



Liminal Time: Yearning Together

We are relearning and rethinking what really matters.

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We are living in a time of dislocation. The world around us has changed. And we are wondering who we are and what it means to be church? We are unsure of what the next year or two may bring.

As I write this article, there are a lot of questions and uncertainties before us. In British Columbia, for instance, the restrictions on gatherings have been loosened. Congregations and pastors are proceeding cautiously, wondering what this all implies for holding face-to-face worship services. We are struggling to understand what is needed to reduce risk and ensure that people stay safe. We are pondering what changes have to be implemented with respect to our worship practices.

We are re-learning and re-thinking what really matters and what is important to us. During this time of cancelling face-to-face worship services, people are thinking about the things they are missing. But they also are discovering, or re-discovering, some things about community, relationships and caring for others.

I have been impressed with how our pastors and congregations are navigating this time of dislocation. Many congregations have shifted to on-line worship and are helping as many people as possible access it. For those not on-line, they are ensuring that sermons and worship resources are delivered to people in other ways.

I hear stories of people caring for those who are having difficulty accessing their church's on-line worship. Imagine — holding up a phone to the computer so that an elder can listen to the worship service, so that she can participate in her church and listen to the sermon by her pastor. How beautiful is that? You might think these are small gestures. I disagree. They are big and important. I think Jesus said something about caring for the other; something about even a glass of water given in his name means we have done it to and for him.

This time in which we are living has been described as a liminal time. Liminal time is that in-between time; it is a threshold. Things have changed so much. There is no going back to previous patterns. Yet we are not certain of the way forward. So we live with one foot on each side of the threshold. It is a time to discern, to reflect, to long for. It is a time to think about what should be left behind, what might have been hindering us, or what might hamper us as we move forward.

Susan Beaumont, in her article entitled “Finding Our New Normal,” acknowledges that this pandemic has “thrown us into deep disorientation” and that we now find ourselves “beyond the limits of our own resourcefulness and knowing.”

While we might be tempted to rely on technology to save us, or at least to save some semblance of community and relationship, we must be cautious in thinking that technology has now solved everything for us. Beaumont writes the following: “Rational decision making assumes that human knowledge is enough to address the challenges we face. Rational decisions can't guide us through the deep disorientation we face now. Instead, we need to pay attention to yearning.”

It was that sentence in her article that caught my attention. What does this mean, that we need to pay attention to yearning? What is it about yearning that provides a path, a discernment, for us?

Beaumont continues: "Yearning is the language of the human soul. When we listen to others at soul level, we sense a collective longing that will guide us to the other side of chaos. Letting go of what once was, we let ourselves be led by God who is drawing us forward and into our future. Discernment is the tool we use to attend the yearning. It is a wisdom way of knowing ... Make space in your congregation for this expression of collective yearning. What is God calling us to do or become next?"

If you are like me, you probably like to move things along and get things all nicely wrapped up and figured out. But Beaumont also wisely cautions us: "This is an exciting time to be the church if we are willing to stay in the disorientation for the time it takes to discover our next chapter."

Can we live with such uncertainty for a while? Are we able to sit for a while and be uncomfortable and unsure? Can we keep wondering, asking, and discerning? I believe we can. I believe we must.

REFERENCE: Beaumont, Susan. "Finding Our New Normal," Congregational Consulting Group, April 20, 2020 <congregationalconsulting.org/finding-our-new-normal/>.