

A Church Rooted in Prayer, Sent in Love

Matthew 28:19–20

The Path We Want to Walk in the New Year

This is the first Sunday of 2026. Turn to the people around you and greet them—“Happy New Year!” I pray that in 2026, the knots that have been tangled in our lives will begin to loosen, and that the road ahead—for us and for our church—will open wide.

But a new year doesn’t mean we drift into wishful thinking. Faith is not about pretending everything will magically work out. Faith begins by telling the truth about where we are, and then asking: God, what are you calling us to do right here? That is the road we want to walk this year—and the road we must walk.

If we are honest, the reality we face is not exactly rosy. In 2025, some researchers and denominational observers estimated that as many as 15,000 churches could close in the U.S. The National Council of Churches projects that around 100,000 churches could close over the next decade.

Some of you may be thinking, “Pastor, it’s the first Sunday of the year. Why start with such gloomy news?” I understand. But this is the reality we are living in. We are witnessing the end of what scholars call Christendom—a time when going to church was part of American culture. For generations, churches didn’t need to work very hard to survive. People showed up. Communities revolved around churches. But that era has passed.

We now live in a country where people with no religious affiliation or with different faith traditions outnumber those who attend church. And that trend is only accelerating. If that makes you feel anxious, you’re not alone. You may wonder, “Could this happen to us?” Here’s what I want you to hear: don’t panic.

Let’s try shifting our perspective just a little. For a long time, the church has been playing as the home team, in a stadium that worked in our favor. Now, we’ve simply become the visiting team, playing on unfamiliar ground. But changing stadiums doesn’t mean the game is over. In fact, this moment—uncomfortable as it is—may be a gift. It may be our chance to recover something essential: the church’s original courage, vitality, and holy imagination.

A Season of Spiritual Rehabilitation

So what did we lose during the long, comfortable years of Christendom? We lost our mission muscles. Think about astronauts returning from space. When they land after months in zero gravity, they don’t walk out of the capsule. They’re helped into wheelchairs. Why? Because muscles unused begin to waste away. The same thing happens spiritually.

Let me ask you honestly: When was the last time you shared your faith with someone? Not argued. Not debated. Just shared. If that question makes you uncomfortable, you’re not failing. You’re normal. For decades, the church floated in spiritual zero gravity. People came to us. We became excellent at hospitality—welcoming those who arrived. But we slowly forgot our apostolic calling—to go. Now we’re back under gravity. And rebuilding strength always hurts a little. Nobody enjoys physical therapy. Rehabilitation is uncomfortable. But that pain is not a sign of failure. It is a sign that life is returning.

“As You Go”

In Matthew 28, Jesus gives the Great Commission: “Go therefore and make disciples...” That command was not given to confident experts. Matthew tells us plainly that some of the

disciples still doubted—and, in fact, all of them were still afraid. But Jesus entrusted the mission to unsure, imperfect people—people like us.

And that word “go” doesn’t mean packing your bags and moving overseas. In the original language, it’s closer to: “As you go.” As you go to work. As you sit in traffic. As you grab coffee. As you walk the dog. As you care for grandchildren. Those ordinary places are holy ground. Evangelism is not a sales pitch. It is witness—sharing what you have seen and experienced. You don’t need perfect faith. You don’t need all the answers. You need only one step of obedience.

In 1858, a Sunday school teacher named Edward Kimball nervously walked into a shoe store in Boston. He placed a hand on a young clerk’s shoulder and said, awkwardly, “I just wanted you to know how much Jesus loves you.” Later, Kimball called it a “limping plea.” But that simple, clumsy, sincere moment opened the young man’s heart. Do you know who that young man was? His name was Dwight L. Moody—one of the greatest evangelists of the nineteenth century, someone who led millions to Christ. Yes—God has always worked through ordinary people who took one brave step.

A Church Rooted in Prayer, Sent in Love

As I mentioned earlier, we are living in a time when we must rebuild spiritual muscles that have grown weak from long neglect. That’s why our theme for 2026 is simple: A Church Rooted in Prayer, Sent in Love. This is basic training.

In exercise, nothing matters more than breathing. Without breath, strength collapses. Prayer is the inhale of the soul. Evangelism and mission are the exhale. If we only inhale—worship, study, prayer—but never exhale, we grow spiritually unhealthy.

In fact, if we stop exhaling, we die. Let me show you what a 'spiritual body' looks like when it only inhales. [PPT] In Israel, there are two large bodies of water: the Sea of Galilee in the north and the Dead Sea in the south. Both receive water from the same source—the Jordan River. Both inhale.

But the Sea of Galilee is full of life. The water is fresh. Fish swim freely. The Dead Sea, on the other hand, cannot support any life at all. What is the difference? The Sea of Galilee receives water—and then lets it flow out again to the lower Jordan River. The Dead Sea only receives. It never releases. Water that is trapped evaporates. Salt remains. And eventually, what should give life becomes something that kills it. The church is no different. Grace that comes into us must flow out of us. That outward flow is service and evangelism.

The Lord Who Runs with Us

So friends, as we enter 2026, let’s breathe again. Breathe in through prayer. Breathe out through love, service, and witness. As you go—into your workplace, your neighborhood, your everyday routines—let the gospel come through your life: in steady faithfulness, in a warm smile, and yes, even in a few clumsy words when you need them. When the fragrance of Christ flows naturally from us, our church will become like the Sea of Galilee again—fresh, moving, and full of life.

This year, think of one person you would like to reach. Just one. I’m going to give you ten seconds right now. Close your eyes. Who is that face popping into your mind?" Hold that person in your heart. Begin praying for them—every day, starting today. And don’t be afraid. Don’t ask, “What if nothing happens?" Remember the promise of our Lord: “Surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (v. 20).

As we step into the world—breathing hard, learning as we go—our Lord is not watching from a distance. Jesus runs with us, right beside us, matching our pace, staying with us all the way. Even if the road is rocky, even if it feels like a steep climb, because Christ runs with us, the road we walk in 2026 can become a good road—a road where grace shows up in unexpected places. May you and I, in this new year, run forward with strength as a church that prays and shares the gospel—a healthy church that never stops breathing. Amen.