

**Pandemic, we can't go to church! But, does that stop us from being the church?!**

## **Who Is Your Church?**

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*It is common to think of church as a place where certain things happen. It is often seen as the source of religious and spiritual services designed to meet individuals' needs. When these notions are primary, a congregation can lose a sense of its connectedness and community. These notions lead to limited expectations and unsatisfactory participation patterns. Then, when we can't go to church, is all lost? We find ourselves in the midst of such a time. **Who is your church?***

It is interesting how the ways we talk about something can give insight into some of the assumptions and expectations that are operating in our behavior. It is very common to talk about, "going to church" or to ask, "what church do you go to?" In a similar fashion we "go to the store," "go to the club," and "are at the game or the movies." We do not talk about "going to the family," however. In fact, to use those words in connection with family sounds awkward and wrong.

We *are* family, *and* we *are* church. At first this may seem to be merely a clever observation about our use of words. But it is more than that. The shift in choice of words from, "I go to church" to "we are the church" implies some very different ways of thinking and then behaving.

Most of us in North Americans have grown up with an understanding of the church as a building or place where certain things happened in a predictable fashion and at certain times. Participation in the life of the church involved going to that place and participating in certain activities.

The dominant experience has been that of a voluntary association, organized and run by professional clergy. While laity may be involved in certain aspects, in most of our experience the primary responsibility for the ministry of the church has rested with the professionally trained clergy – the pastor or pastoral leader. There exists a clear and definite set of tasks that everyone (even those not involved with the church) 'knows' are clerical duties. The problem is that such a division can overlook the giftedness of the whole community, stimulate passivity and dependence, and restrict the scope and power of the church's ministry. This has served to reinforce assumptions and patterns of participation that find us going to church to receive the services provided by the trained few.

Instead, the church is, in reality, a gifted Christian community that is called and sent. It is a community where commitment, accountability, trust, openness, long-term relationships, and sacrifice are the standards that guide its life together.

**Reflect together on the life of your congregation in today's context.**

1. The church – “place?” or “program” or “a called people sent on a mission?” Which do you say? Why?
2. What role has past cultural forces had in shaping your church's understanding of itself as church? How do notions or understandings of church shape our experience (what we do and what we say) as the church?
3. We are NOW in the midst of a pandemic, and we can't go to church. As God's people, what have we lost? What have we not lost? How are we challenged to learn from this experience in this crisis? While not caused by God, is the Spirit providing us with the grace to embrace a deeper understanding of our identity and call?

**Bible Study: Making a connection**

The call to “*be the church*” assumes a particular kind of community, a community in which the Word of God is not only proclaimed, but also embodied in a life together where gifts are shared. What would such a community look like?

- Read *The Household of God* (See on the next page).
- What is the vision of the church proclaimed within this text?
- What do you appreciate about this vision? What is challenging about it?
- To what do you sense God may be calling your church now?
- To what extent are you experiencing church as described in the article now?
- What new ways of being church do you hope will continue?

## The Household of God:

Those who through faith “have been born anew to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead” (1 Peter 1:3), now become “living stones” of God’s household. The resurrection is not a private event that involved Jesus only. It is a public and world-wide event – the beginning of the “New Creation.” And the reality of this New Creation is made visible through the relationships, life, and structures of the household of God—the church.

Consider, for a moment, what God is doing. Although it may not be a familiar way of describing God, the Bible affirms that God is creating, redeeming, and sanctifying households. In ancient times, a household was not primarily defined by blood relationship, but by participation in the same fortunes, the same work, the same successes and failures, and the same dangers. The communal identity of early Christians was shaped by the reality that they were now “members of the household of faith” (Galatians 6:10). All believers, former Gentiles and Jews alike, were “members of the household of God” (Ephesians 2:19). And all believing households together constitute the one “household of God” (1 Timothy 3:15; Hebrews 3:6; 1 Peter 4:17).

The word “household” is associated with many images: parenthood, childhood, birth, adoption, brother- and sisterhood, familial love, and domestic service. Describing the church as “household of God” indicates a communal understanding of the Christian experience. Membership in this new household involves sharing in a common life held together by shared commitments and to the way of life in Christ. It is a way of life that does not make sense if lived apart. The Christian identity is distinctly a communal identity.

God’s household – the church – is to make visible to the world a distinctive way of life. Through its relationships of fraternal love, mutual respect, and humble service, the church proclaims the redemption of God’s creation in Jesus the Christ. It is the manifestation of God’s Dream.



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