

## The New Testament Church: A Refuge for the 21st Century?

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When I was a child, my home life was often chaotic. My father drank heavily, so many of his weekly paychecks got cashed and spent at the local bar, rather than on groceries and rent. My mother often depended on me, the oldest of her four children, for help in ways that placed far too much responsibility on a young child—and I struggled mightily with that responsibility.

Fortunately for me, my wise grandmother knew that I occasionally needed a refuge. So she would arrange for me to spend weekends at her house, and during summers I would sometimes stay with her for a month or more. Grandmommy's house was always neat and clean, quiet and peaceful. I could curl up in a comfortable chair and read, play Scrabble with her on the screened porch, or just perch on the swing set in the back yard and ponder my life.

Spending time at Grandmommy's house provided me with a refuge, time to reconnect with myself, and strength to return to the real world. My fondest memories from childhood are linked to that warm, inviting house, the lush green yard with its flower gardens and bird bath, and the quiet neighborhood that surrounded it.

Refuge isn't a word that we use often today. Refuge is defined as "shelter or protection from danger or distress; a home for those who are destitute, homeless, or in disgrace."<sup>1</sup>

Of course, we all need a refuge from time to time, and my grandmother was no exception. Born in 1897, she spent her growing-up years helping care for her mother, who was diabetic at a time when there was no treatment for diabetes. During World War 2, she lost her oldest son, James, when the B17 that he was piloting was shot down and crashed into a lake in Switzerland.

Eight years later, when my grandfather suffered a fatal heart attack, Grandmommy lost not only her husband of thirty-five years, but also her sole financial support. And one year after that, the remains of her son James were finally recovered from that Swiss lake and shipped back to the United States for burial—and my grandmother, recently widowed, was left to face that ordeal alone.

And yet she wasn't truly alone, because she, too, had a refuge.

My grandmother regularly attended church all her life. And on Sunday mornings, whenever I was staying at her house, I went with her to Pendleton Street Baptist Church, the large, respectable white steepled church where she was a long-time member. I remember little about the Sunday morning services, and frankly I don't think the church itself provided Grandmommy with much refuge.

However, she did find the refuge that she needed in what she always called her "circle," a group

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<sup>1</sup> <https://unabridged.merriam-webster.com/unabridged/refuge>

of church ladies who met formally once a month—and informally much more frequently. There were probably twenty of them, mostly of a similar age and background, and they took turns meeting at one another's homes.

If Grandmommy had a circle meeting while I was staying at her house, she'd take me with her, and I found those gatherings fascinating. They'd start with lunch, then move into the "program," which typically included a group prayer time, a Bible reading, and a devotional, maybe a song or two, and then what they just called "sharing time." Sometimes they'd take up a collection, which always got donated to the Women's Missionary Union.

Nobody was in charge; instead, they all took turns doing whatever needed to be done, based solely on what they were individually good at and enjoyed doing. They didn't need a building or any staff, since they met at their homes and did everything themselves. They kept a list of names and phone numbers, but there was no formal membership. They called each other by first name, with no titles that might suggest status or hierarchy.

It was a group of Christians who supported one another, relied on one another, prayed with and for one another, shared meals, laughed and cried together.

That circle group was my grandmother's refuge for many years, just as her home was mine. And all these years later, I'm struck by how closely that refuge of my grandmother's circle group resembled the earliest Christian churches.

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The earliest Christians, like Jesus himself, were Jewish, and the early Christian church continued to be centered around the Temple and Jewish synagogues for the first few years. But gradually, as Christianity began to attract more Gentiles, Christian churches were marginalized and pushed out of Judaism.

The early Christian church was remarkably fluid, and it has remained in a constant state of evolution and transformation ever since—right up to today. But I'm talking specifically about the Christian communities of faith that split off from Judaism and were evicted from Jewish places of worship, viewed by the Roman government as illegal, and loosely organized mostly as house churches for at least the next century.

Some of what we know about those churches comes from the letters of Paul. For many of us today, Paul's letters can be troubling because of his opinions about women, slaves, and homosexuality, among other things. His writings do serve, however, as a good source of information about the structure and function of early Christian churches, although there are many other sources of historical information on this subject as well.

Early Christian churches saw their two main tasks as (1) supporting and taking care of one another and their larger community and (2) spreading Christianity and starting new churches. At a time when Christians were being persecuted and even martyred, these early churches definitely provided a place of refuge. The early Christian churches, however, were significantly different from most churches today in several ways.

### Buildings

- The early churches met in people's homes. In general, if a house church attracted more than about twenty people, it would split. The first church buildings didn't appear until two to three hundred years later.
- Today, most churches have their own buildings that must be maintained and insured. There is, however, a rapidly growing number of churches without buildings, especially in this country and England. These newer churches meet in homes, schools, office buildings, empty storefronts, and so on.

### Leadership

- In Paul's letters to the various New Testament churches, depending on which translation of the Bible you're using, you'll run into references to apostles, prophets, evangelists, shepherds, teachers, elders, deacons, and so on, but the organizational structure of these churches was actually quite simple. In general, they had a small group of elders who weren't really "in charge," but managed the day-to-day details of church life. In some house churches, specific people served as deacons or teachers, but there was no distinction between religious "professionals" and everyone else. The concept of dividing a church into clergy and laity didn't exist, and the use of titles—reverend, father, bishop, etc.—was discouraged.
- Today most churches have various paid professionals, depending on the church size and denomination, and using titles is seen as an indication of respect for a professional clergy member's education and special calling.

### Meetings and services

- The people who attended any particular church were expected to contribute according to their own spiritual gifts, and everyone's gifts were viewed as being of equal importance. Today, most people don't recognize their own spiritual gifts—and many are, in fact, uncomfortable with the idea that they even *have* spiritual gifts. In general, people who attend Christian services today don't anticipate actively contributing to a worship service except perhaps to sing a hymn or recite the Lord's Prayer.
- Teaching was done through what is known as "Socratic dialogue," which encourages a group to discuss and reach consensus in answering large questions. Today's churches are firmly wedded to the "one expert delivering a sermon" model, known in higher education as "a sage on a stage." Today it would be considered inappropriate or downright rude to interrupt the speaker and ask a question.

### Money

- Offerings were basically used for two purposes: to support apostles and missionaries who traveled from place to place spreading the Gospel and starting new churches, and to provide assistance to the poor, sick, and underprivileged, much as we do today with our deacons' fund. They had no need to fund an infrastructure—building and staff—like churches today.

### Membership

- Although baptism was encouraged in the early Christian church—Jesus himself was

baptized—there was no formal designation of membership. You could move freely from one house church to another and have equal voice in your house church of choice without having to sign a formal document, take a new member class, or any of the other carefully prescribed steps to membership that are common in today’s churches.

- In contrast, membership requirements in most churches today are enshrined in bylaws and quite frankly seem little different from joining an exclusive country club. Centre Street’s bylaws, for example, stipulate two types of membership, covenant and associate, and each type of membership has a list of what are labelled as "privileges." Yes, membership has privileges. According to our bylaws, no matter how long you have attended our church, you must become a member in order to access pastoral services, vote or even speak at church meetings, or have your loved one’s funeral here without paying to rent the sanctuary—despite the fact that we are an open and affirming church. That troubles me deeply, and I would love to engage in a discussion about finding a better way.

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The more that I think about all of this, the more I keep bumping up against three questions:

1. Today’s Christian churches are dramatically different from the early Christian churches. What happened, and can we reclaim some of what was really good about those early churches? Are congregants here at Centre Street willing to engage in a conversation about that?
2. The struggles and decline of Christian churches over the past fifty years has been exhaustively researched and documented. Between 1990 and 2020, for example, the UCC shrank by 52 percent. So why do today’s Christians cling to a model of the church that is so obviously dying, instead of embracing the idea that God is doing a new thing?
3. At a time in the history of mankind when people are facing a truly unprecedented future, driven largely by the damage that we continue to do to our planet, could it be that God is pushing the church to become, first and foremost, a place of refuge?

As I mentioned last Sunday, when people who have left the church are asked why they did so, the most common response is that the church has no real answers to the world’s problems, that the church no longer seems relevant to the challenges faced by humanity.

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Scott Thumma is the director of Hartford Seminary’s Institute for Religion Research, and I recently attended an online seminar with him.<sup>2</sup> According to Thumma, much of what churches have been doing in church life stopped really working twenty or thirty years ago, but it took the pandemic to make us realize that we need to change if we are to survive.

Thumma’s research shows that the pandemic made a lot of people realize that they were attending church out of habit or a feeling of obligation. That habit was broken by the pandemic, and at most churches, 35 to 50 percent of people have not—and will not—return to regular

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<sup>2</sup> “Can My Church Be Saved? A Conversation with Researcher Dr. Scott Thumma.” Convergence CoLab <https://convergencecolab.org/courses/canmychurchbesaved/lectures/45801159>

participation in that church, although they will continue to enjoy an active spiritual life in other ways. The isolation imposed by the pandemic encouraged people to develop their own spiritual sense of purpose and meaning, in ways that have little to do with regular attendance at an institution that seems out of step with how most people live today.

Thumma's advice, based on exhaustive research, was to focus on what God is calling us to do *in this moment*, with our *current* resources and circumstances. We can't afford to fall into the trap of trying to be what we have been in the past. Our congregation is the people we have with us *right now*, not those who have moved on without us. The world, Thumma argues, and the *needs* of the world have changed, and so must God's church.

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One book that I'm reading these days is titled *Refugia Faith: Seeking Hidden Shelters, Ordinary Wonders, and the Healing of the Earth*. Debra Rienstra is the author, and it was published just two years ago. In closing my message this morning, I'm going to read to you a bit from the introduction:

When Mount Saint Helens erupted in May of 1980, it lost 1,300 feet of elevation and gained a new mile-and-a-half-wide crater. The debris and ashfall from the volcanic blast devastated the mountain and its surroundings for miles, crushing, burning, killing, and coating everything in hot ash. Everyone assumed life could return to this apocalyptic death zone only very slowly, maybe over several human lifetimes.

Instead, forty years later, the mountainsides are covered with lush grasses, prairie lupines, and alders. Critters scamper, and streams flow ... Why did life come back with such vigor, and so quickly? ... When the mountain blasted ash and rock across the landscape, the devastation passed over some small places hidden in the lee of rocks and trees. Here, a bed of moss and deer fern under a rotting log. There, under a boulder, a patch of pearly everlasting and the tunnel to a vole's musty nest. These little pockets of safety are called *refugia*. They are tiny coverts where plants and creatures hide from destruction, hidden shelters where life persists and out of which new life emerges.

We are living in a time of crisis eruption. Our failures of vision and restraint have propelled us into ecological danger on a scale never before seen in human history ... But the earth teaches that extreme disturbance can be survived and can even bring renewal—and one way this happens is through refugia ...

How can people of faith become people of refugia? How can we find and create refugia ... in our cultural systems and in our spirits? ... Is it possible to work together, applying all our love and creativity to this task as never before? ...

Refugia faith continually asks, Where are refugia happening and how can we help? Where do refugia need to happen, and how can we create them?<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Debra Rienstra. "Introduction: The Great Work and the Little Work" (p. 3–6). *Refugia Faith: Seeking Hidden Shelters, Ordinary Wonders, and the Healing of the Earth*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2022.

I find it so easy to imagine this church—not the building, but this group of Christians—as a refuge, in the difficult years that the communities around us here in Downeast Maine are facing.

I find it so *right* to imagine us asking those same two questions:

- In our community, where does refuge already exist and how can we help?
- And how can we, relying on God to show us the way, become a living spiritual refuge for the people in our local communities?

May we, here at Centre Street Church, find the courage to open our hearts to the Holy Spirit strengthening us, and open our ears to the voice of God leading us, so that we can become a people of spiritual refuge.