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Worship for the Next Generation:
Finding Community in a Virtual World

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Abstract

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Many liturgical scholars believe that today's teenagers do not want to attend a worship service where everything is done by the "professionals," in which they simply observe and absorb the work of others. They don't want to be entertained; they want to participate. They want to be involved in something larger than themselves. This longing for connection goes beyond forming relationships solely within a single peer group. This project focuses on creating a virtual contemporary intergenerational worship service in the midst of a pandemic that embraces both ancient and modern practices that are meaningful and responsive to today's adolescents enabling them to connect and engage within the Universal Church of all believers.

Worship for the Next Generation:
Finding Community in a Virtual World

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A Final Project submitted to the Faculty of the
Candler School of Theology
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Ministry
2021

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INTRODUCTION

It is Sunday morning and as I enter the worship space, I find myself surrounded by three hundred and fifty smiling faces filled with anticipation. The building, designed and built for the church youth program, has been relatively empty and quiet on Sunday mornings but is now filled with a healthy blend of students and adults. The worship service begins as the minister welcomes the congregation and invites everyone to stand. Music accompanied by electric guitars, bass, keyboard, and drums fills the air. As the congregation begins to sing, I realize that something special is beginning to happen.

This was the scene five years ago as we launched a contemporary worship service called the *Altar* at my ministry site, St. Martin's Episcopal Church in Houston, Texas. The worship service was originally aimed at students and young adults in an effort to engage and retain the next generation. This was not the first attempt to launch an alternative/contemporary service at St. Martin's. Several years before I joined the staff, another service called the *6:10 Service* met for several months in the parish hall on Sunday evenings. This modern service also consisted of contemporary music and liturgy and sought to incorporate a more youthful congregation. Yet, over time the congregation gradually dwindled until the *6:10 Service* was discontinued.

However, this time things seemed different. To begin with, the first attempt at an alternative/contemporary service never experienced such a large gathering as the *Altar's* debut, nor did it feature the energy and enthusiasm generated by such a great mixture of students and adults. It seemed that God had truly blessed this new contemporary worship service and I couldn't wait to see what was in store for the future of our church.

MINISTRY CONTEXT: WORSHIP AT ST. MARTIN'S EPISCOPAL

For the past seven years, I have served as an associate priest at St. Martin's Episcopal Church in Houston, Texas. St. Martin's was founded in 1952 and is currently the largest Episcopal Church in the nation with just over 9,600 baptized members. My primary role as vicar is to oversee all aspects of worship. Before the pandemic, St. Martin's offered six different services on Sundays. The majority of these services were traditional, with four traditional Sunday services offered in the church and two contemporary Sunday services in the parish hall. The traditional services all use Rite I—a more formal and historical style of worship—which reflects the language and piety of the Elizabethan era and the first Book of Common Prayer.

The contemporary services all use Rite II— a much more modern style of worship—which typically reflects a greater sensitivity for inclusive language. The music styles of the traditional and contemporary services also differ. The traditional services include standard hymns and choral anthems accompanied by the organ and choir. The two contemporary services typically use more modern praise and worship songs performed and led by a group of musicians with instruments—including electric guitars, bass, drums, and keyboard.

THE SEARCH FOR CONTEMPORARY WORSHIP

Unfortunately, one of these contemporary services, the *Altar*, which began with so much potential and promise five years ago, has seen a steady decline over the past two years. This service, which was originally designed to attract students and young adults, did not reach its targeted demographic, as very few young people have been attending with any regularity. Instead, now the service is primarily comprised of older parishioners and a smattering of young families—most of whom have simply come over from one of the traditional services. Also, in

general this service has reached a plateau. Although St. Martin's continues to see an increase in general membership, the visibility of high school students in the pews on Sunday is virtually non-existent in the *Altar* service itself. Student attendance in the other services is also sparse. The clergy and staff at St. Martin's not only believe that these students are the future of our church, but also that they should be an integral part of our community in the present. Therefore, we believe it is crucial to reach out and minister to them.

I hypothesize that one possible way to accomplish this is through liturgy. In a world of constant change, liturgy has the power to anchor our faith. As human beings, we are creatures of habit and the habits we practice on a daily basis form us—whether we realize it or not. As Tish Harrison Warren states, "most of our days, and therefore most of our lives, are driven by habit and routine. Our way of being-in-the-world works its way into us through ritual and repetition."[1] In other words, all of our daily practices and routines—whether we realize it or not—move us toward a particular goal. Unfortunately, many of these cultural habits and rituals are aimed at rival kingdoms and point us away from God's Kingdom. As a result, we absorb a very different story about the *telos* (or goal) of being human and what we were created for.[2] Historic Christian worship is the antidote to these rival cultural liturgies. It's the place where we are formed, shaped and re-storied into the people we were created to be. Or as James K.A. Smith puts it, "worship isn't just something we do; it is where God does something *to* us."[3]

Many of today's teenagers do not want to attend a worship service where everything is done by the "professionals," in which they simply observe and absorb the work of others. "They

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[1] Warren, Tish Harrison. *Liturgy of the Ordinary: Sacred Practices in Everyday Life.* (Downers Grove, III: Intervarsity Press, 2016) 28-29.

[2] Smith, James K. A. *Imagining the Kingdom: How Worship Works.* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2013).

[3] Smith, James K.A. *You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit*. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Brazos Press, a division of Baker Publishing Group, 2016), 77.

no longer want to be entertained; they want to participate."[4] Today's teenagers are not interested in a church service that simply offers a slightly different version of what our culture and society can provide. Instead, they are looking for something that is larger than themselves—something that not only makes a difference in their personal lives, but impacts the world. A good liturgy always provides opportunities for everyone to actively participate as well as to become shaped and formed through the practice of prayer and worship. Offering our teenagers more opportunities to be engaged and directly involved in leading a worship service is likely to give them a sense of ownership and remind them of their value and worth within the St. Martin's family and the Body of Christ.

Finally, scholars suggest that today's teenagers, known as Generation Z, are seeking authentic connection and community. This longing for connection goes beyond forming relationships solely within a single peer group. In fact, from my conversations with our students, I have learned that the majority of them do not desire to have a dedicated "student service" in which the content is directly aimed at a "teen" demographic. Instead, many wish to be part of an intergenerational service in which they worship alongside people of all ages. I've also learned through these conversations that many of our students find our traditional services a bit too rigid and formal, and they perceive the Family Table Service (our contemporary worship service designed for parents with young children) as too loose and child-friendly. Ultimately, many of our students seem to desire a worship atmosphere located somewhere in the middle while maintaining the integrity and traditions of the Episcopal Church.

In response to these challenges, my Doctor of Ministry project focuses on developing a contemporary intergenerational worship service that embraces both ancient and modern practices

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[4] Bevins, Winfield. *Ever Ancient, Ever New: The Allure of Liturgy for a New Generation*. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2019), 53.

and will enable adolescents to connect and engage within the St. Martin's family and the Universal Church of all believers. The goal of this service is to fulfill our teenagers' longing for authentic connection and community in contrast to what they have typically been offered in the past. In light of the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, and for the safety and well-being of our parishioners, I have begun this work virtually with the hope that it will provide a temporary harbor of authentic intergenerational community among our student and adult parishioners. I am also hopeful that this experimental virtual worship service will allow us to begin forming and strengthening these intergenerational relationships now until we are able to safely transition back to in-person worship.

ANCIENT WORSHIP FOR A NEW GENERATION

A year and a half ago, I helped form a committee of student and adult parishioners at St. Martin's in order to better understand and visualize the contemporary worship landscape. The committees work entailed visiting contemporary worship services being offered at nearby churches and reporting their findings to the committee. Some of these churches offered worship services designed specifically for their teenagers. Many of these contemporary services seemed to emulate a rock concert or music club in which a raucous band would take the stage and lead the student worshipers in a rousing set of praise and worship songs for thirty minutes followed by an additional half hour of high-energy preaching and teaching. For many of the committee members, it was like viewing a teen-friendly pep rally for Jesus. From my parishioners' perspective, these teen-oriented worship services seemed to place a high priority on keeping the younger generation engaged through entertainment.

In Barna's *Gen Z: The Culture, Beliefs and Motivations Shaping the Next Generation*, Troy Earnest, an area director for Young Life, discusses this approach to ministering to today's teens. Ernest states, "There seems to be a big focus on creating the right environment before they even get started. 'We're going spend all this money and have this great room, and then there will be video games. Kids will definitely come.' But I don't think that's true. Or, if kids come to check it out, they probably won't stay."[5]

I have experienced Ernest's argument first hand at St. Martin's and in other church youth groups over the years. For example, eight years ago St. Martin's designed and built a brand-new facility for our youth. The beautiful two-story building includes multiple game consoles with flat screen TVs, a small indoor basketball court, a pool table, and even a small stage with theater-mounted lights and a projector screen. On the surface, this building seems like a dream space for church youth groups. Yet, during my tenure on staff, this facility aimed at attracting and entertaining our youth, has been sparsely filled on Sundays and throughout the rest of the week. This is due in part to an unusually high turnover in the student ministry team over the past several years. However, the fact remains that a beautiful building specifically designed to entertain today's teenagers has not kept them coming back to church.

The authors Mark DeVries and Scott Pontier, in their book *Sustainable Young Adult Ministry: Making it Work, Making it Last,* discuss similar pitfalls that many churches fall into when it comes to worship planning for students and young adults. "It's so easy to make cosmetic changes, thinking that a few external tweaks will help us hit the bull's-eye. We call the sanctuary a 'worship center'; we refer to the worship service as an 'experience'; we no longer have a

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[5] Barna Group. Gen Z: *The Culture, Beliefs and Motivations Shaping the Next Generation*: (Barna Group: Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 2018), 93.

sermon, but a 'teaching.'"[6] The authors go on to urge pastors and church leaders "to be honest and clearly declare that none of these surface changes hold the secret to having young adults actually show up and stay."[7]

In fact, many of today's students and young adults are looking for much more than simply entertainment and what the secular world has to offer. According to Winfield Bevins in his book *Ever Ancient, Ever New*, "many contemporary churches play worship music that echoes secular pop songs, and we've designed our church buildings to look like Wal-marts or movie theaters."[8] In other words, instead of embracing the differences between the Church and society, many worship leaders have appropriated modern culture to engage today's teenagers all in the name of entertainment.

Yet, various studies show that today's young generation of Christians are longing for something more—whether they realize it or not. Bevins puts it like this: "they have grown tired of shallow, alternative approaches to the historic liturgical practices of past centuries. Young adults want more. They are harboring a longing for a church that transcends any single culture, not an approach that simply accommodates the surrounding culture."[9]

In addition to entertainment, a lot of contemporary worship tends to focus on the individual, placing a great emphasis on how "I" feel or what "I" must do in order to worship the Divine. This reflection on the self tends to feed our ego; and in many ways goes directly against forming and shaping disciples of Christ. As Jesus said in Matthew's gospel, "if any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."[10]

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[6] DeVries, Mark and Scott Pontier. *Sustainable Young Adult Ministry: Making it Word, Making it Last*. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2019), 39.
[7] DeVries, Mark and Scott Pontier. *Sustainable Young Adult Ministry*, 39.
[8] Bevins, Winfield. *Ever Ancient, Ever New*, 34.
[9] Ibid., 35.
[10] Matthew 16:24 NRSV.

Unfortunately, it's all too easy for many pastors and church leaders to simply import today's secular liturgies into a worship service believing that the end result—keeping our students and young people in the church—ultimately justifies the means. However, the truth is that many of these practices simply reinforce a deep consumerism and narcissism that's embedded in our culture. James K.A. Smith sums it up this way in his book *You Are What You Love*:

> In our desire to embed the gospel content in forms that are attractional, accessible, and not off-putting, we look around for contemporary cultural forms that are more familiar. Instead of asking contemporary seekers and Christians to inhabit old, stodgy medieval practices that are foreign and strange, we retool worship by adopting contemporary practices that can be easily entered precisely because they are so familiar. Rather than the daunting, spooky ambience of the Gothic cathedral, we invite people to worship in the ethos of the coffee shop, the concert, or the mall…The problem, of course, is that these "forms" are not just neutral containers or discardable conduits for a message.[11]

In other words, the dangerous thing about incorporating this kind of strategy in worship planning is that these contemporary cultural forms all carry a consumeristic, individualized ethos from which they are extracted. So, instead of forming our students and young adults as Disciples of Jesus Christ, we may unwittingly perpetuate the destructive influence of individualism, consumption and entertainment. Smith goes on to explain that keeping young people entertained in our church buildings is very different from forming them as members of the body of Christ. Instead, he warns that "what passes as youth ministry is often not serious modes of Christian formation but instead pragmatic, last-ditch efforts to keep young people as card-carrying members of our evangelical club. We have confused keeping young people in the building with keeping them in Christ."[12]

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[11] Smith, James K. A. *You Are What You Love*, 75.
[12] Ibid., 145-146.

This is why embracing time-honored, historical Christian forms of worship is so critical. In today's day and age, rival liturgies are constantly forming and shaping our desires and longings—either consciously or unconsciously. Therefore, Christian worship should be the place where we are counter-formed against these cultural practices. Many liturgical scholars believe ancient Christian worship is the antidote to these rival cultural liturgies. It is the place where we are formed, shaped and re-storied into the people we were created to be. In addition to this, there is something powerful about engaging a faith (and its ancient practices) that didn't start yesterday and is not influenced by the latest trends or fads. The strength of historical Christian worship harkens back to another time and is not bound to the biases of today's culture.

Author Fred Edie argues for a return to historical worship practices in *Book, Bath, Table and Time*, especially for teenagers and young adults. He argues that worship is less about individual enrichment and more about communal engagement for and with God. Edie explains, "it is unlikely, for example that worship in the third century prompted comments like 'I just didn't get much out of church today.' Christians were too busy worshipfully entering into the presence and practice of God's Reign on Earth to dwell on how they felt about it or whether it was meeting their needs."[13]

Instead, ancient Christian worship aims to recalibrate our hearts back toward our creator reminding us that we are not the star of our own story, but that we are all supporting characters in God's story. In the opening paragraph of his *Confessions*, Augustine summed it up like this: "You have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you."[14]

Author and Anglican Bishop Todd Hunter calls this rediscovery of ancient practices a "repracticing." He writes, "When I embarked on a search to find ways to make the habits of

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[13] Edie, Fred P. *Book, Bath, Table, and Time* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press), 264.
[14] Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 1.1.1.

Christianity and church significant and valuable, I used the old as a launching pad for repracticed new."[15] For Hunter a lot of contemporary worship seems to place a constant emphasis on the new, hip, culturally trendy church, which leaves one feeling emotionally manipulated and empty. Instead, Hunter claims that the "ancient church liturgies were designed to be used in everyday life. Their purpose was not just to organize worship services, but to shape lives."[16]

In his book *The Purpose, Pattern, and Character of Christian Worship*, Dr. Edward Phillips posits that there are essentially six character types of Protestant worship in the U.S. including: The Revival, Sunday School, Aesthetic Worship, Pentecostal Worship, Prayer Meeting, and Liturgical Renewal.[17] The Liturgical Renewal model also known as "Word and Table," closely resembles the historical form of Christian worship. According to Phillips, specific features of this model that typically draw upon practices of the early church that may be summarized as follows: "Weekly preaching connected to generous reading of scripture; intercessory prayers of the congregation for the world; the Lord's Supper as essential to the full Sunday service; a standard eucharistic prayer modeled on historic patterns; and weekly communion of the laity."[18]

Many liturgical scholars believe that historic Christian worship invites us into a story with four chapters including: gathering, listening, feeding, and sending. Bevins describes this historical liturgy as a divine drama, which "reminds us of the redemptive story of God and invites us to find our place within his narrative of redemption."[19] This connection to the past, grounded in God's Word, helps us to discover our own place in God's story. These ancient

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[15] Hunter, Todd. *Giving Church Another Chance* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press), 32.
[16] Hunter, Todd, *Giving Church Another Chance*, 116.
[17] Phillips, L. Edward. *The Purpose, Pattern, and Character of Worship* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press), 46.
[18] Ibid., 225-226.
[19] Bevins, *Ever Ancient*, 48.

liturgical traditions offer a sense of belonging and a sense of purpose by aligning our lives with

the Christian narrative of redemption. Phillips describes the powerful effect of historical

Christian worship in the following way.

> When a congregation engages a liturgy of Word and Table as participation in the living Christ, pastors and worship leaders focus on what praying these words and enacting these gestures does to the congregation more than the liturgy means in a personal sense. For if Christian worship really unites a congregation with the body of Christ throughout time and space (what it does), regardless of what any worshiper might think or feel at any given time (what it might mean to individuals), then worship is more than words in a book. Rather, it is the local incarnation of the universal body of Christ at prayer.[20]

Phillips also asserts that all worship follows patterns and these patterns work on two

levels which he calls the liturgical unit and the macro-pattern. Phillips suggests that each macro-

pattern has a specific *telos,* or goal, which it aims to achieve.[21] In other words, every worship

service is designed to achieve a particular result, either explicitly or implicitly. And the *telos* for

Christians should be Jesus Christ. After all, Jesus is the very embodiment of what we are made

for and to which we are called. This is why Paul's exhortation to "put on love"[22] is equivalent to

the exhortation to "put on the Lord Jesus Christ."[23] As human beings created in God's image,

this is our ultimate mission and purpose. And how does that happen? By being regularly

immersed in the story of God as revealed through Christ reconciling the world to himself. The

historical liturgy of the church intentionally invites us into that story over and over again, which

aims to re-calibrate our hearts back to God and ultimately form and shape us into the people we

were created to be. In other words, "worship is not an escape from the mundane, but a complete

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[20] Phillips, L. Edward. *The Purpose, Pattern, and Character of Worship*, 227.
[21] Ibid.*,* 25.
[22] Colossians 3:14, NRSV.
[23] Romans 13:14, NRSV.

immersion in it. Like an old family narrative hauled out at every family gathering by the family storyteller, the tale is very familiar."[24]

Over the years, I've witnessed some contemporary worship in which some of these historical practices have been simply cut and pasted into a service. However, this approach to merging or "blending" different worship styles carries several risks. For example, removing traditional liturgical elements from the original context and structure may actually strip away their influence, causing a potential loss of any formative power. The Episcopal priest and liturgical scholar Patrick Malloy cautions individuals and churches against adopting ancient patterns of the liturgical tradition without understanding the beliefs that lie behind them. In his article "Rick Warren Meets Gregory Dix: The Liturgical Movement Comes Knocking at the Megachurch Door," he writes, "This has led to a liturgical style that embraces experience but, as some within the movement acknowledge, lacks theological grounding."[25] Yet, Malloy goes on to explain that it is possible to merge the modern with the ancient style of worship in a healthy way. He believes this new "emergence embraces the ancient, but is not antiquarian. It reclaims all the accoutrements of piety—candles, icons, incense, kneeling and chanting—but does it alongside the projection screens, electric guitars and televisions rolling looped images."[26]

Phillips also strongly cautions against carelessly combining different styles of worship. Instead, he points out that because all liturgical units have a specific *telos* and *ethos* they must be carefully used, otherwise they will inevitably clash. Phillips refers to this conflation as "liturgical whiplash." He believes that this "liturgical whiplash occurs when an order of worship has been

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[24] Monro, Anita. "Experiencing Good Worship?" *Liturgy* (29:2): 2014, 10.

[25] Malloy, Patrick. "Rick Warren Meets Gregory Dix: The Liturgical Movement Comes Knocking at the Megachurch Door." *Anglican Theological Review* 92 (3): 2010, 439.
[26] Ibid., 447.

following one pattern and suddenly shifts to a liturgical unit from a different pattern. For, while liturgical units are portable, they tend to keep something of the DNA of their original pattern."[27] However, like Malloy, Phillips also argues "that a conflated order of service will have coherence to the degree that it has a single overarching pattern of *telos/ethos*. Such an order will likely exhibit a strong character, even though it may have some minor character flaws."[28]

Unfortunately, the term "liturgy" carries negative connotations for many contemporary worship leaders. In fact, for many protestant Evangelicals, "liturgy" elicits responses of meaningless, outdated and rote repetition. Many in the contemporary Christian world, view liturgy as the opposite of heart-felt extemporaneous prayer—and therefore as a detriment to "authentic" worship. However, many students and young people are creatures of routine and habit without realizing it. When they discover habit-forming practices of Christian faith that are ancient and tested, their faith is strengthened not diminished. I don't claim to be an expert on the next generation, but my experience being a parent of two young boys has taught me that children love tradition. In addition to seemingly living from one holiday celebration to the next, our children have come to call Saturday mornings "donut day" and view Sunday afternoons as time for "milkshake car rides." When my wife and I attempt to change up this relatively new tradition, it is immediately met with great resistance from the children. Apart from their obvious addiction to sugar, I think this is because all of us—including children and teenagers—long to be a part of something larger than themselves. Or as James K.A. Smith puts it, what young people "really crave is not liberation from ritual but rather liberating rituals."[29] Smith goes on to powerfully state that that when it comes to planning and preparing worship for the next generation, "we

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[27] Phillips, L Edward. *The Purpose, Pattern, and Character of Worship*, 244.
[28] Phillips, L Edward. *The Purpose, Pattern, and Character of Worship*, 257-258.
[29] Smith, James K. A. *You Are What You Love*, 150.

don't need to invent; we need to remember. We cannot hope to re-create the world if we are

constantly reinventing 'church,' because we will reinvent ourselves right out of the Story.

Liturgical tradition is the platform for imaginative innovation."[30]

KOINONIA: THE DESIRE FOR CONNECTION AND COMMUNITY

Unfortunately, when it comes to many contemporary worship services, the

entertainment/attractional model seems to be the norm instead of the exception. In his book

Beyond the Screen, Andrew Zirschky refers to entertaining students in the church as the "Moth

Myth—the assumption that teenagers, like moths, are attracted to things that plug-in and light

up." [31] On the surface this seems like a reasonable assumption since "more than half of 13-to 18-

year-olds in a recent national study admit that they use a screen four or more hours a day; one-

quarter admit to eight or more hours, making smartphone, tablets or other screen use their top

daily activity."[32] Yet, Zirschky goes on to warn that we must not forget "that teenagers'

attraction to smartphones, laptops, games, and gadgets is not a function of the glowing screen,

but a function of what or who is on the other end."[33] Simply put, today's adolescents are looking

beyond the screen to find deep and meaningful connections with others.

In fact, according to a three-year research project funded by the MacArthur Foundation,

digital ethnographers concluded that teenagers use social media to establish "full-time intimate

communities" that provide for always-on communication and relationships.[34] Social media

researcher Craig Watkins reached a similar conclusion through hundreds of interviews with

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[30] Ibid., 181.

[31] Zirschky, Andrew. *Beyond the Screen: Youth Ministry for the Connected but Alone Generation* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2015), 11.

[32] Barna Group. Gen Z: *The Culture, Beliefs and Motivations Shaping the Next Generation*, 16.

[33] Zirschky, Andrew. Beyond the Screen, 13.

[34] Ito, Mizuko, Sonja Baumer, Matteo Bittani, danah boyd, Rachel Cody, and Becky Herr Stephenson. *Hanging Out, Messing Around, and Geeking Out: Kids Living and Learning with New Media*. (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2009), 84.

teenagers and college students. Watkins argues that today's teenager's commitment to technology is "driven primarily by their commitment to each other and desire to stay connected."[35]

Yet, this sense of connection goes beyond virtual or even physical proximity to others. According to Zirschky, today's contemporary teenagers are seeking "presence—an experience of sharing in which they are alongside, available, with, within, and known to one another. The Christian term for such an experience is the Greek word *koinonia*, often reduced to fellowship, but most appropriately translated in English as communion."[36]

In other words, church leaders do not always have to offer slick worship services replete with the latest technology in order to engage today's teens. According to the research done by the authors of *Growing Young: Six Essential Strategies to Help Young People Discover and Love Your Church*, "warm is the new cool."[37] In short, the warmth of personal relationships and community involvement always seems to trump entertainment. For example, in their church site visits, the authors of *Growing Young* were surprised to notice that some churches are beginning to move away from the models of attractional worship with highly polished, perfectly-timed experiences. Instead, they discovered "that what a particular church lacks in physical resources or flashiness, it makes up in warmth, authenticity, and hospitality."[38]

In order for this koinonia to occur, teenagers need to be included in a caring community where relationships are being fostered by all, not just by youth. Unfortunately, like many church youth groups, the St. Martin's student ministry team has operated as a separate entity from the

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[35] The Young and the Digital, by Craig Watkins (Beacon Press, 2010), 48.
[36] Zirschky, Andrew. Beyond the Screen, 16
[37] Powell, Kara; Mulder, Jake; Griffin, Brad. *Growing Young: Six Essential Strategies to Help Young People Discover and Love Your Church*. (Baker, 2016), 137.
[38] Ibid., 138.

larger congregation with many of our teenagers often excluded from general church leadership positions. This model has been described by some in youth ministry as the "one-eared Mickey Mouse." In this model Mickey's face represents the larger body of the church and the ear represents where our children and youth experience their formation. In fact, our student ministry (ironically originally named "the Island") has been historically and geographically isolated from the rest of the campus. In an effort to change this mentality, we have recently renamed the building and will be opening up a new worship facility with direct connection to the newly minted "Student Life Center."

Yet, if we truly desire to connect our adolescents to the wider church family, we must intentionally create opportunities for community among all generations. As Zirschky states, "Koinonia is not one-on-one. Koinonia does not consist merely of two people in relationship; rather, koinonia is constituted from three or more people who are each in individual relationships with one another, and yet bound together by their mutual relationality."[39]

One challenge to forming this kind of intergenerational worship community at such a large church as St. Martin's involves what is described as "face forward ministry." This type of ministry may successfully bring people together for worship, but the focus remains on the worship leader. In other words, "we might sing the same songs and pray the same prayers, but we remain facing forward and anonymous to one another."[40] This way of worshiping "together" does not typically provide an opportunity for genuine and authentic connection among the entire church community. Instead, it places the emphasis on the worship leader, which can lead to an unhealthy cult of personality or "sage on the stage" following. Unfortunately, this type of

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[39] Zirschky, Andrew. *Beyond the Screen*, 60.
[40] Ibid., 23.

ministry makes it possible for today's teens to walk away from a service having primarily

responded to the person leading the group but without interacting relationally with anyone else.

This face forward ministry also leads to a type of silo effect—where young people only

gather with and by themselves, which ultimately deprives them of the opportunity to learn from

the more mature members in the congregation who have a wealth of wisdom and experience to

share. According to author Christian Smith in his book *Soul Searching the Religious and*

Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers, the role and influence of adults on teenagers is very

significant. Smith describes this powerful influence in the following way.

> US teenagers who retain and grow in their faith are most significantly influenced by their
> parents. But there is also a crucial second tier of relationships in their formation:
> nonfamilial adults who encourage them and speak into their lives. Those religiously
> serious teens they call "The Devoted" . . . have a larger number of nonparental adults in
> their lives whom they can turn to for support, advice, and help. Moreover, the parents of
> the more religiously serious teens are more likely to know more of the supportive adults
> in their teen children's lives well enough to talk to them, expanding what sociologists call
> 'network closure' around religious teens. . . . In sum, the lives of more religious teens are,
> compared to less religious teens, statistically more likely . . . to be linked to and
> surrounded by adults, particularly nonparental adults who know and care about them and
> who themselves have social ties to the teens' parents"[41]

Fred Edie echoes the importance of these intergenerational relationships in his "youth

academy," which always offers a very strong ratio of adult mentors to student participants—

approximately one to three. He explains "that we are so adult-heavy is testimony to our

conviction that the young become Christian and then more deeply Christian through their

association with experienced, exemplary Christians."[42] After all, it's one thing to have someone

from the youth ministry team reach out and make contact during the week; it's a totally different

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[41] Smith, Christian. *Soul Searching the Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*. (Oxford: University Press, 2005), 226-227.
[42] Edie, Fred P. *Book, Bath, Table, and Time*, 145.

experience, however, to be involved in a community of people who are involved in caring for one another throughout the week.

In addition to this research, there are also strong biblical and theological foundations for asserting that an intentional intergenerational environment encourages and sustains lifelong discipleship for all. As stated by Holly Catterton Allen in her book, *InterGenerate: Transforming Churches through Intergenerational Ministry*, "Intergenerational ministry is not just about (and of benefit to) children and youth; it is about (and of benefit to) people of all generations."[43]

Unfortunately, in today's individualistic culture, we tend to recognize and celebrate personal experience and self-fulfillment over a sense of belonging and contributing to a larger community. This is indeed a challenging environment to foster a sense of koinonia with intergenerational relationships. Yet, as Allen points out "when spiritual formation primarily takes place alongside one's own peers, a broader understanding of the church is distorted. Individuals begin to see themselves at the center of the faith community rather than part of the larger whole. Church becomes one more thing to consume in our culture."[44]

Therefore, if we hope for adolescents and teenagers to experience themselves as part of the body and koinonia of Christ in the world, we must cultivate an intergenerational environment, enabling the younger generation of Christians to understand themselves in relationship to the larger body of faith. This will allow them to see that their faith isn't simply isolated to a particular age or stage, but it is an ongoing journey with all generations travelling

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[43] Allen, Holly Catterton. *InterGenerate: Transforming Churches through Intergenerational Ministry*. (Abilene, Texas: Abilene Christian University Press, 2018), 18-19.
[44] Ibid., 46.

side by side. Providing opportunities for the younger generation of Christians to lead worship alongside adults of all ages is a powerful reminder that "all voices have value."[45]

VIRTUAL WORSHIP: THE MEDIUM IS THE MESSAGE

Like most churches, St. Martin's has been deeply impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Many Episcopal churches pride themselves on their historical and traditional worship. To be honest, this is one of the attributes that attracted me to the Episcopal denomination in the first place. The way one worships God in the church should feel and look a bit different and distinct from what we experience in the secular world. However, because of this view many Episcopal Churches have found themselves lagging behind the rest of the world when it comes to embracing media/that enable virtual communication with their parishioners and those outside of the church. St. Martin's is a prime example of this. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, St. Martin's had never offered a virtual worship service. Instead, St. Martin's continued to emphasize and rely upon the physical act of worshiping together in person.

However, on Sunday March 15, 2020 worship at St. Martin's drastically changed. With the guidance of our city officials and diocesan bishop, the church campus was closed to all our parishioners. That first weekend of the campus closure, we scrambled to locate and borrow a webcam to livestream a makeshift service composed of prayers and a brief sermon from our rector. As the weeks went on we added some more webcams and lighting. However, it soon became evident that we were severely underprepared to make this virtual shift—not only with our worship, but in most aspects of our life together.

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[45] Peter Block, *Community The Structure of Belonging* (Oakland, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc. 2008), 96.

On the bright side, the pandemic has forced St. Martin's to move into the virtual world, which has helped to reach many of our homebound parishioners who previously felt disconnected from their church home. For the first time in the history of St. Martin's, parishioners are now able to access and watch Sunday morning worship services, participate in online Bible studies and receive daily e-mailed meditations from members of the clergy. Thanks to this new virtual presence, many of our elderly parishioners who haven't been able to attend church in years have expressed gratitude for being able to reconnect to St. Martin's in a new way.

Yet, along with all churches who have suddenly made a virtual shift, St. Martin's must carefully navigate these new waters of communication. According to Antonio Spadaro in *Cybertheology*, "Christianity is primarily a communicative event…The Bible, in its own way— with its interpretations of angels, the burning bush, tablets of stone, dreams, donkeys, whispers and breaths of light wind—becomes a medium that realizes this communication."[46] Yet, as the great communication theorist Marshall McLuhan once famously stated, "the medium is the message." Contrary to popular belief, media are not merely neutral tools that communicate a specific message. Instead, whenever the methods of delivering a particular message change, the message changes right along with the methods. As Shane Hipps argues in his book, *Flickering Pixels*, "You can't change methods without changing your message—they're inseparable."[47]

In other words, instead of being neutral containers or conduits, the various media through which we obtain information have the power to shape and deeply influence us, regardless of their content. For example, Hipps argues that when we watch television, we are typically unaware of

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[46] Spadaro, Antonio. *Cybertheology: Thinking Christianity in The Era of The Internet*. (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014).
[47] Hipps, Shane. *Flickering Pixels*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 25.

the medium itself. "Instead, we sit hypnotized by the program—the content—which has gripped our attention, unaware of the ways in which the television, regardless of its content, is repatterning the neural pathways in our brain and reducing our capacity for abstract thought. The screen itself is part of the message."[48]

McLuhan summed it up by stating, "we shape our tools and afterward our tools shape us."[49] In other words, technology has the power to both give and take away, and each new medium introduced into our lives should be carefully evaluated. As Neil Postman put it in his book *Technopoly*, our culture is full of people "who see only what new technologies can do and are incapable of imagining what they will *undo*."[50]

Dr. Heidi Campbell, a professor of media and religion at Texas A&M University addresses this issue in *Networked Theology: Negotiating Faith in Digital Culture.* She specifically wrestles with technology as it pertains to our relationships with others, which she calls "networked individualism." Campbell claims the benefit of this networked individualism is that it encourages active participation and exchange with others within the network. Some examples include crowdsourcing, problem solving via blogging, and maintaining relationships through social media (such as Facebook)—all of which can strengthen physically separated friends and family. Yet, the downside to such networked individualism is that it creates fragmented networks of relationships and can encourage individuals to develop multiple social circles instead of investing in and being accountable to a single group. This can create a situation where "people function more as connected individuals and less as embedded group members."[51]

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[48] Ibid., 26.
[49] Ibid., 66.
[50] Postman, Neil. *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology*. (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), 5.
[51] Campbell, Heidi and Stephen Garner. *Networked Theology: Negotiating Faith in Digital Culture*. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Publishing Group, 2016), 9.

Since the pandemic, the way in which teenagers choose to virtually engage or not has been challenging for many churches, including St. Martin's. According to Campbell, as churches and religious institutions hurried to get "online" when the pandemic began, many religious leaders simply assumed "if we do a broadcast version of our service all will be well."[52]

Yet, many people felt disconnected. Campbell argues that just because you use social media doesn't mean that you increase social interaction in the space. Instead she claims that religious leaders must first build a community integrating the technology. Just having events online or offline doesn't mean you have a community. Instead, Campbell believes that many religious leaders have simply "created a religion that has been very event-based and experience-based and not very community-based."[53] This is what is lacking in order to bring Gen Z to the virtual table—a sense of community, participation, connectedness, and koinonia.

Yet, this unprecedented time in our history gives us an opportunity to reimagine how we do church. Campbell suggests, "trying new ways of gathering and trying new ways of meeting…(including) small groups to talk about services online or on the phone."[54] In this model, the main focus is not on the priest, pastor or event. Instead, the sermon becomes a conversation point for a community to build upon.

In a similar vein, pastor Zach Lambert of a nondenominational church in Austin, TX reports that since the pandemic, his church has seen a hunger in Gen Z for more experiential stuff—something they get to participate in rather than receive. They want to belong to a community rather than an audience. According to Lambert, "Online is complete audience. You can't even create a facade that it's participatory. I think that's why you're seeing a drop in

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[52] Jaradat, Myra. "Gen Z's looking for religion. You'd be surprised where they find it." Deseret News. September 13, 2020.
[53] Jaradat, Myra. "Gen Z's looking for religion."
[54] Ibid.

participation during COVID."[55] However, since the pandemic began, whenever his church holds a virtual event that is both justice-oriented and participatory the number of young adult and teen participants is much higher. This is something I have experienced first-hand in my project.

THE PROJECT: THE VIRTUAL *ALTAR*

For the first six months of the pandemic, St. Martin's only offered one online traditional worship service. When some of the COVID-19 numbers temporarily declined in our area in mid-September, we slowly began the process of resuming in-person traditional worship. However, the vast majority of our parishioners continue to join us online for services. Unfortunately, these virtual services have unwittingly perpetuated the face forward model in which people worship anonymously together, watching the service on either Facebook or YouTube. In fact, the only horizontal interaction among our traditional online worshiping community occurs in the chat feature, with typical responses such as, "good morning," "peace be with you," and "amen." This sense of anonymity is amplified by the fact that the majority of our viewers/members "worship" by watching *after* the live service has "aired." This allows them to worship at a time that is convenient for them, giving them the opportunity to simply fast-forward to the portions of the service that pique their interest and skip those that do not.

As I began to redesign my project around the pandemic, I did not want to simply offer another virtual livestream or pre-recorded worship service, which I felt would lack a real sense of connection with others. Instead, I wanted to address the sense of longing and desire for genuine community that so many have been craving since this pandemic began. As I've previously mentioned, there seems to be a prevalent temptation to increase the entertainment value of

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[55] Ibid.

Sunday morning worship. Whether we're focusing on designing entertaining sermons, staging a well-rehearsed band or choir, or investing in state-of-the art lighting equipment, the drive for polished worship events seems to occupy many church leaders' agendas.

With the pandemic forcing many churches to shift to a virtual platform, I imagine the demand and desire for a "professional worship experience" is greater than ever. In his article "Failure Makes Worship Good," Trey Hall cautions against trying to perfect a worship service. He argues that this "often results in hyper-polished and overproduced liturgies that leave no space for mess."[56] In other words, a sense of precision may actually have the opposite effect by diminishing congregational participation. Instead, through my research I hoped to create an environment where our teenagers and adults of all ages would have the freedom to be themselves and begin to form genuine relationships and authentic community. Therefore, instead of viewing worship as an entertaining visit to the theater, I envisioned it much more like "a gathering in the family living room."[57]

I began by forming a small committee of church members composed of five adults and five teenagers. The committee gathered to discuss the future of a virtual contemporary worship service. After candidly reviewing the history of the *Altar* service, we collaboratively discussed the hopes and possibilities that lie ahead for both a virtual and in-person service. Afterwards, each member of the committee was asked to contact 10 - 15 households consisting of both students and adults to obtain some initial information about the format of our pre-pandemic contemporary service and solicit suggestions and creative ideas for the future.

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[56] Hall, Trey. "Failure Makes Worship Good." *Liturgy* 29:2: 20-26, 2014, 22.

[57] Powell, Kara. *Growing Young*, 150-151.

From these conversations, several prevalent themes emerged. One of these themes included fostering a more relaxed or "laid-back" worship environment. In order to achieve this, some suggested that the clergy and worship leaders dress a bit more casually instead of wearing formal vestments or "traditional Sunday attire." In addition to this, there seemed to be a consensus that the clergy member or worship leader have a more "conversational connection" with the congregation.

Another recurring theme was the desire for more community building and fellowship among members. One specific idea that seemed to generate a lot of excitement among the committee members was offering a monthly intergenerational outreach activity for the worshiping community. Ideally, this type of gathering would encourage people from a variety of backgrounds and ages to come together to accomplish a specific goal, while forming and strengthening relationships in the process.

The last common theme contained in our results focused on creating new volunteer positions within the worship service itself. One idea included inviting our musically inclined members (students and adults) to help lead the service along with our staff musicians. Another idea was to ask both students and adults to publicly share a brief spiritual autobiography with the congregation in a designated "ministry moment" of the service. Finally, along with more participation from parishioners, there was a strong desire to increase the intergenerational component by intentionally inviting students and adults to serve alongside each other in the worship service.

After several more meetings with the committee and many conversations with my fellow clergy and staff, we set a date to launch the contemporary *Altar* service virtually via Zoom on Sunday, September 27, 2020. We were hesitant to use Zoom as the platform to host a worship

service. The connection can be unreliable at times and there is always a slight audio/video delay, which eliminates the possibility of synchronous praying and singing. Yet, we believed that the benefits of a virtual "live" connection outweighed the disadvantages found in Zoom. In fact, since launching the virtual *Altar* service we have come to embrace the occasional technology challenge as a reminder that we are gathered not to consume a polished performance, but to worship a great God.

The form and *telos* of the virtual *Altar* service follows the historical pattern of Word and Table. Yet, due to our diocesan guidelines we are not currently able to offer Holy Communion, so we've had to modify the form to focus on the Liturgy of the Word for now. This ancient form of gathering, listening, spiritually feeding on the Word, and sending has provided our student and adult worshipers a sense of belonging and purpose by aligning our lives with the Christian narrative of redemption.

In a typical service, the host begins the Zoom meeting/worship service fifteen minutes prior to the start time. As people enter the virtual worship space they are greeted with slides of upcoming events scrolling across the screen, accompanied by music. The service officially begins with a welcome from the officiant who is "spotlighted" so that parishioners automatically see the cleric and the welcome slide. The "spotlight" feature is also used throughout the service to highlight all those who have singing or speaking roles to help eliminate possible distractions for the rest of the worshiping community.

Each service includes a minimum of four volunteers (two adults and two students) who are assigned to read a passage from Holy Scripture and lead the congregation in prayer. Due to the inability to verbally pray synchronously we have also designated specific volunteers to offer the liturgical responses on behalf of the congregation. In addition, each week a volunteer is

invited to compose and share an original prayer to conclude our time of corporate prayer (the prayers of the people).

Along with the spotlight feature, we have really come to embrace and rely upon the breakout rooms in Zoom. Occasionally during the sermon the preacher will ask a question and then invite the parishioners into breakout rooms of 4 – 5 people for a brief discussion. Additionally, during "the peace" the worshipping community is automatically moved into breakout rooms. After sharing the peace of Christ, each virtual group member is encouraged to check in with other members, and the breakout groups are also provided an optional discussion question in advance. After four minutes, the parishioners are brought back to the main virtual worship space, where we recognize and celebrate any upcoming birthdays and wedding anniversaries. This designated time of interaction in breakout rooms has been crucial in reconnecting and sustaining a community for many of our student and adult worshipers.

<u>PROJECT RESULTS</u>

The virtual *Altar* service has experienced a variety of challenges and successes over the past several months. One of the areas in which we have struggled is in attendance. Although the service debuted with 50 households for a total of 75 people, we have gradually seen a decrease in attendance. The average Sunday attendance now hovers around 35. Additionally, the majority of our virtual worship community consists of adults, with a handful of students. According to some of our teenage and parent members, a large portion of our student population is simply "Zoomed out." Many of our students spend the entire week in a virtual learning environment via Zoom and don't relish the idea of spending more time on that platform during the weekend. In fact,

according to one of our teen parents, the way her child deals with this pandemic is "to push back on everything virtual that he can!"

Another challenge is that many of our parishioners are simply out of the habit of attending church, either in person or virtually, at a "set time." Instead, some of our members have expressed their newfound appreciation for attending church virtually from their homes, at their leisure. I've also heard some of our members explain how the virtual services posted on our website provide them the freedom and flexibility to run errands, attend their children's sporting events, or simply take care of their to-do lists on Sunday mornings—and worship at a later time that is more convenient for the family.

Yet, despite the low numerical turnout we have also experienced some very positive results. Since launching the virtual service we have consistently had a fifty percent ratio of student to adult volunteers. Furthermore, the new virtual platform has also been surprisingly helpful in gaining some new volunteers. For example, some of our teenagers who have felt too intimidated to read or pray in person now have a chance to do so from the "safety" of their homes. Moreover, the families and students who attend on a regular basis are very grateful for this opportunity during the pandemic. Another one of our teen parents who is immunocompromised stated that she and her children are happy to be engaged again and appreciate the opportunity to be involved with the St. Martin's community.

Similarly, the service has also given some of our older members in the "high risk" category a way to stay connected to others during these unprecedented times. One of these long-time members who had never attended the contemporary *Altar* service prior to the pandemic said she loves the "small-church feel" of the service, which is not always present in the larger traditional services. Another parishioner who joined the church in 1957 echoed this sense of a

close-knit community. The virtual *Altar* service reminds her of worshiping in the "old days" of

St. Martin's—when the clergy knew everyone's name, including the children and teenagers.

Finally, the virtual format has opened up new and exciting possibilities. For instance,

instead of always hearing from one of the clergy during the dedicated sermon time-slot, we've

recently invited staff members from our youth and outreach programs to speak. In fact, one of

my favorite services to date didn't include a traditional sermon from a member of the clergy.

Instead, it featured a "live" discussion with some of the boys and girls in a Bolivian orphanage

thousands of miles away.

To some this may not sound like anything earth shattering, but in the Episcopal Church

(or at least at St. Martin's) the clergy are typically viewed as the only ones who are officially

qualified to deliver sermons in the church. However, recognizing the abilities, talents and gifts of

our laypeople and staff has sparked a new sense of excitement and energy within the worshiping

community. In his article "Transforming a Local Church Congregation Through Action

Research," Bruce Martin describes this as an important shift from "official leadership to gifted

leadership"[58] and I eagerly look forward to expanding on this new leadership model in the days

ahead.

REFLECTION AND CONCLUSION

Although a virtual congregation of 45 people may not be considered a "success" by many

pastors and church leaders, the St. Martin's clergy, staff and parishioners have learned a great

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[58] Martin, Bruce. "Transforming a Local Church Congregation Through Action Research." *Educational Action Research* (9:2, 2001), 263.

deal about each other and about our community through this virtual experiment. In fact, the regular attendees have repeatedly voiced their appreciation for the opportunity to really get to know some of the St. Martin's clergy—and their fellow parishioners of all ages—in this new environment.

The virtual *Altar* has also deeply impacted those directly involved with the service. For example, the volunteers, staff and clergy who meet weekly to plan and prepare for Sundays have never felt more like a cohesive team. This newfound sense of unity among the staff and clergy—especially those involved in leading the service—has emphatically impacted the ethos of the service, which is directly experienced by our worshiping community.

As we look to a post-pandemic future, we have many things to be excited about. In addition to regathering for in-person worship at some point in the future, we are also thrilled to be moving into a brand-new worship facility called the Parish Life Center. This multi-purpose building has been designed for our contemporary Sunday worship services and various additional ministries throughout the remainder of the week. As the vaccine continues to be distributed across Houston and the country, we are currently planning to dedicate and bless the facility in the late summer. In the meantime, we have also begun exploring the possibility of renaming and rebranding this contemporary service in order to reintroduce ourselves to each other and the surrounding area. Yet thanks to the virtual *Altar*, seeds of community and fellowship have already been deeply planted which we pray will continue to be cultivated and nurtured until God brings them to their full fruition.

Additionally, this holy experiment has reinforced my belief that worship truly is less about what *we* do to glorify God and much more about what worship does to *us* in the process. Author Ron Rienstra summarizes this nicely by stating, "When someone says to me after a

service, 'that was good worship today!' I want to respond: 'Well, let's wait and see. After some months and years of this, let's see if the worship we offer to God in the gathered assembly has made us better disciples, more loving and patient and kind and courageous.' "[59]

As we look to the future, this is my hope and prayer. May we "wait and see" what God *has* done, what God *is* doing, and what God *will* do in and through this new contemporary service. I, for one, am very excited about the foundation that the virtual *Altar* service has provided and I eagerly look forward to what God has in store for this contemporary service and the people of St. Martin's in the days ahead.

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[59] Rienstra, Ron. "Good Worship: Articulating Standards of Excellence in Worship without Becoming the Liturgy Police." *Liturgy* (29:2: 2014), 54.

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