

# *The Church: Crisis and Opportunity*

*(The journey of St. Matthew's, Westerville)*

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*"St. Matthew's, behold your parish!"*

It was Pentecost Sunday 2014, and a procession of thirty of St. Matthew's Episcopal Church faithful proceeded out of our large church building. Leaving behind pews, stained glass, chancel, narthex, choir loft, Sunday school classrooms, and fellowship hall, we stood together at the foot of a large wooden cross placed in the church building's front garden many years prior. Standing there at the cross, our St. Matthew's faithful knew they were about to leave sixty years of memories and rich tradition to enter the great unknown. Now, the reality of their exodus was here. Some were in tears, others in shock, as we stood in the shadow of the large "For Sale" sign, gazing at the beloved building for the last time.

I had been appointed the priest at St. Matthew's just three weeks earlier. I found myself standing with them amidst a complex past and uncertain future. As we stood there, exposed to passing cars, curious onlookers, and pedestrian traffic, a leader from the Diocese invited us to turn around. Facing the street, with our backs to the building, he proclaimed, "People of St. Matthew's Episcopal Church ... behold your parish!" In this moment of vulnerability and uncertainty, a seed of re-imagining was planted and began to germinate.

Standing amid this congregation determined to survive, I realized the gravity of the journey upon which we were about to embark—the need to maintain a traditional sacramental community while simultaneously completely re-imagining ourselves into a church without a building. After twenty years' experience as a priest (at the time), I began to ask questions: In a time of "siloes" denominational structures and a need for imaginative and courageous visioning, how shall we serve the community beyond walls of religious isolation? How shall we inspire a church to let go of its attachment to buildings as the primary source of identity in the community and the traditional narrative of how it has always been done and dare to find its survival bound to new structures and stories yet to be discovered in the neighborhood? Almost instantly, the moment St. Matthew's left our building, our identity re-focused on relationships as the structure of belonging. Parishioners began to recognize that we were indeed a church without walls—vulnerable and yet accessible. We started to show up in the community—coffee shops, pubs, city hall, neighborhoods, a college campus, the library, and a local bookstore. We discovered that not having a building to invite the community into freed us to truly listen to the stories of those in our

community. In a way, we were asking neighbors to help us write a new narrative for ourselves.

We found new members who wouldn't have darkened our door on Sundays. For example, I was befriended by a self-identified atheist (a regular at the local coffee shop). One day, my new friend was excited to share that he had made up a new name for me. "Father Joe, I have a new name for you, and I want to help you market it ... Papa Pure Love ... you like it?" I replied, "John, I love it!" (and still do). We genuinely began to identify with John Wesley when he wrote, "I look upon all the world as my parish; thus far I mean, that, in whatever part of it I am, I judge it meet, right, and my bounden duty to declare unto all that are willing to hear, the glad tidings of salvation."

### *How Did We Get Here?*

As we stood outside on that Pentecost Sunday, St. Matthew's was remembering their past—a story of prosperity and growth intermingled with much grief and loss. The imposing "for sale" sign was a reminder of the church's tragic split over homosexuality five years earlier. A full two-thirds of the congregation had left to form another parish, leaving the remaining one-third unable to pay the mortgage. However much they loved their church building, they were even more committed to radical hospitality and love for all. It was this remnant that faced a wilderness journey into the unknown. All experienced grief, and while many of the remnant also felt the adventurous urgency, for others, it was too deep of a struggle to imagine a new future. Through the mystery of God's leading and without a gathering space of our own, St. Matthew's experienced the hospitality of others. We moved into a temporary location called *Respite* (a non-profit agency that cared for the developmentally disabled) for the first five months, giving us time to catch our breath. As St. Matthew's new priest, I found my "office" at a coffee house in the center of an Uptown area about five blocks from our original building. I started a public conversation on Christ and Culture at a local pub. We slowly started to claim all of Uptown Westerville as our "building," where human relationships became the actual building blocks of our sense of place.

Within a year and in quick succession, we embraced opportunity after opportunity as we paid attention to Spirit's leading. It's hard to recall them all, but here are a few:

- *We were offered free space to worship and house our office in a Presbyterian chapel near Uptown Westerville (we stayed a year and a half).*
- *We discovered a house for rent that was perfect for establishing our community's "footprint." We called it The Pray Think Love House, enabling us to be more accessible to Uptown and have a unique space for small gatherings and our administration.*

- *Two years into our exodus, we moved our worship to the third floor of a local Irish pub in the middle of Uptown, one block away from our community house.*
- *A year later, a larger Victorian home next to the pub became available. In partnership with the diocese, we moved The Pray Think Love House into this beautiful space to better serve the community and congregation. This community house has become our identity of hospitality in the neighborhood, serving as an art space, co-space, prayer space, and administration space; this is our home to this day.*
- *During the pandemic, St Matthew's discovered that our journey over these past twelve years naturally prepared us to adapt with resilience.*

### *Liturgy as a Way of Life*

Amid this resilient community of St. Matthew's, I saw a sacramental theology of place emerge, one of incarnational community-first belonging. A faith community must give itself away to express Christ in the neighborhood authentically. To be a "real presence" as the Body of Christ means seeing Eucharistic living as the very form of mission and liturgy as a way of life. We must embody the Eucharist and liturgy, not just on Sunday, but as a life practice of missional imagination. When a church sheds its identity of brick and mortar, success by numbers, and the fear driven by a scarcity of not enough, it begins to find renewed vitality and a theology of abundance. Our journey begins at the Eucharist and ripples out, affecting human encounters with liberating, radical hospitality.

### *Story:*

Once, I was led to an encounter with the Director of City Compliance. He shared with me that he struggled every time he had to bring a community member before the Mayor's Court for small infractions—like overgrown foliage or exterior house disrepair—that could have been prevented if their neighbors simply knew their plight. Out of this conversation, St. Matthews partnered with the mayor's office to start Neighbor 2 Neighbor—a movement to unite citizens and other community leaders around the theme of kindness. More agencies and leaders joined the cause for neighborly connection. We began identifying "kindness heroes" and showed up as a reminder to our community to pay attention to the needs of others. Through this opportunity, the people of St. Matthew's began to see itself as a conduit of God's love throughout the city. They began to discover their renewed purpose.

It is amazing how a crisis can inspire a sense of urgency. Since the death and resurrection of Jesus, the church found itself in a state of crisis and urgency. What did this all mean? What were they called to do next? On the day of Pentecost, the Holy

Spirit helped turn that sense of urgency into momentum for spreading Good News. Up to that Pentecost day in 2014, the script for St. Matthew's had been written like that of many other mainline congregations—a scarcity of resources, grieving the loss of what was, a fear of change, and romanticizing days gone by. Finally, leaving the safety of our building behind called forth the best in us, creating urgency and momentum. St. Matthew's started to say, "No building, no problem, for we desire to become members of the neighborhood." Like in Jeremiah 29, we recognized that our welfare was now bound up in the neighborhood's welfare. Deconstructing our need for a traditional church building and the identity that comes with the facility, we reimagined what sacred space could look like in relationship with the neighborhood.

This mindset shift helped us evolve our culture from a tradition-driven parish to a missional-driven one. This was a time to ask better questions about how we inspire creativity and embolden courage in the parish. Thus, St. Matthew's Episcopal Church in Westerville, Ohio, embraced the adventure of truly following Jesus into the neighborhood through an asset-based approach to congregational development. We celebrated crisis as a pathway to opportunity as our narrative began to get the attention of the neighborhood, as we became more vulnerable and accessible among people hungry for relationships.

### *Asking Better Questions*

As we continued to live in this new way of being a small but vital parish in the community, we discovered that the old questions of scarcity no longer served our mission. Measuring our success by numbers, be they how many people attended on Sunday morning or how much money we had in the bank, didn't quite fit our discovery of the abundance found in the stories of those we met along our pilgrimage way. Through our witness to God's love, our questions of identity and the purpose of the church began to be formed by those we encountered in our neighborhood.

As we worshiped and served in our wilderness sojourn, we began asking better questions about ourselves and the community. We especially wondered what our neighborhood thought of our presence among them as a church community. It started with listening to the community around us; new questions arose in the priest and the Vestry. Suddenly, the parish members began to share stories of conversations and questions they were hearing in the neighborhood. It started with two questions: What does being an Episcopal community of Jesus in the neighborhood mean? How can we serve the common good with those around us? And these opened our imagination to more:

- *What is our essential witness to the gospel as we become exposed to the communal "elements"—the sacramental elements of bread, wine, water, and Word in, with, and under individual and community relationships?*
- *Can we truly embrace our new congregational identity in the community without the protection of the traditional sacred space*

*of church building? In other words, what does it mean to be vulnerable, communal, and liturgical simultaneously?*

- *Can we learn another cultural language of the community as we hold on to the best of our traditional language and ancient ecclesial rhythms while re-imagining ourselves as a community partner?*
- *Can we surrender ourselves to the community in its beautiful diversity—that is, become Holy Listeners, vulnerable and risk-taking, join the community as members, and overcome our need to measure success by numbers and membership?*
- *Can we genuinely give ourselves away with a “community first” and “congregation second” intention?*

St. Matthew’s continues to innovate and sustain our energy as we seek to balance the best of our Episcopal tradition and identity with the innovative re-imagining necessary to be the church in a rapidly changing world—a hybrid. We want to focus on what we have and not what we don’t have, even with the sometimes-present temptation to return to “Egypt” and the security of our old insulating structures. Put simply, we have embraced living the questions:

- *What do you have to teach us?*
- *Can we reimagine how we show up as the church in the community?*
- *Can we see the classrooms as a local pub, a coffee house, a prison, a street corner, or a kitchen table?*
- *Can we see faculty members as seasoned bartenders, baristas, immigrants, and refugees, the differently abled, or unhoused among us?*
- *Can we re-envision the role of the ordained as a Holy Listener and One Who Accompanies?*
- *Can we seek to become members of our neighborhood before we solicit members for our parish?*

My journey with St. Matthew’s has opened my mind and heart to new possibilities of what it means to be the church in the world.

As we discover our restoration as a parish, it is bound to how we joined the amazing acts of God’s love already present in the community. While sitting in the local coffee shop one afternoon, the owner approached me with a dilemma. They have noticed an increasing number of young people hanging out in the coffee shop because they have nowhere else to go. These kids had been kicked out of their homes because they were gay. They asked me if I could be available to talk to one young person in particular and then join the baristas in a conversation about offering support and options to those in need. St. Matthew’s joined the cause from this encounter to connect more closely with a local day shelter and safe place for youth. This is

an example of how I came to be seen as a safe spiritual leader and St. Matthew's a secure and brave community that cares and desires to offer a space of belonging and holy listening to all.

The beginning of the Church was ignited on the Day of Pentecost, when Jesus's followers left the upper room and committed themselves to going out into the neighborhood, and, ultimately, the world. I suggest that the future of the Church lies in the community's grassroots and the collective wisdom and imagination it contains. The revival of the church is bound to the revival of the neighborhood. This quest is a mutual and transparent conversation about the traditional and non-traditional ways of being a church worldwide.

The story of St. Matthew's is a missional case-in-point, presenting an incarnational vision of the church as a sacramental presence in the community and its leaders as prophetic practitioners of the gospel. It was born out of necessity and raised into an ancient/future way of being a parish.

The courage it takes to be the body of Christ in the world must be a work of proximity, offering "real presence" in, with, and under each relationship and community organization. Proximity means moving closer and genuinely listening to each other's stories. By being a church that enters intimately into the community, walls of religious distinction become secondary and eventually dissolve into embodiment and accompaniment in the name of Jesus.

St. Matthew's has re-imagined itself into a community of engagement, determined to witness to God with a cultural "bilinguality;" that is, while we express a religious language, we can likewise value a non-religious language that will also be found within the community in which we serve. We have found that discovering true congregational identity is born of urgency and surrender. A congregation is always a community of learning and risk and should be willing to be curious and vulnerable. Once we get caught in a scarcity modality of "not enough," we begin to let fear and worry consume us, thus stifling creativity and innovation. We can get comfortable in our narrative.

Our core values are found in the three words: Pray, Think, and Love, as they form a Venn diagram of our spiritual identity in the community. Thus, our Pray Think Love House has become the portal for relationships in Uptown Westerville as we re-envision the front porch, living room, pub and sidewalk, coffee house, and neighborhood as sacred places. This new identity has established deepening relationships and a narrative that resonates with many "spiritual refugees" seeking a community of belonging. The Pray Think Love House is a safe space to welcome their being and seeking.

Amid this journey, I invited St. Matthew's Vestry to join me in capturing our parish journey in a Collect Prayer that is now spoken in every Sunday worship:

*Holy God, whose beloved Son commanded us to go forth and make disciples of all nations, help us to bring the Word to others in our community. Create a deep love*

*for You, dear God, and a growing love for our neighbor. Through outreach at our Episcopal House and Sunday gathering space in Uptown, may we bring those who desire to know you better and share the Holy Eucharist with all who hunger for belonging. Show us our future in the reflection of our present mission as we celebrate the past that brought us this far. Through Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.*

Our work as a parish has now replaced the old congregational adage of “location, location, location” with a new mantra of “relation, relation, relation” as the understanding that sacred space is built one relationship at a time and not merely in bricks and mortar. We are held together by uncompromising hospitality, and our house facility is a means, not an end. In this, the people of St. Matthew’s embarked on this new journey not as tourists or settlers but as pilgrims and pioneers; it is at this revelation that the culture shifted from a tradition-centric to a missional-centric identity.

Like the early Christians, after the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, we are defining our sacred space to the very shape of the community, and we would do well to learn how the first-century believers of the Way followed Jesus into the neighborhood. In this ancient/future mindset, we pay attention to the signs. We discover the rhythm in the relationships between the core congregation and the now-emerging “indigenous” congregation of city officials, artists, organizers, pub and coffee house culture, merchants, and many unaffiliated spiritual sojourners. Our purpose is to exist *in* community, *with* each person, and *under* the social fabric of our everyday life together. It is to *be* the bread of life by giving ourselves away to others as a sacred offering. We do this by sitting in coffee houses with a fellow brother or sister, calling the coffee and scone our communion. We sit with the local police officer and explore ways to connect to the youth on our streets. We involve ourselves in the arts community, offering them our space and support. We join the conversation on how to cultivate a deeper neighborliness.

### *And the Beat Goes On*

St. Matthew’s finds itself truly unfettered from the silos of scarcity and the serving of bricks and mortar, discovering that its very weakness and vulnerability offers a witness to the gospel that is authentic and accountable to a community hungering for hope. Now, we can reimagine sacred space and see our front porch as a fellowship hall, our living room as a classroom, our family room as a chapel, our kitchen and dining room as a place of holy listening, and our back room as an art studio and meeting space. The community has embraced us as one who comes alongside and not one who is separate from us. In essence, St. Matthew’s and its priest invite the greater community to help write its narrative with each conversation encounter and community partnership.

St. Matthew’s has been recognized in the Episcopal denomination for its courage and creativity and has captured the imagination of the surrounding area and

other congregations around us. The actual reality is that our wilderness journey *is* the promised land. Our story shows that there is always opportunity in any crisis when we offer God our love for the neighborhood and desire to serve through innovation. Twelve years later, we are innovating and reimagining our Episcopal witness to God's hospitality as we join the neighborhood as a partner and collaborator for love.

The story of Pentecost is a call for new wine to be placed in new wineskins. The church is dying to be reborn as it has since the beginning. We are in the death and resurrection business, for Christ's sake! If St. Matthew's has discovered anything, it is that a community is defined by how it loves and nurtures deep and abiding relationships in the world. Following Jesus into the neighborhood does not negate the need to care for the parish. When we embrace an urgency to reimagine what it means to be a parish for the community, the circle widens and includes everyone we meet, and we can genuinely "behold our parish" beyond the walls.