

Pastors

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October 6, 2022

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CT Pastors, September 2022

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Rebuilding Church Community: What's Actually Working?

Pastors respond.

COMPILED BY MARKUS MILLER | POSTED SEPTEMBER 26, 2022

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One ongoing impact of the pandemic is that, today, pastors find themselves shepherding congregations that are more divided and more relationally distant. How can ministers cultivate deep, authentic fellowship in congregations struggling with superficial or polarized relationships? Pastors are trying out both new and time-tested ways to rebuild authentic community in their churches. Here, pastors from across North America share what's actually working in their congregations.

Mix Things Up

I transitioned to a new church during the pandemic and quickly observed three groups of people: those who were already in a deep community (with no room for others to join), those who attended church but were not part of a community, and those who were church-shopping and looking for a community. A word God gave me was *gather*, so we started an event called Gather Together where we created space for people from these three different groups to build community organically over a shared activity. Volunteers hosted dinners in their homes. It was a beautiful event where people of all ages and ethnicities gathered together and quickly dove into deep conversations. Many met people they would've been unlikely to have dinner with and decided to continue to gather regularly.

—Lydia Choi, associate pastor, Bethany Community Church in Seattle, Washington.

Emphasize Love of Neighbor

I have single-mindedly repeated to my congregation that although we each come to Jesus in a personal way, our faith is not just about the individual. I put it this way: The Christian faith is not just about you; it's about us. From the time of Micah, who called his people to do justice, love mercy, and to walk humbly with God, to Jesus who commands us to “love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and mind” and to “love your neighbor as yourself,” we are called to work for the common good of all people. We need to regain this love, even more so at a time of great polarization. I've been preaching, “Love God and neighbor. You will be doing all that God requires of us.”

—Mike Maroney, minister, First Presbyterian Church in Chatham, Ontario, Canada.

Prioritize Play

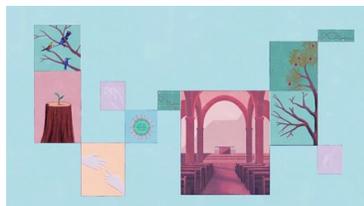
After the past few years, our congregation had grown anxious, disparate, and deadly serious. To move toward a more integrated and joyful fellowship, we needed to rediscover rhythms of playfulness. So we took advantage of our Southern California weather and purchased outdoor activities to place around the church patio—Ping-Pong, gaga ball, and Spikeball. And we provided easy opportunities to eat together as often as possible. From doughnuts after worship to communal meals following Communion services (the taco cart is *very* popular), sharing stories over food helped bond us across partisan divides and renew us after pandemic exhaustion.

—Courtney Ellis, associate pastor, Prebyterian Church of the Master in Mission Viejo, California.

Offer Short-term Opportunities

In the fall of 2021, we started a 10-week-long midweek gathering including a meal, Bible study, and prayer time. The format was very well received, with 50 percent of the congregation attending. So we did another 10-week session in the spring, from February through April, finishing before Holy Week. By God's grace, this format has been fabulous at bringing us together around God's Word. It has also been effective in providing several new families an opportunity to become better integrated into our church community. We don't know how long this format will serve our congregation well, but it is just right for this season of our life together, and we're hosting another 10-week session this fall.

—Greg Starr, pastor, New Life Church of Hershey in Pennsylvania.



The Pandemic Destroyed My Certainty—Or Was It God?

Ongoing disruption exposed my ministry idols, helping me see the work of the kingdom.

RICK MCKINLEY

View Preaching as Pastoral Care

The pandemic initially highlighted the corrosive effects of technology on community. The rapid proliferation of livestreams extended our reach, but it also amplified congregants' consumeristic approach to worship. The antidote, we discovered, is to embrace the fact that preaching has always been a form of pastoral care. In times of shared crisis, empathic preaching helps a disconnected and polarized community name common experiences, anxieties, and pains. Placed within the uniting story of God's redeeming work in Christ, especially in crisis, such preaching remains a powerful tool of community building.

—*John Lee, senior pastor, Bethel Christian Reformed Church in Sioux Center, Iowa.*

As Leaders, Embrace Hope

The immense pressures caused by pandemic challenges and other difficulties highlighted my need to personally embrace hope and to disperse it throughout our community. Our hope is in Jesus. And we know ultimately his kingdom will come and his will shall be done on earth as it is in heaven. So, I had to learn fresh ways to take the hope of the eternal and apply it to the temporal. Using technology, preaching, prayers, stories, and other applications, we learned—and are learning—how to take the hope that Jesus offers for our tomorrow and bring it into our today.

—*Mark Strong, lead pastor, Life Change Church in Portland, Oregon.*

Share Meals and Build Unity

In my small congregation, we usually have lunch together after our services. Sharing meals gives us a very real experience of the Revelation 7 picture of “a great multitude ... from every nation, tribe, people and language.” We had to put these on hold due to the pandemic, and the feeling that we had lost something important was palpable. We were able to resume them about a year ago, and more than anything else, these meals together have given us a sense of being “back to normal.” Our meals together reinforce the biblical teaching that church is about relationships more than it is about services, programs, and activities. It helps us maintain the perspective that Jesus values our unity more highly than he does many of the things that threaten to divide us.

—*Steven Barrett, senior pastor, Christ the Rock Fellowship in Worcester, Massachusetts.*



Strategies for Preaching to the Polarized

How can our sermons bridge the division of our contentious moment?

BENJAMIN VRBICEK



*This article is a part of our fall CT Pastors issue.
You can find the full issue [here](#).*

CHRISTIANITY  TODAY

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