

**Cultivating Purple Church:
Equipping Church Leaders to Lead Politically Diverse Congregations as a Radical
Act of Loving Our Neighbors and Restoring the Beloved Community**

By:

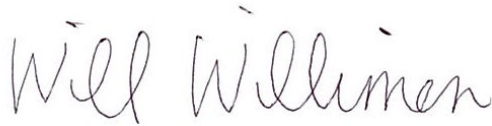
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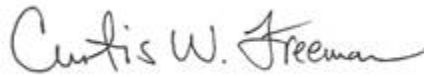
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Date: November 21, 2023

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Dr Will Willimon, DMin Director

Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of
Ministry in the Divinity School of Duke University

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ABSTRACT:

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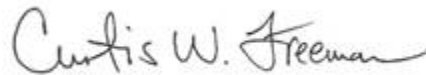
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Abstract

This thesis identifies the local Protestant church as an intentionally purple space and demonstrates that the Church is positioned to bridge differences. Purple churches are one of the last trusted institutions where everyday people gather. The local congregation is one of the social institutions equipped to confront division. Our culture will continue to hemorrhage decency and churches will atrophy unless Protestant church leaders focus on bringing our communities back together.

My thesis argues that practices of sharing sacraments and rituals together, while also supporting deliberative and democratic habits, serve as the civic function of teaching congregations learn how to address and overcome the polarization characterizing our nation. I contend that purple churches are doing the excruciating and challenging work of whispering hope into this desecrated and shattered moment in our human experience. While it takes a few hours to burn a house to the ground or chop down a tree, it takes a great deal of intention, struggle, and investment to build a community of wholeness out of the ashes of our current political landscape. This is the work of purple churches. My thesis will offer tools to strengthen the purple churches that exist in every town across the U.S. and a blueprint for building a purple church culture within existing protestant churches who face political divisions and struggles among membership.

Finally, my thesis also explores stories from scripture that support the work of purple churches and of congregations seeking unity without uniformity.

Dedication

I dedicate this thesis to my husband, Andrew. Thank you for all the hours you put in caring for our children, maintaining our household, and talking me down from the edge when I felt overwhelmed. I could not have done this without your support. To my children, Felix and Zora, who showed compassion when mommy had to do homework and patience when mommy skipped the fun outings. To my parents, Chris Peck and Kate Duignan, who read so many drafts and offered insight and gentle suggestions along the way.

I also dedicate this work to the Community Christian Church of North Canton, OH. You taught me the beauty of being a purple church. My life is richer and more blessed thanks to the relationships I formed with the diverse people who make up our loving congregation. We are true to our name.

And of course, to God, the infinite mystery and source of all love and community: I am blessed by the wild and unpredictable calling to serve Your Church and Your people. It's the greatest honor of my life.

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To the members of my writing group, Robert Bledsoe, Brett Pardue, and Torianto Johnson: thank you for helpful early feedback. To my accountability partner Lauren Gully: the sheer shame of not having an update for you motivated me to write more than you know. To our entire DMin Cohort: I am better for knowing you and learning alongside you.

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Thanks to the pastors to whom I spoke about difficult topics and challenging moments in ministry. Congregational ministry requires so much discernment and

leadership; I am blessed to know an abundance of talented pastors who do the difficult work of navigating ideologically diverse congregations every day.

Thank you to my dear friends who checked in on me and took interest in my work. I am blessed to do life with you.

To my husband, my children, and my parents, whose love makes me brave in this difficult work of building bridges: thank you.

Finally, thanks to the North Canton Public Library. If it weren't for your extremely uncomfortable chairs and large desks, I may have opted to nap instead of focus on my writing. Thank you for providing space for me.

Introduction

One Sunday morning in the Fall of 2019, I was confronted two separate times by people from my congregation. One of my Deacons caught me after worship, shouting, “In the week when Kavanaugh was confirmed, how can you ignore women’s rights in your sermon? I want to resign!” Later that day, during our final membership class, a longtime church visitor asked, “How do you justify serving as the pastor of this congregation when the Bible says women shouldn’t speak in church?”

This particular Sunday was to become one of the most memorable days in my ministry. The concerns and frustrations raised by the Deacon and the visitor mirrored stereotypical progressive and conservative views as well as the confrontational tone of our wider cultural context in this divisive time. However, as I reflected on my experience, I realized that I had achieved one of my goals at Community Christian Church: we were a congregation that could hold difference well and seek unity without uniformity. Unlike so many spaces in contemporary America, Community Christian Church is a place where people with vastly different beliefs, perspectives, and convictions can come together.

In a time when our country is divided on so many social and political perspectives – even aggressively so – where do communities begin the work of building bridges? How do we repair the chasms that form in our neighborhoods and at our family dinner tables when we disagree with such hostility?

Call for Political Diversity

Ideally, people in the United States solve problems and work out differences via the democratic process. While the track record of the United States has been far from perfect,¹ there is nevertheless a strong tradition of people taking part in political campaigns, voting in local and national elections, as well as taking part in democratic public meetings such as local school board meetings and town halls. The recent rhetoric of our election cycles and the media, and the bitter divide between our two major political parties, feels different and unique.² We are living in a time of great hostility and strict separation between Republican and Democrats – between red and blue voters.³

One of the reasons for this heightened divisiveness stems from the intense emotions that the 2016 national election evoked. In *Great Again: How to Fix Our Crippled America*, Donald Trump outlined his political priorities and leadership style.

Trump opens his first chapter with this:

Nobody likes a loser...yet here we stand today, the greatest superpower on earth, and everyone is eating our lunch... take one of the worst agreements in our history—the nuclear “treaty” with Iran... President Obama rammed through and around Congress... our very stupid leaders in Washington DC couldn’t even bring themselves to hold a discussion and vote on it...that’s not winning, that’s criminal negligence... now we’re going to open the gates to refugees from places like Syria, which is like extending a personal invitation to ISIS members to come live here and try to destroy our country from within...so what can be done about it? How do we start winning again?⁴

¹ For example, Ned Blackhawk, *The Rediscovery of America: Native Peoples and the Unmaking of U.S. History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2023); Alan Abramowitz, *The Great Alignment: Race, Party Transformation, and the Rise of Donald Trump* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018); Alex Lovit, “Perpetual Tumult: A Brief History of American Democracy,.” Kettering Foundation White Paper, Kettering Foundation, Dayton, Ohio, April 2021.

² See, for instance, Elizabeth Kolbert, “How Politics Got So Polarized: In a new era of hyperpartisan identities, can anything bring ‘us’ and ‘them’ together?” *The New Yorker*, Dec 27, 2021; Jeff Sharlet, *The Undertow: Scenes from a Slow Civil War* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2023).

³ Abramowitz, *Great Alignment*, 2018; Lilliana Mason. “Losing Common Ground: Social Sorting and Polarization,” *The Forum* 16, no. 1 (2018): 47-66.

⁴ Donald Trump, *Great Again: How to Fix our Crippled America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2015), 1-3.

Trump’s rhetoric resonated deeply with American voters. Many people felt uneasy, even angry, about where we were in our nation and our culture. In his book and subsequent campaign, he appealed to this unease.⁵

Yet in neither his book nor in his political platforms did Trump mention of how or where concerned people might come together to find common ground, build a community, or find a safe space for considering how best to work together. Instead, he capitalized on fear about the conditions of our culture and claimed that he alone could address these concerns. This strategy proved effective in mobilizing voters and capturing the Republican party.⁶ Yet, even as he won the presidency, most democratic and progressive voters could not understand how Trump had done it.

Author Jonathan Haidt, in his book *The Righteous Mind*, tries to explain to Democratic voters who question why their Republican counterparts follow a seemingly inexplicable moral code. Haidt recalls his own comments at the 2008 Democratic National Convention and his argument in an earlier essay, “What Makes People Vote Republican.” Haidt summarizes his points as follows:

I advised Democrats to stop dismissing conservatism as a pathology and start thinking about morality beyond care and fairness. I urged them to close the sacredness gap between the two parties by making greater use of the Loyalty, Authority, and Sanctity foundations, not just in their “messaging” but in how they think about public policy and the best interests of the nation.⁷

⁵ Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, "Why the Republican Party Abandoned Democracy," in *Tyranny of the Minority: Why American Democracy Reached the Breaking Point* (New York: Crown, 2023), 92-132.

⁶ Levitsky and Ziblat, *Tyranny*, 2023; Anne Applebaum, *Twilight of Democracy: The Seductive Lure of Authoritarianism* (New York: Doubleday, 2020).

⁷ Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion* (New York: Vintage Books, 2013), 194.

Haidt makes sound arguments and compelling points about how conservative and progressive voters hold different value paradigms. To understand one another and collaborate, both parties must communicate these values more effectively to one another.

Haidt urges:

The next time you find yourself seated beside someone from another matrix, give it a try. Don't just jump right in. Don't bring up morality until you've found a few points of commonality or in some other way established a bit of trust. And when you do bring up issues of morality, try to start with some praise, or with a sincere expression of interest.⁸

Haidt's case is for communication with thoughtfulness. However, one underlying issue is that conservative and progressive voters increasingly do not find themselves seated beside someone who holds different views.

Divided America

Even though he wrote his book in 2008, Bill Bishop, an American author, journalist and social commentator, was already seeking to understand the ways that Americans were increasingly dividing themselves by identity. His book spoke not only to the issues facing the country when the book was written, but also to the issues that the United States would face in the coming decades. In his book *The Big Sort*, he writes the way Americans rearranged themselves into clusters of like-minded neighbors, business partners, and communities with little motivation to interact beyond themselves. We are cloistered by news channels, churches, school districts, cities, towns, and neighborhoods.

⁸ Haidt, *The Righteous Mind*, 371.

Many Americans have, if unwittingly, created echo chambers that are all but impossible to break through. The effect of this sorting infiltrates our politics as well:

For most people these days, the question of politics certainly isn't: how do people with vastly different beliefs and backgrounds learn to live together? In the first four national elections of this century, the questions have been how best to isolate voters with sophisticated target marketing... and how to demoralize the other side in order to gain, at best, a teetering advantage in the House of Representatives, Senate, or White House.⁹

Both our geographic distance and our silos – as well as an increased interest in eviscerating our political opponents, rather than of searching for common ground – have led to a deeply divided and fractured culture.

The Role of the Purple Church

Many argue that these fierce divisions are not sustainable, and that unless something is done to address the extraordinary polarization along racial, political, economic, and religious divides, democracy in the United States, and perhaps ultimately, even the United States itself is in grave danger.¹⁰ We must explore ways to bridge the gaps and heal the fractures – to remain in collective community together. In her 2023 *Washington Post* column, journalist Kate Cohen argues for a return to congregation-like places where groups of people willingly get together. She writes,

I'm worried about churches because I'm worried about all spaces where people come together in shared purpose. Meaning-full spaces...[Churches] have to offer what people want...But it stands for something larger, too. It makes something

⁹ Bill Bishop, *The Big Sort: Why the Clustering of Like-Minded America is Tearing Us Apart* (New York, NY: Mariner Books, 2008), 281.

¹⁰ Suzanne Mettler and Robert Lieberman Robert, *Four Threats: The Recurring Crises of American Democracy* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2020); Sharlet, *Undertow*, 2023; Levitsky and Ziblatt, *Tyranny*.

larger...if you do value it, you'd better get back to it, or it won't be there anymore. For you or for anyone else.¹¹

Supporting Cohen's argument, there is evidence that those who attend church regularly – not just claim Christian identity – are, among other things, more likely to have positive attitudes toward marginalized racial and ethnic groups¹² and to be less individualistic, cynical, and distrustful of people and institutions.¹³ Church is, of course, not the full answer to healing our divisions, yet when it is envisioned and lived out as a place where people can come together, despite differences, to learn to love each other, understanding each other, and work together, it has great potential for a world and society that has very few remaining venues for such connection and community.

While there has been a rise of those who identify as “spiritual but not religious,” as well as a growing number of people who search for God in the stars, the mountains, and solitude,¹⁴ it is important to remember that, while the divine is to be found everywhere, connection to others, to a community, is central even to faithful practices focused on connection to nature or individual practices such as meditation.¹⁵ Many Christian theologians argue that being in a congregation with others who also seek God is

¹¹ “Go Back to Church! (Or Something Like It),” *Washington Post*, August 29, 2023.

¹² Emily Ekins, “Religious Trump Voters: How Faith Moderates Attitudes about Immigration, Race, and Identity,” A Research Report from the Democracy Fund Voter Study Group, September 2018.

¹³ Daniel Williams, “White Southern Evangelicals Are Leaving the Church,” *Christianity Today*, August 2, 2022.

¹⁴ Elizabeth Drescher, *Choosing Our Religion: The Spiritual Lives of America's Nones* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2016).

¹⁵ See, for instance, Margot Adler, *Drawing Down the Moon: Witches, Druids, Goddess-Worshippers, and Other Pagans in America* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006) or Robert Buswell and Donald Lopez, eds. “Sangha,” in *Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013).

more faithful to the work of God. In his book *What's Right with the Church*, Will Willimon writes,

It takes two to gospel: one to speak and one to turn around and pay attention. So there can be no communion with God that is not also communion with one another. We do not look for God by...wandering in the woods or staring off into nowhere. We begin by looking at one another across the table.¹⁶

It is not that we cannot be spiritual or religious alone. Certainly, there is a long tradition of solitude and quiet as an essential part of a faithful life.¹⁷ Yet, humans are shaped by being in community with others and many understand this as an essential part of growing, healing, and finding a way to create a tenable life together.¹⁸ Local congregations can play a vital role in bringing communities together and teaching us how to relate to one another.

The need for spaces and places where Americans can share common concerns across political differences is as essential as it is at risk. Local Protestant churches are fertile ground to bring people together who hold diverse political opinions. Within local churches, the work of restoring and building relationships across political difference is possible. This is the foundational belief of purple churches. A purple church is a place that honors political inclusion. The term comes from the notion that red and blue voters remain in one community together. The work of cultivating, building, and supporting purple churches is vital: not only does our nation need spaces for people to come together across differences, most American Protestant churches also need revitalization and

¹⁶ Will Willimon, *What's Right With The Church* (New York: Harper Collins, 1985), 36.

¹⁷ In the Christian tradition, we might look to the life and work of Thomas Merton. See John Teahan, "Solitude: A Central Motif in Thomas Merton's Life and Writings," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 50, no. 4 (1982): 521–538.

¹⁸ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (New York: HarperOne, 2009).

renewed purpose.¹⁹ The very effort of building purple churches offers new possibilities for congregations to grow, strengthen, and renew their vision.

A church can and should be positioned as a safe place, one where a community of caring people with diverse political and social views can come together in faith to work through differences and see the perspectives of others. Churches can serve as one of the few remaining American institutions where difference can be met with compassion, where discussion of the issues that affect our communities can happen through a lens of faith and love for neighbors. Deliberation, increased understanding, growing empathy, and peaceful disagreement often require a setting where we have experienced intimate moments and meaningful rituals together.

Thesis

My doctorate of ministry thesis explores the intersection of our deep ideological divides and the commonality we share as children of God. I argue that the church can be a place of transformation and healing, that congregations can be fertile ground to foster decency and civility as we explore those issues that affect our neighbors as well as

¹⁹ Jeffrey Jones, "U.S. Church Membership Falls Below Majority for First time," *Gallup*, March 29, 2021, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/341963/church-membership-falls-below-majority-first-time.aspx>; Nortey, Justin. "More Houses of Worship are Returning to Normal Operations, but In-Person Attendance Is Unchanged Since Fall," Pew Research Center, March 22, 2022, www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2022/03/22/more-houses-of-worship-are-returning-to-normal-operations-but-in-person-attendance-is-unchanged-since-fall/#:~:text=In%20July%202020%2C%20roughly%20four,and%20now%20stands%20at%2027%25; Pew Research Center. "U.S. Public Becoming Less Religious," November 3, 2015, www.pewresearch.org/religion/2015/11/03/u-s-public-becoming-less-religious/; Pew Research Center. *In U.S. Decline of Christianity Continues at a Rapid Pace*, October 17, 2019, www.pewforum.org/2019/10/17/in-u-s-decline-of-christianity-continues-at-rapid-pace/.

ourselves. The local congregation's unique ability to create intimacy and structure in human relationships makes it a natural venue for civil discussion and exploration.

Limitations of the Purple Church

I do not intend my thesis to solve the divisiveness and fracturing of our culture. Rather, it argues that the Church's mission speaks directly to our divisions. Ideally, the work of the church would equip people to build community in the midst of diverse ideology.

I also recognize that the work of the purple church is not for every congregation or pastor. Some pastors feel called to a prophetic leadership, one that leans left or right. Additionally, there are those in marginalized and minority groups who should not be burdened by the slow work of deliberative dialogue and finding hidden common ground when their own sense of safety or legitimacy or the affirmation of their worth becomes part of political debates. I acknowledge that there are limits to the scope and applicability of purple church work. But many American churchgoers live, work, and serve in purple communities, which is just one of the reasons that we need to find a path toward more collaboration, communication, and unity.

Methodology

This thesis will outline a means by which purple church congregations might use their unique position. My thesis draws on research done at the Kettering Foundation, including in-depth interviews with more than thirty U.S. clergy and lay leaders;

observations of and transcripts from dozens of deliberative forums conducted in U.S. churches; the observation of church activities such as worship, small groups, and prayer groups; and survey data from both clergy and laity about how they address sensitive social issues in their churches and communities. The thesis will offer practical tools, steeped in theological reflection, to help churches remain whole when politics seek to divide.

Chapter Overview

Chapter 1 discusses the divisiveness both our nation and our congregations face today. I write about democratic decline and share research from Annual Freedom House and The Varieties of Democracies Institute (V-Dem) about the dramatically worsening state of American democracy.²⁰ Chapter 1 also explores “toxic polarization”²¹ in our communities and the role of the church in addressing these issues. Finally, Chapter 1 serves as a more specific introduction to the concept of a Purple Church.

In Chapter 2, I argue that local congregations serve as civic gymnasiums where everyday citizens learn the skills of bridge building and navigating differences with grace. Chapter 2 also explores the issues that most often divide congregations and provides examples of how to approach these issues and divisive issues generally with the lens of a purple church.

²⁰ Vanessa A. Boese, Nazifa Alizada, Martin Lundstedt, Kelly Morrison, Natalia Natsika, Yuko Sato, Hugo Tai, and Staffan I. Lindberg, *Autocratization Changing Nature? Democracy Report 2022*. Varieties of Democracy Institute (V-Dem), 2022, 6.

²¹ Boese et al., *Autocratization*, 6.

Chapter 3 explores the four tenets of purple churches: intentionality about shared identity; prioritizing practices that foster connection and trust; experiencing civic engagement together; and identifying common ground and acting together on difficult issues despite disagreement. I argue that these four tenets are not only requirements, but involve leadership moves necessary to create and sustain a purple church. I expand on the idea of purple churches, describing the practices and characteristics required to lead healthy, thriving purple churches.

In Chapter 4, I explore the theology and Biblical interpretation that shapes the scriptural foundation of a purple church. I start with exploration of healing stories in the Gospels and argue that each healing story reunited an individual with their community. I focus on the specific exegesis of the story of the woman at the well (John 4:4-42), the story of the bleeding woman (specifically Mark's version in 5:21-34), and the story of the man blind from birth (John 9:1-25). I use each of these to argue that the concept of purple church is also a healing story. I end Chapter 4 with the exegesis of John 17:20-26: Christ's last prayer on earth, or the high priestly prayer. I contend that because unity was Christ's legacy, and because the unity of God's people was Christ's dying wish, the purple church aligns with the gospels.

Transformation is Possible

I have already seen glimpses of what is possible through my ministry at Community Christian Church. I think back to that morning where two people from my congregation confronted me with equal vexation but opposing concerns. The very next

Sunday, the Deacon served again, and the longtime visitor officially joined the church. When I asked the Deacon why she came back, she said, “These are my people, and we will get through it.” When I asked the visitor why he joined, he said, “I heard God say to me: I am not asking you to go to a church where everyone agrees with you; I am asking you to be faithful.” Our church was able to hold space for both of them.

Congregations can be a place to simultaneously dissent and remain faithful, to disagree yet still build relationships. Finding common ground in the middle of our political differences is the most pressing issue of our time. When communities do the slow, patient work of building relationships and sharing meaningful moments in the pews and at altars of our sacred worship sites, we can explore and resolve prejudices, hostilities and bitter disagreements. Opportunities to sort out fiction and fact with a reliance on faith can happen on the holy ground we call church.

Chapter 1

Fractured Congregations and A Fractured Nation

Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing, there is a field. I'll meet you there. -

*Rumi*¹



2

Congregations Divide

In 1876, on the day of the ribbon cutting for the newly installed organ at First Christian Church in Coralville, Iowa, Titus Ray remained opposed to the instrument's installation. He voiced his opinion about the organ and walked out of his church, Titus believed the organ should not be in a church sanctuary because the Bible never explicitly

¹ Coleman Barks and John Moyne, *The Essential Rumi* (New York: HarperCollins, 1995).

² "Me about to comment." Digital Image. Facebook: Pastor Humor. August 4, 2023. <https://m.facebook.com/people/Pastor-Humor/100064536978654/>

endorses the use of instruments to praise God. Because of this, Titus believed installing an organ in the sanctuary was a sin.³

We might imagine that Titus found another congregation after his departure; he may have bounced from the First Christian Church to a Church of Christ or a nearby Independent Christian Church where he felt affirmed in his righteousness. A handful of faithful Christians always seem to be shuffling between Protestant congregations, trading one hymnal for the next and choosing one pastor over another. People leave churches for reasons as ostensibly trivial as carpet colors or sermon topics. And in Titus' day, most Americans identified as Christians and attended church. In recent years, though, something has changed.

In the fall of 2019 at Community Christian Church in North Canton, Ohio, the weekly prayer circle accidentally stumbled into a conversation about President Trump. Most expressed concern for his leadership. But Sherry Hunter loved the president. She stood up for him and defended his name. When she did not receive universal support and

³David Hudson, "The Organ and a Divided Church," *First Christian Church Iowa City*, accessed February 10, 2023, https://icdisciples.org/the_organ_and_a_divided_church. This story is told on the website of First Christian Church in Coralville, Iowa based on board meeting minutes found from nearly 150 years ago. The congregation tells this story as an introduction to the split within the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) that ultimately became official in 1906 when the Church of Christ left the denomination after a long fight about the use of musical instruments in worship. The Church of Christ believes that God does not explicitly permit the use of mechanical instruments in worship so they avoid using them, while the Disciples of Christ believe that what is not explicitly mentioned is permissible. Arguments about the use of instruments in churches have a long history. Clement of Alexandria (d. 215 A.D.) wrote: "Let the pipe be resigned to the shepherds, and the flute to the superstitious who are engrossed in idolatry. For, in truth, such instruments are to be banished from the banquet [worship – RD]...the one instrument of peace, the Word alone by which we honor God is what we employ. We no longer employ the ancient psaltery, and trumpet, and timbral, and flute." <https://www.northwestcofc.org/why-does-the-church-of-christ-not-use-mechanical-instruments-of-music-in-worship.html>) While St. Jerome (4th century) also spoke against the organ saying that Christian virgins should be deaf to its music (<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/04580639009409174>).

affirmation, she walked out. Sherry was 92 years old, but she left her home congregation and never again connected with another church. She still read her daily devotions, but she also turned to Fox News, cutting off ties with her friends, her longtime church prayer partners, and her Sunday morning congregation. Sherry's views led her to abandon relationships, community affiliations, and her church. She forfeited her congregational involvement, her weekly routine, and her social circles because of her own righteous convictions, driven by intense political partisanship. When Sherry died two years later, her funeral home service had no church representation.⁴

These two people left their congregations because they disagreed with a leadership decision. That's not new – churches divide and split; members leave and leaders resign. In many ways, this is part of the rhythm of Protestant churches. Many divinity schools and seminaries teach future pastors that one sign of a healthy congregational ministry is if 50% of your Sunday attendance is new to the church in the last 10 years. To grow, a congregation needs five visitors per 100 attendees per week. Churches count on member turnover for vitality.⁵

The Problem: Decline of Community and the Rise of Hyper Individualism

However, today there is a distinctive shift regarding why and under what circumstances people leave their churches. Churches seem to be losing their status as

⁴ I have edited and revised Sherry's story to maintain anonymity for her experience, but the sentiments of her story remain accurate. Sherry was a member of her congregation from 1956 until her departure in 2019, she cut off all ties with her congregation and specifically requested her pastor and prayer partners not attend her funeral in 2020.

⁵ Hal Seed, "How Healthy Is Your Church?" *Pastor Mentor*, Accessed December 28, 2022, <https://pastormentor.com/healthy-church-18-numbers-will-tell/>.

places where good people with a wide range of life experiences and personal beliefs can join in shared, spiritual renewal. Some use a cultural and political litmus test to decide where to get chicken sandwiches.⁶ Others consider canceling their vacations to Mickey Mouse-themed amusement parks because of LGBTQ inclusion.⁷ For far too many, politics, cultural divisions, and racism seep into their relationship with their church. These cultural anxieties and political affiliations often supersede our commitments to faith, our pledge to love our neighbor, and the collaborative work of community building.⁸

America is fractured. Our ability to build relationships with those who hold different views has, in important ways, declined. Hyper-individualistic thinking has eroded civility in public arenas and often clouds the ability of people to see similarities rather than stark differences. This fractured political climate influences and mirrors itself in protestant congregations. Elsewhere in *The Big Sort*, Bill Bishop explored the growing tendency of Americans to surround themselves with like-minded individuals to create

⁶ The fast food chain Chik-Fil-A gave large donations to the Salvation Army and the Fellowship of Christian Athletes in 2018, and after facing backlash in 2019, the company made a statement that they would no longer financially support anti-LGBTQ organizations. However, in 2021, it was revealed that Dan Cathy, the owner of Chik-Fil-A, donates large sums of his personal money (presumably the profits of Chik-Fil-A) to the National Christian Charitable Foundation, an organization that aims to derail the Equality Act. This trajectory is summarized by Justin Kirkland in his *Esquire* article, “Chick-fil-a’s Owner Is Newly Connected to Anti-Equality Act,” June 3, 2021, <https://www.esquire.com/food-drink/restaurants/a36622217/chick-fil-a-owner-donations-against-equality-act/>.

⁷ Disney Corporation began overtly supporting LGBTQ folks by featuring LGBTQ characters and love stories in their animated films and creating Pride themed merchandise. With these moves, many conservative leaning folks tried to boycott the company by cancelling family vacations to the theme parks and unsubscribing from the streaming services. Hannah Sampson, “Conservatives want to cancel Disney. It’s not the first time,” *Washington Post*, accessed April 18, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/travel/2022/04/18/disney-boycott-theme-parks-lgbtq/>

⁸ See for instance Tovia Smith, “Dude, I’m Done’: When Politics Tears Families and Friendships Apart,” *All Things Considered*, NPR, October 27, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/2020/10/27/928209548/dude-i-m-done-when-politics-tears-families-and-friendships-apart>.

infrastructure, both geographically and culturally, around those who look, think, vote, live, and spend the way that they do. Bishop describes the titular “big sort” this way:

We have worked quietly and hard to remove any trace of the ‘constant clashing of opinions’...in this time we have reshaped our economies, transformed our businesses, both created and decimated our cities, and altered institutions of faith and fellowship that have withstood centuries. Now more isolated than ever in our private lives, cocooned with our fellows, we approach public life with the sensibility of customers who are always right.⁹

Writing in the February 2023 issue of *Atlantic* on how to revive churches and Christianity in America, Rev. Timothy Keller of Redeemer Church in New York City aims squarely at addressing the corrosive effects of hyper individuality in today’s society. Historically, Keller writes, “Americans’ religious devotion counterbalanced...individualism with denunciations of self-centeredness and calls to love thy neighbor.”¹⁰ But many in today’s America no longer embrace nor feel the pull; as Keller notes, “American individualism is now largely freed from the counterbalance of religion (and) is headed toward fragmentation, economic inequality, family breakdown and many other dysfunctions.”¹¹

This has been devastating to local churches. Traditionally, the local church provided strong emotional, social, and spiritual support to neighborhoods and communities. Small wonder, then, that the well-documented erosion of a shared sense of community has led many people to abandon a commitment to a that community and to any local church. Instead, these mostly young seekers go searching for community among a social media-driven, often national framework that thrives on divisive cultural battles

⁹ Bishop, *Big Sort*, 2008, 302-303.

¹⁰ Timothy Keller, “American Christianity is Due for a Revival,” *The Atlantic*, February 5, 2023, www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2023/02/christianity-secularization-america-renewal-modernity/672948/

¹¹ Keller, “American Christianity.”

and identity politics to identify and group “people who think like me.”¹² The resulting isolation and divisiveness experienced in formerly unifying spaces would seem to correlate directly to this growing sense of hyper individualism.

Robert Putman explored the changes in American social behavior in his book *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of the American Community*. Putman notes that as Americans have transitioned away from social and service organizations, they have lost a sense of community. The declining social capital of younger generations is the story of American communities’ collapse – and revival – over the last 50 years. This cycle shifted the way that American communities function.¹³

By extension, engagement in local Protestant churches is also on the decline. Churches bring people together to pray, sing, learn, and build their beloved community. In addition to the work of studying the Bible and learning about faith, churches often focus on building relationships. For generations, church folks dropped off casseroles for those who face health crises, knitted baby blankets for expectant moms, and cooked bereavement meals after funerals. But interest in God and the local congregation is diminishing rapidly – and the implications of this trend are sobering when we look to the future of community, churches, and democracy itself.

The Decline of Shared Commitments, Churches, and Democracy

Americans have long believed that civic health can be measured by various

¹² Keller, “American Christianity.”

¹³ Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000), 24.

collective common good participation: voting, going to church, cheering for the US Olympic teams. Traditionally, communities that vote, attend church, or cheer together in large numbers are in a version of what we might call a covenant relationship, wherein all parties pledge to be mindful and supportive of one another. The acts of decision-making and policy-building are central to this covenant.

Protestant churches are well aware of this dynamic. Each year, in many healthy Protestant churches, the congregation votes to approve the budget. Decisions to fund Habitat for Humanity, support a new staff member to visit the homebound, or construct a new gym – all of which are made collectively – shape the values and vision of the organization.

And the same is true when citizens engage in local and national elections. But participation in collective decision making and civic engagement is declining along with a diminished sense of trust in the practices of democracy. For the past 50 years, the annual *Freedom of the World* study has assessed the global condition of democracy, politics, and civic liberties. The report is one of the most frequently consulted and cited tool of its kind. The 2022 report, though, notes that “global freedom faces a dire threat,”¹⁴ and that we are in year 16 of net democratic decline worldwide. One reason for this decline is the growing following of populist leaders who have unchecked power and authority. The Freedom House conclusion is that democracy is seriously imperiled. With

¹⁴ Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2022: The Global Expansion of Authoritarian Rule*, February 2022, https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2022-02/FIW_2022_PDF_Booklet_Digital_Final_Web.pdf; Vanessa A. Boese, Nazifa Alizada, Martin Lundstedt, Kelly Morrison, Natalia Natsika, Yuko Sato, Hugo Tai, and Staffan I. Lindberg, *Autocratization Changing Nature? Democracy Report 2022*. Varieties of Democracy Institute (V-Dem), 2022, www.v-dem.net/documents/19/dr_2022_ipyOpLP.pdf.

a different methodology the Varieties of Democracies Institute (V-Dem) comes to the same conclusion. V-Dem conceptualizes and measures democracy worldwide. In one of their recent reports, they point out that along with the extraordinary losses in democratic infrastructure over the past several decades, “respect for counterarguments and associated aspects of the deliberative component of democracy” has worsened dramatically.¹⁵ In turn, this has increased what V-Dem calls “toxic polarization.”¹⁶ In other words, V-Dem’s research suggests that we increasingly seek echo chambers for our existing views and without considering or exploring views different from our own.

Another analysis of our fever of individualism and polarization’s long-term societal effects comes from Stanford political scientist Morris Fiorina, who addressed the topic in the *Washington Post* in response to the Pew Research Center’s dramatic report on the change in public opinions in America. As Fiorina explained, “Today partisanship, ideology and issue positions go together in a way they did not in the mid-20th century. Issues and ideology used to cross-cut the partisan distribution, now they reinforce it.”¹⁷ Fiorina points out that in 1960, the greatest support and the greatest opposition to the Civil Rights Movement could be found in the Democratic party, but the cross-pollination of ideas and opinions is no longer welcome in a red or blue political group. Such political sorting has become “a fundamental cause of the gridlock and incivility that characterize[s] contemporary politics.”¹⁸

¹⁵ Boese et al., *Autocratization*, 2022, 6.

¹⁶ Boese et al., *Autocratization*, 6.

¹⁷ Morris Fiorina, “Americans Have Not Become More Politically Polarized,” *Washington Post*, June 23, 2014.

¹⁸ Fiorina, “Americans Have Not,” *Washington Post*.

The Challenges of Today's Cultural Context

Church leadership in the current political and cultural climate is a unique, odd, and challenging phenomenon for several reasons. In addition to the political influence infused into congregations, Protestant churches face a culture of instant communication that dilutes the work of the gospel. Human connectivity has been reduced to impulsivity, which erases a chance to have true relationships that result in meaningful transformation. Lifeway Research reported that 2019 saw the closure of nearly 4500 Protestant churches; two years earlier, a 2017 Lifeway survey found that 7 out of 10 people aged 17-22 found who grew up going to church no longer attend. When asked about the reason for their absence, most indicated that they disagree with their church on political and social issues, and many felt that their church demonstrated hypocrisy and a lack of acceptance of their choices.¹⁹

Sometimes, churches themselves fall into this trap. One provocative sermon can start a mass exodus. Viral tweets from clergy aimed to get attention cause rifts in their congregations. Snap decisions that ignore the intentional, deliberative, and collective task of building community can split churches. To give one example, in 2023, many Methodist congregations began exploring their response to the denominational decision to hold a vote on the affirmation and inclusion of LGBTQ folks into life and ministry. When the Methodist denomination in North America decided to affirm the inclusion of LGBTQ folks, many local Methodist churches decided to leave the denomination

¹⁹ Aaron Earls, "Protestant Church Closures Outpace Openings in US," Lifeway Research, accessed February 14, 2023, <https://research.lifeway.com/2021/05/25/protestant-church-closures-outpace-openings-in-u-s/>.

entirely. One large local Methodist church in suburban Ohio chose to oppose the denomination decision. Their long-time pastor preached a sermon that doubled down on the congregation's strict beliefs about traditional marriage, heterosexual relationships, and purity among church leaders. This single sermon drove scores of congregants from the church. Social media boards in the local community filled up with now-former members of this congregation asking: Who attends a local protestant church that isn't bigoted or divided?²⁰

Protestant Congregations Mirroring National Dichotomy

These changes in the larger society are affecting on local churches across America. In 2019, a Pew Research Center survey of over 15,000 religious Americans found a rapid decline of church engagement among the U.S. population. According to the Pew data, only 64% of Americans identify as Christian. Pew projects that if current trends continue, by 2070, fewer than half of Americans will identify as Christian.²¹

Today, engagement in local community and local congregations are on the decline.²²As former churches become loft apartments, we see is shrinking investment in civic practices. Even interest in local politics has declined over the last 30 years. One measure of this decline is the extent to which political organizations have turned to hired

²⁰ Anonymous response during Kettering Foundation Research Exchange, "Trauma, Healing, and Democracy," April 19, 2022.

²¹ "Modeling the Future of Religion in America," Pew Research Center, Washington, D.C., September 13, 2022, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2022/09/13/modeling-the-future-of-religion-in-america/>.

²² Jonathan Merritt, "American's Epidemic of Empty Churches," *The Atlantic*, November 25, 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2018/11/what-should-america-do-its-empty-church-buildings/576592/>.

staff and paid advertising for voter outreach. Congregations mirror this pattern. For example, many congregations now feel they must hire staff to do the work that volunteers once championed. Browse local newspaper ads and Church Facebook pages and you'll find an abundance of advertisements about paid Sunday School teacher positions, paid nursery worker positions, and the need for landscaping and cleaning companies to be hired.

There has been a parallel contraction of collective involvement in the communities where we live. Americans have shifted away from civic engagement, collaborative work, and democratic deliberation, transitioning instead into industry instead of community building.²³ In other words, spontaneous casseroles and baby blanket drop-offs decrease as interest in community-building vanishes.

For those left in the pews, the cultural and political tension still simmer every Sunday. In American Protestant congregations, familiar fights over carpet color and the use of church organ music have escalated and are now political and cultural debates. Churches reflect the wider world. A Lifeway Research study from November of 2022 found that half of Protestant churchgoers would prefer to hold membership in a church where congregants share their views, and 55% believe this to already be true in their congregations.²⁴ However, when churchgoers make the decision to attend church only with those who agree with their politics, churches are at risk of following the national trend of keeping people in silos. This is the opposite goal of purple churches.

²³ Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, 40.

²⁴ Lifeway Research, "1 Big Question Church Leaders Must Ask About Leadership Development," March 31, 2017, <https://research.lifeway.com/2022/11/01/churchgoers-increasingly-prefer-a-congregation-that-shares-their-politics>.

Building Silos

Congregations must also fight an uphill battle against the cultural trend of socializing, engaging, and connecting in silos of political agreement. Increasingly, Americans elect to surround themselves with people who mirror their own politics and demographics – and individuals had already become more isolated during the pandemic. During our most recent national election, Americans’ desire for siloed churches increased for several reasons. Conservative media has a history of encouraging viewers and listeners to push their pastors and fellow congregants for their stance on political issues. And as far back as 2010, conservative media personality Glenn Beck said that conservatives should leave their congregation if their pastor promoted social justice. On his radio show, Beck announced, “I beg you, look for the words ‘social justice’ or ‘economic justice’ on your church website. If you find it, run as fast as you can. ‘Social justice’ and ‘economic justice,’ they are code words. Now, am I advising people to leave their church? Yes!”²⁵

Divisiveness Hurting Pastors

This divisiveness hurts not only our communities and congregations, but our pastors. Recent data collected from the Barna Group suggests 38% of U.S. pastors have considered quitting the full-time ministry in the last year – a 9 % increase from the

²⁵ Glenn Beck, “Leave Your Church,” *The Glenn Beck Show*, March 2, 2010 Part 1.flv

beginning of 2021.²⁶ Their study cited divisiveness and contentious politics within congregations as leading causes for a pastor's desire to resign.

Don't Ask; Don't Tell

Fear often paralyzes churches in the midst of polarization. The temptation to avoid divisive issues is one of the obstacles many Protestant churches face. The fear that politically charged buzz words will come up among friends, at the Thanksgiving dinner table, or in the grocery check-out line is very real. Words like "guns," "refugees," and "vaccines" can and often do lead to heated debates. In a time when churches are desperate to keep attendance up and congregational life peaceful, many pastors dread discussions of hot-button issues, no matter how much the gospel calls us to bear witness.

In 1993, President Bill Clinton instituted a policy for the United States Military called Don't Ask Don't Tell (DADT), prohibiting military personnel from discriminating against or harassing closeted LGBTQ service members or applicants while also forbidding openly LGBTQ folks from serving. In the absence of integrative thinking, President Clinton and the other political leaders who created this policy felt their only choice was to silence the conversation around LGBTQ rights.

Many churches often take a similar approach to politically charged issues. Or, if religious leaders do speak out, it is often because they feel pressured to announce their stance on topics such as gay marriage; abortion; immigration laws, comprehensive sexual

²⁶ "38% of U.S. Pastors Have Thought About Quitting Full-Time Ministry in the Past Year," Barna Group, November 16, 2021, www.barna.com/research/pastors-well-being/.

education in public schools, tax rates and more. Is there a third way, beyond both silence and self-righteousness?

The Importance of Meaning Making

In his well-known article “Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight,” anthropologist Clifford Geertz explores the Aristotelian notion of the universal event. This concept means that humans draw meaning from the experiences of the everyday. Geertz highlights Aristotle’s argument that while many every day events pass through our consciousness easily, with little affect, some experiences resonate before becoming part of the fiber of reason and meaning in our minds.

For centuries people who attend church have felt what Geertz describes. Human beings often engage in collective rituals and join communities formed around collaborative practices – whether cockfighting or church-going – to understand and express parts of their own experience.²⁷ Geertz argues that our larger culture is constructed from the meanings we make of the symbols and rituals in our everyday routines. Beyond being recognized as honored places that teach about love, community, forgiveness, and grace, churches also become a place to discharge frustration, suspicion, disenfranchisement, and the desire to control something when the world feels out of control.

As society has shifted in recent decades, church attendance and membership has

²⁷ Clifford Geertz, “Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight,” *Daedalus* Vol. 101, No. 1 (Winter, 1972), 28.

declined, and the church plays a less central roll in American religious and civic life, there has been a loss of community, love in the midst of differences, and the experience of the church as a site of love and forgiveness. Young people are leaving the church in droves and explicitly state that this is often due to the judgement, toxicity, and political tensions they experience there.²⁸ Many view churches as places that fuel frustration and suspicion.²⁹ The polarization and the erosion of community-strengthening practices in the United States has accelerated this trend within Protestant congregations. Churches both reflect and mimic the dynamics of the culture within which they exist. When divisiveness and hostility emerge in our congregations, not only are our communities fractured, but our alignment with the Gospel is derailed.

The Importance of Dialogue

In their book *I Think You're Wrong (But I'm Listening)* authors Sarah Steward Holland and Beth Silvers argue that people should discuss political issues. Partisan conversations should not be avoided. Instead, they should be used as a means of deescalating the emotions and stakes that make them so uncomfortable to begin with. As Holland and Silvers put it,

We need to bring our voices and perspectives to the table calmly, with respect for

²⁸ Aaron Earls, "Most Teenagers Drop Out of Church When They Become Young Adults," Lifeway Research, January 15, 2019, <https://research.lifeway.com/2019/01/15/most-teenagers-drop-out-of-church-as-young-adults/>

²⁹ Patricia Tevington, "Americans Feel More Positive Than Negative About Jews, Mainline Protestants, Catholics," Pew Research Center, March 2023, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2023/03/15/americans-feel-more-positive-than-negative-about-jews-mainline-protestants-catholics/>; Stephanie Martin, "People Like Jesus. His Followers? Not So much. Barna Research," May 26, 2023, <https://churchleaders.com/news/451798-barna-research-people-like-jesus-followers-not.html>.

ourselves and one another, recognizing that we do not live alone. America has never been and will never be homogeneous... we need to bring our faith and values not just to specific issues but to the process of engaging in civil discourse. We can share our perspectives on even the most controversial and personal topics. Doing so will de-escalate the rhetoric and open pathways for solutions, innovation, and a stronger national identity.³⁰

Discussing these issues can actually build up community.³¹ But simple discussion is not enough. Christians must be willing to explore alternatives to our deeply held beliefs.

Us Vs. Them

Sometimes, pastors choose the path of partisanship, engaging in us-versus-them division and casting specific blame for moral failings and political corruption. In *Christians Against Christianity*, author Obrey Hendricks attacks what he calls “right-wing evangelicals” for their beliefs, writing:

It is a spirit of antichrist...that [has] possessed right-wing evangelicals to support and even lead assaults on truth and decency...Rather than striving to build harmony, they applauded the construction of spiteful walls of division. Rather than standing on moral consistency, they offered shameless excuses for the rankest of hypocrites. Rather than suing for peace, they embraced death-dealing agenda of the NRA.³²

On the opposite side, just as many conservative writers are convinced that progressive faith is to blame for our political predicament and national problems. Voddie Baucham, writing in his book *Fault Lines*, claims to “see a connection between the infiltration of

³⁰ Sarah Stewart Holland and Beth Silvers, *I Think You're Wrong (But I'm Listening)* (Nashville: Nelson Books, 2019), 4.

³¹ Elizabeth Gish, “Toward the World We Long For: Churches and the Hope of Democratic Life,” *eJournal of Public Affairs*, 9(2), 2020.

³² Obrey M. Hendricks, Jr., *Christians Against Christianity: How Right-Wing Evangelicals Are Destroying Our Nation and Our Faith* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2021), 162-163.

woke/antiracist ideology and soft-selling the danger of progressive politics.”³³ And

Baucham extends his criticism:

My heart is broken as I watch movements and ideology of Critical Theory, Critical Race Theory, and Intersectionality in hopes that those who have imbibed can have the blinders removed from their eyes... Pastors, I beg you to consider what I have written here. I believe the Church - your church - is under attack.³⁴

Both Baucham and Hendricks use inflammatory language to link Christianity to partisanship and warn against the other side. This rhetoric creates fear, otherness, and division within churches, instead of cultivating a purple culture and emphasizing the unity of the Body of Christ.

Polarizing and Politicizing Morality

Another attempt to hijack churches for political purposes is to zoom in on lightning-rod political issues and exaggerate the church’s involvement in them. Stephen Strang discusses the topic in his book *God and Donald Trump*, explaining that

President Trump won the evangelical vote by the largest margin in history because... Christians understood that he alone had the leadership skills and the unwavering persistence to reverse the death spiral of our nation... Leftists, meanwhile, were marching in the streets for abortion on demand and celebrating the right to take the life of an unborn child right up to the moment of birth. They were glad same-sex marriage has been validated by the Supreme Court and that marijuana is being legalized in state after state. And when it comes to old fashioned morality, the mantra of the secular culture these days is simply ‘anything goes.’³⁵

Christians, across all denominations, use their church to engage in moral, ethical and

³³ Voddie T. Baucham, Jr., *Fault Lines: The Social Justice Movement and Evangelicalism’s Looming Catastrophe* (Washington, D.C.: Salem Books, 2021), 195.

³⁴ Baucham, *Fault Lines*, 230-231.

³⁵ Stephen E. Strang, *God and Donald Trump* (Lake Mary, FL: Charisma House Book Group, 2017), 170-171.

faithful living. Attempting to diminish the moral standing of one group of Christians over another splinters the body of Christ. And yet, this type of caricature is often used as a tool to tear down faith-based communities.

This strategy is used by both conservative and progressive leaders. Todd Starnes, in his book *God Less America*, describes contemporary America this way:

When militant homosexual activists launched attacks on Chik-fil-A and the *Duck Dynasty* family, millions of Christians rose up and took a stand... We saw firsthand what could happen when people of faith mobilize...we need patriots willing to defend religious liberty...we are in the midst of a culture war. American values are under attack. They may spy on our phone line. They may throw us in jail. They may take away our shops and bakeries. They may demand to know the content of our prayers. But we will not be bullied. We will not be intimidated. We will not be silenced.³⁶

And with the same tone and strategy, Carter Heyward, in her book *The 7 Deadly Sins of White Christian Nationalism*, offers this perspective:

We watched hundreds of rioters, their makeshift gallows rising above them, attack both the Capitol itself and those there to protect it... We watched in disbelief at the flaunting in real time of white supremacy and other death-dealing dynamics of hate...the dramatic display of the large cross in the midst of this pageant of scorn and terror had been impossible to miss. We had watched this drama unfold in the name of the Christian God...the time [has] come for other Christians to speak out—not only on behalf of this nation but more importantly on behalf of a God of justice, love, and peace.³⁷

Claiming an understanding of God's true nature and using it against those who disagree politically is often a sure way to ignite emotional responses and rally people to action. However, this tactic is one way to decimate the slow, intentional work of cultivating purple churches.

³⁶ Todd Starnes, *God Less America: Real Stories From the Front Lines of the Attack on Traditional Values* (Lake Mary, FL: Charisma House Book Group, 2014), 212-213.

³⁷ Carter Heyward, *The 7 Deadly Sins of White Christian Nationalism: A Call to Action* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2022), 3-4.

The Sacredness of Nuance

When opposing views are addressed with broad strokes and threatening soundbites, Christians skip over the holy wisdom found in nuances. Author Paul Miller describes this in his book *The Religion of American Greatness*. He believes the landscape of American politics

has deteriorated into raw tribalism because the iterated contest, rehashed every four years, has nearly destroyed all sense of trust and common citizenship between the two sides. There is virtually no sense of shared history or a shared meaning of justice among Americans...now we accuse each other (not without reason) of hijacking the rules to rig the game, in which case agreeing to disagree is tantamount to surrender...we claim that casting a vote in a ballot box is akin to charging the cockpit of a hijacked airliner. In that metaphor, our political opponents are terrorists.³⁸

If views of the other side remain categorized as threats or terrorists, communities will have a hard time building bridges. Miller further argues that

ordered liberty and human dignity are the best and only viable anchors for political order. There is no viable alternative to some form of classical liberalism or civic republicanism that can keep the peace among citizens who disagree about the nature of justice.³⁹

Miller rightly calls for liberty and human dignity but understanding and seeking a nuanced lens serves as a first step.

To embrace nuance, Christians must be open to the wonder and mystery of God. Holland and Silvers point out that people often engage with issues only to solidify their

³⁸ Paul D. Miller, *The Religion of American Greatness: What's Wrong with Christian Nationalism* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2022), 257.

³⁹ Miller, *The Religion of American Greatness*, 260.

own convictions instead of maintaining their curiosity and open-ended interest in the issue itself. As an antidote to this way of political engagement, Holland and Silvers recommend engaging issues as students doing research, not as debaters trying to win an argument.⁴⁰ Addressing specifically those Christians who want to learn more about engaging partisan issues with those whom they disagree – and reminding those readers that Christians must embrace paradox just as Christ embraced it – the authors write, “We’ve realized we need to treat nuance as a verb. It is a lifelong practice...engaging in nuanced discussions requires constant conditioning and attention to the fundamentals.”⁴¹ Part of our faith invites us to hold contradictory and complicated ideas together while exploring the nuances in our beliefs and values. Honoring this complexity is one way of honoring the vastness of God.

Leaders of Communities and Congregations alike are Confounded

What, then, are community leaders and church leaders to do? A line has been drawn in the sand between red and blue. At first look, the choice seems just that simple for politicians and pastors. Choose a side and go to war. And in the short term, such a simplistic strategy appears to make sense. Picking sides enables leaders to find the people, money, and talking points to build what at first appears to a successful, seemingly new model of community.

But both the history of civilization and the words of Jesus would say this path is

⁴⁰ Stewart Holland and Silvers, *I Think You're Wrong*, 110-111.

⁴¹ Holland and Silvers, *I Think You're Wrong*, 174.

fraught with dangers and despair. Protestant churches have played an important role in the shaping, defining, and furthering of ethical, moral, and just politics for generations. Congregations help members sort fiction from fact, inspire moral decision making, and encourage consideration and respect for our neighbors and communities. It was the vision of the beloved community that animated the civil rights movement. In a recent interview with Rev. Adam Russell Taylor, the Center for American Progress explored the role of Christianity in politics. Rev. Taylor described the link between political issues and Christian faith by reminding us that both are rooted in “the most deeply held beliefs of the major faith traditions as well as the most cherished ideals and aspirations tied to the Constitution and our democracy—such as the inherent dignity and worth of every human being.”⁴² In other words, when we consider the type of leadership required for a time such as this, we must remember that the ministry of Jesus which rooted in collaborative, collective, bridge-building work.

However, too few congregations make room for purple. We must all find a solution to the growing divide in our pews if we want local, mainline Protestant churches to survive.

Purple Church

There is still hope for our communities to build bridges and reunite. American Protestant congregations have a vital role to play in healing these divides. This is the role

⁴² Guthrie Graves-Fitzsimmons, “Christians Have a Role to Play in Defending U.S. Democracy: An Interview with Rev. Adam Russell Taylor,” *Center for American Progress*, January 5th, 2022.

of the Purple Church.

While church influence and attendance has declined, people do still show up – and faith-based communities still remain one of the most trusted institutions in American public life. Indeed, churches are also one of the few institutions in the U.S. where a diverse group of politically people gather intentionally.⁴³ What kind of Christian Leadership is required at the intersection of our deep ideological divides and the commonality we share as children of God? What tools do we have for pastors who seek to unite congregations when our pews’ demographics and political leanings reflect disunity? What kind of Christ-like leadership does it take to build a politically diverse church today?

A Purple Church is a congregation made up of people with diverse family structures, cultural touchstones, and political views. It has a mix of red and blue ideologies. A diverse church, the Purple Church is uniquely positioned to teach us how to build bridges in an era that would love nothing more than to divide us. It is in church that we find proximity to difference; meaning through ritual and shared life events; a gospel message; and teachings on how to respect one another.

Purple churches are uniquely positioned to bridge divides. The work of a purple church matters: culture will continue to splinter and faith atrophy unless the church's

⁴³ On the increasingly political segregation in the United States, see Abramowitz, *Alignment*, 2018; Bishop, *Big Sort*, 2008; Jacob Brown and Ryan Enos, "The Measurement of Partisan Sorting for 180 Million Voters," *Nature Human Behavior* 5 (August 2021), 998-1008; Daniel Cox; Ryan Streeter; Samuel Abrams; and Jacqueline Clemence, "Socially Distant: How Our Divided Social Networks Explain our Politics," Survey Center on American Life, *American Enterprise Institute*, September 20, 2020, www.americansurveycenter.org/research/socially-distant-how-our-divided-social-networks-explain-our-politics/.

capabilities are brought to bear upon difference and division. There is a powerful civic opportunity for outwardly facing purple churches. In order to change our trajectory, we must understand purple spaces as an opportunity to rebuild our sense of our shared humanity.

Chapter 2

Seeking Unity Without Uniformity

“You can safely assume you've created God in your own image when it turns out that God hates all the same people you do.” -Anne Lamott ¹

REMEMBER

People can only

Love to their level of self-love

Communicate to their level of
self-awareness

Behave to their level of healed trauma



2

Kumbaya, Thoughts and Prayers

Ask a church critic to tell a cliché joke about attending church, and likely the punch line will include a group of people holding hands and singing Kumbaya together as the world burns. Christians have developed a bad reputation as people who would prefer

¹ Anne Lamott, *Bird by Bird* (New York, NY: Knopf Doubleday, 1995), 22. Lamott attributes this quote to her “priest friend Tom.”

² “Remember: Love, Communicate, Behave.” Digital Image, *Safe Space Organization*, April 3, 2021, <https://www.facebook.com/safespacecny/photos/a.123052036202306/276819310825577/?type=3>.

to offer thoughts and prayers during national crises instead of traveling the thorny path of change. One theory about such a simplified, pastoral response to difficulty and crisis is that if churchgoers discussed actual issues, a Christian community could no longer remain whole or unified.

The Purple Church framework, though, challenges these assumptions. Leaders of a purple church can help their congregation build the civic and theological strength to lift up a more just, compassionate, and loving community. This chapter begins to look at examples from churches across the country who have intentionally or unintentionally engaged in rituals, leadership practices, and mission work that create a purple church culture. All of the examples used in this chapter and further chapters come from reflections shared by Protestant clergy during Kettering Foundation research exchanges between 2020-2022. In each of the examples shared, the identifying details have been changed or removed to protect the identities of the clergy and congregations that shared these stories.

The popular Protestant hymn about Christian unity claims that “We are one in the Spirit; we are one in the Lord... We will walk with each other; we will walk hand in hand... They will know we are Christians by our love.”³ However, introduce an organ into the sanctuary or bring up the president in a prayer meeting? Congregations may not be walking and holding hands together anymore. These divisions can be addressed through practiced routines and rituals as well as through a carefully curated purple church culture.

³ *Chalice Hymnal*

It's important to frame the work of the local church as fertile ground for the slow, gradual process of respectful engagement, transformation, and bridgebuilding. Robert Wuthnow equates the strengths of religious communities to the strengths of a healthy democracy in his book *Why Religion is Good for American Democracy*, writing,

We can conceptualize religious practices in terms of *action, conviction, and contention*... religious practices amount to a way of engaging with the world. They consist not only of participating in sacred rites but also of taking action in the affairs of one's community and nation.⁴

Churches can serve as one of the institutions that teach the importance of seeking unity, forgiveness, and bridge-building because often church goers consider the church as a place that shapes us as moral, ethical, and loving human beings.

God's Work of Unity and Restoration

Charles Marsh and John Perkins' book *Welcoming Justice: God's Movement Toward Beloved Community* explores God's work of unity-building through the unfinished work of the Civil Rights movement. The authors argue that God's work is always rooted in unity and restoration of the Beloved Community. Perkins himself offers a powerful testimony about how he became an activist with the goal of bringing people together. In 1970, Perkins was arrested and tortured in prison by white police officers. His recovery took months. Remarkably, the result of this racist, unjust situation, one that highlighted the need for police reform, Perkins felt a call to work for unity:

⁴ Robert Wuthnow, *Why Religion is Good for American Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021), 6-7.

Perkins emerged from six months of treatment at Tuft Medical Center with a new conviction that Christian love could not rest content until it found space for the neighbor and the enemy. He would make his life a parable of forgiveness and reconciliation.⁵

Marsh, professor of religious studies at the University of Virginia and scholar of the civil rights movement and lived theology was moved by Perkins' testimony and community work. He partnered with Perkins because they are and is similarly dedicated to the value of opening ourselves up to each other in order to build unity. Marsh writes:

And indeed, if you listen closely, you will hear that the men and women who work day in and day out in inauspicious places to bring healing to our broken and blistered world are people who are carried and strengthened and nourished by deep spiritual waters, who show that vivid realism about the human condition is more honest and clearly drawn against horizons of grace.⁶

Marsh understands that when we share our own truth and listen to others in their moments of honesty and vulnerability, we can begin to see God's grace unfolding in the world. As John Perkins' life attests to, as well as the long line of theologians whose efforts at connection and healing across differences have had high costs, the work is not easy, simple, or fast. With each generation we must renew our commitment to the difficult and long work of connecting with each other and hearing each other even when that feels nearly impossible. While not the only way to bind a community together across difference in the service of justice and healing, churches provide an important space for this in a society where so many are disconnected, cloistered in their homes and on their

⁵ Charles Marsh and John M. Perkins, *Welcoming Justice: God's Movement Toward Beloved Community* (Westmont, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 36.

⁶ Marsh and Perkins, *Welcoming Justice*, 32.

devices, and where the opportunity to be together, and work together, in a politically diverse public space is incredibly limited.

Togetherness is Important

David Mathews' book *With: A Strategy for Renewing our Democracy* describes the importance of coming together as a community regardless of the urge to divide:

Caring for others, even those not necessarily kin, is one of the most laudable traits of human beings. Eventually, however... much of this human caring has become organized into expert services by institutions... those institutions and their professionals are necessary, but the need for humans to attend to the well-being of others is still there.⁷

What not a theologian, Mathews' work resonates with central themes of Christian life together. Mathews notes that we cannot outsource this caring and connection to institutions such as the government or social workers or schools, but rather the work of care of neighbor must be done by everyday people. The emphasis on citizens throughout Mathews' body of work is not to meant to highlight the need for an institutional form of citizenship that is about passports or immigration, but rather a broader notation of citizenship that understands us as all part of the whole, where we both benefit from the collective, but also understand that we owe something to the collective as well. Mathews alludes to the value of sharing our humanity – a value that churches, in the be best cases, already highlight. Thus, Purple Church congregations have the potential to become the beloved communities that Marsh describes. By emphasizing the humanity and

⁷ David Mathews, *With: A Strategy for Renewing our Democracy* (Kettering, OH: Kettering Foundation Press, 2022), 311

vulnerability of its members, and the connection between each person, the community, and God, Purple Churches create space for people to first listen closely, then hear the work of healing in the midst of our broken and blistered world. A central premise of the Purple Church is that no matter what identities we bring to the table, no matter what experiences we have been through, and no matter where we come from, we are all committed to being present to each other and to bringing into being a world that is welcoming, full of grace, and committed to inclusion and listening even when it is difficult, costly, and when the outcomes are not yet assured.

The Church as Civic Gym

Local Protestant churches serve as civic gymnasiums⁸ where everyday people practice dialogue, decision making, and community response to challenges while building relationships across ideological divides. This framework allows congregations to teach the skills of collaboration and community building. The metaphor of a gymnasium underscores the process of developing skills over time. No one begins a journey to healthy living by trying out the hardest exercises at the gym first. Instead, building stamina requires building muscles through practice and over time. The same approach applies to the Purple Church. For congregations willing to engage with difficult topics together, the community must first take care to not strain relationships as it builds up to more sensitive

⁸ See Elizabeth Gish, Ruby Quantson Davis, and Kudakwashe Chitsike, “Religious Organizations as Civic Nodes and Civic Gyms,” in *On the Significance of Religion for Deliberative Democracy* (Routledge, 2023), 25-30; and Brad Rourke, “Thoughts on Civic Muscle,” *Medium*, August 2020, <https://medium.com/office-of-citizen/thoughts-on-civic-muscle-31f640467521>.

issues. Starting the practices of dialogue and relationship-building before moments of crisis or acute division prepares congregations for deliberative, democratic collective decision-making and collective action. When a congregation shares information, prepares together, and makes minor decisions as a group, it also strengthens itself for harder decisions. For example, a congregation may deliberate about how many handicap parking spaces to include in its newly paved parking lot or whether to create a sensory play area in the children's church room. In these exercises, the congregation would practice considering its approach based on the needs of others and the perspectives of those who are different than the majority.

After exploring the process of collective decision-making and exploring different perspectives, congregations begin working their way up to more sensitive or tender issues. Some of these topics may include climate change, hunger issues and food deserts in the local community, the role of the church in a divided society, or LGBTQ+ members of the church. A local congregation can serve as a place to think through big-picture issues once the Purple Church has built itself up in the civic gym.

Civic Gymnasiums at Work

Congregations with a great deal of practice at this offer clear evidence in support of the promise of Purple Churches. If approached deliberately – and with a plan – the work is not as challenging as many clergy and church leadership presume. Churches that have experimented with deliberative and democratic practices generally report higher levels of job satisfaction among their clergy and higher general agreement within their

congregations that such practices are helpful, meaningful, and effective in addressing problems.⁹

Integrative Thinking and Deliberative Dialogue

A congregation that wants to discuss contentious or difficult topics successfully must value openness and integrative thinking. Jennifer Riel and Roger Martin, authors of the book *Creating Great Choices: A Leader's Guide to Integrative Thinking*, share one strategy for dealing with difficult, nuanced issues:

When faced with a tough decision, we choose one of the options in front of us instead of creating an answer that solves the problem in a new, more successful way. Typically, we look at our options, assess their pros and cons, and choose one that comes out a little bit ahead in the analysis.¹⁰

Though this advice appears straightforward, it does require intentionality. Purple congregations, must link integrative thinking to the belief that part of the Christian faith is admitting we do not have all the answers – and that we, as Christians, are open to see God at work when we ask good questions. Deciding one's stance on important issues suggests elements of righteousness and inflexibility. But Christians, as children of God, acknowledge that we do not have every answer. Our faith invites us to humble ourselves before the mysteries of the world. We are called to faithful lives – and we understand

⁹ Evidence of the work of congregations as civic gymnasiums emerged during research exchanges at the Kettering Foundation from 2021-2022.

¹⁰ Roger L. Martin and Jennifer Riel, *Creating Great Choices: A Leader's Guide to Integrative Thinking* (Boston: Harvard Business Review Press, 2017), 10.

faith through Scripture: “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”¹¹

Riel and Martin’s writing echoes the need for mystery and wonder. In fact, they argue that in order for integrative thinking to be effective, our posture and stance in the world must be rooted in humility. Because we cannot know all there is to know, we must be open to other perspectives, views, and arguments. They remind us that

[t]he world is complex, so we understand it through simplified models. These models are constructions and (at least a little bit) wrong. The world is understood in different ways by different people. These opposing ways of seeing the world represent an opportunity for us to improve our models. The world is full of opportunity to improve our models over time, as long as we are open to the idea that a new answer is possible. Therefore [our] job is to get clearer about [our] own thinking, opening it to inquiry... genuinely inquire into opposing views of the world... patiently search for answers that resolve the tension between opposing ideas and create new value for the world.¹²

The posture of curiosity that Reil and Martin describe is essential for Purple Church cultivation and leadership.

Deliberative Dialogue

Similarly, the process of becoming a civic gymnasium requires us to suspend our righteous beliefs and take on a posture of curiosity and learning. The Kettering Foundation of Dayton, Ohio, focuses on deliberative dialogue as the best approach for addressing polarizing political issues in groups with diverse ideology. Program officer Rev. Dr. Elizabeth Gish focuses her research specifically on the ways that religious

¹¹ Hebrews 11:1 (NRSV).

¹² Martin and Riel, *Creating Great Choices*, 212.

organizations are ideal contexts for such dialogue. In her article “Toward the World We Long For: Churches and the Hope of Democratic Life,” Rev. Gish writes, “Deliberation is distinct from dialogue and civil conversation in that it includes, but goes beyond, respectful listening and increased understanding. It also involves weighing trade-offs, making choices, and identifying common ground for action.”¹³ Most churches already serve as places for people to come and process their reactions to the world. In this setting, we are invited to ask big questions, wonder about meaning, and be open to new perspectives on the world fueled by our belief in God.

Gish goes on to explain the compatibility of deliberative dialogue and congregational ministry:

Although not always self-named as public work, churches are a vital public space for people to share, process, and better understand the theological and public issues with which they grapple... Churches are locations for community conversations and forums on pressing issues, where members and people from the community come together to try to better understand each other, often weighing options and identifying common ground from which to act.”¹⁴

Local congregations can help exercise the muscles of listening, speaking civilly, and exploring solutions for communal issues despite ideological disagreements. This work is often already occurring, but by naming it and highlighting it, we can invite churches to be more aware of the work that they do to provide a space for thinking about complex public problems with others. Additionally, often when we are able to name what we are doing, this provides an opportunity to strengthen and build on that. One example is a weekly

¹³ Elizabeth Gish, "Toward the World We Long For: Churches and the Hope of Democratic Life," *eJournal of Public Affairs*, Vol. 9, No. 2 (2020), 8, <https://bearworks.missouristate.edu/ejopa/vol9/iss2/5>

¹⁴Gish, “Toward the World We Long For,” 10.

handcrafting group at a church in Kentucky. Church members gather to knit, quilt, do needlepoint, and to carve small wooden figures. One might not imagine that this could be a site for deliberation over complex public issues. Yet, when the pastor came to the class and heard Alan discussing with Sue his cousin who was transgender, it gave Sue the opportunity to be curious, to ask questions, and to practice sharing and listening in a low-stakes environment where both Sue and Alan felt safe and that they would be welcomed back no matter what their views on this topic were. The pastor pointed this out to the group a few weeks later, noting how much she appreciated the ways that everyone listened, shared, and spoke to each other with care and compassion. The group was not aware that the handcrafting group on Wednesday mornings served this purpose but after the pastor pointed it out, they began to speak more about difficult public issues that they were worried about in their community. This would not have been possible without the explicit and long-term effort that the pastor made to put relationships and connection in the church before agreement on theological or political issues. This was not a time to debate national political issues, but rather it became a space where congregants were able to create space to bring to the table the issues they were struggling with in their own lives and communities.

Highlighting Shared Concerns

One key element of Purple Church work is minimizing and steering clear of ideological debates for their own sake. The Purple Church instead strives to identify and build upon shared concerns that affect the congregation, such as health, family, or passing

a livable world to our children and grandchildren. The church's focus becomes shared concerns rather than individuality. In his book *Christ and the Common Life*, theologian Luke Bretherton outlines the importance of a communal lens for understanding our lives and what matters in them:

Talk of humanity is political talk because it is talk about the conditions and possibilities of a shared world of meaning and action with those we find strange. It is a recognition that to be who we are we need others, and this entails negotiating some form of common life with them, either through positioning a common humanity or through bringing difference/alterity into fruitful relationship. And this entails a political process of conflict and conciliation through which a just and compassionate common life might be discovered.¹⁵

The concept of shared concerns is rooted in Christian values, not ideology. And one central value of Christian communities is to love your neighbor as you love yourself. This value stems from the Ten Commandments and is highlighted in the teaching of Jesus as the greatest commandment of all.¹⁶ Through the lens of this Christian value, congregants serve their neighbors and act generously toward people who differ from them without getting caught in ideological debates or standstills.

One clergy representative at a Kettering Foundation Research exchange shared a story from his congregation that took place in the fall of 2021 at his suburban church in Middle America. In his congregation, Paul plays the organ every week as one of the music ministers. He performs a prelude and postlude; leads the congregation through hymns; accompanies the choir anthems; and offers prayerful music during the passing of

¹⁵ Luke Bretherton, *Christ and the Common Life: Political Theology and the Case for Democracy* (Grand Rapids, MI: Erdmans, 2019), 313.

¹⁶ See Exodus 20:2–17 and Deuteronomy 5:6–21 for the 10 Commandments. Reference to the greatest commandment can be found in Matthew 22:35–40, Mark 12:28–34, and Luke 10:27a.

the offering plate. One Sunday, Paul missed the worship service because his husband, Peter, was rushed to the ER with heart palpitations. When the congregation heard about Peter's medical emergency, the deacons arranged a meal train of casseroles and soups for the next week. The elders dropped off a prayer shawl. The congregation prayed for Paul and Peter during worship on Sunday morning. The congregation loved this couple throughout its crisis. At no point did the congregation debate the ideology behind gay marriage or argue over medical rights and restrictions for same-sex couples in the hospital. This is the difference between Christian values and ideology. The church community understood that its role was to serve, love, and support its members.¹⁷

Shifting language away from charged-up political issues and toward the concerns and needs of our neighbors among the pews allows congregations the opportunity for dialogue instead of debate. In so doing, Protestant congregations have the ability to teach citizens about democratic practices because of the foundational work of creating trusting relationships and sharing an identity that makes space for addressing difficult topics.

Though not all church members agree politically and ideologically, they can often agree on the meaningful work of the congregation itself: to worship together, to serve together, and care for one another. Different denominations frame this differently. For instance, for the Disciples of Christ (DOC) church, communion is central. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) often focuses on grace. In United Methodist Churches (UMC) contexts, it's holy conferencing. For African Methodist

¹⁷ The story of Peter and Paul is true, but he names, details of the medical condition, and descriptions of the congregation have been intentionally changed to protect the privacy of those involved. Author's documentation during Kettering Foundation Research Exchange, May 23, 2022.

Episcopal (AME) congregations, the focus is on the Sunday sermon and worship experience.

Liturgy as Pre-Deliberative Work

In the purple church, there is a repeated highlighting and returning to theological concepts and practices that involve ideological or political language and created a sense of unity and shared identity. Churches distinguish between Christian values and particular ideologies in big and small ways throughout the liturgical year. In another example from Good Friday 2021, members of Community Christian Church in North Canton, Ohio gathered on the front lawn of the building and walked through an experiential Stations of the Cross worship service. Good Friday often serves as a day of confession, repentance, and a somber encounter with human sin. But the definition of sin and the framework for repentance varied for those who came to this particular Stations of the Cross experience.

A mere three months before Holy Week, on January 6th, 2021, the U.S. Capitol Building was attacked. This Stations of the Cross congregation contained people who were in Washington D.C. that day with the intention of breaching the capitol. There were also congregants who felt outraged by the insurrection. The ideological differences in this congregation were palpable: some people believed the 2020 election had been stolen and Donald Trump should have served a second term as president; other members were long-time poll workers and felt personally insulted by the accusation of an unfair election. Still other members considered moving to Canada if Joe Biden were not elected president.

At each station, a leader read Scripture and all members participated in a ritual

meant to draw them closer to Christ and his journey to the cross. At the fourth station, Jesus met his mother. The station leader read from the gospel of Luke:

Simon blessed them and said to Mary his mother: ‘Behold, this child is set for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is spoken against (and a sword will pierce through your own soul also), that thoughts out of many hearts may be revealed.’¹⁸ And his mother kept all these things in her heart.

Next, the station leader asked each person to say their mother’s name. At this, people began weeping. Their eyes began widening. Compassion grew. The simple ritual of naming their mothers broke open a vulnerable space. It was as if those gathered began to remember that everyone was someone’s child. The group remembered each other’s humanity and connectedness. This ritual highlighted the shared Christian values of seeing each person as an image-bearer of God without engaging in ideological differences. It was as if those gathered had eyes to see God in one another with full reverence and awe.

As the pastor and several congregants reported, the perception was that this particular Stations of the Cross ritual did important pre-deliberative work for the community.¹⁹ It set the table for difficult discussions about challenging issues thanks to the church’s collective participation in a sacrament – an outward ritual that pointed to the inner workings of God’s grace. The Good Friday example highlights what is possible in congregations who do the work of civic gyms: after congregations reconnect people to their shared humanity and vulnerability, more difficult conversations become possible. After this stations of the cross experience, while a discussion of the recent insurrection or

¹⁸Luke 2:34-35, 51 (NRSV).

¹⁹ Anonymous response during Kettering Foundation Research Exchange, “Trauma, Healing, and Democracy,” April 19, 2022.

election results was not brought up, there were glimpses of bridge building after the event. Church members with differing political opinions and convictions embraced and made plans for a shared meal after this ritual. The first steps of reconciling relationships and seeking further understanding of one another started to unfold. This is one unique offering of a local church.

Shared Experiences Build Bridges

Beyond these shared values and traditions, churches cultivate a setting for members to experienced intimate moments and meaningful rituals together. These experiences forge a sense of trust and connection independent of shared political beliefs or ideologies. Churches that prioritize shared vulnerability, openness, and covenantal relationships in the community often find that their work creates more fruitful opportunities to discuss and act on polarizing issues. It may be more complex than singing Kumbaya while holding hands, but congregations have the ability to break down barriers of indignance and unyielding beliefs thanks to their human connection.

God's work is always rooted in unity and restoration of the Beloved Community. Christian faith has inspired transformation and change throughout the history of civic movements in the United States. Purple Church congregations can therefore serve as beloved communities. By accessing the humanity and vulnerability of its members, a Purple Church creates space for people to listen closely and hear the work of healing in the midst of our broken and blistered world. This work can help congregations become sites to gather on holy ground; break bread for all that is broken; and commission young

people by submerging them in the sacred waters of baptism. When people break open their hearts and pray, deeply and vulnerably, communities can change. Through shared belief, churches invite members into a unique relationship: people who sing together, learn together, and serve together can make transformation possible through the work of the Holy Spirit.

This task requires congregations to be open to what might shift when they gather to do ministry. An unspoken covenant emerges: collective ministry must be prioritized over personal righteousness. Daniel Williams’ recent *Atlantic* article points out that engagement in a local church can actually prevent extremist beliefs from taking hold:

People become even more entrenched in their political views when they stop attending services. Though churches have a reputation in some circles as promoting hyper-politicization, they can be depolarizing institutions. Being part of a religious community often forces people to get along with others—including others with different political views—and it may channel people’s efforts into charitable work or forms of community outreach that have little to do with politics. Leaving the community removes those moderating forces, opening the door to extremism.²⁰

Williams goes on to explain that often, when people stop attending church regularly, they still retain their basic theological beliefs –partisan politics become their religion and group affiliation. This is how partisanship becomes almost a religion in itself.²¹

Christian Values Over Partisan Opinions

Christian values often supersede ideological debates. In another example from a

²⁰ Daniel Williams, “What Really Happens When Americans Stop Going to Church,” *The Atlantic*, September 2023.

²¹ Williams, “What Really Happens.”

Kettering Foundation research exchange, consider one story about a large church in a politically conservative county that engaged in mission work in its community. The pastor of this church shared a story of bringing members of his church together around an outreach project that also allowed the congregation to consider a different perspective. Though the details of this story have been changed to protect the anonymity of the research participant in the Kettering Research exchange, the nuts and bolts of the story reveal an important dynamic that emerges in purple churches engaged in pre-deliberative dialogue work.

The church in this example had committed to building a house with Habitat for Humanity. However, there was dissonance among the congregation, as many members felt Habitat for Humanity amounted to a handout or an unfair subsidy for the needy. The divide was an ongoing problem for the church, which had in its endowment a fund specifically for Habitat for Humanity — and so they were unsure how to proceed.

In addition to engaging in a larger internal dialogue, this particular church did some important pre-deliberative work – meaning experiences that help people form deep, trusting relationships, based in religious and spiritual motivation to love one’s neighbor as one loves oneself – regarding the Habitat for Humanity site. The congregation’s pre-deliberative work happened by accident, when the homeowner spent an afternoon at the build site with church volunteers. As they painted trim and conversed, the homeowner mentioned she loved reading but owned few books. The simple exchange became a pre-deliberative experience for the volunteers, who decided to custom build bookshelves for the homeowner, hold a book drive to fill the shelves – and, ultimately, launch a program

that provided bookshelves and books for all Habitat homes built in their area. Through the lens of faith, an anchor in the Christian call to love their neighbors, and the slow work of collaboration and shared mission, this church saw a shift from ideological concerns to shared Christian values among its membership, all from the building of a Habitat for Humanity house.

This congregation's pre-deliberative experience resulted in fertile ground for a process of deliberative dialogue. They were able to create a forum in which they could share differing perspectives and explore a variety of approaches and responses before they decided how to move forward with Habitat for Humanity and their volunteer base.²² The roots of this pre-deliberative work came from a deeper understanding of shared humanity: recognizing the lineage of ancestors who paved the way while looking to the next generations and valuing relationships alongside decisions.

The pre-deliberative practice of valuing relationships with our neighbors extends beyond church settings. It requires an acknowledgement of the interconnectedness of all people. This perspective speaks against dire individualism and a strictly autonomy-based value system. Positioning oneself in a wider context of neighbors and shared community forces strict ideology to yield to a more compassionate, grounded, and contextual response.²³

²² Author's documentation during Kettering Foundation Research Exchange, May 23, 2022.

²³ For more on the impact of interconnected perspectives as they relate to decision-making and ideological stances, see David Brooks, "The Outer Limits of Liberalism: What happens when a society takes individualism to its logical conclusion?", *The Atlantic*, May 4, 2023 <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2023/06/canada-legalized-medical-assisted-suicide-euthanasia-death-maid/673790/>.

Everyday Experiences Can Lead to Change

Pre-deliberative experiences in communities must focus attention on the everyday work of everyday people to manifest the kind of world we long to live. But this labor can seem insignificant. Philosopher Alexis Shotwell observes in her book *Against Purity* that “There is no food we can eat, no clothing we can buy, or energy we can use without deepening our ties to complex webs of suffering.”²⁴ The systems and structures that enable autocratic rule and democratic backsliding are, in the end, built and maintained by everyday people.²⁵ Pre-deliberation and community-building are important not only for local congregations, but because they influence democracy, freedom, and well-being in the U.S. and globally. Purple churches embody the stubborn hope that even within the economic and political structures of our world, there remain spaces and possibilities to intervene. Or, as Shotwell puts it, “All there is, while things perpetually fall apart, is the possibility of acting from where we are.”²⁶

One of the benefits of focusing on politically inclusive congregations is that they are one of the few American institutions where a diverse group of politically minded people gather intentionally. Churches often function as a space for a community of caring people with diverse political and social views to come together in faith to work through

²⁴ Alexis Shotwell, *Against Purity: Living Ethically in a Compromised World* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 5.

²⁵ See, for instance, Asef Bayet, *Life as Politics: How Ordinary People Change the Middle East* (Stanford University Press, 2013) and Stephan Haggard and Robert Kaufman, “The Anatomy of Democratic Backsliding,” *Journal of Democracy* 32(4), October 2021: 27–41.

²⁶ Shotwell, *Against Purity*, 4.

their differences and see the others' perspectives with an intention of reshaping the world together.²⁷ Given the appropriate tools, leadership, and structure, churches can be a place where congregants learn how to address polarizing issues while maintaining relationships across partisan lines. This is a core value of the Purple Church.

Congregations Push Back on Toxic Polarization

It takes time, patience, and a slow pace to see the effects of Purple Church work. Purple Church leaders must seek to understand the role that their churches can play in pushing back against toxic polarization. Purple congregations provide a ready-made group of everyday people already accustomed to attending meetings; discussing; negotiating meaning and ethics; and seeking to address social issues *together*. And the work of many churches already addresses some of democracy's current challenges. While church influence and attendance have declined,²⁸ people do still attend – and faith-based communities remain one of the most trusted institutions in American public life.²⁹ Local

²⁷ See, for instance, Leah Schade, *Preaching in the Purple Zone: Ministry in the Red-Blue Divide*, Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019; Jacob Neiheisel, Paul Djupe, and Anand Sokhey, "Veni, Vidi, Disseri: Churches and the Promise of Democratic Deliberation," *American Politics Research* 37(4), 2009, 614-643; and Elizabeth Gish, Ruby Quantson Davis, and Kudakwashe Chitske, *On the Significance of Religion for Deliberative Democracy* (London: Routledge, 2023).

²⁸ Jeffrey Jones, "U.S. Church Membership Falls Below Majority for First time," *Gallup*, March 29, 2021, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/341963/church-membership-falls-below-majority-first-time.aspx>; Justin Nortey, "More Houses of Worship are Returning to Normal Operations, but In-Person Attendance Is Unchanged Since Fall," Pew Research Center, March 22, 2022, www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2022/03/22/more-houses-of-worship-are-returning-to-normal-operations-but-in-person-attendance-is-unchanged-since-fall;

Pew Research Center, "U.S. Public Becoming Less Religious," November 3, 2015, www.pewresearch.org/religion/2015/11/03/u-s-public-becoming-less-religious/;

Pew Research Center, "In U.S. Decline of Christianity Continues at a Rapid Pace," October 17, 2019, www.pewforum.org/2019/10/17/in-u-s-decline-of-christianity-continues-at-rapid-pace/.

²⁹ Megan Brenan, "Americans' Confidence in Major U.S. Institutions Dips," *Gallup*, July 14, 2021, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/352316/americans-confidence-major-institutions-dips.aspx>.

congregations have long played a role in shifting collective values and nurturing community-centered policy changes.³⁰ However, this work looks different in a church than it does in the political arena. Understanding the effect of purple churches and the transformation they make possible requires a new understanding of the pace of change and prioritizing shared values over politically charged ideology.

Church Work is Slow Work

To give one example of the slow pace of such change, consider the prayer circle of one church in suburban Ohio. This example was shared by a participant in the Kettering Research exchange about the way her congregation addresses prayer concerns each week in a small group setting. Its congregation includes a group that prays together every Tuesday morning, reading prayer requests from a shared list. The last page of the list includes the following prayer:

We pray for the baby formula shortage, shooting victims' families in the U.S., Racial problems in the U. S. and the world, Peace in our country, Covid vaccinations for everyone and control of the Covid virus and its variants, All who are out of work, especially those hungry and/or in danger of eviction, All medical personnel & caregivers, fire & police personnel , esp. the dr. & nurse shortage Our civic leaders & national leaders for wisdom & courage in dealing with crises, Release of all American captives & political prisoners , our military, esp. the

³⁰ For more on the role of religious organizations in positive social change – including democratic change – see Albert Raboteau, *Canaan Land: A Religious History of African Americans* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); Leilah Danielson, Marian Mollin, and Doug Rossinow, *The Religious Left in Modern America: Doorkeepers of a Radical Faith* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018); Robert Wuthnow, *Why Religion is Good for Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021); or Jacob Neiheisel, Paul Djupe, and Anand SokheyVeni, “Vidi, Disseri: Churches and the Promise of Democratic Deliberation,” *American Politics Research* 37(4), 614–643, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1532673X08324216>. And while his conclusions are not convincing, see also Jon Shields, “Between Passion and Deliberation: The Christian Right and Democratic Ideals,” *Political Science Quarterly*, 122(1), 2007: 89–113. www.jstor.org/stable/20202810, along with Shields’ *The Democratic Virtues of the Christian Right* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).

wounded, those suffering from PTSD, & families of those who died.³¹

The last page of the list has included these requests, with only slight variations, for years. But the pastor of this church reported that ahead of the 2022 Midterm elections, several members of the prayer team discussed how these requests related to the issues on the ballot. Many of the congregants, both liberal and very conservative, were able to consider political issues' relationship to human suffering and what the pastor called "the good news of the gospel" in a meeting. The group shifted its focus from ideology to Christian values achieved not through a provocative, politically charged sermon or debate, but by the spiritual practice of living in a congregation together. This, in turn, led to feelings of safety, comfort, and care in the context of trusted relationships.³²

Unity Without Uniformity

Congregations that are able to hold together as purple churches have this in common: they claim their identity as communities that prioritize relationships over righteousness and that believe they can seek unity without requiring uniformity. Author Gary Agee helps define Christian unity in broad strokes in his book *That We May Be One*, writing,

Unity is not the sole possession of any one Christian sect or group. It is simply too large and expansive, as it finds its genesis in God's love for the entire world. Where God's love is shared, unity in some measure and form is manifested. It is not to be delimited by a particular tradition's creeds or narrowly defined 'truth.'³³

³¹ Author's involvement with a frequent participant in the Kettering Research Exchanges, 2021-22.

³² Anonymous Protestant clergy, documented during the Kettering Foundation Research Exchange, "Democratic Deliberation in Religious and Theological Studies" May 23, 2022.

³³ Gary B. Agee, *That We May Be One: Practicing Unity in a Divided Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Erdmans Publishing Co, 2022), 34.

In their quest for unity, congregants must prioritize relationships and love for neighbors over ideology. In addition, they must also share the belief that unity itself allows for nuance in understanding, as well as the potential transformation of rigorously held beliefs. In other words, a commitment to unity also invites an opportunity for growth and evolution of thought, granting our relationships the power to change our convictions over time. Agee continues with this description of Christian Unity:

Where unity is encouraged, a spirit of camaraderie and connectedness binds together individuals on opposite sides of contentious moral issues as well as those of different races, class groups, and sexual orientations. It is by definition more than mere tolerance; it is fueled by love for neighbor. Saturated with generosity and the desire for the good of the other, unity implies a willingness to celebrate difference—or at least to bracket the point of disagreement in order to maintain relationship.³⁴

Uniformity, a desire for certainty, and predictable outcomes are expectations that pastors confront every day. Churchgoers often cling to traditions. Singing “Silent Night” with a candle on Christmas Eve, wearing red on Pentecost, and using the words “Father, Son and Holy Ghost” in the doxology are fixtures of the church experience. The sentimentality and longing for familiarity that often exist in Protestant churches mean that change can feel like a threat. One pastor reported receiving feedback that moving from the traditional doxology to more inclusive language such as “Creator, Christ, and Holy Ghost” was “the worst thing that has ever happened to this church.”³⁵ As part of an outreach effort, another pastor raffled off the opportunity for a church member to choose a given Sunday’s sermon topic. The winning congregant chose the topic “Who Goes to

³⁴ Agee, *That We May Be One*, 25.

³⁵ Anonymous documentation from the during Kettering Foundation Research Exchange, “Kettering Foundation Research Exchange with Faith Based Institutions,” February 24-25, 2020.

Heaven?” and warned that they had asked other pastors in the past this question and didn’t like the answer – so be clear.³⁶

But when church members focus on the specific words of the doxology or attempt to decide who goes to Heaven and who does not, the need for uniformity begins to distract from the truth of Christian Unity. As Christina Cleveland describes in her book *Disunity in Christ*:

By simply categorizing, we often create subcategories that detract from the more important, all-inclusive category of the body of Christ. Before we know it, whether people are pro-life or pro-choice, Calvinist or Arminian, or black or white is more important than whether they are part of the family of God.³⁷

The work of purple congregations requires commitment anchored in the shared identity of being part of the family of God.

Pace of Change

Many congregants want certainty from their pastor and their church. This longing is rooted in the very structure of the human brain.³⁸ While seminaries and divinity schools often teach Biblical interpretation, preaching, and pastoral care techniques, pastors generally receive almost no training in the practical realities managing congregational uncertainties. Part of the reason for this is because the issues that Protestant churches face in our current political and cultural climate are unique and

³⁶ Anonymous Kettering Foundation response, February 2020.

³⁷ Christina Cleveland, *Disunity in Christ: Uncovering the Hidden Forces that Keep Us Apart* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2013), 50.

³⁸ See also Jean Kim, “How America Fell into Toxic Individualism: Our societal narcissistic streak has led to mass tragedy”; Ian Kerner, “Shifting your relationship from ‘me’ to ‘we,’” *CNN*, July 24, 2022, and Kristen Mae, “Americans Have A Major Problem With Toxic Individualism,” *Scary Mommy*, January 8, 2021.

evolve every day.³⁹ However, such navigation is essential in purple churches.

Cultivating the skills necessary to function as a Purple Church is, as mentioned, very slow work. It took several decades for the political and religious dynamics of our age to take shape. Similarly, dealing with the emergence of toxic individuality, the adoption of my-way-or-the-highway thinking, and people's diminished ability engage respectfully with each other will require some sweaty hours in the civic gym.⁴⁰ The reality is that a provocative sermon one Sunday can lead to a mass exodus the next. Impulsive social media posts from a church leader can cause major rifts. In church leadership, sometimes quick decisions, ones that ignore the intentional, deliberative, and collective task of building community, can lead to disaster. Purple churches and leaders must seek measured, slow transformation, instead of an impulse for instant changes.

The skills that Purple Church congregants learn as they try to work through difficult issues have a residual effect on their ability to work across difference in the larger political sphere. As church members practice these skills this in the civic gym, the broader effect for them comes in terms of their actions in the community and public life. The work of the Purple Churches goes far beyond simply making *churches* more deliberative and democratic – it can and should influence how people understand

³⁹ This became especially clear during the COVID-19 pandemic, many pastors expressed stress and concern over how to make decisions for safety protocols and the changing church environment that emerged in the midst of the coronavirus. These comments were made by anonymous clergy during a Kettering Clergy Research Exchange entitled "Living Through Covid-19 Together and Beyond," July 25, 2020. Interviews conducted and recorded by Rev. Sarah Taylor Peck.

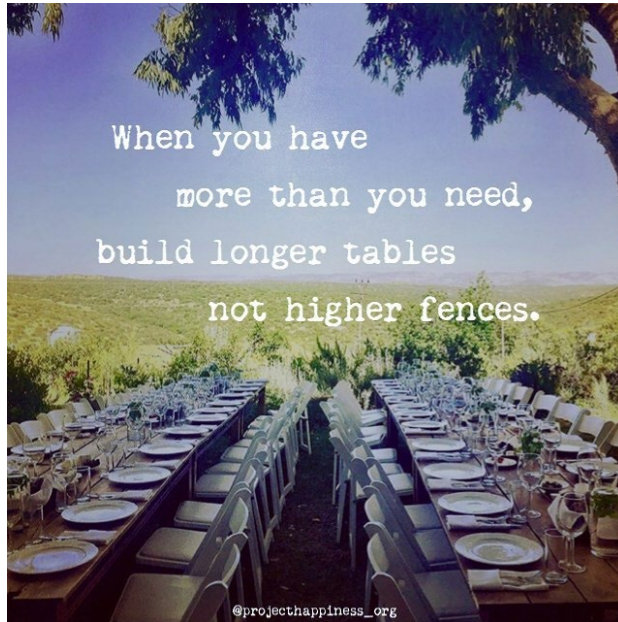
⁴⁰ Lydia Denworth, "Conservative and Liberal Brains Might Have Some Real Differences," *Scientific American*, October 26, 2020; Brown University, "Politically polarized brains share an intolerance of uncertainty" <https://www.brown.edu/news/2021-05-13/polarization>; and ScienceDaily, "Red brain, blue brain: Republicans and Democrats process risk differently, research finds," www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2013/02/130213173131.htm (accessed April 17, 2023).

themselves as political actors and how they act in broader political contexts.

Chapter 3:

The Work of Building Longer Tables

“But the gospel doesn't need a coalition devoted to keeping the wrong people out. It needs a family of sinners, saved by grace, committed to tearing down the walls, throwing open the doors, and shouting, ‘Welcome! There's bread and wine. Come eat with us and talk.’ This isn't a kingdom for the worthy; it's a kingdom for the hungry.” –Rachel Held Evans¹



2

The Call for Longer Tables

If Kumbaya had a meme equivalent, it would be something like “*We need to build longer tables, not higher walls.*” Whenever divisive political issues arise, the peacemaker

¹ Rachel Held Evans, *Searching for Sunday: Loving, Leaving and Finding the Church* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2015), 149.

² “Longer tables – not higher fences.” Digital Image. *Project Happiness* Facebook Page (December 1, 2016) https://www.facebook.com/projecthappiness/photos/new-motto-longer-tables-not-higher-fences-how-might-the-world-change-if-we-all-1/10153898602871637/?paipv=0&eav=AfYiqf_RTGs2fHoE2rfNuOeCgMA-UbCdTfNH10XNP0vBFFNQ45x-pXMt8oLLRUrICLs&_rdr.

types on social media would inevitably start posting and reposting this meme. Concentration camps at the border, with children separated from their families? “*We need to build longer tables, not higher walls.*” Drag queens reading children’s books in classrooms? “*We need to build longer tables, not higher walls.*” A meme, by its nature, skips over the nuances of highly charged issues and suggests a simple solution – in this case, that coming to the table together can solve the world’s problems. And believe it or not, the roots of Christianity share similarities with this concept. In divisive times, Christian churches can strengthen their commitment to unity in through the theology of a longer table. It is one of the central commitments of a successful Purple Church.

Jesus’ Longer Table

Scripturally and theologically, a longer table is a symbol rooted in the work of Christianity. Jesus spent most of his time teaching and leading and training 12 disciples. By choosing to share his message and ministry with a group of 12, Jesus modeled a framework for community building as a group project. In the middle of the synoptic gospels, after his birth in a manger; baptism in the Jordan River; temptation in the wilderness; and his first and largest teaching through the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus commissions his disciples, inviting a dozen of them to do as He has done. Jesus’ invitation to serve alongside him in his ministry is an endorsement of collective and collaborative work.

Not only did Jesus work in partnership with his disciples, He cultivated a group full of ideological differences and diverse political views to work closely. In Matthew,

Chapter 10, Jesus calls all 12 disciples by name and vocation for the first time.³ He tells them to begin their ministry with a metaphor, telling them “The harvest is plentiful but the laborers are few.” Jesus’ figurative language indicates that He cannot do the work of God alone. Instead, He is committed to a collaborative effort – and thus do the 13 men begin serving together. They heal the sick, raise the dead, and teach the gospel on the road to Jerusalem. The disciples did this despite their differences.

Jesus begins the naming of the 12 by identifying Peter, a man who would later deny Jesus three times. He identifies Matthew and Simon as disciples – one a tax collector, another a zealot, and on opposite ends of the political spectrum where the Roman Empire was concerned. Jesus names Judas, the one who would ultimately betray Him and sentence Him to death, last of the disciples. Even understanding the complicated dynamics of the group, Jesus unites its members to make their community a better place through collaboration and public service. From the calling of the disciples to the last supper in the upper room before his crucifixion, Jesus valued this diverse group of people. This is the work of a longer table. This call for partnership and collaboration is a constant theme in the teaching of Jesus – and an important tenant for purple churches.

Four Tenants of Purple Churches

To sustain and support the Purple Church, shared experiences, close proximity, and holy friendships are essential. Sacraments and rituals are the scaffolding for these

³ Matthew 9:35-10:8 (NRSV)

churches' deliberative and democratic practices. The successful Purple Church shares four distinct characteristics and strategies in support of collaboration and bridge building: a shared identity; practices that foster trust and connection; a distinct practice for addressing divisive issues; and shared common leading to common action.⁴ These approaches have shown to keep the church united, functioning, and able to find ways of working through the divisive religious and political issues that congregants care about. The four characteristics of successful purple churches are:

I. Developing a Shared Identity

More than doctrinal stances or rules about baptism and communion procedures, congregations must establish the foundational lens and tone of a congregation through the agreement of its shared values. Haidt's *The Righteous Mind* discusses specifically the human ability to seek and preserve a shared identity with those in our community:

We humans have an extraordinary ability to care about things beyond ourselves, to circle around those things with other people, and in the process to bind ourselves in teams that can pursue larger projects. That's what religion is all about. And with a few adjustments, it's what politics is about too."⁵

A congregation that aims to be purple must let love and humility be the two values that guide the covenantal relationship between members and leadership. These values stem

⁴ These four tenets emerged from Kettering Foundation Research exchanges in 2020-22 and subsequent analysis of transcripts.

⁵ Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion* (New York: Vintage Books, 2013), 318

directly from scripture and the deep traditions of Christianity itself. However, a congregation must also name these values and uphold them as shared traits of their church's identity to function as a purple congregation.

Scripture Supports Concept of Shared Identity

Making a case for these shared values is straightforward: they both point to the very heart of Christian faith. The first, most obvious shared identity in Christian congregations is Christianity itself. While different denominations and communities split hairs over theological nuances and biblical hermeneutics, Christian churches seek to follow Christ and act according to Christ's teachings. When asked by his followers which commandment needed to be valued above the rest, Jesus answered: "Love the Lord God with all your heart and with all your mind and with all your strength, and the second is like it: love your neighbor as yourself."⁶ When we remember that loving God and neighbor are the most significant expectations among Christians, we can use this lens to examine many questions about resolving issues. And when debates over how to love and which policies will best enable people to live by love emerge, their basic, shared identity as people who are committed to a lens of love for creator and neighbor will provide a strong foundation for dialogue.

Valuing Mystery and a Posture of Wonder

⁶ Matthew 22:36-40 (NRSV)

Paired with a commitment to love God and neighbor, purple churches must also value a sense of humility and mystery within the church culture. Recall Psalm 8: “What are human beings that you think about them; what are human beings that you pay attention to them?”⁷ Maintaining an understanding of the smallness of both humanity and our ability to comprehend the world allows for a posture of wonder and an opportunity to confess that there is more to God’s creation and God’s plan than we can ever know. Additionally, all human knowledge and perspective have been inherited and passed down through generations of bias; cultural context; social station; and systems of power.⁸ Humans rarely come up with a unique idea or perspective, and are often unaware of the channels of influence that shape opinions and ideas. Simply acknowledging this dynamic and accepting a stance of personal fallibility and intellectual error allows for more conversations around difficult and divisive topics.

But postures of openness are disappearing. With social media use on the rise, 280-character tweets presented as political debate, and a culture of increasing soundbite- and meme-fixation, taking the time to consider the nuance, errors, and particularities of the issues that split communities has fallen out of favor. Christian theologian Stanley Hauerwas, in his book *The Peaceable Kingdom*, explores the nature of Christian character by connecting honesty and accountability to integrity: “We acquire character,” Hauerwas writes, “through the expectation of others. The ‘otherness’ of another’s

⁷ Psalm 8:4 (CEB)

⁸ David Brooks, “The Outer Limits of Liberalism,” *The Atlantic*, May 4, 2023, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2023/06/canada-legalized-medical-assisted-suicide-euthanasia-death-maid/673790/>

character not only invites me to always imperfect limitation, but challenges me to recognize the way my vision is restricted by my own self-preoccupation.”⁹ Purple congregations emphasize bringing people together, that they may share collective expectations for the community at large.

Lens of God’s Vast Presence

Purple Church leadership must value and implement the shared Christian values of a love of God and neighbor alike, as well as humility and submission to the vastness of God. These paired values keep a Purple Church anchored. The two values also offer a guide for purple congregations navigating divides both big and small. For example, consider the aforementioned cliché church fight over carpet color. When a congregation needs to update the sanctuary carpet, usually two opposing sides emerge: one that feels strongly about the deep traditions and values of the church dating back generations, and one less tied to tradition, that perhaps wants to consider a color good for wedding pictures, that fits modern styles, or that neutralizes the space. Remembering shared values can influence the mechanics of these debates as much as the outcomes. Congregants are more likely to ask themselves: “Am I loving my neighbor by speaking over them; shouting; insisting on my own way; and not considering their perspective?” A congregation with a mission statement, covenant, or leadership training that establishes its commitment to these shared values and to common identity can channel these debates

⁹ Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), 45.

and discussions through its values and ease the tensions debate. Leaders can use shared values to facilitate conversations from which solutions emerge.

II. Practices that Foster Connection and Trust

In addition to shared values and a shared identity, the Purple Churches prioritizes practices that foster connection and trust. Author Allen Hilton, in his book *A House United*, discusses this very connectivity, writing: “If Christians want to stop shooting at one another from a distance...then red and blue Christians need to know each other.”¹⁰ It is more difficult to hold a derogatory stereotype or politically infused grudge against someone with whom you have shared a meal or prayed, or whose child you have held.

Hilton further argues that

Christians are called to be a family about town, baptized into a clan with ‘neither Jew nor Greek slave nor free, male and female’ – all one in Christ Jesus (Galatians 3:28). This family identity has strong implications for the way we’re called to keep community.¹¹

Again, these practices are part of the natural rhythm and culture of most Christian congregations.

Making Space for Difficult Conversations

Author and podcast host Anna Sale has made it her life’s work to help people navigate the most challenging moments in their lives – the death of a loved one, family

¹⁰Allen Hilton, *A House United: How the Church Can Save the World* (Minneapolis MN: Fortress Press, 2018), 166.

¹¹ Hilton, *A House United*, 162.

and identity issues, or financial stress – because Sale claims that people have lost the ability to talk about difficult things. She argues that this loss is largely due to the fact that people are less and less likely to be a part of collective institutions that offer community support. “Each of us,” writes Sales, “is taking more of the burden of life’s hardest conflicts onto our own shoulders. We used to have institutions, rituals and conventions that led us through the uncomfortable patches of life...”¹² A purple congregation has the opportunity to serve as just such a collective institution.

The Importance of Shared Humanity

Gregory Ellison designed a grassroots organization called Fearless Dialogues, which brings unlikely conversation partners together to share heartfelt conversations in order to change the world. In describing his mission, Ellison writes:

It may sound unconventional to hear that Fearless Dialogues measures both local and global change in 36-inch increments...once you truly come to see a maître d’, a drug dealer, a homeless person, or a traumatized teenager as someone made in the image of God, with a potential and perhaps undiscovered gift that can change the course of a community, you can no longer disregard that human being.¹³

Again, fostering trust and familiarity by bringing communities closer to those who are different is fundamental in leading purple churches. However, for a purple church to thrive, one of its congregation’s core values must be cultivating and investing in intra-congregational relationships.

¹² Anna Sale, *Let’s Talk About Hard Things* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 2021), 9.

¹³Gregory Ellison, *Fear+Less Dialogues: A New Movement for Justice* (Louisville, KY: Westminster Knox Press, 2017), 12.

Church sanctuaries are the setting of countless human milestones. It's on this holy ground that couples take their vows and promise to love one another until death do them part. Babies are dedicated and passed around from Elders to Deacons while congregations promise to teach them, love them, and watch them grow. Mourners gather in the pews to eulogize loved ones and say their final goodbyes. Children are baptized and asked to make confessions of faith in worship. Sanctuaries witness a congregation's life unfolding. In Hauerwas' view, the beauty of these rituals are essential for transforming the world:

The most creative social strategy we have to offer is the church. Here we show the world a manner of life the world can never achieve through social coercion or governmental action. We serve the world by showing it something that it is not, namely, a place where God is forming a family out of strangers.¹⁴

Sharing these moments fosters a sense of trust and connection within a church community.

During a spring 2021 Kettering Research exchange, one female pastor shared an account of bringing her child to a church meeting when, two weeks after returning from maternity leave, she found herself without childcare. She held her son in her lap during the opening prayer, willing him to be quiet as he started a chorus of ooo-ing, ahhh-ing, gurgling, blowing bubbles, and in general completely interrupting the prayer. When the pastor opened an eye to survey the damage, she saw, to her great surprise, twelve church

¹⁴ Stanley Hauerwas and Will Willimon, *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2014), 51.

members making silly faces back at her son. When the prayer finished, everyone lined up to hold the baby. They let him pull their hair, remove their glasses, and drool on their cardigans. These congregants were doing the strong, quiet work of being church: praying for the concerns of the world while loving and accepting the child in their midst. This is the work of fostering connection.

This is the work of the church. Eat together. Pray together. Hold each other's babies. Creating space for shared humanity is part of a church's holy opportunity. The pastor who brought her child to the meeting had similar experiences after that fated gathering thanks to the connections and holy friendships within her congregation. During an outreach fundraiser dinner, her baby smashed his hands into a church member's mashed potatoes; at a trustee meeting, the child spit up on the pile of printed agendas. These memorable encounters brought members of her congregation together. She shared, "I'm pretty sure these three things will banish fear, heal the world, unite us all across every barrier imaginable, and teach us how to be the kind of Christians – covered in mashed potatoes and drool – that Jesus can be proud of."¹⁵

The Shadow Side of Building Comfortable Communities

Churches are sometimes scrutinized for emphasizing the cultivation of an internal church culture of relationships and community. Theologian Will Willimon argues against a church culture that prioritizes comfort and connection over challenging and disrupting its congregants' comfort. As the director the Duke Doctorate of Ministry Program,

¹⁵ The pastor shared this quote during a spring 2021 Kettering Foundation research exchange

Willimon has a vested interest in the approaches and success of the pastors he teaches. He also acknowledges that pastors must be close with their their congregants, writing,

In order to speak to our people, we preachers must listen to them. That's easy when you are their pastor. Embedded with them, called and paid by them, present in moments that they keep hidden from public view...our need to people-please or be non-confrontive, all-approving affirmers of needy individuals eclipses our calling to be God's spokespersons."¹⁶

But one risk of prioritizing deeper relationships and fostering trust is exactly what Willimon points to: a further prioritization of individual feelings over a faithful answer to God's call. An effective Purple Church, though fosters trust and connection between members specifically around the truest and most consistent message of God to His people: love our neighbors as we love ourselves and honor their humanity alongside our own.

III. How to Engage Difficult Partisan and/or Ideological Issues

Genuine, wholehearted conversations are rare. One of the intentional ministries of a purple congregation is to equip members with the skills to have these conversations. However, in order to engage difficult issues and discuss partisan and ideological differences, it is essential to focus on the method of engagement and dialogue.

We cannot look to our national leaders for guidance on civil dialogue. During the 2020 election, both presidential candidates tried to highlight their particular perspectives

¹⁶ Will Willimon, *Listeners Dare: Hearing God in the Sermon* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2022), 41-42.

on issues that mattered to the American voters. However, during the 2020 presidential debate between Donald Trump and Joe Biden, the most significant commentary from viewers was that the candidates spoke over each other with no respect to listening, turn taking or considering what the other had to say. In a New York *Times* article entitled “With Cross Talk, Lies and Mockery, Trump Tramples Decorum in Debate With Biden,” authors Jonathan Martin and Alexander Burns observed,

The first presidential debate between President Trump and Joseph R. Biden Jr. unraveled into an ugly melee Tuesday, as Mr. Trump hectoring and interrupted Mr. Biden nearly every time he spoke and the former vice president denounced the president as a ‘clown’ and told him to ‘shut up.’ In a chaotic, 90-minute back-and-forth, the two major party nominees expressed a level of acrid contempt for each other unheard-of in modern American politics.¹⁷

Without a model of civic engagement from the aspirants for our nation’s highest office, it’s no wonder that we let emotions run high in our own neighborhoods and communities during discussion of difficult topics.

Basics of Civil Dialogue

Listening to one another well can make all the difference. Marriage counseling, parenting advice books, and leadership classes often highlight the art of listening as a fundamental starting point for relationship-building, conflict resolution, and community connection. Hunter Clarke-Fields, host of the Mindful Mama podcast and long-time yoga

¹⁷ Jonathan Martin and Alexander Burns, “With Cross Talk, Lies and Mockery, Trump Tramples Decorum in Debate With Biden,” *New York Times*, September 29, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/29/us/politics/trump-biden-debate.html> (accessed August 4, 2023).

and meditation in structure notes in her 2019 book *Raising Good Humans*, “Relationships are built on connection, and connection is developed through our interactions—through communication. Fundamentally, we all want to be seen and heard.”¹⁸ While she is writing about parenting, she is, of course, more broadly speaking to an experience of the human condition. One foundational strategy for engaging partisan issues is shifting the style of communication from confrontational to collaborative and the style of questioning from binary to exploratory. In her New York Times bestselling book *High Conflict: Why We Get Trapped and How We Get Out*, investigative journalist Amanda Ripley echoes this sentiment where she discusses how important it is to find ways to be foster curiosity and care for others, even as we disagree with them and even when those disagreements feel as though they have existential consequences for our lives.¹⁹

In his book *Leadership is Language*, author Davide Marquet explains the importance of this shift from binary questions to exploratory inquiries. He describes how difficult it is for people to respond productively when asked binary questions. For example, when someone may need support or help, questions like asked “Is there anything I can do to help you?” or “Will you reach out if there is anything I can do?” requires too much vulnerability and ownness on the part of the person in need. Using more specific language, such as, “How helpful would it be for me to bring dinner to your family tonight?”, allows a sense of empowerment and collaboration on the part of the person being asked.

¹⁸ Hunter Clarke-Fields, *Raising Good Humans*, (Oakland, CA: New Harbinger, 2019) 95.

¹⁹ Amanda Ripley, *High Conflict: Why We Get Trapped and How We Get Out* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2021).

Shifting from binary to exploratory language also helps when discussing difficult topics. For example, if you ask people yes-or-no questions about whether they support a particular political idea, they will be forced to choose and perhaps oversimplify with their response. By contrast, if you invite them into discussion about the issue, you make room for nuanced conversation. Marquet suggests that we “start by avoiding binary questions; instead of setting people up to give you a ‘yes or no’ answer, ask them ‘what?’ or ‘how?’ questions.”²⁰ We find ourselves in a time where many disagreements about political or ideological issues devolve into legalistic, us-versus-them debates that aim to sort out the right from the wrong; the out-of-bounds from the fair play; the corrupt from the holy; the unlawful and unethical from the righteous. This type of black-and-white divisiveness allows no space for the nuance that emerges when we value our shared humanity.

Restorative Justice as Christian Framework

In his book *Changing Lenses*, Howard Zehr explores the concept of restorative justice as an alternative to retributive justice. Where retributive justice seeks the conviction and punishment of a perpetrator for the benefit of the victim, restorative justice seeks healing for the victim and rehabilitation for the perpetrator. In his epilogue, Zher explores whether restorative justice can be considered not just a legalistic approach for the courtroom, but a way of life:

²⁰ L. David Marquet, *Leadership is Language: The Hidden Power of What You Say—and What You Don't*, 251.

[Restorative justice] offers an inherently positive and relatively coherent value system. It implies a vision of the good and how we should live together...restorative justice is premised on the assumption that we as individuals are interconnected and that what we do matters to others and vice versa...restorative justice reminds us of the importance of relationships. It calls us to consider the impact of our behavior on others and the obligations that our actions entail. It emphasizes the dignity that we and others deserve. Perhaps, then, restorative justice does indeed suggest a way of life.²¹

Such a framework echoes the values of our Christian faith and Christian Church.

Curiosity and Inquiry

Additionally, engaging in civil conversations is a key factor in cultivating a purple congregation. Douglass Stone, in his widely popular book *Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most*, describes the important shift needed in highly charged discussions from “I understand” to “help me understand.” Stone reminds his readers of the relatable moment when you are convinced you understand a situation or concept and then learn one small fact that changes everything.²²

Purple churches need to develop a cultural expectation of inquiry and investigation, not certainty and absolutism. This is a significant shift. Churches can be tempted to want to offer assurance and singularity to their members. Phrases like “Jesus is the only way,” which try to give the impression that faith is an absolute answer to life’s many challenges, often flood church advertisements and billboards. The epistle of Hebrews, which most theologians attribute to the apostle Paul, claims that “faith is the

²¹ Howard Zehr, *Changing Lenses: Restorative Justice for Our Times* (Harrisonburg, VA: Herold Press, 2015), 246.

²² Douglass Stone; Bruce Patton; Sheila Heen and Roger Fisher, *Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2010), 82.

assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”²³ One essential element of faith is a lack of certainty and clarity. Having faith often requires a leaning-in toward what cannot be seen; proven; known fully; or assured. To this end, purple churches must invite the exploration of new perspectives and not simply rely on already-considered ideas. This is the act of holy listening that can lead to productive engagement on difficult and divisive topics.

Assuming Positive Intent: A Purple Church Value

For purple churches, the act of entering a difficult conversation must be rooted in the shared values of humility and love of neighbor. Right-leaning, large church pastor and author Andy Stanley describes these roots this in his book *Not In It to Win It*, writing,

The moment our love or concern for country takes precedence over our love for the people in our country, we are off mission. When saving America diverts energy, focus, and reputation away from saving Americans, we no longer qualify as the ekklesia of Jesus. We’re merely political tools. A manipulated voting demographic. A photo op. Again, we lose our elevated position as the conscience of the nation. We give up the moral and ethical high ground.²⁴

Foregrounding our Christian identity and values when we enter political conversations and have disagreements proves to be one of the most valuable shifts a Purple Church leader can take.

²³ Hebrews 11:1 (NRSV)

²⁴ Andy Stanley, *Not in It to Win It: Why Choosing Sides Sidelines the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2022), 15.

To engage opposing sides of a divisive issue, conversation partners must be committed to the most generous interpretation of the other view in order to truly listen and engage. Theologian Willie James Jennings' book *After Whiteness* explores the intellectual posture of wonder and not-knowing as a gateway to nuanced and critical thinking. "Not knowing," says Jennings, "is glorious energy that fuels intellectual life, pressing us to listen and learn, drawing out both an impatience and a patience that work collaboratively."²⁵ This posture of curiosity and wonder invites rich, nuanced dialogue.

One of the first steps of generous listening is a willingness to shift one's perspective. This can happen in several ways. First, though, a listener must abandon assumptions. It can be tempting to jump to conclusions about another person's perspective. But relying on immediate interpretations of that perspective is often counterproductive and harmful. When discussing divisive issues, we must suspend the temptation to fill in the blanks of another person's opinion. Instead, we are more likely to meet with success when we approach dialogue with a blank slate. Another person's intentions are invisible and impossible to predict. Holy listening requires openness to our conversation partner.

Avoiding Hijacked Conversations

Jancee Dunn's 2022 op-ed in the Sunday *New York Times* highlights the seven skills for active listening that the Federal Bureau of Investigation uses to train crisis

²⁵ Willie James Jennings, *After Whiteness: An Education in Belonging*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Erdman Publishing, 2020). 118.

negotiators. Dunn discusses the skills in the context of navigating difficult family dynamics over the holidays, using a fictional example of how to talk to “Uncle Charlie when he starts railing about politics at the holiday dinner table.”²⁶ The FBI uses the seven skills – affirmations; paraphrasing; labeling emotions; mirroring; open ended questions; “I” statements; and effective pauses – to defuse hostage situations, volatile confrontations, hijackings, and standoffs. These steps, which echo literature about how to de-escalate conflicts between parents and their children, also mirror Douglass Stone’s suggestions for handling difficult conversations. From tantrumming toddlers to conflict-seeking uncles to hostages, the strategies for handling them the same, reflecting a gesture of holy listening, humble engagement, and granting generosity and love to every conversation partner.²⁷

Christ’s Example of Peaceful Dialogue

There is theological backing for this approach as well. Christianity often celebrates Jesus as the Prince of Peace. Many stories from His life and ministry reflect surprising interactions with those who had differing perspectives. Followers of Jesus watched him show compassion to Samaritans, the sworn enemies of the Jews in stories like the woman at the well²⁸ and the teaching parable of the good Samaritan.²⁹ Religious

²⁶ Jancee Dunn, “Need to Defuse Family Squabbles? Learn from an F.B.I. Crisis Negotiator,” *New York Times*, December 22nd, 2022. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/12/22/well/family/active-listening-skills-fbi.html>

²⁷ See also Ripley, *High Conflict* for more on this.

²⁸ John 4:4-42 (NRSV)

²⁹ Luke 10:29-37 (NRSV)

leaders scolded Jesus for interacting with untouchable citizens, such as the bleeding woman who touched the hem of his garment and the 12-year-old girl who had already passed away.³⁰

In both Scripture and in lived experience, God rarely shows up when we're acting impulsively, aggressively, and irrationally. Such attitudes leave little space for the Holy Spirit's influence. Congregational fights over differing perspectives fall somewhere between Uncle Charlie and a hijacking, but sustaining a Purple Church means creating a culture of communication that resembles hostage negotiations. Author Elizabeth Hagan, in her book *Brave Church*, explores what is required of congregations willing to tackle difficult topics. She encourages these congregations to embrace topics such as infertility; miscarriage; mental illness; domestic violence; racism; and sexuality. Hagan also outlines a paradigm for the method of conversation that church leadership must enact to have these conversations well:

Brave churches accept conflict and commit to the way of kindness. We do not avoid or ignore controversial ideas. We do not respond to disagreements by ending the conversation. Nor do we approach conflict as a debate that can be won. We listen. We consider the tone of our voice, and we keep talking to one another. We remember that we are all children of God.³¹

Sustaining Christ's example of loving one another as image bearers of God is a requirement for purple congregations' engagement in difficult conversations.

The Purple Church teaches and encourages its members to engage in

³⁰ Mark 5:21-34 (NRSV)

³¹ Elizabeth Hagan, *Brave Church: Tackling Tough Topics Together* (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 2021), 27.

communication that invites understanding, true listening, and graciousness, while also practicing sacraments and meaning-making that build community.

IV. Common Ground and Common Action

The last tenet that purple churches must adopt is the emphasis of common ground and agreed-upon common action. Finding common ground in the midst of ideological diversity is foundational for understanding the nuances of any congregation. However, finding that common ground does not require a community to become a melting pot of ideas. Instead, common ground and common action are often distilled through thorough, brave conversations.

Practicing Democracy

Author and speaker Adrienne Maree Brown considers herself a student of complexity. During an interview with Baratunde Thurston on an episode of Thurston's podcast "How to Citizen," Brown recalls a time when she was involved in organizing and coalition-building during a national election. She remembers being surrounded by folks who argued that they needed to get a new president – and, despite the political strategists and campaigners working toward this goal, Brown realized that those around her were all missing a basic concept: they were not teaching their constituents how to practice democracy in their everyday lives. The so-called threat to democracy often warned against in the midst of deep political divisiveness ignores the fact that we can practice democracy every day in our households, our communities, our neighborhoods, and our

churches. Brown asked a group of campaigners and politicians about their practice of everyday democracy. When someone asked for clarification, Brown offered this clarification:

“Do you sit down together and talk about how you're spending the resources of your home and your community? Do you talk about how you're agreeing to keep each other safe? Do you talk about how you're agreeing to share time and who has decision-making power and do you make those decisions together?”³²

Embracing the rhythm and choreography of democracy should be celebrated, not avoided. For Brown, practicing democracy comes down to micro, everyday moments of shared humanity, decision making and communication.

In their chapter “Culture, Religion, and American Political Life,” scholars John Dedrick, Elizabeth Gish, and Ekaterina Lukianova discuss this concept as well, noting that

[t]he role of democracy in the U.S. has always gone beyond institutional or electoral politics. It is not just about how the government is structured, who gets to vote, or what laws are passed. It also includes how everyday people live their lives together, day in and day out. Who sits where on buses? How do people treat each other in daily life? What kind of groups or clubs are people joining? Many scholars of American politics have variously described this broader understanding of politics and democracy in terms of the democracy of everyday life (Rosenblum, 2016), strong democracy (Barber, 1984), or everyday politics (Boyte, 2014).³³

This, of course, is not limited to U.S. political life. Asef Bayat makes an adjacent argument in his 2009 *Life as Politics*, where he discusses the ways that ordinary people make meaningful changes in their worlds, democratic changes, through everyday actions

³² Adrienne Maree Brown, “Democracy Fractals and Sci-Fi,” *How to Citizen*. Season 4, Episode 1, <https://www.howtocitizen.com/episodes/democracy-fractals-and-sci-fi-adrienne-maree-brown>.

³³ Elizabeth Gish, John Dedrick, and Ekaterina Lukianova, “Culture, Religion, and American Political Life,” in *The Routledge Handbook of Politics and Religion in Contemporary America*, ed. Jeffery Haynes (London: Routledge, forthcoming 2024).

even in the midst of trying and highly constraining circumstances.³⁴ Brown is drawing from and building on a long history of theory and practice related to democracy that highlights that it is not what happens on election days or when we go to a protest, but that a central feature of a democratic society is how we interact with our friends, neighbors, and enemies day in and day out. When there is an absence of building trust and collaboration skills with neighbors on a small, local scale, it becomes all the more difficult to find cohesion and collaboration in politics on a larger scale. The Purple Church can be a space, an everyday accessible space, that provides a pathway to people practice the art of connecting, of loving, of listening so that we might find ways to create the sort of inclusive and just society that many hope for.

In her article “Toward the World We Long For,” pastor and scholar Elizabeth Gish makes the case that the connections and resonances between democracy and the Christian faith are stronger than is sometimes recognized in contemporary American culture. In the case of democratic practices and faithful practices,

there is an emphasis on slowing down and decentering the self. There is a shared sense that “we” do not have all the answers ourselves, and however encoded some answers are (in scripture or law), they remain incomplete. There is an acknowledgment that whatever we are doing has to relate to something that we already have: What we are doing cannot be completely disconnected from what has gone before. Finally, there is a sense that our work and efforts are proximate or open-ended. ... In considering the resonances between religious life and deliberative democratic efforts, there is a sense that humanity cannot thrive or be complete without community. Recognizing the ways such undertakings are mutually reinforcing can serve as helpful reminders about how our political and religious longings spring from similar places as we struggle to live well with and among each other.³⁵

³⁴ Asef Bayet, *Life as Politics: How Ordinary People Change the Middle East* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009).

³⁵ Gish, “Toward.”

Thus, Purple Churches might benefit from and be strengthened by making the explicit connection between the ways that we learn to be together in our diverse churches, even when it is difficult, and the pressing need for humans to learn how to be together in our diverse world in a time of political unease and pending ecological crises. It is not only that the ways we connect and interact in the Purple Church change the church, but also that these are formational practices that change the people who make up the Body of Christ.

Individual Ownership in the Collective Whole

William Kincaid, his book *Come Again to the Circle*, interviewed a bevy of pastors about what they learned serving their churches at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. For many congregations, the pandemic widened ideological divides, due to ongoing debates about wearing masks, social distancing, and online worship. Covid became the vehicle that drove division, with countless members openly disagreeing with their pastors or leaving their churches altogether. However, for many church leaders, the pandemic also illuminated the greatest values and strengths of the local church and crystalized what matters most in the congregation. Kincaid points out that we each have a responsibility to evaluate what we bring to our congregations: are we contributing to the body of Christ or to the divisiveness of our culture? As Kincaid writes,

We may participate in a congregation for years without every reflecting on our participation. For example, do I bring positive or negative energy into the

congregation? Am I embodying an openness to the Spirit and to others in my community?... What will be my investment as part of the body of Christ?³⁶

Practicing democracy requires each church member to participate willingly in the challenging and satisfying work of evaluating what they bring to each conversation, as well as to the culture at large.

The Purple Church is a Collective Effort

Church attendance continues to decline³⁷ while many Americans now identify as spiritual, but not religious,³⁸ or Christian, but not part of a congregation.³⁹ Often, individuals prefer to experience God in nature: high up in the mountains, or gazing overhead at the vast night sky. But loving your neighbor, showing mercy, and offering forgiveness and unconditional love mean very little when these theological tenets are pondered in isolation. Instead, to mimic Christ, Christians must partner faith with community involvement. This combination is where a purple congregation's work begins.

Author Kaitlyn Schiess describes this pairing in her book *The Liturgy of Politics*, reminding us that

³⁶William B. Kincaid, *Come Again to the Circle: 40 Leaders Imagine the Church Beyond COVID* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2022), 36.

³⁷ Jim Davis and Michael Graham, *The Great Dechurching: Who's Leaving, Why Are They Going, and What Will It Take to Bring Them Back?* (Zondervan, 2023)

³⁸ Elizabeth Drescher, *Choosing Our Religion: The Spiritual Lives of America's Nones* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2016).

³⁹ Kristin Kobes Du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne: How White Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Fractured a Nation* (New York: Liveright, 2020), 6-7.

Our faith is not a private expression of belief that we leave behind when we enter the public square. We need to unlearn our bent toward a private religion and a public politics — and see our participation in political life as a reflection of our very public faith.⁴⁰

To cultivate and build up a Purple Church, participants must be brave enough to join a community in which political diversity is understood and expected. While this takes courage and intention, it may also be the most faithful and significant work a mainline Protestant congregation can do in the current cultural and political climate.

⁴⁰ Kaitlyn Schiess, *The Liturgy of Politics: Spiritual Formation for the Sake of Our Neighbor* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2020), 25.

Chapter 4: The Purple Church and the Gospel

“I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one... so that the world may believe that you have sent me... I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.”¹ + John 17:20-23



2

If the cliché church fight always deals with around carpet color, the cliché church joke involves Kumbaya, and the cliché meme is about building a longer table, then the cliché church slogan has to be the now-infamous WWJD: “What Would Jesus Do?” Nonetheless, each of these clichés does contain a kernel of truth and meaning. After all,

¹ John 17:20-23 (NRSV).

² “Love everyone no matter what.” Digital Image. Episcopal Church Memes, Facebook, November 23, 2019.

<https://www.facebook.com/E.C.M.churchhumor/photos/a.1713895045498788/2624162524472031/?type=3>

Christians have wrestled with questions about living in accordance with scriptures and the model of Jesus Christ for generations. By the late 1980s, a youth group leader from Holland, Michigan had begun making WWJD bracelets to remind her middle- and high-school students to consider Christ's actions as a model for their own.³ The brightly colored bracelets quickly became a trend, with students nationwide wearing them as a visual reminder and expression of their Christianity.

Different denominations may debate the implications of this phrase, but most Christians look to Scripture as a guide for understanding how to model our lives after Christ. The Bible serves as Christians' common language for interpreting morality, shared values, and the will of God for God's people. In fact, many Biblical stories support and encourage the work of purple churches. However, the act of interpreting the Bible varies greatly across denominations, congregations, and individuals. Many Christians refer to the Bible as the "Good Book," which is a misrepresentation of the collected Scriptures.

The Bible as a Library

Because the Bible is not a single book or volume, it cannot be the Good Book. "The Bible is a collection or library," author Stephen Harris reminds us, "of many small books written over a period of more than 1000 years."⁴ When we understand the Bible as

³ "What Would Jesus Do?: The Rise of a Slogan". *BBC News*. December 8, 2011, <https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-16068178>.

⁴ Stephen L Harris, *Understanding the Bible: Fourth Edition* (Mountain View CA: Mayfield Publishing Company, 1997), 1.

a library unto itself, the text becomes less of a monolith and more of a resource to help us distill and discern our own interpretations of Christian values.

At the same time, nearly every member of a religious community has witnessed the Bible used as a weapon. Scripture is often wielded against certain ways of living or voting. The Bible has served as justification for exclusion, judgement, and attacks against those who seem to be break the rules set by Scripture.⁵ However, cherry-picking Scripture as a basis for moral and political arguments does not make sense. Most people can and do understand that truly studying any subject takes deep investigation, cross-referencing – and time. Studying American political history, for example, doesn't involve simply going to the library, finding and reading a single book on the topic published a century ago, and calling oneself an expert. Similarly, one could not read former President Obama's 2020 book *A Promised Land* and get a full picture of the American political landscape in 2023. Despite the relatively recent publication of Obama's book, his particular partisan approach and the rapid pace of change over the last three years in American politics means that *A Promised Land* could not give a comprehensive view of the current state of affairs in the U.S. political system.

In the same sense, comprehending the Bible as a library requires that we see it as a collection of texts in conversation with one another, that refute and debate each another in books written across many generations by many different scribes. Keeping this

⁵ This is so common that the term “clobber texts,” developed as a way to describe the way that the Bible has been used to “clobber” others. See, for instance, Amy Jill-Levine, “How to Read the Bible's ‘Clobber Passages’ on Homosexuality,” *Outreach*, September 12, 2022, <https://outreach.faith/2022/09/amy-jill-levine-how-to-read-the-bibles-clobber-passages-on-homosexuality/> or Colby Martin, *UnClobber: Rethinking Our Misuse of the Bible on Homosexuality* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2016)

perspective in mind, faithful people cannot simply select individual lines or sections to defend their beliefs. What is required is disciplined work: thoughtful consideration of how Scriptures should inform our moral and political decisions. This consideration is a life's work.

Scripture as an Invitation

The booklet *How Can I Love Church Members with Different Politics*, written by Jonathan Leeman and Andy Naselli, elevates our understanding of Scripture and the message of the gospel by arguing that these texts do not prescribe certain politics; instead, they invite a conversation about discerning justice and care for God's creation. As Leeman and Naselli see it, "The gospel does not automatically resolve all our wisdom-based political judgements in the here and now. It helps us love and forbear with one another amid those different wisdom-based judgements. It creates unity amid diversity, not uniformity."⁶ When Christians understand the Bible as an invitation to consider our political and ethical dilemmas through a lens of love and a posture of curiosity and wonder, doors open wide for the work of the Purple Church.

Risks of Individual Interpretation

⁶Jonathan Leeman and Andy Naselli, *How Can I Love Church Members with Different Politics* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020), 26.

While Scripture can be a powerful tool for the Purple Church, it's worth repeating that it can also be a powerful weapon against unity. Hauerwas warns against the risks of scripture corrupting the work of community building:

No task is more important than for the Church to take the Bible out of the hands of individual Christians in North America... They read the Bible not as Christians, not as people set apart, but as democratic citizens who think that their 'common sense' is sufficient for 'understanding' the Scripture.⁷

To avoid the pitfalls of individual Biblical interpretation becoming a justification for personal political beliefs, Christians should both read Scripture on their own and develop connections with a faith community, one that holds its members accountable for their interpretation and use of Scripture.

Focus on the Gospels

While the whole Bible contains stories about communities coming together and wrestling with differing politics, focusing on the Gospels supports the work of exploring Jesus' intention in building unity among God's people. Congregations interested in using Scripture to advance their development as purple churches should view the four Gospels as the Bible's most relevant books. Unlike the New Testament epistles and apocalyptic texts that speak to the structure and nature of churches, the Gospels strive to tell the story of Christ's life: of how He lived in community and what He taught His followers. "The

⁷ Stanley Hauerwas, *Approaching the End: Eschatological Reflections on Church, Politics, and Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Erdmans, 2013), 93.

canonical Gospels,” Harris instructs us, “represent four different attempts to crystallize in final, written form what four different Christian communities believed was important about the Christ figure.”⁸ Throughout the Gospels, Christ’s ministry is relational, focused on the connections He makes with those around Him.

Throughout this thesis, I have argued that the purple church’s work is similarly relational. Purple Church ministry requires leaders to focus on the connections, conversations, and conflicts of their congregations and to redirect their communities to the model of a loving, bridge-building Christ.

The Model of Christ

When we consider the type of leadership needed to handle our culture’s divisiveness, we would do well to remember the ministry of Jesus. To overcome divisions, Purple Church leaders must focus on the theological backing of relating to enemies, strangers, and those who believe and live differently than we do. Theologian Luke Bretherton argues that a theology of hospitality is central to Christ’s message: “Living with those who are different and framing relations with those who are different in terms of hospitality (rather than tolerance) entails understanding hospitality in light of one particular tradition.”⁹ (127) Bretherton also explores, in great detail, the concept of hospitality through a Christian specifically:

⁸ Stephen L Harris, *Understanding the Bible: Fourth Edition* (Mountain View CA: Mayfield Publishing Company, 1997), 308.

⁹ Luke Bretherton, *Hospitality as Holiness: Christian Witness Amid Moral Diversity* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 127.

Christians are not only commanded to welcome the vulnerable stranger, but to see the vulnerable stranger as Christ. The ground of welcoming strangers is Christ himself. To warrant hospitality the stranger neither has to be deserving in in some way, nor do they have to earn the right to it, nor must they possess some innate capacity that renders them worthy of acceptance among the human community, nor is welcome dependent on well-meaning humanitarian impulse on the part of the giver. To be a recipient of Christian hospitality one does not have to do or be anything; one's status as a guest is received as a freely given gift from Christ.¹⁰

Bretherton points to a Christian value system that values compassionate interactions and welcoming gestures above separation due to differing perspectives. Charting the course for this type of human interaction can feel foreign and risky, but following that course means walking the same path that Jesus followed.

Christ Centered Lens for Liminal Seasons of Political Division

When a nation is at odds with itself and hostility runs high between its different groups, we can feel as if we are living in a liminal season, one in which the outcome is wholly unknown. However, by reflecting upon Jesus' life, leaders in the Purple Church leaders can take solace in the realization that Christ was a leader in a time very much like ours. As Jesus began His farewell discourse on His way to Jerusalem, He focused on preparing His followers for a liminal season. His teaching and preaching came during a time of political divisiveness and upheaval, one marked by high tension between Romans, Jews, and Samaritans, to say nothing of more disparate groups, such as tax collectors; lepers; outcasts; – and women and men. Additionally, His disciples faced the

¹⁰ Bretherton, *Hospitality as Holiness*, 149.

reality that their teacher would suffer and that his public ministry would end as a result of this suffering.

Today, America's political landscape involves just as much polarization and hostility. It is for this reason that we, too, are in a liminal season. During transitional moments such as these, Christian leadership must model itself after the first followers of Christ's message. We can learn a great deal from the disciples' lives, their work, and their time. Scripture helps us remember that the disciples' efforts felt small when compared to the powerful systems against which they worked – yet God blessed their work. It helps us see that, from Christianity's very origins, Jesus equipped His leaders for seasons of doubt and scarcity. He did this by building strong relationships rooted in authenticity and connection. Jesus was honest; raw; present; and vulnerable with those He called into leadership. For His disciples, Christ modeled priestly humility. Relational congruence¹¹ was essential to Christ's example: Jesus admitted His own fear to His disciples.¹² He discussed hard topics, like His impending death¹³.

Furthermore, Jesus acknowledged His own limitations as a leader. He told stories about the pain of rejection from His community¹⁴ and about creating a safe space for His disciples to make mistakes and ask for forgiveness.¹⁵ Jesus' leadership took shape because of its basis in humility.

¹¹ I am using the term and definition as coined by Tod Bolsinger: "Relational congruence is the ability to be fundamentally the same person with the same values in every relationship, in every circumstance and especially amid every crisis." *Canoeing the Mountains: Christian Leadership in Uncharted Territory* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2015), 67.

¹² Jesus fears suffering and asks through prayers to avoid it, Matthew 26:39, (NRSV)

¹³ Jesus foreshadows his death many times to his disciples, including in Mark 9:30–32, (NRSV)

¹⁴ Jesus was denied in his home town, Luke 9:51-56, (NRSV)

¹⁵ Jesus knew that Peter would deny him, but he loved Peter anyway, Luke 22:31-34, (NRSV)

Because of His integrity and vulnerability with those He led, Jesus was able to prepare both His disciples and future generations of God's people to face hardship. He assured them of God's presence in the darkness and in the midst of their doubt. Christ proclaimed the truth of God's word when He acknowledged both the challenges ahead and God's promise of protection through that hardship.

Unity is a Theme in the Gospels

Again and again, Jesus taught through parables, healing stories, and the relationships He pursued. When the coin, the sheep, and the prodigal son all were lost, God showed grace and mercy by reuniting what had been lost with the community also left behind. When the blind man; the leper; the bleeding woman; or the man filled with demons needed healing, God healed by erasing the affliction that fractured community and reuniting the untouchable outcasts and scorned citizens as neighbors. When rich men and scribes, Pharisees and Sadducees questioned how to enter the kingdom of God, Jesus taught them by unsettling all they were sure of, every category and law and expectation they held firm. Jesus asks us to value our relationships more than we value our righteousness and our humility more than our assurance. There is more to God and more to our neighbors that we can ever know. When we start with an intentional and sacred commitment to love the people around us, we better position ourselves to explore the complexities of the issues that divide us.

Christ's example reminds church leaders that holding authority in a community means leading all people, not just those who agree with your politics. A pastor must find

ways to relate and resonate with those congregants who hold differing views or polarizing political perspectives. Being an effective leader in a purple space means investing in relationships rather than righteousness and in mystery rather than blind certainty in one's own convictions.

Four Gospel Themes to Biblically Support Purple Church Cultivation

There are four Gospel themes that, when interpreted through the exegesis of specific stories from Jesus' ministry, comprise the Biblically supported lens of the Purple Church.

1) Valuing Shared Ministry Over Political Difference: The Woman at the Well

(John 4:4-42)

Part of the essential equation for Purple Church leadership appears in unlikely places, including befriending those who at first appear different or even opposed to one's own values. Jesus modeled these sorts of ventures throughout His teaching and preaching. Perhaps the most important story involving Jesus going to an unexpected location for an encounter with someone different than him is the story of the woman at the well, told in the Gospel of John.

Jesus wanders up to a community well at noon, the hottest part of the day in Samaritan territory. This story is first about the well. The well, a vessel for water. The well- a place of healing. This story is also about two strangers making a connection. Two

thirsty people meet at a well, in the hottest part of the day as the sun beats down in the Samaritan desert. And they need each other.

The well is a multifaceted symbol: it is a vessel for water as well a place of healing. Likewise, this story is about two strangers making a connection. The premise of the story models the choreography of Purple Church work. Jesus, without a bucket, crosses a border to go to a well, in the sweltering midday heat. At the same time, a rabbi walks into enemy territory, intentionally and alone. Other Jews would have warned him: “Do not speak to Samaritans – it will make you unclean.” “Do not associate with that group of unholy people – you will be cast out.” “They do not follow our religion.” “They are not one of us.” “They are different.” “They are to be feared and avoided.” “Do not go.” Warnings and fearmongering over difference have been a political and partisan strategy since time immemorial. A constant theme in political jargon from the Biblical era to the modern day is the demeaning of the “other.”

In the story of the woman at the well, Jesus ignores such jargon. He puts himself at the mercy of strangers and enemies – those who are different – to quench his thirst. Then, at the well, He meets a woman fetching water in solitude. Already, readers of the story begin to understand that this woman would have been considered untouchable. Going to the well usually meant a time to socialize with the women of the village: to share stories about their children, laugh about their husbands, or catch up on community gossip. But, like Christ, this woman ventured to the well alone. And, like Christ, she did so to quench her deep thirst: this woman longed to be seen and spoken to, to be offered a sip of community, friendship, and inclusion.

But there, at the well, a beautiful mystery played out. This woman's history was non-traditional: she had been married and divorced five times, and lived in a domestic partnership with someone to whom she was not married to. Nonetheless, Jesus did not shame her. He did not reject her because of her marriage practices. Instead, Jesus showed her respect. He invited her to serve him and participate in ministry alongside him. Finally, he encouraged her to use her voice in her community and share the good news of God's grace with her community. What this story teaches us is that Living water from God does no harm. Instead, it offers us a chance to serve, to grow, and to learn.

A Purple Church is like this well. The reason the well is the center of this Scripture is because it is a place to find community regardless of political difference. It is a place to serve and be served. What if we re-told the story of the woman at the well, but used the term "Purple Church" instead?

Jesus goes to the Purple Church at noon, thirsty, alone, and tired. A woman is there alone – an outcast. No friends; no community. Jesus meets her and invites her to serve. He gives her purpose, dignity and a calling. He, too, is strengthened at the Purple Church. Jesus is served. Jesus then discusses what can be found at the Purple Church: living water. Water that will bring you closer to God. Water that will heal and never harm. And because this woman found a place to serve, she, too, was welcomed back into community – because the Purple Church itself is a place for community; living water; healing; service; and love.

The story of the woman at the well shows Christians that Jesus prioritizes shared ministry and shared community over political differences. We can use this story as motivation for uniting politically diverse groups within one congregation. The story strengthens the work of purple churches.

2) Prioritizing Relationships Over Policies: The Bleeding Woman (Mark 5:21-34)

Purple Church work also requires leaders to set aside some of the rigidity of church policies and traditions that specifically prevent building up the body of Christ. When a particular bylaw or church rule stands in the way of showing compassion to someone within the community, purple churches must practice being light on their feet and focusing on the needs of the human beings in their midst – not on upholding policies or traditions that get in the way of ministry.

The story of the bleeding woman in the Gospel of Mark highlights this Biblical Purple Church value. Though the story is also told in the Gospel of Matthew, Chapter 5, as well as the Gospel of Luke, Chapter 8, I will, for the purpose of my chapter, focus on the version in the Gospel of Mark. I do this because the Mark's is the smallest Gospel; thus the stories Mark chooses to share and the details he chooses to include carry added weight when understanding Mark's interpretation of Christ. Mark's version of this story is the mid-point of a seven-part portrait of Jesus' public ministry. Though the story is often categorized as the healing of a bleeding woman, it is in fact *two* healing stories, both of which swivel back and forth. Each of these accounts cross thresholds: from unclean to clean and from death to life. One occurs in public, one in private. One healing takes place for the revered, one for the reviled. One story features a woman who has suffered for 12 years; the other is about a girl brought back to life at just 12 years old.

The passage begins with a synagogue leader who asks Jesus to heal his dying daughter. Jesus agrees to do so, but, on the way, He is delayed by a second request. A woman in a large crowd reaches for Jesus, touching His clothing without permission. She

makes Jesus late, begs for mercy, and is granted a blessing. In the story, this woman is unnamed. We therefore learn only that in addition to being anonymous, this desperate woman fighting her way through the crowds has been bleeding for 12 years. In seeking healing, she defies the religious teachings of the time, which declared that bleeding women are unclean.¹⁶ Because of her condition, this woman belonged in neither the temple nor the sanctuary. Nor did she belong at the dinner table with her family. Nor did she belong in the market. Nor was she permitted to be among the crowds of people. She was alone. Jesus followed religious convention by wearing a traditional religious garment as a sign of his devotion to God.¹⁷

The story of the unclean woman reaching for Jesus' sacred garment is one of the mundane reaching for the sacred, the secular stretching toward the divine. When she reaches Jesus, the woman is no longer unknown; she becomes a woman gazing upon the face of God. Jesus turns to her and says, "Daughter, your faith has made you well."¹⁸

Many elements of this healing are disruptive. Because of the bleeding woman, Jesus fails to arrive at the synagogue before its leader's daughter passes away. By arriving after the girl has died, Jesus breaks with the expectations of his religious

¹⁶ The book of Leviticus, Chapter 15, verses 25-27 say: *if a woman is bleeding for many days... all the days of her bleeding she shall be unclean.... Every bed on which she lies will be unclean... everything on which she stands will be unclean... whoever touches what she touches will be unclean...* " which is why this woman would be considered untouchable.

¹⁷ God commanded God's chosen people to show their devotion through their clothes in the book of Numbers, chapter 15: 37-39 *And the Lord said to Moses, 'Speak to the Israelites, and tell them to make fringes on the corners of their garments, and to put a blue chord on the fringe at each corner. You have the fringe so that when you see it, you will remember all the commandments of the Lord and do them, and not follow the lust of your own hearts and your own eyes*

¹⁸ Mark 5:34 (NRSV)

community.¹⁹ Despite the rule that religious leaders cannot be in the presence of a dead body, Jesus enters the family house, asks everyone to leave, and heals the girl through proximity; connection; touch; and words.

The foundational lessons of these two healings speak to the heart of purple church leadership. Through these stories, Jesus chooses to interpret scripture by choosing relationships over a literal interpretation of God's word. Remembering the framework of the Bible as a library, Jesus would have understood the religious expectations set forth by an earlier book, and interpreted these Scriptures differently to allow for relationships and ministry to flourish. Jesus went against the predominant theological views of his time so that He could prioritize the relationships and encounters in His community. When Purple Church leaders ask themselves "What Would Jesus Do?", they would do well to look to the story of the bleeding woman for an example of how to pair the foundations of tradition with the value of building a longer table for ministry to take place. These two healing stories speak to the importance of being in a community with God's people. For more than 2,000 years, God's people have known the healing power of touch; relationships; proximity; reaching out for one another; and making connections.

3) Theology of Humility and Wonder: Man Blind from Birth (John 9:1-21, 24-25)

In addition to fixating on policies and traditions, congregations can get hung up trying to answer every big questions that faith raises. Christians sometimes yearn to

¹⁹ Scripture in Leviticus 21:11 says this about religious leaders: *He must not enter a place where there is a dead body. He must not make himself unclean, even for his father or mother.*

clarify policies, beliefs, and convictions with certainty and assurance. However, our faith requires that we be humble to the mysteries of God and allow ourselves to be surprised.

A theology of humility and wonder are essential for a Purple Church lens.

In the story of the man who was blind from birth, told in the Gospel of John, Christ's followers seem to wrestle with their own preference to fully understand how God works. Through this story, though, Jesus teaches His followers about the importance of taking on a posture of openness to God's mysteries. The story tells of Jesus wandering into a little town and meeting a man who has been blind from birth. Immediately, people begin to question Jesus: "Who sinned to make this man blind? Him? His parents?" It's as if they are asking why God did not protect this faithful man. The townspeople want to draw a straight line between cause and effect. But it's important to realize that Jesus refuses to answer their questions. He pays no attention to this kind of thinking, and does not allow His followers to connect missteps and suffering. By omission, Jesus refutes the later cliché "Everything happens for a reason" – because, often, it doesn't.

Jesus then restores the blind man's sight, after which the man shares the good news of Christ with his neighbors. When the man's community realizes he has been healed, instead of celebrating, they become fixated on the strict application of the religious law, protesting that Jesus did not observe the Sabbath when he healed the man. The townspeople, clinging to the rule of their law, are unable to focus on anything else. The vision that God offers His people with this story is a reminder of where to look for the holy. The world is full of difficulty, but this is not God's work. Instead, God's people are called to look for signs of Him in their hardships. Rather than fixating on the proper

interpretation of religious law, find God in the knitting together of community. Christ models what is important to him: He goes outside tradition to bring healing and health to the community. He shows us what it looks like to lead with love. This value must be present in purple churches: to heal, protect, and preserve the well-being of a community before worrying about certainty or absolutes within faith. Allow space for God's mysterious and unpredictable work to take shape.

4) Unity Without Seeking Uniformity: Christ's Last Prayer on Earth (John 17:20-26)

Christ's high priestly prayer reminds us to value unity without requiring uniformity. Prayers are often our rawest, most genuine, most vulnerable expressions of faith. With them, we become truth-tellers, opening up to God with our whole hearts. Prayers are powerful; moving; exposed; and intimate. If we knew we only had one more prayer to pray on earth, what would it be? For Jesus Christ, it was this: Let them be one.

As we read the story of Christ's high priestly prayer, the context of this passage is important. The story takes place the night before Good Friday. All of the dishes from the Passover meal have been put away and there is no trace of the Last Supper left. Jesus' disciples are still stunned by the memory of Jesus kneeling down to wash the dust and grime off of their tired feet. Christ is beginning to say goodbye. The high priestly prayer is considered Jesus' last before He is crucified. In it, He articulates His last wishes for those He loves. Jesus bows his head to pray with conviction and courage – and loudly enough for his disciples to overhear him:

I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.²⁰

Christ's deepest prayer for His disciples and all future generations of His followers is that God's people be united so that the world may believe. His final Earthly prayer teaches us that showing unity; affirmation; support; radical love; and acceptance is the key to the kingdom. This is Christ's spoken will to all of God's people: Be one.

Doing so is not as simple as it sounds. This thesis' previous chapters articulate the hardship Americans who seek unity face thanks to our current political climate. And the entirety of human history is full of faithful communities creating divides: between tax collectors and lepers; Samaritans and Jews; rich and poor; the haves and the have-nots; the old and the young; Republicans and Democrats – it is part of what happens in churches among people. Groups emerge based on theological perspectives, worship styles, and lifestyles. Communities separate over cultural and socioeconomic differences.

Nonetheless, Christ offered us His powerful, final prayer on Earth: that we would be one. He does not seek uniformity with His appeal. Instead, unity is Christ's legacy. He does not ask us to unite because of who *we* are, but because of who *God* is. We are one because we are all loved and known and claimed by God. We are one because even in our difference, we were made in the image of compassion, mercy, grace.

²⁰ John 17:20-21 (NRSV)

Lifting up the Biblical value of unity without requiring uniformity is central to the cultivation of purple churches. People do not understand God through religious convictions, but through a display of unity and love unlike the world has ever seen. This value is modeled after the high priestly prayer of Jesus Christ and is a foundational cornerstone of leading a Purple Church.

Conclusion

In May of 2023, Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murthy released a new advisory naming a new public health crisis: more Americans than ever face isolation, loneliness, and a lack of community.¹ Over half of the adults in the United States reported feelings of loneliness. The effects of social isolation include to weaker immune systems, chronic mental and physical health issues, and premature death. In fact, the Surgeon General’s warning called social isolation as hazardous as a daily smoking habit. The conclusion is shocking: We are separated from one another. We feel alone. We have less community than ever before – and it’s making us sick.

For years, we’ve watched Americans use political partisanship to form groups and create a sense of belonging. We’ve chosen loyalty to news channels and soundbites over meaningful connections to our neighbors. As a result, we’ve become more polarized, isolated – and unhealthier than ever. In his book *Them*, former Republican senator Ben Sasse explores the ways we’ve replaced true connection with political convictions and what doing so has cost our nation, our politics, and our community. Sasse writes,

People yearn to belong. They want to be part of a tribe, to have roots. That desire will never be stamped out of the human heart. What it means, though, is that when healthy forms of belonging vanish, people will turn to more troubling forms.²

¹ United States Department of Health and Human Services, “New Surgeon General Advisory Raises Alarm about the Devastating Impact of the Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation in the United States,” May 3, 2023, <https://www.hhs.gov/about/news/2023/05/03/new-surgeon-general-advisory-raises-alarm-about-devastating-impact-epidemic-loneliness-isolation-united-states.html>.

² Ben Sasse, *Them: Why We Hate Each Other and How to Heal* (New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 2018), 72.

Our chosen replacement for community groups isn't sufficient or satisfying. And it's showing in our national health crisis. While we lack social connections, meaningful relationships, and community involvement, local Protestant churches are dying and our hostile political partisanship gains momentum.

What if those same Protestant churches could work to solve our health crisis? What if the local church can begin to remind our communities of *how* to interact with one another, preserving nuanced conversation while valuing the presence of all people as image-bearers of God? The cultivation and leadership of purple churches cannot eliminate our every struggle. But what if the work of purple churches could make an impact?

In this thesis, I have argued that local protestant congregations can and should serve as sites for community connection, bridgebuilding and deliberative dialogue in these increasingly polarized and isolating times. In order to remain whole as a congregation, I have argued that politically inclusive congregations can cultivate leadership and tone within the church to become what I call a purple church.

In chapter 1, I outlined the challenging dynamics of our divided nation and the increase of polarization and bitter disputes between conservative and progressive citizens. I situated the changing landscape of local protestant congregations along side the cultural challenges and changes that exist in the last several decades in the United States. I researched the origins of our cultural context including increasing technology, accelerating isolation, and mounting hostility among those with differing views. I argued

that protestant churches can offer something that few institutions or organizations can because of the built-in community of caring people that can be found within a church.

In chapter 2, I explored the local congregation as a civic gymnasium where everyday people practice skills such as problem solving, discussing difficult issues, responding to community needs, and finding common ground and common respect for their neighbors. I argued that churches are well positioned to empower everyday citizens to make connections and repair divisions in their circles through both the values and vision of taught within their churches. I shared examples from my research of congregations who have grappled with divisive issues in productive ways.

In chapter 3, I articulated the four tenants of purple churches and the leadership moves that are necessary to cultivate and maintain a purple church community. I offered a detailed summary of these four ideas that shape a purple church with examples from my research through the Kettering Foundation from congregations who implemented these action items.

In chapter 4, I engaged in exegesis through three biblical stories from the Gospels and Jesus' ministry and I made connections between the tenants of purple churches and how these values can be traced back to the values and ministry of Jesus.

In this thesis, I have explored both the possibilities and limitations of leading a purple church. While protestant churches are not equipped to fully transform our fractured nation, I have argued that purple churches have an important contribution to

make with regards to supporting a more collaborative and collective approach to keeping communities together despite ideological differences.

I wrote this thesis because I believe in the capacity of purple churches to strengthen local congregations and address the political divisiveness tearing us apart, while also working to reverse the drastic health crisis of loneliness and isolation plaguing our nation.

And I believe this because I have experienced it. One of the most sacred moments I have ever experienced came at Community Christian Church in North Canton, Ohio, on October 8th, 2017. On that particular Sunday morning, we dedicated our daughter, Zora Frances. At the end of our worship service, 155 members of the church stood, as one of our Elders asked:

Do you promise as a community of faith to surround this family with your love, for the strengthening of their life together...to accept this child into your loving care for shared responsibility in her growth toward fullness of life in Christ...and to lead her in service to God and neighbor?

With enthusiasm and joy, all responded: “We do, with God helping us!”

My heart filled with joy at these words. I still get goosebumps when I remember that moment and the blessing that the church gave our family. This is what a church can be. A congregation can be a community that makes these promises to one another each week, each month, and each year. Church can be family. Church can teach people how to accept each other, a place we learn to love each other and urge each other to grow. Now, more than ever, we cannot take this possibility for granted.

Building a Purple Church takes time. It takes a few hours to burn a house to the ground or chop down a tree, but it takes far more intention, struggle, and investment to build a community of wholeness from the ashes of our current political landscape. Purple churches are the congregations that do the hard; sometimes brutal; often excruciating; and always challenging work of whispering hope into this desecrated and shattered moment.

This thesis argues that the work of creating and leading purple churches is worthy, holy, and essential. A Purple ministry will not gain social media traction or go viral, nor will it appease the righteous convictions of those who long to stand out because of a provocative declaration. Instead, the precise effort necessary to cultivate a Purple Church requires patience; exploration; humility; and wonder. I hope this thesis serves as an invitation to all church leaders troubled by the heartbreak of our divisions and who long to reconstruct the messy, diverse, beautiful body of Christ, cell by cell.

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Biography

Rev. Sarah Taylor Peck grew up in Spokane, Washington. In high school, she served as the youngest hospice volunteer in the state, making home visits to her clients after school. She received a Bachelor of Arts in Religion and Women's Studies from St. Olaf College in Northfield, MN, in 2004. During her time as an undergraduate, Sarah also completed 400 hours of Clinical Pastoral Education at St. Jude Children's Research Hospital in Memphis, TN.

From there, Sarah pursued a Master of Divinity Degree at Harvard Divinity School. While there, she completed an additional 1200 hours of Clinical Pastoral Education at the Dana Farber Cancer Institute in Boston. Following her 2007 graduation, Sarah worked as the internship coordinator at the Berklee College of Music.

From 2010 to 2014, Sarah served as the associate pastor for outreach and small group ministry at Lindenwood Christian Church; in 2011, Sarah was ordained by the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). Currently, Sarah is in her 10th year as Senior Pastor of Community Christian Church in North Canton, OH.

Beyond her congregational ministry, Sarah is an independent researcher with the Kettering Foundation, a Dayton, Ohio-based, non-partisan research foundation dedicated to the study of democracy and the role of deliberative dialogue. She also serves as a Peer Group Leader in the National Excellence in Ministry program, where she mentors pastors in the first five years of their ministry. Sarah is the recipient of a 2022 Clergy Renewal Grant from the Lilly Foundation and the Stark County, Ohio "20 Under 40" award, and is a former winner of Harvard Divinity School's Billings Preaching Competition.

Sarah is the wife of Rev. Andrew Taylor Peck, senior pastor at Trinity United Church of Christ in Canton, OH. Sarah and Andrew have two young children and two moody cats.