

What is the theological foundation for “Rethink Church”?

One need only learn the most basic history of the church to realize that 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. Persons like Billy Graham and our own Harry Denman at the midpoint of the 20th century challenged us to do the same in regard to offering and accepting a personal relationship with Jesus. In a variety of different ways with different levels of influence, preachers like William Sloane Coffin in the 70s and Bill Hybels in the 1980s offered their own versions of how we might rethink church to reach those outside the walls of the church .

RETHINK CHURCH is not a call to find a new theology, nor to move away from our commitment to scripture, nor to distance ourselves from our Wesleyan tradition. It is a call to refocus our ecclesiology, to ask the question, “What has God called The United Methodist Church to be in the 21st century?” To see church in a way that is more aligned to scripture, and to be more faithful to the tradition of John Wesley who believed the world was his parish.

The RETHINK CHURCH campaign is about challenging those outside the church to envision a church that is not a static institution, but a movement of people empowered to take ministry into the world. It is simultaneously about asking the people of The United Methodist Church to see their local church in a much broader way: not tied solely to their worship on Sunday morning but in all the ways, locally and globally, they are making a difference in people’s lives.

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

Jesus gave the Great Commission, and told us to “Go into the world” doing the things that he did: teaching, healing, feeding hungry people, speaking out about injustice, and calling the world to more 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 that sense of being a movement and have convinced ourselves it was enough to gather in our buildings and wait for people to come and find us. Jesus sent the disciples, and sends us, out to meet the world. We do that when we encounter the world at its points of greatest need.

The term we are using for these touch points is “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 also paints a clear picture of expectation for the church in the world. Jesus’ followers took these words to heart and to the streets, 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 bricks and mortar 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 those of Paul.

It’s clear from Paul’s writings that he was a central connector in a web of relationships. His missionary journeys were made possible by this web of connections, 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 as the people of God. It 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.

RETHINK CHURCH



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

This very mission drives us to rethink, reexamine and remold how we see our church and how we live as the church. The call to make disciples challenges the church in the 21st century nowhere more profoundly than in our inability to attract and welcome young adults into the life and ministry of local congregations.

Jesus was, by our present definition, a young adult; all of his ministry years he fit into the age range of 18-34 year old target audience. His disciples, many scholars agree, may have been even younger. Jesus taught in stories, a popular medium of his day and culture, and his listeners heard the message and because the medium was accessible, they followed. RETHINK CHURCH calls us to explore new ways to reach seekers (especially young adult seekers) through media relevant to their day and culture. As Christ found the right format for the sharing the story of God's Kingdom, so we believe that our rethinking church for a new , younger audience living in digital, on demand world will help us make disciples of a new generation. RETHINK CHURCH is not another program, but we believe it will be a movement that would make Jesus proud.