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Study guide

The face of the church is changing

By Robert C. Blezard

Pastors, bishops, congregations and other leaders across our country are adapting and innovating to keep up with a shifting religious landscape. Fewer people are coming to church, and a rising number of people no longer identify with a religious tradition. Among these are people who have never been to church—the unchurched—and those who have dropped out of church—the dechurched. Yet there is a deep spiritual hunger. Creative new models of church are helping to reach these people with the good news of Jesus Christ.

Exercise 1: Your congregation

Data shows that in recent years churches across the nation have been losing members and finding it more difficult to maintain finances. How is your congregation doing? (Good information is available on your congregation's "trend report," which is available by clicking on "Find a Congregation" at the top of elca.org. Type in your zip code, find your church and click on "Full Trend Report for This Congregation.") Discuss:

- Are attendance and giving trending up or down? What are the reasons for these trends? In what ways has your church changed or failed to change that may have contributed to these trends?
- If your church continues along the path it has followed for the last few years, where will it lead?

Exercise 2: Reconnecting

Does your congregation need to reconnect with its community? Which image better fits your congregation?

Wheel: My congregation is the hub of vibrant activity in our community, with lots of relationships that are like spokes that help make connections to other groups, such as the unchurched or dechurched, homeless individuals, hungry families, unemployed and underemployed individuals, people who speak a different language, those of other races or who are new to town. Other "spokes" connect my congregation to institutions, such as schools, businesses, other churches (and mosques and synagogues), police and fire departments, government offices and civic organizations (such as Rotary Club, Lions Club, Scouts or Masons).



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Island: My congregation largely operates independently of other types of people and organizations. Our members enjoy each others' company, and we worship, study and fellowship together. Most of us are pretty happy with church life. We are aware of other types of people in the community, but we aren't sure how to reach them or if they would fit in with us. Our church has a few connections with other organizations and agencies, but they aren't a big part of who we are.

- Which image reflects a healthier congregation? Why?
- Do you know of congregations that are definitely a wheel? Explain. An island? Explain.
- How is your congregation like a wheel? An island? Which image better fits your congregation?
- How are the ministries in the article helping Lutherans connect or reconnect with their communities? What do you like about their approaches? What might you adapt for your congregation?
- How can your congregation become more "wheel-like"? What are the limitations you would have to overcome? How could you do that?

Exercise 3: Our buildings, ourselves

- Is a congregation a building? Or is it the people?
- To what degree is your congregation's identity tied to your building? If your congregation's building were to burn to the ground tomorrow, would you still be a church? How? Why? Would your congregation rebuild it? Why or why not? Discuss the pros and cons.
- When was your building constructed? How has it changed over the years? What parts of the building are no longer used or used for other purposes than originally intended? Explain. What are the current maintenance needs of your building? Does it need an upgrade? Explain what needs upgrading and what it would cost. What items of the church budget are devoted to building maintenance or renovation? What percentage of the church budget goes just to the building?
- Given how your church building is used currently, describe the ways in which it's an asset and a liability. Given its needs for maintenance and renovation, and given the level of use, is your church building more of an asset or more of a liability? How do you know?

Exercise 4: What is church?

- What exactly is a church anyway? When does a group of people constitute "a church," and why? What common understandings of belief, purpose, meaning, mission and vision undergird identity as church? Why is each important?



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- What does it mean to “be church” in your current congregation or context, and why? What common understandings of belief undergird your identity as church? Purpose? Meaning? Mission? Vision?
- For each of the worshiping communities profiled in the article, as much as you can, identify the beliefs, purpose, meaning, mission and vision that form their identity as a worshiping community. How are those understandings different from your congregation’s?
- Why do you think these worshiping communities are successful? Are people in our culture hungry for new approaches to “being church”?

Exercise 5: The “nones”

When asked to identify their religious affiliation, more and more people are replying “none.” In just the years between 2007 to 2014 the “nones” increased from 16.1 percent to 22.8 percent of the population, the Pew Research Center reports. At the same time, Mainline Christians (of which Lutherans are a part) decreased from 18.1 to 14.7 percent.

- What evidence have you seen for the growing number of “nones” in your community or congregation? What affect has it had on your congregational life?
- What challenges do the changing demographics present for us as Lutherans in general, and for your congregation specifically? How are some congregations overcoming them? What insights are offered by the worshiping communities profiled in the article?
- What opportunities do the changing demographics present for Lutherans? What do you observe in your community? How can your congregation take advantage of them? What insights are offered by the worshiping communities profiled?

Exercise 6: The “unchurched”

Among the “nones” are people who have never gone to church. As a result, they don’t know the Bible stories that are familiar to many Lutherans, they don’t know the Lord’s Prayer or Apostles’ Creed, the liturgy is confusing, and the Sunday bulletin may as well be written in code. At worship, they may not know when to stand, sit, kneel or how to come forward for communion. As a result, many are reluctant to join traditional worship. Discuss:

- If you are in a new place, experiencing something new, and it’s hard to follow along, how do you feel? What emotions do you experience when everybody else seems to be with the program, but you are having trouble? Therefore, what do you imagine it would be like for an unchurched person to come to your Sunday worship service?



Study guide: **The face of the church is changing** *continued*

- Look at your congregation’s sanctuary. Does it have a “holy” appearance? Are there stained-glass windows? Crosses? Religious artifacts? Do you find them comforting? Many unchurched people find them spooky and intimidating. Can you imagine why?
- The alternative worshipping communities profiled all use different approaches to reach the unchurched, including meeting outside of traditional worship space and using innovative approaches to worship. Why is this important? What could your congregation do to help make worship more “friendly” to unchurched individuals in your community?
- What extra care and attention would be required to take unchurched people and develop them in the faith and church life? What would a comprehensive strategy look like to grow these people in the faith?
- If your congregation were to devise an alternative service to complement your traditional service, what might it look like? Where might it be held? Why would it be important to try?

Exercise 7: The ‘dechurched’

Have you ever been hurt or put off by something that happened in church? Maybe you had a fight with the pastor or a Sunday school teacher, or were disillusioned after a stint on the congregation council. Maybe the ideas you thought were so good received a cold reception by church leaders and you left in a huff. Maybe the church wasn’t there for you when you *really* needed help. Maybe you were just bored and not growing spiritually.

These are all experiences of a subgroup of the “nones” called the “dechurched”—people who have a history in the church but have dropped out of congregational life. Many of them still suffer from their experiences with congregational life, and as a result they want no part of church.

Do you know of “dechurched” people who have left your congregation? Are there dechurched people in your circle of family and friends? Can you share a story about them?

The worship communities profiled offer an alternative path to bring the dechurched back into religious life. What can your congregation learn from them? Why is it important to try to reach them? What’s at stake?

Exercise 8: Make disciples

The Great Commission of Matthew 28:16-20 gives Jesus’ last words to his followers. Read the passage and discuss.

- Among these five verses, which is the most important? If you had *one*

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verse to inscribe in the narthex or above the altar of your congregation, which would it be? Why?

- How well is your congregation following the Great Commission? How is your congregation making disciples? Is making disciples the focus of all that you do? Should it be?
- How does (or could) the Great Commission simplify your congregation's thinking about mission, outreach and purpose?
- How are the worship communities profiled in the article fulfilling, or not, Jesus' Great Commission?
- How can your congregation do better?

The face of the church is changing

By Megan Brandsrud



Every Sunday evening, around 35 people gather for worship in a converted chicken coop at Chicken Coop Church in Grantsburg, Wis. "I'm not scared to tell a person Jesus loves you," said Peter Johnson, mission developer. "What's fun for me is that now I hear everyone who attends Chicken Coop emulating that same language."



Photo: David Joel Photography

Here is the church and here is the steeple. Open the door and see all the people. This well-known nursery rhyme, complete with hand motions, has likely been taught in Sunday school classes for generations. But it might be time to retire it.

As church membership across denominations continues to decline and the number of religiously unaffiliated increases, some leaders are thinking outside the box to find ways to reconnect congregations with their neighbors and bring back the emphasis that the church isn't the building but the faithful who gather to share the good news.

Around 190 of the ELCA's new congregations have thriving ministries that don't involve any steeple—some don't even involve doors.

Chicken Coop Church in Grantsburg, Wis., an ELCA synodically authorized worshiping community, is one of those nontraditional congregations—in more ways than just its unique name.

The “chicken coopers,” as mission developer Peter Johnson refers to them, worship in a converted chicken coop. Instead of a pew, chicken coopers take a seat on a sofa or recliner. For music, they sing contemporary Christian songs, but they've also been known to belt out the words of “Jesus Just Left Chicago” by ZZ Top.

While all of these components sound fun, and Johnson said they do have a lot of fun, make no mistake that this worshiping community is serious about keeping the focus on God and sharing the gospel with their community. “We live in mission with and for others who are beautifully broken, made new by the power of the Holy Spirit,” he said.

Most of the people who attend Chicken Coop Church, which started in 2014, are between their late 20s and early 40s with families and live at or below poverty level. Most are also in recovery or dealing with addiction and mental health issues, Johnson said.

“Our church is the unchurched and the marginalized, and that isn't embellishing anything,” he said. “One could classify them as being some sort of statistic, but what you have is a faith community of survivors.”

“Community” isn't a word Johnson uses lightly. The first-time mission developer



Photos: David Joel Photography



Thomas Johnson holds hands with his wife, Kris, during worship. For him, Chicken Coop is more accepting to a diverse group of people than other churches he's attended.

Peter Johnson (left) distributes communion to Katelynn Clark. Everyone gathers in a circle for communion as a way to show the word of God is incarnate in the eucharist and will meet you wherever you are in life.

begins every Sunday evening worship service by introducing everyone by name and sharing a story that all gathered are from the family of God through Jesus. Simply, worship services are “family reunions.”

Thomas Johnson began attending Chicken Coop Church on Easter Sunday this year and is now part of the leadership team. “I felt like I was in a big, beautiful family from the first service I attended,” he said. “I’m a recovering alcoholic and addict, 6 foot 3 inches and 330 pounds, covered in tattoos. Every church I checked out I felt like an outsider. Chicken Coop Church doesn’t judge. It’s inspired me to be a better person and my heart feels full and at ease.”

Mission is at the heart of Chicken Coop. One of its ministries is a food distribution program called “God’s People Serving,” a shared mission between 10 area Lutheran congregations.

“We have people who were at one time marginalized and felt not empowered who now feel bold enough to go into the community in the public eye with the power to share the gospel with people,” Peter Johnson said. “It’s beautiful.”

The mission developer thinks Chicken Coop is a reflection of the changing church of today. “This is a contextualized version of the Spirit at work. We need to make Jesus relevant and church applicable, and that involves empowering people,” he said. “It’s about the person who comes in and says they’ve been up for three days on meth and are looking for grace.

“The Spirit is at work in all people and we’ll become a vibrant and vital church by acknowledging the Spirit and allowing it to shape us.”

Finding God in a parking lot

One Sunday every month, Ignaki Unzaga goes to the parking lot of the Home Depot in Passaic, N.J., before services start at St. John Lutheran Church, where he is pastor. He isn’t going to buy home supplies—he’s there for worship.

Four years ago when St. John was looking for a way to become more integrated in its community, the congregation came up with the idea of a breakfast ministry. They put up signs advertising a free breakfast for anyone after worship one Sunday. But on the day of the breakfast, no one came.

Someone from St. John then suggested taking the food to the Home Depot parking lot, as there are always men there who could use a good breakfast.

“Sure enough,” Unzaga said. “There were men there who welcomed us. From that Sunday on, we haven’t stopped going there in four years and we feed hot breakfast to about 40 to 50 men every week.”

The men in the parking lot are day laborers who use Home Depot as their daily congregating spot to get picked up for jobs.

In addition to sharing breakfast together, worship is held once a month. “We do a holy service of word and sacrament in about 15 minutes right there in the parking lot,” Unzaga said. “It’s a beautiful ministry.”

They call the ministry *Misión Pan de la Vida* (Mission Bread of Life), but Unzaga said St. John’s members see it as part of themselves—a satellite congregation, so to speak.



Photos: Courtesy of Misión Pan de la Vida (Mission Bread of Life)



Misión Pan de la Vida (Mission Bread of Life) is a worshipping community of day laborers that meets in the Home Depot parking lot in Passaic, N.J. The community grew out of a ministry at St. John Lutheran Church, and Ignaki Unzaga, pastor, leads the group in worship once every month.

The worship services are led in Spanish, and Unzaga always invites the men to take part by reading a lesson or helping serve communion.

“At first I’d go as the pastor and preach and lead everything, but I wanted to make the service more theirs than ours,” Unzaga said. “Now we ask for volunteers to help. Imagine how hard it is to get a reader out of a parking lot when most of them didn’t go past elementary school. But the Holy Spirit always provides and these men do it for the glory of God.”

Holding worship in a parking lot brings an array of variables that can’t be controlled—whether it be interruptions when a van approaches to pick up some workers or store security asks the group to move.

“To be part of such a church (St. John) and then go to a parking lot and claim that as the house of the Lord is powerful and beautiful, especially in the dead of winter,” Unzaga said. “To share the cup of salvation with our immigrant neighbors in the snow is just a humbling and beautiful sight.”

Unzaga said *Misión Pan de la Vida* helped reawaken the spirits of the people at St. John and deepen community relationships. “When I started





New Life Lutheran Church in Dripping Springs, Texas, uses the great outdoors as its worship space. “A lot of the unchurched people here who might be looking for a community talk about finding God in nature, so we’ve been talking about how they can have that here with a Christian community for support in their faith and life journey,” said Carmen Retzlaff, pastor and mission developer of New Life.

as a pastor I had zero experience in nontraditional ministries and zero expectations I would start one,” he said. “But we were looking for the Spirit to lead the way and change the church. It’s about where you are, knowing who lives among you and learning how you can be in relationship with those people. Opportunities are right next to you.”

Faith in nature

New Life Lutheran Church in Dripping Springs, Texas, might fall into the category of a nontraditional church, but Carmen Retzlaff, pastor, would make the point that this outdoor worshipping community is actually a return to ancient times when everyone worshipped outside.

In 2010, the ELCA Mission Investment Fund purchased land and was holding it for this budding congregation until members had enough money to erect a building on the site. But after a few years of using a rental property, the congregation decided that it had fallen in love with the land but no longer had the dream of having a church building.

On Maundy Thursday two years ago, they committed to using the great outdoors as their church.

“I can only credit the Holy Spirit that they were so willing to know that our mission was to reach out to people with the good news of God’s love and not to build ourselves a church like the one we came from,” Retzlaff said.

Being in central Texas, the climate lends itself for outdoor worship year-round, but New Life also has a large event tent and outdoor heaters to use when it’s cold or raining.

The main worship area consists of three giant, century-old oak trees and a horse trough as an altar. There is a labyrinth on the 12-acre property

that is open for anyone, and its walking paths are scriptural stations of the cross. A bird blind is available for observing wildlife, and its roof is structured to collect rainwater.

New Life has Bible study and worship every Sunday. Emphasizing their priority of caring for creation, they use a chalkboard to list song numbers so they can limit their use of paper and their sound system is solar powered. They also leverage social media, which allows them to share updates without mailings.

“I think this idea of church in different spaces and different ways is a return to diversity of the original church.”

Most of the people who attend New Life are young retirees and professionals with families. The congregation is active in the community, serving coffee and fruit to day laborers weekly, hosting a Godly Play Montessori-based children’s program and donating food from their community garden to a pantry.

New Life also has community service Sundays, which has found the congregation in the middle of cleaning up a portion of a highway and pausing for communion at the site to make their work part of the liturgy.

Jenni Peterson and her husband moved to Texas nine years ago and have always attended a Lutheran church. When they moved, they planned to attend church and keep a low profile to give themselves a break after having been very active in their past congregation.



Photos: Jim Woodard

Sawyer Heth, held by his godfather, Jason Gantenbien, is baptized by Retzlaff. New Life's baptismal font is made of a tripod of juniper trees native to Texas hill country and a bowl made by local potters.


"God had other plans for us," Peterson said. "What we found at New Life was the same grace in another setting. We all work together to care for our beautiful piece of land, and through monthly service projects, care for our community."

Retzlaff thinks worshipping communities like New Life are a reflection of the larger changes happening in the church. Nontraditional churches also reflect a return to the basics, which she said resonates with people.

"This idea of church in different spaces and different ways is a return to diversity of the original church," she said. "We got into a fairly narrow place of defining what church is and what church looks like, and when that stopped working for everyone, we've had to revisit being flexible and creative. I think it's just more acknowledgment that church is a community and is where the Holy Spirit is."

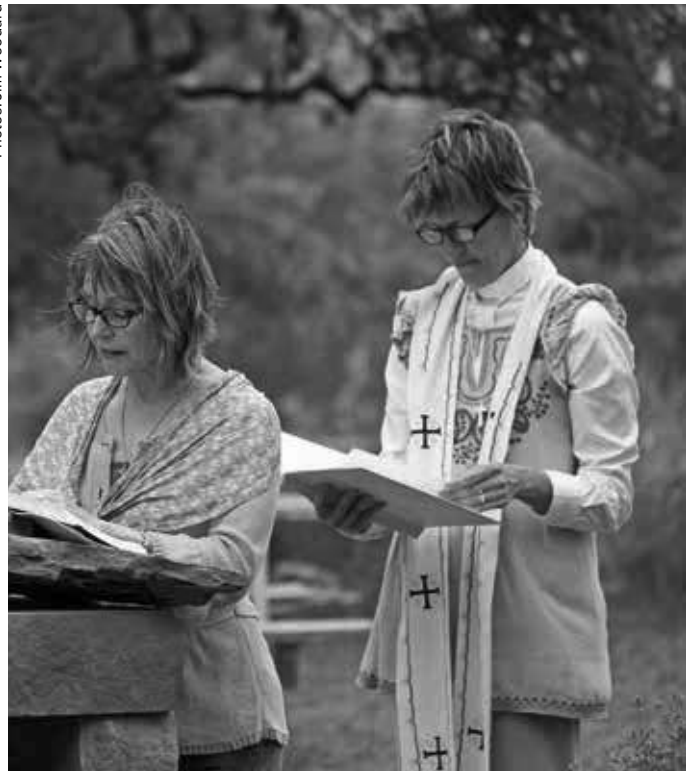
Ruben Duran, ELCA director for new congregations, said ministries like Chicken Coop Church, *Misión Pan de la Vida* and New Life offer important exploration for the church as it's facing a difficult situation with decline over the past decade.

"Churches like these are reconnecting with their communities," Duran said. "We've been doing ministry for years but now we need a laboratory where we can explore a little bit and see where we can best connect the church into the world again."

"People aren't coming directly to the church like they used to, and these nontraditional churches are connecting first with people, building relationships, listening and then getting a sense for how we can build the churches of the future and reconnect with our communities." 



Megan Brandsrud is a content editor for *Living Lutheran*.



Mary Miller (left) serves as assisting minister with Retzlaff. New Life's main worship area is framed by three century-old oak trees.

New Life makes use of its 12 acres of land while inviting people to worship.

