

Loving the church too much to let it stay the same

A sandwich can be a subversive act.

by [Adam Hearlson](#) in the [July 18, 2018](#) issue



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On a cool New England day, a small congregation mills around Brewer Fountain on Boston Common. The sun is out as still more congregants descend on the fountain from all corners of the park. Some carry large sacks of possessions. Some limp as they walk, moving with such labor that you wonder why they don't just pick a park bench and rest. Most of this congregation slept on the street last night. Most carry their possessions on their backs or in a pilfered cart. Most also would never set foot in a church on Sunday morning, let alone approach the communion table. Yet here in a corner of the country's oldest park—the park where Mary Dyer was hanged, where British troops camped during the American Revolution, and where Martin Luther King preached—a small fraction of Boston's homeless population gathers for worship.

At 12:30 p.m., the congregation eats food provided by local churches. By 1:00, the service begins, and the congregation joins in song, prayer, and rest. The minister

provides a short homily and then passes the pulpit, so to speak, for the congregation to respond. Then back to the singing. Most days, the communion table is also a dolly used to wheel supplies. Every week the congregation is fed—physically, spiritually, and emotionally. After the usual post-service chatting, the chairs are packed away and the wax paper that held the afternoon’s communion sandwiches is placed in a nearby trash can. The service ends as the congregation, now sated, shuffles off toward the four corners of the park.

❖ In a rickety old pulpit, in a small church in New Jersey, a pastor weary with age and work takes a deep breath before she begins her final sermon. Years earlier, in seminary, she’d once preached with an uncontrollable fire. Among her peers she’d said what she never could say in her church. She’d sat down from that early sermon feeling unburdened and unbought. The fire ignited in her that day was nearly snuffed out when she preached her candidating sermon at this small hillside church. She did not know these people; she had two small children at home, and her student loans were defaulting. On that first day in the pulpit, she was pleasant, innocuous, and not the least bit dangerous.

She got the job but paid a price. What had once been a fire was barely a spark. Now years after serving these saints—this complicated mass of sin and holiness—she walks into the pulpit with neither spark nor fire, but with a glowing coal. She speaks dangerous truth to this congregation, but with a grace and compassion that had been unavailable to her in class or when candidating. She finds a way to challenge the congregation without damning them and to exhort them without shaming them. She knows them well enough to speak their language and loves them enough to speak to them in coded speech.

❖ In a small suburban church in Michigan, the vestry fills up with box upon box of costumes. A bundle of shepherd crooks lies in the corner, tied together with a red Christmas ribbon. One by one, children line up at the vestry door. The director of Christian education, with a few more gray hairs than the previous week, hands out costumes with the same refrain, “Be gentle on the costume; it has to last another year.” Angels, animals, shepherds, magi, and the holy family—everyone gets a part.

Meanwhile, the adults wait expectantly in the sanctuary, ready to pull out their phones and record the controlled chaos. As the holy family walks timidly onto the stage, the adults sigh and look at each other with cocked heads. “So cute,” they say. Soon the stage is full of children in costume and at the center is a baby lying in a

makeshift manger. And if you happened to look closely, without an electronic device in front of your face and with a head cocked the other direction, you might see the coming kingdom made manifest in some kids playing dress-up.

❖ In a cinder block building in the Katanga Province of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, choir practice begins with drums. How can you sing without a beat? The words are familiar—"Kyrie eleison," "Sanctus," "Agnus Dei"—but the songs are different. The choral textures are smooth and the tempo is constant. Traces of Western music composition are hinted at but buried beneath layers of a Congolese music tradition. The songs rise and fall, the tempo slows and hurries, always accompanied by the constant thump of the drum. In a new setting, the familiar becomes foreign, and the foreign is an invitation to hear the familiar as if for the first time.

❖ In the round chapel in St. Gregory of Nyssa Episcopal Church in San Francisco, people join hands and dance around the communion altar. Above them, 90 large saints (and four animals) join hands and lift their feet in their own dance. Leading the dance above is a 13-foot-tall icon of Christ. As the dancers circle the altar in the center of the chapel, the dance below begins to mirror the dance of the icons above. In a very real sense, the dance below becomes a rehearsal for the dance above.

At the table, the hope for the fulfillment of God's promises is made incarnate in human bodies. The meal is rehearsal for the time when the community of all the saints of God will be made one, and the ones dancing above will finally dance with the ones below. The worship in this church is a rehearsal for the moment when heaven and earth will be one and there will be no end to the dancing saints that circle the throne of God. For a moment amid the dancing and singing, the world remains suspended in time and place, pregnant with possibility.

From the outside, these brief occasions seem small and insignificant. A Christmas pageant, a group of homeless people snacking on sandwiches, some African drums, a farewell sermon, and a mural in a Bay Area church? From the vantage of our busy and burdened lives, these events do not typically register in our ledger of things to care about. These practices seem transient—here today, gone tomorrow, and then back again. They seem a bit out of place, but who has time to put them back?

But if we stop and look just a mite longer, we might see the future of the church. With a little imagination, we might notice that these folks are becoming the engines

of change that the church so desperately needs. If we are attentive, we might see that these sandwiches, these Christmas pageants, and these dancing saints are birthed from imaginations that love the church too much to let it remain in one place for too long.

With enough attention we might notice that in the hands of these folks a sandwich is an act of insubordination, a dancing saint is a critique of our divided world, and a child swaying in her angel costume is an act of radical defiance. With a little imagination, we might begin to hear the echoes of the ancestors who changed the church with a song, who influenced the church with a pageant, who changed our theology with a half-finished sermon that was too honest by half. Indeed, most of these worshipers are not in any position to lobby Congress or enact policy. They do not write legislation or make speeches to thousands of people. Since they cannot enact social change with the sweep of a pen or marshal thousands with a few words, they settle for small acts of subversion.

And small acts of subversion are enough. Enough to count as worship. And, sometimes, by the grace of God, enough to change the church.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "Holy subversion." It was excerpted from Adam Hearlson's book The Holy No: Worship as a Subversive Act, published this month by Eerdmans. Used by permission.