

# THE WORK OF THE PEOPLE

## *Called to Community*

### *Grace for the Church: As it was, is, and is Becoming*

#### **Introduction**

We are at a truly unique juncture in human history. Never before has so much about our lives and the world changed so quickly. From the beginning of human civilization until just a couple hundred years ago, people lived largely agrarian lives in close-knit communities, living in one form or fashion off the land. The industrial revolution led to a population shift towards cities and factories. Now with the dawn of the “Information Age” many people in economically developed countries work by sitting in front of computer screens that connect them to a loose-knit global network. While these developments certainly have their advantages, many fear the consequences of becoming disconnected from the land and from other people.

People are also choosing to disconnect from the Church. The 2015 Pew Research Study “America’s Changing Religious Landscape” notes that in the last decade the percentage of American adults who identify themselves as Christian has dropped 8% while the percentage identifying as “Unaffiliated” grew by 7%.<sup>1</sup>

In the midst of these radical shifts in our society and within Christianity itself, it is clearly time to revisit the question “What is the role of the Church?”

What is the Church’s role in the lives of individuals and families who no longer turn to it as the center of their social and family structure? What is the Church’s role in a world that increasingly sees it as irrelevant or even antithetical to human progress? What is the Church’s role in the lives of the people who continue to return to it as a source of strength, inspiration, solace and connection with God? What is the Church’s role in the lives of the people who have never walked through one of our doors and those who have sworn they never will again?

Our generation’s answer to these questions will have a reverberating impact on the course of human history. Will the Church “die”? What about resurrection? Is there a clear line between the two or are they both happening simultaneously before our eyes?

This curriculum bundle features several of our generation’s wisest souls reflecting on these issues and the larger question of “What is the role of the Church?” Our prayer is that it

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/>

sparks rich, rewarding and fruitful discussion and reflection for your small group and enables you to move through this time of rapid transition with love and with grace.

Over the course of these six sessions, in addition to the films and reflection questions, we will offer a series of “What if the Church...” reflections that envisions a way of being the Body of Christ that looks somewhat different than most congregations do today. Some of these questions are intended to be food for deeper thought. Some are intended to be provocative. They are “what if” questions posed by one person (some guy named Rich whom you will probably never meet) so you should feel free to like the idea or not. All we ask is that you imagine what it would be like and respond to that possibility in a thoughtful way.

This is a fascinating time to be alive. Let us give God thanks for the Church that was, the Church that is, and the Church that is becoming.

Christ’s peace,

Rich Nelson

There are six sessions in this series

SESSION ONE // What is the “Church?” with Walter Brueggemann

SESSION TWO // A Call to Justice with Hannah Terry

SESSION THREE // A Call to Love with Richard Rohr

SESSION FOUR // A Call to Kingdom Worldview with N.T. Wright

SESSION FIVE // A Call to the Body of Christ with Malcolm Guite

SESSION SIX // What is the Church Becoming? with Rachel Held Evans and Brian Zahnd

Link to the series on TWOTP here:

<https://www.theworkofthepeople.com/bundle/called-to-community>

## SESSION ONE // What is the Church?

In session one's film, we hear Walter Brueggemann, one of our generation's most profound and prolific biblical scholars, answer the question, "What is the role of the Church?" His answer will help set the stage for our discussions around that question in the coming weeks as we begin to think deeply about our own answers.

**Watch the film** *Collision Course with Walter Brueggemann*  
<https://www.theworkofthepeople.com/collision-course>

### Going Deeper

When asked "What is the role of the Church", Walter Brueggemann responds saying "the role of the Church is to try to act out the neighbor narrative—that is an endless challenge to whatever one calls the other narrative."

- A. What do you think is meant by the phrase "the neighbor narrative?"
- B. By way of contrast, then, what is "the other narrative" all about?
- C. What name could we give to this "other narrative?"

Brueggemann states that "[The Gospel of] Luke has Mary announce that the story of Jesus we are about to tell is a story of contradiction and conflict. And then I think Jesus simply lives out the song that his mother sang which calls into question all the structures by which people are kept immobilized, disadvantaged and devalued. And what the gospel narrative tells is that Jesus had this incredible capacity to keep breaking that open."

- A. When have you seen examples of the Church continuing this ministry of breaking open the structures that immobilize, disadvantage and devalue?
- B. When has the Church been complicit in reinforcing those structures instead?
- C. Thoughtful Christians advocate both for and against the Church being more involved in challenging political and social structures. How engaged should the Church be with these other forces? Is our call to direct confrontation, exemplary detachment, or some balance of the two?

Towards the end of the film, Brueggemann says that "Before Easter Jesus has already performed many resurrections of people who have been declared dead by the dominant system."

- A. What about these "resurrections" and healings were unique to Jesus's ministry?
- B. What might they also say about the role of the Church as the continuing Body of Christ?
- C. Where do you see signs of these kinds of resurrections in your own life? Or do you?

The title of today's film is "Collision Course."

- A. Is there a power that the Church is on a "collision course" with today?
- B. Do you see this as a collision that everyone will walk away from or one that threatens the life of those involved?
- C. Is the "wreckage" of the modern-day Church in any way a reflection of Jesus's intention for a life of sacrificial discipleship or is it simply a self-made mess?

## Reflection

What if the Church ... lived more fully into its prophetic voice?

Walter Brueggemann says that there are two distinctly different narratives, two different stories we can choose to live into. The first one, which he calls the neighbor narrative, is an "endless challenge" to the second narrative. In the earliest years of the Church, people were drawn to particular fellowships in which people interacted in a distinctly different way than people on the street usually did. They gathered around tables where all were fed, interacting as neighbors instead of a society of haves and have-nots, clean and unclean. Who you ate with defined who you were. Jesus was often challenged on this point since he seemed eager to eat at the tables of even the most foreign of people.

The neighbor narrative looks at the world through an entirely different lens. As the apostle Paul put it,

*"As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise."* (Galatians 3:27-29)

And yet we live in a world that is deeply divided and tries to force us to choose camps. Are you a liberal or a conservative? An intellectual or a redneck? Are you here legally or illegally? Gay or straight? Pro-life or pro-choice? Pro-Palestine or Pro-Israel? Patriot or traitor? The camps go on and on and, for better and for worse, our individual and collective answers to these questions shape the face of our local church communities.

Imagine a world in which this is not the case. Imagine a world in which, before any other distinction is made, we first claim our foundational unity as brothers and sisters in the one family of God. What could be more biblical than to read Genesis 1 and 2 and say "we always must start with the agreement that we are one family and nothing, NOTHING, takes precedence over that. There is no identity or ideology worth dividing over because our only true identity is "child of God."

In the rural Texas county I live in, following the 2014 immigration crisis in which thousands of unaccompanied children from Central America sought asylum in the U.S., our local elected officials saw fit to pass a resolution that none of these people were welcomed in our county and that the federal government had no right to ask that they be housed here. “Illegals” were not welcome. At a meeting of the area clergy and county officials, I challenged them to consider the biblical mandate that we are to offer hospitality to foreigners in our land and that we should look at these children as brothers and sisters in Christ (as they were surely baptized) rather than as “illegals” trespassing on our land. The response I got is that we had no way of knowing whether these children were Christians or not, that they were probably drug smugglers, and that our first responsibility is not to them but to guarding the taxpayers’ money. The only thing we knew for sure was that they didn’t have a right to live in this land and any other consideration was a mute point. And this response came from a lifelong Christian whom I had voted for and found in every other way to be a likable person.

When I attempted to coordinate a letter to the editor in the local paper to be signed by area clergy, I found some support but was strongly discouraged from doing so by some area pastors for fear that it would be “too divisive.” And in the end, even I capitulated partly in fear of the rift it would cause in my own congregation. The prophetic voice had been squashed. Even my own.

What if the Church lived more fully into its prophetic voice and was unafraid to stand up for human dignity and equality, even when there is a clear social price to pay? What if, instead of always trying to be likable in an attempt to lure more people to become members of our congregations, we risk driving some of our people away in favor of preaching the whole gospel? What if more of our church leadership quit worrying about being likable and instead focused on being faithful to even the most challenging parts of our “neighbor narrative?”

What if instead of wringing our hands over the decline in membership of our churches, we march ever more boldly towards the cross, willing to die, even to ourselves, rather than deny the Christ we know? At least then our death would not have been in vain. And besides, our God knows a thing or two about how to breathe life into that which others have left for dead.

## SESSION TWO // A Call to Justice

In session two's film, we spend a few minutes with Hannah Terry, the pastor of a congregation that seeks to incorporate a neighborhood model of Church more akin to the communities created by the early disciples, and also Paul who comes from a more contemporary denominational model, in this case the United Methodist Church.

**Watch the film** *Missional Imagination with Hannah Terry*

<https://www.theworkofthepeople.com/missional-imagination>

### Going Deeper

Hannah Terry's church looks like herself and other faith leaders living in and among the people they feel called to serve rather than a campus that seeks to draw those people to come to it. She says, "Every day is an adventure. I get to be with people who are everyday trying to figure out 'Where is God at work in our neighborhood?' and then rejoin God there every day. So it's a whole lot of living on the fly."

- A. How do you imagine the structure of their church fosters the creation of Christian community? How might it be hindered by it?
- B. What kind of insights into people's lives do you think they get access to?
- C. If your church is more of a traditional campus-model are there ways you can still build relationships with your neighbors as you seek to "live with them?"

Some see justice in punishing those who have wronged the poor. Some see justice in getting the rich to help pay the bills of the poor. Some see justice in changing the systems that keep people from being able to afford to pay the bills. In this film, another element of justice is articulated in terms of relationship. "What does it mean to be Church together when my friend is scared he'll be kicked out tomorrow? But then I also realize we're not in here to be saviors and pay people's rents. So signs of resurrection include when I see this person smiling . . . who didn't smile two years ago. And she shows up at church week after week after week (still doesn't speak English) and yet welcomes us into her home, cooks for us." So we could say there are various elements of justice:

- retribution - which takes something away from those who took first,
- reparation - which gives something to those who had something taken,
- rehabilitation - which works to reform those who have done wrong,
- restoration - which seeks to get all parties to help make right the wrong

- relation - which seeks to build relationship with those who have been wronged, even if we had no direct role in their victimization
  - A. What role, if any, does the Church, as a community of healing and resurrection, have to play in our society and communities in each of these elements of justice?

Terry says, “I would say that my vocation is helping spark missional imagination in others. Helping them to sense where the Holy Spirit is at work. [These three things are true:]

- God’s already at work.
- God’s always inviting us to participate with God in that.
- Get ready because God’s going to surprise you.”
  - A. Where do you sense the Holy Spirit is at work in your life and community?
  - B. How can your church be more active in naming, celebrating, and participating in the work of God?
  - C. What surprises you about what God is doing these days?

## **Reflection**

What if the Church ... lived more fully into its call to justice?

It has always bothered me that the Church exists in such a disjointed and dismembered body. I have been richly blessed in my life to be active in Baptist, Episcopal, UCC and Lutheran faith communities. I am married to a pastor in another denomination than my own. My oldest son was baptized by a Methodist truck driver, my youngest by a Lutheran bishop. The Church has power in diversity, yet this diversification makes it difficult to speak with a unified voice or give a unified witness to the world. Mostly others just hear us arguing with one another.

In 2010, the pastors in my community started having breakfast together and asking the question, what would happen if our churches saw one another as collaborators instead of competitors? We knew there was much which could potentially divide us, things such as polity, social issues, differences in worship style and biblical interpretation. But one thing we all agreed upon is that God calls us to love our neighbor through concrete acts of service and that we could do that more powerfully together rather than apart. We came together across theological and racial divisions to form “Bridge Ministry of Burton, Texas” as a unified Christian identity in town.

Our “Bridge” now has people from the various churches who serve together on six different ministry teams:

1. Seniors Ministry - providing a weekly meal and fellowship time for our elderly and meal delivery to the homebound
2. Children/Youth Ministry - providing a summer camp experience for children which is lead by youth mentors
3. Community Ministry - offering times for fellowship and worship for all in our community around meals on Good Friday and Thanksgiving
4. Helping Hands Ministry - doing minor home repairs for people in need
5. Manna Ministry - offering a weekly food pantry of canned goods, fresh produce and eggs as well as backpacks of food to kids at the elementary school each week
6. Thrift Store Ministry - providing low-cost household goods and clothes while also raising money to fund our other ministries

None of this existed a few short years ago. All of it happens in a town of 300 people (with a couple thousand people out in the countryside). Thirteen churches participate. None of it has revolutionized the world. All of it makes a difference for someone every day.

In our film, Hannah Terry says, “I’ve learned that God is very gentle and in the business of long-term walks with us. God wants to go on walks, not sprints necessarily.” This may be true, but it poses inherent problems for a society in which we have grown accustomed to rapid change and continuous innovation. The Church is uniquely positioned in many communities as a stable center for “long-term walks” as it has its own momentum which sustains its existence when so many other groups and businesses come and go. And yet, we often find it easier to get people energized around something new rather than sustaining something old.

Could it be that the role of the Church to be concerned about justice for our neighbors can only be fully sustained when we live into it together? None of the thirteen churches in and around our little town could do alone what we do together. We stumble at times, but with each passing year it looks more and more like we are in this walk together for the long haul.

There is an actual bridge in our town which goes across a major highway. One the north side of the bridge is a predominantly caucasian neighborhood which also houses the schools, post office, bank, restaurants, baseball fields, community center, and various small businesses. On the south side of the bridge is a predominantly African American neighborhood which is much more economically depressed and houses no city-wide services. We intentionally chose the name “Bridge Ministry” because bridges have the power to connect what is otherwise separate, to unite what is otherwise divided. Our churches have claimed for themselves the role of “bringing unity to the community in Christ’s name.”

And it all started with having breakfast together and getting to know one another again.

*P.S. For an additional film beyond the scope of this curriculum bundle that relates to this topic, consider watching Joyce Hollyday's "Doing Justice" at <http://www.theworkofthepeople.com/doing-justice>*

## SESSION THREE // A Call to Love

In session three's film, Richard Rohr defines the Church as a community of love. He challenges us to compare and contrast "the Church" with "the kingdom of God." And he challenges us to extend our love and concept of "Church family" beyond barriers of denomination ... and even religion.

**Watch the Film** *Two or Three Gathered with Richard Rohr*

<https://www.theworkofthepeople.com/two-or-three-gathered>

### Going Deeper

Richard Rohr starts off by saying, "Jesus doesn't talk about any church, he talks about the reign of God, the kingdom of God. And the kingdom of God is beyond any institution."

- A. What do you think he means by saying there is a difference between "a church" and "the kingdom of God?"
- B. In what ways do these two overlap, intersect, or stand apart from one another?
- C. Rohr is a Roman Catholic priest and a Franciscan friar, so he is certainly a part of "the Church." What is the difference between being a church member and a citizen of the kingdom of God? Do we have "dual citizenship" or are they one in the same?

Rohr notes that both St. Augustine in the 4th Century and St. Thomas Aquinas in the 13th Century said that "The church existed from all eternity whenever people loved one another." He notes that Jesus's definition of the Church is: "Two or three gathered in right relationship, in love, there I am. That's all you need."

- A. What is the difference between a gathering of "the Church" and a conversation among three friends in a coffee shop? Or is there a difference?
- B. What if two or three who gather in Christ's name are in "wrong relationship" and not in love? Can that still be the Church or not?
- C. Rohr speaks of the Church from Abel and says "that Church existed long before the Roman Catholic church was ever thought of and before Baptists were ever imagined. We've got a lot of humble pie to eat to recognize our arrogance." In what ways do you think we are moving beyond this arrogance?

Perhaps most challenging, as Rohr notes in the film, is his assertion that "of course what this also means ... [is] that Hindus, and Buddhists and Jews are also created in that same

image of God. And when they live inside this Christ-mystery, they might not have the right words ‘Lord, Lord’ but they might have the right mystery. And that’s what matters!”

- A. If we gather in love and fellowship with people of other faiths, does Church happen?
- B. What does our response to that question reveal about our understanding of what the Church is?
- C. In what way does the Church depend on the personhood of Jesus to exemplify the truth of Christ? Can that truth, or at least elements of it, also be found in people and leaders of other faiths or must Jesus be acknowledged before Christ can be revealed?

## **Reflection**

What if the Church ... lived more fully into its call to love?

I graduated from high school in Laramie, Wyoming and then moved away to another state to go to college. Laramie is a town not unlike many other towns in the United States. It is a mixture of blue collar workers (ranching and service industries) and white collar workers (education and management). It was in some ways an ideal place to grow up in that it was a fairly small town with a strong sense of community, set apart from the rest of the world by mountain ranges on both the east and the west. And in other ways it was a rough place to grow up as I experienced some of the worst bullying of my life there by someone who thought I didn’t belong.

Still, I was shocked and gut-wrenched in 1998, several years after I had moved away, to learn that two boys I went to high school with were accused of beating and torturing a University of Wyoming student named Matthew Shepard. These two boys tied Matthew to a fence outside of town and left him to die in the brutal Wyoming cold. What surprised me wasn’t that something so cruel could be done by people from my hometown. I myself feared for my life when I was bullied by someone who was known to send guys twice my size to the ER. What surprised me wasn’t that complicated feelings around homosexuality might have played a role in Matthew’s death. After I was cast to star in our high school’s production of the play *Deathtrap*, I asked our drama teacher to write out the fact that my character was gay, which she did despite the plot holes it created. No, what surprised me was the flood of mixed feelings, emotions, and memories this tragedy brought up for me. Because, in regards to the issue of homosexuality, I stood firmly on the side of the fence that said it was a sin.

The defense lawyer for the boy who stood trial for Matthew’s death argued that he had killed Matthew in a fit of rage after Matthew had made a sexual advance towards him. Whether or not Matthew’s death was fueled by hatred towards homosexuals is still

debated by people who knew Matthew and these two other boys. There is much we still don't know and may never fully know.

What we do know is that our nation and the world reacted strongly to this event. My sister stood among people dressed as angels who sought to block out the Westboro (Kansas) Baptist Church members who picketed Matthew's funeral with signs that read, "God hates fags." It took eleven years and several failed attempts before our country passed the Matthew Shephard Act which defines killing someone for their sexual identity as a hate crime. And still in 2015 my mom, as a representative of the Episcopal Diocese of Wyoming, testified in favor of a State of Wyoming bill that would have banned discrimination against someone based on their sexual orientation. As an example of just how deeply hatred towards homosexuals persists to this day, in that hearing one lawmaker proposed the bill be amended to go into effect "when hell freezes over." He was dismissed from the hearing immediately. The bill failed 33-26, however, weeks later, the city of Laramie managed to pass similar protections for its own citizens despite the State's inaction (17 years after Matthew was murdered there).

For years I persisted in believing that homosexuality was a sin and, though murdering someone for their orientation could never of course be justified, I still felt justified in judging them. And that's what surprised me, that I wasn't at peace with that position. It was based on what I believed the Bible said about the issue but something in my spirit still told me I was wrong. It called into question my whole "hate the sin but not the sinner" attitude. Is there any room for hate in a heart that is called to love? What qualifies me to judge someone for an action that is in no way violent towards another person? Jesus's teaching in Matthew 7 continued to trouble me as he said, "Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. For with the judgment you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get. Why do you see the speck in your neighbor's eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye?"

As I went through seminary, I found my way to the position that whether homosexuality was a sin or not was not for me to decide, it was for God to decide. My only role was to love people whether I personally deemed them worthy of my love or not. It took another nine years before I preached a sermon in which I said I stood for the full and equal rights of homosexual persons. I became so emotional, I couldn't finish the end of the sermon. Thankfully, a church member stood up and finished reading it for me.

All of this to say one thing: the Church can either choose to be seen by the world as a righteous (and hypocritical) judge who points the finger at others and says "bad" or it can choose to be seen by the world as a generous lover of all (whether sinner or saint) who reaches out with open arms to welcome all people into their God-given place in the family. We can have it one way or the other. What I am certain of is that we can't have it both ways.

P.S. For an additional film beyond the scope of this curriculum bundle that relates to this topic, consider watching Mark Labberton's "Baptized in Pleasantries" at <http://www.theworkofthepeople.com/baptized-in-pleasantries>

## SESSION FOUR // A Call to a Kingdom Worldview

In session four's film, N.T. Wright gives an incredible 2-minute summary of the Bible in which he describes God's long-term rescue project for the world, tracing the story of God's view of history from Abraham, through Jesus Christ, to us.

**Watch the Film** *Long-Term Restoration Project with N.T. Wright*

<https://www.theworkofthepeople.com/long-term-restoration-project>

### Going Deeper

N.T. Wright begins by addressing the question “What did God do in Christ that we can't do for ourselves?” He notes Israel's inability to live in obedience to God, despite its chosen status as the people of God. “So God has to come and be the true Israelite, the messiah. [God in Christ] has to do for the world what Israel and the world couldn't do for itself, which is this perfect obedience ... to the saving plan of God.”

- A. Why do you think that perfect obedience would be necessary in God's plan for saving the world? Do you agree it is necessary?
- B. Is perfect obedience necessary for God's sake or for the sake of humankind—that is, does it in some way satisfy God's requirement of the world or does it provide the example of obedience the rest of humanity needs to know the way it is to go? Or are both required?
- C. How is this view of human history different from the predominant view which tells the human story through the lens of the rise and fall of human kingdoms, regardless of their obedience to God?

Wright says, “Jesus inaugurates the kingdom. Every human kingdom other than Jesus's kingdom turns into arrogance, pride, etc. The meaning of his death and the meaning of his launching of the kingdom go together, they belong together.”

- A. If Jesus's kingdom is truly different than all of the other kingdoms, what would you say are the hallmarks of his kingdom that differentiate it from all others?
- B. The kingdom of God is inaugurated with a story about the death of our ruler, which stands in stark contrast to the inauguration of other worldly kings and presidents who rise to power by winning wars or elections. What does it mean to you to follow a despised, rejected, Crucified King rather than a triumphant, victorious, Conquering King? (Or how does Jesus's final victory change our understanding of what it looks like to triumph?)

- C. If the Church is called to be a witness of Jesus's kingdom story as the only true story, how do we best immerse ourselves in this story so we are not only telling it but living it as well?

Bishop Wright tells this story in a very orthodox and scholarly way. You will be hard pressed to find a more succinct description of the traditional view of the meaning of Jesus's death in God's plan of salvation.

- A. Our society values individual freedom and the power of each person to write their own story. How do we articulate God's story in language that connects with a people who are unfamiliar with the concept of being "obedient to a king?"
- B. Why would we presume they would want to be subject to a king and live in a self-sacrificial way when they can more easily be subject to no one and live in a self-serving way?
- C. Perhaps a better way at getting at this is to ask, Why would you choose to live inside of this story?

## **Reflection**

What if the Church ... lived more fully into its call to kingdom worldview?

Growing up as an acolyte in an Episcopal cathedral can do wonders for a child's sense of the sacred mystery. I recall how honored I felt to stand by the altar as the priest or bishop surrounded the altar with the smoke and smell of incense, recited the ancient words of institution, held the host high and broke the bread signifying the broken body of Christ which has the power to unite God with all humanity. My skin tingled as I felt the Spirit's presence.

As a priest, there have been times when I celebrated the eucharist and again felt this same sense of sacred mystery and I looked out at the congregation and knew they felt it too. At that moment, all seems right with the world. But I've had very different kinds experience behind the altar too. There have been times when the comedy of life broke through as I broke the loaf of bread in two only to find it raw in the middle, with a drooping bridge of something akin to pizza dough connecting the two sides. There have been times when the tragedy of life broke through as we celebrated communion in times when life seemed too depressing to call it any kind of "celebration." And there have been many, many times where I looked out at a sleepy Sunday morning congregation for whom this moment had become completely routine, losing any sense of wonder, majesty or awe and instead was the last thing standing between them and getting on to the other things they were eager to do that day.

Viewing the world as the kingdom of God depends upon seeing the mundane for what it truly is—holy and sacred. This ordinary bread and wine become Christ's body and blood. This moment playing with my child becomes a glimpse into eternity. This hike in the mountains is an encounter with the face of God. This day, as regular and routine as it is, is a great and precious gift.

Too often we miss it. We live our lives as if the kingdom of this world is all there is and our job is simply survive it somehow. And too often the Church is complicit in perpetuating this same view. We argue over small stuff with the same ferocity and lack of civility we see demonstrated for us by the talking heads on cable news, forgetting that "they will know we are Christians by our love." We obsess about success, focusing so much energy on getting more members and money, forgetting that Jesus sent us out two by two with no money or extra tunic. We jockey for the highest position of authority like anyone else climbing a corporate ladder, forgetting that Jesus says the greatest among us will be the servant of all.

The role of the Church is to exemplify what life is like in the kingdom of God—a peaceable society in which all are fed, all are welcome, and the old divisions of the world have faded away in favor of living into our true identity as one family of God, sisters and brothers in an inescapable network of mutuality borne out of our inherent unity as people created in God's image. This does not mean that all should be smooth sailing in our churches or that sacrifice should never be required. In fact the opposite was promised by Jesus when he said that because of him parent would turn against child and child against parent and we would undergo great suffering because of our commitment to following his way. But it should mean that the divisions and suffering we endure should be the result of our commitment to love one another as God has loved us, knowing full well that we will still be rejected by some since Christ was rejected by all. Sadly, the divisions and suffering we endure are too often the result of our own hatred, greed, and internal violence.

The Church may never be a model of obedience to God, just as Israel never was or will be either. But we should strive to be. And in the meantime, we should be about the business of boldly proclaiming the story of the One who was and is perfectly obedient, even if it meant his own death.

And we are to be about the business of celebrating and naming the holy moments of life for the glimpse of the kingdom of God they offer. If we cannot learn to identify and celebrate the sacred mystery present at the communion altar, how will we ever learn to identify and celebrate the sacred mystery of the mundane moments: the brushing of teeth, the taking of the dog out to the yard to do her business, the long overdue phone call, the unpleasant work that gets done to put food on a table, the snoring of our partner which keeps us from falling asleep. In the end, it is all a gift from God, all sacred. All of it, or else none of it.

P.S. For an additional film beyond the scope of this curriculum bundle that relates to this topic, consider watching Walter Brueggemann's "Transformative Capacity" at <http://www.theworkofthepeople.com/transformative-capacity>

## SESSION FIVE // A Call to be the Body of Christ

In session five's film, Malcolm Guite makes a very direct parallel between what Jesus did and what we are called now to do. Could it be so simple as to do what Jesus did and simply emulate his physical movements and actions? What does this say about how the Church should be organized?

**Watch the film** *Flesh & Blood with Malcolm Guite*

<https://www.theworkofthepeople.com/flesh-and-blood>

### Going Deeper

Malcolm Guite's says, in response to the question, "What is the role of the Church?", that "The role of the Church is not church growth. Any organization that is obsessed with its own growth is essentially cancerous. So, I guess, Paul speaks of the Church as the Body of Christ. So if I want to know the role of the Church I look at role of the Body of Christ, as Christ was walking alive."

- D. Does it surprise you that church growth would be called a cancerous obsession? Why or why not?
- E. Paul speaks in several different places of the Church as the Body of Christ. Read two such places: Romans 12 and 1 Corinthians 12. What does Paul say about the role of the Church?
- F. Does it surprise you that Guite correlates the actions of Jesus with the role of the Church so directly? Is Jesus anything that the Church is not called to be or is that call one in the same?

Guite lists several things that the physical body of Jesus Christ did and draws a direct correlation to the role of the Church. Things such as "moving around the place, he's not stuck in one building, he's touching people where they are, he's healing them where they are, he's giving good news, he's challenging people. He's also getting crucified. Church needs to be there as well."

- A. These are challenging words for a faith that centers itself around meeting in a building. Read what Jesus says about the way his body is to be the center of the faith rather than a physical temple building in John 2:13-22.
- B. Can the Church touch and heal people in the same way Jesus did or must we think of these things metaphorically? Is there any possibility we sell ourselves short and we actually have more power to heal than we gives ourselves credit for?
- C. What does it look like for the Church to be crucified?

Guite recommends going through the gospels and taking note of Jesus's physical actions, "what he does and what is done unto him."

- A. Divide up the four gospels amongst your group and skim through them to create the beginning of such a list.
- B. What does Jesus do?
- C. How does the Church do that? Can it?

## **Reflection**

What if the Church ... lived more fully into its call to be the Body of Christ?

For much of the history of Christianity, the physical body has been looked at with suspicion, if not disdain. On one level, the apostle Paul seems to set a life of "the flesh" against a life of "the spirit" (though some interpret "the flesh" as more akin to our modern understanding of the ego rather than anything to do with the physical body). Gnostic Christianity in the first century went so far as to devalue the entire "world of matter" in favor of the "world of spirit." Interpretations and misinterpretations of St. Augustine's duality of "the spirit" and "the flesh" further complicated the matter. And the Church's modern struggles with issues around sexuality and reproduction also illustrate our mixed feelings and lack of sophistication in knowing how to address the body.

Jesus, however, seems to care about the physical body, a lot. Much of his earthly ministry centered around the healing of people's physical infirmity. Our traditional belief in the physical resurrection of Jesus values the importance of the body, otherwise why would the gospels go to such length to demonstrate it was him in the flesh and not a ghost? And the fact that Christianity is the only major world religion that believes God became incarnate in human form would seem to mean that we believe in a God who values the physical existence as much as the spiritual existence. It may, in fact, mean that the two are not opposed or even separate but rather are a part of one unified field of being.

How can the Church live more fully into its call to be the Body of Christ? We can understand this call on different levels. As Malcolm Guite notes, we can and should understand this in a very practical way to mean doing what Jesus did. If the Church spent more time outside our temples, outside "the city," outside the centers of power, in the places where ordinary people live and the places where we will encounter those who are not welcome in all the usual places, that would likely be enough to revolutionize the face of Christianity.

If we take this call even further it might lead us to a deeper sense of union with one another in which all churches, no matter what the sign outside says, understand

themselves as different members of one body, each with our own valuable role to play. In this way, our divisions might cease if we no longer could say to one another “I have no use for you.”

And if we take this call all the way to its conclusion, it might mean that we too learn how to conquer death in all its forms. And we too might raise the dead to new life. And we too might live in constant communion with the God who is the source of all that is, no longer needing to form and prove our own identities but resting in the assuredness of God’s grace and love and showing all the world how to do the same. That would truly be good news.

P.S. For an additional film beyond the scope of this curriculum bundle that relates to this topic, consider watching Barbara Brown Taylor’s “Speaking to the Body” at <http://www.theworkofthepeople.com/speaking-to-the-body> and Danielle Shroyer’s “Worship and Practice” film at <http://www.theworkofthepeople.com/worship-and-practice>

## SESSION SIX // What is the Church Becoming?

**Watch both films** *Creating Something New with Rachel Held Evans*

<https://www.theworkofthepeople.com/creating-something-new>

and *Come & Die with Brian Zahnd*

<https://www.theworkofthepeople.com/come-and-die>

### ***Going Deeper***

Rachel Held Evans says that “maybe a little death and resurrection is exactly what the Church needs right now . . . maybe our empire-building days are over and maybe that’s a good thing. Maybe the Church isn’t about power, and money, and numbers. Maybe the Church is about something else. And maybe dying to those old ways of doing things is exactly what needs to happen.”

- D. Do you think dying is a good analogy to use to describe what the Church is going through right now? Why or why not?
- E. If the Church isn’t about power, money and numbers, then what is it about instead?
- F. We like to quantify and categorize, which partly is why the old ways of counting people in the pews and pennies in the plate continue to be used. What metrics or criteria could we use to determine the health and fruitfulness of the Church if we didn’t use these?

*From “Come and Die”*

Brian Zahnd starts out by saying “Sometimes I think we expect far too much of the Church. ‘What’s the Church going to do? How are we going to change the world?’ Why not be that part of the world that is being changed by Christ. So I have very, very modest ambitions.”

- A. What do you think of Zahnd’s distinction between a Church that seeks to change the world and a Church that is the part of the world being changed by Christ?
- B. Do you see this as too internally focused and disengaged or do you see this as similar to God’s plan to create a holy nation of Israel?
- C. Zahnd goes on to say, “The Church is this alternative society that is by nature intensely peaceable . . . Jesus is the scapegoat to end scapegoating . . . God overrules Jesus’s death . . . And Jesus comes back saying, ‘Peace be with you.’”

If we take seriously our call to be an alternative society, what peaceable actions will it require of us?

Rachel Held Evans says, “Maybe this is just God creating something new ... so when I’m thinking about death I’m thinking about resurrection.” Brian Zahnd concludes by paraphrasing Dietrich Bonhoeffer in saying, “When Christ calls a man he bids him come and die, not come and triumph, not come and prevail, not come and change the world, come and die.”

- A. Is death always a guarantee of resurrection or can a thing die and simply stay dead?
- B. If the Church were to walk willingly to the calvary of its own death what would that look like and how would we hold onto hope of resurrection?
- C. Many of the world’s greatest leaders died a premature death at the hands of violent forces. What does it say about us that we so often fear and kill God’s messenger? What does it say about God that the messenger is allowed to be killed?

## **Reflection**

What if the Church ... wasn’t afraid of dying?

Death can be a sad and painful thing, but not always. The key to a good death is often preparation and healthy amounts of both grieving and celebration. For some, death comes as a welcome relief by both the person who is ready to pass and those who have done their work to prepare to let that person pass, knowing that the gifts they gave us will live on.

Call it a death or call it what you like, but the Church is being forced to change. And, as family systems theory teaches us, when one element of the system changes the whole system must change in response. For the past several centuries, the Church has seen its role as standard-bearer for what is right, judge of what is wrong, comforter of those who mourn, and shepherd of souls towards heaven. My best guess is that the Church will continue to be all of these things in one form or fashion. But perhaps in this new incarnation of the faith we can be other things as well. Perhaps we can be more humble about our own failings. Perhaps we can be more forgiving of the failings of others. Perhaps we can seek to comfort those outside our walls as well as those inside. And perhaps we will learn to shepherd souls down a path of discipleship on their way to whatever their final destination may be like.

I am happy to leave much of the presumed “role of the Church” in God’s hands. I do not need to make all things right. I can’t. We can’t. But what we can do is just as needed. We can love other people in very concrete ways as we live out the “neighbor narrative,” as Brueggemann put it. I’m tired of the “other narrative,” the one that says you must lose for me to win. I don’t want you to lose. I never really did. I just didn’t know how to love in a way that was unafraid to win or lose so long as we did it together. So join with me, brother and sister, Jew and Gentile, Christian and Muslim, conservative and liberal, slave and free and let us celebrate together our mutual citizenship in God’s kingdom.

What is the “role of the Church?” Well, we live in a very, very broken world. So let’s begin to find out our role by healing wounds, offering friendship, sharing food, and following Christ down this road ... together.