

# The Playground—A New Vision of Church

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*“Move to the edges, if you dare, toward those rising sons and daughters who have long abandoned our houses of worship. Run toward the ones whom the Spirit has captivated in these latest of days—the young artists, and activists, with voices fresh and unorthodox, ready to prophecy. Do not do this selfishly, with the hopes that they will bail out a tired, old church. It is not about us. It is about them. Moreover, it is about transcending all notions of ‘us and them.’ ... it is about showing up to dance with God and all the folks God is bringing to her party.”<sup>1</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> Weird Church: Welcome to the Twenty-First Century, Beth Ann Estock and Paul Nixon, pg. 169

## Summary

We live in a time of seismic shifts in religion and in Christianity in particular. In such a times we must ask the question, what is church? St. Stephen's has the opportunity to look beyond the traditional model of church and dream about additional ways of being church that might connect with our larger community. Here I describe a vision of church as a playground-café-beergarden—a place where children, parents, and other adults might come to play, to be nourished, to build community, to engage in deep conversation, and to journey together. I invite you to dream with me.

## A New Vision of Church

What if people were invited to come tell what they already know of God instead of to learn what they are supposed to believe? What if they were blessed for what they are doing in the world instead of chastened for not doing more at church? What if church felt more like a way station than a destination? What if the church's job were to move people out the door instead of trying to keep them in, by convincing them that God needed them more in the world than in the church?"<sup>2</sup> (*Episcopal priest and author Barbara Brown Taylor*)

I am dreaming of a playground: a place to bring children where they can have fun, interact with each other, and play safely; a place where their parents can have a cup of coffee during the day and feed their children a simple meal at dinner time and have a beer or a glass of wine or a kombucha as they relax in the evening; a place where parents can connect with other parents as they watch their children play together. I am dreaming of a place where people create community: where neighbors get to know each other, where deep conversations are encouraged and invited, where support is offered, where there are opportunities for giving, where there is time to slow down from the hectic pace of life.

My hope is that this would be a place that would appeal to people of all ages, but it is most intentionally crafted for families. There are many places and activities in our community that families with young children cannot participate in and this can be isolating particularly during the stressful time of raising young children. This would aim to be a place tailored to the needs of families where they wouldn't have to worry about how much food is thrown on the ground, how loud their children are, or how much their children run around during dinner.

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<sup>2</sup> Leaving Church: A Memoir of Faith, pg. 222

As I talk to other parents, I hear again and again that some of the most important relationships in their lives were forged soon after having their children, in small support groups of one type or another. When my neighbor moved to Sebastopol from San Francisco after having her first child, she looked for mothers' groups. Her mother told her to check local churches. She found nothing. She wanted to connect with other parents, to make friends, to build community, to not be alone. We can offer such opportunities at The Playground.

From my own personal experience over the last four plus years of being a parent, I have been pleasantly surprised by how naturally conversation begins amongst parents as they watch their children play. We have so much in common as we navigate raising children. Such conversations are a great jumping off point for building community.

We have all experienced how naturally relationships evolve with those we interact with regularly, those who serve us at our local coffee shop, bar, restaurant, or deli. The baristas of Sebastopol have an opportunity to interact with and get to know wide swaths of our community. Such interactions provide an entry point for relationship, the question is how to move deeper from "hey, how's it going?"

I imagine the calendar of this place including somewhat organic opportunities for going deeper: maybe a time for folks interested in knitting to sit together and knit, a support group for parents of children on the spectrum, a breast feeding support group, a play group for stay at home parents, mommy and me yoga, a stay at home dads support group. Opportunities and small groups that would attract interested folks and create an opportunity for them to get to know one another in a deeper way.

I imagine posting quotes of the day from the Bible and other traditions, from individuals, and poetry—quotes that dig into spirituality, the sacred, the beauty of life, the work and challenge we are given to do in our lives. I can imagine such quotes being accompanied by a question to provoke reflection and hopefully conversation. I can imagine having specific events where donations are taken for particular non-profits in our community. And I hope to dream, with others, of other ways to encourage deep conversation in the midst of the noise and chaos of raising children.

I can imagine holding a service in our Outdoor Sacred Space once a month on a night that the playground restaurant is closed, a service that is constructed by those who attend it. It would probably look very different from our Sunday services but would aim to pull from the riches of our long tradition. Planning the service itself would be an opportunity for formation, as we dive into the depths of our tradition, and for community building, as we do the work of creating liturgy. It would be a service that would aim to nourish both children and adults. And then afterwards, I can imagine St. Stephen's hosting a dinner at the playground restaurant for all who attend.

The idea has been met with great enthusiasm as I have shared it with friends and parents of young children. Non-church folk are often surprised that a church would consider such a thing, but they are impressed and excited that we would. The idea of a place for families to play and eat and enjoy one another's company is enthusiastically embraced.

We have all been reminded countless times that church is not the building. Church is the people. But I think we've come to assume that "the people" refers to the people who meet in the building on Sunday for our traditional worship. How else might we understand "the people" who are the church? Estock and Nixon write,

Jesus invites us to meet and to dwell with people where they are. To listen deeply for the presence of God in their stories and to give witness to the sacrament of life unfolding around us with every breath we take. The relationship must not be commoditized as a means toward growing worship attendance or membership. A Jesus-style encounter is simply that—an encounter. Community for the sake of community! Jesus invites us to discover together the sacredness of this moment and to share that experience with others.

In God's counterculture we break bread together, we laugh and weep together, and we learn together until we finally arrive at a sense of one-another-ness, interconnectedness. The New Testament word for this is *koinonia*. We should note that in its ordinary Greek usage, it was not a religious word—it just meant "common table fellowship." Yet such community is often anything but common. It becomes transformational and holy when the Spirit of God shows up at the table.

When we truly show up to one another at common tables, in the power of the Holy Spirit, we become a healing balm for each other and the world around us. When we practice deep listening, we are changed—both us and our neighbors. The Spirit births in us new initiatives, new understandings, new possibilities, new hope. The word "shalom" seems to encapsulate this hope of wholeness for individuals, communities, and the whole world. As such community forms, others will be drawn into its magic and will in turn be more open to explore the depths of their own spirituality."<sup>3</sup>

Church is community. Church is an encounter. Church is people discovering the sacredness of the moment and sharing that discovery with one another. Church is deep listening. It is the transformation that comes as a result of the Spirit showing up in such relationships and encounters—transformation of the individuals involved and transformation of the world as a result of the transformation of the individual.

Phyllis Tickle also addresses this question. She writes, "Thus, when pinned down and forced to answer the question, 'What is Emergent or Emerging Church?' most who are will answer, 'A conversation,' which is not only true but which will always be true."<sup>4</sup> The

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<sup>3</sup> *Weird Church: Welcome to the Twenty-First Century*, pg. 21

<sup>4</sup> *The Great Emergence: How Christianity is Changing and Why*, pg. 153

question is how do we open up the conversation? How do we engage in this conversation, this deep listening, with our wider community? With our neighbors? With members of the generations that are least represented in our current church community?

## How The Playground is Church

On Epiphany with the arrival of the non-Jewish wise men at the manger, we celebrate that Jesus came for all humanity. The wise men were authentic spiritual seekers. The method that led them to God was stargazing. They teach us that there are many different paths to God, that each of us can tell of a distinct spiritual journey that has led us to where we currently are.

In his discussion of Matthew's account of the wise men<sup>5</sup>, Stephen Bauman reminds us that with Jesus there was no litmus test for seeking and that Jesus himself was eventually excluded from the list of accredited rabbis and teachers and condemned as an outsider. He writes,

The seeking that he [Jesus] advocated was a radical departure from status-quo thinking. This suggests an important corollary for today: any seeker, whether by chance or authentic pursuit, can find his or her way to the manger. Certainly the church would not exist but for the determination or simple of faith of seekers who stumbled into the hay surrounding Jesus' birthing trough... The musty sentimentality with which this story has been swathed for cradle Christians obscures the radical implications in God's condescension to humanity. Everyone has been invited to God's natal party, even those who have been traveling radically different paths on their search for their true home.<sup>6</sup>

This begs us look up from our own community worshipping within the walls and traditions of St. Stephen's to our wider community of Sebastopol and West County. Who else is on a spiritual journey? Who else might identify as an authentic spiritual seeker? How do we open ourselves to be in conversation with those seekers? How do we journey with them, learning from one another? While I experience West County to be very post-Christian, I do believe that there is a passion for spiritual seeking. Through the people of the wise men, our scriptures warn us against the risk that we might dismiss such seeking as stargazing, as incompatible with the journey we are on as a Christian Church.

The Rev. Anna Olson encourages churches to open themselves to their neighbors. She writes,

Many of our churches have lost track of where we are. We get tangled up in who we are, and what we are doing, and worse yet, how we are doing. When we do peek out, it looks like a foreign land out there. Like the exiles of Jeremiah's time, we are tempted to hunker down and seek out ways to stay who we are, in spite of where we are. But Jeremiah's prophecy (Jeremiah 29:4-7) rejects this approach. Don't hunker down, he says; don't wait for conditions to become more favorable. Be where you are. Be there

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<sup>5</sup> Matthew 2:1-12

<sup>6</sup> Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year C, Volume 1, pg. 214

fully. Be with the people who are there with you. So where are you? Who is there with you? What are the neighbors up to?<sup>7</sup>

We are part of a wider community that values community, a community that values children, a community that values food and coffee and beer and wine both as art forms and because of the way in which they gather us. We are a community that values our earth, our land, the beauty of this place in which we live.

St. Stephen's is blessed with four beautiful acres in West Sonoma County. We have in recent years begun to invest in our land. We have created our Outdoor Sacred Space so that we and all who pass through our land might be able to worship and sit with God in the beauty of creation, a welcoming entrance to those who come on foot, a food forest to feed all (human and critter) who pass through our land, and a labyrinth which offers the opportunity for meditation and prayer for all who wish to walk it. Already our neighborhood uses our land as an informal park for walks with one another and their dogs.

The Playground would provide a space for community to gather together on the land in the midst of these spiritual practices and opportunities. I have heard the voice of the congregation express our wish to open our land to our neighbors and larger community. This vision of church would be taking a next step as we open the life of St. Stephen's to our neighbors, as we invite them into relationship with us, provide a space for them to build relationships with one another, and an opportunity for us to journey together.

Episcopal priest Joseph Stewart-Sicking writes,

...all spiritual companionship is characterized by a special form of friendship that offers a space of freedom in which we can be honestly ourselves and explore our deepest spiritual longings... This system could be realized in many contexts in contemporary society, not just congregations. I wonder whether some of the most enriching spiritual conversations going on right now might be in brewing clubs or mom's groups.<sup>8</sup>

Dwight Zscheile writes,

Open spaces are public environments for community life and gathering that are recognized by the neighborhood to be shared and accessible to them... the purpose of open spaces is not primarily to transition neighbors into church activities, programs, and membership. It is to form community, to serve neighborhood needs, and to learn.<sup>9</sup>

We must seek spaces in which to break bread together, even at tables that are unfamiliar to us. In these encounters are often sacred moments. Sometimes we won't know exactly what words to say. We won't have quick answers to our neighbors' questions. What matters more is our willingness to go and to stay with them, to listen,

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<sup>7</sup> Claiming Resurrection in the Dying Church: Freedom beyond Survival, Anna Olson, pg. 29

<sup>8</sup> Spiritual Friendship after Religion: Walking with People while the Rules are Changing, pgs. 28&32

<sup>9</sup> The Agile Church: Spirit-Led Innovation in an Uncertain Age, pgs. 99-100

and to share our own lived experience of the risen Jesus. This experience is embodied in our persons and relationships, in our words, and in our way of life.<sup>10</sup>

Might we provide a place, a community, “where people gain a feel for how God shows up—not only in Holy Bibles and Holy Communion but in near neighbors, mysterious strangers, sliced bread, and grocery store wine?”<sup>11</sup> Might such a community help people to “connect their personal stories and the world’s story to God’s story?”<sup>12</sup>

We can offer such a space. St. Stephen’s can be such a space. A space to form community, to serve the needs of our neighbors, a space of learning, a space of deep enriching conversations, where people can explore their deepest spiritual longings, where we can gain a feel for how God shows up, where we might work together on connecting our own stories with God’s story.

In fact, St. Stephen’s already *is* such a space. But this vision would open up the opportunity to participate in such a space, such a community to a much larger swath of our community. Most people in our community are never going to walk through the front doors of St. Stephen’s and into our sanctuary. They just are not. Our Sunday services are not what they are looking for. And they wouldn’t think to look there. It’s not even a question of opening up a side door into our community. The question is how do we crack ourselves open? How do we open ourselves up to our larger community? Open ourselves to interacting with and serving our larger community? How might we provide a space for a different type of church, a new type of community to form? How to we create the opportunity to journey alongside our neighbors even as we travel different paths?

The goal of this new vision of church is NOT to feed new people into our Sunday services. If that happens, great! But that is not the goal. Our Sunday services are not the only way to be and do church. Beth Ann Estock and Paul Nixon write that it is not about enticing people to come to church on Sunday morning, “Rather it is about reconfiguring church as a platform for creating environments for convening and supporting groups that want to grow spiritually and learn more about Jesus both virtually and in real time<sup>13</sup>.”

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<sup>10</sup> The Agile Church: Spirit-Led Innovation in an Uncertain Age, pg. 148

<sup>11</sup> Leaving Church: A Memoir of Faith, Barbara Brown Taylor, pg. 165

<sup>12</sup> The Agile Church: Spirit-Led Innovation in an Uncertain Age, pg. 29

<sup>13</sup> Weird Church: Welcome to the Twenty-First Century, pgs. 65-66



## The Hope of This Vision of Church

The hope or goal of The Playground would not necessarily be to make more Christians. Theologian Marcus Borg tells of a Christian seeker asking the Dalai Lama whether she should become Buddhist. Borg paraphrases the Dalai Lama's response, "No, become more deeply Christian; live more deeply into your own tradition." Borg then quotes Huston Smith who makes the same point with the metaphor of digging a well, "if what you're looking for is water, better to dig one well sixty feet deep than to dig six wells ten feet deep." Borg concludes, "By living more deeply into our own tradition as a sacrament of the sacred, we become more centered in the one to whom the tradition points and in whom we live and move and have our being."<sup>14</sup>

The hope of The Playground would be to create the opportunity and community in which we might each work on digging our wells deeper. Some of those wells would indeed be Christian wells and others would not be, but that does not prevent us from helping one another dig.

Brian McLaren writes, "Now I believe evangelism means inviting people into heart-to-heart communion and collaboration with God and neighbors in the great work of healing the earth, of building community, of seeking first the kingdom of God and God's justice for all."<sup>15</sup> The goal would be the deep conversations. The goal would be journeying together in our individual transformations and in our partnered transformation of the world.

Each individual would engage The Playground in her/his own way and to varying depths of engagement but, in reality, the same is true of the way individuals engage our current model of church. In their materials, the College for Congregational Development states,

"A congregation is a place that houses and shapes a dynamic movement between stages of faith development. When healthy, a congregation both accepts people where they are and creates an environment in which people are invited into a more mature practice of their faith..."<sup>16</sup>

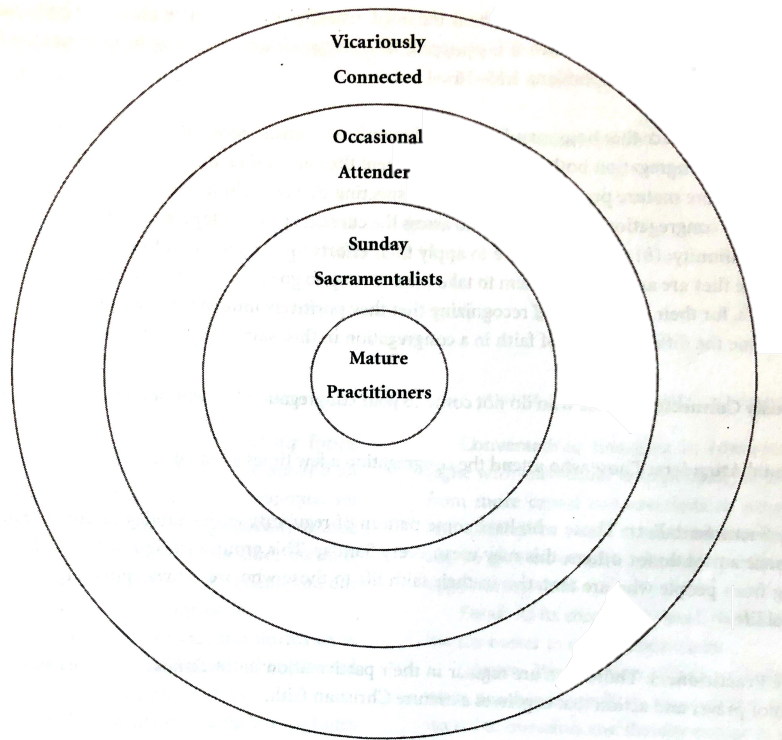
Visually this looks like the following:

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<sup>14</sup> The Heart of Christianity: Rediscovering a Life of Faith, pg. 223

<sup>15</sup> The Great Spiritual Migration: How the world's largest religion is seeking a better way to be Christian, pg. 175

<sup>16</sup> Model 3: Faith Development in Community (<https://www.cdcollege.org/>)



**Vicariouly Connected:** Those who do not come to your congregation but who somehow think of it as “theirs.” For us, these might be neighbors who walk our land daily with their dogs. It might also be those who attend 12-Step or other meetings on our property on a weekly or multiple time per week basis. Or maybe even the Joyful Noise Choir who rehearses in our sanctuary on Sunday afternoons.

**Occasional Attenders:** Those who attend the congregations a few times a year, often Christmas and Easter.

**Sunday Sacramentalists:** Those who have some pattern of regularity at the Sunday Eucharist. For some this may mean once a month; for others, this may mean every Sunday. This group is mixed in terms of faith development, ranging from people who are tentative in their faith life to those who are actively pursuing going deeper in their spiritual life.

**Mature Practitioners:** Those who are regular in their participation in the Sunday Eucharist and have developed a pattern of prayer and action that expresses a mature Christian faith.

The same concept would hold true for The Playground. The **Vicariously Connected** might never stop in but still might walk the land and observe the goings on. The **Occasional Attenders** might stop by for the occasional coffee or beer but do not really make it a regular haunt nor really begin to form community with those who attend regularly. The **Sunday Sacramentalists** in this case might be those who come for food or drink or play on a regular basis. They are forming community and engaging in deep conversation. While the **Mature Practitioners** not only attend regularly, form community, engage in deep conversation but also are actively working to dig their well deeper. They are searching for ways to dig deeper and taking leadership in the The Playground community.

The goal both in the congregation and in The Playground is to meet people where they are, to invite them to go deeper together, and to nurture those who are mature practitioners, for their own sake and recognizing that they positively influence the whole<sup>17</sup>.

This idea of The Playground is disorienting for those of us accustomed to the traditional church. Church is about gathering with a bunch of similar-minded people and worshipping the same God. We may not agree on all the specifics, but we assume we all agree or hold dear some of the more general concepts or practices.

Evangelical authors Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch write that the missional church, ...will leave its own religious zones and live comfortably with non-church goers, seeping into the host culture like salt and light. It will be an infiltrating, transformational community...<sup>18</sup>

The goal is not to be deceptive or to force transformation, but instead to create the opportunity for the formation of community for those in search of transformation. We have the opportunity to leave our religious zones and live comfortably with non-church goers. Most of us already do this in our personal lives—in our places of work, or school, with family and with friends. This would be the church creating a space that reflects the diversity our world and invites us all to go deeper and journey together.

Gautama Buddha advises, “Seek not to follow in the footsteps of the men of old; rather, seek what they sought.” This new vision of church *looks* quite different from our current manifestation. It does not follow in the same footsteps. But at its heart, I believe this space and community will provide our larger community the opportunity to seek what we have long been seeking at St. Stephen’s: a deeper relationship with or understanding of our Creator, of the Divine; relationship with one another, community; and transformation of self and community.

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<sup>17</sup> Model 3: Faith Development in Community (<https://www.cdcollege.org/>)

<sup>18</sup> The Underground Church: Reclaiming the subversive way of Jesus, pg. 237

## Tradition and Innovation

The small glimpse of the life of the church that each of us is granted in our life spans can create the illusion that things do not change. Many of us love to worship with the same words we learned as children. But when we take a step back, we realize that even in our relatively short life spans we have seen much change in the church: perhaps a new prayer book, or new supplementary material, the ordination of women, the consecration of openly gay bishops, the marriage and blessing of same sex couples.

Liturgically, the church has a long and lovely tradition of reaching into its deep bag of liturgical practices and traditions and pulling out old ones that have not been used in decades or more and putting them back into practice while retiring or retooling those that have been in more recent practice. In reality, and this can be hard for those of us who love what we love, the church is in continual flux, continual change, the church is on a journey.

I am proposing that we engage in building The Playground community *in addition to* the current life and community of St. Stephen's. As I said early on, I believe St. Stephen's to be a healthy, vibrant, joyous, and generous community where lives are being transformed and we are working to transform our world. I believe that there exist opportunities for us to engage with our larger community in this work of individual and communal transformation.

As Jesus uses metaphors to teach his disciples about the kingdom of heaven, he instructs them, *'Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.'*<sup>19</sup>

Speaking of tradition versus innovation, Dwight Zcheile writes,

It must be a both/and. We are called to bring forth treasures new and old. The answer today is not to hold on to existing forms of church life and practice unyieldingly when they no longer function well, nor is it to jettison established patterns wholesale. It is a matter of careful discernment, the cultivation by Christian leaders of the treasures of the tradition and a community's life so as to invite people into life-changing discipleship and witness. It is also a matter of *translation*—recognizing that the gospel always comes embedded in cultural forms, and as the cultural context changes, the shape if the church's life and witness too must change. This is the deep logic of incarnation.<sup>20</sup>

St. Stephen's has much to offer. We have a heart and passion for our wider community. We are gifted with land. We have trained clergy who are also passionate about engaging our community. As it turns out, your priest feels called to both traditional

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<sup>19</sup> Matthew 13:52

<sup>20</sup> The Agile Church: Spirit-Led Innovation in an Uncertain Age, pg. 8

church and to something more, to something new. I believe this is part of my vocation, part of my calling. We also have to offer an expansive faith journey. The Episcopal Church on the local and global level has had to learn the challenging lesson of how to stay in relationship when we don't all believe the same thing. This is part of who we already are and we can offer to our larger community that struggles to stay together in the face of difference. We need not all believe the same things nor practice the same ways in order to journey together.

Dwight Zscheile writes,

New innovation initiatives must borrow from established organizations if they are to thrive. Borrowing happens on multiple levels. The most basic is resources—whether funding, people, facilities, community connections, or other assets. The blessing of innovating within an established organization is that you aren't starting from scratch; you have resources and momentum upon which to build. Wisdom, traditions, and practices all constitute treasures that can be shared with the new innovation that is emerging.<sup>21</sup>

We have resources and we have wisdom, traditions, and practices we can share and make available to the birth of something new.

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<sup>21</sup> The Agile Church: Spirit-Led Innovation in an Uncertain Age, pgs. 115-116

## We've Already Begun the Journey!

When St. Stephen's called me as their rector, I was not yet 30 years old. I did not quite have the five years of experience they asked for. And I was the first woman to be called as rector in their 53 years of existence. Just my being called as rector of St. Stephen's says something about who the community of St. Stephen's is—people willing to step into the unknown and trust and follow the call of the Spirit. Over these past nine years with the congregation, numerous members of the community have reflected with me how rightly placed that trust was.

During this time, we have built upon the health of the congregation growing it in attendance, finances, and its life and outreach. I inherited a congregation that loves worshipping with a wide breadth of music and we have added more chant and paperless music to that repertoire. Likewise, St. Stephen's already enjoyed non-1979 Prayer Book liturgies and I have greatly increased the sources from which we draw our liturgies. Our music and liturgy seek to draw from a wealth of resources and a wealth of images of God and ways of expressing our story. This diversity helps to reach folks who feel disconnected from, or hurt by, the language and ways our story has traditionally been told.

At the same time we have enhanced our worship, we have transformed our four-acre property. In the past five years, we have created an impressive Outdoor Sacred Space where we worship in the warm months, we have opened up the fence that lined the front of our property and created a large and gracious Welcome Gate and planted food forest which will provide food to all who pass by, and we have built an accessible a 40 foot outdoor labyrinth that will never be behind lock and key. This revitalization of our property is outward facing with the goal of connecting with our larger community—welcoming them onto our land and providing sacred spaces and sacred practices that connect with our larger non-churched community and provide places of connection for our church community with our larger community.

We believe that even if we are not traveling the same path or even aiming for the same end point, we can journey together along the way. Our new labyrinth is a physical embodiment of that belief and hope. In fact, I am learning that many folks in our area are unaware of the Christian tradition of labyrinths and are quite surprised to find that a spiritual practice they practice or are open to is part of the Christian tradition! The Playground is in many ways a natural next step in this effort to journey together outside traditional church community.

While we as a congregation have been engaging in this journey of transformation, I also began the journey that led to the vision of The Playground during my maternity leave and Sabbatical from August of 2017 through February of 2018. My sabbatical had two

prongs. The first was to read some of the many books<sup>22</sup> I have been purchasing, specifically books about this moment of dramatic change in the life of the church. The second prong was to intentionally connect with my demographic of parents of young children. I attended exercise classes with Gabriel in his stroller, mama and me yoga classes, mini music classes, and toddler reading times at the library. I have continued with a number of these communities and have since become involved in Alma's preschool.

My reading helped me to know that I was not alone in my conviction that church attendance and participation in this country has greatly shifted. It surrounded me with academics, clergy, and Christians who are thinking about this shift—what caused it and what we're experiencing—and who are wrestling with how we move forward from here. At the same time, my family and I realized and acknowledged that our sweet spot for enjoying one another's company, relaxing, and connecting with others is catching an early dinner at a local brewery or taproom. As we feed our kids, chat with each other and enjoy a beer, we find that other families of young children surround us.

On a particularly memorable evening as we sat at Crooked Goat Brewing holding my then two week-old son, we chatted with another couple who it turned out had had their second child in the same hospital as I did a few hours before I did. As we watched our older children run and play and tried to keep them out of the parking lot, they told us that closer to San Francisco there are breweries and bars that have playgrounds for kids to play as adults watch them and spend time with one another. It was there that the idea of The Playground was born. I was still fairly new to the easy and organic connection that parents have with one another. We have so much in common in the early challenges of raising children that it is remarkably easy to strike up a conversation. And parents of my generation, in general, want to be able to continue going out to enjoy food and drink. But we want to do so somewhere that works well for our children—somewhere they are safe to play and enjoy themselves, or at the very least are not underfoot. This is really hard to find.

My colleague group, spiritual director, and other friends and colleagues encouraged me to take this wild dream seriously—this dream of a playground-beergarden-café as church. After all, church is community. Church is an encounter. Church is people discovering the sacredness of the moment and sharing that discovery with one another.

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<sup>22</sup> [The Great Emergence: How Christianity is Changing and Why](#) by Phyllis Tickle, [The Agile Church: Spirit-Led Innovation in an Uncertain Age](#) by Dwight Zscheile, [Claiming Resurrection in the Dying Church: Freedom Beyond Survival](#) by Anna Olson, [Weird Church: Welcome to the Twenty-First Century](#) by Paul Nixon & Beth Ann Estock, [Spiritual Friendship after Religion: Walking with People while the Rules are Changing](#) by Joseph Stewart-Sicking & Diana Butler Bass, [Leaving Church: A Memoir of Faith](#) by Barbara Brown Taylor, [An Altar in the World: A Geography of Faith](#) by Barbara Brown Taylor, [The Great Spiritual Migration: How the World's Largest Religion is Seeking a Better Way to be Christian](#) by Brian McLaren, [The Underground Church: Reclaiming the Subversive Way of Jesus](#) by Robin Meyers

Church is deep listening. It is the transformation that comes as a result of the Spirit showing up in such relationships and encounters—transformation of the individuals involved and transformation of the world as a result of the transformation of the individual.

As this conviction and dream grew within me, I began to intentionally prepare the community of St. Stephen's. Together we read and discussed Phyllis Tickle's The Great Emergence: How Christianity is Changing and Why and Marcus Borg's The Heart of Christianity: Rediscovering a Life of Faith.

I have been preaching on the changes going on within Christianity in our country since I began at St. Stephen's but after my sabbatical, such sermons became more frequent. Our scriptures are full of the promise that God is not done with us; that God is always up to new things; that God delights in destroying our expectations in the creation of life that is bigger and better than we could ever imagine. I found it hard to resist preaching on such passages, as I am sure many St. Stephen's members have noticed.

As we have developed our land and moved toward creating The Playground, I've been very intentional about seeking opportunities to make St. Stephen's and myself, as the rector of St. Stephen's, more visible and known in our community. I use these opportunities to attempt to shatter what most people seem to expect being a Christian means and looks like and to demonstrate that following Jesus can look a lot less stuffy and a lot more inclusive, loving, and progressive than they might expect.

- I wrote articles for our local newspaper for a couple years between my two pregnancies.
- I spoke at the local women's march organized by a few of our parishioners in January of 2018 (while wearing then five month old Gabriel).
- In May of 2019, my photograph alongside a parishioner who helped to organize the Women's Right to Choose Rally in the town plaza, was on the cover of our local paper.
- In August of the same year, I was asked to speak on our local public radio station about the statement made by our National Cathedral which refers to each person's sacred identity as a child of God and calls all of us to fulfill our baptismal covenant in working for peace and justice and standing up for the dignity of every human being.
- In September of 2019, St. Stephen's hosted an Interfaith Celebration of International Peace Day in our Outdoor Sacred Space. With three hundred people in attendance, six communities of faith helped to lead the service and after the service ten local groups working for peace in a wide variety of ways had tables and invited folks to engage in long and short term actions for peace.
- A photo of my blessing our new labyrinth along with a lovely article about the labyrinth made the cover in October of 2019.



- The week after the labyrinth article, the paper included an article I wrote about the way in which the communion of saints was embodied in our community's response to the most recent fire and evacuations.
- On the Winter Solstice we hosted a sunset labyrinth walk attended by 49 people. About one third to half of them were parishioners and the other half or more were not St. Stephen's parishioners.

St. Stephen's is becoming better known in our community and, perhaps most importantly, known for the ways in which our beliefs and work for justice in the world intersect with the beliefs and hopes of our wider community. We are providing opportunities for spiritual practice that connect with our larger community and we have articulated our desire to journey with those who are on different journeys, heading toward different destinations. We are well poised to engage in the vision of The Playground—to invite our neighbors to journey with us, to share their journeys with us, and together to dig our wells deeper.

## What Has Been Done So Far?

In April of 2019, I shared the vision of The Playground with our vestry and they unanimously and enthusiastically endorsed the idea. We decided that we should take more time to gather information about the logistics before presenting it to the congregation.

I shared this vision with new bishop, the Rt. Rev. Megan Traquair, when she visited our congregation in August of 2019 and she enthusiastically supports us moving forward (as did our prior bishop, the Rt. Rev. Barry Beisner).

In March of 2019, I attended a Missional Leadership Discernment Retreat for New Episcopal Communities (<https://episcopalchurch.org/new-episcopal-communities>). I have since been connected to this work in the Episcopal Church across the church. I applied for, and in November of 2019 we received, a discernment grant of five thousand dollars from the New Episcopal Communities Task Force of the Episcopal Church. I applied for the next grant, called The Seed Grant, in November of 2019 and we should hear back in February. This grant is for up to \$30,000. Our being a grant recipient connects me with a community of folks starting New Episcopal Communities, with mentoring, and with opportunities for conversation and learning.

In October of 2019, I submitted a pre-application to Sebastopol City Planning and attended a pre-application meeting on January 9<sup>th</sup>, 2020 with the director and associate director of planning, the interim building director, the fire chief, the police chief, the city attorney/manager, the city engineer, and the superintendent of public works. There will be many details and requirements that we will have to work through as we move forward with this vision. I imagine that our two largest hurdles will be the overall cost of the project and making sure that the neighborhood is on board. For zoning purposes, we will be seeking a conditional use permit for our zoning type which will require notification of our neighbors and public hearings. I look forward to reaching out to our neighborhood and having conversations in the very near future!

## Next Steps

On Sundays, February 2<sup>nd</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> we will hold congregational conversations about The Playground vision during coffee hour. These will be led and facilitated by Caroline McCall who is the Director of Field Education and Assistant Professor of Congregational Studies at Church Divinity School of the Pacific in Berkeley. Our Annual Meeting will be Sunday, February 23<sup>rd</sup> during coffee hour and we will likely use some portion of that to continue these conversations.

This winter we will begin to plan the installation of the playground itself (as in the traditional sense of the word— the play opportunities that will be available to children). It is my hope that we will be able to create a “Waldorf style” playground, and less of a play structure, as there are no public playgrounds of this style available in our community. We would build this playground in the open space between the Outdoor Sacred Space and the Seed Garden. It will have picnic tables for seating and some sort of fence to define the space.

In the spring we will plan to launch phase one of The Playground with weekly or regular alcohol event licenses (one license per event, not an ongoing license) and food trucks around the playground we have constructed. Over the spring and summer we will build momentum and awareness of The Playground.

During this time, we will be researching plans and costs associated with constructing/purchasing a modular kitchen that would be placed by the playground from which food and drink can be sold. In order for us to sell wine and beer and have children present, we must also provide food from a permanent (non-mobile) kitchen.

Phase two of The Playground is when we have secured a conditional use permit from City Planning for operating The Playground and an on-sale restaurant wine and beer license and are ready to serve food from the on-site permanent modular kitchen. Once this happens we would slowly over time increase hours of operation, adding coffee and breakfast and lunch during the day and additional evenings of operation.

There are still many questions to be answered and details to be worked out as this process progresses.

I invite you to join in our conversations in February. Please pray. Please listen deeply. Please consider: What about this vision excites you? What scares you? What do you imagine? Where do you sense the Spirit might calling our community?

## Addendum

### The State of the Church in General

We all know that church attendance in the United States is on the decline. Many of our closest family and friends do not count church as one of their practices or as one of their communities. In 2007, 78.4% of U.S. adults identified with Christian groups, seven years later in 2014, that percentage had fallen to 70.6%<sup>23</sup>. The largest declines have been in the mainline Protestant tradition (which includes the Episcopal Church) and in the Roman Catholic tradition. Mainline Protestants represented 14.7% of U.S. adults in 2014, down from 18.1% in 2007<sup>24</sup>.

We feel this change even more acutely in West Sonoma County. Our community is no longer oriented toward church attendance. Those of us who attend are the exception, the outliers. Our own Ethan Wesselkamper recently shared about a conversation that took place in one of his classes at Analy High School in which a student asked to discuss whether it should be legal to be born into a religion. She argued that if you are unable to choose your beliefs you shouldn't have any forced on you. Ethan raised his hand and spoke to being raised in the church and another girl shared something similar after him. Ethan writes, "[Her] comments made me feel better about what I had said, because if you are religious, you are a minority in our local school system. It is kind of surprising. The teacher then asked how many of us considered ourselves religious. Very few students raised their hands, a few said they had gone to church when they were younger but no longer did, and all those who had spoken about the immorality of being born into a religion were atheists."

American Religion author Phyllis Tickle argues that every 500 years an enormous shift occurs within Christianity.<sup>25</sup> She compares this shift to a rummage sale where Christianity as we know it cracks open, exposing all the parts and each one is examined. Some are discarded, perhaps saved for some later time period, some are kept, new pieces are acquired, and old pieces, family heirlooms, are brought out of storage and reincorporated. These pieces include worship, belief, practice, worldview, and faith. These huge shifts within the Church line up with shifts in wider culture.

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<sup>23</sup> <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/05/12/5-key-findings-u-s-religious-landscape/>

<sup>24</sup> *ibid*

<sup>25</sup> The Great Emergence: How Christianity is Changing and Why, pg. 16-17

Tickle argues that the result of the rummage sale is two fold: the birthing of “a brand-new expression of its faith”<sup>26</sup> and practice and a grand refurbishment of the older faith and practice. The last rummage sale was the Great Reformation. Out of it Protestantism was birthed and the Roman Catholic Church went through the Counter Reformation and was greatly changed. We are now at another 500-year mark. Episcopal priest Dwight Zscheile argues that, “the central challenge facing churches today is rediscovering who they are in a society that has in many ways rejected Christianity.”<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> *ibid*

<sup>27</sup> The Agile Church, pg. 5

## The State of St. Stephen's

In the last seven and a half years, since you called me to serve as your rector in March of 2011, St. Stephen's has grown. There are many metrics for growth—the most common is the Average Sunday Attendance. Using this metric, our growth was greater in the first five years and has slowed in the last few years and saw a decrease in 2017 and 2018.

Year	Average Sunday Attendance
2010	57
2011	68
2012	75
2013	81
2014	81
2015	84
2016	85
2017	80
2018	77
2019	<i>Pending</i>

Another metric for growth is finances. Over the eight years we have seen an increase total plate and pledge with a peak in 2016. In 2017, this amount decreased and held steady for 2018. We are budgeting a \$20,000 decrease in plate and pledge for 2019. Meanwhile, expenses have slowly increased as we have increased salaries and paid more for land and building maintenance.

Pledge Year	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
# of pledges	53	56	57	59	60	55	61
Year end received pledges	\$124,356	\$142,842	\$157,324.08	\$172,283.98	\$158,215	\$175,233	\$162,942*
Givers of record**	\$9,602	\$22,696.50	\$19,723	\$44,185.00	\$41,210.00	\$28,224.00	\$22,580*
Plate offering***	\$5,517.66	\$6,079.05	6,789.75	\$5,396.63	\$7,820.01	\$5,787.23	\$5,400*
Plate & Pledge Total	<b>\$139,475.66</b>	<b>\$171,617.70</b>	<b>\$183,836.83</b>	<b>\$221,865.61</b>	<b>\$207,245</b>	<b>\$209,244.23</b>	<b>\$190,922*</b>
Total Expenses	\$159,857	\$179,851.54	\$193,934.48	\$209,608.61	\$224,946.19	\$256,731.05	\$276,311*

<b>Year End Balance</b>	(\$20,455)	\$55	\$8,324	\$20,197	\$5,015	(\$14,590.93)	(\$22,654)*
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*\*This amount pledged for 2019, not yet a year-end actual*

*\*\*Givers of record are all who give to the church and are tracked but do not make a pledge commitment*

*\*\*\*Plate is donations that are given without a name attached to them*

I am aware that our pledge income disproportionately depends upon large and generous commitments from older parishioners and I do not see newer or younger member pledges beginning to replace those pledges.

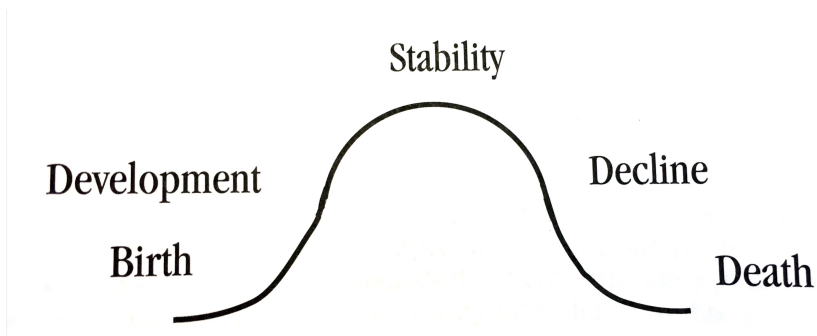
In terms of the life and energy of the congregation, we have seen great growth. Since my arrival at St. Stephen's, the life of St. Stephen's has grown, deepened, and expanded. We have added new activities and community building activities such as Advent wreath making, the celebration of St. Nicholas, camping trips, our Shrove Tuesday pancake supper, and potluck coffee hours. Our Winter Banquet continues to be a huge hit. We have continued to enrich ourselves and deepen our faith by engaging in formation opportunities: evening soup suppers and studies, Sunday Shares, centering prayer, and book group. And we continue to serve our wider community in working for mercy and justice. Our newer ministries and activities include the shelter during the fires, our Saturday Table lunch for those who are hungry, Palestinian Olive Oil and Equal Exchange sales, attendance and representation at marches and protests, and our support of Laguna High School's art program. We are alive and vibrant. What concerns me is that I am finding it increasingly difficult to find volunteers to serve in our various ministries. This leads me to a mode of conservation—asking what is absolutely necessary—rather than a mode of expansion.

That said, I do believe St. Stephen's to be a healthy, vibrant, joyous, and generous community. We continue to receive newcomers who are delighted to find us and call us their church home. We continue to be active and to serve our community. And we are blessed with a very generous investment fund that is currently valued at over one million dollars. This enormous blessing made possible by the estate gifts of four previous parishioners means not only that we have a financial cushion but also that we have the opportunity to dream big. We are not running out of funds. Instead, we are stewards of a huge blessing. Part of the question we will be facing in coming years is how to best steward, best use, and best grow those funds for the work and ministry of St. Stephen's now and in the years to come.

The typical life cycle of any group moves from birth, through development, to stability, and then onward to decline, and ultimately death.<sup>28</sup>

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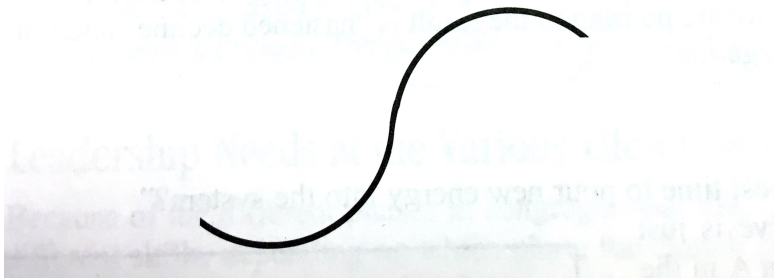
<sup>28</sup> How to Hit the Ground Running, Neal Michell, pg. 18



However, before the eventuality of death sets in, churches can renew or prolong their life by giving birth before the active dying phase sets in. It looks graphically like this.



What results is what many would call an “S-curve.”

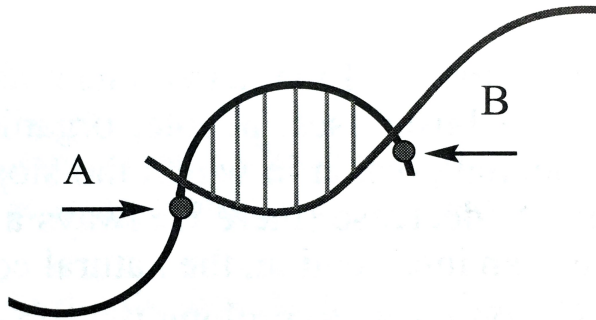


A typical S-curve has an exponential portion in which the slope, representing growth, increases. At some point, the slope begins to decrease (there is always a downturn), and the curve then begins to round off. Unless there is an intervention, the natural course of life is to reach a peak, decline, and eventually to die. I believe that St. Stephen’s is currently near the peak and beginning to move toward decline.



The way to prolong the life of the organization, the only way to prevent decline is to start a new S-curve. Thus, the organization must continually reinvent itself in order to avoid the decline and death that are natural to the uninterrupted life cycle.

The challenge is when to start the new S-curve. When things are going well, there seems to be no reason to change. Life is stable. But in fact, the best time to start a new S-curve is at the very point that things are still on their way up (point A).



## The Sigmoid Curve

There are a number reasons to start the new S-curve before the plateau. It takes a certain amount of time and resources for the new change to set in. The later you start the new S-curve, the more energy it takes to overcome the forces of decline. It takes more energy to start something new once in decline (point B)—attendance is down, people are discouraged, morale is low, resources are scarcer.

I do not believe we are yet at point B. We are still quite healthy and hopeful. In fact, I am going into all this detail about church growth precisely because I know that it may be a challenge for some members of our community to believe that we do in fact need to do anything new. As we continue to have new people join our community, it is easy for us to feel that all is well and that as long as we keep doing what we are doing well, we don't need to try anything different. I am making the case both that we do need to try something new AND that God is calling us to try something new. Being good stewards of the gifts God has given us—our church community, our land, and our finances—

requires us to look up from the day to day and to dream about where we are going and what new things God might be calling us into.

John Phillip Newells writes,

The walls of Western Christianity are collapsing. In many parts of the West, that collapse can only be described as seismic...there are three main responses or reactions to this collapse. The first is to deny that it is happening. The second is to frantically try to shore up the foundations of the old thing. The third, which I invite us into, is to ask what is trying to be born that requires a radical re-orientation of our vision. What is the new thing that is trying to emerge from deep within us and from deep within the collective soul of Christianity?<sup>29</sup>

Episcopal priest and seminary professor Dwight Zscheile writes that,

Churches face dramatically changing cultural surroundings in which established patterns of Christian life and witness no longer connect with many people in the neighborhood. Forming and restoring community with these neighbors for the sake of Christian witness and service requires learning new ways of embodying and communicating the gospel. This work demands much from us and can seem daunting. In the face of this challenge, many churches seem to be making the bigger mistake of simply doing what they've always done, even if it isn't connecting deeply with their neighbors—and sometimes their own members—rather than risking learning and growing...<sup>30</sup>

The church has spent a generation trying various technical fixes to address the decline of membership and institutional influence, while the trends have only continued and grown more widespread. For the most part, it has yet to address the deeper cultural currents at work, currents that undermine the assumptions and practices around which many churches have built their lives. Such assumptions and practices functioned well in embodying and communicating Christian faith for earlier generations in many ways. Those elders comprise the majority of the membership of many congregations, and their faithfulness is to be praised. They have much to teach us. Yet if local churches are to have a future today, space must be made for new expressions of Christian life and witness to take shape in the native cultures of new generations and populations.<sup>31</sup>

The cultural currents of our nation, and even more so of West County, do not flow toward the church. We live in a post-Christian community. This is best evidenced by the number of people who now attend church, the cultural fluency with the church and the Bible, the abundance of activities that now occur on Sunday mornings, and even our own farmer's market that takes place downtown while we are worshipping on Sunday morning. We live in an area that values spirituality, diversity, and inclusion and struggles with the way the church has traditionally presented Christianity as *the* way. Technical fixes—a more attractive sanctuary or more contemporary music or dropping

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<sup>29</sup> [The Rebirthing of God](#), introduction

<sup>30</sup> [The Agile Church: Spirit-Led Innovation in an Uncertain Age](#), pg. x

<sup>31</sup> [The Agile Church: Spirit-Led Innovation in an Uncertain Age](#), pg. xii

the creed—will appeal to some and can be important for our continued life and vitality, but they are not enough to re-engage the deeper cultural current of our society.

In his 2018 address to the Diocesan Convention of the Diocese of Northern California, the Rt. Rev. Barry Beisner declared,

True, congregational vitality cannot be reduced to Average Sunday Attendance, or anything quantifiable. It is more a matter of how well we discern the God-given mission opportunities around us, and how faithfully and energetically we respond. But the numbers merit attention. We must beware of the cognitive illusions, wishful/magical thinking, and denial that are so prevalent in church circles. Business as usual is not acceptable. Still, there simply is no technical fix or programmatic solution to the problem of declining numbers; the way forward requires that we look deeply into what it means for us to be a church entrusted with the Good News of Jesus Christ, and to be partners with him in his mission here in Northern California. And we must continue to be willing to seize opportunities, and to take risks.<sup>32</sup>

We have the opportunity to ask questions: Why was St. Stephen's created in the first place? Who are we as a community? What makes us unique? What do you most love about St. Stephen's? How have our practices and assumptions embodied and communicated our faith?

And then these questions inform a second set of questions: What new expressions of Christian life and witness might God be calling us into at St. Stephen's? What new practices or expressions might embody and communicate our faith? Where might our life and witness connect with and interweave with the native cultures of our neighbors, the native cultures of the new generations around us?

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<sup>32</sup> <https://vimeo.com/303433826>

*“At the end of our journeys lies a promise—  
that we are claimed eternally in a community of healing and  
mercy, sharing in a great feast at God’s table.  
This promise frees us to take the risk of dying to all that keeps us  
from God and one another, trusting that new life will come forth.  
It frees us to enter into the lives and journeys of our neighbors  
as we share at their tables.  
It frees us to change, to grow, to learn, to fail,  
knowing we are held and carried by One who will not let us go.”<sup>33</sup>*

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<sup>33</sup> The Agile Church: Spirit-Led Innovation in an Uncertain Age, pg. 149