

# A Public Vocation: Mister Rogers' Neighborhood Congregation

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**M**ister Rogers' *Neighborhood* was not a religious program, but it often felt like going to church. For more than thirty years, viewers attended daily worship at the church of the *Neighborhood*, formed by comforting rituals of cardigan zipping, shoe tossing, and a little red trolley transporting us into another world. We knew all the hymns, leaned in close when it was time for that day's parable in the Neighborhood of Make-Believe, and by the end of the show found ourselves challenged yet encouraged by a man who always seemed to know exactly what we were feeling and said just what we needed to hear. In his unique way, Mister Rogers was subtly yet effectively shaping his viewers into curious, empathetic, emotionally intelligent, and virtuous people.

Fred McFeeley Rogers began attending seminary when he was already working in television, to deepen what he brought to his children's programs. For eight years, he took classes during his lunch break and in the evenings, graduating in 1962 with a Master of Divinity from Pittsburgh Theological Seminary. Following graduation, the Presbyterian Church ordained him with a charge to serve children and families through mass media.<sup>1</sup> Ordaining someone who had no plans to assume a traditional pulpit or serve under a tall steeple was so radical for the time that it reportedly sparked controversy in the local presbytery, leading to heated debate over whether someone should—or even could—be ordained to a wider, more public ministry outside of a local church.<sup>2</sup>

Those in favor of ordaining him for public ministry won the debate, and this is how Mister Rogers became America's children's minister. In his own kind and curious way, he looked at the world and the church and intuited that his vocation would not be of clerical robes and pulpits, but rather of cardigans and trolleys. Children's television was, as Frederick Buechner might say, the place where Rogers' deep gladness and the world's great hunger would meet. And his public ministry offers hope and

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inspiration for today's seminary graduates who will increasingly find themselves in ministry beyond pulpits and pews.

## Doing theology in public

Today, earning a seminary degree and being ordained for service outside of a local church is no longer the unusual vocational path it was in 1962. In a 2017 survey by The Association of Theological Schools, two out of five seminary students stated that they intended to use their degrees to serve in contexts outside the local church.<sup>3</sup> Those who *do* enter local church contexts may find congregations nearly unrecognizable from the ones in which they grew up. In many places attendance and giving numbers are not returning to pre-pandemic levels, and livestreaming worship is now standard even in the smallest congregations. Additionally, for twenty years the fastest growing religious group in the United States has been the "nones": people who, when asked to state their religious preference or affiliation, select "none."<sup>4</sup> The "rise of the

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1. Fred Rogers, *A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood* (New York: Penguin Books, 2019), 2.

2. Amy Hollingsworth, *The Simple Faith of Mister Rogers* (Nashville: Integrity Publishers, 2005), xxi.

3. Abby Perry, "Non-Traditional Seminary Students Are Changing the Church," *CT Creative Studio*, n.d., <https://www.christianitytoday.com/partners/higher-education/non-traditional-seminary-students-are-changing-church.html>.

4. Frank Newport, "Slowdown in the Rise of Religious Nones,"

nones” has recently begun to level off at around 21-22 percent of the U.S. population, but sharing the gospel in the public square has always been the mission of the church. These trends seem to be pushing the newest generation of theologians further out of sanctuaries and more into the public than those of previous generations. This might be viewed as a failure of theological education or religious leadership to keep students on the path to pulpit ministry, but what if it is instead a movement by the Holy Spirit to help the church reclaim its central mission for a new era?

Changes in the wider public tend to cause two reactions in religious communities. The first is a retreat further into the safety of the sanctuary, where stained-glass windows, well-worn pews, and congregational hymns reinforce feelings of familiarity and comfort. The second reaction is to approach changes with curiosity and imagination, using new tools to deliver timeless messages.

H. Richard Niebuhr once claimed that Christian ethics is first asking, “What is happening?” and then asking, “What is a fitting response to what is happening?”<sup>5</sup> Rogers discovered television as a young adult, leading him to ask, “What is happening?” The rest of his life then became a fitting response to what was happening with this new communicative tool. In 1968, *Mister Roger’s Neighborhood* began broadcasting nationally. The first week of the show was less than a month after the Tet Offensive of the Vietnam War, and Rogers used this current event to minister with children about how it feels when things around us are different and scary. In that week’s episodes, Trolley takes the viewer into the Neighborhood of Make-Believe, where Lady Elaine Fairchilde has done some rearranging. Amid these changes, King Friday XIII is unsettled, anxious, and fearful. He does not like change! So, he uses his power to establish border guards and declare war against any further change. This puts everyone on edge, even the viewer. What will happen to the Neighborhood? Will it ever be the same again?

Throughout the week, Rogers helped viewers understand how feelings of fear and anxiety can lead people to react in many ways. The prevailing message was that building up defenses and waging war is not the only way to respond to conflict or change, and it is certainly not the preferred way. At the end of the week, Lady Aberlin and Daniel Tiger send messages of peace, love, kindness, and tenderness, tied to balloons they float over King Friday’s defenses. Upon receiving them, King Friday’s hardened heart is softened, and he recognizes that there are healthier ways to handle unwelcome change.

At some point over the last few decades, Lady Elaine Fairchilde must have also snuck into our churches overnight and rearranged things while we were sleeping. Church is different now, and religion does not hold the same place in American public life that it once did. The Pew Research Center estimates that only 64 percent of Americans currently identify as Christian, and projects that this

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percentage may fall below 50 percent as early as 2070.<sup>6</sup> What will happen to the church? Will the church ever be the same again?

The most likely answer is, *probably not*. Some changes in the world are out of our control. When this happens, we are tempted to retreat and set up hostile defenses, all while lamenting that things are not like they used to be. It’s hard to adjust to changes imposed upon us. But as modeled by Daniel Tiger and Lady Aberlin, feeling anxiety and fear amid a changing landscape can be met with adaptation and optimism. If we let it, changes in the wider public can draw us out of our fears and invite us to imagine new ways of more strongly aligning ministry with the needs of the world. And what is needed today is a church, and its leaders, willing to do theology in public.

Public theologian Alison Eliot examines the relationship between church and public and identifies three ways the church engages in the work of public theology: institutional, constructive, and personal. Each form of engagement with the public has a time and place, she says, but the effectiveness in delivering a theological message that is received by the public is largely dependent on the context.

In the institutional public, the church internally discerns a position about what the public ought to believe and do, then delivers it publicly as an attempt to influence policy and decisions. In this public, religious bodies function as one of many institutional authorities negotiating power through carefully compromised decisions and resolutions, often through a democratic process. This model has merit but also tends to be impersonal and with little to no consideration of passions, feelings, or opinions.

The constructed public functions like a town hall meeting or public forum, where individuals, groups, and institutions openly share ideas with one another. In this model, truth is not assumed to belong to one group but is sought after as a collaborative effort. It is not worked out elsewhere and then delivered to the

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Gallup.com (blog), May 31, 2023, <https://news.gallup.com/opinion/polling-matters/406544/slowdown-rise-religious-nones.aspx>.

5. Mark Toulouse, *God in Public* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 45.

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6. Reem Nadeem, “How the U.S. Religious Landscape Could Change Over the Next 50 Years,” *Pew Research Center’s Religion & Public Life Project*, September 13, 2022, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2022/09/13/modeling-the-future-of-religion-in-america/>.

hearers. Instead, the public itself is sought out and constructed by this process, but with the church as the host and convener of the process.

Personal conversations embody Elliot's third expression of public theology. As opposed to an impersonal, top-down institutional public, or a constructed public in which the church remains the "host," a personal public uses the model of personal conversations and stories which connect a speaker and listener in ways that merely preaching or delivering the church's position to a waiting public cannot. The goal here is less about winning a debate and more about encouraging listeners to regard a different view more sympathetically than they did before.

Elliot maintains that despite these three expressions of public theology, the church continues to fail in its engagement with the public—not because of a lack of effort, but due to an inability to communicate effectively. The church has not stopped "speaking out" on public issues, but it often falsely assumes a certain shared level of theological or contextual literacy, fails to specify an audience, and incorrectly believes that screaming louder means the message is more likely to be received. These mistakes in communication are compounded by two additional realities: (1) the American public is less religious than prior generations, and thus less biblically and theologically literate; and (2) the primary method of theological education remains one in which instructors and students approach theology as a position to be well-researched and sufficiently argued, worked out in classrooms and offices, only later to be disseminated to a waiting public.

Beyond these struggles, the wider public is seldom given space to have its own voice(s) heard, instead being relegated to the role of passive recipient of what the academy and church offer. The church and academy speak from the heights of their understanding, and the public does as well, but the result is talking across one another in competitive debate rather than open-minded engagement in collaborative truth-seeking.<sup>7</sup>

Above all, Elliot says public theology ought to be "the meeting point between the perspective and the resources of faith and the detail of a world that is broken and hurting."<sup>8</sup> In other words, it is an encounter in which the hope-filled balloons of faith can heal and bless the make-believe yet still very powerful kingdoms of our world. Public theology is an episode of *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*.

## Lessons for today

*Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* itself has evolved with the times. The original show ended production two years prior to Rogers' death in 2003, but an animated successor, *Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood*, began broadcasting in 2012. Most episodes of *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* are still available online or streaming, but the decision to create *Daniel Tiger* was a recognition that today's children are growing up in a world far different than the one in

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Similarly, in order to communicate effectively with today's public, religious leaders and theologians will need to look first outward, then upward. Looking outward entails observing the public and asking, "What is happening?" Then, looking upward seeks imaginative responses by God to what is happening. Rogers' ministry, though constructed for a different age and not meant to be emulated specifically, offers three general principles crucial to consider by all who attempt public theology in the current American religious landscape:

1. Utilize new forms of communication to reach a wider public audience.
2. Prioritize personal conversation over top-down messaging.
3. Speak theological truth that is still broadly intelligible to a non-religious audience.

### *Utilize new forms of communication to reach a wider public audience.*

During his senior year of college, Rogers' parents bought a television. He had never seen one before, and when he turned it on, he was, in his words, "appalled by what were labeled 'children's programs'—pies in the faces and slapstick! That's when I decided to go into [television]. Children deserve better. Children need better."<sup>9</sup> Tom Junod describes it more dramatically:

He was the soft son of overprotective parents, but he believed, right then, that he was strong enough to enter into battle with *that*—that machine, that medium—and to wrestle with it until it yielded to him, until the

7. Alison Elliot, "Doing Theology: Engaging the Public," in *International Journal of Public Theology*, vol. 1, nos 3 & 4 (2007).

8. Elliot, "Doing Theology," 304.

9. Rogers, *A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood*, 2.

ground touched by its blue shadow became hallowed and this thing called television came to be used 'for the broadcasting of grace through the land.'"10

A decade later, when Rogers graduated seminary, he wanted the church to use this new medium to broadcast its message and was deep in conversation with the United Presbyterian Church to produce a denominational television program. But funding never materialized, and this made him furious at the church, explains Shea Tuttle. She writes: "In his mind, they were not only missing an enormous opportunity but also abdicating responsibility [for children]."11 Facing a church unable and unwilling to support this mission to which he felt called, Rogers chose to live a public vocation using tools contemporary for his time.

During the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, religious leaders and congregations began livestreaming worship, offering pre-recorded or live devotions through social media, and conducted meetings, Bible studies, and prayer groups with videoconferencing. In many places, this shift in practice had been resisted or ignored for years because of a perceived lack of resources or collective disinterest in attempting something new. But crises often have a way of forcing adaptations previously considered impossible. In this case, congregations quickly realized that broadcasting worship and staying connected was possible with nothing more than a smart phone and an internet connection. These practices, once temporary fixes amid crisis, remain as permanent fixtures in the new normal of ministry.

These new media, while raising wider concerns about accessibility to technology for *all* of the public, also create opportunities to reconsider the definition of and best practices for making personal connections with the public. First, online viewers must not be neglected or considered secondary. Rather than setting up video cameras in worship and meetings for online viewers to merely eavesdrop on conversations, speakers should regularly acknowledge online viewers and invite them into the conversation, as Mister Rogers did with his television viewers. Rogers had the ability to make a viewer he had never met feel like they were just as much involved in the activity on screen as the characters and guests of the *Neighborhood*. Second, much of Rogers' ability to communicate effectively was the result of recognizing the importance of both the message and the method of delivery. Today's preachers should begin to experiment with new methods of delivery, including where to stand or sit; attentiveness to body language, facial expressions, intonations, and eye contact; and recrafting the sermon or message itself to sound less like a formal lecture and more like a casual conversation.

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10. Tom Junod, "Can You Say ... Hero?" in *A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood* (New York: Penguin Books, 2019), xxvii.

11. Shea Tuttle, *Exactly As You Are: The Life and Faith of Mister Rogers* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2019), 73.

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***Prioritize personal conversation over top-down messaging.***

*Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* always felt like more of a visit than a show. Rogers often spoke directly into the camera, giving the illusion that there was no boundary between his living room and the viewers. His opening routine of changing into a sweater and sneakers, and preference for sitting, further communicated that this was a visit between neighbors. And he used body language, facial expressions, intonations, and words to form a deep personal connection. Amy Hollingsworth says that Rogers mastered the art of talking to children "as if they were there with him."<sup>12</sup> And like any good preacher, he seldom used first-person singular pronouns, opting instead to include his listeners in a collective "we" and "us" as much as possible.<sup>13</sup>

The *Neighborhood* was both a personal and constructed public. Rogers, though still the host, was "convinced that in the space between the television set and the viewer is holy ground, and what we put on the television can, by the Holy Spirit, be translated into what this person needs to hear and see."<sup>14</sup>

When neighbors came to visit Mister Rogers, or when he went to them, the viewer was never neglected but always invited to participate and learn alongside the people on the show. For more than thirty years Mister Rogers introduced us to his beloved and diverse community in the *Neighborhood*: people of all different professions, ages, genders and abilities were not only welcome, but celebrated for what made them special. He visited people who made crayons and pretzels or lived in underground homes. Mister Rogers' curious approach to the world and the people we share it with taught us that we can all learn something from each other, whether it's a skill, experience, emotion, or feeling.

With respect to race, gender, socioeconomic status, or physical ability, everyone was part of *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*. If viewers ever doubted that, Rogers would sing "It's You I Like" directly into the camera, and the children watching couldn't help but think he was singing specifically to them. Rogers once said:

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12. Hollingsworth, *The Simple Faith of Mister Rogers*, xxii.

13. Tuttle, *Exactly As You Are*, 101.

14. Fred Rogers in Hollingsworth, *The Simple Faith of Mister Rogers*, 34.

Christianity to me is a matter of being accepted as we are. Jesus certainly wasn't concerned about people's stations in life or what they looked like or whether they were perfect in behavior or feeling. How often in the New Testament we read of Jesus' empathy for those people who felt their own lives to be imperfect, and the marvelous surprise and joy when they sensed his great acceptance.<sup>15</sup>

Rogers took a genuine and curious interest in people unlike him. He credits his favorite seminary professor, Dr. William Orr, for teaching him that Scripture has both an accuser and an advocate. The accuser, the evil one, "would like nothing better than to have us feel awful about who we are . . . and look through those eyes at our neighbor, and see only what's awful—in fact, look for what's awful in our neighbor," said Rogers. But Jesus, the advocate, he said, "would want us to feel as good as possible about God's creation within us, and in [our minds] we would look through those eyes, and see what's wonderful about our neighbor."

For Rogers, being neighborly was not politely waving to one another from across a picket fence or when passing someone on the sidewalk. Neighbors are people who care for one another, listen with curiosity rather than judgment, and appreciate the other exactly as they are. Neighbors are, as Jesus taught in the parable of the Good Samaritan, people who follow the command to love God *and* neighbor with equal conviction and commitment. And neighbors are those who communicate on the same plane, sitting next to one another on a park bench or while standing in line at the coffee shop. Neighborly practices reject the dynamics of power imbalance between speakers and assume that everyone has wisdom worthy of sharing.

### ***Speak theological truth that is still broadly intelligible to a non-religious audience.***

Twentieth century Catholic theologian John Courtney Murray argued that to be effective in a pluralistic society, theology must be communicated in broadly intelligible ways so the message can be received by those with a different religious background or no religious background at all. This means knowing how to speak theologically without using explicitly theological language.

Mister Rogers exhibited this masterfully. He never intended to impose his belief on others, but instead created an atmosphere that would allow viewers to feel safe and accepted. Once, when asked whether he saw *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* as spiritual formation, he referred to the program as "tending soil."<sup>16</sup>

One tool he used to tend the soil was Jesus' preferred teaching method: parables. The stories in the Neighborhood of Make Believe were carefully written parables meant to deliver a moral and spiritual lesson to viewers. Rogers knew, as Jesus did, that we learn best through stories, and with his puppet parables Rogers

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Rogers also served as a moral exemplar by modeling a life of spiritual virtue both on and off camera. Every episode began with a yellow light, encouraging viewers to slow down and learn to be patient. The show's intentionally diverse cast and his kind manner with every guest was an act of charity, drawing closer to God by loving those whom God loves. And he taught viewers how to recognize negative emotions and find healthy, creative outlets to handle them.

In his personal life, Rogers famously practiced temperance with exercise and healthy habits. And in public appearances, when an interviewer would ask if he was offended or upset by the parodies of him and his program (such as Eddie Murray's "Mr. Robinson" on *Saturday Night Live*), he presumed that those poking fun of him meant well and had their hearts in the right place. In all of this, Rogers was not shy about his religious faith but was also intentional about not imposing it on others. Striking this balance is difficult, yet necessary if others are to be persuaded by anything we say or do.

### **Conclusion**

Thirty years ago, Linell Cady lamented that theological scholarship exists primarily as "theologians who speak to theologians who speak to theologians," and the lack of cross-disciplinary conversation creates and widens distance between academic disciplines. Today, many American congregations and religious leaders are caught in similar closed-loop systems, in which "Christians speak to Christians who speak to Christians." As a result, the distance between religion and other areas of American public life is also growing.

There was a time when theological education was preparation for one thing: ministry in a grand sanctuary, behind a pulpit, among a church and a neighborhood in which a certain level of theological understanding could be assumed. This was also a time when the church did not need to work hard to engage the public

15. Fred Rogers, "Protestant Hour Broadcast Script" (radio, February 25, 1976), 2-3, FRA, quoted in Tuttle, *Exactly As You Are*, 24.

16. Hollingsworth, *The Simple Faith of Mister Rogers*, 38.

because it was already centrally located within the wider public. The church thus served as a dispenser of theological truth to a passive public whose only role was to receive and accept it—or not.

But the public—the neighborhood—has changed, and so has the church. Things are not like they used to be and may never be the same again. Some within the church have responded in the manner of King Friday XIII, digging in their heels and defending the kingdoms of prior eras. Others, struck by fear, have chosen to look away and hope that tomorrow things will go back to normal.

However, there is reason for optimism. First, 60 percent of seminarians *are* still planning to practice ministry in local church contexts. This is wonderful, because there are still millions of faithful Christians who will benefit from their ministry and partner alongside them to renew existing congregations.

The remaining 40 percent are learning theology in preparation for a more public ministry. These students are unburdened by the institutional history and traditions remembered by older generations, and as a result they are more prepared to engage the public in new ways.

As they do, we should continue teaching them about the beloved Mister Rogers. He was also a young seminary graduate once, and he also followed God's call into a public vocation of ministry that confused and rankled the church establishment. In doing so, he became a balloon that lifted up messages of peace, love, kindness, and tenderness for a public desperately in need of them, and then patiently and eagerly listened to what the public could teach *him* about faithfulness and virtue.

If one quiet and gentle man from little Latrobe, Pennsylvania, can leave this kind of legacy, imagine what hope-filled messages will be released into the wider public by the seminarians of today? Imagine what wisdom the public could share with the faithful, if we are bold enough to visit the public to listen, and learn? Imagine what truth the church and public have failed to find on their own, but could discover together if the communication was a little bit more like an episode of *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*?

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