

A church for noise refugees

A short word to pastors

**John Mark
Comer**

“Religion has accepted the monstrous heresy that noise, size, activity, and bluster make a church dear to God ... God says, ‘Be still, and know that I am God,’ and still He says it, as if He means to tell us that our strength and safety lie not in noise but in silence.”

—A.W. Tozer¹

“Americans in general have little tolerance for a centering way of life that is submissive to the conditions in which growth takes place: quiet, obscure, patient, not subject to human control and management. The church is uneasy in these conditions. Typically, in the name of ‘relevance,’ it adapts itself to the prevailing American culture and is soon indistinguishable from that culture: talkative, noisy, busy, controlling, image-conscious.”

—Eugene Peterson²

“The flame of love, when it’s the most vehement, is the most quiet.”

—Saint John of the Cross³

Down the road from my house is a small meditation studio. On Sunday mornings, it is absolutely packed out — people sitting on the floor, up against the walls. The clientele is incredibly eclectic — college students de-stressing from all those late nights, twentysomething bohemians on the way to brunch, young moms getting a respite from their kids, middle-aged Angelenos in athleisure just enjoying their weekend. They all pay good money to just ... sit together, in silence — their attention on their breath, and a soft voice offering guidance to their mind.

No fanfare, just quiet.

Across the street is a little country church, the only church for miles. I visited recently; there was a stage, and a band, and six people in attendance. Yes, six. All lovely, but, to put it mildly, the contrast was striking.

There was a time, not long ago, when people searching for peace and

quiet would have graced the doors of a church and found inside the time, space, and solace they so desperately craved. Not today: Our churches, with a few exceptions, are noisy, busy, talkative affairs. While a growing number of our nonreligious neighbors spend Sunday mornings sitting cross-legged at the meditation studio, or on docent walks at the local nature preserve, or just reading a novel on the couch, we gather people in front of stages, with rock bands, and offer them a ninety-minute stream of nonstop sound. Not all bad: everything has a place. Yet I fear we're guilty of A.W. Tozer's sharp critique of the church (written in the 1940s): We have "accepted the monstrous heresy that noise, size, activity and bluster make a church dear to God."

Of course, this problem is felt most acutely in evangelicalism.⁴ Other streams of the church prefer a quieter expression of worship. Our Catholic siblings still offer open, quiet churches, available throughout the weekdays for silent meditation. (An idea other churches could easily emulate.) Votive candles and empty pews await any who want to stop in on their way to or from work, or as they go about their day. I recently spent four days down in Orange County at a Norbertine monastery that doubles as a church; the sanctuary opens at 5:30am for morning prayer and stays open until 9pm. Every single time I stepped into the church to pray, no matter the time of day, **(1)** it was quiet, and **(2)** there were people just sitting there in contemplation.

Interesting: While mainline, theologically liberal churches continue to fade away, older, more liturgical streams of the church that are still orthodox are experiencing a renewal. The Anglican church is rapidly growing in the US (populated mostly by ex-evangelical megachurch members); the Orthodox, long a tiny sliver of the demographic pie in the West, is seeing unprecedented growth (also, mostly from people from evangelical backgrounds); and Catholics?

Catholics are having a *moment*.

Arguably, for the first time in US history, the Catholic stream of the church is growing *faster* than the evangelical stream. If this is true (as you can imagine, it's debated), it's monumental; it's *never* happened in two hundred and fifty years of American life. In fact, there's long been an anti-catholic bias in the US.⁵ The data is open to interpretation, but what's very clear is: the Catholic surge is driven by Gen Z conversions, *not transfer growth*. A recent WSJ article entitled "Young New Yorkers Have a New Hot Spot: Sunday Mass," points out church attendance is higher among Gen Z than Millennials and Gen X, and even higher than Boomers.⁶

And this is in *New York* — urban, secular, progressive, busy.

Yet if you walk into Saint Joseph's Church in Greenwich Village a few minutes before daily Mass, you're likely to see a room of twentysomethings, more than a few wearing head coverings, sitting in silence, just adoring the person of Christ.

Who would've thought?

There are various theories for the uptick among Catholics, Orthodox, and other, older streams of the church. Here's the one I'm paying the most attention to: It's that traditional models of worship are *quieter* than more modern ones. In survey after survey, when asked why they chose the Catholic tradition over a Protestant church, many young people's answer essentially boils down to, "I just wanted a church that was quiet."

Years ago, a dear friend of mine who was raised in a staunchly evangelical

home, to the horror of his parents, left our church to join the local Catholic parish. It always stings when a friend leaves your church, so I had to ask, “Why?”

He gave two salient reasons: **(1)** He wanted to work on becoming a better person. And **(2)** our church was really loud, and he craved quiet.

I remember our conversation vividly, sitting outside at a café table on 23rd Street in Portland, a sinking feeling in my chest, *not* because he was leaving our church, but because of *why* — something about our church made him feel he had to look elsewhere to **(1)** grow into spiritual maturity, and **(2)** come to quiet before God.

That moment has stayed with me. In hindsight, it was one of a few key inflection points in my journey that set my mind on a different trajectory for the development of my pastoral imagination — my dreams for what the church could, and even *should*, be.

The broad stream of evangelicalism in America and Britain (and, by extension of influence, the wider West) has been profoundly shaped by its history of revivals, most notably the Great Awakenings.⁷ I thank God for these historic movements; they shaped the world I grew up in, and they shaped *me*. But “revival” is not the same thing as “revivalism.” The former is a move of the Spirit of God; the latter, a strategy, an atmosphere in a room, a mood. And the revivalism of the evangelical tradition has created a church culture designed to *stir people up*, to get their blood pumping and adrenaline flowing, to set their hearts afire.

And there’s certainly a time and place for this. “*Did not our hearts burn within us?*”⁸

This approach made perfect sense in the Great Awakenings of the 1700s and 1800s (or even in the charismatic renewal of the 1980s), when the pressing pastoral challenge was *apathy*, or what the early revivalists called “dead orthodoxy” — scores of people who were nominally Christian, who believed in all the basic tenets of the faith, but remained unmoved to any kind of serious devotion.

But what about now? When our driving problem seems to be *anxiety*? When burnout has become a rite of passage, just like graduation or marriage?⁹ When most people barely sleep six hours a night? When vast, multinational corporations, with more power and wealth than any empire in history, are working tirelessly to capture and monetize our attention, at any price? When we’re facing an epidemic of mental illness?

I can’t help but wonder if we’re missing the chance of a lifetime here.

My fellow pastors, let me tell you what you *already* know, but possibly haven’t thought deeply about the implications of yet:

There is a deep yearning in our time for quiet in a world of noise.

For peace in an age of anxiety.

For a slower, simpler life in a culture of speed and complexity.

The modern soul is overworked, overstressed, and overstimulated; a beleaguered group of noise refugees stumbles into our churches on Sundays, exhausted by the relentless pace and auditory oppression of the world.

What if the role of pastors in our time isn't to ramp people up, but to calm people down?

Not to stimulate people's (already maxed out) nervous systems, but to emotionally regulate them?

During the Great Awakening, if you were to attend a Wesleyan camp meeting, sawdust floors and all, you would have seen brother Charles up there leading the group in a long time of boisterous singing. Of course, the loudest sound would have been of the *people* singing, not the band; there was no sound system, much less electric guitar. But you would have likely gotten a bit riled up. Then brother John would have done everything in his power to speak the truth of God from the heart. It would have been a noisy, emotive time. I imagine it was wonderful.

But then you would have returned home, and your *life* would have been profoundly quiet and slow. You likely lived on a small family farm, up a dirt road, with no electricity. Outside of church, the only music you heard was music you made. If you wanted to learn, there were no podcasts or websites, only books. You would have spent hours every day alone, or with your immediate family, just working the soil. You probably slept nine to eleven hours a night. You lived in tune with nature, with its rhythms of sleeping and waking, seedtime and harvest, summer and winter. The writings of Wendell Berry would have read like an exercise in naming the obvious. Quiet, solitude, reflection — all of this was built into your daily routine. Handed to you, in a sense, by the cultural architecture of the era.

Not so today: we arrive at church after driving on noisy, four-lane freeways, our bodies sleep-deprived and over-stressed, our schedules maxed out; airplanes drone overhead as we walk across the parking lot

and into the church auditorium, where the stage and band awaits; our smartphones ping alerts throughout the gathering, the church having largely accepted the digital “revolution” uncritically, posting QR stickers to the back of chairs and promoting their social media account,¹⁰ rather than calling for any kind of digital denial. Sunday mornings often find us absolutely exhausted and frayed. And yet: our church services have gotten *louder*, not quieter, than the Wesley brothers’ era.

We rarely hear *anyone* singing anymore; our voices are all drowned out by the band.

Your mind is likely racing forward to the anxiety-inducing implications of what I’m saying here: *Do I need to fire the band? Tear down our theater-style auditorium? Act like I’m an introvert? Abandon my tradition?*

Hold those questions at bay; just sit with the anxiety for a few pages longer.

As I think about how to best pastor in the digital age — with the specter of AI looming before us — I wonder if one of the most precious gifts we could offer our people, and the world itself, would be a kind of shelter and refuge from the noise; a time and space, each week, to find stillness and peace, for people to regather their scattered senses, and find Sabbath rest in God.

Every word in that last sentence is important: not just “find stillness and peace,” but find stillness and peace and rest *in God* — through union with the Father and Son and Holy Spirit.

Mindfulness, which only a few decades ago was only found in remote monasteries in Burma and Thailand, is now mainstream — secularized, repackaged for a monthly fee, and ubiquitous. Our kids learn it in second

grade at their elementary school. And for good reason: people yearn for a way to quiet the roar of their own mind. For an aid to emotional regulation in a disturbed and disturbing time.

Yet we come to church, and we get ninety minutes of non-stop noise.

It doesn't have to be this way.

Our Sunday liturgy is *far* more flexible than many of us realize. Read the New Testament; there's no order of service. The early church didn't even have *sermons*.¹¹ Many of us inherited a model of church that was fairly pre-set: a call to worship, four songs with a band, a few community announcements, a forty-minute sermon, possibly the Eucharist, and then a closing song before we send people back to their busy lives.

Not bad.

That may be *exactly* how you should do it, but it's good for us all to remember: it's not the way it's always been.

It's not the way it has to be.

It's not how church is done by other traditions around the world.

It's not how it was done in previous eras here in the West.

And it's certainly not the shape of the churches we read about on the pages of the New Testament.¹²

The Apostle Paul's church plants were likely around forty people; they gathered in homes, around a shared meal; they had an open time of

waiting on God for prophetic words and manifestations of the Holy Spirit. Following Paul's template, the Quakers just sat in silence until a member felt so moved. The Orthodox follow a liturgy that's sixteen hundred years old and don't have full-length sermons, just short homilies, which are one of many pieces in their gatherings. Catholics have the Mass. Some traditions barely sing at all; others, like the charismatic stream, sing for hours.

My point is: liturgy is flexible.

There's no one-size-fits-all approach, much less a fixed rule.

There is no template in the New Testament for exactly how we *should* "do church." Hints, glimpses, like in Corinthians and Acts, yes. But certainly not a prescribed order of service. The intentional ambiguity of Scripture is an extraordinary gift, one that keeps on giving; it allows the church to flourish and thrive in "every tribe, tongue, and nation." To iterate and grow and take on a thousand different forms in countless cultural contexts, all while staying true to the New Testament's vision of a family following Jesus together.

Five hundred years ago, in the years before the Protestant Reformation, there was no congregational singing, no sermons, and the Mass was said in Latin, which nobody spoke. Until the Reformers thought bold, new, creative ideas about how Sunday should go — introducing the reading of Scripture in the people's native language, centering expository preaching, and singing hymns, rich in theology, but set to popular tunes; even redesigning the buildings themselves, famously replacing the altar with the pulpit.

Most of us still follow the template the Reformers created. But it's

been half a millennium since Luther nailed his thoughts to the door in Wittenberg, and *so* much has changed. The liturgies that served the Reformers' purposes may not be the liturgies that serve ours. We are living through a key time of radical social upheaval and change, and I believe that it, too, calls for bold, new creative forms.

Of course, by "new," I actually mean *old*. Cards on the table: I believe the future is ancient, so I'm more interested in what I can learn from church history than the latest fad, but I deeply believe that our cultural moment calls for a new (or renewed) practice of quiet.

I dream of a church for noise refugees: a place where the "weary and heavy laden" can find rest in the gentle embrace of Jesus; find peace in the "God of peace"; where we can keep Sabbath *together*; where participating in church slows my life down, not speeds it up. A place where people can find shelter from all the noise, where people can *breathe*. A church that is more than just a place to decompress, but a place to experience God, to be enfolded into the vast tranquility of the Trinity, to touch the "sea of glass"¹³ around the throne, to sink into the vast abyss of compassionate love that is over and under and in all creation.

I love the global, historic church, and I celebrate the wide gamut of Christian spirituality, including my more boisterous, emotionally energized brothers and sisters in Christ. There's no one model or style of church I'm trying to advocate for here. Different personality profiles will be drawn to different types of churches, and that's not bad at all. I have my convictions, certainly, and our church has a point of view on Sundays, but I've also been around long enough to realize there's no "right way."

God has called each of us from within a tradition, or stream of the wider church — Presbyterian or Lutheran or Pentecostal or

nondenominational charismatic or Anglican or Catholic or Orthodox, and so many others. Every branch of the church has its strengths and weaknesses, its spiritual legacy, its unique charism, and its shadow. As pastors, it's important to honor our spiritual ancestry. Churches are not whiteboards upon which we impose our ideas or theories; they are living, breathing bodies, in families, with legacies.

So, here's my question: What can you do inside your stream or church tradition to pastor your flock into the quiet?

Without blowing up your church, what can you do to gently lead your people in the direction of a quieter, more peaceful spirituality?

How could you and I curate moments of silence, reflection, and communion with God for those we shepherd and so deeply love?

We're all a bit allergic to the word "attractional" when applied to church, but a church for noise refugees could become one of the most attractive things in the world.

The law of supply and demand is a well-known truism: Luxury is a function of scarcity. "Make Sunday non-downloadable" is timely advice.¹⁴ As noise and distraction eat quiet alive, and technologies like AI continue to profoundly reshape the world as we know it, whatever is non-downloadable will become most valuable. What happens in our churches that people *can't* download or stream or watch on the internet or glance at in their social feed? (Hint: not music and sermons.)

Here's a few ideas to spark your pastoral imagination ...

(Disclaimer: none of the following ideas are theory; every one has been

road-tested in our church. I won't get into the specifics of how we do church, which is fairly experimental, but most of these ideas could be done in churches of almost any shape or size. My point is: I'm offering this list from a real-life community, not just tossing ideas into the air.)

#1 Hold silence

Why not have a moment or two where you just invite people to be quiet and still before God?

You could do this before or after the sermon, or at the beginning or end of the service, or in between songs. Anywhere, really.

It's the easiest thing you could possibly do.

You already have a minute or two to "pass the peace" (or, in less formal churches, "say hi to your neighbor"), where all the extroverts exult, and we introverts grind it out through a mild panic attack. (Which, for the record, I'm all for.¹⁵)

Why not offset it with a minute or two of silence?

Even a few *moments* would be a gift. Remember: silence is not an absence, but a *presence*. A portal to communion with God, an opening to the Kingdom of the heavens.

As Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger (later named Pope Benedict XVI) urged pastors,

"We should expect the liturgy to give us a positive stillness

that will restore us ... For silence to be fruitful. ... it must not be just a pause in the action of the liturgy. No, it must be an integral part ... this silence is not just a period of waiting ... Shared silence becomes shared prayer.”¹⁶

I begin and end my teachings with at least a full minute of silence; just for people to come to quiet before God, to receive his love, and give it back in return; to process all the words I just poured into their brain, and discern what God may be saying to them, personally; and to bookend my many words (which always contain a modicum of error, never pure truth) with a quiet that is pregnant with the mercy of God.

So. Simple.

A pastor I know started offering a minute of silence in their church’s weekly gatherings, just a few hundred people, standing before God, in the quiet. He regularly has congregants say it’s their favorite moment every Sunday.

He’s a fairly good preacher and tries not to take it personally ...

#2 Turn down the volume

Literally. Turn it down. Let my people *sing!* Take a Sunday off from the band or strip it down to the bare essentials.

Again, this is *easier*, not harder. Less work, not more.

And my prediction? A shocking number of people in your existing

church will love it.

I understand I'm speaking to a specific stream of the church here (the one I came up in), not all of you. (My liturgical Anglican friends are rolling their eyes at me right now.) But it's a wide stream, and a loud one.

Could it be time to change?

I've recently taken to leading worship acapella. Yes, me. (And no, I do not have a good voice, sadly.) I just returned from leading a four-day retreat in which I gave seven — yes, seven — new teachings, which I thought were pretty good. But you know what the overwhelming highlight of the retreat was for most people? — the singing. A woman came to me in tears, “That’s the first time in years I’ve been able to hear my own voice in worship.”

I'm just old enough to remember a time, early in the contemporary worship movement, when older, more established churches put on a “traditional” service, with robes and hymns, and a “contemporary” service, with t-shirts and acoustic guitars.

I wonder if soon we'll have to repeat that playbook; with Millennials singing Coldplay-esque rock ballads, and Gen Alpha sitting in silence, with guided prayers and *Lectio Divina*.

#3 Pray the Psalms

The Psalms are our legacy; the prayerbook of the people of God, for every stream of the church. And they are poetry; you can't speed-read them, much less speed-*pray* them.

You could guide your church in slowly praying a psalm every Sunday, pausing at moments to “selah,” and praying the inspired words back to heaven. Take your time. Discipline yourself to read, *slowly*. Give room for people to encounter God.

There is a living tradition of praying the psalms in Sunday worship that goes all the way back to the first century, and before that, to sabbath in the synagogue; let’s not be the generation to break that chain.

#4 Read Scripture

This is already done in the more formal, liturgical traditions, but many of us could borrow a page from that tradition, as it’s an ancient one, dating all the way back to Paul and Timothy: “Give your attention to the public reading of Scripture.”¹⁷ Take about simple: you read a passage of Scripture, and then follow it up with a few moments for quiet reflection.

In our little community, we aim to read (or better said: pray) a psalm, a selection from the New Testament, and a passage from the Gospels, every Sunday, to immerse our minds and imaginations in the person of Christ and our hearts in God.

You can do this as your call to worship, in between songs, before the sermon, almost anywhere; again, it’s the easiest thing in the world to do.

This may sound like I’m advocating for a more liturgical style of church. I’m not, actually. A liturgical church may lack the rock band of a nondenominational megachurch, but, with much respect to my brothers and sisters from the magisterial tradition, it can also be fairly left-brained,

dry, and rote. What I'm really advocating for here is a church that is more experiential. A church with a contemplative heart.

This can be done in a congregation with forty people, four hundred, or four thousand; it can be done in a Cathedral, a suburban office park, or a living room; in a church with formal liturgical prayers or extemporaneous sermons.

I'm not advocating for any particular model of church, just for a community that is saturated in Scripture, and, well, quiet.

#5 Talk quieter

There's a maxim all preachers should be sobered by: "A truth shouted is a lie."

I get that every preacher has their own style, and the church should look and feel totally different in different cultural contexts and streams of the church. For example, I think of the gift of preaching in the Black Church in the US and the Pentecostal church around the world, where the poetry and emotional arc of a sermon is like a communal choreography of joy, utterly beautiful. But the yell-y style of preaching, so common in America, feels wildly out of place to me, culturally. It's often laced with a subtle undercurrent of anger, or a performative kind of pseudo-joy. It just doesn't feel *real*, to me.

Do any of us talk like that *off* stage?

Again, if your goal in preaching is to *stir people up*, then okay; but what if it's to ground and center people in the God of Peace? Then you may opt to dial it back a few notches.

I'm not saying be boring or dull, but remember: emotional intensity is *not* the same thing as spiritual power. Jesus was "gentle and humble," and Paul was "weak," but both were *powerful* preachers. Paul even said, "My message and my preaching were *not* with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power."¹⁸

I can only speak from personal experience here, but my teaching style has evolved significantly over the last decade. Maybe I've just gotten older, but I don't think so; it feels like my body responding to the cultural air. My preaching is much quieter, calmer, slower. I suppose it's mirrored the arc of my spiritual journey, and that's my story, not yours. But to me, it just feels right.

#6 Do everything you can to get people off their phones

When Muslims attend their local mosque, there are cubbies all outside the main room for their shoes. It's considered totally inappropriate to wear your shoes to prayer.

What if we did the same, but for phones?

When I visit churches, I'm regularly asked to pull out my phone to sign up for an event or give or answer a survey or follow them on social media, but on Sundays, I don't have my phone; I practice a digital Sabbath

every week. Our whole family does, teenage kids included. Shouldn't the church *help* me with this, and not hinder me? Shouldn't it *lead* me? Isn't that, by definition, the role of a pastor? To lead, not to follow? To help me go where I would not go on my own? To comfort me, yes, but also to call me up?

What about, instead of offering public Wi-Fi in your auditorium, you installed a cell phone dampener, like they do in the customs area of an airport or a growing number of schools?

Just a playful thought ...¹⁹

In our church's Rule of Life, a full digital Sabbath is "highly encouraged, but optional," but a phone-free gathering is not optional. We ask the church to leave their phones behind for our Sunday gatherings (which, by the way, are three hours long).

Sinners are most welcome; screens are not.²⁰

#7 Offer guided prayer meditations

I chatted recently to a church planter in a global city; he was planting out of an internationally known church with a clear template for how to do Sundays, but, after surveying people in the city, the *number one* question he got from Christians was, "Is it okay to meditate?" He realized: people were craving meditation; they wanted someone to help them quiet their mind and heart before God. He was also well-versed in the ancient *Christian* origins of meditation, and its potency in prayer.

So, they planted a church model with shorter sermons, which all end with an eight-minute guided prayer meditation. Brilliant. And, again, *so* simple. My friends at The Way Church in Vancouver, BC end their Sunday sermons with a few guided reflection questions, beginning with: *God, what did I most need to hear this morning?* After each question, there's a long pause, for people to quietly ponder. It only takes a few minutes, but makes a world of difference.

In our church, after an opening liturgy and short time of acapella singing, we offer a guided meditation. We begin with a short breathing exercise, just trying to help people quiet down and become present to their bodies and the moment, all with the aim of becoming present to God. It changes week to week, but usually it's just an imaginative reading of a Gospel story, placing ourselves in the scene. Last week was Jesus coming to Jericho and calling to Zacchaeus in the tree. We all imagined ourselves in that tree, Jesus looking up and calling our name.

When Jesus looked at me, my heart melted.

For me personally, the guided prayer meditation is the highlight of our Sunday meeting, and, frequently, the most direct encounter I have with God all week.

So. Easy.

#8 Offer people take-home reflection questions

Because I don't believe people change simply by hearing sermons, but through a slow, complex process of teaching and practice and healing and community and grace, I will try to always end any sermon with some practical next steps. Sometimes that's a practice or discipline, like Sabbath or a prayer exercise. But other times, I simply print out a one-to two-page reflection for them to take home, with a few thoughtful questions for them to pray over and journal, should they so choose.

I think of it like a soft invitation to the *eremos*, and a little map for the path in.

#9 Offer silent retreats

Silent retreats are a time-tested way of getting people out of the city and into the quiet, in a way they can handle, all with minimal effort from a church leader.

You need a local monastery or retreat center, but it's likely you have one. For many, the jump from their normal, noisy life to solo retreat is too extreme; a guided silent retreat for twenty or thirty people at a time can build a bridge to a life of retreat and return.

Strangely, it can also build community.²¹

#10 Build a poustinia

“*Poustinia*” is the Russian word for *eremos*, or desert, but in the Eastern Orthodox stream of the church, it’s come to mean a small, one-room hermitage on the edge of a city or out in nature, that is set aside for prayer and open to members of the community. (I say more about *poustinias* in the book.)

As a born and raised Californian and urban church planter, I’m painfully aware of how difficult or even impossible it is for new churches to ever buy or build a facility. But many could buy an acre or two outside the city and stand up a little prefab cabin for people to go and pray.

Can you imagine the gift this could be to your community?

A member in your church may already have the land; you just need to go do it.

#11 Run the Solitude Practice from Practicing the Way

We’ve created a Practice that roughly follows the four chapters of *Into the quiet*, but also includes a companion guide with discussion questions and weekly spiritual exercises to put it all into practice.

The Solitude Practice is completely free and designed to be done in community, either in small groups or as a one-time course or class. You could also preach a sermon series version of it quite easily.

Visit practictheway.org/solitude to learn more.

#12 Open a prayer room

A growing number of churches are offering a small, quiet prayer room that is open throughout the week (sometimes, 24-7) to their church. Usually it's just a small storage room or spare classroom that's repurposed into a space that's dedicated to prayer. At Bridgetown Church in Portland, OR, they created a lovely basement room, with couches, soft lighting, art, prayer boards, and more. It's available for quiet prayer, anytime.

—

This is just a short list; there are *so many* more ideas we could name — keeping Lent, creating a digital rule of life for your church, doing an annual digital detox, etc.

None of the ideas above are theory; I've seen every single one effectively used in real-life communities, and we do pretty much all of them at our little church plant (minus the cell phone dampener. Don't need it; we don't have our phones).

And again: most of the ideas above are *less* work than a traditional Sunday service, not more.

Still, they may feel scary to you, threatening to what you know. Or worse: like a passive-aggressive indictment of what you currently do.

Pastor, that is *not* my heart, not remotely.

Please hear me: *you do not need to be afraid.*

Of course, you may find these ideas to be silly, or too extreme, or just not right for your community. I get it. I'm just trying to spark your imagination. Please, *go*, dream with the Spirit of God, imagine what this could look like in your church, and your place in the world.

Our community is still getting started, so it's easy for us to try new things, but what could *you* do? In your community?

What creative ideas do you have?

What small, easily doable steps could you take?

What practice do you see in the global or historic church that would work in your church?

Why not just *try* it?

—

One final word, that you already know, but is crucial to remember: this has to start at the “top.”

“As the leaders go, so goes the church,” as brother Pete so wisely says.²² Solitude, silence, and stillness aren’t just spiritual practices to habituate into our busy pastoral schedules, but a calm zone deep within our hearts, where our call is to carry the peace of God into every room we enter.

When Jesus entered the room after his resurrection, he carried the atmosphere of heaven in his body; his first words to the disciples were, “Peace be with you.”²³

When we enter a room, can we say the same?

Do we carry the peace of heaven everywhere we go? So much so that we have an excess to *share* with the anxious and afraid?

Start by living the quiet in your own life. Go on retreat. Take a digital Sabbath. Pray contemplatively. Pause for two minutes of silence before you open your email. Pause for ten seconds before you lead a public prayer. And love God when nobody is watching. Cultivate a rich, hidden life with the Father.

Then do this with your leadership team. Begin your meetings with a few minutes of quiet waiting. Let silence bookend all your words. Before you make a key decision, stop, still yourselves, wait, listen for God. If you can’t get to a consensus, wait. Return to prayer. Go on retreat, together. Schedule a regular team solitude day (ours is quarterly), make digital communication that day *anathema*.

Then, let it spread to the church. After all, this stuff is “caught more than

taught,” and, especially in this case, actions speak far louder than words.

The prophet Isaiah said of the coming Messiah Jesus that he would be “a shelter and shade from the heat of the day, and a refuge and hiding place from the storm and rain.”²⁴ Imagine hearing that as an ancient Israelite, living in the open desert, the sun beating down on your neck, and then hearing that God is a *shelter and shade*.

In our time, what if we were a shelter from the noise? A shade from the incessant assault of sound and stimulation? A place of freedom for those coming out of slavery to what Robert Sarah called “the dictatorship of noise”?²⁵

A church for noise refugees.

Notes

1. From *The Pursuit of God*. Interesting, some versions have “make a man dear to God,” but others, such as Treasures from Tozer, have “church dear to God,” which I used here due to our subject material. “Treasures from Tozer,” Grace Gems, https://www.gracegems.org/29/treasures_from_tozer.htm.
2. Eugene Peterson, *Practice Resurrection: A Conversation on Growing Up in Christ* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2010), 6.
3. This is actually a summary of Saint John’s book *The Living Flame of Love* that’s used by many, including my friend Strahan in his lovely substack article: <https://commonerscommunion.substack.com/p/awakening-quiet-fire>
4. I know this label has almost completely lost any coherent meaning; I’m using it here in the broadest sense of Protestant churches that are still theologically orthodox and vibrant.
5. As I understand it, much of the reason for this is political, more than religious. It wasn’t until after WW2 that Catholics firmly got behind democracy, after the fallout of Mussolini in Italy and Franco in Spain. Prior to that, European Catholics were wary of democracy due to, among other things, the militant atheism of the French Revolution. American Christians feared a return to any form of monarchy, leading to a wary eye on the Catholic church.
6. Anvee Butani, “Young New Yorkers Have a New Hot Spot: Sunday Mass,” Wall Street Journal, https://www.wsj.com/us-news/young-new-yorkers-have-a-new-hot-spot-sunday-mass-b96e1449?st=L86n1T&reflink=article_email_share.
7. While there are countless stories of renewal and sweeping moves of God down through church history, the paradigm of

“revival” is uniquely modern and American/British; that is, an outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon the church, resulting in waves of conversions to the faith and newfound devotion from those previously apathetic or dull, often brought on by travailing prayer. It’s an open question right now whether or not revival is a Christendom concept, and if it’s appropriate to carry that paradigm forward into our highly secular and Post-Christian era; but whatever your point of view is on that debate, my argument (here) is that *revivalism* is the wrong energy for our supercharged time.

8. Luke 24:32

9. See the infamous article from Anne Helen Peterson, “How Millennials Became The Burnout Generation,” *Buzz Feed News*, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/annehelenpetersen/millennials-burnout-generation-debt-work>.

10. But who says a church needs to have a social media account?

11. In the sense of a weekly forty-minute Bible teaching. They had lots and lots of preaching and teaching, but the early data would say it was mostly done outside the Sunday meal. It seems that long-form preaching didn’t really become normative until the fourth century. For more, I *highly* recommend *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church* by Alan Kreider.

12. I’d highly recommend reading *Paul’s Idea of Community* by Robert Banks for a good scholarly overview. At the end of the book is a fictional story of two friends visiting Aquilla and Priscilla’s house church in Rome, very fun way to get your head around it.

13. Revelation 4:6 and 15:2, naming the atmosphere around God’s throne.

- 14.** Carey Nieuwhof, *AI and the Future Church: Make Your Ministry Irreplaceable in a World of Artificial Everything* (Forefront Books, 2026).
- 15.** Passing the peace, that is, not a mild panic attack. Still working on that bit.
- 16.** Joseph Ratzinger, *The Spirit of the Liturgy* (Ignatius Press, 2020), 223.
- 17.** 1 Timothy 4:13.
- 18.** 1 Corinthians 2:4 (italics added).
- 19.** One small and relatively easy step would be to offer physical Bibles for people.
- 20.** I highly recommend you read *The Screen-Free Church* by Brad East for a longer (and better) treatment of this idea.
- 21.** Here's a fun idea from a church we work with:
<https://www.practicingtheway.org/pastor/church-formation-stories/guided-contemplative-retreat>.
- 22.** Peter Scazerro, *The Emotionally Healthy Church: How Transforming Your Inner Life Will Deeply Transform Your Church, Team, and the World* (Zondervan, 2010), 36. I feel the honorable Pete Scazerro has officially reached first name status. See his amazing work, starting (if you're a pastor) with *The Emotionally Healthy Leader*.
- 23.** John 20:19, 21
- 24.** Isaiah 4:6.
- 25.** Cardinal Robert Sarah, *The Power of Silence: Against the Dictatorship of Noise* (Ignatius Press, 2017).



About the author

John Mark Comer is the New York Times bestselling author of eight books, including *Practicing the Way*, which was named the 2025 Christian Book of the Year by the ECPA, and *The Ruthless Elimination of Hurry*, which has sold more than a million copies and been translated into over twenty languages.

He is a pastor and the founder of Practicing the Way, an organization working to see the renewal of apprenticeship to Jesus in our time.

The Comers live in the Santa Monica Mountains just outside Los Angeles.



About Practicing the Way

Practicing the Way helps churches form lifelong apprentices of Jesus. Our free resources are used by thousands of communities and pastors worldwide to help people be with Jesus, become like him, and do as he did. Our work is possible thanks to a group of monthly givers called The Circle and other generous givers.

Learn more at practicingtheway.org

The Solitude Practice

Over four sessions, begin practicing Jesus' pattern of retreat into the quiet, and discover how stillness and solitude opens us to encounters with God, the enemy, and our own souls — and ultimately forms us into people of growing love and peace.

Get started at practicingtheway.org/solitude