

# Five Themes LeaderWise Hears

## And Why They Are the Death of the Church

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*Note: This article may or may not apply to your context. At the time of its writing, this commentary represents Christian mainline denominational churches in the USA. While each church is unique in its experiences, certain themes have been observed by LeaderWise consultants. We recently had a conversation about our observations. This article is a result of that conversation.*

As I sat with yet another group of lay leaders, an older pillar-of-the-congregation persisted with his question. “What is the future of the church? Do you think we will ever get back to what we used to be?” He remembered the sanctuary being full on Sundays while the organ played, the choir sang, and young parents tried to keep their children from squirming in their seats. Yet, time had passed and the numbers had dwindled, both in attendance and finances. Difficult decisions faced this group of lay leaders and the gentleman wanted straight answers. Others on the committee stared at me as the question hung in the air. Their faces showed hopefulness; their eyes showed fear.

While none of us knows what the future will bring, I think people do know that we cannot return to the past. The desire to recreate what has brought joy and fulfillment leads many congregations to chase former experiences and cling to what worked “before.” When the pews don’t fill, anxiety rises and we hear the same themes repeatedly.

### **1. We need families and children.**

Aging congregations believe they need families and children in the pews on Sunday mornings in order to bolster membership, improve finances, and increase the pool of volunteers who do the work of the church. When we ask congregations why they are expressing the need for “families with children,” it becomes evident that, while they believe that families and children benefit by connecting with the Divine, the root desire is based more on concern for the survival of the church than it is for meeting the needs of those families.

If the passion of the congregation is to connect families and children with God, it is necessary to be willing to serve them where they are instead of insisting they come to us at our prescribed time on Sunday morning in the prescribed place of church. Instead, the congregation goes to where the families and children are ... *even if* they never come to the church. The focus becomes meeting the needs of others rather than trying to get others to meet our needs. *What if the church stopped asking how to get the young families to attend and started asking what the young families need? What might happen if churches shifted energy from recruitment to hands-on ministry? The church would look different; yet, it would be living out Christ's mission.*

## **2. We just need a pastor.**

We regularly work with congregations who are between pastors. Often, they surmise that calling the "right" pastor will result in increased membership (especially young families), revitalize mission and ministry, and provide solutions to their challenges. A similar comment expressed by those who currently have a pastor is: "We just need our pastor to do (fill in the blank)." These remarks arise because the congregation expects the pastor to do the ministry of the church.

While pastoral leadership can be incredibly helpful, these expectations alleviate the congregation's anxiety by placing the burden on the pastor. The comments reflect the belief that ministry is what the pastor does ... not what the people do. By scapegoating the pastor/pastoral role, the congregation does not need to change. This thinking discourages lay people from discerning God's call to them and empowerment of them, and deprives them of the joy of loving and serving their neighbor. It also puts an undue burden on their pastor. *What if congregation members saw the task of ministry as the responsibility of the church instead of the responsibility of the pastor? What if the church re-focused its sights on the needs of their community and how they, the members, could partner with God in meeting the needs that exist outside the four walls of the church? The structure of the church would look different; yet the church would be living out the commandment to love God and neighbor.*

## **3. We are a welcoming church.**

This statement raises questions: *Welcoming to whom? Welcoming how?* Occasionally, congregations are willing to welcome people who will do things the way they do things

and who will agree with them on their thoughts and beliefs without questions or challenges. They rarely understand that their tight-knit congregation that has been worshipping together for years, which they see as a strength, can feel closed and impenetrable to people outside of it. “Old guard” members say they welcome new people in leadership yet continue to make the decisions from behind the scenes. The thoughts and ideas of those who have only been a part of the church for a handful of years are dismissed. Longevity and familiarity matter and new members or attenders feel excluded.

Claiming to be “a welcoming church” implies that if someone doesn’t experience the congregation as hospitable, the burden is on the visitor. It’s denial at best and gaslighting at worst. Neither is helpful. Both are harmful. According to former U.S. Surgeon General Murthy, “loneliness is an epidemic.”[1] People are longing to be accepted and to belong. *What would it look like if churches became radically inclusive? What if people felt valued and accepted when they encountered someone from the church? How can the resources of the church be used to bring healing to the health crisis of loneliness? How could a church building be as easy to walk into as a coffee shop?*

#### **4. We love our building.**

Many church buildings are beautiful; some have historical significance. Through the years the stories of sacrifice made by previous generations have been passed down. Memorial gifts, which have helped to maintain, beautify, or enhance portions of the building, were given in honor of loved ones. These sacred buildings have been the places of vows being exchanged, people being baptized, children being cherished, and loved ones being memorialized. These buildings are where so many have gathered for so many years. It’s easy to understand why the congregations cannot see themselves as separate from their building, even as maintenance costs for a space that is often empty stretch already diminished resources.

While the church building has been central to how mainline denominational churches have operated, the mission and ministry to which Christ calls us does not necessitate a building. *How would church be different if the members decentralized their identity from their building? Could the building be seen as a resource to be shared with the community? What if there wasn’t a church building at all?*

## **5. Our church can't die. It just can't.**

While the sentiment is understandable, within our universe, a life cycle exists and the church is not immune. There is life and there is death. It's true throughout nature, in our human experience, and within all organizations and nations. While the Divine is eternal, nothing else is, not even our specific understanding of church. Christianity is fundamentally based on the belief that death is never the final word, that God is always working to bring about something new.

Society has shifted. Newness is everywhere. We see it every day. We look at the gadget on our wrist to see who called the device in our pocket. We sit at our computers and choose our groceries, enter in several digits from a plastic card in our wallet, knowing we will drive to the store and someone will load the bags of goodies into the trunk of our car, or better yet, deliver them to our doorstep. We utilize our computers and even our phones to work, to worship, and to connect with people down the street and across the globe.

Let me say it again: Society has shifted. Priorities differ from those of former generations. Possibilities that didn't exist only a few years ago abound. Expectations change.

### ***Our world will never be the same as it was.***

As humans, and therefore as humanity, we morph; we adjust; we change. This is true of individuals, organizations, and civilizations. The church must shift too. *What makes it so difficult to imagine church happening differently? What are we afraid of losing that blinds us to what we might actually gain?*

What is the future of the church? I don't know. However, as I observe our society with a keen eye on the church, I am convinced that church *as we know it* has a shelf life. It will expire. It is expiring. As with all loss, there is grief and that grief is painful, maybe even haunting. The sorrow for no longer having what was at one point in history a meaningful way of connecting with God and neighbor needs to be acknowledged and processed. AND, what better place to process grief than with faithful siblings in Christ. The church is set up for that. When we bring our heartache to The Divine, we are more able to love God and neighbor authentically, and we open up space to imagine a new way of being God's people together.

A shift in society requires a shift in our focus. Regardless of the beneficial nature of the organization, God never instructed us to perpetuate an institution; rather, we are called to do the following:

- love God and neighbor
- bear one another's burdens
- be good stewards as we care for creation
- walk humbly and act justly
- . . . and the list goes on.

These top five themes hold limiting beliefs and keep the church squarely anchored in the past. Yes, uncertainty about the future abounds; grief for what is past seems more than we can contain. Nevertheless, where we see death, The Life Giver is already at work to bring about new life for God's people and God's church. This isn't the first time God has brought about newness of life (Isaiah 55:8-12; Luke 1:46-55). The Creator is constantly creating and re-creating (Genesis 1 - 2; John 1:1-5). In the midst of these ever-changing times, we can trust that Divine Love is inviting us into a "new thing" (Isaiah 43:19), that "new wine [is being] poured into new wineskins" (Luke 5:36-38), and we are not alone (Matthew 1:23, 28:20b). It is challenging to think in ways we haven't previously thought; yet, it is imperative that God's people ask questions that will launch the church into the future. Questions like:

- What are the needs of the community, and how might the church partner with God in meeting those needs? What other organizations within the community are also concerned about these needs? How can we partner with them?
- In what ways can the church create opportunity to assuage the loneliness epidemic in our society? Who can we talk to in order to find out what might be helpful? Who is not here with us? Where are they and what do they need? What can we learn from where they are choosing to be that will help us be more truly welcoming?
- What would it look like to radically love our neighbor?

I find myself wondering, *what if we stop fixating on the future of the church, and instead, commit ourselves within our faith communities to care for the needs of creation, our communities, our country, and our world? Could it be possible that new life is waiting for the church?*

*May all our wonderings and wanderings lead us home.*

[1] Vivek H. Murthy, MD, *Together: The Healing Power of Human Connection in a Sometimes Lonely World* (New York: Harper Collins, 2020). See also [Mary Kay DuChene and Mark Sundby, \*A Path to Belonging: Overcoming Clergy Loneliness\* \(Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2022\).](#)