

Role-playing the future

Pastors find an imaginative outlet in Dungeons & Dragons.

by [Elizabeth Eisenstadt Evans](#) in the [January 2023](#) issue

At the height of COVID, United Methodist pastor Cynthia Kepler-Karrer and her husband were invited to join a Zoom-based Dungeons and Dragons game made up mostly of clergy. “I play a tabaxi (cat person) monk (not so much religious as highly dexterous, like a ninja), and some of what has been so awesome is learning how to live into and embody another perspective,” wrote Kepler-Karrer in an email. She is the pastor of Memorial United Methodist Church in Austin, Texas.

“She is braver in many ways than I am,” she said, “and I am learning to channel some of that courage when I most need it.”

Kepler-Karrer and her friends aren’t playing alone. Across the country, the role-playing game is bringing ordained Christians [and Jews](#) together in a fantasy world in which good and evil sometimes seem clearer and choices more obvious than in murky, real-life, pandemic America.

Adam Thomas, rector of St. Mark’s Episcopal Church in Mystic, Connecticut, and author of [Digital Disciple](#), plays D&D with Carrie Combs, priest-in-charge at Trinity Episcopal Church in Torrington, Connecticut. Together, they host the *Podcast for Nerdy Christians*. In a recent [episode](#) they make the case that playing D&D can make you a better Jesus follower.

Thomas estimates he has about 85 board games, and he suggested that the recent resurgence of D&D may be in part a reaction to the past few years of online communication. “Sitting at an actual table, holding actual materials, looking at people face-to-face reawakened something in us that being online all the time has dulled,” he said. “We crave that connection.”

Thomas and Combs play D&D both online and in person. One online game, launched before the pandemic, includes several clergy who used to reside in the area.

In the spring and summer of 2020, said Combs, she played D&D three times a week. Her church position is part time, and she has another part-time job as well. Suddenly she found herself working full time from home. “I felt like everything got thrown on end. I noticed, specifically with the role-playing games, that I was craving that escapism.”

Fighting vampires was more enjoyable than the real world she spent most of their time in, she said. “We all enjoyed having a little bit of a good versus evil” dynamic, she added. “In the moments when you are role-playing, you can do something about it.” Now that the pandemic has ebbed, at least for the moment, it’s harder to find times that suit the players’ schedules.

For Thomas, the shutdown spurred moments of intense creativity as well as the “horror and terror” many others were experiencing. Then, he said, “we went from creativity to languishing to just exhaustion.” The exhaustion of addressing multiple crises, from racial reckoning to climate change, remains.

But Thomas has a unique role in his D&D world: he’s a dungeon master, which means he gets to create a new world, an act of imagination that helps him process what’s going on offline. So does writing novels—he’s got 14 under his belt, one of which is published in a traditional format. “In a sense, these are spiritual disciplines, because I’m grappling with how to imagine a different world,” he said. “That’s one of the things we’re always encouraged to do—to look for that new creation.”

Imaginative play is not just for children, he said. “When we exercise our imagination, we are living into that piece of us that God put there. Play is something to connect us to God.”

[Read Elizabeth Evans's feature story on the clergy mental health crisis.](#)