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(page 26)

Living Lutheran,
March 2022

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Study guide

They may not come back

By Robert C. Blezard

As the pandemic eases its grip on our world, life is settling into a new normal that may spell difficulty to many churches. People who stayed away from congregational life because of COVID-19 may not return. Some may have gotten used to being away from church, and others may enjoy worshipping online. This presents both challenges and opportunities for communities of faith. How is your congregation faring? How can you lean into the new reality unfolding today?

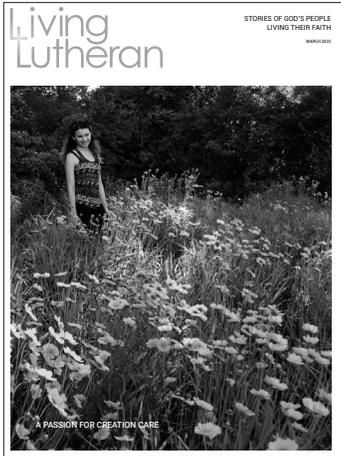
EXERCISE 1: POST-COVID

- How has the pandemic affected your congregation?
- What are the biggest challenges facing your congregation in the post-pandemic period? How can you face them?
- Have you resumed worship and fellowship activities? How has attendance been? If it's been down, what explanations can you summon?
- How has giving been during the pandemic? How is it now? Is your congregation on good financial ground? If so, why? If not, why, and what can be done about it?
- Are your congregation's members and its leaders more hopeful or less hopeful about the future than before the pandemic?
- What strategies is your congregation formulating to enter the future?

EXERCISE 2: HYBRID CHURCH

Many churches didn't have online or livestreamed services until pushed to do so by the pandemic. Now many find that parishioners are accustomed to at-home worship and aren't coming back. These churches may be transitioning to a "hybrid church" model, where permanently they offer both in-person and online worship as a regular part of church life.

- Has your congregation encountered members who choose to experience worship online and at home rather than attend church in person? Explain.
- What challenges emerge from a congregation that is split between in-person and online worshippers? What opportunities?
- How has your congregation tried to bring back members who are staying home? How has it worked? What do the now "at-home" congregants say?
- How is your congregation working to maintain strong connections with the "at-home" worshippers?



Study guide: **They may not come back**

continued

- Has your congregation decided to go with the “hybrid church” model?
- If so, how is it working to improve and keep fresh the online worship experience and keep at-home worshippers involved in church life?
- If not, why not? How does that decision best fit your context?

EXERCISE 3: AGE OF ASSOCIATION

The ELCA is a denomination founded on principles of what professor Ted Smith calls “The Age of Association.” The principles have served us well, but now they have limitations. How about your congregation?

- What is your understanding of the principles that gathered and sustained churches during the Age of Association?
- What were the positive aspects of this age and its underlying principles?
- How did they fit their own time and place?
- How has the world changed?
- Is your congregation an Age of Association church?
- How has that served your church in the past? How is it serving your church now?
- What challenges arise from your congregation being from the Age of Association? How are you strategizing to meet those challenges?
- Describe the roles of “faithful innovation” and “thinking outside the box” in adapting to a new reality.

EXERCISE 4: AGE OF AUTHENTICITY

Changes in our culture have given rise to what philosopher Charles Taylor calls “The Age of Authenticity” for religious institutions.

- What is your understanding of the principles and concepts undergirding the Age of Authenticity?
- What social and cultural factors have given rise to this age?
- How does it differ from the Age of Association?
- What are its positive aspects?
- What opportunities does it present for Christians and congregations to have a meaningful faith journey?
- How can congregations formed during the Age of Association adapt to the new age? What opportunities present themselves?

EXERCISE 5: CORE PRACTICES

The article’s author writes: “The core practices of Christian faith and community

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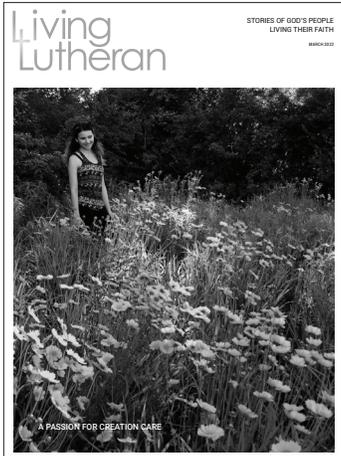
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Study guide: **They may not come back**

continued

must endure, but their organizational expression will need to change. ... It will require a lot of experimentation—what I and my colleagues at Luther Seminary call faithful innovation.”

- What are the “core practices” that must endure in our denomination and your congregation? List them, then make the case for why they must endure.
- Which practices could be let go? List them and make the case.
- How is your congregation’s “organizational expression” changing? Is it voluntary and strategic, or forced by circumstances and done as a coping mechanism? Or necessitated by hardship?
- Is your congregation poised and prepared to enter into a time of experimentation and faithful innovation? If so, what does that look like? What strategies are you putting in place? If not, why not? How might your congregation begin planning for experimentation and faithful innovation?
- What are the current strengths and assets of your congregation? How might they assist your congregation in adapting, experimenting and faithfully innovating into the future?
- What are the risks of experimenting and innovating? What are the risks of not experimenting and innovating? Which is worse?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- As our culture continues to evolve into the Age of Authenticity, churches aren’t the only associations facing decline in membership and support. So are service organizations, labor unions, scouting, among others. How does this information affect your understanding of what’s happening in your congregation? Does it encourage or discourage creative adaptation for the future?
- Some people are staying away from church entirely because they have gotten accustomed to not worshipping on Sundays, having found other uses for their time. Does your congregation have people like this in your congregation? What strategies might your congregation employ to bring them back to church? Brainstorm some good ideas and share them with your pastor or congregation council.
- Some people are staying away from in-person worship because they enjoy participating online. Is this a phenomenon at your congregation? What strategies could help these online worshipers maintain a deeper connection to God and your congregation? Brainstorm some good ideas and share them with your pastor or congregation council.
- Our culture has changed rapidly, and the pandemic may have accelerated trends already underway. What do you see as the most prominent changes? What factors led to those changes? What changes do you expect to continue into the future? Anticipating those changes, how can your congregation adapt to meet them?

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- While our culture has changed, do you think people's need for spiritual connection and growth has changed? Explain. Has the gospel of Jesus changed? How can our church preach and teach the gospel to a new generation?
- Not all congregations are facing decline. In your synod or region, which congregations are holding their own? Which are growing? What would explain their stability or growth in the age of COVID-19? Would those approaches work for your congregation?
- How is the Spirit guiding and leading your congregation to adapt, experiment and innovate in this time of change? How are your leaders and congregation prayerfully discerning the future?
- The Christian faith has endured for 2,000 years despite obstacles, setbacks and dramatic shifts in cultures. How has it survived and thrived? What has guided and empowered the church through thick and thin? Won't the Christian witness survive this latest setback and cultural shift? What will enable the church not only to survive but thrive?

They May Not Come Back

AND HERE'S WHY

By Dwight Zscheile

When in-person worship resumed last year, congregations across America saw significant decreases in their pre-pandemic attendance rates. It's true that some congregations have grown over

the last two years, but the more common story is one of decline—in some places, 40% or more.

There are multiple reasons for this: some people are still concerned about safety as the pandemic

continues, some prefer online worship even when in-person is offered, and others have simply walked away. No one is sure how things will settle, but I suspect the pandemic has accelerated a deeper cultural shift that was already long underway.

To understand this shift, we need to examine history. After the American Revolution, a new paradigm for institutional life emerged and came to dominate American religion and society—the voluntary association. Whereas congregations prior to that time carried over the state church model from Europe (with some important variations), the disestablishment of religion spurred innovation.

Congregations began to organize themselves as voluntary societies, which individuals could choose to join and support with donations. Ted A. Smith, a professor at the Candler School of Theology in Atlanta, says this new “Age of Association” also brought countless service clubs and other ways of organizing, joining, participating and serving. Many denominations emerged during this era. While institutions in the Age of Association were often problematically exclusive, they unleashed a lot of dynamism and vitality in American religion and life.

Since the late 1960s, Western societies have increasingly come to inhabit what the philosopher Charles Taylor calls the Age of Authenticity, when people focus on discovering and expressing their true selves, not affiliating with or serving institutions. In fact, institutions are regarded with deep suspicion.

In the Age of Authenticity, people can leave voluntary associations and institutions without embedding themselves elsewhere. Things are far more fluid, and identity springs less from a web of institutions (family, neighborhood, career, etc.) than from a series of individual choices. Social and economic burdens once borne by institutions (like defined benefit pension plans) are shifted to individuals.

The systems of the ELCA (congregations, synods, the churchwide organization) and its partners were designed for the Age of Association, not the Age of Authenticity. No one should be surprised that they are unraveling as church membership declines. If you talk to leaders of other voluntary association systems—scouting, labor unions, service organizations—you’ll hear the same story. This isn’t just the church’s problem—it’s a larger cultural transformation.

Think outside the box

This causes enormous loss and grief, particularly in older generations for whom the Age of Association model worked well. Many congregations are

being sustained by faithful elders who know how to build, serve and sustain voluntary associations. They puzzle at why their children and grandchildren aren’t interested in affiliating and participating.

Pastors and other leaders are expected to manage and revitalize the Age of Association institutions, typically with fewer resources. No wonder that 51% of mainline Protestant clergy have considered leaving full-time ministry in the past year, according to a recent study by the Barna Group. Getting younger people to affiliate with and participate in (let alone sacrificially support) voluntary associations in the Age of Authenticity is a difficult proposition.

Instead, the church should embrace the huge opportunity the Age of Authenticity provides to share the gospel in a culture where people are told to go their own way and find their own meaning, purpose and community. This age is full of yearning for deeper connections than those facilitated by social media, for more adequate stories than those provided by consumerism, and for more just and sustainable ways of patterning human life than people see around and within themselves. There is isolation, despair and division. What an opportune moment for the promises of God in Jesus to be made known!

If the church is going to make those promises known in the Age of Authenticity, it may need to think outside the old boxes of the Age of Association. The core practices of Christian faith and community must endure, but their organizational expression will need to change. We don’t yet know what this will look like. It will require a lot of experimentation—what I and my colleagues at Luther Seminary call faithful innovation.

This involves investing presence and relationship in community spaces where people already spend time (both virtually and physically) so that we might listen to their stories and learn how to connect the gospel with their longings and losses. It involves learning how to embody the richness of Christian spirituality in simple, accessible practices that people can see in ordinary lives and try on for themselves.

In the Age of Authenticity, people are looking for authentic expressions of spirituality, community, justice and hope. That is a good thing. May the church meet them there with the good news of Jesus. †

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