

The Church has Left the Building



If you think churches are buildings where people gather for Sunday worship as they have since before Indiana became a state in December 1816, you would be correct. However, you may also be susceptible to the danger of stereotyping and minimizing the place of the Christian church as an enduring institution of American Society.

The Church is far more than a gathering place represented by brick and mortar dotting the landscape in every county in Indiana. My experience is rooted in The United Methodist Church but is only representative of the many denominational expressions of the Christian church along with a host of other religious bodies that deserve more than a drive-by superficial definition as places of worship.

As Bishop of The United Methodist Church of Indiana, I have traveled across the state visiting many of the 1,066 United Methodist Churches in Indiana. Because of the global Coronavirus pandemic, worship services have been relegated to online platforms like Facebook Live, YouTube, and ZOOM. For many of our smaller congregations, this was their first time offering their worship experience to a wider audience.

We miss being together in worship. We are not designed for confinement. We are hungry for community as expressed in coming together for singing, preaching,

talking, and human touch. I hope we go back to gathering for worship, but I pray we are never the same. Maybe some of those drive-in services with cars in parking lots should be maintained, along with online offering for more to find community where radical hospitality and meaningful worship are not reserved for insiders but all people.

What I have witnessed and celebrated is how many of our churches are also childcare sites, with church-operated daycares or afterschool programs. Hundreds of churches are feeding places for people to get much-needed groceries or a hot meal. Clothing pantries, free or reduced-price thrift shops, or in some counties the Church has one of the few available meeting places for community meetings.

Who is responding to the opioid crisis and providing a meeting place for Narcotics Anonymous or Alcoholics Anonymous? Twenty-six chapters of “A Better Life, Brianna’s Hope” (a response to the opioid crisis) meet in many of the United Methodist Churches across this state. Our pastors serve as chaplains for local fire departments, police departments, and crisis counselors. Dozens of churches have formal and informal relationships with local school districts and schools that are often only hundreds of feet or less from the church buildings. Churches major in prayers for the teachers of our communities but also first responders, healthcare workers, researchers, bus drivers, store clerks, restaurant owners, and workers who are representative of many of those who make up the Church.

As I write this article, persons who will never be known are making protective masks to provide for those who need them, writing notes of support and encouragement to children and adults. The Church is alive and well as long as we are able to continue to be part of the social and spiritual safety net in Indiana.

The history of America includes the Church as a planter of institutions of higher education, establishment of community hospitals to meet healthcare needs of the underserved. The establishment of children’s homes for orphaned children, promoting foster care and adoption out of a belief that every child deserves a safe and secure place to live and flourish.

From the cradle to the grave, churches with the clergy and laity who are part of these communities care for, abide with, and bless our families in ways that bring sanctity and sanity to our lives in times of jubilation and crisis. Two weeks ago, I prayed with and for a pastor who lamented because he could not be present with

a senior member who died of COVID-19. Lord, have mercy as we remain resilient in sharing grace and compassion in this season.

Yes, the churches are challenged because we are employers, and we depend on faithful giving from members, some whose income has been interrupted. Yet we press on because we have a charge to keep and a God to glorify. We press on without excuses because we remain the Church whether gathered or scattered.

Sundays, and every other day, the Church is at its best when we leave the building to bring the incarnational love of Jesus to a hurting and hungry world and when we continue to put people before our sacred places of worship. The next time you drive by a church building, say a prayer for the people who have left that building for we are praying for you.

Be encouraged,

Bishop Julius C. Trimble

Resident Bishop

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