

REIMAGINING Church



A Toolkit

USC Dornsife
*Center for Religion
and Civic Culture*

Reimagining the Church

Reimagining the church
The way that it could be
Dreaming with the Spirit
Lord help us to see

Reaching our communities
Caring for the poor
Fighting for social justice
What the church was made for

Collaborating together
It's not a competition
So much more can be done
Unified on mission

Thy Kingdom come Thy will be done
On earth as is in heaven
We are the salt and light
God's heart expression

Until the Lord returns
All hands to the plow
Reimagining church
The future's begun now!

David Kim

Reimagining Church Cohort Member

Senior Pastor, The Garden Church, Chatsworth, CA

5.11.23

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Introduction

What does it mean to *thrive*?

Even as religious affiliation declines in the United States, some faith groups across religious traditions continue to thrive. But what does it mean to *thrive*? How can congregations grow more vital as they provide meaning, community and identity to their members?

The USC Center for Religion and Civic Culture (CRCC) has conducted research and programs on thriving congregations.

This toolkit includes resources from CRCC's work. With it, we seek to **guide faith leaders on their journey** of reimagining how religion can be lived out communally.

Reimagining Church

With funding from The Lilly Endowment, CRCC launched a program on “Thriving Congregations” in 2020. In California, the pandemic had shut down in-person attendance at worship services, even as congregations’ work to provide material, emotional and spiritual support to their communities was as essential as ever. CRCC shifted its effort to provide online conversations about what it meant for congregations to thrive during this time. Once in-person gatherings resumed, CRCC held a public conference and launched a cohort of leaders interested in “Reimagining Church” in a post-pandemic world.

Video content in this toolkit comes from these various events. Members of the cohort also contributed their suggested readings and reflections about “reimagining church.”





Defining Thriving Congregations

Based on a large-scale research project on successfully innovative religious groups, CRCC developed a framework for “thriving congregations” that includes 10 characteristics.

Not all of the following 10 characteristics are found in the same combination or strength in all thriving communities. However, we believe that the presence of these characteristics — and of both leaders and lay persons committed to their communities having these characteristics — is what separates thriving faith communities from those that are declining or perhaps relying on their history and tradition for their survival.

It is important to note that an organization’s ability to thrive is intertwined with the vitality of the individuals in that organization, the organization’s financial and human resources, the formal and informal institutional structures that surround the organization (such as denominations, government, gender or family), the built environment and issues such as access, equity and structural racism.

The following resources touch on both the supports and constraints found within these various levels of vitality.

Thriving communities are:

Adaptive

responsive to
challenges and
opportunities

Bounded

pushing boundaries
within a tradition

Enfranchised

led by loose hierarchy
with ideas from all

Embodied

integrating somatic
experience

Embedded

committed to a
particular place

Authentic

grounding truth in
intuitive resonance

Empathetic

centered on care
and compassion

Activated

enacting their vision
for a better world

Pollinating

spreading ideas not
institutions

Networked

connected within and
across traditions



READ MORE

Ten Characteristics of Thriving Communities of Faith

Scan or click on QR code to read more.

Songs

Songs speak to the experiences, hope and dreams of the believer. Additionally songs spark emotions and ideas. Singing songs that talk about change can be great inspiration for a pastor or leader to get people interested, organized and moving. The following playlist includes songs that our Reimagining Church cohort find helpful in their contexts. Listen along while you review this toolkit. Or consider these songs for your worship services, meetings and gatherings.



LISTEN

Find a playlist of these songs on YouTube.

Scan or click on the QR code to listen.

“Voice of Truth” by Casting Crowns
“Center of Thy Will” by The Clark Sisters
“Endow Me” by Coko
“Build Your Church” and **“Talking to Jesus”**
by Elevation Worship & Maverick City
Build This House” by Lou Fellingham
“He’s Able” by Darwin Hobbs
“Hold On, Help Is On The Way”
by Whitney Houston
“Spirit Is In Me” by One House
“We Are Family” by Sister Sledge
“Praise God” by Edna Tatum
“How Great is Our God” by Chris Tomlin
“Guide My Feet”
“I Pray For You You Pray For Me”
“We’ve Come This Far By Faith”
“Working On A Building”

Wellness

**To flourish means to recognize our wounds
and know that trauma affects us,
but it does not define us. In the midst of
the storm, God is present.**

— Dr. Thema Bryant

Wellness is foundational to thriving in the midst of multiple challenges.

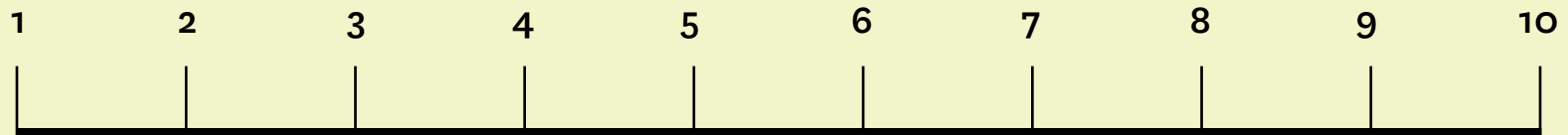
Wellness is also holistic, incorporating one's physical, mental, spiritual and social wellbeing and health.

These wellness areas are interconnected and affect each other.





How would you rate your wellness on a scale of 1-10, 10 being the best?



How can you improve your score?

How can you improve your community's sense of wellness?

Mental Health for Faith Leaders



MYTH

(and bad theology)

People of faith cannot be affected by anxiety, loneliness, anger, grief, etc.



REALITY

Jesus wept and addressed his follower's contexts. God was with Jesus through Gethsemane.

■ Mental health challenges of leaders and congregants:

- Loneliness
- Lost/Hopeless/Purposeless
- Angry about Injustice
- Grieving
- Numb

■ Impact of traumatic stress

- Disrupts our coping mechanisms, everyday functioning and identity.
- Results in depression, anxiety, panic, insomnia, irritability/bad attitude, distrusting, turning to food, alcohol or substance.

■ What faith leaders can do in their congregations:

- Name and acknowledge traumas.
- Preach about emotions and wellness practices.
- Give congregants permission to engage in therapy and other practices. It makes a difference!
- Follow wellness practices: Establish boundaries, rest, form relationships and take part in therapy.

Wellness Practices

- **Physical** — Rest, Eat Well, Drink Water, Exercise
- **Psychological** — Journaling, poetry, art, music, therapy, meditation
- **Spiritual** — Reimagine prayer
- **Congregational/social** — Foster relationships; lament together

SPEAKER

Dr. Thema Bryant

Professor of Psychology, Pepperdine University

CRCC turned to **Dr. Thema Bryant**, psychologist and minister, at the height of the pandemic for two sessions on trauma and mental health. Her advice remains essential for faith leaders who want to thrive personally through challenging circumstances and address the crises that their congregants continue to face.



***You can be blessed
and stressed.***

— Dr. Thema Bryant

WATCH



***How Congregations
Can Heal and Grow
in the Face of Trauma***



***Thriving Congregations
Conversation with Dr.
Thema Bryant***

Scan or click QR codes to watch

**What wellness practice
will you commit to
implementing in your
personal life?
In your congregation?**

Physical Wellness for Faith Leaders

MYTHS

- Physical wellness is not within my faith or is against my personal beliefs.
- Unhealthy or older congregants won't be able to participate in physical wellness activities.
- I don't know enough or don't have the time to address physical concerns.

REALITIES

- Religious practices are often embodied. People's medical conditions and physical wellbeing affect their mental and spiritual health.
- Wellness comes at every stage of life and can be very simple.
- Studies show congregations can have a positive impact on members' health metrics through health education.
- **The best posture is the next posture.**
 - Poor posture results in pain in hip, lower back, neck, wrists, headaches.
 - For good posture, align hips, shoulders and ears.
 - Address your set up: Use a secondary keyboard or screen with a laptop.
- **There's lotion in the motion.**
 - Stretch for 1 minute every 30-60 minutes of sitting.
 - Motions: round/arch your back, twist left and right, lean side-to-side, chin nod, shoulder squeezes.
 - 20/20 rule: Every 20 minutes, look at something more than 20 feet away for 20 seconds.
- **Raise your heart rate.**
 - Make a plan, schedule a recurring meeting for cardio-vascular exercise.
 - 150 minutes moderately intense exercise a week means exercising 30 minutes 5 days a week.
 - Or exercise intensely for 75 minutes per week.

SPEAKER

Dr. Kimiko Yamada

*Associate Professor of Clinical Physical Therapy
Director, Oncology Physical Therapy Residency Program
USC Keck Biokinesiology and Physical Therapy*

Dr. Kimiko Yamada, physical therapist, joined our Reimagining Church cohort retreat to offer a clear and basic understanding of how we can take every day moments and incorporate simple movements that lead to overall improved health and physical wellbeing. Follow along with the movements and feel better instantly.



WATCH



Physical Wellness for Faith Leaders

Watch the video for posture/stretching demonstrations

Scan or click QR code to watch

How can you incorporate movement into your day?

Leadership

Leadership is a function of:

- 1. Knowing yourself,**
- 2. Having a vision that is well communicated,**
- 3. Building trust among colleagues, and**
- 4. Taking effective action to realize your own potential.**

— Warren Bennis, USC Professor

Authentic Leadership

Self-awareness is a key element of effective leadership. It grounds one's vision and helps leaders shape their organization's culture.

Self-awareness includes understanding:

- Your preferences, values, work styles, perspective
- Why you hold such preferences and values
- How your life experiences shape you as a person and as a leader
- How your beliefs align with the community you serve

This blend of personal insight, purpose and connection empowers leaders to make a difference.

Why lead with authenticity?

When leaders understand their stories, they can better relate to others, lead with empathy and bring a genuine sense of purpose to their congregational work. Self-aware leaders can create psychologically safe spaces where people feel seen, valued and motivated to grow together. Self-awareness is a tool not simply for self-improvement but also for building trust and connection.

Hands-on exercises and retreats, as offered through CRCC programs, foster introspection.

Adaptive Leadership

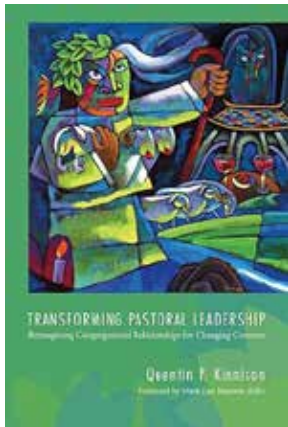
Leadership can be defined as having technical expertise. Challenges like the pandemic or disaffiliation, however, don't have technical answers.

- Adaptive moments require leading across three spheres:
 - Interpretative: meaning, purpose, intention that shapes our work
 - Relational: bonds and connections that nourish human flourishing with one another and our neighbors
 - Implemental: systemic and structural elements (schedules, budgets, etc.) that embody our work
- Pastors are not shepherds, but “bell sheep,” who point people back to the shepherd, God.
- Leading, therefore, is not about control, but listening, including when there is healthy conflict.
- Strategies include appreciative inquiry and open source (detailed in book).

SPEAKER

Quentin P. Kinnison

Dean, School of Arts and Sciences
Fresno Pacific University



READ MORE

*Transforming Pastoral
Leadership: Reimagining
Congregational Relation-
ships for Changing Contexts*

WATCH



*Adaptive Approaches to
Congregational Leadership*



*Shifting Your Mindset
About Church Leadership*

Scan or click QR codes to watch

**What challenges in your
congregation require you
to be adaptive?**

The Jazz of Leadership

- Teams operate in different modes:
 - Survival
 - Stability
 - Individualism — Nearly 50 percent of teams operate here
 - Collaboration — Jazz lives here
 - Transformation
- Collaboration mode draws the greatest performances out of each individual and creates best results.
- Jazz is a conversation — It requires listening, teamwork and trust, creativity, and improvisation.

That's the problem with the majority of our churches. Everybody wants to shine as a soloist.

As a pastor, I'm a band leader. I don't think I ever saw myself as a band leader.

My biggest challenge is recognizing that uniqueness in each voice but then finding ways to bring it into harmony.

SPEAKERS

Ronald McCurdy

Professor of music, USC Thornton School of Music

Ken Perlman

*Adjunct professor of management and organization,
USC Marshall School of Business*



McCurdy



Perlman

WATCH



*Highlights from The Jazz of Leadership
for Faith Communities with
Ron McCurdy and Ken Perlman*

Scan or click QR code to watch



Theological Framework for Thriving

**What do Biblical examples say
about churches thriving
in American culture today?**

CRCC launched and concluded programming for the Reimagining Church cohort with talks by two presidents of Fuller Theological Seminary. Outgoing president Mark Labberton spoke in October 2022 and David Emmanuel Goatley spoke in November 2023.

This section also includes scripture and sermon topics from the Reimagining Church cohort to inspire your reflection.



Leading Outside the Confines of Culture

European-descendant Christians often see America as a promised land — a place of exodus. The “paradigm of exile” in the Book of Daniel allows Christians to reframe their role in America.

■ ***How will you remember who you are in exile?***

- **Daniel 1:** The people lost land, law and worship practices. They were asked to assimilate, but kept dietary practices.
- It's important to maintain your identity.

■ ***What does it mean to live faithfully — in exile?***

- **Daniel 2:** Nebuchadnezzar looks for credible spiritual authority in asking for dream interpretation. Daniel and Jewish leaders point not to themselves but to God as authority. They tell Nebuchadnezzar that his kingdom is falling. He thanks them for telling the truth.
- Spiritual credibility comes from telling the truth in spite of threats. A credible witness is a reflection of the credibility of God.
- White evangelicalism and other parts of the church “has done so much to deeply discredit the name of Jesus and the Gospel itself in this era.” Challenges such as young people leaving are symptoms of lack of credibility.

■ ***How do we live a life unhooked from idolatry and lead others to do so as well? How do you challenge powers that point to conformity to an idol?***

- **Daniel 3:** Nebuchadnezzar builds his golden statue and then commands all to bow down and worship it at the sound of the music. When Jews refuse to do so, he threatens them with death.
- They respond whether or not God delivers them, idolatry is the greater danger than death; they aren't hooked by Nebuchadnezzar's message.
- Multiple idolatries split our country and congregations.
- “We are products of a culture that has mesmerizingly told us what to say and do and how to be.” Mesmerizing rhythms cue us. We hear and know what we are supposed to do. Companies, dictators, parties on the left and right know how to elicit certain feelings and actions and control us.

SPEAKER

Mark Labberton

Former president, Fuller Theological Seminary



WATCH



***Thriving Congregations Conversation
with Mark Labberton, President of
Fuller Seminary***

Scan or click QR code to watch

**How does the
“paradigm of exile”
make you think about
your role in
American society?**

Reimagining Church as a Stream of Life in a Time of Thirst

- Elements of a thriving congregation:
 - Engages members in core decisions about identity and mission
 - Offers spiritual development and experiences
 - Impacts and influences communities
 - Functions as a learning community that acquires knowledge and adapts behavior
- Inspirations for ecclesial imagination:
 - Cohort responses: Scripture, world events, CRCC, prayer, people you serve
 - Appreciative Inquiry with the congregation: What do we value? What are our dreams?
- Strategies for flourishing:
 - Capacities + Context => Ministry
 - Focus on assets
 - “What can you do?” not “What do you need?”
 - Learn to say no. Saying “yes” to everything doesn’t allow for excellence.

Scriptures for Thriving

- The church can be a stream of life during a time when people thirst:
 - **Psalm 42:1** — “As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, my God.”
 - **Isaiah 55:1** — “Come, all who are thirsty, come to the waters....”
 - **John 4:10** — Jesus with the Samaritan woman at Jacob’s well
- Evidence of streams of life:
 - **Acts 11:19-21** — Vibrant variety
 - **2 Corinthians 8:4-5** — Model of generosity
 - **Hebrew 13:1-2** — Character of hospitality
 - **Acts 2:42-47** — Countercultural community

SPEAKER

David Emmanuel Goatley

President, Fuller Theological Seminary



WATCH



Reimagining Church as a Stream of Life in a Time of Thirst

Scan or click QR codes
to watch and listen

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES



Leading and Thriving in Church (2nd episode)



Pilgrimages of Striving and Thriving

What one thing do you want
your church to do well and be
known for? In “reimagining
church,” who, by God’s grace,
might we become?

Scriptures

When we think about “Reimagining Church,” the Bible is about people in the midst of change. The scriptures offer numerous texts that speak specifically to people moving through social, economic, political and structural change. Use these texts, which were suggested by members of the Reimagining Church cohort, in your preaching and teaching, to create a series on reimagining the future of your church context or community.



Genesis 2:23 — Text refers to a person leaving the comfort of home to pursue calling.

Joshua 1:1-9 — Joshua is commissioned to lead the nation into new territory; and is instructed that the two leading qualities are strength and courage.

Nehemiah 6 — Through focus, coordinated effort and intentional diversion from distraction, Nehemiah and the people are able to rebuild the walls in 52 days.

Psalms 1:3 and Psalm 92:12-13 — When we are planted in good soil (environments), we can produce (fruit) well.

Psalms 133 — Unity and collaboration is beneficial for the mission of the community.

Proverbs 3:5-6 — A key point for leaders, it's important to not only rely on oneself but to pursue understanding from divine council.

Jeremiah 29:1-7 — A word of encouragement to people who have lost everything due to exile; to pursue increasing in number and prospering as a people in spite of their being exiled.

Luke 5:1-12 — The call of spiritual leadership will require obedience and sacrifice.

3 John 1:2 — There is a parallel between the thriving of the soul and prospering in life.

Acts 2:46-47 — There is power and benefit around coming together.

Galatians 6:9 — Doing good toward others we are in community with leads to beneficial reward.

Philippians 1:3-6 — Leaders pray for those they are in faithful partnership with, that their work together would be completed well.

Sermon Topics

The following sermon topics were submitted by Reimagining Church cohort members, inspired by our retreat and additional sessions.

Staying the Course & Persevering

Hebrews 10:36

The text presents a spiritual benefit to staying the course and persevering, which is the promise(s) of God.

The Faith of the Turtle

Eccl 9:11

The race of life is not guaranteed to those who run fast or strongest, the true test of life is endurance.

Spiritual Formation and Human Development as a Means to Reduce Lack and Poverty

Isaiah 58:6-11

The true fast (act of worship and spiritual development) is evidenced by what we do to uplift others from poverty and lack.

Women in Church

Judges 4-5

A case for women in leadership, God chose Deborah to lead as a prophet and judge. She even led the men into battle.

The Feminine Aspects of God

Isaiah 66:13

God is not male or female, but shows up in our humanity in both male and female anthropomorphic forms. God, like a mother, comforts.

Try it Again

Psalms 126:4

One of the prayers of the believer is, “God do it again.” Restore again. Revive again. Heal Again. When God has shown us what God can do, the believer may pray, Do it again.

Shifting: From Great to Greater

1 John 4:4

We face great challenges in our day-to-day lives;
but God is still Greater and working through us in a
great way.

Peace is my Praise

Isaiah 26:3

There is a peace that the people of God experience
when their minds are set on Him and His praise.

Don't Leave Me Out

Hebrews 13:5

God promises to never leave us or forsake us;
we are never left out.

Engaging the Imagination of the Pew

Prov 29:18

God gives us all vision, but where there is no vision,
the people perish. We must engage the vision and
imagination of the people.

God is Community Too

Hebrews 10:25

An important aspect of God is that God created
humans to live, work and worship in community.

**What message does
your congregation
need to hear to spark
their imagination?**

Community Engagement

**God is within the walls of the church
to be worshipped. God is beyond
the walls to be worked.**

— Rev. Dr. Cecil L. Murray

CRCC defines “thriving” to mean that congregations serve both their members and the wider communities in which they are situated.

The following section shares examples of how congregations might be able to work “beyond the four walls of the congregation,” as the Rev. Dr. Cecil L. Murray said. Rev. Murray served as the pastor of First African Methodist Episcopal Church, Los Angeles (1977-2004) and as the Tansey Chair in Christian Ethics at USC (2004-2022), where he led and continues to inspire civic engagement programs at the Center for Religion and Civic Culture.

We have to be both pastor and prophet.

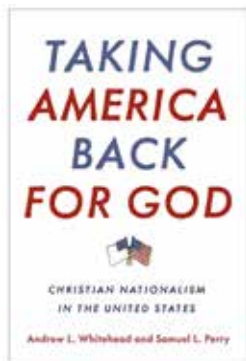
We have to tend to the wounds of the hearts of our community members who are in incredible anguish and pain right now, and we have to look systemically.

We have to think about what this moment offers us in terms of an opportunity for real transformation.

— Rabbi Sharon Brous

Politics, Divisions, Elections and Thriving Congregations

The context: Americans are deeply divided in how they understand their faith in relation to civic life. Andrew Whitehead shared his research on Christian nationalism, arguing that for white people in particular, belief in America as a “Christian nation” better predicts their political views than their religious identity or practices. Christian nationalism carries with it assumptions of nativism, white supremacy, authoritarianism, patriarchy and militarism.



READ MORE

Taking America Back for God: Christian Nationalism in the United States (Oxford University Press, 2020)

Divisions cannot be talked through or resolved. Then what?

- Collaboration is possible by finding “operational unity” — by unifying for a purpose while understanding that we see Christianity differently.
- Faith leaders have to hold to and preach to the truth, even if it makes some people uncomfortable.
- You might not be able to change people, but you can hold them accountable.
- Churches may need a shift in priorities, emphasizing the value of being connected by the spirit rather than by political principles.
- This can be learned from Asian Christianity, which holds collectivist values and emphasizes the Christian virtues of humility, submission and unity. Can differences be acknowledged while allowing for silence?
- Power matters in creating change. Therefore, white evangelicals that do not embrace Christian nationalism can help people of color gain access to power.

SPEAKERS

Andrew Whitehead

Associate Professor of sociology, Indiana University

Najuma Smith

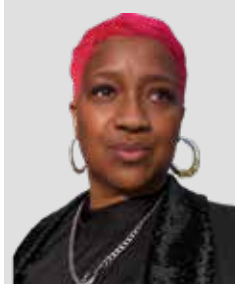
USC Center for Religion and Civic Culture

Russell Jueng

*Professor of sociology and Asian American studies,
San Francisco State University*



Whitehead



Smith



Jueng

WATCH



Politics, Divisions, Elections and Thriving Congregations

Scan or click QR code to watch



Election Dissection: Understanding Faith and Politics in the 2020 Presidential Election

*Learn more about voting
patterns among Asian, Latinx,
Muslim, Evangelical Americans*

**How comfortable are you
with division within
your congregation?
How do you want divisions
to be addressed?**

Social Justice and Thriving Congregations

- Thriving congregations have two wings — personal transformation and societal transformation. Without both wings, the plane won't work and people leave.
- Decolonize our theology by reading commentaries by people of color.
- Look closer at scripture: Who are the “least of these” that Jesus talked about today?
- Jesus had a pulse on the people's lived experiences. Congregations, therefore, must represent the people, particularly with societal powers like government, police.
- Congregations are often segregated by race and class. If a congregation only serves the comfortable, it further marginalizes those who are vulnerable to social issues.
- We all benefit from a healthy society. For congregants that live comfortably, the pastor's job is to expand our understanding of self-interest so that we work for the collective good.
- Latino church must resist the urge to assimilate and gain “honorary whiteness.”
- Generational trauma in Jewish community can point people to creating security for oneself or as the Hebrew Bible says, because we were enslaved in Egypt, we must help others who are oppressed.
- Exodus is the meta-narrative in Judaism, and also in Christianity and Islam: “It's building in a reflex of love into a society of cruelty. Our work is to build justice and love because we know what it has been like, and even if we're not in a chapter of suffering, we were and we will be again, so our job is to work to make the world a more just place.” — Sharon Brous
- What stories of oppression are in our own families and ancestors?

SPEAKERS

Rabbi Sharon Brous

Senior and Founding Rabbi of IKAR

Pastor Stephen “Cue” Jn-Marie

Founder of The Row LA and Creating JusticeLA

Robert Chao Romero

Associate Professor of Chicana/o Studies and Asian American Studies, UCLA



Braus



Jn-Marie



Romero

WATCH



Social Justice and Thriving Congregations

Scan or click QR code to watch

**How can your
congregation work for
justice in the world?**

The Reality of Good Intentions

The context: In CRCC's research, we have met faith organizations doing amazing work to address communal needs, and we also have met others whose work is not sustainable, either because of organizational capacity or bureaucratic restrictions. This conversation examines considerations for congregations interested in having a wider impact.

- Ministers serving as “unpaid social workers” for the community’s needs is not sustainable. A better model is the one of a church with an affiliated non-profit that can harness outside resources.
- Hyepin Im presented her guide to what pastor’s need to know to have a “Black belt” in nonprofit management.
- Good intentions can displace communities, marginalize them and bring harm. It is critical to create ministries responsibly and be committed for the long haul.

- To avoid pitfalls, ministry must work with the community rather than for the community.
 - Start with a needs assessment — survey congregants, community leaders, members (see page 50 for more on becoming a learning organization).
 - God is already operating in communities; how can you partner with this work? (See page 52 for more on collaboration.)
 - It requires humility to take direction from the community.

We are all called to this work of doing good ... AND our perspectives are limited. This is just good theology. When God is revealing who God is in the world ... it always comes in community.

— Tabatha Jones-Jolivet

SPEAKERS

Hyepin Im

Faith and Community Empowerment (FACE)

Tabatha Jones-Jolivet

Azusa Pacific University

Becky Teter

Fountain of Life Covenant Church



Im



Jones-Jolivet



Teter

WATCH



The Realities of Good Intentions

Scan or click QR code to watch

**What is God —
and the community —
calling you to do?**

Creating a Social Enterprise

- Social enterprise is a direct business model (a separate LLC or S-Corporation) to generate money, not raise funds for the non-profit (though you can also have income generating projects under 501c3).
- Talk to a lawyer/accountant about the best structure. Make sure to create a contract between the non-profit and the social enterprise to ensure that the business remains accountable to the non-profit.
- B-corp is a non-governmental certification that an enterprise has social impact.
- Three forms of social enterprise, which can overlap:
 - Product with social good (i.e., selling products from a local farm)
 - Employee benefits (i.e., hiring foster youth so they gain income and workforce development training)
 - Profits given back into a social or environmental mission (i.e. proceeds from T-shirt sales support after school program)
- “Reimagining Church” to reach those who have left institutional religion requires building relationships, understanding what brings them joy and what causes them pain, meeting their needs and caring for the whole human, and being humble enough to listen and change course.
- Opportunity comes from willingness to reimagine. Tiyya Foundation reimaged nonprofit, “refugee,” restaurant, leadership, power, activism and community.

If you are a faith leader, your charge is not to care just for the souls of your congregation but to care for the entirety of their humanity.

— Meymuna Hussein-Cattan

SPEAKER

Meymuna Hussein-Cattan

Founder and CEO, Tiyya Foundation

Meymuna was named a CNN Hero for her work with refugee communities through the Tiyya Foundation and its social enterprise restaurant, Flavors from Afar, where refugee chefs gain income and work experience while sharing authentic menus from their homelands. She also spoke with the group about her personal disillusionment with religious institutions and her hope that these leaders were willing to “reimagine” church.



WATCH



Creating a Social Enterprise

Scan or click QR code to watch

Exercise: Creating a Social Enterprise

Meymuna Hussein-Cattan led the Reimagining Church Cohort through an exercise to come up with an idea for a social enterprise. Answer and discuss the following questions with your team.

1. What is the name of your company?

2. Who is your target audience and why?

3. What is the mission of your company?

4. How are the proceeds allocated?

5. Does this address a direct or indirect pain in your community?



*There is a needs pathway.
When you respond to one need,
other needs will emerge, as will
opportunities to meet those
needs.”*

— Najuma Smith

**What “needs pathway”
are you walking down?
Where is it taking you?**

Advice from Successful Organizations

- A simple program like after school tutoring can be extraordinarily transformative for individuals, the congregation and the wider community.
- Time is more important than innovation: Your congregation needs to show the community that you are committed to it in order to gain their trust. It can take a decade or more.
- “Flexibility to the point of pain”: What you have always done doesn’t matter; instead listen and strive to meet the needs of the community.
- Serving one’s community also sustains the “givers” in ways that cannot be anticipated.

Caroline Sato

Director of Community Inclusion

Fountain of Life Church and Family Learning Center



*Scan or click QR code
to hear her advice*

About Fountain of Life

Fountain of Life was founded in 2008 to serve a particular neighborhood in Long Beach. Instead of buying a church building, they bought a house to serve as a Learning Center, where they offer community members English as a Second Language classes and after-school tutoring. Caroline Sato spoke to the group about what she saw as the most important aspects of working within a community: relationship, persistence, flexibility and personal sustenance.

Connect:

folcov.org/in-the-city

- Collaborate, Collaborate, Collaborate.
- As needs arise, there is more to do than you can do by yourself. You need to have a team and empower others to lead.
- It's not about you. Don't start a new program without knowing what else is going on in your community and how you might engage with those efforts.
- How can you work with other congregations to meet the community's needs?
- It takes humility to ask for help, so it's important for the givers to have humility as well.

Richard Weinroth

Founder

Stone Soup



About Stone Soup

With a background in culinary arts, Richard has worked to provide food to people in need through disaster relief and food banks. Right before the pandemic, he started the Stone Soup Project LA, through which he donates as much soup as he sells and provides culinary arts and job training. Congregations can work with Stone Soup to buy soup or provide soup for people in need.

Connect:

stonesoupprojectla.com

Examples of Community Engagement

As part of a research project, CRCC created short video profiles of creative congregations and projects across religions in Los Angeles. Watch these videos not as templates but rather as examples intended to spark your imagination of how a congregation might meet the needs of its members and the community in its own context.

Social Service

Laundry Love



Social Enterprise

5,000 Pies



WATCH



Reimagining Religion Playlist

Scan or click QR code to watch playlist

Worship and Action

The Row LA



Bridging Divides

Trust Talks



Becoming a Learning Organization

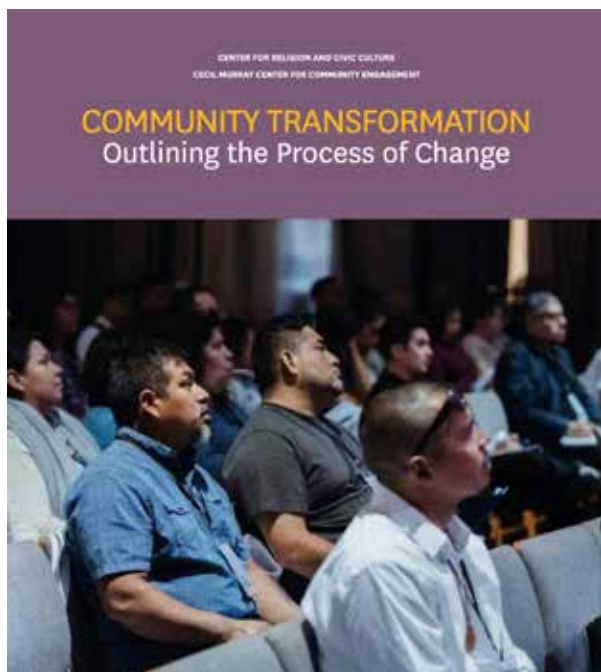
“Reimagining” a congregation’s social impact requires continually evaluating the effectiveness of its activities.

A learning organization dedicates time to “creating, acquiring and transferring knowledge, and modifying behavior to reflect new knowledge and insights.” (David Garvin)

This model helps faith-based and non-profit actors overcome organizational inertia (i.e. “we’ve always done it this way”), utilize team members optimally and become more flexible and innovative in meeting future challenges.

CRCC recommends a three-part assessment for evaluating ministries:

1. Congregational Assessment: How does the church want to engage with the world?
2. Organizational Assessment: What are the capacities, mission and vision of the congregation’s social ministry or community development corporation?
3. Community Assessment: What are the needs of the people who will be served?



Contact crcc@usc.edu for congregational and organizational assessment tools and recommendations.

READ MORE



Community Transformation: Outlining a Process for Change

Scan or click QR code to read more

**How does your
congregation learn and
adjust to new knowledge?**

Collaboration

**What do you hope to accomplish
by working with other organizations?**

You'll notice calls for collaboration throughout this document. But what does it mean? And what does it require of you and your organization to collaborate with another?

The Collaboration Continuum allows you to think through your work with outside partners and what is required to create something of value. It differentiates between four forms of partnerships: networking, cooperation, coordination and collaboration. All four forms can be effective, with each having different limitations and opportunities.

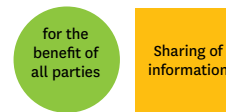


Collaboration Continuum¹

Collaboration lies on a continuum of inter-organizational strategies that build upon each other with increasing complexity, each requiring specific capacities, commitments and support systems.

Networking

Networking involves individuals sharing information about their organizations, resources and best practices. It promotes continued learning and creative problem solving, creates social capital and builds initial trust for future linkages. Requires boldness and open-mindedness.



Coordination

Coordination involves organizations altering activities for mutual benefit and to achieve a common purpose. Requires deeper levels of trust, communication and leadership through which activities are managed.



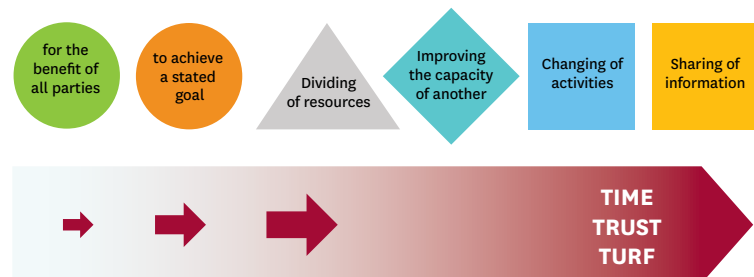
Cooperation

Cooperation involves organizations sharing resources to solve a shared problem. Requires access to decision-making bodies and leaders who envision a community bigger than their own. Can involve tensions over power and distribution of resources, and representation of religious identity. May necessitate written agreements.



Collaboration

Collaboration involves parties sharing risks, responsibilities, resources and rewards in order to do something that cannot be achieved alone. Transforms power relations between parties. Requires finding agreement about how to implement a shared vision and creative solutions that exceed the limited perspectives of individual stakeholders.



¹ Adapted from Arthur Turov Himmelman, in C.Huxmon (ed), *Creating Collaborative Advantage*, Sage (1996)

Potential Partners

Congregations can partner with other faith groups, secular nonprofits, advocacy groups, government agencies, philanthropy and corporations.

At our Reimagining (Again) conference, we invited potential collaborators and resource providers for faith communities in the Los Angeles area. We asked them to introduce themselves in videos which can be seen on CRCC's website:



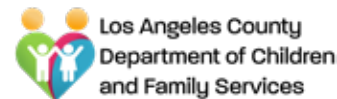
Resources for Thriving Congregations

Scan or click QR code to find out more about potential partners and resources

TOGETHER LA



@drsilverfoxx7



Technology

**What technologies do you use
to reach congregants and beyond?**

The shutdowns of the Covid-19 pandemic only hastened a trend toward digital religion. Congregations had to pause in-person worship and other gatherings and move online. Today, many people of faith continue to seek spiritual meaning and connection in digital spaces. This reality presents challenges and opportunities

God exposed what I believe is a misinterpretation of scripture, that the temple or some physical location is the only place you can encounter God or experience God....

How we worship the omnipresent God should not be limited to our imaginations or past practices. We should feel liberated and free to worship God and the beauty of holiness in a creative and limitless way.

— Bishop Mark Richardson

Changing our Mindsets

- For people embedded in a religious tradition, digital religion supplements rather than supplants their community.
- Congregations cannot simply transfer what you do offline to online.
- Create opportunities for engagement, reflection, embodiment, not just one-way content.
- **Take a “Beta testing” approach:**
 - Be willing to move quickly, adapt, try new things and fail.
 - Ask what your community needs and wants.
 - Continuously survey and make adjustments.
- **Collaboration is critical:**
 - Online spaces create too much work for one person to do it all.
 - Offer new people and digital creative the opportunity to take leadership.
 - Implement team- and community- based practices.

- **The algorithm is the authority:** Authority is generally earned based on expertise but in digital culture it comes from prominence and visibility. The question is, “Who do I have a relationship or affinity with?” For young people, that’s peers and influencers.



■ **Building Community:**

- In network culture, community is built around individuals. Content is king and may draw people in, but community is what keeps people there.
- Worship is central to congregations' "vitality," but it doesn't create community. Problem isn't the technology, it's the services.
- To create community, pay attention to neighborliness — networking, outreach (online, phone, text and in-person), service to those in need.
- Online communities open participation to homebound, people with disabilities, those with small children.
- Lots of competition for your attention online. For elders in particular, what other technologies can help you connect? Phone, TV or DVDs?

■ **There are no right answers:**

- It's ok to close the doors and do ministry in a different way.
- It's ok to do both digital and in-person.
- It's ok to focus on the physical church.

Luke 17:11 — “Now on his way to Jerusalem, Jesus traveled along the border between Samaria and Galilee.”

**How are you walking
along the borders between
digital and analog,
contemplation and action?
What does it mean to
be border-walkers in our
imagination and practice?**

SPEAKERS

Heidi A. Campbell

Professor of Communication, Texas A&M University

Amanda Quraishi

Communications Expert

Bishop Mark Richardson

New Journey Jurisdiction

Pastor Greg Russinger

Alongsiders Church, Portland and Laundry Love

WATCH



How Congregations Can Build and Nurture Community in Digital Spaces With Amanda Quraishi



Technology, Innovation and Thriving Congregations: Changing Our Mindset

Scan or click QR codes to watch



Campbell



Quraishi



Russinger



Richardson

Additional Reading



The following readings and books were recommended by the Reimagining Church cohort, CRCC staff or program speakers.

Click or scan the QR codes to find a list of these books with links.

Poetry

“Don’t Quit”

by Edgar A. Guest

“To Be of Use”

by Marge Piercy

Books

Christianity in America and the World

The Christian World: A Global History

by Martin Marty

Random House, 2009

In this cogent volume, historian Martin Marty gives readers of all faiths a brief yet sweeping account of Christianity and how it grew from a few believers two thousand years ago to become the world’s largest religion. While giving a broad overview, Marty also focuses on specific issues, such as how Christianity attempts to reconcile with the teachings of Christ some of its stances on armed conflict, justice, and dominion.

America’s Book: The Rise and Decline of a Bible Civilization, 1794-1911

by Mark Noll

Oxford University Press, 2022

America’s Book shows how the Bible decisively shaped American national history even as that history influenced the use of Scripture. It explores the rise of a strongly Protestant Bible civilization in the early United States that was then fractured by debates over slavery, contested by growing numbers of non-Protestant Americans (Catholics, Jews, agnostics), and torn apart by the Civil War.

The Future of Church

The Dangerous Act of Worship: Living God's Call to Justice

by Mark Labberton

IVP, 2012

Worship is the dangerous act of waking up to God and God's purposes in the world. Too often worship has become a narrowly private experience. Pastor Mark Labberton shows how to move beyond the comfort of safe worship to authentic worship that is awake to the needs of the world.

The Dangerous Act of Loving Your Neighbor: Seeing Others Through the Eyes of Jesus

by Mark Labberton

IVP, 2015

Jesus didn't see a sick woman, he saw a daughter of God. Are we able to see others with the eyes of Jesus? Seeing rightly, says Mark Labberton, is the beginning of how our hearts are changed. This book is ideal for both personal reflection and group discussion.

Church Next: Quantum Changes In Christian Ministry

by Eddie Gibbs & Ian Coffey

IVP, 2001

The authors identify some of the major storm centers through which churches must navigate, not in order to return to a previously more tranquil world, but to enter an entirely new one. They look at mission, church structures, developing new leaders and mentoring, worship, spirituality and evangelism, and ask how our ministry must change in order to serve a new generation of Christians.

Cultural Catholics: Who they Are, How to Respond

by Maureen K. Day

Liturgical Press, 2024

Cultural Catholics comprise just over half of self-identified Catholics in the United States. This book explores cultural Catholics' religious beliefs and practices, political and civic commitments, parish experiences, and concludes with concrete, evidence-based pastoral approaches.

***Catholicism at a Crossroads:
The Present and Future of America's Largest Church***

by Maureen K. Day, James C. Cavendish, Paul M. Perl, Michele Dillon, Mary L. Gautier, and William V. D'Antonio
NYU Press, 2025

Addressing how the church is responding to recent cultural challenges presented by political polarization, racial unrest and threats to democracy, *Catholicism at a Crossroads* offers an up-to-date, nuanced and definitive portrait of American Catholicism in the 21st century.

***Why Religion Went Obsolete:
The Demise of Traditional Faith in America***

by Christian Smith
Oxford University Press, 2025

Drawing on survey data and hundreds of interviews, Christian Smith offers a sweeping, multifaceted account of why many Americans have lost faith in traditional religion. Crucially, he argues, it does not mean a strictly secular future. Rather, Americans' spiritual impulses are being channelled in new and interesting directions.

***Becoming a Future-Ready Church:
8 Shifts to Encourage and Empower the Next
Generation of Leaders (Exponential Next)***

by Daniel Yang, Adelle M. Banks, Warren Bird
Zondervan, 2024

Becoming a Future-Ready Church is a blueprint to guide you through eight critical shifts to help lead your church into the future with wisdom and hope. It describes several major converging trends that will greatly impact the church in America over the next few decades: the Great Resignation of Boomer leaders from churches, the shrinking percentage of Christians in America, and the change in felt needs among rising generations shaped heavily by anxiety, skepticism, and fragmentation.

***Reorganized Religion: The Reshaping of the
American Church and Why it Matters***

by Bob Smeitana
Worthy Books, 2022

Uncover the ways the Christian church has changed in recent years—from the decline of the mainline denominations to the mega-churchification of American culture—and a hopeful reimagining of what the church might look like going forward.

Youth and Intergenerational Issues

InterGenerate: Transforming Churches through Intergenerational Ministry

by Holly Catterton Allen

Abilene Christian University Press, 2018

InterGenerate addresses important questions of why we should bring the generations back together, but even more significantly, how we can bring generations back together.

When Generations Collide: Who They Are. Why They Clash. How to Solve the Generational Puzzle at Work

by Lynne C. Lancaster & David Stillman

Harper Business, 2003

This book provides hands-on methods to close the generation gaps. With effective tools to recruit, retain, motivate, and manage each generation, you can now create teamwork, not war, in today's high performance workplace, where at any age, productivity is what counts.

New Monasticism and the Transformation of American Evangelicalism

by Wes Markofski

Oxford University Press, 2015

This book describes how some younger evangelicals are expressing their evangelical commitments in more progressive ways than their parents.

Families and Faith: How Religion is Passed Down across Generations

by Vern L. Bengtson, Norella M. Putney and Susan Harris

Oxford University Press, 2013

For almost four decades, the authors followed more than 350 families composed of more than 3,500 individuals whose lives span more than a century—the oldest was born in 1881, the youngest in 1988—to find out how religion is, or is not, passed down from one generation to the next. Families and Faith explores what allows a family to pass on its most deeply-held tradition—its faith.

Handing Down the Faith: How Parents Pass Their Religion on to the Next Generation

*by Christian Smith and Amy Adamczyk
Oxford University Press, 2021*

The most important influence shaping the religious and spiritual lives of children, youth, and teenagers is their parents. *Handing Down the Faith* explores the beliefs, parenting styles and congregational experiences of religious parents, including immigrant parents of various traditions.

From the National Study of Youth and Religion:

Almost Christian: What the Faith of Our Teenagers is Telling the American Church

*by Kenda Creasy Dean
Oxford University Press, 2010*

This book investigates why American teenagers are at once so positive about Christianity and at the same time so apathetic about genuine religious practice. In order to produce ardent young Christians, Dean argues, churches must rediscover their sense of mission and model an understanding of being Christian as not something you do for yourself, but something that calls you to share God's love, in word and deed, with others.

Growing Up in America: The Power of Race in the Lives of Teens

*by Brad Christerson, Korie Edwards and Richard Flory
Stanford University Press, 2010*

This book provides a rich, first-hand account of the different social worlds that teens of diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds experience. It shows the importance of race in how young people are tracked into different kinds of opportunities in their lives.

Lost in Transition: The Dark Side of Emerging Adulthood

*by Christian Smith, Kari Christoffersen, Hilary Davidson,
and Patricia Snell Herzog
Oxford University Press, 2011*

Emerging adults enjoy more freedom, opportunities and personal growth than ever before. But the transition to adulthood is also more complex, disjointed and confusing. *Lost in Transition* investigates the difficulties young people face today and the consequences both for individuals and for American society as a whole.

Back Pocket God: Religion and Spirituality in the Lives of Emerging Adults

by Richard Flory and Melinda Lundquist Denton
Oxford University Press, 2020

This book explores the role of religion and spirituality among young adults and raises important questions about the nature of the future of religion and religious institutions in the U.S.

Wellness

Homecoming: Healing Trauma to Reclaim Your Authentic Self

by Thema Bryant Ph.D.
TarcherPerigree, 2023

In the aftermath of stress, disappointment, and trauma, people often fall into survival mode, even while a part of them longs for more. Juggling multiple demands and responsibilities keeps them busy, but not healed. Dr. Thema shows you how to reconnect with your authentic self and reclaim your time, your voice, your life.

The Amen Effect: Ancient Wisdom to Mend Our Broken Hearts and World

by Sharon Brous
Avery, 2024

In a time of loneliness and isolation, social rupture and alienation, what will it take to mend our broken hearts and rebuild our society? Sharon Brous—a leading American rabbi—makes the case that the spiritual work of our time, as instinctual as it is counter-cultural, is to find our way to one other in celebration, in sorrow, and in solidarity.

A Walking Disaster: What Surviving Katrina and Cancer Taught Me about Faith and Resilience

by Jamie Aten
Templeton Press, 2020

Is there a meaning to our suffering? Is hope realistic when tragedy befalls us? Is a return to normalcy possible after our life is uprooted by catastrophe? These are the questions that disaster psychologist Dr. Jamie Aten wrestled with when he was diagnosed with Stage IV colon cancer. In this gripping memoir, Aten shares the life-affirming and faith-renewing insights that he discovered during his tumultuous struggle against the disease.

The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma

by Bessel van der Kolk M.D.

Penguin Books, 2015

Trauma is a fact of life. Dr. Bessel van der Kolk, one of the world's foremost experts on trauma, uses recent scientific advances to show how trauma literally reshapes both body and brain, compromising sufferers' capacities for pleasure, engagement, self-control, and trust. He explores innovative treatments that offer new paths to recovery by activating the brain's natural neuroplasticity.

Leadership

Transforming Pastoral Leadership: Reimagining Congregational Relationships for Changing Contexts

by Quentin P. Kinnison

Pickwick Publication, 2016

Pastoral leaders are often expected to manage realities beyond their expertise, experience, and ability. That expectation, a product of modern approaches to leadership, views the pastor as responsible for maintaining the status quo. Transforming Pastoral Leadership challenges readers to reconsider dominant leadership practices and rediscover biblical themes around shepherding. It offers two processes to help congregations move forward.

The Principles and Power of Vision: Keys to Achieving Personal and Corporate Destiny

by Myles Munroe

Whitaker House, 2015

Through The Principles and Power of Vision, you will discover your purpose in life, understand why vision is essential to your success, grasp the necessary keys for fulfilling your life's dream, develop a specific plan for achieving your vision, and overcome obstacles to your vision.

The Purpose Driven Life: What on Earth Am I Here For?

by Rick Warren

Zondervan, 2013

Before you were born, God already planned your life. God longs for you to discover the life he uniquely created you to live—here on earth, and forever in eternity. Let The Purpose Driven Life show you how.

***Choosing Leadership: Revised and Expanded:
How to Create a Better Future by Building Your
Courage, Capacity, and Wisdom***

by Linda Ginzel

Health Communications, Inc., 2022

Choosing Leadership gives readers the tools to sharpen your leadership skills, putting the responsibility for personal growth and professional development in your own hands. It counters stereotypes that lead us to believe it takes a fancy title, big budget, impressive credentials, charisma, or innate leadership traits to be a “leader.”

From Harvard Business Review:

10 Must Reads on Leadership (2011)

10 Must Reads on Leadership, Vol. 2 (2020)

10 Must Reads on Women and Leadership (2018)

Community Engagement

***Better Capitalism: Jesus, Adam Smith, Ayn Rand,
and MLK Jr. on Moving from Plantation to
Partnership Economics***

by Paul E. Knowlton & Aaron E. Hedges

Cascade Books, 2021

This book shares the underlying philosophy and the practical applications needed to not merely criticize exploitative capitalism but constructively work toward something better. It adds value for you across the full landscape of capitalism and its bridged worlds of business and faith.

***The Hole in Our Gospel: What Does God Expect
of Us? The Answer That Changed My Life and Might
Just Change the World***

by Richard Stearns

Thomas Nelson, 2010

Is our faith just about going to church, studying the Bible and avoiding the most serious sins-or does God expect more? Have we embraced the whole gospel or a gospel with a hole in it? The Hole in Our Gospel is the compelling true story of a corporate CEO who set aside worldly success for something far more significant, and discovered the fullpower of the gospel of Jesus Christ to change his own life.

The Deeply Formed Life: Five Transformative Values to Root Us in the Way of Jesus

by Rich Villodas
Waterbrook, 2020

During our chaotic times, discover five forgotten values that can spark internal growth and help us reconcile our Christian faith with the complexities of race, sexuality, and social justice.

At Home in Exile: Finding Jesus among My Ancestors and Refugee Neighbors

by Russell M. Jeung
Zondervan, 2016

Russell Jeung's spiritual memoir shares the difficult, often joyful, and sometimes harrowing account of his life in East Oakland's Murder Dubs neighborhood and of his Chinese-Hakka history. On a journey to discover how the poor and exiled are blessed, *At Home in Exile* is the story of his integration of social activism and a stubborn evangelical faith.

Taking America Back for God: Christian Nationalism in the United States

by Andrew Whitehead and Samuel L. Perry
Oxford University Press, 2020

Christian ideals and symbols have long played an important role in American public life, but Christian nationalism is about far more than whether the phrase “under God” belongs in the pledge of allegiance. At its heart, Christian nationalism demands that we must preserve a particular kind of social order, an order in which everyone—Christians and non-Christians, native-born and immigrants, whites and minorities, men and women recognizes their “proper” place in society.

The Violent Take it by Force: The Christian Movement That Is Threatening Our Democracy

by Matthew D. Taylor
Broadleaf Books, 2024

Scholar Matthew D. Taylor pulls back the curtain on a little-known movement of evangelical Christians who see themselves waging spiritual battles on a massive scale. Known as the New Apostolic Reformation, this network of leaders and believers emerged only three decades ago but now yields colossal influence, galvanizing support for Trump and far-right leaders around the world.

Technology

Digital Creatives and the Rethinking of Religious Authority

by Heidi A. Campbell

Routledge, 2021

This book explores the ways in which religiously-inspired digital media experts and influencers online challenge established religious leaders and those who seek to maintain institutional structures. Today, online and offline religious spaces are increasingly intertwined, reshaping notions of authority.

Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in Digital Media

Edited by Heidi A. Campbell and Ruth Tsuria

Routledge, 2021

This book offers a critical and systematic survey of the study of religion and digital media. It covers religious engagement with a wide range of digital media forms and highlights examples of new media engagement in all five of the major world religions, from mobile apps and video games to virtual reality and social media.

Additional reading from Heidi A. Campbell, including free PDFs about post-pandemic shifts in religion and digital spaces, are available from Texas A&M OAKTrust Digital Repository.

About the USC Center for Religion and Civic Culture

Mission

The USC Center for Religion and Civic Culture advances the understanding of religion and society, and supports faith and community leaders in becoming full partners in the work of positive social change.

What we do

CRCC's unique team consists of scholars, journalists and faith leaders. Our core work is in two related areas: We conduct empirical research on religious, cultural and social change in the US and globally; and we make this knowledge applicable and available through books, media, reports, public events, and training programs.

CRCC's initiatives help leaders realize their potential and transform their organization so that they can have a more effective and sustained impact on community health and wellbeing. CRCC also provides consulting and evaluation work to philanthropy, business, public officials and elected leaders to enhance their engagement with faith communities on social issues.



CRCC thanks the Reimagining Church Cohort for their contributions to this toolkit.

LEARN MORE

crcc.usc.edu

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