only be church in a building on Sunday morning with the accepted clergy roles and liturgies of the denomination and local church involved. We will not eliminate the exposure to “church as we know it” because we will include a link to a full, one hour United Methodist service held at one of our circuit churches.
- Have the authority of the church decentralized as the church is made up of casual members. Clergy is involved but the projects, service projects, and fellowship opportunities can be lay driven, and messages and discussions are driven by trending topics, rather than lectionary.
- Business of the church minimized – no facilities, less administration, mostly volunteer staff
- To embrace the success of current online entities
 - Possibility of offering translation to other languages
 - Trending topics identify the sentiment of the world – watching what problems, concerns, celebrations people are facing as seen by Twitter traffic, current news, Wikipedia articles
 - Immediate feedback – surveys after forums and articles

- Act as a catalyst for new/smaller/ad-hoc organizing around things such as service projects and social gatherings
 - Through meet-up type connections, members can launch their own service projects, table conversations, and social gatherings.
- Connect members across geographic boundaries
 - The neighborhood becomes as broad as the internet – an online neighborhood can be global
- Connect members in a peer-to-peer arrangement and allows them to act as part of the sharing economy. The sharing economy is a collaborative system of sharing human and physical resources. So, for example, if a person wants to help a neighbor build raised garden beds he/she could come to the site, explain the project, call for three people needed to do the project. When three people respond the project can be planned and executed.
- Use online “protocols” for communication
 - By using hash tags on Twitter and Facebook sites, members can pray, discuss, share together
- Retain elements of tradition
 - There will be a “classic” worship service recorded weekly for those who want a “church as we know and remember it” experience online.
 - Stream “news and church” where a present day issue is introduced and debated in an open forum

- Bible studies

This document guided the LAC and me throughout the entire process of building our online church. The first thing we needed to do was find out if people would be interested in this project. Were there people who would find it helpful? Was the idea as good to others as it was to the LAC and me?

Process of Evaluation

Most members of the LAC went and got a Facebook page, if they didn't already have one, and we asked folks, via our Facebook pages, if they would be interested in an online church experience. There was wide interest accompanied by ideas and suggestions, most of which we tried to incorporate in this project. We would be evaluating as we went along, and studying the data available to us through the website and Google Analytics, to see if an online church could be a valuable tool for reaching people with the love of God – for seeking the welfare of our neighbors. Each area of our website would ask for comments, suggestions, feedback. We would ask specific questions when appropriate. We could evaluate our effectiveness with things like numbers of hits and likes, demographics and comments.

Theological Reflection

I have always taken the call of Jesus to 'go and make disciples' (Matthew 29:19-20) quite seriously. Over the years, as a lay member of the church and later as clergy, that call has meant different things to me and I have lived it out in different ways. I have been slow to take the call outside the walls of the church. I believe that all Christians need to be about giving the message of hope and love to a world desperately needing to hear it. I know God did it by moving, flesh and blood, into the neighborhood, John 1:14. God

came, through the person of Jesus, and lived among the people God so wanted to reach. God didn't do it by constructing a church and hiding out in it until people came to God out of their need for what God had to offer. Jesus walked the streets of the neighborhood, knowing and loving and serving all those He came across, as their needs were made clear.

My neighborhood, however, keeps changing – both because as United Methodist clergy I am itinerant and move from one neighborhood to another – and because the technological, media driven culture in the 21st century in the United States has changed the landscape of everything I do. I have made a promise to myself that I will never leave an appointment without adding media and sound equipment to the churches I serve. I have kept that promise because it is my opinion that we (clergy) must change the way we deliver the message of love and hope, even within the walls of the church, in order to be heard by those we are trying so hard to reach, 19-35 year-olds, as well as those many folks of all ages who have left the church. The addition of media is important, even to seniors in the church, as it is easy to see and read, and provides the opportunity to show visual prayers, YouTubes, and illustrations. It opens the church to new ways of doing church. What it hasn't done, at least in my experience, is bring 19-35 year-old folks into my church.

In a country where excellence is everywhere and technology is racing ahead in a way we have never seen before, it seems to me the church should do what it can to try and keep up. According to the website, *The Emerging Future*, “the amount of technological advancement that occurred in the year 2000 occurred every 1 hour 6 minutes in 2013 and will occur every 30 seconds in 2020...the speed of technological

advancement is becoming so fast and is getting so much faster as the weeks go by, that you need to understand what is going on now, or things may become too difficult to comprehend or act on... Suffice it to say that the changes in everything will be coming so fast that you will not be able to keep up. This is personal. This is business.”³ The use of technology in the church may not be able to compete with the business world but I believe it is important for the church to engage this culture of technology with creativity and intelligence, trusting the Holy Spirit for guidance in its use and benefits.

The church has, in my opinion, the most important message anyone will ever hear. We could transform the world with God’s love if we could teach the world about it. If our neighbors are hungry for transcendence, and the church seeks the welfare of its neighbors, then the church must “keep up” with the communication style of the current culture in order to reach them. Study after study shows that we are no longer living in a time when most people are thinking about going to church. Many of this generation have not been in a church except to attend a wedding or funeral. They hear messages of hate and judgment that have come out of the church and into the news media. Those messages of hate and judgment are widespread and much more interesting to news broadcasters who have to fill 24 hours every day, than are our simple good works of feeding the hungry and clothing the poor. The Christian church is losing its opportunity to reach new disciples because, in my opinion, it refuses to find ways that will reach out to an entirely different culture than the one we live into inside the walls of the church.

³ Marian Liatuad, "Disruptive Technology," *The Emerging Future*, 2014, "5 Things Millennials Wish the Church Would Be | Exponential," *Exponential*, October 15, 2014, accessed February 18, 2016, <https://exponential.org/5-things-millennials-wish-the-church-would-be/>.

My project is an attempt to try something entirely new. By using the current means of communication, a web site linked to social media such as Twitter, Facebook, Meetup.com, YouTube, and Instagram, to build a church without walls, I believe I can communicate God's message of love and hope in a whole new way and still create peer to peer relationships in Christian community. I don't believe we can remove the flesh and blood relationship. We need Christian community, but I do believe we can find new ways to bring it about.

My mind was swimming with ideas and new information and it would all have to find a way into actuality with the help of the members of my LAC as well as some brilliant (in my opinion!) young minds who would know how to make this happen. I stepped into this project full of fear and trepidation over my need to learn an entirely new language of technical communication in a very short time, but I did so in anticipation of the Holy Spirit's guidance and assurance. I'm "moving into the neighborhood," and seeking its welfare, in order to introduce it to the love and grace of God. I'm off to make new disciples for Jesus Christ for, as the United Methodist Church states clearly, the transformation of the world.

The Purpose

The purpose of this project is to find out if a small, suburban, brick and mortar church can still engage its neighborhood in a way that is relevant to the lives of its neighbors. If families are out on the soccer field, or in the bagel shop on Sunday mornings, then we have to find another time/place/space in which to engage (connect, and involve) them. We will implement a series of online programs/projects/events and services that we hope will bring our neighbors into a life-transforming encounter with our

loving and gracious God. We will see if an online worship experience can do that for those longing for transcendence, but who do not believe they will find it in a church building.

Scope

In the weeks leading up to the project the LAC and pastors in our circuit churches (the UMC district churches in the California Nevada Annual Conference are divided into circuits for the purpose of study, service and renewal) envisioned and created plans for a website which holds within it six major elements: classic worship, which is a link to a full one-hour United Methodist worship service recorded at one of our circuit churches; a Daily Chapel in which we post YouTubes, scripture readings, meditations, prayers, music and images; a MeetUp area for in-person, peer-to-peer service projects, discussions and fellowship opportunities; Forum Discussions which will be filmed conversations around trending topics that will be found on Twitter and Facebook; 24 hr. availability of clergy (circuit clergy will be on call in a rotation for 24 hour periods for live chats); and an area for donations to the site, local and global charities as well UM projects such as Imagine No Malaria.

It was our hope that the project would consist of the eight weeks following Easter, April 5, 2015. Each week, during that period, members of the LAC and Sonoma County Circuit churches would be recording, writing, photographing content for a worship experience that was based around trending topics. The content was to be updated no less than every week and when appropriate (daily chapel prayers, blogging conversations) daily.

Although the website was not finished by Easter, we were able to grow our Facebook page and get used to keeping the content fresh while watching participation and responding to comments. When the site was finished we would be able to watch participation both online and in-person (meet ups) to see if this is a viable way for folks to form a Christian faith community without a building, and without the constructs of traditional worship elements. We would be asking specific questions when appropriate to invite people to tell us their stories. When putting this idea on Facebook, when it first came up, many people who responded did so by sharing their stories of broken relationship with the church. We hoped to continue asking people to share with us why they had left the church and why, if our online church was successful, they had found their church within the experiences of our website. We hoped to gather both quantitative and qualitative information as we moved through our eight-week project. It was the hope of the LAC that this be an on-going church development project.

CHAPTER ONE

THE PERFECT STORM; CATEGORY 5

*And behold, there arose a great storm on the sea, so that the boat was being covered with the waves.
~Matthew 8:28~*

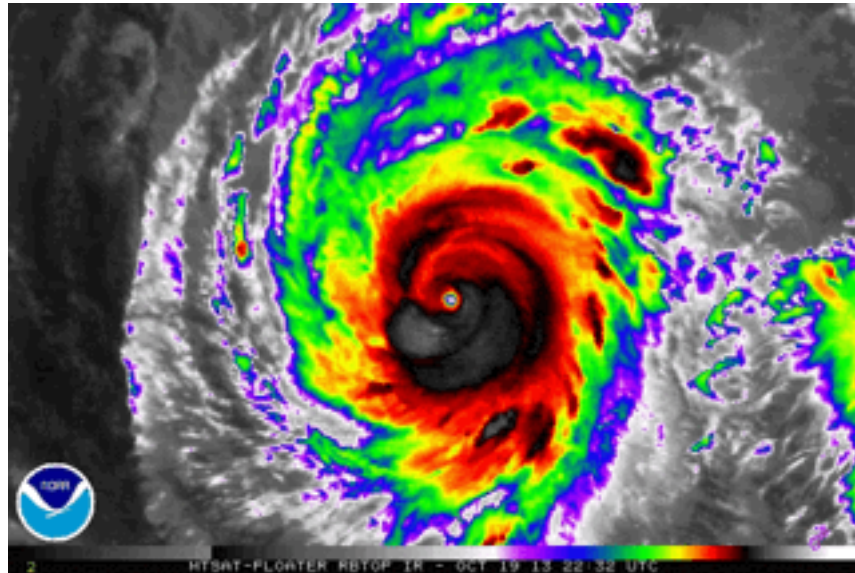


Figure 2. *Typhoon Francisco*, Digital Image, *Severe Weather Storms*, Dutchsinse, 2013, Web. <http://dutchsinse.com/10212013-two-typhoons-one-hurricane-one-tropical-storm-and-three-invest-areas/> Accessed Feb. 10, 2016

21st Century Spirituality

In 2008 Leonard Sweet wrote a book called “The Perfect Storm.” In it he said the church had entered the perfect storm of post-Modernity, post-Christendom, and post-Scale. The idea of post-Scale is that we have “scaled-up” so far that a single step up in the scale today could be disastrous. Sweet uses the example that at one time humans hunted the Woolly Mammoth with a club. We have scaled up one thing at a time to bow

and arrows, rifles, and now to automatic weapons. One step up could mean an atomic or nuclear weapon – kill a Woolly Mammoth with that and you commit suicide.¹ I believe the Church is still in the midst of the storm now and there is more to come as we swirl around in the wind trying to figure out how and where we will land and if we will survive the landing. The “storm” the church is experiencing is defined differently by different people these days. Some believe the church has caused its own storm by becoming too liberal, too open, too “laid back” in its morals and standards. I’m not speaking about that kind of storm in this paper. I’m referring to Leonard Sweet’s idea that 21st century culture is a vastly different time and the church is caught up in the need to catch up. I love church.

I love *the* Church. I love all the church has meant to me in my life. I love thinking about Sunday school and junior choir, youth groups and retreats, fellowship events, ski trips - even worship and occasionally even sermons. It was the thing we did on Sunday mornings in our family. We got up, got dressed up, and went to church. If we were visiting Grandma we went to her church. If we were traveling we went to a Congregational church nearby where we were staying. If we were on the post (my dad was in the Army) we went to the chapel and attended the Protestant service there. When I got married and had children I took them to church. It’s what we did. It was a source of steadiness in our lives. Sunday was a family day. We went to church, then we came home and had a quiet day. Stores were not open on Sundays so the family stayed at home and had a big meal and prepared ourselves for the week ahead both physically and emotionally.

¹ Leonard Sweet, *The Church of the Perfect Storm* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2008), 4.

I still love church. The problem is that fewer and fewer Americans do. Pew Research Center reports that only 36% of Americans go church regularly.²

So what's the deal? Why don't most people go to church anymore? The answer is simple in my mind. They don't want to. The church has become stale, using an antique language in old, outdated facilities to cast its judgment on the heathens outside her walls. Okay, that was a bit harsh, and certainly there are lovely churches full of loving Christians who are kind and caring and who demonstrate the love of Christ in wonderful ways, but that is not the reputation of the church and this generation is not going to church to find out otherwise. What is the reputation of the church? One of my professors suggested we Google, Why are Christians so...and see what comes up. What came up were words like obnoxious, mean, mean spirited, judgmental, hypocritical. If churches are full of Christians, and Christians are thought of in those terms, then we have some work to do to improve our reputation.

Only 2 out of 10 millennial young adults value church attendance and nearly a third of them actually take an anti-church stance.³ The reason? It is because we live in a world of the Internet and Google and the church functions as if the printing press were just invented. Guttenberg's printing press was likely the most important invention in the life of the church between handwriting and the computer. It changed how the church communicated. It changed the ability of people to take charge of their own religious

² "Religious Landscape Study," Pew Research Centers Religion Public Life Project RSS, May 11, 2015, accessed February 23, 2016, <http://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/attendance-at-religious-services/>.

³David Kinnamon, "Americans Divided on the Importance of Church," Barna Group, March 23, 2014, accessed February 18, 2016, https://www.barna.org/barna-update/culture/661-americans-divided-on-the-importance-of-church#.VjOYB4Qg_-Z.

education by making the Bible more available. It changed the amount of control the church had over people's lives. The British Library says that the printing press meant more access to information, more dissent, more informed discussion and more widespread criticism of authorities within the church.⁴ The church was forever changed by the invention of the printing press.

Now we have computers, cell phones, tablets, and the internet giving us access to and control over piles of new information and forcing us to discern which information we will accept, edit or throw out. "Today, there are more than 600 million websites worldwide, 500 million tweets are sent every day and an estimated 2.4 billion people go online every day. People are now able to access information and share things in a way that was not possible in a previous generation, and as a result, the rise of the internet and social media have changed the way we work, the way we live and the way we communicate and make and maintain friendships. Sociologist, Barry Wellman states "Online communication – email, instant messaging, chat rooms, etc. – does not replace more traditional offline forms of contact – face-to-face and telephone. Instead, it adds on to them, increasing the overall volume of contact."⁵

The Internet has changed everything –but the church is slow, it seems to me, in understanding the importance of entering the world of the World Wide Web.

⁴Rat Kennedy, "What Impact Did the Invention of the Printing Press Have on the Spread of Religion," Synonym, 2016, accessed Feb. 18, 2016, <http://classroom.synonym.com/impact-did-invention-printing-press-spread-religion-6617.html>.

⁵ Laura Harrison, "25 Years of the Internet: How It Has Changed the Way We Interact," Socialnomics, 2014, accessed February 18, 2016, <http://www.socialnomics.net/2014/07/28/25-years-of-the-internet-how-it-has-changed-the-way-we-interact/>.

Although churches are beginning to understand the importance of having a website, many within the church resist change. They make declarations about the status quo and a sense that they must maintain it. “We have always had church on Sunday morning.” “If there are other activities on Sunday morning then people just need to get their priorities straight.” “We have always said the creed every Sunday.” “We have always had communion at the rail on the first Sunday of the month.” “We have always sung songs from the hymnal, we don’t need a new sound.” We will never... We have always... Perhaps the church needs to open itself up to new possibilities.

The effort by congregations in various mainline denominations to make music more relevant in the past 50 years has included the incorporation of praise music, guitars and drums and bands added to the pianos, organs and choirs already included in most worship services. Drums in the chancel may or may not be the answer. But there is an answer and our need to understand that we have not had the answer is of huge importance. The first step to recovery is always the recognition of the presence of illness. The church may never again look the way it has looked the last hundred (300?) years. And that is good. Not because it was bad the way it was but because the way it was no longer works in the same way for making new disciples . We must speak the language of the current culture if we are to reach them.

Most churches are still doing what they have always done in the same ways they have always done it. They keep thinking if they just do it a little better and a little more often people will stop whatever it is they’re doing on Sunday mornings at 10, 11 or 12 and come to church instead. Or maybe they’ll come on Tuesday night. Or maybe they’ll come if we serve good coffee. Or nachos. They like coffee and nachos.

It's not working. Yes, Tuesday night might be more available to folks but they aren't using it to come to church. Yes, they like coffee and nachos but they don't need to come to church for those. If those outside the church think of church people as mean, judgmental, hypocritical etc., why would they want to join in, regardless of the latest trendy offer?

State of the Church

Fixing our reputation *in* the church may be impossible. The one and only thing I can think of to get the church up and moving again is to get the church up and moving. The church needs to build new relationships. The church needs to be who and what the church needs to be for this generation in this culture and at this time. We are fooling ourselves if we think there are things we can do inside a church building that will attract many new people outside the building and entice them to come in - especially if they have never been in a church, don't understand what the church has to offer, and have been influenced by the current reputation of the church. Perhaps a few folks might *return* to the church if they hear of some exciting and new program that wasn't there when they left, but for the most part no, they won't. From my experience as a pastor who visits those who have left the church for one reason or another, most who leave have done so after making an agonizing decision to leave an institution they have loved and devoted themselves to. The biggest reason they leave is that they have been hurt – either by fellow congregants or the pastor, and that hurt is enough to keep them away forever. It does not, however, again in my experience, keep them from longing for a continued and deepening relationship with God as they have known through the church and their relationship with Jesus.

My Northern California Nevada Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church considers me a church planter. Because of this I am invited to gatherings for pastors starting new churches. I love getting together with folks with such love and devotion to the church that they are willing to take risks and create and innovate with new energy. Here's the problem. Many of them are trying to do what we in the church have always done – only do it in a different building, or at a different time, or with renewed energy. Every once in a while someone tries something really risky, really innovative – totally different. What is it like for a church to meet in a bar, or at the coffee house or on the ground floor of a new home, built in a new housing development with no church being considered for the area? These are some of the things being tried in the Cal. Nev. Annual Conference currently with some success. What happens when the church decides to move into the neighborhood and enter the lives of its neighbors? The real risk-taking innovators will be the ones to find out.

If people are in the bar on Saturday night then I think church needs to be there too. If people are in the bagel shop on Sunday morning the church needs to be there too. If people are in the bleachers watching their children play soccer on the weekends then the church needs to be there too. The church doesn't need to go there to let people know they have their priorities all mixed up and should, in actuality, be in church, but the church should be there building relationships, learning about the people's lives and what gives them joy and what is breaking their hearts. Until the church becomes familiar with the culture it has been trying to avoid it cannot have a relationship with them. We have not embraced this generation. We have been busy studying their habits and judging their behavior instead of engaging their lives and reaching their hearts. Somewhere along the

line we got the idea that they just don't get it. But I'm afraid it is we, in the church, who don't get it. Their lives are fast-paced, driven, and noisy. They have no breaks – there is no “Sunday” in which they get to sit quietly and regroup before a busy week begins again. Stores are always open. Businesses do their business 24/7. It's business as usual on Saturdays and Sundays just like every other day in the week. Their weeks run together. Their work never stops.

Millennials (those who reached adulthood around the year 2000) make up 35% of the workforce. 69% of those would prefer freelance work if they could find it and 79% would quit their regular job and work for themselves if they could.⁶ They are craving control over their time. They don't need one more entity (the church) telling them where they need to be and when they should be there. This generation is seeking more balance to their lives. Millennials want more flexibility in their lives in terms of how and where they work and they are willing to take a pay cut to get it. They are getting to the age when they are getting married, buying homes and having children and they are finding that it's difficult to keep up the fast paced work-lives they've been leading. Employers aren't making it easy for them and many Millennials say they suffer negative consequences when they choose a more flexible schedule.⁷ Employers, like the church, better start caring about what makes this generation happy because as of this year they make up the largest percentage of the workforce. They are the ones who need us. NOW. We need to

⁶Alistair Mitchell, "The Rise of the Millennial Workforce," Wired.com, 2012, accessed February 18, 2016, <http://www.wired.com/insights/2013/08/the-rise-of-the-millennial-workforce/>.

⁷Donna Rosata, "Millennials Want Work-Life Balance Too, Here's How They Can Get It," Money, 2015, accessed Feb 18, 2016, <http://time.com/money/3859182/millennials-work-life-balance-2/>.

start serving this generation of weary workers – wherever they are, whenever they are there. It is their welfare we need to seek if we are to find our own.

One young man I spoke with told me his pastor told their congregation, “If you’re coming to church just for fellowship then why do you bother coming at all?” He was crushed by this statement. He said fellowship is exactly why he and his wife go to church. He was raised in the church. He loves Jesus, values the Body. He works from home, though, and his wife is a teacher. They are so excited each week to see their friends at church where he directs the praise band. The members of the band are his closest group of friends. They have brunch together every week after church. They are all involved in the church in many ways, serving with the youth, helping folks out with their computers etc. But he didn’t consider all the service he did his reason for going to church. He went to church for contact, for relationships, for fun and relief from the tedious workweek. Recently, this young man quit the band and has not yet returned to his church. He will, he says, but he needs a break.

So does this overworked generation, and the many others who have never gone to church or have left the church for various reasons, recognize their spiritual needs and longings? It appears that many do. Many will claim to be spiritual but not religious. I know what they mean by not being religious. It means they don’t go to church. I’m a little confused by what they mean by “spiritual.” I think it means that they have found things that help them relate to something bigger than themselves and that they understand that to be meaningful. There is a big turn toward meditation, contemplation, yoga, tai chi – things that quiet the spirit and open it to renewed energy. Sociologist of Religion Daniele Hervieu-Lege says that,

Rather than succumbing to modern secularism, science, and rationality, religion ‘re-emerges, revives, shifts ground, become diffuse’ in post-modernity. While religion in its institutional forms declines, religiousness – what we more often refer to as ‘spirituality’ today – continues in new ways, within new forms of elective community. We sit contentedly in various cathedral grounds, that is, with whatever resources seem to offer comfort of a familiarity that we count as ‘spiritual’ without feeling compelled to worship at altars of traditional religion.⁸

So rather than just walking away from religion, even though they have been “turned off” by the church, 20% of the population claim to understand their spirituality and have a desire to grow deeper in their understanding of it. In an article I read on Beliefnet, on this subject, Robert C. Fuller said,

A group of social scientists studied 346 people representing a wide range of religious backgrounds in an attempt to clarify what is implied when individuals describe themselves as "spiritual, but not religious." Religiousness, they found, was associated with higher levels of interest in church attendance and commitment to orthodox beliefs. Spirituality, in contrast, was associated with higher levels of interest in mysticism, experimentation with unorthodox beliefs and practices, and negative feelings toward both clergy and churches. Most respondents in the study tried to integrate elements of religiousness and spirituality. Yet 19 percent of their sample constituted a separate category best described as "spiritual, not religious." Compared with those who connected interest in private spirituality with membership in a public religious group, the "spiritual, but not religious" group was less likely to evaluate religiousness positively, less likely to engage in traditional forms of worship such as church attendance and prayer, less likely to engage in group experiences related to spiritual growth, more likely to be agnostic, more likely to characterize religiousness and spirituality as different and nonoverlapping concepts, more likely to hold nontraditional beliefs, and more likely to have had mystical experiences.⁹

If people today (not just Millennials - obviously if only 36% of folks are attending church then we are talking about people of all ages,) are not feeding their

⁸ Keith Anderson, *The Digital Cathedral: Networked Ministry in a Wireless World* (New York City: Morehouse Publishing, 2015) xii

⁹ Robert C. Fuller, "Spiritual, But Not Religious," Beliefnet. 2015, accessed February 22, 2016, <http://www.beliefnet.com/Entertainment/Books/2002/07/Spiritual-But-Not-Religious.aspx>.

spiritual needs in church, then how does the church reach them with the Good News of Jesus Christ? How do Christians let them know they are beloved by a great and gracious God that longs for them to know? How do we get into their world (*our* world in its current state) and offer this message of hope and love? The Church has reached hearts with this important message for over 2000 years, but if fewer and fewer people are coming to church, how then is the Church to reach those who have not heard?

I propose that the neighborhood of the Internet could be a viable venue for sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ. America has the highest percentage of Internet users in the world (87%).¹⁰ There is not a lot of research yet on how the internet is used for spiritual practice but in the last two years Oprah Winfrey and Deepak Chopra have teamed up to offer free 21-day Meditation Challenges. More than 600,000 people from around the world participate. These are not Christian meditations but they do recognize a higher power and human spirituality:

“Through the use of technology and the power of social media, we have been able to cut across geographical boundaries and share the gifts of meditation with an unprecedented number of people around the globe,” said Deepak Chopra. “Meditation is one of the most effective tools we have for creating greater health and wellbeing,” he said. “To cite just one major benefit, meditation is enormously helpful in relieving stress, which is the underlying contributor to so many illnesses, including heart disease, diabetes, depression, and chronic pain. Meditation helps the body release stress and return to its natural state of balance and health,” said Dr. Chopra.¹¹

¹⁰ "World Internet Users Statistics and 2015 World Population Stats," World Internet Users Statistics and 2015 World Population Stats, 2015, accessed February 18, 2016, <http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats.htm>.

¹¹ Kathy Bankherd, The Chopra Center, About Us, accessed Feb.10, 2016, <http://www.chopra.com/about-us/press-releases/more-than-600000-people-from-around-the-world-come-together-to-meditate-with>

More than 49% of the participants are accessing the Meditation Challenge using mobile devices, and every day the Meditation Challenge's community Facebook page is alive with people sharing support and inspiring stories about the way in which practicing meditation for just 15 minutes a day is transforming their lives.¹²

Elizabeth Drescher, in her forward *Pilgrims to the Digital Cathedral*, a forward for Keith Anderson's book *The Digital Cathedral: Networked Ministry in a Wired World*, writes,

Christian practice can play out in a networked world. It calls us to value the richness of our traditions and, in particular, to honor their adaptability and robustness as they are plugged into new digitally integrated ministries. Yes, chains are broken here – perhaps chiefly the hard and fast link between the local church building and what has traditionally been counted as 'real' religion. But new relationships are developing, new memories are being formed, and new pathways to the holy are opening in a world set to hear the meandering tale of so many new digital pilgrims.¹³

Christianity has always been about networks, networks of people coming together around their need for community, service and love. There has never been a straight line to transcendence. We walk the path, then we walk away from it, we find our way back to it only to stray once again. "Networks are defined by multi-directionality, mobility, diversity and expansiveness. They are formed not of individual links connected along a line, but of interrelated clusters that may change in relationship to one another and in overall significance over time. Chains break...networks reconfigure," writes sociologist

¹³Keith Anderson, Elizabeth Drescher: *The Digital Cathedral Networked Ministry in a Wireless World* (New York; Morehouse Publishing 2015), xiv

Hervieu-Lege.¹⁴ Online interaction is all about networks, about networking, about building community. And it seems to happen, even without face-to-face engagement.

Offering “church” outside the church building seems to be a comfortable approach for those who are considering their spirituality, and beginning to question their need for religious community. One might stop in the coffee house or pub for a drink and a discussion on gun control or climate change, where they would never consider going to a church for the same discussion. Likewise, a discussion online offers the same idea. A conversation ensues and it is joined by all kinds of people with all kinds of opinions. A Christian take on the discussion doesn’t necessarily turn folks away – in fact, it may even peak the interest of some as they begin to see the true Christian nature of those in the discussion and realize that perhaps Christians are not as they have imagined them to be. Often these non-traditional Christian faith communities aim to provide an inclusive, accepting and welcoming space for everybody, no matter what their spiritual path. Most coffee house and pub churches revolve around open discussion, creative expression and alternative approaches to worship. Their purpose is to exist as an authentic Christian community, but in a way that is both challenging and accessible to un-churched people. If alternative Christian community is attractive to unchurched people then perhaps an online venue could be challenging and accessible as well. My project is about finding out if this might be true.

¹⁴ Ibid., xiii.

CHAPTER TWO

THE WIND

*The LORD hurled a great wind on the sea and there was a great storm on the sea so that the ship was about to break up.
~Jonah 1:4~*



Figure 3. Donna Paulk, *A Wave Tossed in the Wind*, Digital Image, SBC of Virginia, accessed Feb. 18, 2016, Web, <http://www.sbcv.org/wp-content/uploads/boat-storm-womensblog-feature-150728.jpg>

In deep waters, the wind may only cause moderate seas with slow, rolling swells. In shallower waters that same wind force may make steep, breaking seas. Handling a boat in heavy weather is as individual as the skipper himself. No two boats react exactly the same in the same sea conditions. Even two boats with the same design can act differently depending on their load and trim. Every skipper must learn the idiosyncrasies of his own boat and know how it will react as conditions change.¹

¹ "Heavy Weather Boat Handling - BoatSafe.com," Heavy Weather Boat Handling - BoatSafe.com. 2009, accessed February 18, 2016, <http://www.boatsafe.com/nauticalknowhow/heavy2.htm>.

Building a church online requires several things: someone to build the website, a group designing the site, and some way to communicate between the two. Our original ideas came out of a dinner meeting with my son, Ian, and his best friend, Colin, whom I coerced to the house one night with the offer of enchiladas and guacamole. I had explained what our committee had decided to do for our project and the two men came loaded with ideas. We talked at length about how an online church might work, who might be interested in this kind of thing and what elements the site would need to have to meet the needs of its users.

Both Colin and Ian had church experience and both work in the tech world. They were the perfect ones to help me think through an online church. How could it work? Who would use it? What would its users be looking for? How can a website begin, build and maintain a spiritual experience for its users? We believe the church to be the Body of Christ. How can an online community become the Body of Christ? How do we form community and provide a way for face-to-face fellowship and service when needed?

Colin came, that night, with a document of his own creation, with answers to many of those questions. (See the document in the introduction to this paper, pages 8-10)

The committee and I poured over the ideas at our next meeting. We got out poster board and put each element of the site on the wall so we could see our ideas as we brainstormed. Even as we went through this creative process we had no idea if what we were creating could be made to happen on a website. We knew we didn't know how to make it happen. We had no idea what we were even talking about but the idea wouldn't leave us. We were stuck figuring it all out. I called my sons, Kyle and Colby, who work

in the tech industry in New York to ask if they had any thoughts. They told me they could set me up with a website designer for about 3500.00.

Funding

This is a doctoral project so there are no funds except whatever happens to be in my bank account - so essentially *no* funds! I decided to start looking for money to build the site. My local church was not in any position to hand out these kinds of funds and because the project idea was brand new we hadn't yet formally told the church about it. We were really in a fix.

The next week I was at a Gathering of the Orders retreat (a retreat called by the Bishop each year for training and renewal of church leaders) and had a discussion with our Conference Superintendent for Congregational Vitality. He suggested that the conference might consider our online church a new church plant for the conference, which would make a conference grant a possibility. He asked me to write up a proposal and come to the next meeting to present it.

We had a lot of work to do and it had to be done quickly. I couldn't ask for funds for something that was still just a bunch of ideas on poster board. I went back to my LAC and we started meeting often and long to get the elements of the site figured out in a way that could be presented to the conference committee. Meanwhile I had to speak with a website designer to see if the ideas we had were feasible for an online platform. It was crunch time. Everything needed to be done at once. We had to get things started so we had something to talk about. But we needed money to get started and wouldn't have the money until after we presented the project as something that was definite and underway. We had to step out and take a chance. I asked my son, Kyle, to line up a site builder. We

would send the deposit as soon as the grant money was in our hands. It was agreed that we would pay 1/3 up front, 1/3 half way through and the final payment would be made after the site went live.

We put together a presentation (attachment). We built a budget that included the money to pay the site builder, equipment for filming discussion forums, a logo and marketing. The discussion, at the conference mtg., around the site was similar to all the discussions I've had since. The questions that come up for everyone when we discuss an online church are: How can you build a Christian community if the members of the church never meet each other? And, how do you measure the success – what does church membership and attendance look like in this forum? As I said earlier and will talk about more later in this paper, the community is built as people come together through “Get Involved” (a page on the site with a link to our events at [meetup.com](https://www.meetup.com)) around service projects, discussions, Bible study and fellowship events. I've also learned, since, that virtual community is considered *real* community by those who use social media on a regular basis. It's hard to grasp this idea that church events aren't going to happen in a church and might not even happen in the same town where we who built the church reside, and might even occur in cyberspace. It's even harder to wrap one's head around the idea that membership will have to look entirely different and therefore folks might not be counted in the same way that we are used to, and that is considered “valuable” information in the United Methodist Church. We give up a certain amount of control over how people relate to the church when we take the church online.

In the United Methodist Church we use something called “Vital Signs” to make goals and report results each week/month/year. The statistics (results) we report each

week are in the area of weekly attendance, professions of faith, small group participation, members involved in mission, and the dollar amount given to mission. How does an online church fit into this picture? Could the host church count the people who have visited the site in the weekly attendance? Would meet-up Bible studies, discussions etc. count toward the reported number of small groups? If someone professes to finding a relationship with Jesus through online study, does it count? Of course it does to those of us working with the online church but will the United Methodist Church recognize these figures as “countable?” We have yet to find out.

All in all I felt good about the presentation to the conference. There were lots of questions but the group remained positive and encouraging. Now we just had to wait for the decision, which wouldn't come that day but hopefully by the end of that week.

When the call came we learned that the conference would pay for the site to be built but nothing else. So we now knew what we had to work with. The lack of funds would mean immediately culling some parts of the site. We would not be able to film forum discussions and we would have to find money elsewhere for the logo and marketing. We were not deterred. It felt good to have the conference even consider this project and we were thankful for any help we could get.

This kind of funding is a game changer. This is no longer just an eight week doctoral project but a church plant for the Northern California Nevada Annual Conference. It just became a whole lot more complicated. Where it might be possible to have new creative content for eight weeks we now have to consider a long-term maintenance (discipleship) plan.

Communicating In A Foreign Language

Meanwhile discussions with the site builder had begun. The man that helped us was very kind and worked hard to understand what we were asking. The problem was we were not asking the right questions. We didn't even know enough to know what we didn't know!

A committee of 50-75 yr. olds was trying to explain church in church talk to a 30-something yr. old site developer who was talking tech in tech talk. We kept trying to explain how we wanted the space to feel holy; we wanted a certain aesthetic that would draw people into the sacred. He kept saying, "send me content." I didn't know what that meant. One morning my son called and said the site developer had asked him to ask me to send him content. I told Kyle that I had. I had explained to him what we wanted and how we wanted people to feel when they entered the site. Kyle laughed and said, "Mom, the content will make all those things happen – you just have to send what you want." I said to Kyle that I guess I didn't know what content was and he finally told me in a way I could understand!

Content is everything. It is "the stuff in the website." It is the text, graphics, images, sound, videos and animations that make up each page of a website. Each page needs quality original and creative content, updated regularly if not constantly.

Breaking Ground

I gathered my committee. We needed to find out who was willing to do what, and who had the skills to write content. I decided to reach out to the circuit clergy, as well. The circuit pastors were excited about the project and offered many new ideas and some, thankfully, offered to help with content. Rev. Laurie McHugh, a musician and full time pastor in Northern California offered to do some original musical meditations for the site

as well as a promotional video that could be put on Facebook when we were close to launching the site. Here are some of the videos Laurie produced for us: (Click on the Title to view video – takes a minute or so to load)

Desktop Meditation: <https://youtu.be/kgmpGFFUxwM>

Growth from the Ashes: <https://youtu.be/FoZi37H43ek>

Our circuit leader pushed us to consider a way to help people who were coming regularly to the site to have an opportunity to go deeper in their Christian walk. Great ideas poured out during our meeting and I relayed all the ideas to my son, who was doing the “interpretive” work with the site developer. Finally he said, “Mom, please stop getting new ideas! We have what we need and all these other ideas are moving you further away from your original intent which was to have a ‘simple to navigate online church with basic elements that would bring people together around worship, fellowship, service and generosity.’”

He was so right! We kept getting things more complicated and the original idea was to keep this all simple enough for anyone to use, whether it is someone who missed church one Sunday and wanted to “make it up” or someone brand new to the idea of faith and looking for a way to walk the journey. It was freeing to be given permission to quit taking on new ideas and to begin the deep spiritual work of building the church.

If we were building a regular brick and mortar building we would have to wait now for the building to be constructed before we moved in the altars and hymnals and

pews and people. But we were skipping that step. We had to create holy space with content. What images would capture people's hearts? What words would bring new life? What music would move the spirit?

I spoke earlier of the SBNR (spiritual but not religious), and there are things to consider when trying to reach a population where this mantra is a prevailing cry. Many who try and avoid religion do so because they understand religion to be the cause of some great ills in many societies of the world. And of course they are right. Endless wars, the persecution of the Jews, slavery of all kinds, the Inquisition and basic religious intolerance and zealotry that leads to terrorism are among the examples of how religion has been harmful. Then you can add the annoying workmate that quotes scripture at you all the time, the neighbor who loudly proclaims his righteousness in doing good works, and the holier-than-thou relative that judges everything you say and do. Religious institutions are made up of human beings and therefore have the same sinful tendencies that the rest of humanity has. No one knows this better than those inside the church. On the whole though, I would stack up against the negatives the positives of love, forgiveness and charity of the faithful and the good work that has come from those whose lives have changed the world for the better. Abolition, women's suffrage, the civil rights movement were all founded on explicitly religious principles. Add to those things billions of believers who live selfless lives, serving and comforting friends and strangers alike and offering a challenge to the culture around them, all in the name of Christ.

Those claiming to live spiritual lives, not religious, often believe in living moral lives, and often believe in God, but they do not want to be held to dogma, doctrines and creeds that they feel do not define who they are. They believe that being free of those

things allows them to be who they are and worship in the way that feels right to them. They often pick and choose pieces for their spiritual journey like they would choose spices for their stew; a touch of Buddhism, a slice of Jewish Seder, a splash of gospel music, thrown in with an occasional Christmas Eve or Easter morning visitation to a church. None of these things are bad – that is certainly true – but it implies that this homegrown, handpicked religion is something between you and God. While faith is something between you and God, it is not only between you and God. If you're relationship is only with God then you miss out on the community and accountability that are so important.

I read a story once about a man who quit coming to church. The Pastor went to see him and when he got there the man told his pastor that he didn't feel he needed the church anymore. He felt just as spiritual at home as he ever did in church. At that the pastor went over to the fireplace and pulled out a brightly burning ember. It was red hot when he first placed it on the hearth but within minutes the flame diminished, the glow went out and the ember cooled. The man was in church the next Sunday realizing that he couldn't sustain his red hot relationship to God without the heat of his fellow Christians.² They had to work together to keep the fire going. So, "it's a healthy tension: the wisdom of our religious traditions provides us with a corrective for our propensity to think that we have all the answers; and prophetic individuals can moderate the natural propensity of

² John McArthur, "The Lonely Ember," The Lonely Ember, accessed February 23, 2016, <http://www.inspirationalarchive.com/texts/topics/evangelization/lonelyember.shtml>.

institutions to resist change and growth. As with many aspects of the spiritual life, we need to find balance in the tension.”³

This being the case for many we would be trying to reach with our online church, it would be important to find a way to lead their curiosity about faith (providing there was some) to a place of discovery. Could we get them from our Facebook page onto the website where they might encounter a holy word or image that would move them deeper. Once deeper could we continue to provide food for their journey?

We shared our ideas. Did we want to use candles and soft meditative music or did we want high-energy sounds with bright and moving images? Was there a place for both? What about hymns? Should we occasionally put up some hymns as well as rock and gospel? There was no way to know – we had to try different things and see if there was a positive or negative response. We had to bring all ideas to the board and find our way to the path that would become churchtogether.today.

Kyle encouraged us to use a project management tool called Trello. Trello allows on-going conversations, ideas etc., that can be edited, and moved to different “rooms” as the projects develop and eventually conclude. Each person on the committee can then go to Trello, put up an idea or article or blog or whatever. I can see their offerings, edit them, approve them and move them on. When a project is completed (ready to be sent to the developer) it can be moved into the completed area for archiving. It is a great system that helped us tremendously as we got started.

³ James Martin, SJ, "Spiritual and Religious: The Benefits of Being Both," *Thinking Faith: The Online Journal of the Jesuits in Britain*, accessed February 23, 2016, http://www.thinkingfaith.org/articles/20121116_1.htm.

Each person on the committee began to find his or her place within the needed work. We set up social media accounts (more on that later) and began to play around with all of it so that we could get comfortable in this new world of cyberspace. Ideas started flowing. Blogs were being written and suggestions for devotion topics came in. We had to figure where everything would go on the site.

Although we had culled some of our original ideas, we landed on 5 elements (pages) for the website: Home Page with links to Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, links to our events on meetup.com, ways to donate to local and global causes, a way to donate to our website as well as a link to information regarding who we were and how we got started; a Daily Chapel page, with blogs, YouTubes, live chat with Clergy, Going Deeper, and prayer requests; Last Week Today page, with a full length, recorded weekly Methodist service, a YouTube of music from Hillsong in Australia (We didn't include full worship services from Hillsong because, although we loved their music, it is a very evangelical church and we were very clear that we wanted things on our website that fit in with the liberal theology of St. John's) and a YouTube selection that changes weekly from a variety of cultures and church experiences (Fijian, Cantonese, Spanish etc.); a Get Involved page with a direct link to our MeetUp.com page that advertises three face-to-face activities, events, classes, discussions, or fellowship opportunities; and a Collection Plate page for donations to our website (the link on the Home page leads people to this page for their donations.)

We were clear, at last. We knew the elements of the site. We knew our goals for each of the elements and we had begun the process of collecting content.

As we became clear about the project, how it would work, and how we would work with it we realized it was time to try and explain it to the rest of the church. We decided the first place to introduce it would be at St. John's church council. After our presentation we would ask for an official vote as to whether or not the members of the church would like to consider themselves hosts of the online church. The vote was a unanimous yes.

CHAPTER THREE

THE WAVES

You rule the swelling of the sea; when its waves rise, You still them.

~Psalm 89:9~



Figure 4, ¹ Anthony Delaney, *Dream of a Coming Revival*, Digital image, Reeve Creative, 2013, Web, <http://i2.wp.com/anthonydelaney.files.wordpress.com/2013/05/original.jpg>

Once on the water sudden severe thunderstorms are a hazard and can materialize out of nowhere. That's when seamanship-the ability to pilot a vessel effectively under adverse conditions-becomes important. It is a skill acquired over time and involves a broad understanding of your boat and how it handles in different situations. It also requires knowledge of wind, water and geography, information that can be gained both in the classroom and in on-the-water training. You and your boat need to be prepared at all times. Anchors and ropes should be kept in a state of readiness, along with life jackets and all other safety equipment.¹

Pages and Content

¹ Wayne Stacey. "U.S. Coast Guard - Safe Boat Handling in Bad Weather," U.S. Coast Guard - Safe Boat Handling in Bad Weather, accessed February 18, 2016, http://gulffishing.com/USCG_BadWeatherBoating.html.

After figuring out what content was, we needed to study more about it. We all began bringing in articles that would guide us through the creation of each page of the site. One of the most helpful articles we read was “9 Simple Tips for Writing Persuasive Web Content.”²

I condensed the 9 tips but wanted to share them because they were very helpful to us and guided our content writing.

1. Treat your web visitors like wild animals

The idea is that people are hunting, like a hungry animal that wants to eat NOW.

All they want to know is, do you have what they want and can they find it quickly and easily.

2. Put your most important information first

Let people know what you do on your website. If they want to go further they will, but if they have to spend any time at all finding out if you have what they want they will move on.

3. Don't try to be clever or creative

Simple statements are the best. If people have to think too hard they will just move on to the next site in the Google line up.

4. Write for scanners

Only 16% of people read web pages thoroughly.

A checklist for writing for scanners:

² Henneke Duistermaat, "9 Simple Tips for Writing Persuasive Web Content," Enchanting Marketing, February 19, 2013, accessed February 18, 2016. <http://www.enchantingmarketing.com/writing-for-the-web-vs-print/>.

Does your headline communicate what you're about?

Does your caption communicate a sales message?

Do your sub headlines summarize your key points?

Do easy-to-scan bullet points reduce wordiness?

5. Use familiar words

“Carewords” are the words people are looking for. People are sniffing around for familiar words that convince them they are in the right place. This is especially important information for church folks. We can't use church lingo when trying to interest people who don't speak the language.

6. Write for lazy people

“A lazy panther looks for an easy catch for his dinner.” Make your content easy to read:

Use short paragraphs

Use short sentences

Skip unnecessary words

Avoid jargon and gobbledygook

Avoid the passive tense

Avoid needless repetition

Address your web readers directly

Shorten your text

7. Expect People to arrive anywhere on your website

People won't read your website like they do a book – it can't be a successive story but each page should be self contained, easy to scan, clear, and should have a call

to action that directs people where you want them to go next.

8. Make it easy for people to find you

Potential “customers” are hunting for something. Use words that will help them know they found the right spot.

9. Make a visual impression

Visual appeal influences your readers. Use pictures, quotes, images, highlights, bold text. Change paragraphs to bullet points when you can.

It’s not talking down to people but at the same time it’s important to assume you are not talking to academics unless you have an academic website. Don’t try to be everything to everybody – just state who you are, and what you have to offer in a way that is easy to grasp on a site that is easy to follow.

This was all very helpful information to someone who is used to writing for classes and sermons. It’s a very different way of thinking and certainly a different way of writing and sharing information.

The Site Elements

Home Page

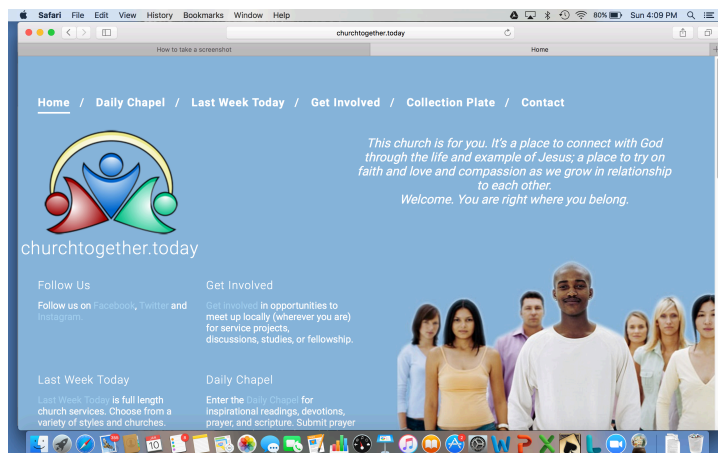


Figure 5. <http://churchtogether.today/index.php>, home page.

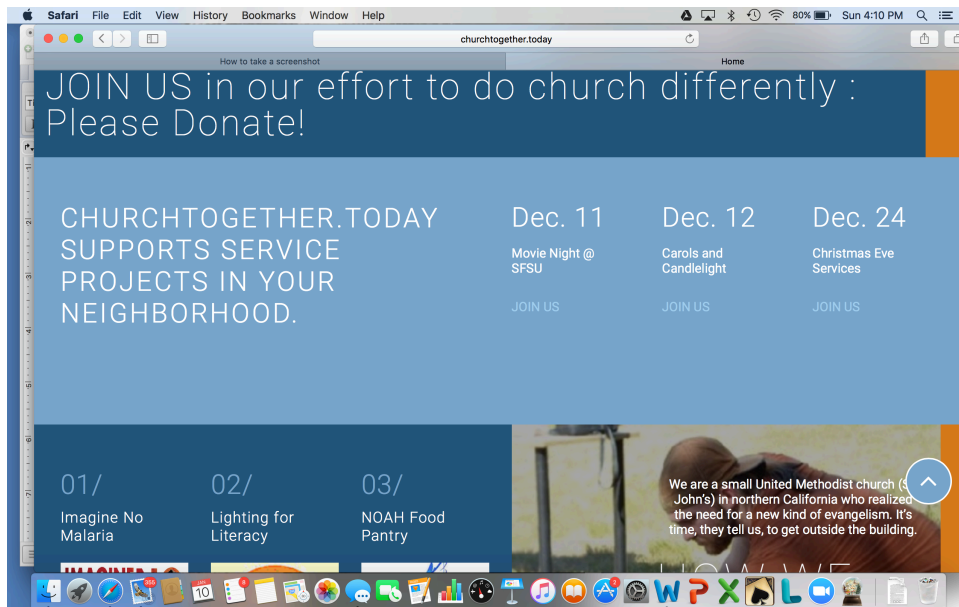


Figure 6. <http://churchtogether.today/index.php>, home page con't.

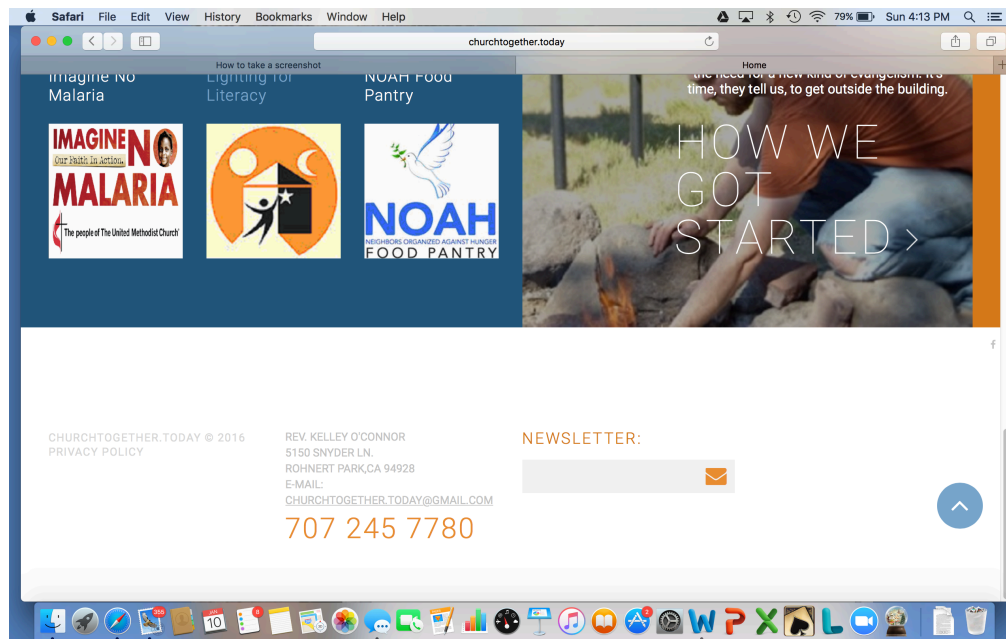


Figure 7. <http://churchtogether.today/index.php>, home page con't.

We spent a great deal of time discussing and “playing” with the home page. As was just stated it was important to get a lot of information down to a small amount of print

that would invite people in, direct them to the various parts of the site and work within the mobile optimized template that we had chosen to be the structure for the site.

We had already set up a Facebook Page, Twitter Account and Instagram. We knew we would need direct links to those things from the home page. There was a place on the template for a large image and finding an image was difficult. We wanted people of all ages but our church had no families and no children so we weren't going to find that at St. John's. We would have to have permission to use young kids in any picture so we finally decided to use a stock photo. Stock photos are photographs of common things like landmarks, nature, events or people that are bought and sold on a royalty-free basis. They can be used and reused for commercial design purposes.³ The one we finally chose was of a group of Millennials. The picture had a little edge. To us, the youth didn't look like goody-goodies but like the youth we knew – with a variety of expressions. We all liked the choice.

We wanted to tell our story and tried, at first to have too much information on the home page, so we created a link to “How we got started.” That way if anyone was interested they could learn more. The image that goes with that link is one of my sons building a fire. We thought it would seem like a youth event campfire. We would eventually like to have scrolling photos of our various events there. The template doesn't allow for that so until we are ready for version #2 we will keep it as it is.

The menu across the top of the home page has the names of the other pages and with a single click one is able to maneuver through the different pages of the website.

³ "Stock Photo," What Is? A Webopedia Definition, 2016, accessed February 18, 2016, http://www.webopedia.com/TERM/S/stock_photo.html.

The template had several places on the home page for donations – one bright orange bar that says “Please Donate” and then three small windows for donating to different charities. We weren’t sure that we wanted to talk about donations on the home page given that one common criticism we often hear about church is “all they do is ask for money.” We are also aware that good stewardship of our resources is biblical and the charities we chose; Imagine No Malaria, Lighting for Literacy and a local food bank, were busy living out the gospel message to love one another. Some of the LAC members were never convinced that asking for money on the home page was a good idea – but the template we chose for our website was laid out for these functions so we didn’t have a lot of choice. Fortunately the LAC was made up of friends and people who believed in what we were doing, and where we were going, more than they believed any one thing had to be done their way. What a wonderful group to work with.

There is one more area on the home page and it is for information about and direct links to the events on our meetup.com page. We can show three events at a time. All that is needed on the home page is the name and date of the event. All other information will be on our meetup.com page and when one clicks on the event on the home page they are taken directly to the event at meetup.com where they will find a map to the location of the event and all other pertinent information.

Daily Chapel

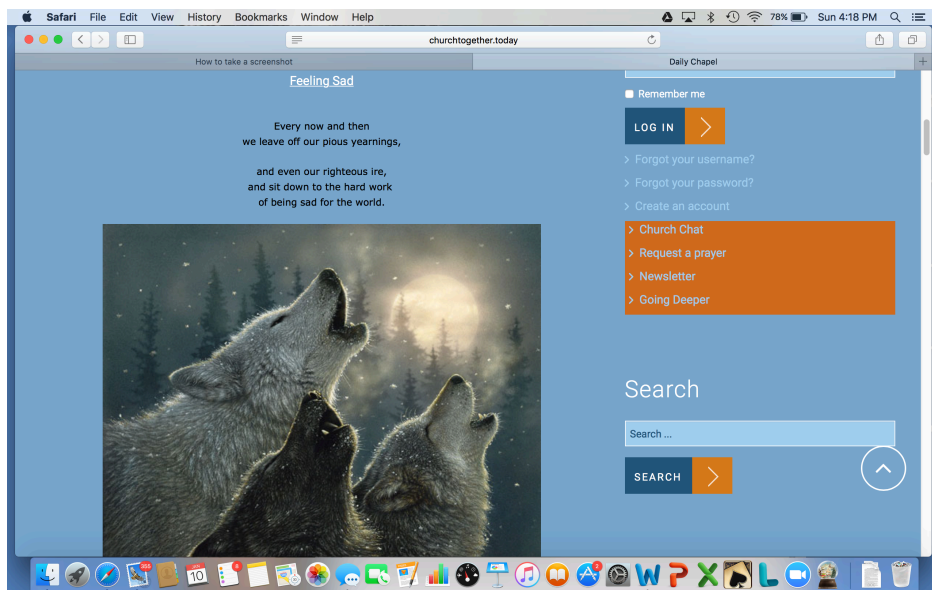


Figure 8. <http://churchtogether.today/index.php>, daily chapel.

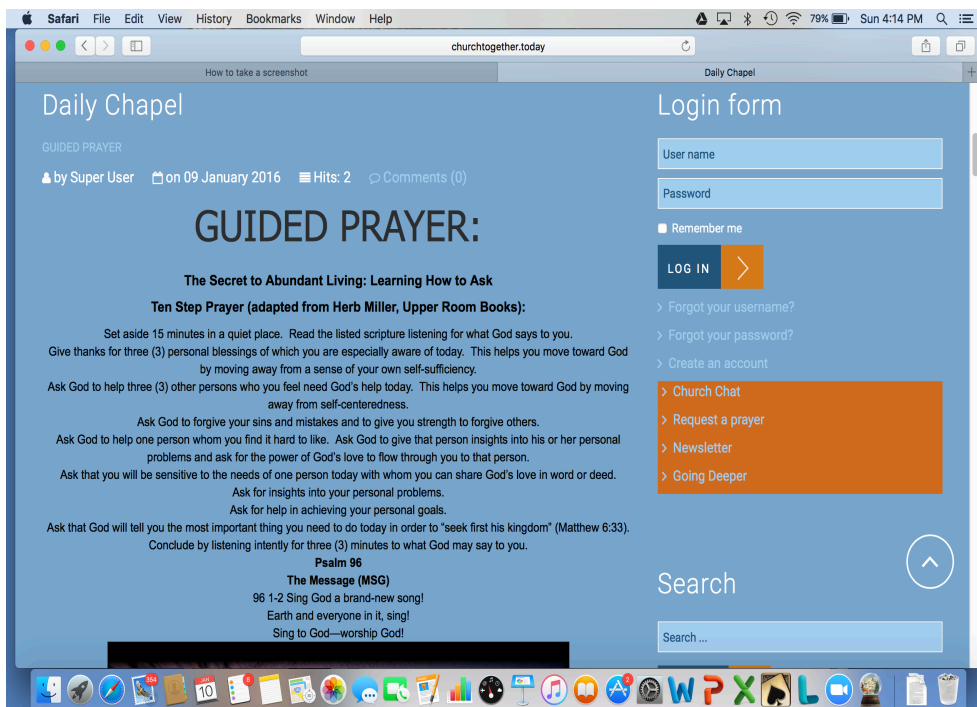


Figure 9. <http://churchtogether.today/index.php>, daily chapel con't.

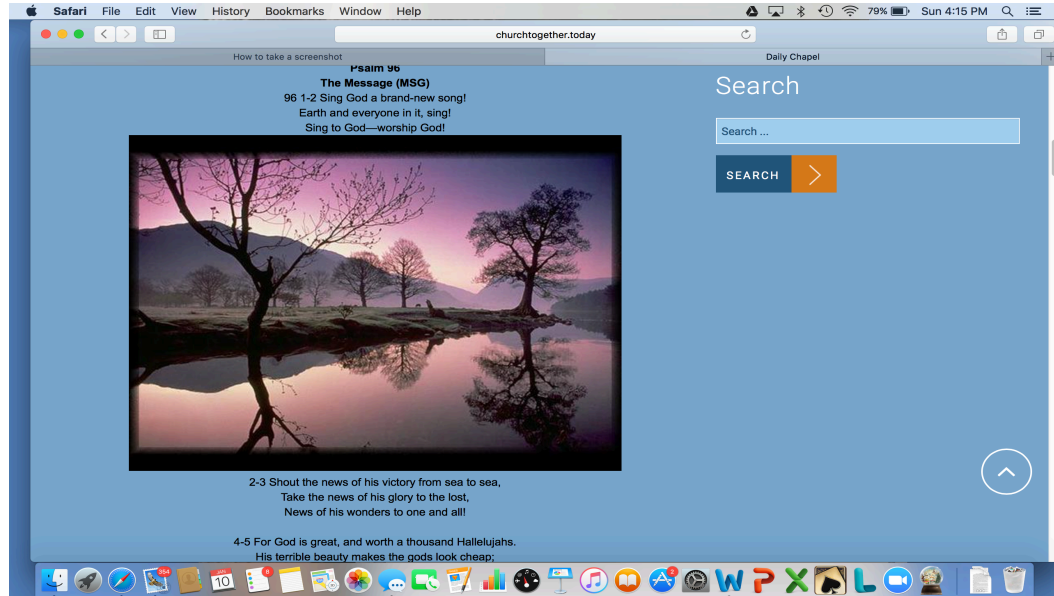


Figure 10. <http://churchtogether.today/index.php>, daily chapel con't.

The Daily Chapel (Shown in the screen shots above) requires the most constant and consistent content maintenance. There are many elements to this page. First and foremost there is a daily inspirational article, or prayer or music or all three. Sometimes there is a blog inviting discussion. My goal is to have something new up by 7:00 AM each day, seven days a week. This has been a great challenge. It has also encouraged a great deal of discipline for me to enter the sacred each morning and figure out a way to share it. I comb through articles and You Tubes and Facebook posts. I look through my Twitter feed and see what's on Instagram and what's on the morning news that might help me figure out what folks might need for the day. What might help, guide, inspire, encourage and challenge those who are looking for something to get them through the day. When I find what I want for the day I go into the admin. part of the site and create the page using images and music and words that work together to create a holy aesthetic – sacred space.

There are challenges here. Who is my audience? I won't know until I am able to see the demographics of the site users. Someone has to use the site before I can get those demographics. As I was lamenting this in one of my classes, one of my professors said to give myself permission to be surprised by who "attends" this online church. It was freeing to think I would create this daily chapel with things I thought might help, in the same way I prepare sermons on Sunday morning. I work hard, prepare well and always begin my Sundays with a prayer asking God to take my crumbs and present a loaf of nourishment for those in need. I'm always surprised that, as people leave the church on Sunday morning, often more than one person will thank me for talking directly to them that day. And they will have each heard something different and sometimes something I didn't even say. That is the work of the Holy Spirit, using me in ways I'm unaware to help in ways I never intended. That is what I trust about this project – that it is guided by the Holy Spirit, and it will reach those it is intended to reach with a word they need to hear. I am a small cog in a large wheel.

Also on the Daily Chapel page is a place for asking questions of clergy. If you click on Church Chat you will be directed to a page where you can type questions you might have. Your questions are then emailed to me and either I or another clergy will respond. Just under the church chat button is the Request a Prayer button. Clicking on that will take you to a page where you will be able to type out a prayer request. That too will be emailed to me and we will confirm that your request has been received and we (me, and others on the LAC who have promised to pray) are praying.

There is a button to sign up for our newsletter and a button for Going Deeper.

The Going Deeper page has several things to help someone who has been using the daily chapel and is ready to begin creating a spiritually disciplined life. The going deeper page answers several questions that someone just beginning their faith journey might have: What do Christians Believe? What is prayer? How should we pray? The Model Prayer (the Lord's Prayer), Creating a faith space in your home, and How do I start reading the Bible? These are, I hope, some helpful tips that can guide someone starting out or even a more "seasoned" Christian who has never seriously read the Bible or who might want to learn more about prayer.

Last Week Today

Last Week today is a page on the site that offers some different worship experiences for those who want to "go to church without going to church." There is a full one-hour United Methodist Church service filmed at First United Methodist Church in Santa Rosa, California. They film their service every week, using 5 mounted cameras. The pastor of the church is the circuit leader for his area and offered to let us use the YouTube of the services each week. I change the YouTube each week on Tuesday and leave the archived services on the site for those who might like to revisit a service or part of one, or binge watch church services!

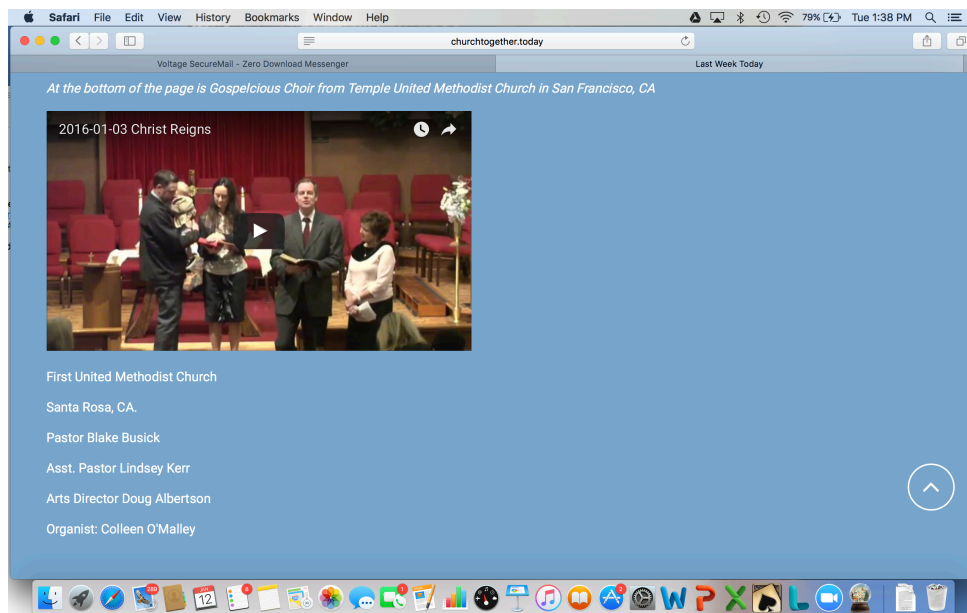


Figure 11. <http://churchtogether.today/index.php>, next week today.

The second offering on this page is wonderful music from Hillsong Church in Australia.

This also has archived material.

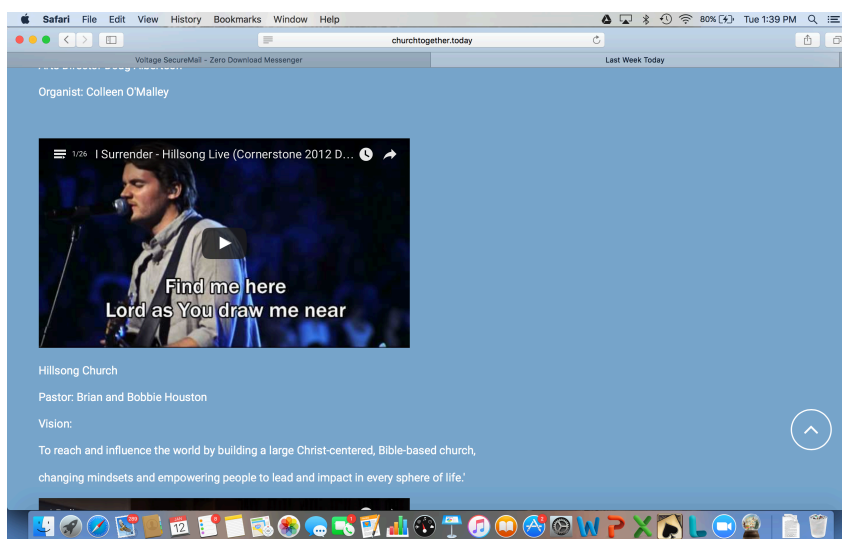


Figure 12. <http://churchtogether.today/index.php>, next week today con't.

The third offering changes from week to week. Sometimes I put something up for kids, like a children’s sermon and sometimes, I put up something from a Cantonese or Filipino service, or if our own choir has been especially great (they are always great!) I will put up their latest offering.

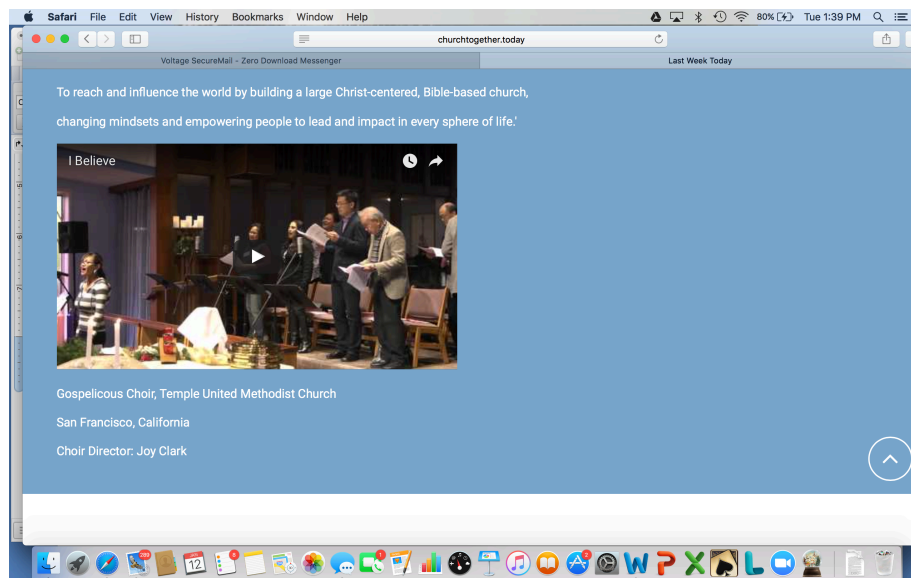


Figure 13. <http://churchtogether.today/index.php>, next week today, con't.

The point of this page is to offer some “traditional” church to those who would like it. By traditional I mean something filmed in a church service in a church building with a pastor and choir and seasonal liturgy, according to the denomination, culture or religious institution I’ve chosen. It is also a chance to offer snippets of other church experiences.

Get Involved

In some ways the Get Involved page is the most important page on the website because this is the way face-to-face Christian community happens. This is where people come together around service projects, classes, discussions, programs, and events. When

something is happening we schedule it on the churchtogether.today page on

The screenshot shows a Safari browser window displaying the churchtogether.today website. The browser's address bar shows 'meetup.com'. The website's header includes the Meetup logo and navigation links: 'Find a Meetup Group', 'Start a Meetup Group', and 'Invite Friends to Join'. The main content area is titled 'churchtogether.today' and features a navigation menu with 'Home', 'Members', 'Sponsors', 'Photos', 'Pages', 'Discussions', and 'More'. A 'Group tools' section is visible on the right. The main content area is divided into three columns. The left column shows group statistics for 'Rohnert Park, CA', including 'church members without a church' (37), 'Group reviews' (1), 'Upcoming Meetups' (9), 'Past Meetups' (22), and 'Our calendar'. The middle column features a 'Churchtogether.today ~The Church has left the building!' announcement, a 'SCHEDULE A NEW MEETUP' button, and a 'Food Pantry Volunteers Needed' event listing for Temple United Methodist Church on Wednesday, January 27, at 4:00 PM. The right column displays a 'What's new' section with recent member activity, including 'NEW MEMBER Con joined January 12', 'NEW RSVP churchtogether-today RSVPed Yes for Lord, Teach Us to Pray January 12', 'NEW MEMBER Kimberley Sweeney joined January 4', and 'NEW MEMBER Mandy Clark joined December 10'. The browser's taskbar at the bottom shows various application icons.

Figure 14. <http://churchtogether.today/index.php>, get involved.

MeetUp.com. We can invite those who have joined our Get Involved page and anyone who seeks it out from our home page on our churchtogether.today website.

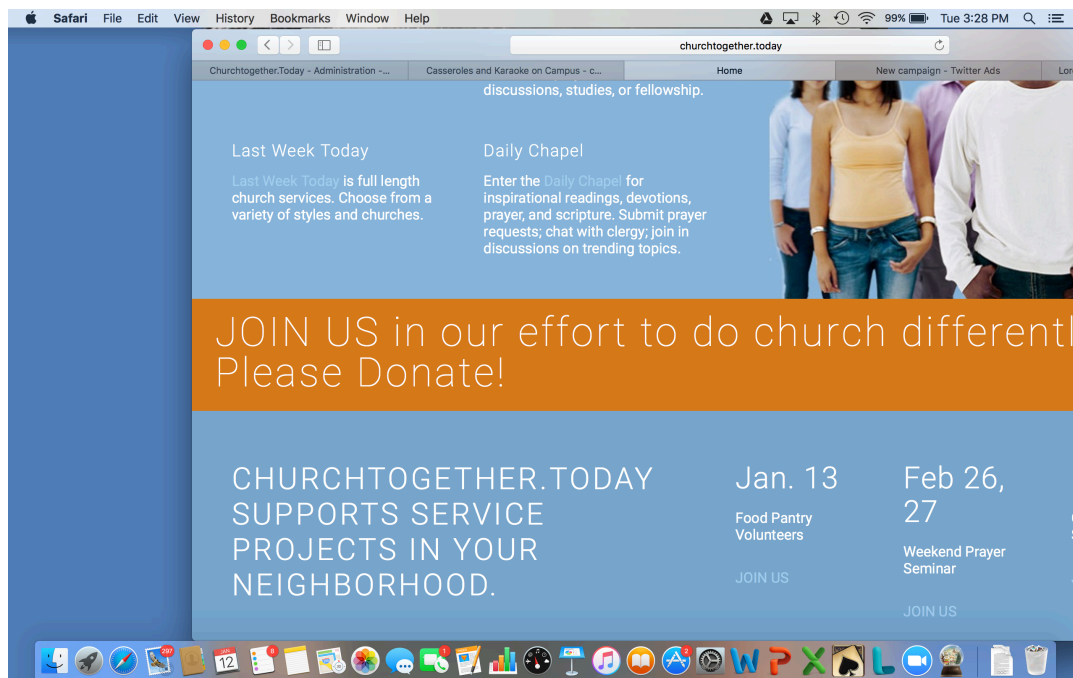


Figure 15. <http://churchtogether.today/index.php>, home page.

These events can occur anywhere. We have had Meet Ups in Windsor, Healdsburg, Santa Rosa and San Francisco so far. By clicking on the link on our home page, next to the event you're interested in attending, you will be directed immediately to our Meet Up.com page and there you can register and pay (if there is a fee.)

The challenge with meet ups is that they require manpower and time. It takes time to schedule an event somewhere, market it enough to get folks interested in attending and then pull off the event and all that it entails. Our first meet up was the site launch celebration. Only two people outside the LAC attended even though we invited everyone from circuit church members to the Bishop of our conference. (The Bishop responded with his regrets – I'm afraid we were too last minute in our invitation.) We had not really planned far enough ahead for anyone. We didn't know how to market our event very well – and maybe most importantly, people didn't know what we were doing. It's difficult to

get even committed church people to attend events inside their own church building, imagine having no building and no idea who to contact about the event! This is the biggest challenge of an online ministry - marketing, reaching out, and gathering together. Once it starts it will grow, I am confident of that. But a full time pastor serving a full time church will have a hard time starting a full time ministry online at the same time. It will take the confidence of the conference and their willingness to take a risk by funding the church until it becomes sustainable on its own. It's not as hard to convince a conference of funding a brick and mortar start-up. Not so easy with something as strange and new as an online church. But thus the quandary with thinking outside the box this far - getting buy-in before it's successful. Buy-in would mean financing some Meet Ups, buying the equipment necessary to film forum discussions out of which good blog discussions could happen – the true building of community both online and in person. I still believe this will be a successful project but it will be slow going because of lack of funding and ministers doing the work. Our success so far is in the building a steadily growing community on Facebook and providing Daily Chapel to those who have chosen to start their day with a bit of the holy from churchtogether.today.

Another difficulty with meet ups is being unsure of our audience. If we schedule a meet up at Starbucks for a discussion around gun control our audience could be significantly different than if we are looking for volunteers to help out in the local food pantry. Each meet up could be targeting a different group of people making blanket marketing difficult at best. Each event needs to be marketed to those who might be interested. It is an ongoing challenge to determine who that is and how we get the word to them.

Collection Plate

Our means of funding the site by charitable contributions happens with our Collection Plate page. I thought this name would be too churchy but one of my sons who has not been to church in years, came up with the name. I figured if he liked it, and got it, others would too. This is simply a nice part of the template, which allows you to click on the amount you'd like to donate and then go to PayPal and pay, or of course you can send a check as well. It's an easy process for the visitor.

In order to keep the fees limited it was important to have a non-profit status for PayPal. We needed to discuss if it was reasonable for churchtogether.today to establish itself as a non-profit or work with the non-profit status of the hosting church. Since the wonderful church treasurer was a member of the LAC we didn't have to go far for our answer. He said he thought it made the most sense to go through the host church since we had not yet established ourselves and because getting a non-profit status would take time that we didn't have at that point.

Social Media

Facebook allows us to reach the largest number of people across generations. There are grandmas bragging about their grandchildren and teens lamenting homework assignments and boasting new prom dresses as well as way too many selfies! The point is that people of all ages use Facebook to communicate- to share their stories – their greatest joys and deepest sorrows, along with their menus and food pictures and the locations they visit. There are travel logs, Christmas letters and obituaries on Facebook. It is a great venue to try out something new. It allows you to share pictures, videos, links,

conversations and YouTube's. You can coordinate and promote events and connect people across generational lines.

Only a few members of the LAC were on Facebook when we started our project. Before we were through all but one were on and using it regularly. We started a churchtogether.today page and began using it to communicate to our friends. The first day we had our page we put out our idea of an online church. The comments came pouring in. Some people didn't understand the idea at all but many commented that although they would never step foot inside a church again they would be very interested in "attending" an online church. Some comments included personal stories. One woman told us how she had been hurt by the church and was not interested in returning but was feeling the absence of community and Christian discipleship. She loved the idea of the Daily Chapel and the idea of having discussions, fellowship and Bible study in coffee shops. She wrote, "Now that's a church I'd go to!"

The following is one of the Facebook conversations when we first introduced the idea of an online church:

Entry, [October 24](#) ·

Thinking about my doctoral project. It has been on my mind that the church has, by its own determination to shut out people who don't cooperate with its doctrine, shut down the very ones it would like to reach. An example, beyond the obvious ones, is soccer families. When soccer became a Sunday sport the church just said to young families, "Get your priorities straight." We should have been saying, "how can we continue to serve you and make space for you to grow and serve, in the midst of your 24/7 lives." I'm thinking of creating a total online worship experience -accessible at anytime even for

marathon weekends when you need a lift, a word of encouragement-a bit of Jesus for your soul. I'm thinking the online worship would need to stay rather short - message, drama, music, visual prayer - but what do you think? If you wanted to go to church without going to church, what would feed you? What would encourage you to find a relationship with God, while inspiring you to service and generosity? I'd appreciate hearing from you all and especially those of you who miss church because of your schedule or exhaustion, who long for worship and connection.

- 30 Likes

Entry: Thinking out of the box excites my spirituality~ DO IT!

[October 24 at 6:49am](#)

Entry: Sounds like a great idea, I'm sure there's already something on YouTube, CUMC recently started a Wednesday evening program to help fill the gap

[October 24 at 7:14am](#)

Entry: More than any other thing, the content needs to be positive/uplifting. Links can always be provided to reference materials and specific passages for those doing topic research/learning. Make the content reason to connect or learn more (evangelism) or tough hour uplifting.

[October 24 at 7:18am](#)

Entry: Sounds good. Could it be interactive?

[October 24 at 7:20am](#)

Entry: idea.... I know if it were something they could access with their phone...that's uplifting.... they would use it. I'm on a support group on FB.... many go there!!

[October 24 at 7:47am](#)

Entry: The only problem I see is that we have rapidly become a society without face to face communication...one can live life with lots of "Friends" and never see another human being. There is a part of church that is community, especially in our Wesleyan tradition, so how would you bridge that gap?

[October 24 at 8:01am](#)

Entry: I would go a step further. Have as a goal to have a brief worship service at every tournament on Sunday am before the tournament. If a prison ministry goes to the prisons shouldn't a soccer ministry go to the soccer fields?

Entry: In addition to nourishing the flock it provides opportunity for witness and outreach.

[October 24 at 8:09am](#)

Entry: Kelley, you could become Chuck Colson of soccer ministry.

[October 24 at 8:29am](#)

Entry: What a wonderful idea...safe journey home.... you are such a blessing to us...

[October 24 at 8:44am](#)

Entry: I love your idea. I don't do church anymore for a number of reasons, but I do worship everyday. I DO miss the church family aspect, but in some churches that has faded away a bit. My Christian friends are my church family. Your idea can really help others who have other obligations or have similar issues as me. It would give an opportunity to come back to a church family

[October 24 at 9:05am](#)

Entry: Someday I will be in California sitting in your church. See if you recognize this 'old friend and fan of yours

[October 24 at 9:06am](#)

Entry: While I am nourished daily by Steve Garnaas-Holmes writings, I really think at some point we have to be in actual community with others to grow in our relationship to God. I DO love your thinking that we must find ways for the church to serve and fit into the schedules of young families.

[October 24 at 9:16am](#)

Entry: Kelley--I couldn't agree more.... However, I would say we need much more than "a bit of Jesus". And why does the on-line worship need to stay rather short? If we are trying to

[October 24 at 10:07am](#)

Entry: Sorry...hit the wrong key...I'll try again...if we are trying to "feed" the people why only give just a short, quick meal? We have a much bigger appetite for Jesus.

[October 24 at 10:10am](#)

Entry: Enjoying the comments. Where is the app for that?

[October 24 at 10:45am](#)

Entry: I love it, [Kelley O'Connor](#). You continually amaze and inspire me. Sign me up!!!!

[October 24 at 11:51am](#)

Entry: Ditto on what [Quannah](#) said. I love the idea that you want to reach people due to whatever reasons they can't make it on Sundays. What if you opened the church on one night a month other than a Sunday and did a service? You might reach some SSU students (as well as others) who find it hard to come on Sundays because it might be their one day to themselves before heading back to school/work on Monday.

[October 24 at 12:09pm](#)

Entry: Perhaps, in addition to online access, in person meetings could be arranged on a waterfall schedule (a different day each time) so that everyone can come at some point.

Church needn't be only Wednesdays and Sundays.

[October 24 at 12:21pm](#)

Entry: I am LOVING all these comments!! Thanks and keep them coming! Together we'll create a very cool thing here!

[October 24 at 3:08pm](#)

Entry: Love the idea [Kelley O'Connor](#). Not sure it would work for me but the folks you are targeting could very well love it whenever they can tune in!

[October 24 at 5:07pm](#)

Entry: Love the way you are thinking! Make a place for prayer requests. How about music requests? Kids page? A way to chat with other congregants? Sign up for service projects? Wow I think you are onto something BIG!

[October 24 at 5:42pm](#)

Entry: me too! Go get them [Kelley O'Connor](#) , Pastor _____ check her out!

[October 26 at 8:36am](#)

Entry: Hey Kel! Here are some that are happening now: [Church of the Larger Fellowship](#) and [Extravagance UCC](#). The first is a UU online fellowship that has been active for at least a couple of years (<http://www.clfuu.org/>) and Extravagance UCC, which I'm involved with, that's UCC. I'd love to be a part of what you do!

[Church of the Larger Fellowship](#)

A Unitarian Universalist Congregation without Walls

CLFUU.ORG

[October 25 at 7:57pm](#) ·

Entry: I'd love it!

[October 25 at 8:24pm](#)

Entry: I think you're absolutely right, Kelley! We've taken the wrong approach. Sunday morning soccer games are a no-win for Sunday morning church. Good ideas above about developing a soccer ministry! In addition to community and music, what I miss when I mis...[See More](#)

[October 25 at 9:56pm](#)

Entry: I'm curious: which would fill that void for you: a recorded version of the sermon, or reading the script of the sermon? We post scripts on our church website but have the ability to podcast (audio now, video a possibility later), but haven't determined if that's worth the volunteers' time.

We found these comments very helpful and along the lines with the responses we hoped for. From these postings we could begin to see that a big part of our audience would be folks who had become disenchanted with their churches and were looking for a church experience of another kind. All but two of those who responded were my age (58-Boomer) or older but, of course, that makes sense because this is my Facebook page and my “friends” tend to be around my age. The two that were not Boomers were women who are Gen Y/Millennials. (Born between 1977 and 1994) Because of these responses we added an area for prayer requests and had long discussions about how the site could be interactive, have a kid’s page, and stay positive vs. political.

We keep the Facebook page positive and inspiring. We are clear that we are followers of Jesus and trying to live out the Gospel – meaning that we are advocates for social justice. We don't avoid politics but we avoid judgment and criticism. Several people manage our Facebook page and all are very careful as to the message we send.

We felt it was important to create a profile on Twitter as well even though we were less familiar with the format and aware that fewer folks use Twitter (750 million Facebook users vs. 175 million Twitter users.) The demographic of Twitter users is slightly younger and includes more of the male population where Facebook has a higher female population.⁴

Twitter is a limited blogging site. Each post is limited to 140 characters including spaces, and punctuation. “Tweets” tell a story over time. The Smithsonian Institution believes the social narrative that unfolds on Twitter is so significant that they have been collecting everything ever tweeted for future study by cultural commentators and scholars.

Anyone can see your tweets as Twitter is an open forum so you can comment on news items, participate in open conversations, and create new and professional contacts. On Twitter you can put a link to your webpage so we can invite people to churchtogether.today directly. It's also a good venue for inviting folks to social action. Twitter reaches people in a different way than Facebook, in that Twitter connects you to people beyond your existing relationships. You can connect to people with similar interests and join in public conversations that go beyond local geography. You don't need

⁴ Keith Anderson, Elizabeth Drescher, *Click 2 Save The Digital Ministry Bible* (New York City, Morehouse Publishing 2012), 60, 75

permission to follow someone on Twitter so you can build a body of relationships in a much different way than on Facebook.⁵

As a group, the LAC found Twitter much more challenging to learn and use than Facebook. Perhaps we're just too wordy! It is definitely a different beast but it is vital to have a presence in both places. Twitter organizes tweets with hashtags. When people post a tweet they # hashtag it with a keyword (not too long because it is counted in the 140 characters!) and when you want to see the conversation around that topic you simply click on the hashtagged key word and you will see all the tweets under that hashtag. More complicated than it sounds? Not really! At least for our LAC who found the use of hashtags very confusing. After a few of us played with it all a while we began to catch on. Most never attempted and few stuck with it.



Figure 16. churchtogether.today Twitter page, <https://twitter.com/churchtogethert>

⁵ "Getting Started with Twitter," Twitter Help Center, 2016, accessed February 23, 2016, Web, <https://support.twitter.com/articles/215585>.

Instagram was the third social media venue we decided was important to our outreach efforts. Instagram is a social networking app that allows you to share photos and videos from a smartphone. You have a profile and newsfeed in the same way you do on Facebook and Twitter. You can follow people and they can follow you. Instagram is all about visual sharing. Pictures of food at your favorite restaurant, pictures of your birthday party and visit to Italy are all fun to share with your followers. For churchtogether.today we were able to try out some of the visuals we were thinking about for our website and see how people responded to them.

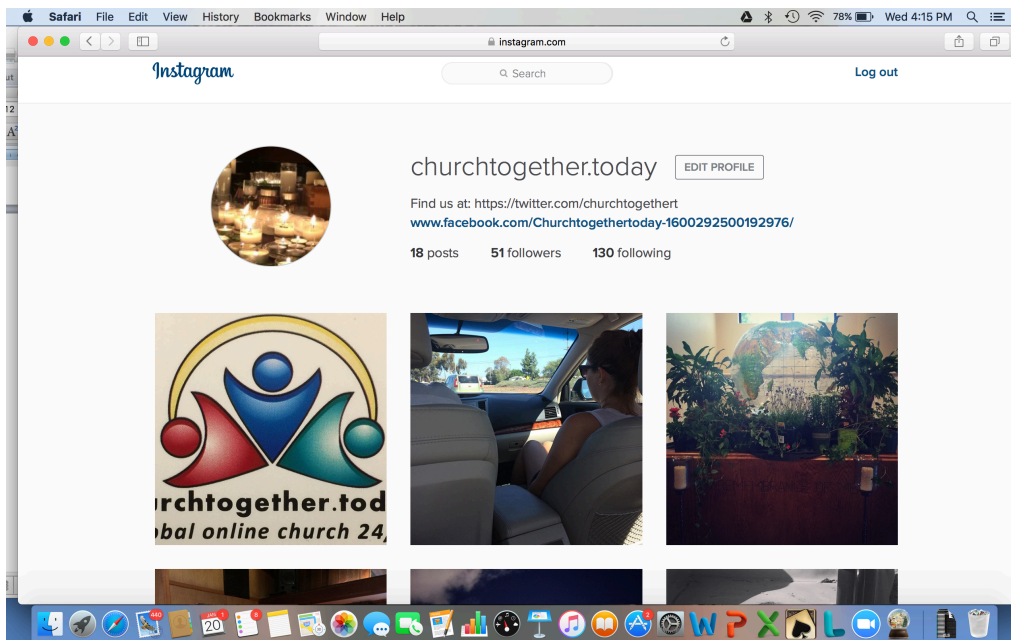


Figure 17. churchtogether.today Instagram page,
<https://www.instagram.com/churchtogether.today/>

After getting accounts with Facebook, Twitter and Instagram we needed people who would be responsible for keeping fresh content on our pages. Several folks, as I said

earlier, were willing to work with our Facebook feed but none of us were very familiar with Twitter and Instagram so that was a harder sell. I have tried to keep things going on all our social media pages but it is a challenge!

Each post, tweet, photo takes time. We don't want to just throw anything into the social networking atmosphere, so we ponder, pray, search out the thing we think is perfect for the subject, time, person, etc. that we are addressing. Sometimes after spending a couple hours in the morning I have posted one thing on the Daily Chapel page of the website and have not even glanced at Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram yet. I work full time so if it doesn't get done in the morning it may not get done at all that day, or at least not until the evening when I finally get home and start the process all over again. The good thing is that I love it, feel called to it, and feel that this is a positive thing I am doing.

We used Trello to stay organized and share ideas when we were together as an LAC but once the website launched and I was appointed to a different church we were unable to have the contact we had during the build. This made our work more difficult. The United Methodist Church has a rule against contact with parishioners for a year after a move. I had gotten permission from my DS to have a small amount of contact with my LAC but it proved much more difficult than I had hoped. At that point we were no longer able to have contact even through Trello so we closed off that venue for communication. It became clear that I would need to find people outside my LAC to continue the project. People at my new church in San Francisco and some folks that are no longer attending the founding church are now finding, or are continuing, roles in our online church. Once the Holy Spirit has decided there will be a new church there is no stopping it. Every time

I think I've hit a wall I just can't climb I suddenly find myself on top of the wall looking into a whole new future.

CHAPTER FOUR

WALKING ON WATER

*Peter answered him, “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.”
29 He said, “Come.” So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and
came toward Jesus. 30 But when he noticed the strong wind, [b] he became frightened,
and beginning to sink, he cried out, “Lord, save me!” 31 Jesus immediately reached
out his hand and caught him...*

Matthew 13: 28-31a

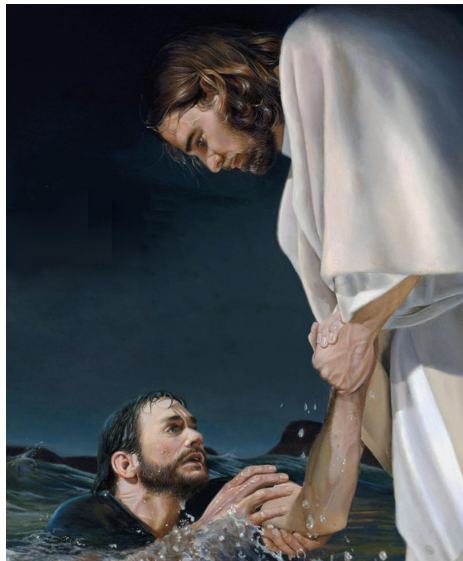


Figure 18, Jesus Pulling Peter Out of the Sea, *Picasa Web Albums*,
RK Digitals Gallery, 2011, Web, [https://s-media-cache-
ak0.pinimg.com/736x/ee/1d/2e/ee1d2eef8bc4ecc0dde466dfdd9a1b62.jpg](https://s-media-cache-ak0.pinimg.com/736x/ee/1d/2e/ee1d2eef8bc4ecc0dde466dfdd9a1b62.jpg)

Name

Finding a name was difficult. We came up with all sorts of things that we liked. We had a page and a half of names for the website. When we sat down to get a domain name all of our well-thought-out choices were already used by other people. After going

through each one GoDaddy (an internet domain registrar and web hosting company) started offering suggestions of names not yet taken. We went through a long list and finally decided that churchtogether.today said what we needed it to say. It is long and recently we have had discussions about naming the online church something else @churchtogether.today. The names we are considering are Merge and Engage.

Logo

It seemed important to have an easily identifiable logo (design that symbolically represented our church) for churchtogether.today. No one on the Local Advisory Committee felt confident in coming up with something so we decided to use some of our funds to have a logo designed for us. After discussing this with my son he said he would have one designed and donate the cost. Thank you Kyle!

We began by sending several Google images to the designer to give him an idea of what we were thinking. In return we were sent several original designs with a variety of color schemes. We discussed each one and tried out the different colors.

We did not want a cross or a church or any common symbol of religion. We were concerned that if our image were too religious it would conjure up unwanted baggage, which might stop an otherwise interested visitor from proceeding to the web page. We wanted something that represented community and openness. It seemed from the conversations on Facebook that I referred to earlier and because of conversations we had as the LAC that we needed to be careful of two things – people who had been hurt by the church and those for whom the church, though not having attended, invoked negative feelings.

We thought by using a multi color design we would represent our desire to be open to all. We thought of an image of people of different races holding hands, but that is an image that is used quite frequently and we wanted something unique. We chose the following color pallet but asked that some red be used instead of the more liturgical color, purple.



Figure 19. color Pallet, sent by web designer.

After we finally decided on the design and color our final request was to see if the designer could make it look a bit like stained glass. We were all thrilled with the final results.

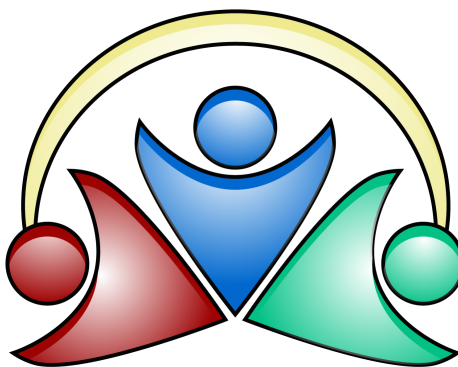


Figure 20. Logo for churchtogether.today

After the logo was completed we were able to get business cards made and at last had something tangible for advertising.



Figure 21. Business Card for churchtogether.today

The Launch

churchtogether.today went live on March 15, 2015. We didn't know it. We were not informed that the site was up and really were not fully prepared for folks to see it. We didn't have enough content. We weren't happy with the layout of the home page. It was not fully mobile optimized for use on a smartphone and tablet. It threw us into a bit of a panic until we realized no one really knew about it yet anyway!

So our work continued. We were talking with the site builder almost daily now – sending lists of changes needing to be made, screen shots of worrisome images, asking questions about what and how things were being done. We worried about how we were going to take on the website and learn to make changes ourselves as they were needed.

How would we find out if anyone was attending our church? How would we really deal with prayer requests and questions asked. Were we really ready to do this great thing we were about?

We decided we had worked hard, spent a great deal of time pondering, praying, figuring, plotting, planning. It was time to celebrate what we had accomplished. We called and booked a room for our launch party. We sent invitations out to circuit churches and to the District Superintendant, even the Bishop. As I said earlier we set up a Meet Up on MeetUp.com and the Get Involved page of our website. When the day came we ran off the liturgy for the consecration (see Attachment 2), picked up a cake with our new logo on it, lots of snacks and beverages and went to celebrate.



Figure 22. cake for launch party.

Following the official launch we decided to present the site to the St. John's family. We used the Sunday after Christmas. We set up tables in the sanctuary (we didn't have pews

so it was easy to rearrange the room,) and invited everyone to bring leftover Christmas goodies to share. We set up easels with poster boards showing the five areas of the online church. We read scripture, played music and had a nice discussion about this new idea that was coming to life before us. Most of the church was excited and supportive but two couples decided we had wasted their time and wrote a letter to the District Superintendent saying we had misused worship time by putting on an “Amway Demonstration.” They didn’t stay for worship that day – they saw the easels, saw that there were no bulletins and left to go home and report our behavior to the D.S.

The D.S. happens to be a doctoral student as well and understood exactly what had happened. He called to comfort and console and let us know he supported what we were doing. I find it interesting that when the Holy Spirit gets moving there always seems to be an opposing force. It happens everytime I’m feeling inovative and try something new and creative in the church. I’ve decided it means I’m doing something right. I’m stirring the right pot.

CHAPTER FIVE

WEATHERING THE STORM

The sea became rough because a strong wind was blowing. 19 When they had rowed about three or four miles, they saw Jesus walking on the sea and coming near the boat, and they were terrified. 20 But he said to them, "It is I; do not be afraid." 21 Then they wanted to take him into the boat, and immediately the boat reached the land toward which they were going.

~John 6: 18-21~



Figure 23. *Boat on Shore*, *Daily Mail.com*, News, 2013, accessed Jan 12, 2016, Web, http://i.dailymail.co.uk/i/pix/2013/09/30/article-2439311-1866A44B00000578-133_634x372.jpg

Whether out for a short jaunt or a circumnavigation adventure on the sea, take care, keep a keen eye, risk a little, trust a lot and enjoy.

How Are We Doing?

The website, completed, came with a whole new bunch of challenges – especially when you add in the fact that within days of the website launch I was informed by my District Superintendent that I would be moving to a new church in a new city. That would mean, as I stated earlier, very reduced contact with my LAC. I would set out on

the next part of this adventure essentially alone, (well, except for wonderful professors and classmates in the Drew doctoral program!) hoping that my new church would embrace churchtogether.today (and me) as new partners in ministry. I also prayed that my new church, Temple United Methodist Church in San Francisco, CA, would allow me the time I would need to write my dissertation.

So now that the website is up and active and The Facebook, Twitter and Instagram pages are being used, how can we know if churchtogether.today is making a difference in anyone's life? Can we tell if an online venue for church is viable in transforming hearts for Jesus?

The real answer is it will take time to build a new community, especially now that the host community has changed. But we have some statistics and analytics to help us see where we are.

We started with a Facebook page to begin to build interest and begin to build an online community. We have promoted our page occassioanlly and boosted specific posts several times with good results. Promoting a page is a way to create ads that will show in the news feed on the right side of people's Facebook page. Boosted posts appear higher in the news feed, so there's a better chance our audience will see them. As of today we have 436 followers or people who have "liked" our page. "Because of the viral nature of social networking, brand and product exposure on Facebook grows exponentially...

Every time someone "Likes" your page or something on it, he exposes it to all his friends, who then have the opportunity to expose it to their friends."¹

When a Facebook user "Likes" our page or its content, his/her friends will notice either in advertisements or on their news feeds. Then, since friends often share common interests, he or she exposes the item to other people who are likely to have similar preferences. So, this way, we naturally target the audience who is most likely to be interested in our online church.

So who are those people? How do we gather the demographics on those visiting and liking our page? Facebook has a section called insights for the managers of each page. If I click on "insights" and then on "people" I can get the following information. I need to point out that the idea of watching this site for two weeks flew out the window long ago. This has been a slow steady process requiring daily interaction with churchtogether.today on the website as well as our social media pages, since March of 2015. We can see that our reach is growing. The following gives us an idea of who is visiting the Facebook page, whether they are male or female, and where they are from.

Your Fans People Reached People Engaged **The people who like your Page**

Women
71%
Men
29%

¹ Gina Poirier, "What Does "Likes" Mean to Me on Facebook From a Marketing Perspective?" 2016, accessed February 18, 2016, <http://smallbusiness.chron.com/likes-mean-facebook-marketing-perspective-28729.html>.

Table 1. Facebook Statistics, <https://www.facebook.com/Churchtogethertoday-1600292500192976/insights/>

Country	Your Fans
United States of America	419
Puerto Rico	1
Nicaragua	1
Chile	1
Canada	1
Uganda	1
City	Your Fans
Santa Rosa, CA	23
Houston, TX	19
Jacksonville, FL	12
San Francisco, CA	10
Rohnert Park, CA	9
New York, NY	9
Sacramento, CA	5
Jackson, MS	5
Modesto, CA	5
Atlanta, GA	5
Nashville, TN	5
Petaluma, CA	4
San Jose, CA	4
Los Angeles, CA	4
Mariposa, CA	4
Chicago, IL	4
Coarsegold, CA	3
Philadelphia, PA	3
Charlotte, NC	3
Stockton, CA	3
Dallas, TX	3
Bakersfield, CA	3
Indianapolis, IN	3
Memphis, TN	2
Forestville, CA	2
Ashland, OR	2
Windsor, CA	2
Sonoma, CA	2
Lumberton, NC	2
Kansas City, MO	2
Seattle, WA	2
Sunnyvale, CA	2
Fulton, CA	2

Elk Grove, CA	2
Detroit, MI	2
Baton Rouge, LA	2
South Santa Rosa, CA	2
Flint, MI	2
Roanoke, VA	2
Oakland, CA	2
Montgomery Village, CA	2
Kissimmee, FL	2
Miami, FL	2
Denver, CO	2
Lynchburg, VA	2
Language	Your Fans
English (US)	407
Spanish	13
English (UK)	3
Spanish (Spain)	1

It appears that, at least on some level, we have attained a global reach. Our page has reached men and women from age 18 to 65+, the largest group being women between the ages of 35 and 65+. That reflects the ages of both those dreaming of and those building the website. I hope it means that we have found something that appeals to most adults.

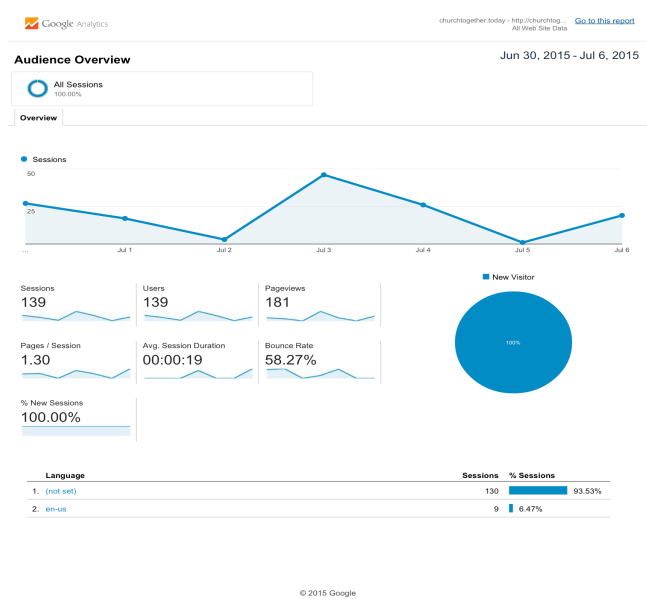
It is a bit harder to get analytics on our web age, the church itself. Our website builder has sent the analytics results from time to time but we have not had success in accessing them ourselves until very recently. That has happened for a couple of reasons. First, I didn't know I could! And second, after finding out I could access this data, it took months to get the sign-in information I needed to see the analytics page for myself.

Now I am able to see that during this particular week, 139 users spent 139 sessions on the site. There were 181 page views equalling 1.3 sessions per user. It also

shows that the average duration per session was 19 minutes, with a bounce rate of 59.27%. I wasn't sure what was meant by bounce rate so I had to look it up. The bounce rate has to do with how many people went to a single page on the site and went no further. 59.27% isn't exactly good news but I believe this could be the case if the majority of folks go directly to the Daily Chapel page and don't navigate further. That makes sense to me because that seems to be the page being visited most frequently.

We have achieved our hope of a global reach on the website as well. Google Analytics shows, in this last month (Dec., 2015 – Jan. 2016) we have had visitors from the U.S.(90), China (12), Russia (11), Germany (9), Japan (8), Spain (5), Brazil (4), South Korea (4) and the Netherlands (3).

Table 2. Google Analytics, <https://analytics.google.com/analytics/web/#report/defaultid/a60902718w95455923p99517127/>



I find this information helpful and encouraging. First, it means we have reached beyond social media to begin forming an international community of churchtogether.today supporters. It also signifies that we are using content that people find engaging. What we can't yet tell is how deeply we are reaching into people's lives. They are visiting the site, and seem to be returning to parts of it. We have not had many comments, and only one prayer request.

Because our finances were limited we have not been able to film forum discussions to lead into blogging conversations. We have not had consistent or regular meet ups. Meet ups create perhaps the largest challenge. It's one thing to plan and announce a meet up. I can plan to have a meet up at 10:00 in the morning at Starbucks around a given topic. I can announce it both on the meetup.com page and our Get Involved page on the website. I can tell friends. I can even boost an announcement post on Facebook. But when it comes to 10:00 AM at Starbucks I may not have anyone to have a conversation with! Now, I have been a pastor long enough to know that the same thing can happen in a church building, so I am not in despair over this. But I am wondering how to get the word out in such a way that folks who might be interested in the conversation will know they are welcome to come.

We have not marketed as much as I would have liked at this point. I do feel that all those things are still a possibility and with Temple UMC's continued support I feel sure this church will continue to grow. As we add content that invites conversation we will be able to know more about the people who visit our church and know if we are serving them in a way that is helpful and relevant to their lives. I think the fact that we have people coming and returning means that the church is helpful to them in some way.

CONCLUSION

*Try as I might to maintain
a steady gait
I walk like a drunk
through life
cloudy and crooked
on a path
laid straight
before me.*

*From halls of love and laughter
fear and tears
I emerge alone and quiet
not sad
but wondering
how I found my way here.*

*God called me, I say
and I believe that happened
as it happens to all
at some point
God called me and I said okay
Not knowing what was ahead.*

*Like Peter stepping out
of a rocking boat
onto the stormy water
I thought I could
I still think
if this damn water
would hold still
for just a moment
I might make it all the way
to Jesus.*

*Meanwhile
I reach for the outstretched hand.
~Rev. Kelley O'Connor*

My new appointment, Temple United Methodist Church has been kind and gracious and welcoming! They have supported me completely without judgment or concern. They have even allowed me to work with an intern from MYEEP (the Mayor's Youth Employment Education Program) five hours a week to keep fresh content on the churchtogether.today site as well as experiment with some meet-ups and marketing. Our Myeep intern is wonderful with all social media and has gotten us even more engaged with Instagram and Twitter.

On a Sunday morning, a few weeks ago, a young man who has become a regular at TUMC was walking out of the sanctuary when he stopped to discuss our church's Facebook page. He noticed it could use a little "pumping up." I smiled and agreed and asked if that was something he might like to help with. Just so happens he works for Facebook/Instagram. Praise our good and gracious God! He came the next week and worked with our intern and me and donated some ad boosting funds so we could market our church events better. He helped us link churchtogether.today with the church's social media and we will begin working on both churchtogether.today and TUMC's websites. What a gift!

The website, churchtogether.today has been a source of joy and, at times frustration, but it has taught me the discipline of getting up every morning and seeking out something sacred for the day. Each morning I get up about 5:00 am, put on a pot of coffee, pray and begin the search through social media, emails, web stories and news to see what might be a need for the day. I put up a simple prayer or YouTube or poem that I hope will guide and inspire and offer a little hope, and/or a challenge, for living in this time and place. I realize that I can only come to this project as me, a white American

woman who has lived her life in the church and continues daily to be a part of the institution as well as the holy, sacred things that come from a life of faith. I have to be careful of my language because church speak comes naturally to me but is foreign to so many people. Given my personal background as a military brat who moved constantly all over the world, growing up in the 60's, attending an integrated high school, and playing in the school orchestra (perhaps the most life-education a young girl can get in the area of nerdiness, as well self-confidence building, and an understanding of bullying) I feel that, although I can't claim anything but white privilege, I have had experiences that have broken open my heart and filled it with compassion. I can offer compassion and understanding in any arena, even online. That is what I try to do each morning – show some compassion and encourage some compassion as well as the call to the service of humanity that compassion compels. That is, in my mind, moving flesh and blood, into the neighborhood and seeking its welfare.

I believe the world is dying for the Good News. We yell at each other, shoot each other, criticize one another over the smallest things. We are wound tight. God offers peace, comfort, companionship and hope for a new day. If churchtogether.today can whisper that message in a few ears I will consider this project a success. That is what it is all about – trying to find a way to move hearts toward love. I don't know of a greater way to serve our brothers and sister than to let them know and feel God's love and be encouraged to love others. That is why Jesus moved into our neighborhood and why we should move into the neighborhoods surrounding us. We may do that by building a new church, by holding holy conversations in bars and homes and coffee houses, or online.

The Holy Spirit is alive and well and moving among us. May that Spirit bless our work and always move us in the direction of love.

I believe in this project. This is a pioneer website. I already see where a churchtogether.today 102 version might go – improvements that could be made - things we thought about in the beginning but haven't been able to do given lack of funds and workers! I would still love to set up a room for filming forums and mini-plays, out of which some serious blogging conversations could take place. I would love to have many more meet-ups – not just events that are already taking place somewhere but churchtogether.today discussions around trending topics, Bible studies and book groups at coffee houses and bars, in parks, on hikes, etc. Building a true community will take this kind of activity. But it also takes a pastor and lay people committed (perhaps even officially appointed) to this holy project. It would also require some non-churched advisors so we are caught when we try to make this too traditional or too churchy or use ancient, unknown languages! Unfortunately it takes funds and time set apart to make all these things happen while the community is built and until it can sustain itself. We'll see where it all goes. I'm praying for it daily and I ask for your prayers too.

APPENDIX 1
Presentation for Conference Grant

churchtogether.today
A mobile-optimized website for a 24/7 faith community

6 elements

- 1) **Home Page:** 4 Calls to Action – what we would like people to get out of the site and where to find it
 - a. Last wks. church services
 - b. Get involved – next meet up
 - c. Sign up to volunteer
 - d. Daily chapel
- 2) **Daily Chapel:** blog in facebook style - scripture, messages of inspiration, prayer requests and community written prayers, you-tube visual meditations, clergy chat; link to **Going Deeper**
- 3) **Last week.today:** Church service archive; click and play full taped church services from First Santa Rosa and others; link to **Going Deeper**
- 4) **Meet-up:** Face to face meet ups for fellowship, service projects, Bible study and discussions
- 5) **Forums:** live chat discussions on trending topics via the site blog, Twitter, Facebook
- 6) **Donate:** Donations to the site with a percentage going to Imagine No Malaria, Lighting for Literacy or a specific charity.

Going Deeper will be a page for those who want to grow in discipleship – it will feature helps on how to pray, learning to forgive, reading the Bible, finding resources for study, linking to local meet-ups for accountability groups, studies and discussions

churchtogether.today
Budget

EWS site builders, site and logo	3500.00
4 - GoPro Hero 4 digital Cameras	1728.00
2 interview poles	54.00

GoPro Accessories	44.00
GoPro Cases	95.00
GoPro Grip, Tripod, arm	67.95
Nikon D40 Lens and Accessory kit	302.29
Lighting Kit	182.47
Background Drape	172.75
Marketing	2000.00
	<hr/>
Total:	8146.46

APPENDIX 2
Litany for Site Launch Party

WELCOME!



churchtogether.today

Bridges District new global online church!

Consecration

Brothers and sisters in Christ, this is a day of rejoicing! We have come together to consecrate churchtogether.today, our new global online church.

Scripture: Genesis 28: 10-17

Jacob left Beer-sheba and went toward Haran. He came to a certain place and stayed there for the night, because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of the place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place. And he dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven; and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. And the Lord stood beside him and said, "I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring; and your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring. Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you." Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said, "Surely the Lord is in this place—and I did not know it!" And he was afraid, and said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven."

Prayer

Loving God, whom heaven cannot contain, much less the walls of temples made with human hands, you have promised your special presence where two or three are gathered in your name to offer prayer and praise.

By the power of your holy spirit, consecrate this new house of worship. Bless us and sanctify our work and all that we do together – that this place, not confined by walls or

geography, may be holy for us and a place of prayer and spiritual growth for all people. Guide and empower, by your holy spirit, the proclamation of your word, the pouring out of prayer, the singing of your praise, professions of faith, testimonies to your grace, celebrations of your sacraments and service to your people.

Save us from a failure of vision which could confine our worship within four walls – but instead send us out into the world, sharing the blessings of Christ with the world he came to redeem. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

Communion

Song:

Sent out in Jesus name,
 Our hands are ready now
 To make the earth a place
 In which the kingdom comes (repeat)

The angels cannot change
 A world of hurt and pain
 Into a world of love, of justice and of peace
 The task is ours to do
 To set it really free
 O help us to obey
 And carry out your will

Sent out in Jesus name,
 Our hands are ready now
 To make the earth a place
 In which the kingdom comes

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