

**THE CHURCH AND PROXIMITY:
LEADERSHIP IN, WITH, AND UNDER BOTH COMMUNITY AND PERSON**

By The Rev. Dr. Joseph G. Kovitch

It was Pentecost Sunday, and a procession of 50 of St. Matthew's faithful walked out of a large sanctuary of pews, stained glass, chancel, narthex, and choir loft and stood together at the foot of a large wooden cross placed in the church building's front garden. For 50 years, St. Matthew's had been built on memories and traditions in this building and on this land. Now, the reality of their exodus had come. I, having just been appointed their priest three weeks earlier, stood in the midst of a complex past and uncertain future. We gathered in this moment, some in tears, most in shock, as they absorbed the reality of their inability to sustain a large mortgage, as well as the "For Sale" sign in the front yard indicating it was time to go. Go? Go where? How?

Standing around the cross, holding onto each other, feeling exposed to the passing cars, curious onlookers, and pedestrian traffic, a priest from the Diocese asked those gathered to turn toward the street and, with their backs to the building, he proclaimed, "People of St. Matthew's Episcopal Church...behold your parish!" In a moment of vulnerability and uncertainty, the seed of re-imagining was planted and began to germinate through a stirring of anxiety and anticipation in the midst of a holy departure.

It was then, standing in the midst of a congregation determined to survive, that I realized the gravity of the journey upon which we were about to embark - maintaining a traditional, sacramental community, while at the same time completely re-envisioning

ourselves in the community. After 20 years' experience as a priest, I began to ask questions: In a time of "siloes" denominational structures and a want of imaginative and courageous leadership, how shall we serve a vision beyond walls of religious isolation? How shall we inspire a church to let go of its idolatry of buildings and isolating traditions and dare to find its true survival which is bound to the very survival of the community around them? What does authentic and accountable religious leadership taste like, smell like, feel like, look like, and sound like?

I saw a sacramental theology emerge, one of incarnation, of a congregation in existence for the sake of the world. Religious leadership must give itself away to be an authentic expression of church in community. To be a "real presence" as the Body of Christ means to see Eucharist-living as the very form of mission and to see liturgy as a way of life. We need to embody the Eucharist and liturgy, not just on Sunday, but as a life practice and a missional imagination. When a church sheds its identity of brick, mortar, financial security and want, as well as the fear of losing traditions and control, it begins to find freedom and imagination.

"Behold your parish!" meant this: 'For you, St. Matthew's, are called to be the real presence of Christ on these streets, by entering *in* relationship with all, being *with* this city, coming alongside its hopes and dreams, and existing *under* by the supporting and holding up of this people in the name of love. *This* is your liturgical practice of Word and sacrament."

To be a congregation of spiritual sojourners is to be both vulnerable and accessible to a greater communal relationship. Our journey must begin at the Eucharist

and ripple out, affecting our human encounters with liberating, radical hospitality. If we can capture a prophetic imagination (that is, a creative participation of faith active in love and justice), we can then begin to re-imagine sacred space as a manner of engaging differently and more meaningfully, giving to a world that needs more relevant offerings from the church.

It is amazing how a crisis can inspire a sense of urgency, and how a sense of urgency can call forth the best in a congregation. The script for St. Matthew's has been written like many other mainline congregations in our day, through the loss of relationship, fear of change, and scarcity. The failure to adapt to a changing spiritual landscape has left many institutions groping for answers on how to be in proximity with the "nones" (those who indicate they have no religious affiliation), the "dones" (those who are done with organized religion), the "unaffiliated" (those who are spiritual but not religious), the generational gaps, and the ever-widening a-theism. The conundrum appears more stark when we realize the acceleration of change, and the question of the relevancy of the church is increasing both in the world of social media and in the generations being raised to question the effectiveness of all institutions. Thus our urgency. Thus our opportunity.

Side Bar: An Inconvenient Truth

The Pew Research Center discovered that for every person who joins the mainline Protestant church today, 1.7 people leave. The United Church of Christ projects an 80 percent decline in membership by 2045. David Roozen, a scholar at the Hartford Institute for Religion Research, told a gathering of religion writers that "at least one-third of members in more than half of mainline congregations are 65 or older. Half of [these] congregations could lose a third of their members in 15 years." Only 45 percent of those raised as a mainline Protestant continue in the church as an adult. (Mark Barger Elliot)

<http://www.pewresearch.org>

In light of this, it is time to do the deep work of re-envisioning engagement and relevancy of the church, how we inspire creativity and embolden courage. This paper will explore one such response through St. Matthew's Episcopal Church in Westerville, Ohio, a church, out of urgency, that had to venture out into the world and find its new identity.

It is vital to re-imagine the incubation and formation of leadership, both non-ordained and ordained, and dare to risk seeing the world as our seminary in the same spirit that Wesley proclaimed the world as his parish. Can we see the classrooms as a local pub, a coffee house, a prison, a street corner, a kitchen table? Can we see faculty members as seasoned bartender, barista, immigrant, differently abled, or a death row inmate? Can we re-envision the role of the ordained as a Holy Listener and One Who Accompanies, and local community leaders or church members as faculty deans? Can we let go of our presumptions of denominational insulation and spend more time in the emotional intelligence of sitting in the story of another, and seeing each and every person as a library in and of themselves? Can we let our greater community teach us, the Church?

I suggest that the future of the Church is to be found in the grassroots of community and in the collective wisdom and imagination found therein. This quest is a mutual and transparent conversation with both the "traditional/inherited" congregation and the greater community "indigenous/6 day" parish. (Traditional or inherited congregation will be used when referring to the assembled Sunday gathering and indigenous or 6 day parish when speaking of the extended relationships in the local community.)

The story of St. Matthew's is a missional case-in-point illustrating an incarnational vision of the church as a sacramental presence in community, and its leaders as prophetic practitioners of the gospel.

PART ONE: St. Matthew's Episcopal Church and Incarnational Re-imagining
Crisis as Opportunity: A Journey of Blessed Exiles – A Case In Point

Standing outside on that Pentecost Sunday, St. Matthew's was remembering their past of prosperity and growth intermingled with lack and struggle that all culminated in a major split over the matter of homosexuality and the church. A full two-thirds left the church family, leaving one-third trying to hold it together. It was this remnant that faced a wilderness journey into the unknown. Grief was experienced by all, and while many of the remnant also felt the adventurous urgency, for others it was too deep of a struggle to imagine a new future, and they moved on.

Departing into the unknown, into the mystery of God's leading, St. Matthew's experienced the hospitality of others. We moved into a temporary location called *Respite* (a non-profit agency which cared for the developmentally disabled) for the first five months, and this gave us time to catch our breath. With a place for altar, font, and pulpit, St. Matthew's began to consolidate its assets - held together by a Common Prayer, a liturgical framing, and a sacramental identity. As St. Matthew's new priest, I found my "office" at a coffee house in the center of an Uptown area about five blocks from our original building. I started a public conversation on Christ and Culture at a

local pub, calling it “Pub Theology.” We slowly started to claim all of Uptown Westerville as our “building,” where the cultivation of relationships became the very foundation of our sense of place. We began forming our congregation to a geography and not a facility. Within a year, and in quick succession, we embraced opportunity after opportunity:

- We were offered free space to worship closer to Uptown Westerville in a local Presbyterian church’s chapel for a year and a half.
- We discovered a house for rent that served as a perfect space to establish our community “footprint” and called it “The Pray Think Love House,” enabling us to be more accessible to the Uptown.
- A year and a half into our exodus, we were given the opportunity to move our worship to the 3rd floor of the pub right in the midst of the Uptown, rent free again.
- A larger Victorian home next to the pub became available a year later, and in partnership with the diocese, we moved The Pray Think Love House into this beautiful space in order to better serve the community and congregation.

The courage it takes to be the body of Christ in the world must be a work of proximity, to offer “real presence” in, with, and under each and every relationship and community organization. Proximity means that we move in closer, truly listening to each other’s story. By being a church that enters so intimately into community, any walls of religious distinction become secondary and eventually melt away.

St. Matthew's has re-imagined itself into a community of engagement, determined to witness to God with a cultural "bi-linguality"; that is, while we express a religious language, we can likewise value a non-religious language that will also be found within the community in which we serve. We have found that discovering true congregational identity is born of urgency and surrender. A congregation is always a community of learning and of risk and should be willing to be all things to all people.

The Pray Think Love House has become the portal for relationships in Uptown Westerville as we re-envision the front porch and the living room, the pub and the sidewalk, the coffee house and the neighborhood. This new identity has established deepening relationships and a narrative that resonates with many "spiritual refugees" seeking a community of belonging. The Pray Think Love House is a safe space to welcome their seeking. In the midst of this journey, I invited St. Matthew's to capture it all in a Collect Prayer that is now spoken in every Sunday worship:

St. Matthew's Collect

"Holy God, whose beloved Son commanded us to go forth and make disciples of all nations, help us to bring the Word to others in our community. Create in us a deep love for You, dear God, and a growing love for our neighbor. Through outreach at our Episcopal House and Sunday gathering space in Uptown, may we bring those who desire to know you better and share the Holy Eucharist with all who hunger for belonging. Show us our future in the reflection of our present mission, as we celebrate the past that brought us this far. Through Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen."

The old congregational adage of “location, location, location” has been replaced with a new mantra of “relation, relation, relation” as the understanding of sacred space is realized not in bricks and mortar, but flesh, blood, and spirit in uncompromising hospitality. The people of St. Matthew’s embarked on this new journey not as tourists or settlers, but as pilgrims and pioneers.

As we worshiped and served in our wilderness sojourn, we began to ask better questions of ourselves and the community in relation to our presence as a church:

- What does it mean to be an Episcopal community of Jesus in the wilderness?
- What is our essential witness to the gospel as we become exposed to the elements - the sacramental elements of bread, wine, water, and Word in, with, and under both individual and community relationships?
- Can we truly embrace our new congregational identity in community without the protection of traditional sacred space of church building?
- Can we learn another cultural language of community as we hold on to the best of our traditional language and ancient ecclesial rhythms, at the same time re-imagining ourselves as community partner?
- Can we surrender ourselves to the community in all of its beautiful diversity - that is, become Holy Listeners, joining the community as members, and get over our need to measure success by numbers and membership?
- Can we truly give ourselves away in a “community first” and “congregation second” intention?

St. Matthew's is committed to live into a new chapter that would be a balance between traditional/inherited and indigenous/6 day - a hybrid, if you will. We want to focus on what we have and not what we don't have, even with the sometimes-present temptation to return to "Egypt" and the security of our insulating structures.

Relationships began to determine the shape of what we called sacred, as we recollected that our key identity as Episcopal Christians was rooted in our Common Prayer and our mutual love for one another. Like the early Christians after the destruction of the Temple, we are defining our sacred space to the very shape of the community. Paying attention to the signs, I began to discover the rhythm in the relationships between both the core congregation and the now-emerging indigenous congregation of city officials, artists, visionaries, pub and coffee house relationships, merchants, and many unaffiliated spiritual sojourners.

St. Matthew's no longer defines its narrative by building first, but by community first - with a beautiful landscape of homes, streets, storefronts, university, city hall, and of social demographics, relationships, and sacramental presence. Our purpose is to exist *in* community, *with* each and every person, and *under* the very social fabric of life together. It is to *be* the bread of life and to *be* the wine poured out by giving ourselves away to others as a sacred offering. We do this by sitting in coffee houses with a fellow brother or sister, calling the coffee and scone our communion. We sit with the local police officer and explore ways to connect to the youth on our streets. We involve ourselves in the arts community, offering them our space and our support. We join the conversation on how to cultivate deeper neighborliness.

St. Matthew's finds itself truly unfettered from the silos of financial fear and the serving of bricks and mortar, discovering that its very weakness and vulnerability offered a witness to the gospel that was authentic and accountable to a hungry community. Now, we have a front porch that can be a fellowship hall, the living room can be a classroom, the family room can be a chapel, the kitchen and dining room can be a place of holy listening, and the back room can be a meeting space. We have been embraced by the community as one who comes-alongside and not one who is separate-from. In essence, St. Matthew's and its priest invites the greater community to help write its narrative with each conversation and encounter and community partnership. St. Matthew's has been recognized for their courage and creativity and has captured the imagination of the surrounding area as well as other congregations. Two in particular have recently invited us to accompany them on a similar journey. The true reality is that the wilderness journey *is* the promised land.

Let us now go deeper and explore St. Matthew's as a servant church in three movements: 1) Living Eucharist, 2) Belonging, and 3) Partnerships.

PART TWO: St. Matthew's Narrative Emerges with Leadership in Three Movements: Living Eucharist, Belonging, and Partnership

When the wilderness journey is the destination and embracing exile is the place that forms identity, we are able to relate with the prophet Jeremiah when he wrote to his exilic community, (29:7) *"But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into*

exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.” In this, we recognize that congregation and community merge into one beloved people. The city sees our presence through pub, house, and street as a story that resonates with their desire to re-imagine a community of compassion, neighborliness, diversity, arts, and new vision. And St. Matthew’s seeks to be known as a safe place for spiritual exiles seeking embrace and belonging, those who have been wounded by the “Church” of their understanding. We are finding new ways of defining what makes a successful congregation beyond the numbers, and we welcome all to come and dream a church with us.

The community of God is a movement of hospitality, for it grows out of a living Eucharist that forms church into a servant community of theopraxis, thus, cultivating a safe environment of belonging that inspires the imaginations of innovators and entrepreneurs. Three movements of leadership now arise:

- 1) A movement where theological leadership is nurtured (*Living Eucharist*)
- 2) A structure of belonging where authentic relationships are forged and a creative entrepreneurial sense of leadership arises (*Belonging*)
- 3) A movement of asset-based action where the leader becomes a community organizer (*Partnership*)

Living Eucharist and Leader as Theologian

Walter Brueggemann writes in his book, Prophetic Imagination, *“To participate in the Eucharist is to live inside God’s imagination. It is to be caught up into what is really real, the body of Christ.”*

The word “re-imagine” touches every aspect of who St. Matthew’s is becoming, yet we still hold the essentials of what it means to be an Episcopal expression of the Jesus movement. And the communion table of radical welcome is the epicenter of our identity of welcome and inclusion. The Eucharist within our liturgy each time we gather exemplifies the core of our mission, for it is a space of hospitality and common meal. It is in this very meal that we find Christ in, with, and under the bread, wine, its mission, and its people. A common meal of grain and grape transforms into a holy supper of liberation, setting captives free. Alexander Schmemmann writes in his book, For the Life the World: *“It is the very communion with the Holy Spirit that enables us to love the world with the love of Christ. The Eucharist is the sacrament of unity and the moment of truth; here we see the world in Christ, as it really is, and not from our particular and therefore limited and partial points of view. Intercession begins here, in the glory of the messianic banquet, and this is the only true beginning of the Church’s mission. It is when, ‘having put aside all earthly care,’ we seem to have left this world that we, in fact, recover it in all its reality.”*

What is the ecclesia but a gathered community of hope animated by a cruciform relationship of God and community? The gathered community is formed as a Eucharist-driven people and formed by ancient rhythms of Word and Sacrament framed by a

liturgical life. Eucharist is God's narrative intersecting ours, and it sets the framework for St. Matthew's leadership in, with, and under the world. It is a covenant. It is promise. It is where Christ and culture meet, in an Irish pub in the Uptown area of Westerville, Ohio. It is learning how to be a servant church by making sacred what is considered secular, and naming it all Christ. Ordinary elements of bread and wine can transform flesh, blood, and community into the Christ, and so we shall be in the world a liturgical people of promise.

Brueggemann continues: *"It is the task of the alternative prophetic community to present an alternative consciousness that can energize the community to fresh forms of faithfulness and vitality...It is the task of prophetic imagination and ministry to bring people to engage the promise of newness that is at work in our history with God."* We need more poets and artists who can capture such an imagination of the people of God - prophetic practitioners, leaders who can inspire with words of promise and images of what can be.

We are inspired to be a living liturgy in community and discover that Eucharist happens when we are God bearers, advocates for justice, and acolytes for Christ in the sanctuary of the streets, homes, businesses, political offices, first responders, and simple encounters with our brother and sister. Our story of resiliency and determination resonates with other fellow pilgrims or wounded seekers who find our story speaking to them; they find that their exile journey is similar to ours. And St. Matthew's adopted community grows and becomes a real presence as we acknowledge a people beyond ourselves, as the priest sets up "office" in a local coffee house, and as the House embedded in the very community we feel called to serve becomes not only our home,

but a space of new relationships, a space to give away, and a space to pray, think, and love.

Belonging and Leader as Entrepreneurial Innovator

*“We are a community of possibilities, not a community of problems. * Community exists for the sake of belonging and takes its identity from the gifts, generosity, and accountability of its citizens. It is not defined by its fears, its isolation, or its penchant for retribution. * We currently have all the capacity, expertise, programs, leaders, regulations, and wealth required to end unnecessary suffering and create an alternative future.”* From Peter Block’s Community: The Structure of Belonging.

“Go in peace to love and serve the Lord...Thanks be to God!” Once fed at the table of Grace, we become transformed, transfigured, and dare I say, transubstantiated into the body of Christ. And once you capture the imagination of the people, a community of belonging is cultivated and rooted in genuine and accountable relationships. Walls of “us and them” are transformed into safe places - sacred spaces of belonging. An inherited community that dances to the liturgical rhythm of Christ knows the deep and abiding love of God in all aspects of their lives. This love of neighbor and of self arise in a common community with its own tradition, ritual, and sacramental mystery. St. Matthew’s wilderness experience of vulnerability bridges easily into an intentional inclusion and welcome for all, for we too are sojourners in the community, exiles among exiles. Since the rupture of our former identity of place, we

now recognize what our survival means as it is in direct proportion to the survival of the city; thus mutual hopes emerge.

With this renewed sense of belonging, we begin to think entrepreneurially and take the risk of allowing ourselves to become partners in social enterprise. To lead from an entrepreneurial sense is to be open to both the image of God and the imagination of God in every relationship and to build structures of belonging. Thus, the distinction between church and the world fade into one image of Christ and the Kingdom of God in our midst. The risk of failure becomes a positive attribute when trying new ways to create community, because we are set free from the fear of making mistakes, as they become fertile ground for new discoveries.

Peter Block writes in his book, Community: The Structure of Belonging: *“What makes community building so complex is that it occurs in an infinite number of small steps, sometimes in quiet moments that we notice out of the corner of our eye. It calls for us to treat as important many things that we thought were incidental. An afterthought becomes the point; a comment made in passing defines who we are more than all that came before. If the artist is one who captures the nuance of experience, then this is whom each of us must become.”*

To be a church of deep belonging is a church that joins the world in small incremental ways. For St. Matthew’s, it is found in the priest and other leaders *showing up* and being proximal to the life of Uptown Westerville. It is discovering places where people gather and encounter one another, such as coffee houses, pubs, restaurants, book stores, and street corners, seeing them as places of holy listening and sacramental relationship. This is when we become a true member of the community

and join it on their terms. We discover a structure for belonging already written in each encounter.

Partnership and Leader as Community Organizer

John McKnight and Peter Block write in their book, The Abundant Community:
“An abundant community is not organized the system way - there is no interest in consistency, uniformity, and replaceable parts. Abundance is about the variety of gifts and what is most personal and idiosyncratic to families and neighborhoods. A competent community, one that takes advantage of its abundance, admits the realities of the human condition and the truth of the decay, restoration, the growth process that are a part of every living system. Variety, uniqueness, the appreciation for the one-of-a-kind are its essence...Three properties of a competent community: Focus on the gifts of its members. Nurture associational life. Offer hospitality by the welcoming of strangers...In this capacities emerge: kindness, generosity, cooperation, forgiveness, acceptance of fallibility, mystery.” St. Matthew’s recognizes, in relation to community development, that not only do we, as an inherited church, have all the gifts needed to be vital, we also exist in a community of people with limitless assets, and together we can all contribute for the common good.

The pilgrimage of St. Matthew’s has given us the opportunity to enter into partnerships through community engagement, becoming in essence a “church without walls.” We seek to participate with our city in a regenerative way, for its restoration, and to listen to a conversation already in progress among leaders in the city. St. Matthew’s has discovered that instead of the customary congregational ways of engaging with

others, such as asking, “how can the people join us and give us what we need?” - we are simply asking, “how can we *serve* the people and what do *they* need?”

As we more deeply engage with leaders in our community, I look around each common table, and I recognize the Body of Christ. The community itself has been living the gospel message of Christ without the religious baggage of institutional distinction, and it is a liberating reality. And I am privileged to be invited into the conversation as a community spiritual leader.

An important attribute of leadership is the ability to ask questions that help both individuals and groups discover the collective wisdom already present. A church too quick with answers is a church not concerned with building honest and sustaining relationships beyond its own agendas. As we become more willing to surrender those agendas while maintaining the centrality of Christ, and then joining the greater community in collaborative relationship, we are, in turn, embraced by our city, because our efforts come with no strings attached. We merely wish to accompany, to come along side and serve.

CONCLUSION

The urgency within our institutions is to embrace the reality of needed change. We need to promote adaptive leadership and encourage support for leaders who have the courage to risk letting new narratives be written by those outside the institution. The case of St. Matthew’s begins to reveal just one way in which we can courageously and imaginatively live into new ways of being church. A new reformation can arise that

seeks to move the church into the world and not a cloistered cave of self-preservation. This is a call for new wine to be placed in new wineskins and for the wisdom in appreciating the need for the structure of wineskins. The church is dying to be reborn as it always has since the beginning, for we are in the redemption business. If St. Matthew's has discovered anything, it is that a community is defined by how it loves and nurtures deep and abiding relationships in, with, and under community, in the knowledge that Christ resides in, with, and under it all. When we embrace an urgency created by a desire to serve, it then becomes natural that the circle widens and includes everyone we meet.

The Church is defined not by denominational lines or walls of church facilities but by every act of love and inclusion done in Christ's name. In the midst of such a realization, our identity is defined by how much of ourselves we can give away for the common good. Holy listening is the first act of a servant church, and leadership is the baptismal right of everyone who follows Jesus into the neighborhood. We the church need to be theologians of covenant relationship, committed to building a community of belonging for all and having the courage to lead into such a vision. We re-imagine with all the assets already at our disposal, celebrate the best of our history yet not let it hold us back from new possibilities, and embrace an entrepreneurial spirit with the commitment to join the community on its terms.

I am inspired by Lao Tzu, who wrote (700 BCE) in relation to leadership: *"Go to the people. Live with them. Learn from them. Love them. Start with what they know. Build with what they have. But with the best leaders, when the work is done, the task*

accomplished, the people will say "We have done this ourselves." These words speak to me of a deep sense of personal engagement and communal ownership.

St. Matthew's has turned itself inside-out and has begun to embrace a real presence in Uptown Westerville that moves us out of our traditional comfort zones of programs and ministries, finding our missional story instead in holy listening and community engagement. Thus, we become restorers of the breach and champions of restorative and regenerative sacramental presence - and to be so bold as to be prophetic practitioners in the spirit of Isaiah 58:

*"If you remove the yoke from among you,
the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil,*

10

*if you offer your food to the hungry
and satisfy the needs of the afflicted,
then your light shall rise in the darkness
and your gloom be like the noonday.*

11

*The Lord will guide you continually,
and satisfy your needs in parched places,
and make your bones strong;
and you shall be like a watered garden,
like a spring of water,
whose waters never fail.*

12

*Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt;
you shall raise up the foundations of many generations;
you shall be called the repairer of the breach,
the restorer of streets to live in.”*