



**Here All Along:**  
**A Story about the Spirit in Our Backyard**  
**September 30, 2026**

Adam Mixon: Hello, friends. This is Adam Mixon with the Ministry Collaborative. I'm here with my colleagues Beth Daniel, Adam Borneman, and our special guest, Katie Nakamura Rengers. Katie recently published an article on our blog, and she's going to share a bit of that with us today. Katie, tell us a little bit about where you are now, and what's going on in your context, and how things are going out there.

Katie Nakamura Rengers: Yeah, absolutely. So I'm Katie Nakamura Rengers. I'm an Episcopal priest. And just about four months ago, I made a huge vocational and geographic move. I was a priest in the Diocese of Alabama, and my family and I discerned a call to the Diocese of Hawaii. And we moved with, uh, one shipping pod and a dog and two preteens to Honolulu. Church is wonderful, but church is also really challenging. It's got a little of that, like, West Coast secular vibe. There's a huge unhoused crisis that you might not expect in paradise, but it is something that surrounds this church.

And St. Elizabeth's is the name of the church. It's in one of the last working class neighborhoods in Honolulu, surrounded by public housing, the blessing of a lot of recent immigrants, particularly interesting, from Micronesia, and specifically the island of Chuuk. That plays some role in the story that I'm going to tell.

This is titled "Here All Along", and it begins with a conversation that I had with a-a young man, a parishioner that I'm going to call Justin.

"Yeah, there's no one else my age at church," shrugs the 28-year-old with resignation.

Justin grew up at Saint Elizabeth's, Honolulu, back when his brother led the lively youth group. He's still here. But most — well, maybe all — of the kids he knew a decade ago are now gone. Moved away, working, or sleeping in on Sunday mornings.

I'd invited Justin out to lunch, mostly for the sake of begging him not to eventually leave us for one of the more youthful mega churches in town.

Yet as we're talking, I suddenly realize: we're wrong. There are at least three other twenty-something men at our church. They live in the old rectory house, which means they're physically at church more than anyone — including me. Not two days earlier, they'd taken me out for a virgin mai tai.

See, three months ago, when I started here as Priest-in-Charge, I inherited a ministry that calls itself a Catholic Worker House.

The House was started a decade ago by two older folks who had been actual Catholic Workers. Those Baby Boomers had devoted their lives to Dorothy Day's instruction to "live in accordance with the justice and charity of Jesus Christ." They'd found their way to one of the roughest areas of Honolulu and started a food pantry at Saint Elizabeth's.

When the original Catholic Workers retired, there was an ensuing panic. Who would run the pantry now? A guy on the Mainland responded to a haphazard notice on an online bulletin board. It was discovered that someone's nephew had just graduated and likely had nothing better to do. These two guys eventually became three when they invited their triathlete buddy from the Midwest to join them in Paradise. He could train all he wanted, as long as he used his muscles to lift heavy pallets from the Food Bank.

When I investigated, I found young adults with little religious upbringing, almost no knowledge of Dorothy Day, and scant connection to the congregation that sponsors them. I also found hearts awake and full of compassion for the people they see and serve, day in and day out. On my very first day, I watched one of them lift Don, an ailing addict with open leg wounds, into his wheelchair — an act of pure tenderness now emblazoned on my heart.

One afternoon, Guy Number Three, the most recent addition, wanted to talk with me.

"I'm just curious," he said. "What is the Catholic Worker Movement?"

I honestly don't know much myself yet, so I gave him a brief overview of what I hoped were related topics — the Christian tradition of charity, liberation theology, and more recent New Monasticism movements.

"Yeah," he replied slowly. "I didn't grow up going to church at all. But you know, before this I spent several years in active duty military. I miss having that sense of purpose, of being willing to give your life for something. I want to live simply. I'd like to not own much. I really like the work we're doing at the House. I'd love to hear more about this stuff. I want to live my life intentionally."

No, this twenty-something wasn't exactly asking for a Bible study. Neither had he quite built a monument "to an unknown God" that I could, Paul-esque, interpret for him. But he did pull me out of a particular rut I can get stuck in — the one where I think there's some sort of shortage of ministry just because twenty- and thirty-year-olds aren't showing up to Sunday worship en masse.

If the Church's mission is reconciliation, these guys are sure trying to do just that. They don't do it perfectly, and they need mentorship. But that mentorship is something two millennia of Christianity can offer: how to process suffering and compassion. How to live with contradiction. How to discern a life of purpose.

I think of what Paul writes to the Romans: "But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? How are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him?"

We can't expect younger people who haven't heard the Gospel to come to us. But we can be more generous about offering a Gospel interpretation when we see that it may be really helpful.

And it's possible those young people aren't as rare or far off as we think — perhaps even living in our backyard.

Adam Borneman: Thanks, Katie. I love this story for lots of reasons, but I think for me right now, one of the reasons that I loved it so much the first time I came across it recently, is that I've been leading a Bible study now. And right now, we're going through the Book of Acts, and I always see something new in the Book of Acts. And I think one of the things I'm really struck with more than usual is: with every chapter in the Book of Acts, the Spirit is just wrecking every assumption we had about how ministry is supposed to work. It's wrecking every assumption we have about formulas for how people are included, or how people get saved, or whatever the formulas might be. And as I was reading your story, I was thinking about how many conventional assumptions or conventional wisdom is just getting wrecked by the different relationships and conversations.

So I would love to hear more from you on that. What were the things that showed up in this that were either surprising, or seemed to be in a, kind of, a liminal space that was hard to describe, just out of nowhere, and emerged in a way that only the Spirit could provide?

Katie: Yeah. So I came to this church and felt really called to it, felt really called to the amount of outreach that we do here: food pantry, hot lunches, hot breakfast; felt really called to the diversity of the congregation. We speak five different languages during the church service alone. And at the same time, there's something that feels kind of universal to the Mainline at St. Elizabeth's, which is the fogginess of interpreting what the future of this parish might look like. And, you know, without trying to predict that too much — we're going through many of the same challenges that are happening in San Francisco and New York and in Birmingham, Alabama: an aging congregation within a church tradition that served it really well from the 50s through the, maybe, early 2000s. And the culture and the way that people are spending their time, the way that younger people are seeking spirituality, is just shifting the ground all around us.

And so, I really see a lot of my role over the next however many years is to help this congregation discern: Where is the energy? Where is the Holy Spirit leading? I'm a big believer in that. I'm a big believer in not always trying to produce my own energy, or drag us backward into an energy that we used to have, but to say, like, "Where is it now?" Like, "Where is the creativity now? Where are the questions now?"

And there is energy, and there is Spirit in the people who are worshiping here on Sunday mornings. We turn 125 next year, and I tell people at the congregation this all the time, like: "I arrived four months ago. You have been annoying each other and blessing one another for decades." I have people who went to preschool together, right? And so it's not that the Holy Spirit is not in that Sunday morning, but it's that, maybe, the renewal that the Spirit is bringing is outside of that Sunday morning, and that these guys living in the back of the church in the rectory, some of their friends from their athletic groups, so many of our volunteers who don't go to church but are present during the week, like, all week long, I just sense that a lot of the renewed creativity is going to come from these folks.

What does that look like? I think it's going to look pretty different. I don't know if it's going to look different from the last 125 years, but it's going to look different from the last 30 years.

Adam Mixon: Yeah. Katie, first of all, thank you for always, when you write and you tell your stories, you're so candid about your encounters. So, I deeply appreciate that, and I do appreciate the overlapping of our stories. As I was reading what you wrote and then listening to you again tell the story, I was re-imagining myself back in Avondale at Zion Spring, and the people who are there to serve and

find welcome and community who, if we track back just a few years, they might not be as well-received. It is surprising.

You named a young man. I'm thinking of another one that we both know who we'll call "Rico", who grew up across the parking lot in the housing project, and has had this passing relationship with the church, and, kind of, brushing up against Jesus. But when the food pantry opened and we started serving on Saturday mornings, and how he put on an apron, and was very proud to stand next to me and help serve his neighbors in the community...and my mind just started to track toward the conversation that Jesus had with that young man that day. He asked him a question, and he notices that the young man's answer was discreet, and he says to that young man in a moment, "You're not far from the Kingdom."

I think we have these opportunities for folks to encounter the gospel in ways that aren't even so much about our proclamation, but they are tied to our ability to recognize the compassion, not being talked about very much, but is showing up in the places where God has privileged us to serve. It is remarkable. And to your point, it is very different. And some might even say it's kind of weird and funky-looking, but wow, these are the places where God shows up. So, thank you. I found a bunch of points of contact with you sharing that, and the fact that you hinged it all on this idea of they've been here all along, so maybe what has changed is us, and our sensitivity to God's presence outside of the sanctuary.

Katie: Right. St. Elizabeth's reminds me a lot of Zion Spring. It's always been a congregation of recent immigrants, of minorities, But then the people who've been there the longest have developed stability and gotten education and moved out of the neighborhood, and yet linger, because there's something of the Spirit and their ancestors, right, that ties them there. And at the same time, the neighborhood keeps rolling on, and there's this trust fall. I mean, can you imagine, right, saying at Zion Spring, "The future of this church is Rico"? Or at St. Elizabeth, "Oh, the future of this church is living in your backyard"?

Adam Mixon: Yeah.

Katie: Oh, that sends a little knot into my stomach. It's like, "Oh no."

Adam Mixon: Yeah. My hair is standing up on my forearms at the mention of it. They're like, "Wow."

Katie: Well, then, how much of that over the course of Christianity has there been, right? The hair standing up on your arms being like, "Oh no. If this is how the gospel is going to continue, I'm not sure that it will." and yet it has.

Adam Mixon: Somehow, somehow.

Adam Borneman: Or, "I'm not sure that I want to be a part of it."

Katie: Right.

Beth Daniel: There are so many different strands that we could pull on from your piece. I loved when you said you sometimes get in a rut about worship numbers, and then lift your eyes up and see, "Oh, the mission of the church is actually going well ,through people who are not there on Sunday mornings, they're doing something else."

And I loved your interaction, obviously, with guy number three. When you talk about the questions that we need to be eager to have, and ready to answer, even if it's, "I don't really know", are those questions from guy number three; like, "What is all this about?" Someone who's able to articulate that they're looking for purpose, they're rejecting materialism and progress in the traditional sense. They want something that they can give their lives to. These are all the things we as the church say we're about. Like, shouldn't we get more excited when someone can actually ask the questions that maybe we've even stopped answering as we're sitting in the pews? Maybe the people in church are not even asking anymore.

How did you feel in that moment when they asked you? I mean, I'm sure that you were articulate and wonderful, but did it fill you with like, "Oh, this is a muscle I haven't flexed in a little while"? Were you excited? Did you feel equipped? Like, how was it when someone so rawly names what it is that I think a lot of people are looking for, young and old?

Katie: Yeah, it was really enlivening. I mean, what pastor doesn't want to have a conversation with someone about the New Monasticism and Dorothy Day, and-and the ability to start from the beginning? I mean, with this wonderful person, it really was a starting from the beginning: "So, you know, there was this man named Jesus, and he proclaimed the first will be last, the last will be first." That passage was in our lectionary last Sunday, and that same young man, he brought it up at one of our staff meetings — not because I preached it, just because he was thinking about it, and maybe had researched it or something. I mean like, wow. That's what I want to spend my time doing. So there's an energy of the Spirit that's in our backyard, and a creativity that I want to have influence the rest of this parish.

And then there's also the Spirit of stability, and reading spreadsheets, and tithing money, right, with regularity every month, that has to infuse the reality of the mission. So, my background is in church planting and innovation, and not being the priest in charge of a congregation, trying to see how do these two ends (or these two perspectives) — they need to inspire each other.

Beth: Yeah.