

What is the Church: Programs & Presence

2nd in a Series

Live in me. Make your home in me just as I do in you. John 15:4 MSG

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Prayer - Lord, as we enter this moment of listening to your word, help us to understand what we are hearing. As we continue to ask our questions, help us to live into the answers with clarity and wisdom. Amen

Message

If there is one thing we have learned about doing church over the last year and a half, it is that church doesn't look the same as it did. In a lot of ways church was changing and the way people did church was changing even before the last year and a half. But now, doing church almost has to look, sound, and maybe feel different in order for people to engage and feel connected.

The days of everyone being dressed up, sitting in pews one day a week and calling that church have melted away, especially now. The days of knowing the majority of people in the church grew up in church, knowing the churchy language, the symbols, sights, and sounds of church, are disappearing. The days of counting on the majority of the people in the church being of the same background, life experience and spiritual expectations have faded into the sunset.

Which brings us into week two of our series, What is the Church and Why Does it Exist based on the book by David E. Fitch. Last week, I asked you to consider in the midst of all the uncertainty that surrounds us and the tension of the world we live in, what matters most about being a church? And we answered by looking at those first believers and what they did to be the church. They practiced what we call the practices. Practice makes perfect but we must remember that what we practice is what we perfect. The early church focused on the fundamentals of faith; prayer, worship, study, building community around meals and the sharing of all they had so that no one went without. They lived out the practices of forgiveness and reconciliation so that others could see their unity in Christ and a new way to live together.

That answered the “what” of the “what is the church? question. Today we hope to explore the why. Why does the church exist? The change of how churches do church and what that even means, leaves many people asking questions not only inside the church, but outside the church as well. Questions like: How do we adapt and stay true to what we believe the bible teaches? What does it mean to be church in 2021 and beyond? Do we need church? Why have church? Do believers actually need church? For that matter, does God need the church?

Why church?

The fundamental answer is simple, sort of. The answer is that “Presence is the way God works. Therefore, for God to work, requires a people for God to be present to, and people to make space for God to be

made known in the world. (That space for our context and conversation today, is known as the church. Not that God's presence is not felt elsewhere or that God's presence is limited to a building). God's presence works in and through social relationships, therefore God needs a social network to be present to and through. God's chosen network is the church" (Fitch 38).

Some of you are not going to hear anything else I say because I just said God's chosen network is the church. By that I do not mean the building or only those who gather inside the building. By church, remember, we are talking about believers committed to practicing and practicing well, a living faith so that their relationship with Jesus grows, and so that others would see what love, justice, peace, compassion and a kingdom community looked like and that it was possible.

You might think of it this way. I am one of your pastors. Do I have to be in this building to be one of your pastors? Do I have to be in the sanctuary with you to pray for you, to support and care for? Do I have to be in my office, or in the hospital room, at the coffee shop, or the dinner table to offer guidance, to listen to your circumstance and offer strength or comfort? The answer is no, I don't. I can do all that and be all that and never be in the same room physically by your side. This past year and half taught us that right?

However, does it make a difference if we are in the same room? Does our presence matter? Is there something about gathering together, seeing each other's faces, masked or not, sharing a smile and maybe

some tears in person? Is there something about physical presence that impacts connection? The answer is yes. In my case as a pastor, it makes a difference to have people to pastor to. The past year and half has taught us that as well has it not?!

I can be the best pastor out there - organized, gifted, passionate, smart, caring, kind, spiritual, and thoughtful. But if I am not present, emotionally, physically, and spiritually, I cannot share, we cannot share, the benefit and blessing of both giving and receiving God's love and grace through the Holy Spirit.

Likewise, a church can have all the bells and whistles - the best facilities, the most entertaining and energizing worship team and music, the latest technology, and the most up to date sound and light equipment. It can have program after program after program for every age and stage, interest and topic, and speciality group out there, but if the people aren't engaged, present, and connected; where they are valued, seen and heard, all of it is for naught - it becomes what you might call an empty practice session of worship or fellowship - going through the motions and having a good time, but there is no there there.

There is being present *for* something or something, and there is being present *with* someone. There are programs that bring meaning and value to those involved and there are programs that take up space on the calendar. There is being present so you can check it off your list of things to do and there is being present so you can change and be changed for the good. There are programs designed to create space and moments of

connection, growth, and transformation and there are programs that just make a church look good.

Programs and presence.

The gospel of John gives us a beautiful description of being present; of abiding in the spirit and presence of God and God abiding with us. It is the sweetest of sweet spots in programming, worship, preaching, teaching, gathering, sharing, building, growing, and in being and doing church to know that we are with God and God is with us. That is what matters most in all that we do and all that we are as believers committed to a life of practicing the life of Jesus - that is why we are church.

Hear this description of abiding presence as recorded in John 15:1-4
Read text.

From the time of Adam and Eve, it seems humanity walks precariously on the edge of closeness with God. We have always found ourselves teetering in the tension of being so close with God we brush against the holy, and being or feeling so distant from God we brush against all that is dark, lonely, and isolating.

Throughout the Bible we read of how time and time again God's people felt the closest to God, the safest, the most secure, loved, and unshakable when God's presence was tangible:

In the garden with Adam and Eve.

With Noah on the ark.

With Abraham and Sarah bearing a son and birthing a nation

With Moses freeing his people and crossing the sea.

God's people are not God's people apart from God's presence. In Exodus 33, Moses responds to God saying, "Is it not by Your going with us, your presence with us, that we, Your people, may be distinguished from all the other people who are on the face of the earth?" (Exodus 33:15-16 NASB).

It is through God's presence that God works among them and through them. On and on it goes through the Old Testament - through the wilderness, into the promised land, until once again God's people turn their backs on God and turn away from the practices that ground them in their faith. Turn away from creating space for God in their midst.

And then, in God's greatest act of love and restoration, God's promise is made whole in the birth of Jesus - the one the prophets foretold with the words, "...and he shall be named Immanuel," which means, what??? God with us! God's very presence came and lived among us - showed us the way to live and how to treat one another.

So when we ask, "why does the church exist?" Why does a body of believers matter? The answer is because "presence is the way God works. Therefore, for God to work, requires a people for God to be present to, and to make space for God to be made known in the world" (38).

Presence and programs. Once we grab hold of just how significant this understanding of presence is, then we build the programs and we ask

ourselves, “what is more important, to organize the church as a set of programs, for individuals to access, or as a whole way of life to be lived together in the world? (30).

I think you know my answer to that one. Practicing the presence of God individually and as a gathered body of believers must be understood as a way of life, not something insignificant and immediate, but something transforming and eternal. Not something once a week but something everyday in everyday life.

Presence is how God works, therefore God’s presence needs our presence. Out of such awareness the needs, interests, values, struggles, and questions of the people are made known and the programs then, are a response to God’s presence and leading. Programs that equip, teach, build, empower, and direct others into an awareness and lifelong pursuit of God’s presence.

What are we to be, church? A place of program upon program upon program or a place where the evidence of God’s abiding presence is known, programs emerge, and transformation occurs?

Why church? Because God’s presence needs our presence to work in and through. We are vessels of God’s presence. Why church? Because we need the presence of one another to show our world there is hope and that love does prevail. Why church? Because it is bigger than us.

Amen