

Sit & Get or Contend & Send— The Opportunity for the Church Now

Mark Ramsey

The Ministry Collaborative, Charlottesville, Virginia

On their year-end podcast for *Death, Sex, and Money*, host Anna Sale was talking with her contributing editors about their pandemic coping habits. Amidst a flurry of admissions that they were binging TV shows from their youth (“I just don’t have the energy to do anything except enjoy characters I already know...”), contributing editor Afi Yellow-Duke made her own confession: “I just finished binging all 121 episodes of *Gossip Girl*,”¹ at which everyone on the podcast immediately voiced their recognition of the need and the benefit of such an endeavor.

The global pandemic has revealed many things that we had managed to keep barely submerged out of sight, and it has accelerated every trend that was even gently active before March of last year. In our personal lives, it has revealed coping strategies of “return”—a return to comfort foods, comfort hobbies, and yes, comfort media consumption. We have found ourselves wanting to return to parts of our lives and histories that worked for us in past moments of crisis and stress.

This has also led to a hunger for comfort church or return to a “comfort religion.” The “revealing” aspect of this months-long crisis has impacted faith communities with talk of a “return” of a different kind. Returning to in-person worship has been a priority for many congregations, often pitting pastors and members on opposite sides. While certainly not true of all congregations, the dialogue in many congregations over the last several months has focused on “getting back to normal” or “returning to our worship and what we have lost in the pandemic.” This feels a bit like binging *Gossip Girl* (or *The Office* or *The Wire* or *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*—take your pick) to experience something familiar from an earlier time where comfort and clarity were more prominent. But to take refuge in Buffy saving the world one more time is to miss the larger crosscurrents active right now.

There is real pain that is driving us to want to “return.” In our year-end message² to our network of pastors and congregational leaders engaged with The Ministry Collaborative, we tried to address the deep needs revealed by the pain of the last several months:

This is a season to be very gentle with one another. Please, be gentle with your pastor who is probably barely holding on. If you are on your congregation’s church board or council, I hope you strive for deeper places and larger goals in the months ahead, but please do it with grace and good spirit and consideration for others alongside you who aren’t where you are and aren’t moving at the same pace—whether faster or slower—that you are. Congregations need to be gentle and forbearing with one another. No sentence should be uttered that begins with “well, it’s obvious that we should...” The Oxford English Dictionary named several “2020 words of the year, among them: *unprecedented*, *entangled*, *omnishambled*, *apocalyptic*, and *hellacious*.”³ Well, nothing is “obvious” in this unprecedented,

entangled, omnishambled, apocalyptic, hellacious year! We are all looking for the light God will provide for our way forward. And we need all of us together to help find, nurture, share, and reflect that light.

No wonder each of us in church work is seeking comfort, stability, and ideas that don't drain us further! However, scripture points us to a different path of "return." Jeremiah 24:7: "I will give them a heart to know that I am the Lord; and they shall be my people and I will be their God, for they shall return to me with their whole heart." Joel 2:13: "Rend your hearts and not your clothing. Return to the Lord, your God, for God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing." Zechariah 1:3: "Therefore say to them, 'Thus says the Lord of hosts: Return to me, says the Lord of hosts, and I will return to you, says the Lord of hosts.'" Hosea 12:6: "But as for you, return to your God, hold fast to love and justice, and wait continually for your God." And perhaps most crucial for this moment—Jeremiah 15:19: "Therefore thus says the Lord: 'If you turn back, I will take you back, and you shall stand before me. If you utter what is precious, and not what is worthless, you shall serve as my mouth. It is they who will turn to you, not you who will turn to them.'"

From these words of the prophet, to the journey of Mary and Joseph in their return from Egypt, to the return of the Prodigal after "coming to himself" through the disciples' feeble attempts to return to fishing when instead they encounter the Risen Christ, Biblical "return" is not engaged in nostalgia or re-composition. For all the yearning of those who wish to return and recompose life as it was in church in 2019 (or 1979, or 1959...), the Bible's direction is clear. When we "return," it is to God. We do not return to institutions or structures or "the way we do things." We return to the author of life. God is always creating, redeeming, healing, and leading. While God may be the same "yesterday, today, and tomorrow," that is not God's intention for us nor for the church. "We were once lost and now we are found." In initiating creation, redemption, and healing with us and with our faith communities, scripture indicates that we are, as the People of God, always on the move. Part of this movement is, in the words of Jeremiah, to "utter what is precious and not what is worthless." An opportunity for the church in this season is to discern, with the leading of the Spirit, what we have been engaged in that is worthless, and likewise, what is precious in God's sight.

In a conversation about the state of the church in this challenging year, TMC colleague Wil McCall, president of Dallas Leadership Foundation among other ministry roles, said: "The time for churches of *sit and get* is over. Now is the time of *contend and send*." We are living in a time when powerful forces are attempting to make the truth negotiable. It is a time when spiritually hungry, institutionally suspicious people are looking for meaning but are often not finding it in faith communities. It is time for congregations to face this urgent challenge. Faith communities cannot satisfy themselves with "inviting people to come join us" or with "member services." Among the most challenging things for a congregation to do are to plan for, give attention and resources to, give priority in mission and ministry to a constituency not yet present. Yet, that is exactly the call to the church in this moment.

The tweet I read was posted hours after the insurrection and violent assault on the United States Capitol—that horrific day where confederate flags and "Jesus 2020"

banners were paraded through the Capitol Rotunda. The words that were posted can stand for scores of other voices that expressed virtually the same thing:

Can I be honest for a moment?
Observing Christians combined w/ my study
of history the last few years
makes me want to distance myself
from Christianity altogether.
I find it increasingly difficult
to separate Jesus from the
manifold *bs* I read,
see & experience every day.

A significant reveal for churches in this challenging year has been the reinforcement of a conviction that our study of scripture and theology has long proclaimed, but the church has often submerged in a blizzard of inward-looking activity: God loves the world more than God loves the church. God's love is abundant, and there is plenty of God's love for both church and world, but the Biblical witness makes primary "God so loved the world...." Wherever congregations go from here, this love of the world must be a prominent guidepost. The Jesus of the Gospels is needed in the public square. Others with vastly different agendas are placing Jesus there ("Jesus 2020"), and so it is incumbent on faith communities who hold the values of Jesus as demonstrated in the fruits of the Spirit—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control—to re-introduce Jesus to this spiritually hungry culture who has long since ceased expecting much from most churches. This is the "contend and send" part that will largely supplant "sit and get" as the way churches engage their ministry.

We in churches do not have a lot of time to move in this direction. Crises open opportunities, but the windows of opportunity close as quickly as they open. Everything has been accelerated in the past year. Every trend that was slowly working its way through the church is now on triple time. If a church had been exhibiting signs of health within itself, there's a good chance its health has increased, even in the midst of the unprecedented pressures of the pandemic. If a congregation was actively nurturing good relationships with its neighborhood and larger community before 2020, almost certainly that congregation has been looked to as a trusted partner to help meet acute local needs in this time to help ease the pain of illness, hunger, and unemployment. In the same way, if a church was already struggling by being too inward-looking, too interested in keeping its own machine running, then there's a good chance that its congregation has watched, helpless, as the machine ran out of the fuel it needed to keep going. There are congregations located near the epicenters of Black Lives Matter marches or Confederate Monument protests who explicitly said, "We don't want to be involved." They just wanted to get back to in-person worship and "invite people back in." The "return" in Jeremiah 15 observes the imperative for churches to be attentive to the needs that are presenting themselves all around us: "If you turn back, I will take you back, and you shall stand before me. If you utter what is precious, and not what is worthless, you shall serve as my mouth."

The time for modest calculation, of thinking that "sit and get" will carry the

day, is over. The accelerated pace of this year's changes brought that time to an end, finally. Right now, after a year of pandemic and all that has been revealed, so many are feeling lost, empty, lonely, separated, hurting, and isolated. People in every space are looking and wondering who or what can fill their deep need for care, community, connection, depth, and equity.

On March 20, 2020, just days after the full force of the pandemic hit this country, Andy Crouch, Kurt Keilhacker, and Dave Blanchard published an astonishingly prescient article, *Leading Beyond the Blizzard: Why Every Organization Is Now a Startup*.⁴ The authors asserted that what we were entering into was not a blizzard—something that would pass in a few days, after which we could get back to normal. It was also not a winter—a season we could anticipate and hunker down through, knowing that spring is coming. Instead, they described it as “an ice age”—something that would last and would reconfigure much of what we understood as “normal.” In that regard, every faith-based organization was now going to have to see itself as a “start-up”: lean, nimble, carrying values of holy risk and courageous exploration for God at the heart of its identity.

It is notable the church planters have fared well in these last several months. They and their communities know these start-up values down to their foundations. It's all a challenge, but none of it is a surprise for them. Likewise, and in some ways more significantly, congregations who have always lived on the margins are largely not feeling the angst of change and de-centering that many majority white and more established congregations are. This is where they have lived for generations. They know that the wilderness is where God is present. The gifts these faith communities have to offer the rest of us are worthy of our attention, investment, and respect. What do they know that the rest of us are working to understand? What do they experience in the regular course of living, loving, and serving that can help us through this ice age?

When a prolonged crisis reveals and accelerates our need for, care, community, connection, depth, and equity, there is an unprecedented opportunity for the church to respond as a well-spring of each of these—as an initiator of care and connection, as a model of true community, as a trusted partner in striving for equity for all, and as a collection of women and men, girls and boys who know there are much deeper parts to life and faith than binging *Gossip Girl*.

So what is a church to do in order to move from “sit and get” to “contend and send”? How do we re-introduce ourselves—in our preaching and in our living—to the needs of this culture as a place of care, community, connection, depth, and equity? Here are a few thoughts to get the discussion rolling:

Know that the “constituency not yet present” may be in the shadows, watching and discerning who you are. In every church I served, eventually some well-intentioned usher would suggest roping off the often-empty side and back pews “to keep everyone close together.” We never did that roping, for we understood that if someone was going to come into a sanctuary as an institutionally suspicious stranger, that is where they might want to sit, enjoying the safety of being close enough to the exit for a retreat if needed. (Watching online offers an even safer back pew.) Strangers with needs, wondering if the church has anything to say to those needs, are present in our midst. Do we meet them with insider language and internal management demands, or with words and deeds of hope and life?

If you are in a traditional, established church, consider looking to faith communities on the margin for guidance and resources. They have much to teach. Church folk who have lived in vulnerability and lived with overt oppression and injustice have so much wisdom if we will look and listen. This year has de-centered all of us, and it has de-centered every congregation I know. For some, their word to the rest of us simply is “welcome to our world.”

Please take seriously the *well-earned institutional suspicion* of at least the youngest three generations among us. How can we discern honestly and without defensiveness the traditions that nurture our identity as a people of God versus the institutional infrastructure that seems irrelevant and distracting to those who don’t know the code? Having a discussion within your church on the 2000-year-old question “What is essential?” (and what, in turn, is not essential) seems, well, essential.

Likewise, please take seriously the *authentic spiritual hunger* of at least the three youngest generations among us. People are looking for meaning and hope and life and purpose and connection. If that is met with “We are so glad you are here, we just happen to have our sign-up table in the narthex (*the what?*) so you can keep our church program machine running,” none of those who are searching for care, community, connection, depth, and equity will stick around for long.

And along with that, as preachers, we need to be careful that we are preachers and not pundits. It’s fun being a pundit, offering our passionate and considered opinions on the issues of the day (and what outrageous issues we have been dealing with!). But people come to church to hear about, learn about, be formed by God. Over the last sixty years, culture has picked the carcass of the church clean. It has carried off our “mission statements” and our book studies and our ideas for gathering in fellowship and repurposed them for our consumer society. It seems that all that is left behind is Jesus. They didn’t know what to do with Jesus. Churches who try to keep up with culture by offering a similar menu of “sit and get” aren’t going to be able to engage the needs that surround us. But Jesus..., people are hungry for Jesus. We focus on, proclaim, and model ourselves on Jesus, and from that flows engagement in both faith formation and the urgent needs of the day. We renew our commitment to proclaiming Jesus, crucified and risen, and then we work in partnership with all others for justice and peace. In a gift of grace, all the church has to offer the world is what the world does not have—and cannot imagine.

Father Gregory Boyle has worked for more than thirty years with the gangs of South-Central Los Angeles. He founded Home-Boy Industries—to create jobs and hope for those who were trapped in the inner city. Father Boyle got diagnosed with leukemia a few years ago, and he observed the wonder of having gang members, one after another, come to his bedside. These gang members, who so often inflicted death or had it inflicted upon them, reacted with uncommon grace to Father Boyle. One of the most memorable was “Grumpy,” a huge guy with “no neck and a ton of tattoos,” who visited Father Boyle in the hospital. Grumpy was the one they all feared. Grumpy got whatever Grumpy wanted. One afternoon, Grumpy appeared—just like that—at Father Boyle’s bedside. Without preamble, Grumpy looked straight into the eyes of the priest and said simply, “What do I have...that you need?”⁵ There are few better places to start a culture of invitation than with the question “What do I have that you need?”

In her Baptism of the Lord Sunday sermon, delivered the Sunday after the January 6th assault on Congress, my colleague Kristy Farber told the legendary story from church history about an earlier emperor who had all the soldiers under his command baptized, but told them to hold out their right arm, the arm they fought with, so that they could continue to fight, even as the rest of them were subject to their baptism into Christ. Then, she said:

Painfully, awkwardly, gratefully, needfully, everything in our life is subject to our baptism. We don't get to hold out an arm to reserve for fighting. Or a leg in case we want to run.

We can't leave out our pride or our intellect. God claims us—all of us—which includes how we spend our money, spend our time, live as neighbors, use our words, how we vote and even how we view the horrific events of this week. Wednesday's tragedy was counter to the ways of Jesus and today; God continues to call us into Jesus' ministry. We follow in his steps by prayer and by action, by understanding our history, listening for voices that have been ignored, by working for justice on behalf of the oppressed and hurting. Jesus went where people were hurting. He called out the places of idolatry. He refused to worship anyone but God. In baptism, we are called into Jesus' ministry where boundaries are broken, where we cannot form the Gospel to fit our preferences and our politics and our comfort and our people. There are no flags to represent our faith, only the waters of God's love and the bread and cup of God's feast. And the cross—showing us the way.⁶

Love and hope. Table, font, prayers, and service. Solidarity in moving toward justice and God's beloved community, against all odds. Cross and Easter life. These are the elements we have to offer.

Our world is reeling after this unprecedented year. Everywhere we look, including many days when we look in the mirror, we can see people so hungry for meaning and connection and care. We see those who are yearning for a depth they don't even know how to describe. Do we have the courage and imagination to ask "What do we have that you need?" There will be no returning to "business as usual" as we emerge from all the dislocations and pain of this global experience. Frankly, "business as usual" wasn't working too well for the church of Jesus Christ in recent years, so that is gift.

A short time before his death in 2013, Episcopal priest Robert Farrar Capon wrote:

If Christianity is simply about being nice, I'm not interested. What happened to radical Christianity that turned the world upside-down? What happened to the kind of Christians whose hearts were on fire, who had no fear, who spoke the truth no matter the consequences, who made the world uncomfortable, who were willing to follow Jesus wherever Jesus went? What happened to the kind of Christians who were filled with passion and gratitude, and who every day were unable to get over the grace of God?⁷

If the church of “sit and get” is over, the time of “contend and send” issues the church an invitation. To contend with all the pain, hunger, and injustice of the world, the church needs to be eager to be sent into the world that God so loves. The invitation is even deeper than that. In her poem, *On the Pulse of Morning*, for the Presidential Inauguration in 1993, Maya Angelou wrote:

History, despite its wrenching pain
Cannot be unlived, but if faced
With courage, need not be lived again.

The church of Jesus Christ does not need to return to the comfort foods of coping with decline. A gift of this crisis is the opportunity to focus instead on reintroducing ourselves to our culture as the very place of hope and life that is so needed. It is Hosea’s invitation that we carry with us a promise and a charge: “But as for you, return to your God, hold fast to love and justice, and wait continually for your God.”

Notes

- 1 <https://www.wnycstudios.org/podcasts/deathsexmoney/episodes/death-sex-2020-death-sex-money>.
- 2 <https://mministry.org/questions-of-the-year/>.
- 3 <https://languages.oup.com/word-of-the-year/>.
- 4 <https://journal.praxislabs.org/leading-beyond-the-blizzard-why-every-organization-is-now-a-startup-b7f32fb278ff>.
- 5 NPR, “Driveway Moments” Podcast, September 7, 2006.
- 6 Sermon preached by Kristy Farber at Mercer Island Presbyterian Church on January 10, 2021.
- 7 Michael Yaconelli, *Dangerous Wonder: The Adventure of Childlike Faith* (Colorado Springs: Nav-Press, 2003).