CHURCH RENEWAL IN THE DIGITAL AGE

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Introduction

Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, there has been much interest in church renewal and that interest has been closely related to a narrative of congregational and denominational decline.[1] Christian institutions, including local churches, have been losing their place of privilege and authority,[2] while some congregations and their leaders feel increasingly marginalized in secular Western society. Especially difficult for faithful members of declining congregations is the loss of younger generations from the pews; older church members struggle to understand why the traditions and institutions that were so spiritually significant for those who embraced Christian faith in the mid-twentieth century seem now to have little meaning for their own children and grandchildren. Amid the sense of loss and defeat that characterizes many declining congregations,[3] the hopeful idea of "church renewal" in the face of secular society seems to offer for discouraged congregations and their leaders the possibility of an end to decline, institutional stability, and perhaps even the hope of some growth.

This article argues that those expectations are misplaced, and that such a conception of church renewal ignores the extent that all social institutions, including the church are being affected by

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1.   For an example of how church renewal began to be viewed in relation to culture at the approach of the new millennium, see Miller, *Reinventing American Protestantism*.

2.   Chaves, "Secularization," 749–74.

3.   McMullin, "Social Aspects," 187–89.

the transformation of social life that is driven by the digital revolution. The idea that somehow history will reverse itself and congregational life will return to something even vaguely similar to what existed through much of the twentieth century ignores the extent of the social change that is transforming the world in general and Western culture in particular. The experience and meaning of community is not the same as it was when local congregations routinely measured their strength by counting attendance at Sunday morning worship, the number of members, and the size of the offering. Local institutions and their leaders do not have the power and social influence they once did. Online aspects of daily social life eclipse face-to-face interactions for many people. Information about spirituality, with regard to both theology and practice, is more likely to be accessed online than from a local church.

At the same time, church renewal is essential amid these new twenty-first-century social and technological realities, provided that there is an understanding that the focus of renewal will be quite different from a plan for increasing church attendance and offerings and maintaining nineteenth-century church edifices. Renewal in the digital age will be about authentic spiritual vitality, a renewed practice of Christian community, and an outward focus. For congregations in the West, where Christianity had previously enjoyed cultural hegemony, that renewed vitality, community, and witness will be experienced in very different ways than was expected in the twentieth century.

Church Renewal in the Twentieth Century

Current interest in renewal as an antidote for church decline in the West developed out of twentieth-century ideas of renewal. Church renewal had two quite different meanings, depending on whether one was part of an evangelical tradition or if one adhered to a mainline Protestant congregation.[4]

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4.   The term "charismatic renewal" was also in vogue among many Protestant and Roman Catholic congregations, but the meaning was quite different from the more general "church renewal" label.

Renewal among Evangelicals

For many evangelicals, the term *renewal* (and the related word *revival*) had an almost exclusively internal focus. Renewal was about an intensification of qualities such as holiness and un-worldliness; it was about consecration and surrender, about repentance and restoration, about effective prayer and victorious Christian living.[5] It was typical for calls for renewal and revival to emphasize the importance of "death to self" based on Jesus' call in Matt 16:24 for his disciples to "deny themselves and take up their cross" and on Paul's statement in Gal 2:20 that he had been "crucified with Christ."[6] Church renewal was *not* about engaging the culture; it was about separation from the culture and about the consecrated lives of devout Christians in the church.[7] Popular church renewal hymns such as *Take My Life and Let It Be*; *Revive Us Again*; *Renew Thy Church, Her Ministries Restore*; and *Cleanse Me* all emphasized personal piety with little or no mention of mission or social engagement.

For large numbers of evangelical Christians in the twentieth century, church renewal was closely linked with separation from the world—the maintenance of thick social and behavioral boundaries between the congregation and the surrounding society so the Church would remain strong amid what was perceived to be a hostile and godless social environment.[8] Safe inside its

5.   Ravenhill, *Revival God's Way.* In his writings, Ravenhill calls for a revival of prayer and of preaching in churches, urging the church to get "a divorce from the world and worldliness" (10).

6.   Lutzer, *Flames of Freedom*. Lutzer's book chronicles the so-called "Canadian Revival" of the 1970s that emphasized "dealing directly and immediately with sin" and trusting God to "help us die to self."

7.   Examples of sermons about these themes by well-known late-twentieth-century itinerant revivalists can be accessed online at https://www.praxis-ministries.org/media. The Canadian Revival Fellowship provided itinerant revival preachers to a variety of evangelical churches in the USA and Canada.

8.   Regarding the practice of "separation from the world," there were important distinctions between those twentieth-century congregations that considered themselves to be Fundamentalist and those who considered themselves to be Evangelical. Although Fundamentalist congregations adhered much more strictly to behavioral prohibitions, Evangelicals also constructed a subculture to

cultural walls, the faithful congregation could remain holy and distinct from the society around it while its members lived lives that interacted infrequently with the secular environment.

Of course, such a fortress-like mentality meant that the church became quite ineffective for communicating the Christian message to the society from which it had withdrawn. Evangelicals generously supported televangelism as a means of safely crossing those thick boundaries to share the Christian message with an increasingly secular society, but studies in the 1980s clearly demonstrated that those supposedly evangelistic television programs were "narrowly targeted to a highly selective audience which already has an affinity for their messages."[9] Well-publicized scandals then served to shake the confidence of loyal followers; apparently this method of evangelism was neither as unworldly nor as safe as supportive evangelicals had hoped.

Commonly, renewal was promoted as a means to increase personal piety and corporate commitment among church members. But data from my research into declining congregations demonstrates that member commitment tends to increase as congregations decline.[10] The issue is not that declining congregations are insufficiently spiritual or devout; it is that as Western society has changed with regard to religious belief and practice, many congregations have difficulty understanding the society with whom they seek to share the Christian message.

In today's digitally connected world, those theologically and sociologically narrow understandings of renewal have lost their currency. With the reality that many people today claim "no religion," renewal cannot be primarily about attracting people *back* to church—increasing numbers of people have never been part of a church. Nor can the illusion that church is a safe holy place be sustained in a digital age; the digitally facilitated and disseminated #MeToo movement that rocked the entertainment world

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maintain distinctions between Christian and worldly behavior. See Reimer, *Evangelicals.* Also see Smith, *American Evangelicalism.*

9.   Litman and Bain, "Religious Television Programming," 329–43. For further examples of relevant studies from the 1980s, see Hadden and Swann, *Prime Time Preachers*. See also Bourgault, "The PTL Club," 13.

10.   McMullin, "Gendered Responses," 21–39.

beginning in 2017 quickly gave birth to disturbing #ChurchToo accounts of abusive practices perpetrated in many congregations. With shortcomings among churches and their leaders now readily publicized on the Internet, the idea that the church is substantially holier than the surrounding culture has become more difficult to maintain. In the digital environment, it is perhaps not surprising that the meaning of church renewal among many evangelical Christians has lost much of its previous spiritual and internal focus and has now been replaced with a focus on stemming church decline.

Renewal and Mainline Congregations

For mainline congregations, church renewal has typically meant something quite different. The primary emphasis of the many *renewal* movements among mainline denominations has been a call for a return to traditional orthodoxy.[11] In that context, church renewal has meant a rejection of new curricula that re-interpreted Biblical stories in light of modern secular and scientific understandings; it meant a renewed emphasis on the historic creeds and other documents that were central to denominations' traditional identities;[12] and it meant affirmations of traditional understandings of sexual morality. For some leaders of these renewal movements in mainline churches, there was a sense of a battle being fought for the soul and for the future of the denomination.[13] Strategies were considered, networks were developed, and alliances were formed.[14]

For both evangelical and mainline Protestant Christians, the term *renewal* meant a return to a more spiritually vibrant and orthodox past, and a restoration of what had once been but more recently has been lost. In the latter half of the twentieth century, when there was an increasing sense that the institutional church was losing its place of privilege and authority in Western society, renewal was an attempt to keep Christendom from slipping

11.   Flatt, "Loyal Opposition," 1–18.
12.   See Abraham et al., *Canonical Theism*.
13.   McKinney and Finke, "Reviving the Mainline," 771–83.
14.   Oden, *Turning around the Mainline*.

away and to ensure that the Church and its institutions remained strong amid the modern social upheavals that were battering traditional Christian belief and practice.

New Social Conditions

Data from my sociological research in declining congregations[15] show that the desire for church renewal in the twenty-first century often has a pathological basis. Because many of its members see the Church in the West as dying, they seek various renewal strategies as a means to restore health or at least to slow the decline in the face of secularization.[16] But what church members and leaders often do not realize is that the church is not alone in experiencing the changes that are taking place in contemporary Western society.[17] Something far more profound than generational change is taking place: social institutions of every kind are being affected by tumultuous social changes in a world that is increasingly characterized by digital connectedness. Previously strong institutions are being challenged in the new digital environment: everything from political parties and journalists who feel under siege from "fake news," to the retail mall that struggles to compete with online shopping, to youth sports leagues trying to pry children from their online devices. Reginald Bibby has pointed out that in some ways the church has been more successful than other institutions and organizations in the face of social change,[18] and Robert Putnam has documented effects of

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15.   The research was conducted among sixteen Evangelical and Mainline Protestant congregations in eastern Canada, the Midwestern United States, and New England. They were chosen because they were identified by religious leaders as being typical of declining congregations. The remarkable similarity of results regardless of location, tradition, or community size demonstrates the generalizability of the research results.

16.   In almost all of the sixteen congregations included in my sociological study of declining Protestant congregations, leaders asked me if my research would result in a plan for them to reverse the decline.

17.   Cheong et al., eds., *Digital Religion*, vii.

18.   Bibby, *Boomer Factor*.

individualization across traditional social institutions.[19] Because digital media allow everyone to participate as agents in ways that can be very disruptive of hierarchies and institutionalized bureaucracies, the digital revolution especially affects aspects of traditional authority, which is why institutional churches with traditional authority structures are especially vulnerable.

Digital media have ushered in an age characterized by individualism and consumerism in ways and to an extent never previously experienced in human social life, and that change has eroded confidence in traditional social institutions. At the same time, this new digital age has transformed and is transforming social identity and social relationships. People communicate in new ways, people understand themselves and others differently, and people relate to others daily and globally through these new media. The meaning and experience of friendship has changed; membership is not so much about mutual responsibility and accountability as it is about commercial value; personal choice is not so much about freedom from coercion as it is about one's ability to do and to buy what one wants. As Zygmunt Bauman has pointed out, in a digitally connected culture characterized by increasing levels of fear, society has chosen to exchange freedom for security.[20] Social life has experienced and is continuing to experience dramatic shifts.

From a theological perspective, Christian congregations are relational at their core, emphasizing both relationships with one another and a relationship with God. Effective communication (especially the proclamation of the gospel message) is essential to the Christian mission. Therefore, it should be obvious that an understanding of the social and communicative effects of digital media would be essential for effectiveness today among Christian congregations, especially regarding the engagement of younger people whose life experiences have in so many ways been incorporated into the digital world. But understanding those social effects is complex and requires a level of critical thought that may be foreign to many congregations. Digital media

19.   Putnam, *Bowling Alone*.
20.   Bauman, *Community.*

contribute to the commodification and consumerization of socie-
ty, including religious aspects of social life, and when that is not
understood, or at least questioned in congregations whose mem-
bers are utilizing the new media,[21] the result is increased secular-
ization of church life. The response of many church leaders to
the digital revolution has simplistically been to advocate for the
prominent use of digital media in congregational life (especially
in worship and in teaching) without asking critical questions
about how the congregation is changed by the media. When that
happens, the use of media may actually accelerate the congrega-
tion's decline.[22]

Digital technologies are changing human social life. For
much of the twentieth century, scholars assumed that the primary
theoretical foundation for understanding religious change was
secularization theory, but toward the end of the century it be-
came clear that secularization alone was insufficient for explain-
ing religious change. Sociologists like Peter Berger and David
Martin were among the first to suggest that secularization was
not happening in the ways that might be expected,[23] and others
questioned whether there might be better theoretical paradigms
for the study of religion.[24] Jürgen Habermas has argued that we
are living in a "post-secular" society, not in the sense that a re-
vival of traditional religion is immanent in the West, but in the
sense that religion continues to play an important, though per-
haps quite different, role in human affairs and that religion will
maintain public influence and relevance.[25] What has been
overlooked by many in the theoretical discussion of religious

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21.   Neil Postman argues that "No medium is excessively dangerous if its
users understand what its dangers are. It is not important that those who ask the
questions arrive at my answers . . . This is an instance in which asking the ques-
tions is sufficient. To ask is to break the spell" (Postman, *Technopoly*, 161).

22.   See the chapter "Role of Technology" in McMullin, "Social As-
pects," 255–98.

23.   See Berger, "Religion," 112–19; and Martin, *Tongues of Fire*.

24.   Warner, "Work in Progress," 1044–93; Stark and Finke, *Acts of
Faith*; McMullin, "New Paradigm," 3–16.

25.   Habermas, "Post-Secular Society." See also Habermas, *An Aware-
ness of What Is Missing*, 15–23.

change is the way that the digital revolution has been a powerful secularizing force because of how it has disrupted traditional social understandings and experiences.

Renewal in a Digital Age

Daniel Bell argued that religion and culture are closely entwined, with culture expressing humanity's questions about meaning and religion providing answers to those questions.[26] In keeping with that argument, in this time of great social change Bell asserts that the decline of religion as it is currently being experienced in the West is a necessary prelude to religious revitalization. Humanity's questions about meaning will be asked quite differently in a digitally connected, globalized, postmodern world than they were in nineteenth- and twentieth-century industrial modernity. The search for meaning is changing dramatically; there is increasing evidence that the ways that questions about meaning are being asked have changed and that the Western world no longer finds meaningful answers to life's deepest questions in the traditions of the institutional Christian church.

Castells points out that "in a world of global flows of wealth, power, and images, the search for identity, collective or individual, becomes the fundamental source of social meaning."[27] Charles Taylor explains how recent social changes have resulted in a different understanding of the self as it relates to meaning, with people seeking meaning not outside of themselves but instead by searching for meaning and authenticity within.[28] For the Christian Church to regain vitality, it must effectively address the identity-related and inward-focused search for meaning.

For congregations in the twenty-first century, church renewal will not be focused on regaining lost ground in terms of church attendance and offerings. It will not focus on re-erecting barriers

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26. Sociologist Daniel Bell defined religion as "a set of coherent answers to the core existential questions that confront every human group" (Bell, "The Return of the Sacred?" 419–49).

27. Castells, *Network Society*, 3.

28. Taylor, *Secular Age*, 539–40.

to insulate church members from the changing social environment. If Christian congregations are once again to be characterized by spiritual vitality and growth, renewal in a digital age will be characterized by dynamic engagement with society and it will require the theological depth to provide a robust intellectual foundation for a meaningful response to social change.

Characteristics of Renewal in a Digital Age

In the twenty-first century, renewal is not simply an antidote to church decline. Theologically and sociologically, renewal means confidently engaging the questions being asked by the culture in ways that provide meaning and that comprehend the re-shaping of personal and corporate identity in a digital society. Congregational renewal will be characterized by critical understanding of the effects of media on faith, on community, and on identity, and of how to express Christian faith and witness through digital means.[29]

Renewed Intellectual Vigor

Jesus lived out the Biblical command to "love the Lord your God with all of your . . . mind" (Matt 22:37; Mark 12:30; Luke 10:27) as he engaged the questions of his day (e.g., Luke 2:47; 5:33; 10:25; 17:20; John 3; 8:33). It is also illustrated by the apostle Peter in his theologically rich explanation of the events of Pentecost (Acts 2:14–36) and his fearless address to the Sanhedrin about the identity of Jesus (Acts 4:8–14), by Stephen's erudite defense of the gospel (Acts 7), and by the apostle Paul in Athens (Acts 17:22–31). Paul refers to the renewal of the mind (Rom 12:2) and Peter urges his readers to have "minds that are alert and fully sober" (1 Pet 1:13; 4:7; 5:8) as they followed Jesus amid a hostile culture.

Richard Lovelace points out that the great renewal movements in history (including the Protestant Reformation, Pietism and Puritanism, and the Great Awakenings) were characterized not only by religious fervor but also by intellectual and

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29.   Cheong et al., eds., *Digital Religion*.

theological vigor. Luther and Calvin were theologians and schol-
ars who challenged previously accepted church tradition; Jona-
than Edwards addressed the social realities of his day. Such
church leaders did not shrink in fear from the great intellectual
questions of their day nor did they seek to insulate the church
from the skepticism of their age: "The leaders and shapers of the
Reformation, the Puritan and Pietist movements, and the first
two awakenings included trained theologians who combined
spiritual urgency with profound learning, men who had mastered
the culture of their time."[30] In today's world of Google, Wikipe-
dia, and 24-hour News, the church has an opportunity to address
the great issues of these times by engaging the questions of the
secular culture. Yet at precisely the time when important existen-
tial questions are being asked by our culture, many congrega-
tions have eliminated much of their teaching. As traditional
teaching methods like Sunday School became less ineffective in
a digital age, local churches have in many cases simply elimi-
nated or greatly reduced Biblical and theological instruction in-
stead of seeking renewed ways of teaching effectively in a digital
age. Similarly, the current trend among theological schools with
declining enrollments to decrease their course requirements in
order to attract students does not portend well for the ability of
future Christian leaders to engage the culture.

In a society that is increasingly well educated, both through
formal education and informally via the Internet, many church
leaders have limited and narrow understandings of the issues of
the day. Amid the social upheaval in the Western world, the
great questions are not doctrinal and historical; they are primari-
ly social. Unlike the first half of the twentieth century when the
church had a welcome voice in the public square, it is now unu-
sual for church leaders to be included in such discussions—not
because communities do not see the need for spiritual input, but
because it is expected (rightly or wrongly) that clergy may pro-
vide simplistic, bombastic, predictable, or ill-informed answers
to the serious questions people are asking instead of engaging
with others in the questions. The discussion in society regarding

30.   Lovelace, *Dynamics of Spiritual Life*, 50.

sexuality is one example: rather than address the brokenness of human sexuality as a sign of our fallen nature as Jesus did when he emphasized grace and restoration, many churches instead have chosen to address it more like the Pharisees did with their emphasis on judgment, condemnation, and self-righteousness. Because church leaders often refuse to engage such issues not as they relate to the lives and relationships of broken people but as they relate to the enforcement of moral rules, the church's voice is now rarely welcome in public discussions. For renewal to take place in ways that affect the wider society, the church will need to be seen as caring for society's broken people as Jesus did and the church will need to do as much listening as talking (Jas 1:19 is instructive).

When the church brings intellectual vigor to the important questions of this digital age, it demonstrates to the culture that the good news truly is always new—that the gospel is not bound by modernity or by Christendom and that the gospel meets the needs of people in all times and places. Spiritually vital congregations do not offer simplistic answers to complex and profound and important questions; they listen and they encourage questions and they engage in conversation. Since the nineteenth century onslaught of Marx, Darwin, and Freud, many churches have been in intellectual retreat. Evangelicalism in particular has had a story of fearing secular scholarship. Renewal will mean a willingness to engage the culture with confidence in Scripture.

A young woman who participated in one of my sociological research projects explained it this way:

> The [secular] ideas I see are available on the internet and in some ways I think it's caused me to have a lot more struggles in my faith and a lot more doubts and at the same time helped me to build a stronger faith because I have to discern what I think amidst all of these other ideas that are right in front of me (14:1).[31]

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31. For details about the sociological study, see McMullin, "Christian Congregational Life," 135–55. This particular quote (14:1) is the fourteenth respondent in the first participating congregation.

In an age of seemingly unlimited online information, instead of seeking to insulate their members from the ideologies of the culture, spiritually vital congregations will equip their members to face questions and doubts in ways that lead to a stronger Christian faith.

Sacred Space and Place

Digital media transforms place and space in ways that clash with traditional ideas of sacred space. Virtual experiences blend with physical experiences, while virtual places and spaces take on and sometimes eclipse the meaning previously ascribed to the physical world. For conventional religious congregations that historically have expressed much of their identity through the architecture, symbolism, and furnishing of the building in which they worship, the change is dramatic and difficult. Spiritually vital congregations consider buildings and property in light of ways that property will facilitate Christian mission. Because that mission will be carried out in a digital age in ways that are quite different than what had been long-established in the West, many congregations will have difficult decisions to make about their buildings and property.

The issue is complex. It is not a matter of criticizing previous generations for the massive financial investment in church buildings and properties that characterized many congregations over the past two centuries or more. In those pre-digital times, sacred spaces were prioritized in society and religious buildings had meaning and purpose for the wider community in ways that now have greatly diminished.

The first and perhaps most obvious issue is that religious edifices were constructed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries for a pre-digital age and they cannot easily be repurposed for current social realities. Churches were designed for one-way communication from pulpit to pew, with auditorium-style seating, often in straight rows of fixed wooden pews. Aesthetics and religious symbolism were considered essential for the creation of a worshipful atmosphere. A tall steeple or spire, often making the church the tallest structure in the town, proclaimed the centrality of the church building in the community. Stained glass not

only depicted Biblical and historical figures and stories, but as memorial windows they reminded the congregation of the great cloud of witnesses (Heb 12:1) that had participated in that church's history and who had passed the torch to a new generation. Decorative crosses, Scripture verses displayed in Old English script, and religious artwork were prominent in the worship space as reminders of spiritual and theological truths as well as the cultural hegemony of Christianity in Western society. Classroom facilities were constructed as small cubicles for children and youth who were expected to sit quietly around tables and listen to one-way instruction from a volunteer teacher who was following a quarterly teacher's guide. Memorials to fallen war veterans were conspicuous in many church buildings, because right after the First and Second World Wars whole congregations and communities were experiencing grief at the tragic loss of so many young lives from their midst due to war, and such memorials were an effective pastoral response to that grief.

In the twentieth century, for a congregation to have a large, well-maintained, and well-furnished church building solidified its prominence in the community. To be planning a building expansion was a sign of confidence in the future. In most cases, those traditional buildings are no longer conducive for ministry in a digital age. They were not designed for the use of media, and the symbolism is no longer meaningful (and may be offensive) for people of no religious tradition or who were brought up in another faith tradition. More importantly, they do not facilitate the kinds of multi-directional conversations that are essential for community and for the communication of the Christian faith in today's culture.

A second and less obvious issue regarding church buildings is that as social realities have shifted, so too has the meaning of those sacred spaces changed, especially for those who have grown up in the digital age. Today, in a digitally informed culture that is much more aware of poverty, homelessness, injustice, and racism, and that is also critical of institutionalized and systemic inequality, an opulent church building is seen as wasteful at best and immoral at worst. Communities expect congregations to use their buildings to help people or to meet the needs of the

marginalized or at least to serve the community. Spending thousands of dollars to maintain a historic pipe organ or a grand piano seems archaic when a digital keyboard can provide similar musical quality and much more flexibility for a fraction of the cost. Expensive artwork and stained glass seem wasteful to install and maintain when images can be projected on a screen.

A third issue is the function of church buildings. On the one hand, there is the question of whether or not the building will provide adequate and effective space for the kinds of worship and ministry that will facilitate the congregation's mission amid twenty-first-century social realities. But perhaps more important are the ways that the building will be seen by the community. Is the building seen in the community as a mostly empty space that is wasted six days of the week? Is it seen as a place where only religious activities are permitted and only religious people are welcome? Or is it seen as a resource being provided by the congregation for the use of the whole community?

Renewal for many congregations will include the repurposing or sale of beautiful and historic buildings because those buildings are no longer effective for carrying out the congregation's mission. Because those historic edifices are closely connected with meaningful memories of great spiritual importance or memories of family or personal events (baptisms, weddings, funerals), change will not be easy. Renewal in a digital age will entail selflessness as church members decide to free the congregation from religious buildings that, although historically significant to the community and nostalgically important to older members, are using up all of the congregation's financial resources for maintenance while preventing the congregation from investing in mission that will affect the community. Spiritually vital congregations will make those decisions now, while it is still their decision to make, instead of spending all of their resources to maintain an obsolete building until they have no resources left and cease to exist.[32]

32.   See my 15 April 2019 blog post on the *Flourishing Congregations* website: McMullin, "How Many Church Buildings Should We Lose?"

Renewed Community

Many Christian leaders are convinced that in a much more individualized society and with traditional congregational structures, face-to-face experiences of community must be programmed and scheduled because community will not happen spontaneously as it once did. For increasing numbers of congregations, "small groups" are seen as the contemporary answer to the dearth of spontaneous community in contemporary society, but as Paul Lichtermann has documented, it takes work for even the best-intentioned small groups to create community.[33] Many traditional congregations now organize small groups as an integral part of church life, while an increasing number of congregations define themselves as small-group congregations. So-called "house churches" take the small-group idea to a different level by defining the house church as a congregation, even though the form ranges from a group that operates independently, to a house church that is connected to a traditional congregation (often the house church is comprised of younger or newer church members who do not feel they fit in the older, more traditional congregation) to congregations that have intentionally planned "house churches" in a hub-and-spoke model where each house church is responsible to a central governing body.

Whether small groups in a larger congregation, a small-group church, or a house church, these increasingly common models have certain common characteristics. First, they often cite biblical precedent for their form.[34] Second, they provide opportunity for prayer and for Bible study that once were incorporated in the traditional weekly church program schedule (Sunday School, Prayer Meeting). Third, there is an expectation that these groups will provide a level of mutual care and that members of each group will experience a sense of belonging.[35] In most cases, it is expected that these groups will meet in homes, which is

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33.   Lichtermann, *Elusive Togetherness*, 3.

34.   Simson, *House Church Book*. See also Atkinson and Comiskey, "Lessons," 75–87; Hellerman, *When the Church was a Family*.

35.   Wuthnow, ed., *I Come Away Stronger.*

significant because in a digital age people's homes have become more private than they were in a previous generation.

The first major problem is the idea that small groups mark a return to *the* biblical model for experiencing church. Even if it is considered appropriate that first-century social models should be imposed on the twenty-first-century church with no hermeneutical scrutiny, it is questionable at best that early churches met exclusively or even commonly in members' homes. Such a conception of first-century society represents an anachronistic imposition of twenty-first-century family and economic structures (the nuclear family owning a spacious detached home in suburbia) on a very different first- and second-century social and economic context. Edward Adams convincingly argues that early followers of Jesus were predominantly marginalized lower-class members of society who would not have had homes large enough to accommodate gatherings of the faithful, but who had access to larger spaces associated with their work where early believers could gather.[36]

Form and structure are not the important issues that they once were with regard to community; in a digital age it is authenticity that matters. Spiritually vital congregations may or may not emphasize small groups, but they will prioritize authentic community. Instead of focusing on the form of small groups or house churches, it may be more helpful to ask why small groups have become an effective means of creating community in a digital society where intimacy tends to be experienced at a distance. What matters more than the form is the authentic sharing of one another's lives in the context of Christian discipleship, and that may take place in a variety of forms.

Regardless of whether or not they incorporate small groups in their church program, a common attribute of vital congregations is hospitality. For first-century people who were unfamiliar with Jesus and his early followers, hospitality provided a meaningful bridge to groups such as tax collectors (Levi and his friends, Luke 5:29; and Zacchaeus, Luke 19:1–7) and even the Roman Centurion Cornelius and his family and friends (Acts 10:48).

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36. Adams, *Earliest Christian Meeting Places*, 34.

Upon discovering that Peter had been welcomed to a meal at Cornelius' table, the Jerusalem church immediately recognized the momentous social significance of Peter eating with Cornelius's Gentile household (Acts 11:3).

Hospitality is not a program. It rarely works when programmed because when it becomes a program it ceases to be genuine hospitality. Hospitality may have been less significant in the twentieth century when homes commonly served as social gathering places, but in the late twentieth century, the opening of one's home for meals or other social events became rarer.[37] In this digital age, intimacy is mediated by devices. If people wish to meet face-to-face, it is likely to take place in a coffee shop and after the exchange of a series of texts. But that new reality makes Christian hospitality even more powerful today. Inviting others into homes where they can see how Christians live their everyday lives provides a level of intimacy that is unusual in today's society. In a culture where people commonly meet at a restaurant instead of opening their homes to guests for a meal, it is especially significant when, like in New Testament times, an invitation is extended to a shared meal in one's own home.

Hospitality is an important Biblical principle (Rom 12:13; Heb 13:2; 1 Pet 4:9), not just a social form that can be translated into twenty-first-century practice. Eating is something that every person does—a shared meal provides a common experience regardless of age, background, education level, or religious belief. Jesus shared meals with others in people's homes; the New Testament church broke bread in each other's homes (Acts 2:46). Hospitality provides a level of welcome into personal and family life that has the potential, as people allow others to know them as they are in their homes, to de-professionalize pastoral care and make the Christian community less programmed and more authentic. It provides the potential for vulnerability that leads a congregation to celebrate its brokenness in the light of God's grace.

In spiritually vital congregations, such hospitality will not focus only on building close social bonds among church members.

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37. Putnam, *Bowling Alone*.

Shared meals with people outside of the congregation are opportunities to build bridges to the community, and it is those "weak ties" that have a greater social effect.[38] While small groups are a perhaps necessary but somewhat contrived means of programming community in the life of a congregation, hospitality is a more authentic means to providing opportunities for people to share life experiences in community.

Renewed Worship
The corporate worship of God is central to Christian congregational life, and renewed vitality will be characterized by a renewed priority for worship. Unfortunately, much time and effort has focused on what style of worship is most effective for church renewal in these changing times. It certainly is true that distinctly different generational tastes regarding worship music and the use of media in worship have developed in recent decades. The problem is that changes in the style of music or the use of media may do little if anything to make worship more meaningful. As an example, in an attempt to attract younger families, the leaders of one aging congregation I surveyed made the decision to change quite suddenly from a traditional worship format (hymnbooks, pipe organ, traditional liturgy) to a more contemporary style (worship team, drums, guitars). The result was the immediate and permanent loss of a portion of the congregation because some older members felt so alienated by the changes that they left the church. Their departure produced an unexpected financial crisis, which led the leaders suddenly to revert back to the more traditional format, which resulted in the return of none of the disgruntled people but did lead to the additional loss of a number of younger families. By addressing only the style of worship, the real issues about meaning in a changing social context had been ignored.

Changes began in the late twentieth century as some Protestant congregations recognized that there were many spiritual seekers who had grown up in church but had left as young adults and who might potentially be convinced to return to church if the

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38.   Granovetter, "Strength of Weak Ties," 1360–80.

worship was "seeker sensitive." In the 1980s and 1990s, especially among some well-known mega-churches, the seeker-sensitive worship approach seemed helpful for attracting such people back to the church. In style, seeker-sensitive worship music more closely resembled the secular music of the culture than it did the traditional church hymnody. Media were incorporated in worship in innovative ways. Pulpits and pipe organs disappeared; sermons became talks; casual dress was the norm.

When this new attractional formula for worship achieved considerable success in drawing baby boomers back to church, more and more congregations adopted the style. The serious problem that emerged was that although the congregations who began the seeker-sensitive focus did so with intentional consideration about how it would enhance meaningful worship, many other congregations jumped on the bandwagon solely to increase their attendance and with little regard for how the changes would affect the worship experience of members. The stylistic changes entailed in the move to a seeker-sensitive worship format intensified some people's nostalgic longing for the traditional past while some innovative thinkers became frustrated by those who to them seemed unwilling to accept change.

Spiritually vital congregations cultivate a theologically robust understanding of worship that is about more than style and format. They understand and address the problems of nostalgia and innovation in worship, which are inevitable problems when the focus is on style instead of meaning. It is essential for spiritual life that meaning in worship is derived from one's relationship with God, not from the way the music is played or how the pastor is dressed. Meaningful Christian worship challenges worshippers to change, to be open to God's guidance in new ways, to relate differently to God and to others, and to appreciate God's character and God's grace. It leads to deep thankfulness, greater love for God, and an openness to the leading of God's Spirit.

Nostalgia is inevitable, especially in times of great change. In every aspect of life, people quite naturally relate current experiences with their past, so it is not surprising that nostalgia is common in the religious realm as society changes. Witnessing the baptism of a new believer may trigger meaningful memories of

one's own baptism; stained-glass memorial windows may be a reminder of meaningful worship experiences from decades ago. Connections with one's own spiritual history can be comforting and encouraging; the problem is that nostalgic memories may lead to a longing for the past, or a sense that only when worship is conducted in a certain traditional way will a believer be able to experience those pleasant memories that give one a sense of being in God's presence.

In a nominally Christian society, nostalgia did not present as much of a problem. During the twentieth century, most people in North America could recall their own personal experience of attending Christian worship as children. Aesthetics were central to that experience—architecture and symbolism were carefully considered for a worship space. Gowned choirs sang traditional anthems and led in the singing of nineteenth-century hymns from a hymnbook accompanied by the pipe organ; congregants sat on hard wooden pews facing a solitary preacher behind a pulpit. That was the common experience and expectation of most people in the twentieth century. There may have been slight variations among the major denominations, but for most people, that was church.

In the twenty-first century, when many younger people are entering adulthood without ever having attended a church service, traditional worship that is intended to evoke memories of the past seems meaningless and irrelevant to their lives. The old hymns and the lyrics seem archaic and indecipherable; the whole social experience is strange and antiquated. For congregations today, the new social realities mean that if a congregation wishes to be multi-generational, the focus of worship cannot be to evoke nostalgic memories among members who have been churched since birth. In a similar way, though, worship must be more than an innovative experience that dazzles those seeking something novel while alienating those who find such innovations irreverent and troubling.

Neither nostalgia nor innovation can be substitutes for worship in the digital age. If a congregation's worship is meaningful only to the extent that it provides nostalgic religious connections with the past, it is not an authentic expression of a vital

relationship with God. If innovation is essential for one's worship, it ignores the corporate and intergenerational aspects that are essential to congregational life and it can degenerate into an inauthentic experience that is more about the dazzle than about God. In a digital age when media intrudes in life in so many ways while also facilitating life in so many ways, the use of media in worship will be not so much for performance as to invite participation, and it will be used with critical thought to prevent it becoming a distraction. When incorporated well in worship, media allows people to participate as agents, not as spectators, which changes the worship experience of a congregation in profound ways. Churches will especially take care to understand how media affects power relations within congregations.[39] When improperly utilized, media allows loud voices to become louder and silences softer voices. In spiritually vital worship, congregants experience God in the present, regardless of the style of worship.

Renewed Outward Focus

Data from my sociological research show that in declining congregations the primary focus is almost invariably inward. Time, effort, money, and resources are focused on the maintenance of the building and the fulfillment of the desires of church members. When members of those congregations did mention a need for outreach to new people, it was consistently expressed in terms of the need for new members to provide additional money for the offerings or to allow church members to retire from their ministry tasks. At the same time, concern was expressed that having too many new people at once might result in changes that the current members would not want. Typically, the problem of decline was attributed to external factors. As Daniel Smith and Mary Sellon have explained, members of declining churches often are not looking for the congregation to save the community, but for the community to save the congregation.[40]

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39.   Stahl, *God and the Chip*, 25–27.
40.   Smith and Sellon, *Pathway to Renewal*, 9.

Spiritually vital congregations are more focused on the community around them than on the internal history and traditions of their congregation. Although caring for the needs of members should be an important aspect of congregational life, it will be less professionalized. It will be carried out more by members caring spontaneously for one another and less by trained clergy, which will free clergy to lead the church in its mission to the wider community. Importantly, the internal concerns of the congregation will not eclipse Jesus' Biblical commission for the church to go and make disciples.

During the twentieth century, evangelism usually meant inviting people to the church building to hear the Christian message, or occasionally sending a few trained members out to the street in an attempt at what Alan Hirsch calls "extraction evangelism"[41]—evangelism that had as its goal the removal of new converts from the secular social environment as quickly as possible. Interestingly, many congregations referred to annual or even semi-annual evangelistic events as "revival meetings," demonstrating that even in evangelism the focus was on restoring people who had strayed from the faith back to the church. In a nominally Christian society, there was little focus on engaging secular people or people from other religious traditions.

Evangelism is essential for a spiritually vital congregation, not as a means of recruiting new members to replace those who are aging, but as an expression of a genuine desire to obey Jesus' Great Commission to go and make disciples, baptizing them and teaching them (Matt 28:19–20) and because of a genuine love for one's neighbors. Making disciples will not be the same process that it was in the twentieth century, when most families considered themselves Christian, when public institutions commonly acknowledged Christian beliefs and traditions, and when the vast majority of children were enrolled in weekly church programs (e.g., Sunday School, catechism classes). From early childhood most children were taught Bible stories, they were mentored by devout volunteer teachers and leaders, and they were incorporated into the life of the congregation so that by their teenage years

41.   Hirsch and Frost, *Shaping of the Things to Come.*

when part of the church youth group they were ready to be confirmed or baptized and welcomed as church members. In most cases in the twentieth century, evangelism was not really about reaching nonbelievers but instead was focused on restoring lapsed members or convincing people to do what they already believed they should do. Most people already knew the basics of Christian teaching from childhood.

In the twenty-first century, disciples must be made from scratch. In these more secular times, public institutions are careful not to promote religion, fewer people acknowledge a belief in God, and those who do believe in God may believe in a God who does not resemble the God of the Bible. Most children are not enrolled in any regular church program.[42] That massive shift has led to a whole generation of young adults who understand and respond to religion quite differently from what was common just a generation or two ago.[43]

It has led to a crisis among Christian congregations. Although many constructed large Christian Education facilities when the baby boomers were children, those classrooms today are mostly empty. Congregations have little or no experience of effectively communicating the Christian faith to people who were not raised in a Sunday School program. In the twentieth century, congregations commonly assumed that even those who did not actively participate in church life considered the Bible to be authoritative and in many cases that was probably accurate. Today, that is no longer the case and neither church members nor their leaders are equipped to communicate the Christian message to secular people.

The result is that since the 1980s most churches that still consider evangelism to be an important priority have mostly limited their disciple-making activities to the ever-decreasing segment of the population that was raised in a church. Few congregations make any serious attempt to engage in witness with the increasing number of people who have no church background, or with

42.   To understand the social and religious effects of this change, see Manning, *Losing Our Religion*.

43.   Smith, *Souls in Transition*.

those who consider themselves to have no religion, or with those (especially immigrants) who identify with a religion other than Christianity. The issue is not that those groups of people have no interest in engaging in conversations about spirituality or about Christian teaching; in some cases they are very interested. The problem is that congregations and their leaders may have no experience with disciple-making in a secular or religiously plural social context. A related problem is that some Christian leaders are pessimistic about even the possibility of making disciples in a secular society.

For churches to be spiritually vibrant in the twenty-first century, the ability to communicate the gospel with secular people is essential. Evangelism will be effective when lives are lived with an authenticity. The Internet has had the very positive effect of making it much more difficult for churches to pretend to be something other than who they are. To the extent that social media make congregations more transparent, the witness of the church to a secular age is enhanced. It helps the church's witness when flaws are out in the open. But if congregations or church leaders attempt to use digital media to portray themselves in ways that are inauthentic, the church's witness can be diminished or destroyed.

Conclusion

Social life is being radically transformed by digital technologies, and the extent of what that transformation will be is not yet clear because digital technologies continue to develop. What is clear is that the ways that people relate to one another in community, the ways that people communicate, and the ways that people understand themselves are quite different from how people lived their lives in twentieth-century industrial modernity. Attempts to bring renewal to the church that ignore those new realities are doomed to failure. Church renewal in this digital age cannot be about a return to twentieth-century religiosity; it must be about a return to the essentials of the Christian gospel with the belief that Jesus' message transcends culture and is as relevant in the digital age as it has been in any other age. For traditional congregations,

renewal will mean change in ways and to an extent that will be very challenging.

The twenty-first century presents new opportunities for congregations to communicate effectively and to create meaningful community. Those opportunities will require careful thought, authentic and meaningful worship, and an outward focus that cares less about institutional survival and more about engaging in conversation with the wider community. Twentieth-century Christianity is over and it is not about to return. But a spiritually vital Christianity that is culturally aware and authentic has great potential in this new digital age.

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