

Today feels to me like a transitional moment. It is my first Sunday back at All Saints Chapel after a summer of supply priests. It is the first Sunday back to the 11am service at Grace Church, the choir *is* back (!), we will be returning today to the use of the high altar, and it is our Kick-Off Sunday [complete with hot dogs]!

Individually, we have perhaps finished some traveling over the summer. The kids and grandkids are back in school. It has been scorching hot lately but we have occasionally been getting a little taste in the mornings of some of the coming cool. Some are sad to see summer go. Some are eagerly awaiting fall. Things are shifting.

For the Grace Church staff, parish leaders, and I, it is a time of looking ahead and making plans. We are working on hiring our first nursery worker since the pandemic began and working on other plans for young families. We are anticipating Bishop Harris' visit in November and working on a confirmation class. There are plans afoot for more fellowship gatherings, parishioner care efforts, special programs, Blessing of the Animals, our fall stewardship campaign, Halloween, and before you know it, we'll be thinking about Blessing of the Hounds. We are working on lots of lists. It is a busy time at church.

But we don't plan all these things at church just for the sake of being busy. Or for the staff and I to justify our existence and our salaries. Or to keep the business aspect of the church running for its own sake. We are trying to be a *community in Christ together*. That is no small thing. It takes a lot of thought and effort. And it is something none of us can do by ourselves.

However, we are definitely living in an unprecedented era where the *value* of what we are trying to do together is no longer obvious. In a recent book entitled *The Great Dechurching*, the authors are quoted as saying that more Americans have stopped participating in churches in the last 25 years than all the people who became Christians over the last 300 years from the First Great Awakening, the Second Great Awakening, and all the Billy Graham crusades. *This is now the largest change in church participation in American history.*

It is clear that the pandemic was a pivot point--and yet it did not create this change as much as accelerate a change that was already underway. It is clear that people have been disenchanted with church due to relentless church scandals, meanness, and partisan division.

But even those challenges actually are not the leading reasons. It turns out that when you really dig into the details, people are more likely to stop going to church due to very specific reasons, the leading ones being: moving to a new location, inconvenience, and because their friends aren't there. Which then begs the question—why has moving and convenience and not having all your friends at church now become such a large factor? Something larger is in play.

Apparently there is a larger systemic issue in which we are swept up in as a society. In a recent article entitled "The Misunderstood Reason Millions of Americans Stopped Going to Church", the writer says:

...the defining problem driving out most people who leave is ... just how American life works in the 21st century. Contemporary America simply isn't set up to promote mutuality, care, or common life. Rather, it is designed to maximize individual accomplishment as defined by professional and financial success. Such a system leaves precious little time or energy for forms of community that don't contribute to one's own professional life or, as one ages, the professional prospects of one's children. Workism reigns in America, and because of it, community in America, religious community included, is a math problem that doesn't add up.

In other words, even when people think they are making a personal and private choice to stop attending church—or even more likely, they just fade away without even deciding to--then they are being influenced by a

larger community that we don't even realize we belong to—a *social environment where spiritual community doesn't easily make sense anymore to prioritize.*

Our lives and our schedules can be so complicated. We can be so busy. Maybe we can hardly imagine spending an entire hour in church not being able to check our smart phones. We can be captivated by the illusion of community on the internet. And when we have a crisis in our lives then that can just compound our isolation.

And whether we realize it or not, our era is actively creating mental and technological environments where God no longer makes much sense anymore. Are we really going to need to even think about God anymore when we can be surrounded by all kinds of artificial intelligence that can do things for us and be our private companions?

Note: It is not that God actually does not make sense—it is that we are part of a way of thinking and being in the world that is more and more just all about us—and reflections of us in a mirror.

I am thinking so much about these kinds of things these days--as you can probably tell. But I'm not the only one either. Grace Church is well underway with the Renewal 2025 Task Force, as appointed by the Vestry. These meetings began in May and these parish leaders are also doing their own big thinking about our church and chapel...the neighborhoods where we live...and what has changed...and what we can do—conversations that normally we don't have the time or attention for. With gratitude, I want to name these leaders: Margaret Wachenfeld (chair), Cathy Bodkin, Tom Brubaker, Dick Crawford, Harry Gamble, Rachel Harrison, Elizabeth Longwell, Susan McShane, Breck Scalise, Fred Shackelford, and Reg Woods. Thank you for giving your time to these kinds of conversations! *Churches have to start thinking bigger thoughts if we want to continue as communities in Christ.*

[So I want you to realize at the chapel that even in your twice-monthly gatherings here, you are not just “going to church,” but you are caretakers of a community in Christ. And it is real--because you are still here. And it is worth taking care of—not only this building, but this little spiritual community. It matters that we gather with God.]

[So I want you to realize that when you are eating hot dogs shortly and browsing the many interesting ministry tables in the parish hall that this isn't just a “program”--but what is on display there is much of the heart of our efforts to be a community together—and it depends on you.

And all the many things that will start happening this fall, again, are not just “programs” that we do for their own sake, but ways we are intentionally trying to be a community together in Christ.

And every Sunday we livestream our services—we are trying to be a community together even when we cannot always be together.

You are not just “going to church” when you come here or turn On our livestream--we are caretakers of a community in Christ. And it is real because we keep making the effort to be together in all these different ways. And it is worth taking care of—not only this building and grounds, but this spiritual community. It matters that we gather with God.]