



Viva la Church

Several leaders of St. Matthew (Pamela and Greg Beihl, Sue Edman, and Pastor Ann), went to Las Vegas for Viva la Church, October 21-23, a conference about what's next for the church. This conference promised to be “a dynamic innovator gathering for leaders, dreamers, and doers who are passionate about the future of the Church...designed for clergy and laity who are ready to reimagine church, ...revitalizing a small congregation, exploring new models of ministry, or simply curious about how to reach new people in new ways outside of church walls.” And we were not disappointed. The conference drew participants from all over the connection, not just the Western Jurisdiction (75 from our Annual Conference alone) but from all over the US, and we had participants of all ages, from the Silent Generation (born 1928-1945) through Gen Alpha (born 2010-2025) and everything in between.



Desert Southwest Conference Attendees at Viva la Church

We heard preaching from our own bishop, Bishop Carlo Rapanut, as well as Bishop Dottie Escobedo-Frank, and Rev. Derek Jacobs. We heard stirring keynotes and thought-provoking workshops, as well as practical tips from people across the United Methodist connection. With 5 different tracks, and 4 workshops in each track over the course of 3 days, there was a wealth of information. The tracks were: Revitalizing Churches, Church Innovation, Property Best Practices & Redevelopment, Hispanic/Latino/Latine Ministry, and Fresh Expressions in Post-Christendom.

We heard keynotes on how all generations matter, how a neighborhood church should be just as diverse as a neighborhood school, how our buildings can and need to support ministry, and how sometimes things have to die for life to come anew. We are, after all, a resurrection people!

So, what is the future of the church? It's more diverse than ever. Younger generations are more and more diverse. That means if we want to reach those younger generations with the message that Jesus loves them (and that is our calling, right?), we need to be open to their diversity, and not just be open to it, but value it, seek it out and welcome their diversity. We heard over and over from younger people how passionate they are about Jesus, the love of God and the Church. So, for those who are wondering, yes there is a future for the church.

But being the church looks different as we look forward, or maybe it looks more like what church once was centuries ago—a community center, not just a worship space, but a gathering space with community partners who help pay the expenses of the space. The future of church buildings is knowing they are *buildings* - they are NOT *the church*. Buildings are assets that support the work of the Church, and that Church is (just like we used to sing) the people, not the building.

The future of the church looks like community, supporting each other, listening to each other, and meeting the needs of our neighbors. The future of the church is nothing short of biblical: love God, love your neighbor as yourself (Mark 12: 30-31); feed the hungry, clothe the naked, house the homeless, visit the sick and imprisoned, care for the least of these (Matthew 25:31-46); and as Bishop Dottie reminded us, the religious practice God wants from us, as set out in Isaiah 58 is:

to loose the bonds of injustice,...
to let the oppressed go free,
and to break every yoke.

If we do that, indeed the future of the church is bright because God promises that if we do that, we will be a light that shines in the darkness, a spring whose waters never fail, and, “known as those who can fix anything, restore old ruins, rebuild and renovate, make the community livable again.” (Isaiah 58:12, The Message)

If you want to get involved or just know more, talk with any of us who went to the conference. If you are ready to step up and be part of the renewal and revitalization of St. Matthew, talk with Pastor Ann or any member of the Nominations Committee.

