

What do you hope the Episcopal Church will look like in 2050? Vestry Papers January 2023

How to See the Church of the Future Today

By Lorenzo Lebrija

Ever wish you could see into the future? Curious about what the Episcopal Church will look like in a decade – or two or three? [In this brief video](#), the Rev. Lorenzo Lebrija, Executive Director of [TryTank Experimental Lab](#) and Chief Innovation Officer at Virginia Theological Seminary, offers insights that can help us spot clues to the future that are present today. He explains drivers of change and signals of change and encourages us to be on the lookout for them. Seeing the future today can help us find positive ways to work creatively with the changes that are coming, to see new possibilities for growth and grounds for hope for the Episcopal Church in the world.

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Lorenzo was the Chief Development Officer for the Episcopal Diocese of Los Angeles prior to launching TryTank. Before entering seminary, he was president and CEO of Seraphic Fire & Firebird Chamber Orchestra, Miami's professional choral and orchestral ensemble, and also Miami Program Director for the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation. He is a certified Foresight Practitioner from the Institute for the Future in Palo Alto, California, and has a certificate in Design Thinking from IDEO, also in Palo Alto.

Resources:

- [Clinging to Old Paradigms Can Be Fatal](#) by Ken Howard, an ECF Vital Practices blog, April 13, 2020
- [Bearing gifts, hosting parties](#) by Richelle Thompson, an ECF Vital Practices blog, January 11, 2017
- [New Leadership for a Changing Church](#) by Donald V. Romanik, Vestry Papers, January 2017
- [Through All Kinds of Weather](#) an ECF Vital Practices webinar presented by Anne Vickers, May 23, 2019

God is doing a New Thing

By Alicia Hager

At first glance, hope seems to be in short supply. Just turn on the evening news and stories of natural and manmade disasters, wars, people held prisoner and those who left with no choice but to leave home will fill the screen. It's easy to see how more of us are anxious now than previously, especially since we've been through a worldwide pandemic and still have so much residual fear and loss.

In the church too, it can seem like the sky is falling. Giving is down, people have not come back, kids have been left behind – and not on purpose, but because they could not abide one more Zoom class and slowly disconnected from their church communities. The church many of us remember, with packed Sunday School classrooms, abundant choirs and potlucks that go on for miles are gone, and we may feel like we're left holding the bag. Our volunteers are stretched thin and so are we, as we work to keep the lights on and souls fed.

Hope in the wilderness

That is not, however, the end of the story unless we allow it to be. The truth is that usually in the wilderness God is hard at work. In the waste, the wreckage, the is-this-all-there-is, God is creating and God's soft voice is calling us into a new way of envisioning the church, into a new way of reconciling all of God's creation.

I serve a small parish in Western Michigan. We've taken the re-opening process at a pretty conservative pace and only now are working to tell the bones of previous ministries to stand up on their feet once more. We hosted an acolyte training several weeks ago, and it was overwhelming to see who showed up. Parents and their kids who will serve in teams, single folks, grown and young, too. At the end of the day, 14 new people were trained to carry the cross and bear the torches – and just this week a new schedule came out filled with people who are ready to serve in the liturgy.

This is hope.

The Gathering of Leaders, an Episcopal organization dedicated to literally "gathering the leaders" of the church, launched pilot weekend gatherings last summer and fall, one for bi-vocational church leaders and lay church leaders. Both of those weekends were packed with people who are passionate about the church and passionate about their ministries. Alongside their clergy counterparts, all of these leaders are really excited about the church and the future.

This, too, is hope.

Choices to make

As we emerge from – or rather, adapt to live with – an endemic virus, we as the church have choices to make. We are on the precipice of something, but none of us quite know what that something is. As we start up old ministries and launch new ones, we have the opportunity to re-think the ways that these things were before, who they served, what they served and more. We can re-tool completely or just make modest edits here and there.

How can we make choir practice more attractive to new choristers? Could a solution be to offer a simple family style supper beforehand and a comfortable place for kids to play while their parents sing? Could it be robing up some of the kiddos and allowing them to process and sit with the choir, even if they can't quite sing the music?

Another parish in my diocese started a Gay-Straight Alliance Youth Group, open to all in the area, focused on acts of service and building a supportive community. That group has been more successful than any youth group the church has hosted in the last several years. It draws in kids of all ages, adults and allies who desire so deeply to be part of something that is meaningful.

Be part of the new thing God is doing

Every day church leaders, lay and ordained, are popping in and out of virtual and in person meetings and they are visioning the future of the church. They want to stop playing defense, stop running to catch up. They want to create a solid, sustainable, theologically sound idea of what the church can be and then go and make it happen. I know these meetings happen because I get to be part of many of them.

There are certainly many people who are wringing their hands over the decline of the church, and my gentle suggestion to them is to look forward, to look up, and to ask how they can help. This necessarily means letting go of many old structures and laying down ministries that don't work anymore, so we can take up new ones. It is difficult work, and like Moses, we probably won't get to enter the Promised Land of the revitalized Episcopal Church. But also like Moses, we are called to lead the people in the directions we believe God is indicating, always listening for the voice from the bush on fire and willing to obey it.

"I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert."

The deserts and the wildernesses we find ourselves in are places of deep possibility and abundant hope. There God is doing a new thing. God is calling new acolytes to serve at my parish. God is showing us where we can make changes that have been a long time coming.

Last month on Christmas Eve, when our church doors opened again and the peal of our bells filled our neighborhoods, when our windows shone out, I hope you saw and heard this hope for yourself. It was there in the pews. The hope is us. This is the joy that God created us for, if we will only be brave enough to get to work.

Mother Alicia Hager serves as the Assisting Clergy at Grace Episcopal Church in Holland, Michigan, and as the Community and Communications Curator for the Gathering of Leaders. Alicia lives with her family in Western Michigan, has too many cats, and enjoys reading and writing in her spare time.

Resources:

- [Seeking Refugia: Hope for a World in Climate Crisis](#) by Josh Anderson, Vestry Papers, March 2022
- [A Message to Leaders in the Church](#) by Donald Romanik, an ECF Vital Practices blog, January 4, 2021
- [Let's Remember Hope...](#) by Amanda Nickles, an ECF Vital Practices blog, July 9, 2020
- [Uncomfortable Realities and Hope](#) by Jeremiah Sierra, an ECF Vital Practices blog, November 30, 2015

Embodying Hope

By Ranjit K. Mathews

One word –*embodiment* – expresses my hope for the Episcopal Church in 2050. It would be a place for misfits and truth tellers, for people in all kinds of wear – and most importantly, people who are

authentically following Jesus in the world. In 2050, the Episcopal Church would be known as a place where people can be their whole selves, where *vulnerability* and *connectedness* are manifest.

Status and the who-you-know thinking would be things of the past. The incarnation, bandied about in rarified spaces in the Church in previous decades, would be made real in embodiment. There would be a radical understanding around connectedness. The professionalization of being an Episcopalian would not exist. Being a Christian would be more connected, more real and not just in the space of a 9 to 5 reality.

Embodied Christianity, lived out in the world

In 2023 it was easier to create resolutions at diocesan and general conventions, but embodiment was much harder. In 2050, my hope is that the Church would be more real. The way we talk about Jesus would be seen in the lived encounter and people in the public square would find Christians protesting injustice because it was what Jesus of Nazareth would have done. Christianity wouldn't be performative: it would be a lifestyle, a way of living, not a religion. When News reporters asked these Episcopalians why they were protesting, they wouldn't hear that it was because of some secular understanding of justice or just "the right thing to do." They'd hear, "we are following Jesus, trying to imitate him."

The Episcopal Church in 2050 would be a space where politics is preached from the pulpit – not partisan politics, but the truth of Jesus made contextually real out in the world. It would be *lex orandi, lex credendi* in incarnational form. The beauty of Episcopal worship, the weight of the words that were said for decades, if not centuries, would be embodied.

Parishioners, old and new, would remember the stinging rebuke of younger Episcopalians or secular activists and see how the words of our beautiful Cranmer were more often than not passed over. They would remember that suited, booted and tied, we'd been professional Christians, but those radical words were not embodied by us. Back in the day, Episcopalians were too scared by politics, too afraid of

crossing the vaunted Church and state rubbish. Episcopalians in 2050 would live and breathe politics, the politics of Jesus, not of partisan groups – but a rooted politics, firmly articulated through the beautiful conversation between scripture, reason and tradition.

A way of life that is holy and whole

My hope for the Episcopal Church in 2050 is that it would be a place where wholeness in Christ is celebrated. Purity culture and an anti-body understanding would be anathema, and Episcopalians would feel the deep connection between the body, mind and spirit. They would understand all the messiness of humanity and its giftedness. In 2050, people would see and understand this Church as *re-ligio*, “knitting things together.” Back in the day, people looked at religion, and in particular mainstream denominations, as spaces that were judgmental and hypocritical, but in 2050 they will see the Body of Christ, committed to a way of life that is holy and whole, beautiful and radical and counter-cultural.

My hope for the Episcopal Church in 2050 is that when people who are not connected to religion were asked about the Episcopal Church, their first thought would be, *Oh, that’s the Church that is about love, that cares for all who are marginalized, that stands with the broken-hearted and left behind, that isn’t afraid of being more loving, that practices the way of Jesus.*

My hope for the Episcopal Church is that it would live more fully into its unique calling to be counter-cultural and own its vocation, to step boldly into who God has called it to be in the world. People would know palpably that Episcopalians are Christians, because there is something about Jesus living within us.

A beacon of love and truth and justice, fully alive and at work in the world

My hope for the Episcopal Church is that we would claim our high moral calling to be a beacon of love and truth and justice and especially of grace in this world. In a world that is so often riven by a lack of civility and harshness, the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ would permeate all that we do. In 2050, people

would encounter and experience the grace of Jesus and it would touch their hearts, mind and souls and transform them.

The Episcopal Church would not be 95 percent white, as it was in 2020, but would be polyphonic, multi-lingual and multi-ethnic in dynamic ways. White supremacy would no longer be our drum beat, because integrated and in touch with our bodies, minds and spirits, we would be more able to confront the systems of our time. My hope for the Episcopal Church in 2050, is that it wouldn't be beholden to the market and its every whim, but driven, compelled and set on fire by the gospel of Jesus. We wouldn't be scared of saying something deep and powerful about the realities of the world.

Rectors or priests in charge, deacons, lay folks, church leaders in 2050 wouldn't be beholden to the market or the whims of capitalism. Back in 2023, more often than not, a preacher would preach from Luke on a Sunday morning and then move to Robert's rules at a Tuesday evening vestry meeting. In 2050, this wouldn't be the case. Episcopal clergy would preach the whole Gospel without fear of people withholding their pledges because they didn't like what the preacher said. My hope is that the Episcopal Church in 2050 would be an institution that is fully alive, as Irenaeus of Lyon imagined, "the glory of God is a human being fully alive."

*The Rev. **Ranjit K. Mathews** serves as the Canon for Mission Advocacy, Racial Justice and Reconciliation in the Episcopal Church in Connecticut, working with parish and diocesan leadership to make real God's realm of justice, love and peace.*

A graduate of George Washington University and Union Theological Seminary, Ranjit was recently appointed the secretary of the Social Justice and International Policy Legislative Committee for the House of Deputies and is Chair of the interim Task Force of Dialogue with South Sudanese Anglicans living in the diaspora. He is also a board member for the Episcopal Evangelism Society and elected to serve as the Episcopal Church's clergy representative to the Anglican Consultative Council. Previously, he served as Partnership Officer for Africa on the Presiding Bishop's staff.

Ranjit lives with his spouse Johanna, their two boys Dhruv and Kabir, and their dog Samara in Rocky Hill, Connecticut. He grew up in the Boston area and considers New England home. Ranjit loves national and local politics, pop culture, hip-hop, sports and being out in creation.

Resources:

- [Triple Threat](#) by Adialyn Milien, Vital Practices, July 2020
- [An Evening with The Rev. Canon Stephanie Spellers](#), an ECF Vital Practices webinar, May 6, 2021
- [Respectful Practices for Approaching Multicultural Resources](#) by Ellis Reyes Montes, Vestry Papers, November 2022
- [Whatever you do now will prepare you for what you can do in the future](#) by Audra Abt, an ECF Vital Practices blog, July 20, 2020

The Church in 2050

By Jay Sidebotham

So many questions, so many perspectives in what some call the “motley crew of the Church.” With characteristic wit and accuracy, cartoonist and priest Jay Sidebotham helps us see that when it comes to the future, we’re not a lot different from that first motley crew following Jesus. They, too, had lots of questions and no idea of what was coming.



These days, the Rev. **Jay Sidebotham** divides his time between New York City and Wilmington, North Carolina. In New York, he serves as Associate for Formation at St. James' Church on the Upper East Side. In North Carolina, he continues work with RenewalWorks, a ministry of Forward Movement. Ordained to the priesthood in 1991, Jay has served parishes in Rhode Island, Washington, DC, Durham, North Carolina, New York City and Lake Forest, Illinois.

Jay attended Union Seminary in New York. Prior to that course of study, he worked in illustration, graphic design and advertising in Manhattan. (Some might say he still works in advertising.) He also worked as an animator for Schoolhouse Rock. He is married to Frances Murchison, who grew up in Wilmington. They have two adult children, each married, and two quite splendid grandchildren.

Resources:

- [Flight Adjustments in a Changing Church](#) by Jesse Zink, Vestry Papers, July 2022
- [The Ultimate 'Online' Church](#) by Sean Steele, Vestry Papers, May 2022
- [Center for Chinese Congregations in LA and Beyond](#) by Thomas Ni, Vestry Papers, July 2022
- [Part Time ≠ Less Than](#) by Cathie Caimano, Vestry Papers, May 2016