

## **“Ministry Has Left the Building”**

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First Congregational United Church of Christ, Gaylord, Michigan

Sunday, May 25, 2025

Texts: Acts 16: 9-15 and Revelation 21: 10, 22-22:5

“I did not see a temple in the city...” (Revelation 21:22a).

Now there is a surprise. Most cities in the world have many temples, churches, mosques, and other buildings that “house the Lord” – or at least the Lord’s people. Town after town has not just a steeple or two but often has many. I remember back in Wisconsin there would be a crossroads with a large church and two bars – with a flashing light. If nothing else, we can count on a church building in a community. And yet, here is the book of Revelation – perhaps the most mis-read and mis-understood book of the Bible that says in the New Jerusalem there was no temple in the city. And the reason: because the Lord Almighty and the Lamb are its temple (Revelation 21: 22b).” Meanwhile, in our reading from the book of Acts, Paul travels all over the place, which he does a lot in the book of Acts, and this time meets with Lydia. Lydia was among a group of women to whom Paul was speaking. Totally unexpected in his day. In both our scriptures, the writers are widening our imagination about where God dwells and to whom the Gospel can be shared. It would seem to me that the message that brings them together is that the ministry has left the building and we need to go with it!

Now, before you worry, I’m not advocating that all church buildings be abandoned, and we start being street preachers. They have their place – both the buildings and

preachers—but there is still a need for widening of our imagination about what it means to be church and how it is that we share genuinely good news with the world.

This is a struggle for many of us, particularly in the mainline church. We rightfully worry about evangelism and what it means and how it has been traditionally used as a tool of power, indoctrination, the decimation of cultures, and the disrespect of people. We fail to remember that the word evangel (from which evangelism comes) in Greek means to be the messenger of good news. If the news we bring is destructive to people and culture, then it is not good news. So how do we honor people and their cultures and share good news? How do we take ministry out of the building without losing important things here and without causing harm? The mainline answer has usually been to do nothing. If we keep being good people and serve good coffee, people will come.

The problem is that at least 80% of people come to church on the arms of someone else. Not literally, of course! For many, the hardest thing they will ever do is step across the threshold of a church. They've never been, and they don't know what to expect! That is part of why we have our church online each Sunday. More and more people today check out church first online before they ever darken the doors. Even more may follow and attend a church while living far outside reasonable driving distance to attend the church. It presents to us a challenge: how do we make community for folks who are online rather than present. For some of us, we must get beyond our judgment that people who don't attend church are somehow lacking. Many of us grew up in the church and it has been, by and large, a good experience for us and we cannot wrap our minds around the experiences of others related to church.

Some of those who don't attend church are called the "nones." These are people who have never attended a church in their lives. They may have no idea what the church does and are neither positive nor negative toward the church. It is just outside their experience. No one took them, and their knowledge of the church may only come through television, weddings, funerals, and other public events. They are not necessarily hostile to church, although they might be as popular culture gets a lot of mileage making fun of the church and its leadership. Quite frankly, sometimes we deserve it!

Others who don't attend are called the "dones." I don't George and Judy! 😊 D-O-N-E-S. These are people who have had an unpleasant experience in church. It could be because of whom they are not being accepted by the congregation or the denomination. This can be people who are divorced, LGBTQIA+, women, folks of limited economic means, or a variety of other things. These people have been hurt by a church, or more than one, and are not only hesitant, but may be hostile to involvement in any congregation. We could write them off and wish them well and take our message elsewhere. Or we could be good listeners and thereby attempting to understand the reasons for their distaste for church. Whether or not we change their mind is not really the point. Instead, sometimes our welcoming presence is more important than the outcome.

Other people have fallen out of practice. Other people see themselves as too busy to attend church. Others don't find church relevant. Many things in people's lives impact their church participation. Those things are out of our control.

However, other things are within our control, and both of our scriptures today name them. During Paul's ministry, "the Way," which would later become Christianity, met exclusively in people's homes, or in other locations because there were no churches. Paul traveled all over the ancient near east sharing with people what was important to him about Jesus, yes, but also about the community he founded. Folks like us struggle with that because we don't want to be seen as "beating people over the head" with religion. I agree. At the same time, there is a reason we are here. Maybe it is our faith. Maybe it is our community. Maybe it is what this congregation believes and how we care for each other. Maybe it is... Many of us are afraid to mention church or faith at all, fearing that we will offend someone. And that may be true! Some of the "nones" don't want to hear about church or religion.

But you know your friends. You know this community. What you may not know is some things I learned just last week. I met two people in the course of an hour who are new to our community and want to be involved. They also are searching for community. You may not be surprised that church was not the first thing I talked about, but being out in the community gave me an opportunity to get to know someone new. At some point there may come a time when I get a chance to say that there is a great community I know on the corner of Otsego Avenue and 2<sup>nd</sup> Street! It's more of a dance, or an art, to know how and when to talk about religion in our culture. Our task right now is to be on the dance floor. And to do that, we cannot wait around until people find us. We need to be where people are and look for opportunities to share what we love about this place, about these people, and

about our God. There are a lot of people in our area that might consider a church as open and as welcoming as we are.

And even if they never come, that's okay. Maybe we did their heart some good to hear and to know that there is a congregation of faithful people who do everything we know how to do to be the "most loving versions of ourselves possible" while at the same time welcoming people, "no matter where they are on life's journey." We won't always get it right, and for me the number of people sitting in the pews has little to do with the impact we can have on a community like ours. What if we were the example of Christians who are different from what people expect? What if we were the example of another kind of faith community that what people believe is out there? What if we simply invited someone into conversation? And when we do, be honest. We are not perfect, and we always have things to work on or to do better. We do make mistakes. For a lot of people, our honesty will matter much more than our cheerleading about our church. People are distrustful today, and, sadly, especially so of the church. So, we have our work cut out for us.

At the same time, let us not decide for people whether or not church is for them. Let us not decide for people whether the church is relevant anymore. Maybe they won't want to come, or they'll come and decide it isn't for them. No big deal. But I fear that right now too many sit in the church hoping someone will come or go out into the world and deciding that church is ALWAYS the one thing no one can talk about.

Over the next year or so, we will be embarking on a Strategic Planning Process with a Progressive Church Consulting group called Convergence. We are investing our own time,

staff time, and financial resources to begin to chart a course for our future. It begins with a congregational survey. I know, we don't like those things, but they are necessary to find our baseline. What is going well and what is not? The link for the survey will be in your upcoming newsletter, and a host of other places. If you're uncomfortable with the computer, or don't have one, we can have folk help you complete your survey. It's important that many of us participate, if not all! It doesn't matter how long you have been here. It doesn't matter if you've never served on a committee. It doesn't matter if there are some things you just plain don't know about the church. We need you. That is step 1.

Step 2 is to begin to think about this church and why you are here. What do you love about the place? What things do you wish were different? What have you learned here and what would you like to learn? What would you tell someone in an elevator about your church if you were asked?

Then go. The church at its best is when its people are carrying Good News to a hurting world. You know people are hurting. You know people are struggling. Maybe they aren't looking for answers, but they are looking for supportive community. Maybe they just need to know there is some place where they belong. Maybe they feel like they aren't wanted, or needed, or welcome because of something about who they are. While being honest about not being perfect, you can tell someone about this church and the community we have formed here.

I know, your parents trained you not to talk about politics or religion. And yet, we know the importance of people receiving information so they can make the best choices.

You don't need to "beat them over the head." In fact, please don't! But maybe, just maybe, there is a reason you are here. And maybe, just maybe, your friends and family would find a place here as well. We don't know if we keep all the news to ourselves. I've always said that the United Church of Christ congregations are their community's best kept secret. We have the power to change that.

Following in Paul's lineage, and enacting the beautiful vision of Revelation, let us, too, take church out of the building. Come here to refresh, renew, learn, and grow. Then go. Love the world. In Jesus' name. Amen.