

White Paper: The One Church Model

This past summer was a deep learning experience for me. Francis and I spent the month of July 2022 in Brighton, a city on the south coast of England. We had come to write, each of us is working on a book. I had hoped to connect with the local Unitarian Church there to do some pulpit supply but that possibility never materialized. What we did do was visit several congregations in Brighton. The first was the local Unitarian Church, a beautiful Georgian style building in the center of the bustling downtown. We found it small and insular, with almost everyone there over the age of 60. They told me that they had a hard time keeping the doors open, renting the space for concerts and special events. My impression was that this was a dying congregation that was a venue that happened to have Sunday worship.

We visited two other congregations in Brighton. St. Peters Anglican Cathedral which we found alive and bustling with families and young adults and One Church on the North End of the city. <https://www.onechurchbrighton.org/>

One Church is a joining of two dying churches (one downtown and one on the North End) that merged and embraced a transformative model that has been copied across the UK. The worship service was dynamic and engaging. The theology was progressive (One Church is a congregational polity of the British Baptist denomination). And the people were from all ages and backgrounds. I have asked Dave Steell their Lead Minister to mentor me in what he is doing and this white paper is my attempt to distill some of the most important factors to their transformation.

1. **Be with people don't do for them.** Connection especially in worship is the glue and the attraction that brings people in the door. Be comfortable to engage in worship with all people. You will see I am already doing this on Sundays; coming out from beyond the pulpit, chairs slightly facing each other. Less concern about staying to the Order of Service and ending "on time". Ed and I have had some conversations on how we can bring more energy to our music ministry, making it livelier and less performative. One of the reasons our Summer services are so well liked is because they have this more informal air about them.

2. **Mission first, all the rest follows.** There are three legs to the stool in the One Church model, Worship, Mission, Fellowship. (actually, there is a fourth 'discipleship' a more Christian concept than we would use). Keep outward focused and people will come in. It's not about driving people to your doors. It's not about having people come to us, it's about us coming to them and letting our works speak. We do some of this already in our Social Justice Ministry. I will be reorganizing Social Justice to put more emphasis on partnering with existing organizations. Have faith they will come.

3. **Marry the Church to the Commercial.** The original proponent of this idea comes from Sam Wells the Rector at St. Martins in the Field off Trafalgar Square in London. Wells wrote several books on how St. Martins decided that the “Benefactor Model” of funding was destined to fail as the bigger givers fall away. (see [A Future That’s Bigger Than the Past: Towards the Renewal of the Church](#)) I think we have seen this here at TUCW. Our founding generation and their children have moved on leaving us with a huge deficit in giving. Likewise, the organ controversy originated in part with large gifts from wealthy individuals. Wells says this is not only unsustainable as religion declines but disempowering to those who don’t have those means. He suggests instead embracing commercial enterprises that do good. Not just using the space for rent but actually running a gift shop, contracting to produce the gifts for sale, publishing books, running cafes, growing and harvesting vegetables geared to both a mass market and higher end restaurants. I can imagine our sanctuary becoming a daytime café, or our lawn a vegetable farm. The point is you can make money while doing good.

4. **Match the person to the need.** Look for those who come to you with a good idea to serve the community and give the idea some fuel so others will join in the idea. Establish a small team to review the ideas and approve them, informing the congregation along the way. I call this “setting free the ministry in you”. One very practical tip Dave had was to sit down with your congregation and solicit commercial ideas that follow our values. Then sift through the brainstorm and look for people who will carry the idea forward. Most importantly, don’t make this a congregational decision. As congregations, he said, we tend towards the negative and it is likely the idea will die in committee so to speak.

5. **Incubate and Experiment.** Projects get tried for a year. Inform people of the project but don’t ask for permission. Create a culture of experimentation and manage people’s expectations that failure is an option and that is ok. Be ready to let go if it fails or let go if it takes flight. I found this last one especially appealing. I took a two-year business school program run through the UUMA on Entrepreneurial Ministry. As Tina Seelig of the Stanford Graduate Business School put it to us “fail fast and frequently”. This sets up a culture of managed expectations and helps to undo our tendency towards perfection. Dave shared several of his colossal failures at One Church and what they learned.

My study of the churches in Brighton contained a cautionary tale. Religious attendance in the US is falling fast. We can continue to offer worship and mission work in the same congregationally centered way. I believe this will not attract young families who both yearn for connection and want to see us doing good in their communities. The UK has come to this reality sooner than we have. Congregations such as St. Martins and One Church have found a way to make religion relevant.

On our last day there, Francis and I visited a beach side sauna (wood fired horse trailers) and we were talking with some thirty something folks about how much Brighton seems to care about its marginalized people. They talked about the Rock Farm which is a project of One Church and how they loved working there and delivering vegetables. I asked if they had ever been to worship at the church. They looked at me quizzically. "Worship?" they said. A light dawned on them, "well of course, it's a church isn't it? But no, we haven't worshipped there. That never occurred to us. But we will."

I welcome a dialog on this model. In the meantime, I am going to put some of these pieces in place. After all, we can at least "give it a go".

John Morehouse

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