

## What the Church Could Learn from Libraries

Pastor Sarah Schaaf



Transitions in life usher us into new places or sometimes old places that have been made new. My family is in the process of moving. When you find yourself living between communities you search for safe places to simply be. One place my family has discovered along the way is Ida Rupp Public Library in Port Clinton.

If it has been a while since you have pulled out your library card, you should know that over the past few decades libraries have gone through a transformation. At Ida Rupp Library you can still check out books or read them digitally, but you can also check out cake pans, fishing poles, life jackets, video games, board games, and so much more. You can access the internet for free, or you can play on their digital gaming table. There are discussion groups, children's programs, yoga, movie events, tech help and community goods collections.

Gone are the days of being shushed upon arrival. Libraries have become community hubs with maker spaces, art exhibits, classes on a wide array of contextual topics, and free access to all kinds of technology. They create spaces that gather a diverse crowd of people and their events spill out into the communities they serve. Some may question, have libraries watered down their mission? Have they assimilated to culture? Have they lost their way? But, perhaps they have simply discovered that their mission is bigger than books. Libraries, at their best, enrich lives by encouraging people to learn and grow. In the last few decades, I think librarians have discovered that some will grow through reading a book, others through fishing safely on Lake Erie.

Jeffery Hoover, a library designer puts it this way, "In order to get libraries right in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we need to steer away from global solutions. There is no one-

size-fits-all approach. Instead, we must understand what local communities want and create a uniquely local facility.”

I believe that the transformation of libraries can be a guide for our parishes. Parishes that thrive in the 21<sup>st</sup> century will do so by listening to their communities’ longings and needs, then creating uniquely local spaces to encounter the grace of God. I am sure that worship on Sunday morning will continue, just as libraries continue to lend books, but what opportunities might we be missing if this is all we offer?

What are we doing to listen to our communities? How are our ministries uniquely local? Not every library needs life jackets, but Port Clinton does. What can we do to celebrate the gifts of our communities? In what ways can we innovate and tinker with new ideas, while still remaining faithful to the mission of Jesus?

I have found that transitions are often a bit uncomfortable, but they are also healthy. They jump-start our growth. They invite us to rediscover who we are. In this Advent season as the winter month grow cold, I invite you to spend some time exploring your local library; curl up with a good book, check out a board game, maybe experiment with the 3D printer. Explore how your library is meeting the needs of their community in ways that are faithful to their mission and then spend some time dreaming about your own parish’s transformation. Let me know what you discover, as we anticipate the coming of one who makes all things new.



Pastor Sarah Schaaf is Director of Community Engagement for the Northwestern Ohio Synod ELCA.

This article was originally published on the Northwestern Ohio Synod website:  
<https://nwos-elca.church/2022/11/29/what-the-church-can-learn-from-libraries/>