time, though, I wanted desperately to serve a traditional congregation, and so I began applying to open positions. I did a lot of interviews and was close to receiving many calls. One congregational committee even negotiated a contract with me and then, at the last minute, revoked that contract.

This is where the heartache comes in. I so badly wanted to be, and thought I was called to be, a parish pastor. But these experiences put an end to any sense of a traditional ministry. I went back to the board of directors of Presbyterian Welcome and asked if I could have my job back.

What happened then really was remarkable. Chris Shelton, president of the board and a teaching elder, told me that I could have my job back but that it was clear I was not called to ministry as it stood at Presbyterian Welcome. So either I was called to go elsewhere or God was calling us, through me, to shift directions. I was sent away to pray, write, and think, and that's when I had the vision for Not So Church.

During that period of time I had become fairly obsessed with the yarn arts. I was learning how to crochet, and I found that I was most happy when I was with groups of people who knit and crochet. I also had picked up my violin for the first time in years and was taking old-time fiddle lessons. Both crocheting and playing the fiddle required me to get out of my head and let my body take over. They were also teaching me how to improvise.

While speaking with my spiritual director, I bemoaned the fact that I had very little interest or energy for much of my work, noting though that I did get excited every time I picked up the fiddle or gathered with others to knit and crochet. So she asked me: “ Might God be calling you through these contexts of fiddling, knitting, and crocheting? Might God be calling you to the places where you do find energy—calling you to start something else, something for people who have been burned by the church and who love the arts?”

In other words, it was time to do some improvising. It was time to get back into the church, but this time with my whole self—my queer self and my artistic self and my fiddling musician self.

At the time, I didn’t know exactly what this ministry was going to look like, but I did know that I wanted to attract people who were ambivalent about church—people who were church curious but wouldn’t necessarily go on a Sunday morning. I knew I wanted to attract musicians and people who hadn’t yet discovered they were musicians. I knew I wanted worship to be created by the community for the community and to be a laboratory for art. Beyond that, only time would tell.

We began with a trial period that lasted over a year. At that point we didn’t have a name—we tried out lots of different names to see what would stick, and in the end Not So Churchy won. For our trial period, I invited friends from different communities. We played and explored and experimented. Remarkably, people kept coming back. People who had originally just come to support me ended up coming back again and again. When I told them they didn’t have to come back just to support me, they told me they were coming back because they loved it; it had nothing to do with me.

After our year of experimentation, Presbyterian Welcome adopted Not So Churchy as part of its ministry. We found space in the lovely building of Lafayette Avenue Presbyterian Church, located in the Fort Greene section of Brooklyn—a transportation hub full of artists and community leaders.

We now gather there for worship on the third Monday of every month. We meet on Mondays because the theater world is not working on Monday nights. We meet a half hour before worship for chocolate hour, munching on fruit and chocolate-covered caramels as we catch up with each other. We sing much of the liturgy. After I preach, we talk together about the reading and my sermon, and making sure everyone’s voice is heard. We take Communion every time. Everything else is improvisational. Children are welcome, and we have a handful of them. They have their own table with coloring books and Lego sets. They love to take Communion, and they dance their way through most of the music. We leave feeling calmer and supported, often gifted with a new perspective.

We also meet each time another month for community meetings, artistic workshops, and service opportunities. We currently have about 20 individuals in our core group, with many others that drop in and out. Many who come identify along the LGBTQ spectrum, but not all. All of us, however, have had a rocky relationship with the church, often the Presbyterian church in particular.

But that relationship is changing. We are now recognized as a new worshiping community as part of the denomination’s 1001 initiative. This designation has brought healing for many participants in our community who never imagined being acknowledged, let alone celebrated, for the gifts we bring to the PC(USA) and beyond.

Where will we go next? Who are we to become? From which ashes will we again be reborn? Only time—and a lot more prayer, experimentation, and improvisation—will tell.

Mike Vanderhall is an ordained teaching elder in the PC(USA); the executive director of Presbyterian Welcome, and the founder of Not So Churchy.

**LEARN MORE**

To connect with Not So Churchy:
- [notosochurchy.org](http://notosochurchy.org)
- [facebook.com/notosochurchy](http://facebook.com/notosochurchy)
- [twitter.com/notosochurchy](http://twitter.com/notosochurchy)

---

**Out of Order**

Out of Order (directed by Amanda Biaggini) is a documentary following three LGBTQ members of the PC(USA), including Mike Vanderhall. Joining a group of future ministers at a secret retreat in the South, Out of Order is the first film of its kind to positively portray queer people of faith actively changing the meaning of church through alternative Christian communities, worship practices, and theological interpretation. To watch the trailer and learn more: [outforderers.com](http://outforderers.com)

---

**Too Cold Out There Without You**

Movies, when they are really good, can open you to the experience of walking for a while in someone else’s shoes. Too Cold Out There Without You, which played in October at the College Town Film Festival in Athens, Ohio, and won the best LGBT film award at the Toronto Independent Festival in September, is such a movie. Using interviews filmed over several years, director Amy Gattis deftly weaves together the story of a remarkable Episcopal priest, Christopher Fike, and the people in his life who are negotiating, reconciling, and healing after his transition from being female to male. Unlike other films that have dealt with the tribulations of transgendered people, Too Cold Out There Without You is remarkable for the way that it examines the many reactions to Chris’s change without judging or moralizing. Set during a period when the Episcopal Church was being torn apart from within over the question of whether to ordain gay and lesbian priests, Chris himself understands the difficulties his transition caused within the Massachusetts diocese where he was ordained as a married woman named Sarah. “In all fairness, they didn’t get what they bargained for,” he says. But throughout, he continues to acknowledge that all the trials he has gone through must be for a reason. “OK. That did happen, but I’m still here,” he says, “and I think that God wants me here.”

Like its subject, the film is grounded in a sense of what is truly important. First and foremost, Chris is a single parent who must be there for his kids and his family. He helps his daughter and son come to terms with what his new identity means for them and also helps his sister and parents work through their own feelings of confusion. Just as he is a loving parent to his children, a sibling to his sister, and a child to his parents, he is a remarkable priest and social worker. His faith never wavering, he thinks that the challenges he experienced during and after his transition made him a better minister, better able to empathize with the many kinds of people whom he serves. Through the example of his calm thoughtfulness, audiences go through a conversion experience just as the people interviewed in the film do. “We learn about God through the experience of the other,” says Massachusetts bishop M. Thomas Shaw, who knew Chris as a talented female seminary student. At first, he says, “it gave me the willies.” But by listening to other transgendered people within his community and learning from their stories, Shaw felt moved by the Spirit to welcome them all. It is this spirit of open acceptance and inclusion that animates Too Cold Out There Without You, making it a transcendentally human story and a very special film. To watch the trailer and learn more: [toocoldouttherewithoutyou.com](http://toocoldouttherewithoutyou.com)

Matt Jordan, a Presbyterian, is associate professor of film and media at Penn State University.