

The Church is Still Open: Reimagining Christian Ministry in the 21st Century

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Introduction

A discourse concerning the function and significance of the Church in the 21st century has become increasingly urgent, not only in Africa but also in other parts of the world. Many church structures have been shut down or repurposed as a result of situations involving political instability, public health emergencies, and limits imposed by regulatory agencies. However, despite the fact that buildings could be locked, the Church is not closed because it is not a building. A divine calling to a people, rather than a location, is what constitutes ministry. It is not a career that is restricted to Sunday services. The annals of history attest to the fact that the early Christian communities flourished underground in the catacombs of Rome. These communities were concealed, but full of worship, teaching, care, and ministry throughout their existence. These believers were aware that having a ministry was not a matter of convenience but rather a calling. In the present day, the same reality continues to be true: the Church is still open because the call of God on His people is still irreversible (Romans 11:29). The purpose of this paper is to advocate for a reimagined Christian ministry that is founded on the theology of calling, informed by the resilient history of the Church, responsive to modern realities, and devoted to holistic discipleship and mission that extends beyond walls. For this reason, it is necessary to have a leadership that is humble, has a heart of service, and is empowered by the Holy Spirit. This paper extends an invitation to everyone to take part in the work of God's kingdom with bravery and compassion.

Ministry as Calling: A Theological Foundation

First and foremost, a calling from God is what constitutes ministry. Throughout the New Testament, the Greek word *kaleo*, which means "to call," is used to describe the identity and assignment of believers.¹ For example, Romans 1:1 and Ephesians 4:1 both use this ancient Greek word. The people of Christ are the ones to whom we are called, not the structures or titles that we hold. The idea of a calling or vocation begins with God calling the church to acknowledge Jesus

¹ Stephen Seamands, *Ministry in the Image of God: The Trinitarian Shape of Christian Service* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2025), 25

as Lord. English words like summons, invitation, calling, and vocation relate to the New Testament word *klēsis* and symbolize it.² God's calling, vocation, summons, and invitation give us confidence that he will accomplish his purpose for creation and us (Eph 1:18; 4:4). Our vocation is to pursue that higher call (Phil 3:14). We share a heavenly calling (Heb 3:1).³

God's calling requires a life worthy of that vocation now (Eph 4:1). God must enable us to fulfill it (2 Thess 1:11). It solidifies our vocation and choice from God (2 Pet 1:10). This illuminates how God calls and chooses us irrespective of our history or background. God called us (2 Pet 1:3); by living God's way, we establish that vocation and enter God's kingdom (2 Pet 1:11). This aligns with the theological foundation that God saved us and called us to a holy destiny according to his purpose and grace (2 Tim 1:9). The good news is that “the expressions of grace [charismata] and the calling of God are not capable of being revoked” (Rom 11:28–29). It is not in the scope of this paper to discuss the various controversies around this verse, but this verse is used here in the context of our Christian calling to emphasize that God can't change his mind. God loves the Jewish people because of his choosing, Paul says.⁴ But Gentiles who are grafted into God's chosen, loved, graced, and called people also benefit indirectly. God has called Jews and Gentiles to show his honor (Rom 9:24–25).

Vocational calling encompasses more than just full-time clerical positions. According to Acts 1:8, every person who believes is called upon to serve as a witness in order to share their faith with other people, regardless of their occupation or line of work. For every Christian, spreading the message of the gospel is not only a responsibility but also an honor. The clergy are not the only ones who are obligated to fulfill this commitment; believers have greater daily access to the unreached in their own jobs than the clergy do. In light of this, it is absolutely necessary for every single Christian to enthusiastically communicate their faith to other people, regardless of the profession or calling that they have. These two dimensions of the vocation of the people of God,

²Richard W. Christopherson, “Calling and Career in Christian Ministry,” *Review of Religious Research* (1994): 219–237.

³Ibid. 230.

⁴Clyde J. Steckel, “The Ministry as Profession and Calling,” *Word & World* 1, no. 4 (1981): 373–381.

which are referred to as blessing and obligation, are succinctly summed up in the passages of Isaiah 41–42. If you are called to be God's servant, you do not need to be scared because you know that God will stand by you (Isaiah 41:8–10).⁵ On the one hand, the fact that God has called Israel to be his servant is good news for Israel because it indicates that God is committed to Israel in the same way that a master is committed to his servant. According to Isaiah 51:2, the call of Abraham was the one that came before the call of Israel. This indicated that God blessed Abraham and made him prolific. It is associated with the call of Jerusalem, which is the call of the community for whom Jerusalem is their city. When God calls them, it signifies that God will demonstrate to them a commitment and compassion that will endure until the end of the age (Isaiah 54:6–8). For Israel, vocation is synonymous with blessing.

Biblical and theological understanding of Christian ministry calls for an understanding that ministerial calling does not cease when the pulpit is vacant or when the sanctuary is closed; rather, it continues wherever the people of God are.⁶ Ministry is not limited to the confines of the pulpit or the four walls of the church. It extends far beyond those boundaries. Serving others and spreading the love of God wherever we are called to be is the essence of all that we do in ministry. Serving as the hands and feet of Jesus in a world that is broken is what ministry is all about. The purpose of ministry is to make a difference in the lives of other people, regardless of how great or tiny the acts of love that are performed may be. Being a ray of light and a source of hope in the midst of darkness is what ministry is all about. The purpose of ministry is to demonstrate the love of God by our deeds and words, and to put the message of the gospel into practice in everything that we do.⁷ In the context of Christian service, theological understanding of calling extends beyond the confines of physical institutions. As Christians in ministry, we are being extended a spiritual invitation to serve and accomplish a particular mission in the world.

⁵ Ibid., 373.

⁶ Oluwasegun P. Aluko, “Faith under Fire: A Look at the Multifaceted Persecution of Christians in Nigeria,” *Archives of Humanities & Social Sciences Research* (2024), 34.

⁷ Sibusiso Zungu and Buhle Mpofu, “Rethinking Theological Training as Ministerial Empowerment for Contextual Mission: A Case of the Uniting Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa,” *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 78, no. 4 (2022).

In our homes, online spaces, places of employment, and communities, we are commanded to serve, evangelize, and disciple others as part of our missional calling as followers of Christ. Doing so inspires us to emulate the Rechabites, who were aware of the times in which they lived and responded appropriately. In every aspect of our lives, we are obligated to consider biblical truths, interpret them, and respond to them.⁸ The biblical mandate that we are to be the salt and the light of the world, as instructed by our master, is the source of this. To fulfill this requirement, we must be faithful and obedient to the word of God. Because of the nature of this calling, we are required to devote ourselves completely and make a firm commitment to putting our faith into practice in every facet of our lives. The expansion of the ministry beyond the confines of the four corners of church structures also necessitates the utilization of the intellect and creativity that God has bestowed upon us. In order to reach those who may never set foot inside a church, we need to be willing to move outside of our comfort zones and communicate with them.⁹ We need to be willing to engage with individuals in ways that are pertinent and significant to their lives, including meeting them where they are. In order to successfully communicate the message of love and hope to all individuals, we need to develop an attitude that is receptive to novel concepts and ways of thinking.¹⁰

In the context of Africa, where communal life and oral traditions continue to be prevalent, the concept of a calling to community is congruent with the ways in which our culture expresses kinship, duty, and leadership. Therefore, carrying out ministry in the community, even in the absence of church facilities, is a natural fit with the natural setting of our African community. In addition to this, it presents the opportunity for a more profound connection and comprehension of our cultural history and values. Even when Sunday fellowships are not taking place in a conventional church building, it is possible to take a more holistic approach to serving and

⁸ Richard W. Christopherson, "Calling and Career in Christian Ministry," Review of Religious Research 35, no. 3 (1994): 219–237.

⁹ Jacob Dunlow, "Digital Discipleship: A Study of How Churches in New York Used Technology for Adult Discipleship during the COVID-19 Pandemic," Christian Education Journal 18, no. 3 (2021): 458–472.

¹⁰ Ibid.

supporting one another within the context of the community. This creates a very unique sense of community and belonging among those who participate in it.

The Catacomb Church: History of Faith Under Pressure

Due to Roman persecution, the early Church was unable to publicly offer worship services. Catacombs were underground burial sites in cities like Rome that were frequented by Christians from the first to the early fourth centuries.¹¹ These catacombs were used not only for the purpose of burying their dead, but also for the purpose of praying, teaching, sharing communion, and encouraging one another.¹² The concept of discipleship survived in spite of the absence of official church institutions. This was accomplished through oral teaching, the memorizing of Scripture, and mutual exhortation. Even though it usually came at a considerable personal sacrifice, evangelism continued. For refusing to surrender their faith in Christ, a great number of believers, ranging from common laborers to prominent members of the church such as Ignatius of Antioch and Polycarp of Smyrna, were subjected to captivity and martyrdom.¹³ However, rather than ending the faith, persecution served to refine it, resulting in the formation of a resilient community united by love, sacrifice, and hope in the resurrection.

During the second and third centuries, apologetic writings, such as those written by Justin Martyr and Tertullian, were used to defend the faith in front of hostile rulers. At the same time, the testimony of martyrs encouraged new believers, and the phrase "the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church" was written.¹⁴ Despite the fact that the Roman Empire was at war with itself, networks of house churches continued to expand throughout the empire. Christians were able to adapt to the intense persecutions that were carried out by Emperor Decius (249–251 AD) and Diocletian (303–311 AD) by holding secret meetings, employing symbols such as the ichthus

¹¹ Wolfram Kinzig and Markus Bockmuehl, "Christian Persecution in Antiquity," *On Knowing Humanity Journal* (2022): 129.

¹² Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church: Vol. 2* (BoD–Books on Demand, 2022).

¹³ Kinzig and Bockmuehl, "Christian Persecution in Antiquity," 129.

¹⁴ Alister E. McGrath, *Historical Theology: An Introduction to the History of Christian Thought* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2022), 134.

(fish) as covert identifiers, and maintaining strong communal relationships. This covert but thriving movement persisted until the Edict of Milan, which was issued in 313 AD, made Christianity a public institution.¹⁵ As a result of the Church's continued existence and expansion over several centuries, we are reminded that its actual power has never been in walls and material but rather in people who are filled with the Holy Spirit and who are living out their calling with bravery, creativity, and faith. It is not because of political favor or physical buildings that the Church thrives; rather, it is because it perpetually adapts, reimagines, and triumphs over adversities by the power of the Holy Spirit.

The Closure of Buildings Is Not the Closure of Ministry

In today's world, government laws may restrict access to physical churches. These constraints may be imposed due to pandemics, security concerns, or zoning restrictions. It is imperative that pastors and other church leaders do not erroneously believe that these laws are intended to silence the Church.¹⁶ According to the argument presented earlier, the scope of our Christian ministry and calling is outside the purview of any regulation imposed by the government. It is possible that the annals of church history would not have been written if the government had imposed rules that would have silenced the church. The church is growing even in the midst of severe persecution, like as in China, Northern Nigeria, and many other places. This is due to the fact that even "the gates of hell shall not prevail" against the church. It is expected that the church will continue to expand and thrive.

The ministry of the Christian faith expands beyond the confines of structures. During his time in jail, the apostle Paul preached to the people, and Jesus taught from hillsides, boats, and homes, providing Christians with a model that they might emulate in their own lives.¹⁷ It is imperative

¹⁵ Edward D. Andrews, *Mere Christianity Reimagined: Rediscovering the Faith for the 21st Century* (Christian Publishing House, 2023), 109.

¹⁶ Rendani C. Nthakheni and Ndidzulafhi Mudau, "Pneumatology in the Digital Age: Reimagining the Holy Spirit's Role in Trinitarian Theology," *African Journal of Pentecostal Studies* 2, no. 1 (2025): 53.

¹⁷ Kelsey L. Lambricht, *Becoming Eli: Practicing Prophetic Listening to Reimagine Models of Ministry* (Princeton Theological Seminary, 2022), 230.

that the Christian ministry depart from the convenient confines of the church structure and adopt principles of mobility, as demonstrated by the lives of Jesus and Paul.

Christian ministry in our era is digital. The advent of the digital revolution has created global platforms for counseling, education, and preaching. To accommodate the digital nature of ministry, the conventional approach to conducting church services needs to be rethought.¹⁸ Because the closing of a building does not correlate to the closing of digital spaces, the church needs to accept the new normal of conducting ministry in the digital era.¹⁹

Incarnational ministry is a form of Christian ministry that takes place in various settings, including homes, schools, offices, refugee camps, market stalls, and even at the end of the world. Christian ministry should not only be domesticated within the bounds of the church building but also in the marketplaces. The fact that the ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ is incarnational draws our attention to the reality that the Christian ministry is not confined to buildings but rather resides among members of the community.

Therefore, the Church in Africa must not retreat into passivity because of building closures or other government-related restrictions. Instead, the church must reimagine new wine skins for the new wine of this generation (Matthew 9:17).

Reimagining Ministry in the 21st Century

The key question remains: What does it look like to live out our calling in a world where churches are sometimes closed?

Decentralized discipleship is the first thing that the church needs to take into consideration. To put it another way, the church ought to provide Christians with the resources necessary to lead house churches, family devotions, and personal Bible studies. It would be necessary to provide believers with training in order to build contextual Bible study materials that are tailored to the

¹⁸ Daniel L. Tebo Jr, A Grounded Theory Study of Digital Discipleship Methods for Effectiveness in the Phyigital Church (PhD diss., Liberty University, 2023), 40.

¹⁹ Ibid.

needs of the people. Additionally, the church would need to cultivate mentoring connections that empower laity leadership in order to fulfill its mission. Believers would be equipped with the tools necessary to effectively carry out these obligations and to disciple others in their religion through the training that would be provided. Ultimately, this would be beneficial to the church community since it would strengthen it and further the spread of the gospel.²⁰

The church must also embrace digital mission fields, which is the second point. The church is obligated to spread the gospel through various media, such as social media, podcasts, films, and music. The church needs to meet people where they are in the digital world and engage with them in an authentic way.²¹ According to several studies, the majority of young people in Africa spend more than seventy percent of their lives online. In order to effectively communicate with the future generation, the church needs to accept this fact and adjust accordingly. Furthermore, the church must invest its resources in raising a new generation of “digital apostles” and “digital missionaries” to occupy spaces of influence.

Third, the church is obligated to provide provisions for contextual ministry. Using African metaphors, stories, and rhythms, it is necessary for it to acquire the ability to serve in the native languages. It is imperative that the church confront real-world concerns, such as poverty, inequality, mental health, and youth unemployment, with theological depth and practical compassion in order to ensure that the gospel will find its roots in every aspect of life.²²

Lastly, the church ought to cultivate a witness that is vocational. We have a responsibility to educate believers on how to put their faith into practice in their chosen professions, whether they be nurses, teachers, entrepreneurs, farmers, or public workers. The definition of Christian ministry and calling needs to be rethought in order to incorporate public theology and the theology of work into its definition. For the purpose of discouraging the mistake of dichotomizing secular and sacred

²⁰ Gordon T. Smith, *Courage and Calling: Embracing Your God-Given Potential* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2024), 123.

²¹ Tebo, *A Grounded Theory Study of Digital Discipleship*, 40.

²² Zungu and Mpofu, “Rethinking Theological Training as Ministerial Empowerment,” 2022.

notions of work and ministry, we need to reframe success in ministry as obedience to God's call in every aspect of life.²³

Conclusion: The Church is Still Open Because the Call Still Stands

It has been argued in this paper that the church is called to keep on functioning despite the seeming constraints imposed by the government in terms of buildings and meeting places. At the same time, it has been argued that we must never confuse the closing of buildings with the closing of the Church. When she has stepped out of her comfort zone and into her calling, the Church has always been at her most effective. This has been true from the catacombs of Rome to the nooks and crannies of African villages. Not only are African believers being called upon to reclaim the gospel in our culture, but they are also being asked to rethink ministry for our time. It is not a Sunday event that constitutes ministry; rather, it is a way of life. We are not concerned with whether or not the Church is accessible. In a world that is constantly evolving, the issue that needs to be answered is whether or not we are awake to the call, alive to our purpose, and courageous enough to rethink what it means to be God's people. In light of the fact that God's call has not been rescinded, His Spirit has not been removed, and His purpose has not been finished, the Church is still operational.

²³ David Heywood, *Reimagining Ministerial Formation* (London: SCM Press, 2021), 8.

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