

Getting ultrareal about the church

Ultrarealism, a concept I learned from distance running, begins by seeing things as they really are.

by [Martha Tatarnic](#) in the [August 2023](#) issue



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Like many leaders in the Christian church, I have fallen into the trap of thinking that one new slant, one new program, one new focus will be the thing that saves us. I have fallen into the trap of believing that *I* can save us.

The desperate desire to save, grow, and transform the church marks a lot of what weighs on the minds and hearts of parish leaders and what creates the most anxiety in our work. In an institutional church that has been in population decline longer than I have been alive, the programs and trends that are supposed to save us are constantly on offer. Some of these offerings blatantly promise numerical growth; others make vaguer promises but speak of transformation and vitality for the institutional church.

Our professional development opportunities tend to be focused either on corralling us into leading these new ways of being the church or on offering us models of self-care to recover from the stress of always trying to get our communities to become something different from what they currently are. In a breakout session in one such professional development day for clergy, a colleague expressed his fatigue at what was being shared by our charismatic presenter.

“I’m tired,” he shared. “I’m tired of being given yet another hypothetical vision of what the church should be.”

When the pandemic hit, it became unavoidably clear to me that I was close to burnout. I can name a number of specific circumstances that were tipping me over the edge at that time, but in truth, the reasons I was struggling had little to do with any of them. The weariness my colleague expressed was mine, too. I had gotten into the habit of carrying around the heavy weight of other people’s expectations like it was compulsory; I kept taking on more and feeling less like any of it was working. I was stuck in a place I didn’t want to be, following a carrot that always seemed out of reach. One of my primary feelings when COVID shut down our world was relief from the relentless pace I had been keeping.

Along with this unsettling realization was also a collective question, a question not unrelated to my burnout. When we couldn’t gather, we had to ask why gathering might matter. When all the world was in disarray and the profound inequality, injustice, and suffering of our world laid bare, mere self-preservation wasn’t a good enough answer. It is so easy in our Christian leadership to become consumed with questions of assuring the church’s survival, but the critical question is, *Why bother with any of this at all?*

There is a concept, which I learned through long-distance running, called *ultrarealism*. Runners can easily undo their own efforts by worrying about what is coming next or wishing that things were different. Ultrarealism instead sees, accepts, and embraces what actually is. I might get freaked-out about my uneven breathing. I might feel despair about the spitting rain and how slowly the first mile seems to have gone when I still have 17 to go. But while these things about breathing and rain and mileage might be true, I can choose to note that, right here in this present moment, my leg muscles feel strong, the rain is refreshing, and I

have the great privilege of being able to run. I can feel the discomfort but also recognize that not only am I not dying, not only am I safe and okay, but I am running and it feels good.

The concept of the ultrareal could have powerful implications for the life of the church. As an institution constantly reminded of its own decline, it is easy to get locked into endless lamenting for the societal change that has so impacted our congregations, the nonstop pursuit of the programmatic solution that is going to reverse those trajectories, and a soul-destroying envy toward the versions of Christianity that seem to be so much better at drawing the crowds. It's easy, as my colleague expressed, to feel as if we are trapped in the hypothetical—never closer to attaining the picture of institutional health that has been set for us by nostalgia or programmatic promise. It's not just that these dynamics leave those of us in leadership wondering if there's an exit hatch; it's also that there is very little that is compelling or life-giving about a church that is so obviously desperate and dissatisfied.

Instead, the ultrareal church begins by seeing who we really are. The church is the real, complicated, messy people who have found themselves gathered together and who have been met by the surprising power of God's love. This reality has implications for me as a leader in the church. My job description is amazingly simple: my job is to lift up. Day in and day out, I am the one who stands at our church's altar, physically and literally lifting up the bread and wine to be the stuff through which God's blessing will be communicated. It's representative of my whole job, which is to lift up the real stories of struggle, mess, heartbreak, and beauty—to help us better see the truth of how God is meeting us right here and right now.

That realization allows me some acceptance. I have to accept that there is never enough of me to go around, that there is always unfinished work at the end of the day, and that when people are hurting, my shortcomings as a pastor might become an easy target for expressing their pain and frustration. I also accept that it is a holy thing indeed to be able to care for and pray with people in the most critical moments of their lives. By God's grace, as I continue to invest my heart and soul in this work, I can participate in something beautiful.

I accept too that although the institution of the church can be toxic and hurtful in ways that must be called into question and even protested, right now I understand that the best place from which I can fight for change is within the bounds of the thing that needs changing. I accept that as I fight for change, sometimes what might most need changing is me.

I can serve and fail and fight and admit inadequacy; I can marvel at what God does with my inadequacy. What I don't have to do is save anything. I haven't been commissioned by Jesus to go and reverse trends of institutional decline. Neither have you. What we are invited to do is to turn around—repent—and open our eyes to the kingdom that, with or without us, is already here. We don't have to fearfully manage the powerful reign of God's healing and transforming love. We don't need to make it something else or wish it were different. We do need to get better at putting our energy, attention, time, and love toward what is already happening.

In seeing and accepting, I find something to embrace rather than run from. The thing I end up embracing is salvation—but it's not up to me to make it happen, and it's not about resuscitating a dying institution, either. Why bother with any of this? Why should the church, rocked to its core by COVID, keep trying to gather?

We bother and we gather because the church bears witness to the truth of who we really are. Whether or not an individual participates in a faith community, the inescapable truth for every creature on this planet is that we are connected. I might wish I could pick and choose which parts of creation and which of God's creatures share in that connection, but God is a pretty good door crasher when it comes to the gates of my heart. As COVID made clear, we are radically infected by one another's oxygen and water vapor and germs and skin molecules, and at the same time our souls actually can't know and love God without one another. The great crises of our modern-day living are all rooted in having lost sight of that truth. The gathered church bears witness—for us and for the world—to the inescapable truth of how our lives are finally and forever bound together.

In the falling apart of a global pandemic, I had an opportunity to get ultrareal about myself and about the church. It turns out that these two living, breathing realities are connected. I didn't experience any magical answers to how I, or we, could assure the future of the mainline church. But I did experience freedom. It is freeing to be

clear about who I am and who we are. It is freeing to shift away from the dead-end street of trying to measure up to the messianic expectations declining institutions place on their leaders and toward the job I am actually called to do.

The church is littered with all of the ways that we get it wrong. It is also showered with the inconvenient blessing of the God who keeps showing up, especially in the people and places I might rather edit out of my field of vision. It is not hypothetical. With or without us, it is happening. That's what I want to get better at seeing; that's what I want to love and serve. I want to lift up those stories of God meeting us in the mess and binding, the heartbreak and confusion and truth of just how infected with one another we really are. I want to love and serve an offering that has a chance of speaking to a whole world of hungry, broken, messed-up people—who are also already brimming with stories of God's touch and looking for language and permission to speak of holy things.