

BIRTH

By Zac Harmon-McLaughlin, Community of Christ Seminary director

The future church is being formed by a basic concept: Our chief purpose is to birth, nurture, and multiply communities of disciples and seekers engaged in spiritual formation and compassionate ministry and action. This basic blueprint—spiritual formation, community, compassionate ministry, and action—is true to the vision of Christ. Everything else, like organizational structure, resources, funding methods, congregational forms, etc., should support this primary purpose.

—Steve Veazey, September 20, 2017, "A Time to Act!"

Our challenge is to open ourselves to the uncertainty of what it means to "birth, nurture, and multiply communities of disciples and seekers engaged in spiritual formation and compassionate ministry and action." What does this look like? How do we do this?

Perhaps, many of you are overwhelmed (just as I am) by the perceived task of "re-inventing" church. Such a blueprint feels impossible and too grandiose. But then I am reminded that the future church is not something new, but rather something old. It is Christ's church.

The future church is not a new program, model, or formula. The future church is a cultural shift toward incarnation. Doctrine and Covenants 164:9d comes to mind:

If you truly would be Community of Christ, then embody and live the concerns and passion of Christ.

If we are to be who we are divinely called to be, we must give birth to Christ within us.

My wife recently gave birth to our first child. You can anticipate some things in pregnancy, but much of the future is mystery. We dreamed about our child, but we did not truly know her until we held her in our arms. I remember reading books and articles, seeking wisdom from seasoned parents, and comparing experiences with other young families. When our daughter was born I quickly realized that while I was prepared to be a father, I didn't have any idea what I was doing or how to do it. My daughter and I shared a learning curve on the specifics of what daily life together would be.

She now is more than a year old, and we still are learning and growing together. Yes, I still read books and articles and talk with other parents, but there is no magic formula to nurturing new life. It rests in a willingness to authentically and vulnerably love one another.

So what does it mean for the church to give birth to a new paradigm of mission? It means we must give up control. We are not in charge of God's church. In fact, we preach and teach that God is speaking to us and prophetically moving us forward. Why then do we always feel like we are the ones to do the moving?

If we are to become whom God is calling us to become, then we must be willing to study, read, and talk with other communities of faith. We also must be willing to authentically and vulnerably love one another.



Acts 2:46–47 NRSV gives us a glimpse of this:

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...

The possibility of newness does not rest in our control. What emerges will happen as we open ourselves to whom God is becoming in us, through us, and with us. Author Donald K. McKim defines church as “the assembly of the body or the community of people who have faith in Christ.” The call to the Christian faith is not about rigidity of structure, worship, or beliefs the church may hold. In fact, as President Veazey reminds us, those things should support the primary focus of our faith, which is communities engaged in spiritual formation, compassionate ministries, and action.

The Spirit is always seeking to incarnate. We easily are overwhelmed when we consider current trends of decline and feel the weight of trying to create something new. The good news is God is the One doing a new thing (Isaiah 43:19). God invites us to notice where that is happening and join that movement. Moment to moment, the Spirit is opening possibilities for incarnation, or God becoming flesh with and among us.

The process of birthing a transformed church is a return to authentic community that is grounded in the Spirit as the source of life. The new thing the

Spirit is doing in and through us may be simpler and more soul-refreshing than we imagine.

In your next interaction with someone in your community, consider how the Spirit is yearning to incarnate right here and now. Once we allow this habit of attention to form our lives, we begin to see abundant opportunity for living into God’s movement and invitation. It may even begin to shape how we come together in Christian community.

The next time you gather with your faith community, what if you pause to notice how the Spirit is yearning to incarnate? What might change? What might remain the same? How would you see yourselves and others differently if the lens of God’s movement among us was primary?

To do so we must authentically and vulnerably love our neighbors in Christ. We must be willing to forgive and continue to transform by the Spirit of God. This is what it means to be a church of incarnation. We are the Living Christ in the world. We are the hands and feet of Jesus. To birth a new paradigm of relationships and mission is to incarnate, or embody, and live the concerns and passion of Jesus Christ. The trick is not to create something new. The trick is to love one another just as Christ loves us.

Be in awe, break bread with glad hearts, and become a community of Christ.

