THE LOCAL CHURCH

They shall run and not be weary!
They shall mount up with wings like eagles!
ISAIAH 40:31
A NOTE FROM THE EDITOR

You’re reading a sneak preview of CT’s upcoming special section, The Local Church. We’re creating a space for anyone who’s invested in the life of the local church: elders, deacons, pastors, small group leaders, and active members alike.

We know there’s been a lot of talk about an entire generation “leaving the church.” We don’t buy it. To you, the local church is more important than ever. You couldn’t imagine life without it. And you’re not alone. CT’s The Local Church special section is a place for anyone who has taken a long hard look at the local church, seen it in all its beauty and blemish, and chosen to stay.

Every part of The Local Church is meant to address the needs of church leaders. In our “Notes” section, daily, easily-digestible articles will remind you that you’re a part of a community of church leaders with many distinct qualities and contexts, all focused around the local church and the gospel message.

In addition, our weekly podcast will feature long-form, highly personal interviews with church leaders. These no-holds-barred interviews will focus on the nature of our calling, the inherent struggles that come with that calling, and the many different ways God has shaped us to work within his church.

The PDF you’re reading now, is an example of what we call a “Dispatch”—a web-only collection of pieces centered on a singular theme. We’re crafting these Dispatches with your Sunday afternoon in mind. We imagine you’re home from church, the kids are down for a nap, and you’re tired enough to put off chores, but are hoping to read something that will interest, soothe, and engage you. That’s what a Dispatch is. It’s a place where you can rest, feel known, and revel in the calling of the local church leader.

Overall, our aim is not to convince you of anything, nor to tell you how to do your work. Instead, we want The Local Church to be a place to breathe, to engage, to belong.

Enjoy this read, and we’ll see you late March!

Richard Clark, Online Managing Editor, Christianity Today
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Imagine the church service of the future.

EMILY LUND

Sunday morning.

The church building sits with doors waiting to be opened, screens waiting to flare to life, chairs waiting for occupants. It’s quiet—for now.

The first cars pull up in front of the doors. Couples, families, friends—old and young—step out and, with the push of a button, send their vehicles away to the offsite parking lots. Cars follow each other away from the building in a shining procession of windows and wheels.

*   *   *

What might church—what might that Sunday morning—look like someday?

There are some ideas, some guesses.

“We are going to have a whole new layer of outreach tools beyond what we have now with people sharing information and messages peer to peer,” said Dave Travis, CEO of Leadership Network, noting the kinds of tools being used by political campaigns for tracking and isolating individuals.

For Bobby Gruenewald, pastor and innovation leader at Life.Church, technological advances create huge potential for the church to establish and build relationships: “History tells us that the needs we have for relationship and community will ultimately shape these tools into something that can integrate into our lives as a way to relate and connect.”
“The question for the church is going to be what level of modern technology makes people feel like this is something different from what [they] get everywhere else,” said John Dyer, executive director of communications and educational technology for Dallas Theological Seminary. “Do you make your 90 minutes be about that, or do you make your 90 minutes be about facing the new reality that we’re in and working through that world? Each church is going to have to ask that question separately, and answer it differently.”

Adam Graber, who explores the intersection of faith and technology on his blog The Second Eclectic, is optimistic about technologies influencing the future church.

Take driverless cars, for instance: “I think it’s going to happen,” Graber said, referencing the push for such cars from companies like Google and Tesla. Parking issues? Solved. “It’ll drive home,” he predicted, “It’ll drive to an off-site parking lot. It doesn’t need to be anywhere close. But it can come pick you up at the end of the service and take you home or to lunch or whatever. These massive parking lots that churches have today that sit empty most of the week could be used for other things. The land they have suddenly becomes more valuable.”

Technology that aids mobility could also play a significant role in the demographics of the future church.

Driverless cars and other such advancements “may give the elderly a little bit more clout within the church than maybe they have right now,” said Graber. “The church is for those who are mobile, those who are able to get to church very easily. So it’s going to skew younger; it’s going to skew to the active. But if people are able to get to church without having to drive, then there could be more elderly attending church and having more influence.”

For Daniel Fusco, lead pastor of Crossroads Community Church in Vancouver, Washington, a significant growth in traffic for online services has presented the need for some brainstorming.

“This has challenged us to figure out how to fully engage our online congregation,” he said. “We are in the process of rolling out prototype online community groups and brainstorming other ways to make their ‘church’ experience even more engaging. I believe that we will see more and more of this going forward.”

John Wurzbacher, pastor at Blessed Hope Community Church in Webster, New York, also sees challenges for church growth and development as these kinds of online advancements are increasingly emphasized.
“What’s still driving the growth of the church is people being able to connect on a personal level,” he said, “and that is one of the challenges with technology is the focus off of personal connections between individuals.”

He predicts churches will look for ways to create those personal connections, no matter how technology unfolds: “There’s going to always be a push for churches to figure out how to bring that back into the church, where people are still face-to-face. That’s still, I think, where the best discipleship is going to happen, and that’s where people are going to grow the most.”

But an increase in streaming church services could potentially present problems for those who hold to these traditional ideas of church fellowship: “The church—the values that Scripture emphasizes—are going to continue to be challenged,” said Graber, “even notions of gathering together.”

* * *

Quentin stands in the church lobby, his caffé Americano in hand. Looking around, he recognizes the elderly man standing just a few feet away from him—he’d spoken in last week’s service from his home campus, about 70 or so miles away.

Quentin thinks about going up and talking to him—telling him how much he enjoyed his message—but he can’t muster up the nerve to introduce himself. He takes a sip of coffee. *Maybe if Jocelyn were here, we could have talked to him together.*

But Jocelyn wanted to stay home. Again. “I’ll just check out the videocast later,” she said.

* * *

Technology and the church have enjoyed a close relationship from the beginning.

“God’s people have always used the latest technology,” said Warren Bird, research director for Leadership Network. “From Jesus preaching from a boat to let the water carry his voice farther, to horse-back-riding preachers extending the gospel’s impact by forming the multi-site churches of their day.”

Dyer also noted some of the ways technology has influenced the practices of the church:
“There’s some great old things in the old Book of Common Prayer from the 1700s and 1800s where the prayers are about getting through the night,” he said. “Once you have electric lighting, all those prayers are taken out because obviously electric lighting does wonderful things for when you can worship and what kind of building you can have. But it also changes what we care about and what we think we need from God.”

One of the tools that churches may use to maximize outreach? Big data.

Tracking church attendance is “just one point of big data,” said Graber. “But I think it could become more personalized in the sense of who’s actually attending every week—not just what the number is, but [rather], ‘Is this person attending twice a month? Are they attending three times a month? Are they attending once every two months? What’s that frequency?’”

Graber sees the effective use of this data as a way to ease the tension between a church’s desire to be “big” and its efforts to be “personal.”

“If we know that so-and-so attends once every two months, that their attendance has gone up or gone down, we can reach out to them through an email or through an automated text,” he said.

Todd Rhoades, Leadership Network’s director of digital initiatives, calls this potential use of data a sort of “inside intelligence into what [congregants] are thinking, feeling, and what ministry needs they might need.”

But will people welcome the idea of data and intelligence guessing at their emotions and thoughts?

“Something about it feels kind of sinister,” Rhoades said, “but it could do some good as well!”

*   *   *

She remembers the days when you had to sign up for an email list to receive updates, not just wait for the facial recognition technology to send you something.

Norah and Evan walk through a set of double doors into a room of high ceilings and white walls, with chairs scattered across the concrete floor. Voices and footfalls echo through the space as the couple quietly makes their way to two open seats.

They visited this church two months ago with a friend, but they didn’t come back—life just got in the way. Then the text came this
week, greeting them by name, asking how they were and whether there was anything the staff members could provide, reminding them about the class for new members this Sunday and about childcare options for their three-year-old daughter.

These ultra-personalized communications still unsettle Norah sometimes—she remembers the days when you had to sign up for an email list to receive updates, not just wait for the facial recognition technology to send you something.

*But at least they want us to come back,* she thought.

And now, this morning, they take their seats.

* * *

Technology may make church more accessible, but it could also prove distracting.

“In previous decades, preachers have praised the page-turning sounds of God’s people looking up passages and the opening of journals to take notes,” said Bird. “Today the sound is one of people accessing the Internet and using Evernote. In both cases, people could actually be doing something else!”

When it comes to our tendency to be distracted today—as compared to times gone by—“our hearts are the same,” said Lauren Hunter, founder and editor of ChurchTechToday.com.

But there are a few more opportunities for minds to wander now.

“We have the entire world in the palm of our hand with a browsing Internet device, and there’s so much distraction,” she said.

Bird agrees: “Our world is one of increasing noise, and people’s tendency to be distracted is ever increasing while attention spans are decreasing. For better or worse, today’s culture likes that pace and approach.”

Even so, Hunter’s vision of the church to come—even the church 10 years from now—is a far-reaching one.

“The church service of 2026 could include believers and non-believers from all over the world,” she said. “‘Community of faith’ will have a whole new meaning and way of operating. Imagine global campus locations with global worship teams and campus pastors. As the
technology improves, real-time teaching, worshiping musically, and global interaction will become possible.”

* * *

As the sanctuary lights dim, Isobel watches the man in front of her adjust his glasses. She wonders what he's looking at—what messages, screens, texts, pictures and to-dos are appearing in his own vision, invisible to her and to everyone else. She looks around. Several others are wearing their own pairs of glasses and stare straight ahead.

Lost in their own world. She sighs.

Adam, her husband, looks at her.

“The glasses,” she says.

“You don’t know what they’re looking at.”

“Something tells me it’s probably not the Bible.”

In an instant, the band appears onstage, their holographic figures flickering. Words flash onto the wall above them, announcing them as guest artists coming in live from a service in London. The musicians wave and smile. “Good morning!” the worship leader calls out.

* * *

Bird’s vision of a future worship service includes plenty of screens.

“We will continue to shift to a more visual and participative era,” he said. “Most worshipers will prefer screens that offer image magnification or the words to songs. They’ll find help in thoughtful lighting and quality sound. They’ll use the Internet (or its successors) to interact with the teaching of God’s Word.”

But he also provides a word of caution.

“Church leaders have to be very intentional about which elements of today’s technology to embrace and which to create a sanctuary or ‘technology Sabbath’ from,” he said.

Dyer sees both good and bad in the church’s embrace of rising trends like online and mobile giving. He recognizes an opportunity for a consistent source of income for the church, but also a spiritual rhythm that might fade away.
“Online donations give you that regular giving possibility, and make sure that flow stays,” he said. “And yet on the other hand, the actual practice of writing a check or giving cash or whatever it is . . . that part of it is taken away.”

* * *

Quentin stands up as the lyrics to the first song appear on the screens. His pocket buzzes, and he quickly checks his phone—it’s a message from the church. “Thanks for your gift, Quentin!” the words glow cheerily. He puts his phone back in his pocket.

As lyrics flit across the sanctuary’s screens, he sings along with the band, but his thoughts roam back to church when he was a kid, back to when offering plates were passed around and his mom would make him leave his phone in the car. “We’re going to church, not an Apple store,” she would say.

He smiles.

* * *

According to some, welcoming technology into churches is one way of ministering to the culture where it’s at.

“If we want to reach the world, we have to know the world,” said Gruenewald. “We should be students of our culture. What’s connecting with people? How do they spend their time? How do they connect with each other? What trends do we observe?”

“Anytime you’re using a technology that is native to what people use in their everyday life, I think that’s helpful,” said Hunter. “Utilizing technology that people natively use in the ministry context will meet them where they are.”

That kind of contextualization is not new to the church.

“Just as the New Testament was written in everyday Greek in order to reach the common person,” said Bird, “so today’s Bible apps are intended to be accessible to a world that increasingly looks online as its primary communications pathway.”

* * *

Ellen sits with her hands in her lap, her eyes following the shooting stars and twinkling lights that dance across the walls, her foot tap-
ping to the beat. In some ways, it all looks like the concerts and shows she’s been going to for years—but the words that appear and fade on the giant screens are unlike any of the lyrics she’s sung along to before: they’re about joy, love, and a hope for something greater.

Maybe she’ll come back next Sunday.

* * *

Even with the incredible pace at which technology is evolving, the world of printed books—and printed Bibles—doesn’t seem likely to disappear.

“I don’t think the print Bible will ever go out of style,” said Graber. “I think there may potentially be a decline in how many Bibles are printed and purchased because people do use . . . their apps [more frequently], but I think there will be some sort of balance between them.”

In his research, Dyer has found a lack of absolutes concerning technology use.

“It seemed like the vast majority of [those surveyed] were using a combination of both things,” he said, referring to both print and online resources. He’s found that it’s not usually an “either/or” decision, but a combination based on personal preference.

He’s also predicted that many will continue to make the choice to abstain from technology in certain places and during certain practices.

“I think that people are finding that they need some other area to cordon off where they may be doing a lot of other things on their phone or device,” he said.

Hunter, meanwhile, sees the physical size and weight of a print Bible as something that shouldn’t be overlooked.

“There’s something that can’t be replaced [about] the weight of the Bible,” said Hunter. “The weight of the book, but also the weight of the gospel.”

* * *

The congregation sits, and Ellen glances at the older woman beside her, who wears a yellow dress and holds a large, leather-bound Bible on her lap—much bigger than the other print Bibles Ellen has noticed.
others carrying in.

The young woman sitting on the other side of Ellen has a printed Bible, as well, and a spiral-bound journal she is flipping through. *Keeping it old-school, I see.*

*   *   *

Some churches may be tempted to avoid some technological advances simply because they’re afraid they may not work.

“In the tech world,” said Dyer, “there’s this idea that you should fail fast, you should try something, iterate it, lose, and then go over. And I think that’s a little harder for us to do in church—our failure is attached to sin, and bad things, and not getting enough crowns in heaven, and stuff like that.”

But Dyer thinks it’s worth the risk.

“Sometimes you have to try it and go back on that. I think having a culture of grace is just very important to realize we’re not going to get it right the first time.”

“As technology continues to advance,” said Fusco, “the local church—the called-out assembly gathered together in Jesus’ name—will be the last bastion of real, organic, face-to-face relationships. We should have both prongs: technological savvy and good old-fashioned Christian fellowship.”

*   *   *

The projected images of the band members flicker and fade. The pastor walks onstage, smiling and asking how everyone is feeling this morning.

Norah can’t help but wonder how he is feeling—speaking to hundreds here in the building, thousands outside of it.

The pastor asks if they could all please bow their heads for prayer.

Norah and Evan close their eyes and do so. Ellen and Adam and Isobel and Quentin do the same.

The pastor prays, his voice resounding against the ceilings and walls.

He pauses—and for a moment, all is quiet.

“Amen.” ✝
The Next 10,000 Years
When considering the future, could our vision be much too small?

DAN DARLING

It was a slick PowerPoint—presented by a (self-described) cutting-edge ministry practitioner—that sent me over the edge. Carefully presenting cherry-picked research, this ministry leader offered a doomsday scenario for the American church: heresy is rising. Millennials are fleeing. Culture is changing.

Of course, this inevitable slouch toward Gomorrah could be prevented, we were told, if we purchased this organization’s brand-new curriculum.

If I sound cynical about the demise of the church, it’s because I am. I read Jesus’ words to Peter in Matthew 16:18 and I believe them: “I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.” I’m bullish about the future of the church because Jesus is bullish about the future of the church.

And not only “the church” as we think of the worldwide communion of saints, but your church, my church, and every local expression of Christ’s body. Healthy churches are not formed simply through handwringing, navel-gazing, or trend-setting, but through an appreciation for the past, a clear-eyed view of the present, and a fixated march toward the future—and not just any future, but the approaching kingdom of God.

THE CHURCH’S PAST: AN UNCHANGING PROBLEM

Every few years, well-meaning church practitioners urge the church to shed what is perceived to be “cultural baggage,” to let go of the past. In some ways, this is important for life-giving congregations. A
crippling deadness can set upon a successful church when it continues to rest on a previous generation’s successes and cling to that generation’s methods and styles.

When churches act as if one time period in church history—the 1950s, for example—is the golden paradigm for ministry, they are effectively contextualizing their congregations for a certain demographic. In doing this, they worship a model instead of proclaiming a message. Change is good for a church.

Yet some of the most popular practitioners of change aim not at the peeling paint and the threadbare pews, but at the timeless body of truth passed down from generation to generation. Orthodoxy, they say, must change to fit a changing world.

Ironically, this is not a new argument, but an old canard, long disproven. Every generation since Pentecost has seen challenges to what we know is true. And every generation proves that it is fresh commitment to old paths that sustains God’s people.

The Christian story of creation, fall, redemption, and consummation—this story is vibrant and new for every generation. Only the gospel thread that runs through Scripture answers today’s pressing questions. Only a sinless, crucified, and risen Christ can offer hope for a world in turmoil.

Culture changes and people shift, but the problems remain the same: the curse of sin weaving its destructive path through the human heart and through the cosmos.

THE CHURCH’S PRESENT: AN ANSWER TO INJUSTICE

Can we faithfully answer the questions of the hour—the real questions our people in our congregations are asking—with the old, old story?

It’s not enough to simply know theology and Scripture in the abstract if we are unfaithful shepherds to the people God called us to serve. Do we know their unique needs and problems? Are we listening to the soundtrack of our age: the longings, the hurts, the aspirations? And are we communicating in mediums and platforms where the questions are actually being asked?

We can, however, be so laser-focused on the culture that we hold theology too loosely. We can so identify with the people around us
that we forget we are ambassadors of Christ’s kingdom. When we do this, we not only fail our mission as Christ’s followers, but we fail the people we are called to serve. Only the story of Christianity answers the deepest human longings.

Are we both “in the books” and “in the community”? Are we steeped in Christian theology and ethics and also deeply engaged with the people we serve? Are we ever-learning, winsome, teachable?

Applying trite phrases and yesterday’s talking points to new and dangerous assaults on human dignity will not equip our people for living on mission for God. In our congregations, the people who come on Sunday are facing temptations wildly different from those of our grandparents’ generation—technologies and trends that are all new and varied versions of the Fall. But amazingly, Christian theology is not surprised by today’s corruptions. It is instead able to meet them.

We must also be present—to inspire our churches to live out the gospel in fresh ways in the communities we serve. Where are the vulnerable, and how can we serve them? Where is justice being denied, and where can our influence make a difference?

People today are inundated with injustice: it’s on their social media timelines, on television, at the water cooler. But the ancient concept of the church—the gathered, Spirit-led people of God—is uniquely equipped to meet today’s challenges and offer a signpost to the kingdom of God.

**THE CHURCH’S FUTURE: AN OUTPOST FOR A RADICAL KINGDOM**

Most of the time, expert musings about what the worldwide church will look like involve demographic surveys, technological advancements, and philosophical reflections. Bestselling authors and popular conferences focus on future trends.

It’s important for churches to be part of this discussion so they can freshly apply the gospel to the moment and help their people think through inevitable ethical challenges.

Yet, when future-casting, leaders can often be ironically shortsighted. Our strategizing thinks in terms of 15, 20, and 30 years down the road. We worry about the church we will leave our children and grandchildren. We talk about investing in the next generation.

But is our vision sufficiently large? What if we dreamt about the next
10,000 years? What if we prepared our people for living as citizens of God’s future kingdom?

Sometimes, in our quest to create cutting-edge churches, we sacrifice our long-term futures for short-term benefits. I’ve often felt this way as I’ve walked into vibrant, well-known churches or as I attend popular evangelical conferences. It seems that we are often creating a church for the young, hip, and sexy. It’s as if we want our message to the world to be something like, “See, church is the place where the cool people gather on Sunday.”

But the kingdom of God takes the opposite approach.

Jesus said it is the poor, the downtrodden, and the marginalized who have a prominent place in the kingdom of God (Matt. 5:3, 20:16). Paul reminded his churches of the shocking ordinariness of God’s people (1 Cor. 1:26). James scolded those in the church of Jerusalem for their tendency to favor the wealthy and powerful at the expense of the poor (James 2:1-13).

Do our congregations look like outposts of this radical kingdom? Do people enter our congregations and wonder to themselves, How did these disparate people get here? What possible thread unites people so vastly separated by age, race, political affiliation, and class? Why is it that old and young, black and white, disabled and able-bodied, rich and poor, prominent and anonymous gather together every Sunday?

Imagine what the church would look like if we thought more about the future—our future as resurrected kings and queens in Christ’s new kingdom. What would it look like if we intentionally worked to image that kingdom here in the present, fallen world? What if we allowed the Spirit of God to shape us into a body that looks strange in a world of tribes, divisions, and class systems?

We might pray that God would not bring more people into our congregations who look just like us, but that God would bring people into our midst who have no business being there—people like us, who, though once far from God, are made near by the blood of Jesus’ cross.

This is the future we might hold in our sights, a future Jesus says can be experienced—in small part—right now. ☯

People today are inundated with injustice: it’s on their social media timelines, on television, at the water cooler.
My Local Vision

The book of Jeremiah and my longing to see beyond the veil in a local coffee shop.

MANDY SMITH

I’ve come to this café often enough now to have a favorite table and a nodding relationship with a few regulars. I chose it because it’s on a main street downtown—locals filter in and out each day, ordering their favorites, talking, and laughing.

I committed to coming here every day and praying a simple prayer: to ask God to reveal his longing for this neighborhood. I’ve stuck to this commitment most days, watching what’s going on around me, waiting to hear from God.

But some days, it’s easier to scroll through Facebook than to study humans and God and try to figure out how they might come together.

Today I’m attempting to read Jeremiah. But the young woman at the next table is more interesting. She’s often here, chatting with friends or reading alone. Today she seems to be sketching, her pencil scratching away at loops and lines. From what I’ve picked up in overhearing her various conversations, she’s a thoughtful person: kind in offering her opinions, interested in important issues but quick to draw out the insights of her friends. She reads poetry and politics. Her yellow cardigan is hand-knitted—I assume it has an interesting story.

I make guesses about her career path. Maybe she’s an artist of some kind, but she makes ends meet with more practical—but still meaningful—work.

I might have chosen a life like that if I hadn’t gone to seminary. But I did go to seminary, and now I find myself here, studying the community and praying about a church plant.
I wonder what this woman would think if she knew my plans. Would she think I’m weird, assume I’m judgmental? I wouldn’t blame her. I have the same assumptions about church people sometimes.

I turn back to Jeremiah and begin to read: “Then, just as the Lord had said, my cousin Hanamel came to me in the courtyard of the guard and said, ‘Buy my field at Anathoth in the territory of Benjamin.’”

I look back at the woman next to me. What interest could she possibly have in a field at Anathoth?

Am I even interested in a field at Anathoth? It might take some effort.

I look at Jeremiah again and let my yearning flow out to God. If there were words, they would be something like: “It’s hard enough to understand the Bible, to understand this neighborhood, and to understand myself. Finding a way for them to come together seems impossible.”

As I hang my head, longing leads me into imagining, imagining draws me into dreaming. The walls and roof of the café fall away—yet I’m still in the café.

The girl in the cardigan is still here, too. I find myself wanting her to like me, hoping she’ll notice my vintage shoes. It’s only now that I see she has a lampshade on her head.

Does she need help? She seems quite comfortable, standing still as a post. She obviously doesn’t want to be disturbed.

This is obvious to me but not to the man in the suit who’s trying to hand her a tract. She’s really not interested. I wish he’d just go away, but he stands there still, smiling awkwardly, holding it out for her to take. It’s easy for her to ignore him with a lampshade on her head.

For the first time, I notice a cathedral sitting behind her—one of the big, European ones. Ancient and glorious, but a long way off in miles and years. Between the spires of the cathedral, a choir of children sings in perfect harmonies: their Latin pronunciation flawless, their eyes directed ever so condescendingly at her.

Still, the girl is uninterested. Or maybe she’s not even aware of their efforts.
But now my eyes are drawn to a growing cloud of smoke. Behind the billows, I see an angel, flapping over the smoke, shaping clouds into signals. He watches the girl in hope that she will notice the efforts he’s making for her sake. But she can’t see the cloud he’s shaping, doesn’t know how much it looks like her. I will her to look, to see the strange plant growing within the smoke version of herself, a plant that is hopeful but not yet fully formed.

The smoke girl grows. In some ways, she seems more real than her human counterpart, so filled with the potential for life. This smoke girl’s dreams float over her head—visions of a strange, colorful church. It has a steeple, but the walls sway with color as if painted by Picasso. It’s hard to say what shape it takes as it pulses with life. Is it new for the sake of new? Cool for the sake of cool? Or is it something real and lasting? It has more life than the cathedral, more hope than the tract. I want to watch and see what her dream will become.

As I wait on all that’s growing, I begin to take in what is happening beneath and behind it all. The setting of this whole tableau is a desert. But there, not so far away, is an inviting scene: a huge tent has been built. Is it a revival tent? A tabernacle in the desert? I don’t know, but it stands empty and unnoticed.

It is filled with light. And the door flaps are tied back, open wide, ready for all who will come. Is that music I hear, inviting us in? Why is no one coming? Does anyone else see it? Does anyone else hear the music? Is that Leonard Cohen, singing “Hallelujah” over us all?

The drifting chords draw me out of my dream and back into a busy café on a Tuesday afternoon. The cash register rings; the door opens to admit a new customer.
Was it a prayer, a dream, or a vision? All I know is it grew from my longing. And from it, my longing is clearer: I long for a native expression of church, something that doesn’t feel so many steps away from this moment, this café, this girl in her yellow cardigan.

I long to find an expression of faith that grows from this ground, responds to the questions this community is asking. I wish “church” didn’t bring to mind 1950s evangelism, European feudalism, and a million other negative images. I long for Scripture to speak directly to the hurts and issues and questions of this moment and this place.

What can it mean to be a missionary to my own people?

What does it mean to see these people as my own when I feel like a missionary?

I snap myself back to the present moment. I am sitting in a café, reading Jeremiah.

The story of buying fields continues. God instructs Jeremiah to buy a field in his hometown, even though the siege barricades are against the walls and the people of Israel are about to be dragged into exile in Babylon. To spend the money now, to invest in the land of his fathers, to seal up the deed and store it away: it seems like the least realistic use of his time and money.

But God has chosen to use Jeremiah’s life as a place to reveal his promises to his people. Jeremiah allows his life to be used as a story of God’s faithfulness. He invests in a real place with an eye toward what God has in store.

Whatever my work will become, it will grow from that kind of life.

For now, I look over and share a sheepish smile with the girl in the yellow cardigan. ✝
As a rule, I pretty much hated any use of leadership jargon when I worked in my local church. “Casting vision” sounds like something forbidden in Leviticus, while breaking down “silos” to facilitate teamwork would probably land me in the chiropractor’s office.

All the same, one concept I’ve come to appreciate from this jargon is “mission drift.” The idea is pretty simple, really: your organization—whatever it is—has a mission, but when it drifts from that mission, things start to go sideways.

Once you get your mind around it, applying “mission drift” to the work of the local church is fairly simple. If the church loses its sense of mission—its goal, its telos, the end for which it exists—then breakdown, failure, distraction, and dysfunction (at least, more than usual) is inevitable.

If local church leaders and congregations want to have a future, then they must keep their eyes on the great mission of the triune God: God’s people in God’s presence.

**GOD’S PRESENCE WITH GOD’S PEOPLE**

Sometimes it helps to start at the end.

Revelation 21 gives us a picture of where the whole sweep of God’s project is headed:
I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God.” (Rev. 21:2-3)

John the Revelator’s glorious vision of the end fulfills God’s plans from the beginning. Genesis 1-3 portrays God creating the world as a holy temple: as God’s house where he can dwell with his image-bearers, rest with them on his holy Sabbath, and walk with them in the cool of the day.

That is, until we exile ourselves through sin and rebellion.

The rest of the story is caught up in this cycle of presence and exile, with God continually providing ways for sinful people to enter into his company. In the Exodus, God saves the Israelites from slavery, bringing them to the foot of Mt. Sinai to be his people (Ex. 19). The heart of the sacrificial system given to Moses—with its provisions for atonement, cleansing, and sanctification—is to allow Israel to dwell in God's camp surrounding the Tent of Meeting (Ex. 33). God's holy laws set the people apart to live with their set-apart God (Lev. 18-21). Israel's ability to turn, worship, pray, and be heard by the God who is present among them is the great blessing of Solomon's Temple (1 Kings 7).

Jesus Christ, of course, is Immanuel: God come to dwell with us in the tabernacle (or temple) of his own flesh (John 1:14). At his death, the temple curtain tears in two (Mark 15:38), and in his resurrection and ascension, Jesus himself becomes the new and living way through which we are brought into the presence of God (Heb. 10:20). Therefore, when we as believers are united with Christ, we become the dwelling place of God's Spirit, continually being built up into a spiritual house (1 Cor. 3, Eph. 2).

God's people in God's presence. This is the story of the Bible and the future of the universal church—and, therefore, of your local church.

Keeping this eschatological future in mind contributes to the immediate future of the local church. It keeps our eyes focused while we are in the midst of regular ministry—and it keeps our regular ministry focused on God's great mission.

A BROADER VISION FOR THE EVERYDAY

It's fascinating to think about the Levitical priesthood: a priesthood
aimed at mediating between the people and the presence of God, at representing the people to God. It was a high and holy task that was sometimes quite dangerous, and it was a task upon which the health of the whole people depended.

And yet, when you scan the liturgical literature, you begin to get a sense for how simultaneously messy, repetitive, and meticulous the whole business was. Light the incense, prepare the showbread, slaughter the daily offerings, make sure and manipulate the blood properly. Rinse, wash, and repeat.

Let’s be honest and say that much of the priestly ministry was tedious work. What’s more—despite the gift of the Spirit, a couple thousand years, and a New Covenant—that doesn’t seem to have changed much. Not really. Answering what feels like a hundred emails before lunch, heading off to a couple pastoral visits, squeezing in an hour of sermon prep, rushing through dinner, and then taking two hours to settle a parking procedure in an elders’ meeting: it’s easy to get discouraged and to become distracted, bored, and complacent in the daily work of the ministry.

This is one of the ways the local church experiences the sort of mission drift that kills its future. Pastors, elders, and various members of the congregation involved in the regular, unglamorous tasks of ministry need a broader vision of the grand end of all their striving in the Spirit.

Our preaching is aimed at bringing people into the presence of God through the Word. Our counsel and admonition is aimed at sanctifying the house of the Lord. Even our decisions about the parking lot become less about logistical headaches than removing the little obstacles that can interfere with people coming to experience the presence of God in worship.

In other words, it’s only as we appreciate the radiant glory of the Holy of Holies reflected in the lives of our people—and as we remember where we’re headed—that we receive the focus, joy, and clarity of purpose we need to keep from falling into the sort of mission drift that kills ministry.

**THE FINAL PURPOSE**

While it’s easy to get thrown off course by discouragement, boredom, and drudgery, it’s also a fairly simple matter to get caught up in the pressure to do good things.
If you're preaching the Bible regularly, and you're grasping the personal, social, and cosmic implications of the gospel, it doesn't take much time to think of any number of programs your church can get involved in—or even start. We can start choirs for various ages, launch recovery groups, host afterschool tutoring programs, form relationships with local homeless ministries, support refugee settlement efforts and hospital ministries.

You see how easy it would be to keep going?

And none of this is bad. They're all worthy projects and programs for the people of God to be engaged in.

But it's easy to see the way an ever-expanding list of programs dedicated to varieties of wonderful causes can exhaust us, pull us in 20 different directions, and overwhelm our sense of the final goal of all our work. Living in a Sabbath-less, workaholic culture, it's easy for the church to believe the myth that “more is always better”: especially when it wants to appeal to religious consumers, church-shopping based on goods and services offered.

In his classic *Mere Christianity*, C. S. Lewis points out that the various activities of “the State”—with its armies, bureaucracies, courts, economic policies, etc.—boil down to promoting one goal: the ordinary flourishing and happiness of its people. In the same way, the church exists “for nothing else but to draw men into Christ”—into the presence of God. Lewis continues, “If they are not doing that, all the cathedrals, clergy, missions, sermons, even the Bible itself, are simply a waste of time. God became Man for no other purpose. It is even doubtful, you know, whether the whole universe was created for any other purpose.”

God’s people drawn into God’s presence—this is the final purpose of all of our works. This is the final purpose for the world in which we live.

**ARE WE?**

Ultimately, the future of the local church depends on God—the God in whose presence we will spend our future.

Are we trusting that the God who is not to be ashamed to be called our God, who is preparing a city for us (Heb. 11:16), will also preserve us until the day of salvation? Are we trusting that he will not neglect to finish the good work he has begun within us (Phil. 1:6)?

Are we remembering where we’re going? ✨
My wife makes the most delicious brownies,” the man in the YouTube video says, “using coconut oil and cacao nibs. When you start paying attention to what goes into the recipe—you know, healthy replacements for the bad ingredients, the processed things, the cane sugar and high fructose whatever—you really start to reap benefits.”

Watching him on one tab, you open another on your office computer’s browser and search for “coconut oil.”

“What she does, see, is she goes online to buy these things directly,” he says. “She gets coconut oil from Trinidad and Tobago, cacao nibs from Cote d’Ivoire, and butter from a family-owned farm out in Bath Township, where one of the farm’s employees will package the butter right there for you when you come to pick it up.”

At room temperature, you read, coconut oil is a liquid. Chocolates made using coconut oil need to be refrigerated or frozen to remain in solid form. It has many health benefits, either ingested or applied topically. It can be used as a hair tonic.

“What I want to suggest is that we should be mindful about Scripture translations in the same way that we are mindful about ingredients—that even though certain translations read smoothly, are familiar, can go down easy, there are healthier ones for us to use, and if we pay attention to those healthier translations, we can start to reap spiritual benefits.”

“If we look at the translators’ introduction to the 1611 edition of the—”

In an attempt to queue a new tab, you accidentally exit the one on which the video is playing. You reopen it from your history and try to skip back to where you left off.

“—makes the most delicious brownies using coconut oil and cacao nibs. When you start—” You hit pause. Is it possible that Christ was acquainted with chocolate? Perhaps the apostle Paul encountered it in the course of his travels. As he encountered—who was it, again? Seneca? The Roman Stoic? Is this true?

You take out your phone and search “Seneca Apostle Paul meeting?”

The first result is locked up behind a paywall (your church does not pay for you to have a JSTOR membership). Wikipedia, though, has a short article entitled “Epistle to Seneca the Younger,” which refers to a collection of correspondence from the apostle Paul to Seneca that is widely believed to be a forgery on account of (the article says) “poverty of thought and style, the errors of chronology and history, and—” You go back to the search results.

Well . . . jesusneverexisted.com is right out.

* * *

You glance at your computer and decide that you should get back to this video, which you hope will help you draft your response to the man awaiting a reply to this, his third unanswered email about the importance of “cleaving to the King James Version of the Bible and forsaking all others.” You click back to his email. You think that maybe he said something about dropping by to discuss it . . . Did he mean today?

“I understand that my position might seem a tad extreme to you,” his email reads, “so I thought that perhaps for the sake of starting a dialogue I might offer this level-headed teaching about the importance of the KJV that, I might say, does not have the tonal issues that one might accuse certain of the other videos of possibly having, as might be the case. Even so, I think you’ll see . . . ” He goes on for hundreds
of tortured words, expositing the arguments of the video and anticipating counterarguments and objections. You are not sure why you thought watching the video would help.

*What would be a good, winsome metaphor for Scripture translations?*

You pick up your phone again, type “Scripture translations metaphor.” Your search results are illuminating, but not for the question you are pursuing: “Scripture uses metaphors extensively, as a way of illustrating aspects of its . . .” “The metaphor/idiom literally means they are patient. I doubt any translation . . .” “If the principles suggested are followed in the translation of these figures, the meaning of the Bible will be more.”

*Will be more, eh?* You chuckle as you open a new tab on your browser: “history of scripture trans.” You read: “The term ‘transmission’ describes the ancient process of copying Hebrew and Greek manuscripts to preserve . . .” You search “Septuagint.” From the Latin septuaginta, meaning “seventy”: a translation of the Hebrew Bible and some related texts into Koine Greek. You search “Koine Greek,” read about the “Hellenistic supraregional language.” You stifle a burp and give yourself several therapeutic taps on what you believe to be your solar plexus.

You search “solar plexus.” You did not tap yourself on the solar plexus, it turns out.

* * *

All the while, your email draft has sat, the cursor blinking blankly. What can you say to someone who's completely sold, as a matter of first importance, on an esoteric idea you can barely muster the enthusiasm to research? Chiding yourself, you open a new tab: “KJV only?” The first result is, again, a Wikipedia entry. You are halfway through it when there is a knock on your door. In a panic, you somehow restart the video you were sent. “—paying attention to what goes in the recipe—”

“Pastor?”

“Hi! Yes, sorry, just a sec.” You pause the video at “high fructose whatever.” You breathe in and turn to your visitor. “I was just watching that video you sent me.”

*Isn’t it interesting,* you think to yourself during the tense and short conversation that follows, *how versatile God made coconuts?*

“Bill, I’m afraid I’m going to have to cut this conversation short.” you
say, just as he is getting ready to move into the tough stuff. “I'm afraid that, possibly on account of some bad cacao nibs I had earlier that came from Ivory Coast, I am experiencing some issues in my solar plexus.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah. It's not bad, but I'm finding it a bit distracting, pain-wise. Think I might take some coconut oil to soothe it. For now, though, could we reschedule?”

“Well.” Bill looks upward, thinking. “I suppose that would be okay.”

I need time to sort out this metaphor, you think, so I can tone down your anxieties about my occasional use of the NIV.

There's a lull, and your mind expands, runs the gamut of Christian history. You think of Augustine's theory of signs in On Christian Teaching. Do the things still exist the way he thought? You surreptitiously search “on christian teaching augustinen” on your phone under your desk.

“Well, Pastor . . . I just wanted to say, before I go, that I've had a change of heart about some things.”

Oh? You look up.

“I don't mean to keep you when you've got a pain in your solar plexus and all, but I've been doing some thinking about the emails I sent, and, well, I just think I could have been a bit less aggressive about the whole thing.” He is looking at his knees, one of which is bouncing as though possessed.

“Well, Bill, that's very—”

“I just think I felt like I was on the defensive, you know? And I wasn't really open to hearing what you had to say. I felt like you just sort of had it all figured out—and here's little old me, what do I know?” He looks up at you.

“Bill, I—”

“You don't have to say anything, Pastor. In fact, I don't think you should say anything. I hope you accept my apology, and maybe we can talk again another time.” He stands, coat over his arm, preparing to leave.
“Well—”

“See you later, Pastor. Have a good week.” And then, Bill is gone.

You close your browser window, revealing underneath a PowerPoint window containing a slideshow that already has 70 slides. It’s the message you’d been preparing. Seneca is in there somewhere, the Septuagint too—all of it in a great swirl of disconnected factoids cobbled together in an ad hoc fashion.

* * *

Sunday arrives. You feel like Karl Barth about to renounce that sermon about the Titanic—the one where he used the catastrophe (sank in April 1912, 1,490 lives lost) as an object lesson about the folly of human endeavors or something. An old seminary anecdote, not indexed for online searching.

“I’ve got just one obligation as your pastor. Just one.

“Before I begin,” you begin, “I want to say: I have made a mistake.” Everyone looks up, curious. “I have made a mistake in approach. Basically, I became so caught up in my tools—we have access to the sum of human knowledge, you know, with today’s technology—that I became, myself, a tool, if you know what I mean. I took access to technology to imply an obligation to it. Well, folks, I’m here to tell you . . . I’ve got just one obligation as your pastor. Just one.” Bill leans forward. Noticing him, a few others do the same. Soon, everyone is inclined toward you in rapt attention.

You lean over the pulpit towards your congregation.

“Let me tell you about it.”
AUTHORS

Daniel Darling is pastor of teaching and discipleship at Green Hill Church in Mt. Juliet, Tennessee, and vice president of communications for the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention.

Mandy Smith is lead pastor of University Christian Church in Cincinnati, Ohio, and author of The Vulnerable Pastor (IVP, 2015).

Derek Rishmawy is a PhD student in systematic theology at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. He blogs at derekzrishmawy.com.

Martyn Wendell Jones is a writer and editor whose work has appeared in Books & Culture, The Behemoth, The Curator, and other publications.

EDITORIAL

Richard Clark is online managing editor of Christianity Today.

Emily Lund is editorial resident for Christianity Today.

Adam Marshall is freelance editor for The Local Church.

Jacob Walsh is associate publisher for Christianity Today.

Mark Galli is editor-in-chief of Christianity Today.

DESIGN

Seth Hahne did the illustrations. He’s a writer, artist, and comics creator from California.

Sarah Gordon is a designer for Christianity Today.