

Seven possibilities for church

by [Samuel Wells](#) in the [June 22, 2016](#) issue



St. Martin-in-the-Fields stands next to Trafalgar Square in London. [Some rights reserved](#) by [thisstage](#).

All pastors want their churches to be signs of hope—to embody configurations of trust too seldom found elsewhere. Yet in many communities people set out in hope but end up disappointed, dejected, and even cynical. Pastors spend a lot of time tending people's difficult experiences and confounding people's stereotypes of what hope can mean. Here are seven projections and assumptions that I face in my current context and responses that reflect what the church I serve is called to be.

First, it's possible to be a church without being defensive and closed-minded. Jesus came that we might have life in all its glory. God made each of us as we are because God wanted one like us. God made us with minds and bodies, not just with wills and souls. God wants us to live before death as well as after. The Holy Spirit works as much beyond the church as within it. We're called to be what only we can be but to want what everyone else can have as well.

Second, it's possible to care for those who are ostracized or in trouble in a way that enhances rather than diminishes the community. There's no true community without the enrichment and challenge that come from people whose face or migrant status or identity doesn't fit. That's because care comes not out of some self-important altruism but out of recognizing our own need and desiring to be transformed by the strangers God sends us. With them we acknowledge that each of us is a stranger too.

Third, it's possible to be aspirational, financially sustainable, and participatory all at the same time. Many creative initiatives come to grief because they focus on one of these and overlook the others. Beauty and brilliance are great, as are fun and friendship, and having enough money to do it again next year.

Fourth, it's possible to have commercial activities and administrative practices that deepen and embody our understanding of the kingdom rather than conflict with or confuse it. By serving people and creating a staff team, a church learns what love and justice and flourishing mean when translated into economic decisions and regular habits of trade and employment. If a church wants to pay good wages, it has to make sacrifices elsewhere. If it wants to sell fair trade lines of goods, it has to ensure they're attractive. If it wants to give disadvantaged people a step up the employment ladder, it needs to give them appropriate support. It's difficult to get these things right, but a church that does is discovering a pearl of great price.

Fifth, it's possible to grow without becoming impersonal, two-dimensional, or an ogre. No one wants to lose the joys of interactive community. Everyone knows what it feels like for something spontaneous and good to become big or formulaic and lose its character. *Partnership* names the ways an organization can share its practice and extend its influence while respecting and affirming its differences from other institutions and without building an empire. It's possible to promote the things you believe in while cherishing what's unique about your own context.

Sixth, we can do unbelievable things together if we start with one another's assets rather than deficits. In a community of fear we begin with our hurts and our stereotypes and find a hundred reasons why we can't do things or why certain kinds of people don't belong. But if we peel off labels like disabled or wealthy or migrant or evangelical or single, and instead see qualities like passionate or committed or generous or enthusiastic or humble, then there's no limit to what a community of hope can do. God gives us everything we need to fulfill our vocation. If we

experience our life as scarcity, and yet don't receive and enjoy the gifts God gives us, we have no one to blame but ourselves.

Seventh, it's possible to believe that in Christ the future is bigger than the past. So much of the church in England and the United States is limping sadly, like a puppy with a sore paw. Social and political discourse in both countries is inflamed with a rhetoric of nostalgia for some ill-defined era of pure nationhood and cultural supremacy. Christianity is founded on two convictions: the forgiveness of sins, which maintains the past can be healed by the Holy Spirit, and everlasting life, which claims our future with Christ has no end. Congregations love to tell stories of good things and noble deeds that have happened in their midst. But the best and most prophetic thing about the church I serve is that it believes the future is bigger than the past. That's what makes it an energized and inspiring community. We don't know, but we're learning. We haven't arrived, but the journey's great. We're not sure exactly where we're going, but it's getting better all the time. We've had wonderful experiences, but the best is yet to come.

Like the Carpenters' 1970 hit, "we've only just begun." Our church communities have many blessings, a great deal to enjoy and be proud of, and a lot to learn. This church thing is only 2,000 years old. It's early days.