

RETHINK CHURCH

What is the theological foundation for “Rethink Church”?

Across the centuries, God has called upon leaders to rethink what it means to be the church in ministry with the changing world around us. Martin Luther boldly asked his generation to rethink church, as did John and Charles Wesley in the 18th century when they envisioned a spiritual movement based on social holiness rather than just personal piety.

RETHINK CHURCH is a call to refocus and ask the question, “What is God calling The United Methodist Church to be in the 21st century?” It is not a call to find a new theology, to move away from our commitment to scripture, or to distance ourselves from our Wesleyan tradition. Indeed it seeks to see church in a way that is more aligned to scripture, and more faithful to the tradition of John Wesley who believed the world was his parish.

The RETHINK CHURCH campaign is about challenging those beyond the church to envision church as a movement of people engaging the spiritual and physical needs of the world--not a static institution. It simultaneously asks the people of The United Methodist Church to see themselves more broadly: not tied solely to Sunday morning worship, but in all the ways they are making a difference in people’s lives, locally and globally.

What if church were not just a building? Not a noun, but an action verb?

Jesus gave the Great Commission, telling us to “**Go** into the world.” Do the things that he did: teach, heal, feed hungry people, speak out about injustice, and call people to faithful living. Jesus sent the Holy Spirit to empower the disciples to begin a movement.

The early Christians did not see themselves as “church.” Until Paul and Peter agreed upon a division of labor, one attending to Jewish followers of Jesus and the other taking the gospel to the Gentiles, the followers of Jesus spoke of themselves as the people of “the way.”

In too many places, we have lost the sense of being a movement, convincing ourselves it is enough to gather in our buildings and wait for people to come and find us. Jesus sends us out to meet the world at its points of greatest need, as He sent the disciples. We are referring to these touch points as “doors.” Jesus consistently used a door as a metaphor to present opportunities to engage and invite his listeners to be part of the building of God’s kingdom here on earth.

What if the word “open” in “Open hearts, Open minds, Open doors” was a verb instead of an adjective, not describing who we are but instead telling people what we do?

“Then the king will say to those at his right hand, “Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.” Then the righteous will answer him, “Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?” And the king will answer them, “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.” Matthew 25:31-40 NRSV

Jesus’ illustration of the judgment scene paints a clear picture of expectation for the church in the world. Jesus’ followers took these words to heart, following the calling to take the message to Jerusalem, to Judea, to Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

Just as the early church was on the move, so too, we are calling churches to move beyond our doors to engage a world longing for love, compassion and hope.

What if church was the way church was in the beginning: unbound, outbound, a true social network?

“All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people.” Acts 2:44-47a, NRSV

Under persecution from the time of Jesus' crucifixion to the third century, Christians connected with each other in small groups, often secretly. They connected with each other through the sharing of letters, the most notable, of course, being Paul's.

It's clear from Paul's writings that he was a central connector in a web of relationships. Those connections made his missionary journeys possible, as he moved from one group of Christians to another and preached to the unconverted.

The phrase "social network" applied to this communal network does not denigrate the understanding of the church that came in later centuries, but merely reflects the understanding and practice of the first century. The phrase takes on new skin but retains the same heart when applied in the digital context of today's world.

How does RETHINK CHURCH connect with our mission to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world?

It is this very mission that drives us to rethink, reexamine and remold how we see our church and how we live as the church. Nowhere does the call to make disciples challenge today's church more profoundly than developing the ability to attract and involve young adults in local congregations.

Jesus fit into the age range of our 18-34 year old target audience during the years of his ministry. Many scholars believe his disciples may have been even younger. Jesus taught through storytelling, a popular medium of his day and culture. His listeners heard the message and they followed.

RETHINK CHURCH calls us to explore new ways to reach today's seekers (especially young adult seekers) through media relevant to their day and culture. As Christ found the right format for the sharing the message of God's Kingdom, so we believe that rethinking church for an audience living in a digital, on demand world will help us make disciples of a new generation. RETHINK CHURCH is not another program, but hopefully will become a movement that would make Jesus proud.