

THEOLOGY

The Rise of the 'Umms'

MIKE MOORE

Unlike “Nones” and “Dones,” many church-adjacent Christians want to return to a local body—but they feel stuck.





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For the first time in my nearly 40 years, I do not belong to a church body.

Each Sunday I awake with a longing to gather around song, Scripture, and sacrament. Most of those mornings my wife and I walk to the nursing home to celebrate the Eucharist with a faithful but forgotten few.

This year my wife and I want to plant a church in Chicagoland, but many weeks I am left wondering, *Where do we fit in?*

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Recently, I was lamenting this season with a friend. He echoed my sentiment, “I’m also floating without a church—it isn’t ideal, just the way it is.” Our exchange wasn’t significant, just two friends consoling each other through ecclesial purgatory. Later that week, I heard similar thoughts repeated by my neighbors who are new parents.

Again, this sentiment was echoed by a friend who works at a large Christian nonprofit. Over text messages and phone calls, my old roommate and my denominational executive repeated a similar status. But what really caught my attention is when I heard my students and colleagues at Northern Seminary describe themselves and their congregants in much the same way.

All expressed a strong commitment to Jesus and a desire to be part of the church, but they are not active in a local congregation. This growing segment of believers is what I am labeling the “umms.”



Americans' Return to Church Has Plateaued

KATE SHELLNUTT

Dones, nones, and umms

COVID-19 has been described as a global x-ray, revealing what was hidden in our systems and relationships all along. To be more precise, COVID-19 seems to be an *accelerated* x-ray, revealing and amplifying these hidden truths at an expedited pace.

Acquaintances became strangers as relational ties grew strained. Economic inequalities became glaringly obvious. And with more attention on the news, the nation was gripped by the murder of George Floyd and forced to reckon with the structural racism that too often stays muted in our country.

This same accelerated unveiling has descended on the church, revealing a major decline in congregational involvement.

Over the past few years, comprehensive research has chronicled the rise of the “nones” and “dones.” The nones are ostensibly those who do not self-identity with any religious affiliation, most prevalent among zoomers and millennials. The dones are those exiting established religions, most notably Christianity. For a variety of reasons, they are done with church.

Early research in the pandemic suggested that up to one-third of churchgoers stopped attending church. More recent data shows a majority of churches are below their pre-pandemic attendance. A study released early this year reveals that church attendance is down by 6 percent, from 34 percent in 2019 to 28 percent in 2021.

People end up far from church for lots of reasons, as the nones and dones demonstrate—but the umms represent yet another distinct group worth talking about. I would argue that many of those who have distanced themselves from church attendance, both in-person and online, might be described as umms.

Umms are a different category altogether, and the ones I have spoken with share several common characteristics. They are fond of the local church and were active members in the past. They take Jesus seriously and want to belong to a local congregation. They are not bitter or cynical—in fact, if anything, umms are uncomfortable with not being committed to a church body.

As a result, there is a gap between their desire and their situation. They are umms because they are uncertain and hesitant about how to reengage with the church. And although their individual stories are myriad and diffuse, I would like to present four potential types of umms and their struggles: disoriented, demotivated, discouraged, or disembodied.

Disoriented: Over the last two years, these folks became new parents or had to move back in with their parents. Some lost their jobs and are looking for employment, while others have changed jobs and are still adjusting to a new vocational calling. The helter-skelter rhythms of the pandemic have upset the stability of their lives, which the church used to provide. Thus, amid major life changes, these people are no longer active in church.

Demotivated: These umms are demotivated because of the array of problems they witness in the church. Perhaps they have reexamined their faith after the public downfalls of esteemed pastors and the ongoing sins of racism and sexism, but they by no means want to sever ties. The failures of the church have pushed many umms away from being part of a congregation.

Discouraged: The weight of suffering and collective grief of the last two years has discouraged many umms. They are struggling with their mental health and motivation. Many of their family members, neighbors, friends, and church members have died. The loss of relationships, whether through death, divorce, or distance, has left a residue of malaise that has estranged some umms from the local church.

Disembodied: Another sentiment I've often heard from umms is that online worship does not work for them. Early COVID-19 research suggested that

Sunday-centric churches struggled to retain large swaths of their parishioners. These umms grew more removed from their churches as the services went digital—and when some congregations began to regather in person, they did not return.

Many umms have been displaced physically and relationally, uprooted from place and people. They are wandering around, looking for another church to call home. I spoke with 20 or so friends and acquaintances who would classify as umms about what their reentry into the church might look like.

It turns out that for many, it will most likely *not* be through a Sunday morning worship service. In this, some umms are similar to the dones and nones, who have no interest in walking into a church service on the Lord's Day.

For churches who have centered their ministries around Sunday morning worship services, this presents a problem. If Sunday morning is not the on-ramp to community and pastoral care it once was for some people, this leaves us with two important questions: What are Sunday-centered churches to do? What are umms to do?



Here's Who Stopped Going to Church During the Pandemic

WENDY WANG AND ALYSSE ELHAGE

Reimagining God's home

As the oft-quoted poet Robert Frost mused, “Home is the place where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in.” *Home* is a tremendously weighty word—filled with smells and sounds and memories of pain and hope.

Home is also a golden thread weaved throughout the biblical narrative. As theologian Douglas Meeks comments in his book *God the Economist*, God is “incessantly seeking to create a home, a household, in which God’s creatures can live abundantly.”

If my instincts are right and Sunday morning is no longer the primary entry point for some believers, then we need to further reflect on the idea of a “church home.” Specifically, we must reconsider the physical places where we gather.

I would like to suggest that rediscovering the biblical theme of home can help us interpret the current social architecture of the church, diagnose its challenges and limitations, and provide a faithful way forward for church leaders and umms alike.

In the biblical story, God’s home is the place where he dwells with his people—functioning as the earthly coordinates of God’s presence.

In the beginning, God's home was a *plot* of land in the Garden of Eden, where God walked with Adam and Eve in the bliss of a pre-fall abode. Next, God instructed Israel to build a mobile home during the Exodus called the tabernacle—a *property* that served as a portable “sanctuary” and dwelling for the Lord (Ex. 25:8).

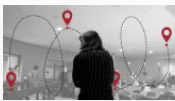
After David's rule, his son Solomon built a stationary home called the temple—the *place* where God would dwell with his chosen people. Yahweh promised that in the temple, “I will live among the Israelites and will not abandon my people Israel” (1 Kings 6:13).

But subsequent generations drifted into sin—and despite prophetic warnings, the temple was destroyed and Israel was exiled. Although the temple was rebuilt during the ministry of Ezra and Nehemiah, it never returned to its former glory. Instead, for the next four centuries or so, Israel continued to be occupied by foreign powers, which indicated the absence of God's presence.

Then, in the first century, the Messiah arrived, and suddenly God “made his dwelling among us” (John 1:14). In one *person*, Jesus, the fullness of God came to dwell! Jesus became God's new temple, the very coordinates of God's presence, the exact place where heaven and earth met.

Then, after Jesus' crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension, the Holy Spirit descended on the disciples on the Day of Pentecost. And from then on, it would be the *people* of God, the church, with whom God would make his home.

All of this is good news for umms.



Christians Are Going Back to Church—But Maybe Not the Same One

MELISSA MORGAN KELLEY

Finding home again

Although my wife and I have not been part of a formal church for the last few months, we still gather with friends every Monday night to eat, pray, and meditate on Scripture. We have a loose collection of friends with whom we fast every Wednesday. A small group of mentors have joined us on a Zoom call once a month to pray for our future.

None of these are formally connected to an organized church, but they are just a few examples of how umms might navigate this liminal time—finding unique ways of “not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another” (Heb. 10:25).

Remember, our distancing does not have to be permanent. As I noted earlier,

most umms grieve the loss of Christian community, and many look forward to returning to a church body. And while it may be tempting to remain at a distance and be critical of the church, like so many, we must remember that the church—with all its beauty and blemishes—includes umms!

So, whenever you are ready to sink your roots into a local church once again, first consider the people in your life who are already active in their churches. Approach them in their homes and beyond—or better yet, invite them around your table. Such people can act as the front doors of the church and can pray alongside you as you seek to reassimilate.

If you are “cold-calling” churches, prioritize ones near your home that emphasize a mission beyond Sunday gatherings. Whether it be the local laundromat or food pantry, the sidewalk or a PTO meeting, neighborhood communities and public facilities can become unconventional places for umms, dones, and nones to encounter God’s people.

Lastly, in this time of displacement, we can cultivate the virtues of courage and long-suffering that have marked believers for generations.

In fact, this uncertain time for umms corresponds with the Lenten season of prayer and fasting. There is much to lament in being displaced, so we join the global church in the cacophony of prayers for help. In our fasting, we physically feel the pangs of being distanced from fellowship.

When Christian practices like these are done in community, they become a corporate way to discern and engage with what God is doing in the world. These rituals of faith open us to the presence of Jesus in the intimate confines of our home.

One of the many reasons my wife and I want to plant a church is because it is the very place to foster such virtues and practices! The church gathers to announce that even in the midst of feeling disoriented, demotivated, discouraged, and disembodied, God has not abandoned us.

In a season that is marked by so much death and distance, we confess our need for an in-breaking of the Spirit. My hope for the umms is that our love for and wonder of the triune God will not grow stagnant—and that in years to come, we will yet be able to testify, “Great is Thy faithfulness.”

And for pastors who want to reach the umms in their areas, it helps to think beyond the current social architecture of church (i.e., Sunday service in a building). Many pastors are already doing this, but for those who aren't, try to envision unique ways for “church” to happen in the homes of your congregation during the week—where *people* become the primary entry points for ministry.

I am not suggesting pastors sell their buildings or cancel Sunday worship. Buildings are incredible resources and Sunday gatherings facilitate large-scale celebrations of people marked by resurrection hope. But when Sunday gatherings are the *only* entry point to the church, we will most certainly miss many of the umms, nones, and dones in our midst.

To fully address the realities highlighted and amplified by the ongoing pandemic, the church and its pastors must seek to recover a social architecture that centers on *people* rather than *properties*.

Perhaps pastors and leaders could mark on a map the homes of their church members and consider them extensions of their sanctuaries—encouraging them to invite neighbors over for dinner. Many umms, dones, and nones may not join your worship service on a Sunday morning, but they might enjoy a BBQ on a Saturday afternoon in one of your parishioners' backyards.

How would that invigorate your church's mission or realign your resources?

Now I know that for my pastoral colleagues, this could sound like yet another weighty task—in addition to the mask mandates, budget gaps, funerals, and chaos of coronavirus church life you are already navigating.

But hear these words from Jesus: “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest” (Matt. 11:28). Jesus intends for us to receive rest from him, and our physical homes are one of the sacred places we do that—practicing both sabbath and hospitality with boundaries.

I also recognize that for some, physical homes are not an option because of safety, size, or cultural norms. Regardless, my proposal remains: The social architecture of the church can and should extend beyond buildings and into the social spaces wherever God’s people dwell.

All of us, the *people* of God, are constituted by the *person* of Jesus. As Jesus extended God’s presence beyond the temple and into the homes of Simon and Andrew, Mary and Martha, Zacchaeus and Jairus—he still knocks on our doors today. May the King of glory come in and make himself at home.

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TYLER J. VANDERWEELE AND BRENDAN CASE

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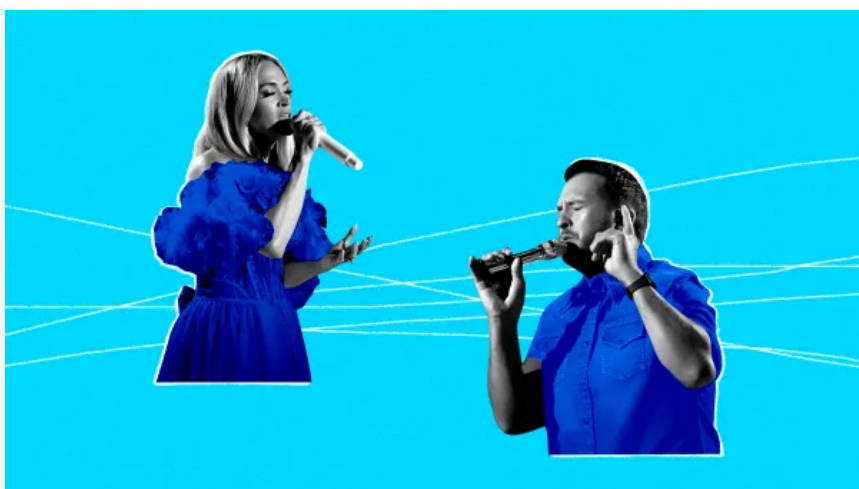


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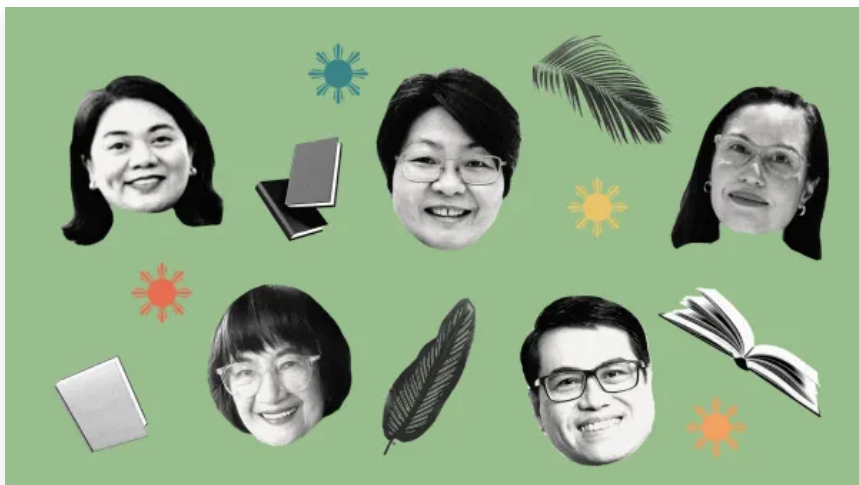
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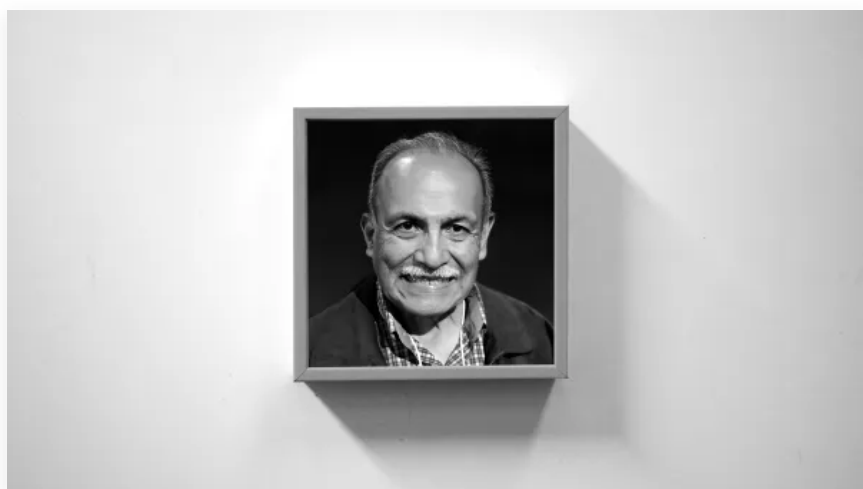
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