

Transformation U Week 2: Gather Differently and Better

Hebrews 10:19–25 • Acts 2:42–47

How many of you remember where you were when you first learned about 9/11? How many of you remember where you were when you first heard about COVID-19? Isn't that interesting? Thom Rainer, in his sweet book, *The Post-Pandemic Church*, uses this contrast to point out how different this world-changing event is from the others in our lifetime. Our ongoing worship series this fall is "Transformation U: Navigating Uncharted Waters," during which we are going to "go to school" about how we are different and how God might be working in our lives, but also how our society is different, and how our church might think differently about how God is leading us. Today is the second in our series.

Hebrews 10:19 Therefore, brothers [and sisters], since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, **20** by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, His body, **21** and since we have a great priest over the house of God, **22** let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water. **23** Let us hold unwaveringly to the hope we profess, for He who promised is faithful. **24** And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. **25** Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

Acts 2:42 The disciples were devoted to the teachings of the apostles, to fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and to prayer. ⁴³ A feeling of fear came over everyone as many amazing things and miraculous signs happened through the apostles. ⁴⁴ All the believers kept meeting together, and they shared everything with each other. ⁴⁵ From time to time, they sold their property and other possessions and distributed the money to anyone who needed it. ⁴⁶ The believers had a single purpose and went to the temple every day. They were joyful and humble as they ate at each other's homes and shared their food. ⁴⁷ At the same time, they praised God and had the good will of all the people. Every day the Lord saved people, and they were added to the group.

So could we spend a few minutes reflecting on how the pandemic affected our lives at first? What are the things that you and your loved ones experienced at the beginning of the pandemic?

[Take responses from the congregation.]

So now let's think a little more about what we learned from those experiences.

[Take responses from the congregation.]

In some ways, we are still trying to figure out what we've learned, but we all have a sense that things are really different now. And we have questions that came up around our faith: how could God let this happen? But also, for some of us, thank You God, that we're ok, and Lord, how are we going to get through this? In the darkest, loneliest, crazy-making days of the pandemic, I found myself really leaning into Jeremiah 29: "Then you will call to me. You will come and pray to me, and I will hear you. ¹³ When you look for me, you will find me. When you wholeheartedly seek me, ¹⁴ I will let you find me, declares the LORD. I will bring you back from captivity..."

At the beginning of his chapter, "Gather Differently and Better," Thom Rainer uses a great illustration to talk about a big thing we learned in the pandemic. Did you ever play this game when you were a kid? [Do the motions with my hands.] Here's the church, here's the steeple, open the doors and there are the people. That's how we thought about church back then. There was always some wisecrack—sometimes I was that wisecrack—and I would fold my hands like this, then say the same words, Here's the church, here's the steeple, open the doors and where are the people? Up on top! One, maybe two or three days of the week, the church gathers in this facility [do the motions with my hands the first way] but most of the time—[change hands to do it the second way] we are out in the world.

So what does it mean to be church? Why do we get together?

[Take responses from the congregation.]

Sure, that's all good. What does the Bible say? So let's look at our passage from Hebrews to see if we left anything out. The author suggests what we are to do, by using the phrase, "let us," so let's go through and pick those things out. According to this, the first reason we gather together is...? What do you think?

[Take responses from the congregation.]

Do you see how this really sums up all the reasons you originally gave? Oh and by the way, does it say when we should gather? Or how we should gather? I think that's very interesting! Why do we get together? To draw closer to God, to hang on to the hope we have in Christ, to spur one another on to love and good deeds, and to encourage each other.

Another thing Thom Rainer talks about is that our understanding of gathering is a little different now—we gather in person *and online* for the same worship service. And now we have folks who join our worship—but at different times and on different days—by watching the videos. We have embraced pieces of this, right? As a fellowship, we have decided livestreaming worship is something we want to make available. We have continued to post videos of our worship on YouTube. And for Bible Study, we are offering both for in-person and by Zoom. And our Boards and Council have also gathered on Zoom and in-person. It suggests that our church has the potential to gather people in lots of different ways at lots of different times, and that our fellowship becomes a connector for all these different groups of people. We used to have just one way and one time to gather for worship and study, and now we have many more!

There are down sides to this too, though, right? We don't see the same people every week in the way that we used to—because some folks are online sometimes—and at some point, we do need to talk about what that means for us.

You know, it's weird to think about, but in the earliest days of the Church we learned about in Acts today, they didn't even have a building. Baby church shared the Temple with other Jews, and they met in each other's homes and shared meals together.

So here are two suggestions for us as we look forward:

First, let's do more to reconnect as a fellowship, to remind ourselves really how much we enjoy walking through life together. This fall, we have regular opportunities to hang out together—a baseball game, ice cream social, choir, new Bible studies, potlucks in October and November—ways that we will gather, as Hebrews says, to encourage one another and spur each other on to love and good deeds.

And second, to begin to offer more opportunities to do good deeds together as well as on our own. Yes, let's make sandwiches for St. Vincent's, but let us find at least one or two other opportunities through the missions that we support, to work together in doing good.

We have always said the church is the people—not just the building—and through the pandemic we learned some things about looking after each other and trusting God. Now is a great time to remind ourselves how God works through our time together to help us stay encouraged and motivated in loving each other and releasing God's grace into our community. At the end of the day, we don't have to stress or worry about our church moving forward. The pandemic did not catch God off guard—God was already ahead of us to work even this for good. And God has great things in mind for us! Let us hear God speak to us through Jeremiah, "I know the plans that I have for you, declares the LORD. They are plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you a future filled with hope."