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# Galileo Church: A Disciples of Christ Experiment in Next Church

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# Galileo Church: A Disciples of Christ Experiment in Next Church

Joel A. Brown and Katie Hays

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*The following was adapted from a presentation given by Joel at the Stone-Campbell Dialogue meeting in Abilene, Texas (October 2014). As such, please excuse the sometimes-colloquial nature of the article.*

Let us begin with a word regarding form. What follows is not a critical analysis of *next church*.<sup>1</sup> Rather, it is more like a missionary report to a mission board or sending congregation. Think of it as a field report of sorts on our experiences at Galileo Church working on the frontier of next church.

## Why Galileo?

Often the first question people ask when introduced to our church is “What’s up with your name?” Indeed it is odd for a church to identify itself in name with a long-deceased astronomer and scientist, even one as renowned as Galileo Galilei. The strangeness of the namesake elicits immediate questions and perhaps even suspicions. So where does it come from? The short answer is that our founding pastor (Katie Hays) made it up. The longer answer is precisely because it raises questions: it sets us apart. In our previous experiences of church we had come to recognize that traditional church does a lot of work to get people to “come in here and be like us,” and we wondered what it would be like to push back against that tendency. This led us to ponder what it might mean to decenter the gospel, to take it out of the structure and infrastructure of the traditional church. What would that look like?

With this question in mind, we moved forward in an experiment of doing church by a single principle—we are not the center of the universe. In a uniquely Galileo-esque way, we came to realize that we are not the main thing. The church is not the main thing. There is something else around which everything else revolves. Thus the name—Galileo Church—at once serves to decenter our life together and yet is also a caution; after all, Galileo was excommunicated and put under house arrest for saying that the sun did not revolve around the earth.

The name also sets us apart in at least one other important way. As followers of Jesus who are well aware that *Christian* has become synonymous in many instances with anti-intellectual fundamentalisms—which are explicitly and often proudly opposed to “science”—by taking a scientist as our namesake we signal that we are a curious, rational group of people. In this way we are intentionally declaring that we are a different kind of Christian.

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1. Katie uses the phrase *next church* to contrast Galileo Church’s exploration of the next iteration of North American Protestant congregational life with *now church*, a phrase intended as a non-pejorative name for the current shape of traditional, mainstream congregational life, whether mainline or evangelical. Galileo is one among many next church communities from all across the denominational spectrum, though mostly among Christians who identify as “progressive” theologically and socially. Rather than *emergent church*, which evokes particular (if often erroneous) assumptions about style and ethos, next church opens into a wide vista where Christianity lived communally takes any of unnumbered shapes. Iterations of next church are as varied as the redeemed imaginations of the people who form them.

What does a decentered church look like? Well, for example, one manifestation of this decenteredness is that we have committed ourselves to a sort of ecclesial nomadism; that is, we have chosen to be a church that does not own a building. We rent. We relocate. We are a church light on its feet, always on the move, intentionally decentered in the community we inhabit. And while we will be the first to admit this is not the easiest or even the most efficient way to do church, we sense it is something a particular part of our world desperately needs.

### **A Mission-Driven Church**

Galileo Church is unique (we like to use the word *queer*) in a number of ways. We are not like most churches you might walk into on a Sunday morning, not least of all because you would have a hard time finding us on a Sunday morning. Instead we gather for worship on Sunday evenings precisely because it just so happens that many folk in our key demographic—twenty- and thirty-somethings—are working a shift at Starbucks or Denny’s on Sunday mornings. You would also be hard-pressed to find a *Chalice Hymnal* in the pew in front of you, both because we do not have pews (we currently meet in a renovated theater) and we are as likely to sing Johnny Cash, the Decembrists, or Gungor as we are to sing “A Mighty Fortress is Our God.” Our gatherings throughout the week also might look a little queer for a church in suburban Dallas/Fort Worth. For instance, on Tuesday evenings we gather for “Bible and Beer,” which is precisely what it sounds like: we read the Bible and we sip microbrews (two tasks we take very seriously). And while we are unique for all of these reasons, among others, perhaps the thing that truly sets us apart has less to do with church forms or doctrines, but rather that our fundamental queerness is wrapped up in the very people for whom our church exists—the broken and bruised, the overlooked and forgotten.

One way of getting at this is by way of a parable told by Katie, Galileo Church’s lead pastor-planter, who shares, “I started having this dream. In the dream there are acres and acres of wheat fields, shining in the sun, countless stalks of wheat standing straight up obviously waiting to be harvested. And then a combine rolls through the field, churning and rumbling through the grain with incredible efficiency and power. At first I’m mesmerized, but then I realize that the combine, for all its efficiency, can only get the stalks that are standing straight up. If a stalk is broken, lying on the ground, it won’t make it into the machine. Moreover, the machine itself breaks some of the stalks, rolls them flat into the ground and all that grain is just left in the field. I wake up from this dream feeling so mournful for the stalks of wheat on the ground. Between sleeping and waking, it seems to me that someone should walk behind the combine, picking up the broken stalks, gently scooping them into a basket—something more primitive and less efficient than the combine.”

In other words, there is a segment of the population in our town, however small and unnoticeable, who have been passed over and, in some cases, broken by the traditional churches that abound there. We have sensed a call to these broken, bruised, and forgotten souls in our midst. This is to say that we are driven by an otherwise queer mission—to welcome and care for those we have come to identify as spiritual refugees.<sup>2</sup>

So while there are quite a number of things one could point to that differentiate our church from just about every other one around, the real substantive difference is found in the mission that drives our life together. Galileo Church seeks spiritual refugees, rallies spiritual health for all who come, and fortifies every tender soul for strength to follow Jesus into a life of world-changing service. Spiritual refugees are any for whom church has become boring, irrelevant, exclusive, or painful—especially millennials (young adults in their twenties and early thirties), and especially our LGBTQ<sup>3</sup> neighbors and those who love them. But really, all are welcome. In rallying spiritual health for all who come we are saying that we are not content to remain refugees forever. We all long to belong, and so we are practicing in the present the future of God’s imagining in which there is room at the table for all, even the queer ones, believing that in the end God gets everything God wants. Finally, we seek to equip every person who comes alongside us with strength to follow Jesus in the work of redeeming a broken world; that is, we are serious about discipleship and mission.

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Interestingly, in the process of this project we have come to recognize the refugee in each of us; that is, in seeking out others who we think Jesus would seek out, we have found ourselves to be the very objects of God’s seeking. We are finding our own redemption in Galileo, because God came seeking us.

Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning

In a sense one could say we are in the business of artisanal church work. Our mission is unique precisely because we exist for those stalks of wheat that have been broken and passed over. We do not expect that every church should look like us or be about the work to which we have devoted ourselves. We are a queer church driven by a queer mission. Maybe the best way to summarize what we are trying to do is to quote Jesus, quoting Isaiah: “A dimly burning wick we will not quench; a bruised reed we will not break. We will faithfully execute justice” (paraphrase of Matthew 12:20; cf. Isaiah 42:3). It is a new kind of gentle, compassionate evangelism we seek to practice, bringing good news to those who are not in danger of hellfire, but who are already, in so many ways, in hell and needing to be released from it.

### **What We’ve Learned**

From the very beginning we have imagined Galileo Church in part as a research and development (R&D) project of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in next church. As such, we are always looking to present our findings with those who share an interest in what church might look like in the future. So here are a few lessons we have learned thus far.

**Money matters.** This is a huge point that we would be remiss not to share. In too many conversations about church planting the subject of money is treated as taboo and is neglected. The truth is, however, that we could not be doing what we are doing if it were not for the \$180,000 we have received from the Trinity-Brazos Area of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) for our first two years of ministry, along with numerous gifts and grants from individuals and established “traditional” churches who believe in our mission. It takes money to do this kind of ministry. And yet, while this may seem like a lot of money, in truth it is a pittance against the budgets of traditional congregations. We are streamlined; we are frugal; we are a pretty cheap project.

**Transparency is crucial.** Closely related to the first lesson, we have found that transparency on every level is important. Our church does not make any major moves that have not been presented and discussed at the congregational level. We also publicize our budget on our website ([galileochurch.org](http://galileochurch.org)), because we believe that how we use our money says a lot about who we are and what we are about. Transparency is also crucial for our life together as a church. Almost on a daily basis we document our life together via various social media platforms (“Galileo Church” and “Galileo Church Group, Open to All” on Facebook, [@Galileo\\_Church](https://twitter.com/Galileo_Church) on Twitter, and [@galileo\\_church](https://www.instagram.com/galileo_church) on Instagram). We do this not primarily for the sake of attracting people (although that happens as a result), but because we are committed to keeping our operations completely open to the people who have already signed on. We have discovered that the people whom we tend to gather up will not tolerate being swept along in the current of “the way we have always done things.”

**Authenticity is vital.** While millennials, our key demographic, appear to be madly connected through social networks, we have found in research and in our experience that many of them are as lonely as any souls we have ever known. Indeed, we have discovered that if you build an infrastructure that allows for real relationship, there are many who are so hungry for it they will come along and never leave. What this means is that next church has to be contiguous with the rest of life. In other words, we have to be the same on Sunday as on any other day of the week, with all the messiness, brokenness, and exhaustion that we experience all week long. We have to talk like we talk, all the same, all the time. No “preacher voice” will be tolerated. Certainly not every millennial desires this, but there are some who do, and for a long time they have believed that the church could not provide it.

**Don’t overlook aesthetics.** Perhaps one of the most delightful discoveries we have made is that when it comes to worship, aesthetics are important for millennials. That is, they desire (and expect) things to be and feel gorgeous, but not “slick” (if it looks expensive, that is bad; if it looks cheap and unattended to, that is worse). This kind of attention to aesthetics is less about looks and more about a way of being that seems casually amazing. In fact, since we launched almost two years ago, we have found this aspect of our life together so important that we have contemplated incorporating an aesthetic emphasis into our mission statement. We have thought about saying something like “Galileo Church celebrates the God-who-is-beautiful by making beauty together as best we can.” So we have worked with artists and artistic types in our community to think about how to architect beautiful worship spaces and experiences.

**Go against the grain.** When we first began thinking about planting a new church, some church analysts told us that we could grow a “big steeple church” in our town in just a few years. And while somebody might be able to do that, and perhaps somebody should do that, it was not what we felt God prodding us to do. We sensed a need to break from the mold. Indeed we believe that next church will scoop up a remnant of believers that will survive and thrive by doing church differently even as our denominations face more decline, and it will be this remnant in part that will carry the faith into the future. This will no doubt require a good dose of courage and some ecclesiastical inventiveness.

**Aim for the margins.** Finally, as part of this experiment we are trying to articulate a compelling vision for next church as a missional project with a completely evangelistic focus for a new generation of people who claim to be “Spiritual But Not Religious” (SBNR). In this process we have discovered that if you have a truly evangelistic mission, and if you can identify a group that has been marginalized and stepped on and figure out how to offer truly good news to that group, then we have found that lots of other people come along as well because they have been looking for a way to believe again that their Christian discipleship matters in this world. So for us, it is LGBTQ people, and we articulate that in every way we can. At the same time that we have narrowed our aim, however, we have been able to cultivate a community where any number of people from any number of demographic groups feel at home. It is as if by reaching out to one small segment that deserves our compassion and apology, we have made it clear that we would offer the same to you too, if you are in need of that.

### Helpful Resources

Lastly, we want to share a couple of resources that we have found most helpful for doing next church. Maybe the first place we would point other next church entrepreneurs toward would be the JoPa Group and their Church Planters Academy ([thejopagroup.com](http://thejopagroup.com)). The academy helped us in a lot of ways as people who were coming from a traditional church context to gain a whole new sense of what next church entails, a new list of people to follow, and a new perspective on what is possible when you start from scratch and really ask what God is up to with these people. We also found the Wild Goose Festival ([wildgoosefestival.org](http://wildgoosefestival.org)), which might best be described as a Christian Woodstock of sorts that takes place every summer in Hot Springs, North Carolina, to be really beneficial as it provided us with a new set of conversation partners and sparked our imaginations concerning how church can be done differently in very practical ways. We also like to read (a lot), and so following this is a short bibliography that Katie recently put together. It consists of books we have been reading and that have been an important part of our conversation about what it means to do next church.

Finally, we want to officially report that this work has been as much fun as any of us have ever had doing church! In fact, one of the best things we have learned to do in this process is to party, and party more often and harder than any other church we have ever met. We take our cue here from Jesus, who—Matthew reports—“came eating and drinking, and they said about him, ‘Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners’” (Matthew 11:19). And at Galileo we say, who wouldn’t want to follow a messiah like that? Thus something we count as important kingdom work is throwing parties. If there is no reason to have one, we make up a reason. We do this as a form of kingdom work because, to paraphrase Isaiah again, we believe that in the future of God’s imagining, “the shroud that is cast over all peoples” and “the sheet that is spread over all nations will be ripped away, and God will swallow Death as an appetizer, and all God’s people will be invited to boogie down as tears are wiped away and disgrace is erased from our existence. The table will be laden with deliciousness and no one will be turned away” (cf. Isaiah 25). So at Galileo we are doing our part to pull God’s future into our present, one party at a time. This is good work, so come party with us.

**JOEL A. BROWN** IS A PHD STUDENT STUDYING RELIGIONS IN AMERICA, AND PARTICULARLY THE NEXUS OF RACE AND RELIGION IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY, AT THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO DIVINITY SCHOOL AND WAS PART OF THE TEAM THAT PLANTED GALILEO CHURCH IN MANSFIELD, TEXAS ([JOELABROWN@UCHICAGO.EDU](mailto:JOELABROWN@UCHICAGO.EDU)). **KATIE HAYS** WAS WELL-TRAINED TO SERVE TRADITIONAL CHURCHES AT YALE DIVINITY SCHOOL AND PRINCETON THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY; AND SHE DID FOR ALMOST TWO DECADES, FORMERLY IN CHURCHES OF CHRIST AND CURRENTLY IN THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH (DISCIPLES OF CHRIST). IT WAS ALL PREPARATORY, SHE MAINTAINS, FOR ANSWERING THE CALL TO EXPLORE THE RELIGIOUS FRONTIER OF THE NEW MILLENNIUM WITH GALILEO CHURCH ([KATIE@GALILEOCHURCH.ORG](mailto:KATIE@GALILEOCHURCH.ORG)).

## Next Church Bibliography

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