

FaithLink

Connecting Faith and Life

The Future of Movies by Jessica Petersen



An American Pastime

“A great story has the power to move us. It speaks to something that lives at the core of who we are.” These are the opening words of the *Cinema Stories* podcast hosted by Courtney Huskisson and Matthew Rushing. When we watch movies, either at home or in theaters, we don’t just watch them for entertainment but also to connect with the stories and to learn about ourselves and the world. These stories transcend generations and often become more meaningful to us over time.

Going to the movies has been an American pastime for more than a century. From storefront theaters and nickelodeons to the lavish movie palaces of the 1920s and the drive-in theaters and multiplexes that followed, movies have compelled Americans with their stories and become an icon of American culture.

While the movie industry remains strong, the theater industry is in turmoil. Over the past several decades, home televisions, cable, VCRs, and DVD players have all contributed to the decline of theaters. More recently, the increasing quality and affordability of high-definition TVs and surround-sound systems, coupled with the convenience of streaming services like Netflix and Disney+, have made it even more challenging for movie theaters to thrive.

In 2020, movie theaters all over the country were forced to shut down for months due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Some theaters are still closed, and those reopening are operating at reduced capacity. It remains to

In recent years, our experience of watching movies, both in theaters and in our homes, has changed dramatically. How has the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated these changes? What will the future of in-person entertainment look like? How can churches learn from these changes as they work to shape the future of their own communities?

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be seen whether Americans will return to theaters given the taste they've acquired for first-run films released directly to streaming services.

REFLECT

- How have movie theaters and the ways you consume movies changed during your lifetime?
- Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, did you prefer watching movies in the theater or at home? How has the pandemic changed your experience of movies?

Looking Toward the Future

After struggling through the Great Depression and World War II, many theaters were forced to shut down in 1948 following the Paramount decrees, a series of government orders that prevented studios from screening films exclusively in theaters the studio owned. The ruling was designed to limit the monopolization of the industry and gave rise to a number of independent theaters and independent studios.

Significant changes may be coming for the movie industry again. Last month, the US Department of Justice terminated the Paramount decrees, allowing studios and streaming services to own theaters. Netflix has already taken over the lease of the Paris Theater in New York City, and there are rumors that Amazon, Apple, and Disney are considering similar moves. While streaming services are in high demand, movie theater chains are falling further into debt and ownership changes may be on the horizon. Imagine the moviegoing experience at a theater owned by Disney or Apple.

When and how major films are released may also change. With theaters closed, studios have been experimenting. Some movies, like the hit musical *Hamilton*, were released free to subscribers of a single streaming service, while others like *Trolls World Tour* were released to multiple streaming services for a rental fee. *Mulan*, a highly anticipated release from Disney, mixed the two models and was released only to Disney+ subscribers, but at an additional cost.

In an article for *The New York Times*, James B. Stewart wrote that the release of major films on

streaming services “might be a win for those stuck-at-home hungry for new content, but it will be a loss for American culture. Unlike watching a movie in the basement while wearing pajamas, going to a theater is an event and a social experience, and at its best a memorable one.” Movie theaters provide a designated place and time to focus on the story while engaging in a shared experience. Combined with the enormous screen and all-encompassing surround sound, the atmosphere of movie theaters cannot be replicated outside the theater.

According to Maggie Valentine, author of *The Show Starts on the Sidewalk*, “Movie theaters have always come back, and when they do, they’ve been better.” She says the movie palaces of the 1920s lured people out of their homes for entertainment after the 1918 flu pandemic. Perhaps we can benefit from streaming services now while looking to a future that includes innovations for movie theaters, so that we can continue the culture of moviegoing together.

REFLECT

- How do you think the dissolution of the Paramount decrees will influence the future of movie theaters?
- What innovations would you like to see in the movie industry? What are the possible costs and benefits?

Learning from the Movie Industry

For decades, movie theaters have struggled and church attendance has declined. The two aren't directly connected, but both are receiving the same message: innovate or die. While the purpose of worship is not entertainment, movies and worship are both communal experiences. They center around stories that have the power to change us, and they are enriched by in-person participation with others. So, what can churches learn from the movie theater industry?

During the pandemic, churches with the financial and technological means streamed their worship services, allowing people to join without leav-

ing their homes. Streaming also allows worship services to transcend geographical boundaries. Beyond the pandemic, livestreaming and digital ministry have a lot of potential. They enable those who cannot leave their homes or are working during services to worship with their church when they cannot be physically present. Some churches may find that many in their congregation participate exclusively online, which requires ongoing creative engagement with digital ministry. But, like streaming movies, the experience of online worship is often lacking.

The movie theater industry has taught us that while gimmicks and atmosphere may get people in the door, they won't keep them there. Churches have more to offer than free coffee, indoor play-scapes, and stadium seating. When people return to churches, they will seek community above all else. They've seen worship online; what they need is in-person connection through the experience of worshipping side by side with others who profess the same faith. This experience is irreplaceable. When we seek out community in movie theaters, the community around us is fleeting while the

stories stick with us. In worship, community is as essential to the experience as the stories we tell. Churches must offer worship that is meaningful, relevant, and—like the best movies—connects with people of all ages and abilities on their level.

REFLECT

- What are the benefits of online worship? What is missing? What are your hopes for in-person worship in the future?
- What types of Christian community are you connected to? In what ways are they helpful to you on your Christian journey?

Core Bible Passages

Hebrews 10:25 exhorts Christians not to neglect meeting together and to focus on encouraging one another. As the COVID-19 pandemic continues, it is especially important that Christians connect with one another for support and encouragement. Movie theaters may bring people together for a communal experience, but the community possible among Christians is durable and life-giving.

The entire chapter of Hebrews 11 is like a film reel of stories about our ancestors in faith, the Israelite heroes that remind us who we are and where we came from. Like the stories in movies, these narratives of our faith shape who we are as they connect deeply with our hearts and minds.

The description of the early Christians in Acts 2:41-47 exemplifies what Christian community and worship was intended to be like. As Christianity spread throughout the world and centuries passed, our practices changed and evolved, but we are still called to devote ourselves “to the apostles’ teaching, to the community, to their shared meals, and to their prayers” (Acts 2:42). Remembering the stories of our faith in community with other Christians and in conversation with God enables us to live out our calling as Christ’s disciples.

REFLECT

- During this challenging time, how can you continue meeting with other Christians to encourage one another in faith?
- What images or stories stand out in Hebrews 11? What is their significance in your faith story?
- What characteristics of the Acts 2 community do you see in your Christian community? What aspects of it are absent?

Learning from Pixar

Many assume that Pixar—the animation studio behind the movies *Toy Story*, *Finding Nemo*, and *Cars*—makes films exclusively for children. But that assumption does not explain why adults flock to see these so-called kids’ movies.

Impressive animation is the medium Pixar uses to tell timeless stories and focus on themes that get at the core of our humanity. The stories are multilayered, allowing children to understand one aspect of the story, while adults grasp a deeper and more complex meaning. The same is true of the films’ humor. While appropriate for all ages, adults and children appreciate it differently. What if worship was like this too?

Churches can take a cue from Pixar to make worship engaging and meaningful for people of all ages. Five minutes of children’s time or an occasional performance from the youth choir does not equate to multigenerational worship.

Worship that is engaging for all ages is consistently appropriate for children and youth, inviting them in and speaking to them through music, liturgy, and sermon illustrations they can understand and relate to, while also delivering a deeper message for adults. Right now, intergenerational worship is more important than ever.

REFLECT

- At your church, who is worship for? What implicit message do the children and youth of your congregation receive during worship? Is it one of inclusion and value as members of God’s family or something else?
- What would worship at your church look like if it was truly inclusive of people of all ages and abilities? What current elements would remain? What would need to change?

United Methodist Perspective

The United Methodist Book of Worship declares that, “Our worship in both its diversity and its unity is an encounter with the living God through the risen Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit. When the people of God gather, the Spirit is free to move them to worship in diverse ways, according to their needs.” While this statement refers to the diversity of worship expressions within United Methodism, worship looks more diverse for all of us right now, whether we are worshipping in person or online.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, United Methodist churches across the connection are experimenting with creative approaches to socially distant in-person worship. Many churches have moved worship outside while others are imitating drive-in movie theaters by hosting drive-in worship services. Some churches are relocating services to a local park or beach, with an emphasis on reaching out to the community. Other churches are empowering families or small groups to worship on their own with a provided order of worship. In Africa, some clergy have divided their congregations into “class meetings” for small group gatherings and services. While worship may look different than it did in the sanctuary before the pandemic, that does not make it any less an offering to God.

REFLECT

- What is the purpose of worship? How has the COVID-19 pandemic impacted your experience and understanding of worship?
- In his book, *Worshipping with United Methodists*, Hoyt L. Hickman says: “The way we relate to God and to other people in worship should be a model for the way we do so during the week.” How is this true in your life?

Helpful Links

- The *Cinema Stories* podcast focuses on connecting the stories in movies with the story of the gospel: <https://www.listennotes.com/podcasts/cinema-stories-podcast-to-be-the-church-FGcSj6fohnR/>
- “Movie Theaters Are on the Brink. Can Wine and Cheese Save Them?” from *The New York Times*: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/15/business/movie-theaters-coronavirus.html>
- “Churches embrace outdoor worship during pandemic” from *UM News*: <https://www.umnews.org/en/news/churches-embrace-outdoor-worship-during-pandemic>
- “Turning to Wesley’s class model amid pandemic” from *UM News*: <https://www.umnews.org/en/news/turning-to-wesleys-class-model-amid-pandemic>

About the Writer

Jessica Petersen is an ordained deacon in the Rio Texas Conference of The United Methodist Church. In her ministry, she is passionate about family faith formation and intergenerational discipleship. Jessica lives in Round Rock, Texas, with her husband and their two daughters.

Next Week in **FaithLink**
Connecting Faith and Life

Lessons from Another Pandemic

by Kira Austin-Young

Nearly forty years after its discovery, HIV/AIDS continues to ravage the globe. What is the state of the HIV/AIDS pandemic today? What can we learn from the struggle against this disease as we fight a new pandemic? How does our faith guide us to provide healing for the sick and mercy for the suffering?



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Opening Prayer

God of grace, meet us in this place. As we enter into this time of sharing, open our hearts to you. Enable us to share honestly, listen intently, and respond faithfully. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

Leader Helps

- If meeting in person, have several Bibles on hand and a markerboard and markers for writing lists or responses to reflection questions.
- Remind the group that people have different perspectives and to honor these differences by treating one another with respect as you explore this topic together.
- Read or review highlights of each section of this issue. Use the *REFLECT* questions to stimulate discussion.
- In the week before this issue is used, a video about this topic will be available online at <https://www.facebook.com/Lets-Talk-About-the-Bible-109513374028090>. You can watch this video for your own benefit or share it with your participants to prepare them for this week's discussion.
- As a group, take time to read Hebrews 11 slowly and reflectively. Leave space between the stories. Encourage participants to close their eyes and listen, noting the images that come to mind.
- If participants have seen movies based on the Bible, engage in a discussion about these movies, asking: What movies have you seen? How faithful were the movies to the biblical text? Did watching these movies enhance your understanding of the text or call it into question?

Teaching Alternatives

Plan a movie night and choose a film for your group to watch together (for safety, consider an outside or online screening), or select a movie most of your group has seen or can easily view before you meet. If it's a movie covered in an episode of the *Cinema Stories* podcast (for example: Pixar's *Inside Out*), listen to the podcast episode as a catalyst for discussion when your group meets. Alternatively, your group can create a mock podcast as you discuss the themes in the movie and how they relate to the story of the gospel.

Closing Prayer

Loving God, as we seek entertainment in movies, speak to us through their stories. As we seek you in worship, surround us with community. Transform us with the story of your love and grace, so that we can live out our call to share it with others in Christ's name. Amen.