

Beyond the Event Centered Community

by Len Hjalmarson

"N.T. Wright writes in "The Challenge of Jesus," that people will put up with all kinds of theological weirdness but *watch out* if you ever mess with their symbols. The Jewish people in first century Palestine defined themselves by Torah, Temple, Sabbath, Land, and Family. Wright argues that Jesus' words and actions usurped these major Jewish symbols and offered a Kingdom alternative centered on himself."ⁱ

"But a holistic vision and practice of worship cannot actually occur until God's people seriously embrace their vocation as the incarnation of God's fullness and life on earth. When they view all of life as opportunity to engage with Christ, then all of life can become worship. This is where I find Dallas Willard's works so helpful. The reformation must take place primarily within the human heart."ⁱⁱ

"A new church means reformulating the faith in radical ways in the midst of a community that has to begin again. For Ezra, as for Moses, new church starts do not aim at strategies for success, but at strategies for survival of an alternative community. What must survive is not simply the physical community; what must survive is an alternative community."ⁱⁱⁱ

Mike Bishop, Jason Zahariades, and Walter Brueggemann.. each has provoked me to reflection as I open this consideration of the typical western church: an event centered community.

Please don't misunderstand as you read.. I am NOT against gathering. I gather together with believers every second Sunday around a meal, and at other events when appropriate.

What I am describing in this article is a western Christian tradition that sees the life of faith *centered* around gatherings and programs. In his article of 2002, Mike Bishop laments that approximately 80% of the resources of the typical western church community are invested in large gatherings. It shouldn't surprise us, then, that our very identity as the people of God becomes defined by our gathering.

But if we are defined by a weekly event.. if we take our cues for the meaning of priesthood, worship, vocation and more from that event, it is no wonder that discipleship, mission, and shared priesthood have ceased to be lived out. It is no wonder, in turn, that believers are bored, are not formed spiritually, and have virtually no impact on the world around them. And it is little wonder that evangelical Christianity is on the decline.

We create our buildings, then our buildings create us. Sir Winston Churchill

Mike Bishop's article appeared at Next Wave online. Mike astutely observed that the deeper problem in the Sunday church paradigm may be rooted in our Greek way of thinking about culture. Unlike the Hebrews, the Greeks divided life and culture into categories of sacred and secular. In postmodernity, we are learning anew to question such assumptions.

What does it mean that "all life is sacred," and how will that impact our use of meetings versus "doing life" together? What does leadership look like in a community of friends (if we can even use the "L" word any more...)

The way many evangelicals worship contributes to a secular world view or at least fails to challenge it. By worship I mean: gathering of people, singing hymns, praying, reading Scripture and hearing a sermon. By secularism I mean a world view wherein God is relegated to the edges of life.^{iv} Mark McKim

Ever since reading an article on the separation of sacred and secular as viewed through the lens of the modern "worship service," I've been awake to related issues. Recently I read about the Celts, whose view of the world was holistic. In the modern West we maintained that this space was sacred (the gathering) while this was secular (the home); this was sacred space (prayer) and this was secular (reading a book to a

child); this was sacred (listening to a teaching tape) and this was secular (listening to a non-christian singer talk about his relationship with his father).

The religious man goes to church and thinks about fishing; the holy man goes fishing and thinks about God.

In “Detoxing the Church,” Jason Zahariades asked,

Do we maintain religious systems because we are concerned that people may not be able to figure out what is holy and what is not? In doing so, are we only reinforcing the false separation itself? I wonder...

We create a separate space and call people together to worship. We listen to a lecture.. information about God, about life, about transformation. We reflect carefully on our lives and try to organize for balance.. this much time for rest, this much for work, this much for church... (notice the neat compartments)...

Then we gather.. We sing while a professional leads us in song. The medium tells us that only a few specially trained people are really priests. And this sacred space is created to remind us of what.. that all life is sacred? But could it be that that all our activities only reinforce the old paradigms.. only specially set apart people can mediate the holy.. only when we gather in these buildings and do these rituals or liturgies are we in God's transforming Presence. Only as we carefully plan and organize our lives will all things fall into place.

Hmm... there is a lot of distortion here. And honestly.. I wonder if there is any escape for one raised in the west. Certainly, our just thinking about it isn't going to get us there, and "we don't know who discovered water, but we know it wasn't fish.." (Santayana) We are immersed in our culture; perspective is therefore limited. The path forward will involve new choices. As Richard Rohr has opined in *Everything Belongs*, “We don’t think ourselves into a new way of living; we live ourselves into a new way of thinking.”

For Mike Bishop, moving beyond the Sunday centered community meant literally moving beyond it with their feet. They took a Sunday as a gathered work day, and went out to help a member of the community rebuild her yard.

It was overgrown with weeds, vines from the neighbor’s yards, and had old lawn equipment and cinder blocks strewn everywhere. So we arrived, Amber and I with our 18-month-old son Jackson, carrying our weapons of warfare: shovels and rakes, weed-whackers and hedge-clippers, gloves and garden hoes. Lori and her mom had a pot of coffee brewing and Kim had her delicious coffee cake laid out on the back porch. Mark, who spends his weekend nights parking cars at a Palm Beach hotel to help support his family, showed up bleak-eyed with his wife Suzanna, two sons Caleb and Silas, and sister-in-law Hope. Ines, her mother Amanda, and brother Manny, all from the Dominican, arrived just in time to enjoy a simple breakfast on the porch. This was not a scheduled ‘service’, but just a group of friends gathering informally for worship.

To help set the context, after breakfast I read the introduction to Genesis in Peterson’s “The Message.” Then I passed the book around the porch and we read the first chapter. Everyone, even Caleb with his 7-year-old reading skills shining for all to see (and they were quite excellent), read a small part of the Story. As we began swapping ideas for the yard, it was undeniable what we were there to do – worship the Creator with shovels, rakes, and clippers.

In the process, this community learned some things about worship that he could not have learned any other way.

- 1) they learned that paradigms are not shifted through thought alone.. one must ACT
- 2) they learned that the Sunday centered paradigm is a symbol of who we are
- 3) they learned that worship really is about the people of God being that people wherever they are
- 4) that Mike doesn’t talk about this action in terms of priesthood, it demonstrates in a concrete way that our priesthood is anchored in creation, and not merely in redemption. Priesthood is as broad as the kingdom of God, and as wide as Jesus Lordship.

Controlling Theological Paradigms

Learn from me how difficult a thing it is to throw off errors confirmed by all the world, and which have become a second nature to us. Martin Luther

I am particularly curious about the theology that informs this break with tradition. Reading through Mike's article, I am struck by his language and his use of Scripture. He mentions the false sacred/secular dichotomy. He reads from the creation account as they begin their work/worship day together. And he closes the article by calling on us to *incarnate* the truth we claim.

In the early 80's I was impacted by classical spiritual authors, and I found myself seeing church and culture through a new set of lenses. One of those lenses was the incarnation. "The only thing that every really happened" (GK Chesterton) and "the still point of the turning world" (TS Eliot). I began to realize that the secular/sacred dichotomies that have been with us since the Greeks, and were baptized by the Enlightenment, were a faulty lens for viewing the world. More than this, I saw anew how systematic approaches to theology, and in particular formulaic approaches, have done violence to the seamless garment of revelation and God's ongoing work in the world.

The Reformed tradition has much to recommend it. To those thinkers schooled in the work of Luther and Calvin (and before them Augustine), the theological center is the Cross. Justification, a legal exchange, is the heart of the matter, and redemption is best described by Jesus act of sacrifice and propitiation. Note that the exchange is "point action" rather than process.

While in the West the center of redemption is personal and anchored in the Cross, in the East the center is the Incarnation and the whole creation is in view. It is the life and death of Jesus that is God's redemptive agenda. "What Christ has not borne, Christ has not redeemed." In his life and death Jesus heals creation, reconnecting all the world back to the life of God. In Orthodox sacramental theology both process and relationship are at the center.

The content and quality of our lives will be determined by how we respond to the ordinary. Elizabeth O'Connor

While most of us are well informed on sin and justification and the "great exchange," we have paid less attention to the Incarnation itself. Yet "God became man," was one of us, lived among us. The Incarnation is God's ultimate YES to matter and to ordinary life in the world. If this is not true, then Jesus spent thirty wasted years as a carpenter. The very idea is absurd.

What a wonderful point of contact with postmodern theology and the emerging church. Evangelism is not what we do .. it is who we are. Neither is evangelism a set of propositions we recite.. it must grow out of authentic communities that incarnate the message. The word must be seen to be believed.. dwelling among them in grace and truth. As John put it, "that which we have seen, that which we have touched with our hands.."

And what a wonderful slant on mission, pointing to both message and method.

Message: Our cause of redemption is not merely the souls of humanity.. it is their very lives. We live transformed lives so that the world around us may be transformed.. even the creation itself is presently enslaved, but God continues to care for and to love this physical world and His love must be our love.

Method: Jesus emptied Himself and became fully human. And then He was truly among us. He didn't remain safe in a fortress preaching from a pulpit, but was found in the pubs and parties, out among the poor and needy. He risked reputation among the religious crowd by being profoundly "among," enjoying the hospitality of his hosts. And His emptiness was a true invitation. He was not interested in neatly wrapping up tidy sermons, but asked hard questions, confronting the idolatry of the age.

Jesus seemed less interested in "point action" decisions than in coming alongside people in process. We never see the "Roman road" or hear Paul recite the four spiritual laws. Salvation is never reduced to a formula. Moreover, Jesus even bestowed his time and attention on those *outside* the community of faith. This carries through to the book of Acts as we see Peter arriving at a Greek household, and even before he has presented the Gospel the Holy Spirit has fallen on the unbelievers!

Perhaps from this perspective it is less a mystery that Jesus talks so little about the church and so much about the kingdom. His perspective is as broad as creation. The church as the transformed community shows the first fruits of God's intention for all creation.

To embrace this truth is to begin a journey back to the garden, where Adam was the first steward in God's house. All the earth is the Lord's, and our tidy Greek categories of sacred and secular do not adequately describe reality. The great commission, the new creation mandate is really meant to restore the first, the creation mandate. Jesus really is Lord of all, and the boxes that held our idea of Gospel turn out to be thimble sized where God's idea was for them to house the Universe. Our Lord's interest in a physical resurrection and a new heaven and new earth ought to clue us to understand that the plan of redemption is far, far beyond just ridding the world of sin.

Kenotic Theology and the Gospel to the Poor

When Jesus announces his ministry in that often quoted passage in Luke 4, he makes it clear that His agenda is to turn the world upside down. Jesus, the Most High Lord of all the Universe, is not interested in sitting on a distant throne and being praised, but comes to bring good news to the lowly and the poor. God is among us as one of the common people. He empties Himself of power and privilege and steps down from a place of safety to a place of chaos and risk.

Following in the footsteps of Jesus means living on the edge. He doesn't seem to have spent much time in meetings. He hung out with the despised and marginalized. God stepped down in the world. Benjamin Roberts wrote,

"Let us come back to the spirit of the Gospel. Let us get down so low at the feet of Jesus as to forget all our pride and dignity, and be willing to worship with the lowest of our kind, remembering that we are the followers of Him "who had not where to lay His head."

Incarnation as a paradigm for the emerging church brings us closer to praxis and to actually following in the footsteps of Jesus. Serving the poor is concrete action, not abstract concept. It is done or not done. Claims of apostolicity ring hollow if the church is not in fact good news for the poor." In *Decoding the Church* Snyder quotes from an old Methodist author:

"Two fundamental claims about the nature of the true church are made here: First, that preaching the gospel to the poor is an identifying mark of the church -- part of its essential DNA. Second, that this mark is a test of whether the church is genuinely apostolic -- is the church walking in the steps of Jesus? Whoever ministers the good news among the poor "is in the true succession. He walks as Christ walked," Benjamin Roberts observed (1823-1893).

"But for whose benefit are special efforts to be put forth? Jesus settles this question.. When John sent to know who he was, Christ charged the messengers to return and show John the things which they had seen and heard. "The blind received their sight, and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up," and as if all this would be insufficient to satisfy John of the validity of his claims, he adds, "and the poor have the gospel preached to them." This was the crowning proof that He was the One that should come." ^v

Imagine the change that Jesus knew in emptying Himself of power, position and privilege. Imagine His real descent from glory and light into the world of darkness and dust. Talk about culture shock! Walter Brueggemann writes, in *The Message of the Psalms*,

It is no wonder that the church has avoided these Psalms. They lead us into dangerous acknowledgement of how life really is. They lead us into the unthinkable presence of God where everything is not polite and civil. They cause us to think unthinkable thoughts and utter unutterable words. Perhaps worst, they lead us away from the comfortable religious claims of modernity in which everything is managed and controlled.^{vi}

Perhaps we have found it easy to justify our large buildings and temple centered religion because the poor are excluded there. We can feel good about our well ordered meetings and neatly presented theological packages, while avoiding the discomfort that emptying ourselves and being among the poor would bring. We can talk about blessings and wealth and maintain the illusion that “the American dream” is a Christian myth. But if we are to follow our Master, we must be missional people who find our identity in loving what He loved and continuing His work in spreading good news.

A Structure for Life

Perhaps the old analogy of the cart and the horse is useful. When our gatherings grow out of our shared life and mission, they are likely to add to the depth of our community. But when we rely on our gatherings to give life to the community, they are likely to become an anchor that prevents us from moving forward together. When the cart is before the horse we will struggle to be a missional people.

One of the challenges we have had to face as we worked through a more incarnational and holistic approach to gathered life was dealing with traditional expectations based on our church culture. We wanted to move from **doing church** to **being the church** in all expressions of our life, but we had people coming to us who were expecting to come to a “home group” or “bible study.” They expected to experience a “service” where various components were prepared and then handed to them on a platter.

But in our paradigm, we thought that description better suited a theatre or an audience than a gathered community. We were not interested in staging a performance, and we weren't worried about who was in control.. our desire was to celebrate our life together.

The classical elements of a gathering are these. Many faith communities believe they must hit each point in order to have a valid gathering:

- * worship (ie singing and meditation)
- * word (teach/preach, response maybe)
- * sacrament
- * in all this, a hierarchy (positional authority) and an order
- * an ethos of activity focused on a stage, with little space for reflection

But if the center is not the gathering .. if the focus is life 24/7... and meetings are secondary and not the end but one means of building life.. if a teaching need not be wrapped up with a neat conclusion in 20 minutes, but instead can be more like a learning conversation.. if defined leadership can fade into the background in favor of a real community.. things can begin to follow a different path.

In “Reimagining Spiritual Formation,” Doug Pagitt comments:

"Our gatherings reflect our belief that we are in this together and that we all have something to offer here. Our worship gatherings are not meant to be shows or concerts. They are designed as interactive experiences. We invite participants to join in, share what they have, and take a piece of what those around have to give. We are a gathering of people who are on a pilgrimage through life with each other and with God. Our gatherings for worship are designed to help us on that journey.

"Part of our communal effort on Sunday nights is to limit the things that separate those in charge from those who are not; our hope is that all people will be part of this experience. That's why it's important that the roles people play not be confused with power in other areas of our community. We don't have special places of activity or certain rights that are reserved for some. Because we don't have a stage, we don't have to be concerned with who is utilizing that place of power."^{vii}

If we view a gathering more as a family event than a university classroom, and if our direction is primarily relational, then we don't have to hit each of these elements each time we gather. We can view the gathering over a longer time period as an expression of life.

Our own community offers some understanding of actual implementation. The structure of our community is so relaxed it borders on chaotic. But in reality, it is "chaordic," combining elements of chaos and order dynamically through the self understanding and intentionality of our members. We view ourselves as followers of Jesus.

Our life is both structured and spontaneous. We relate to one another through the weeks over coffee, on the phone, and via email. We drop in on one another, and we may organize a helping event around a specific need.

Our structured experience is via a community gathering twice a month on Sunday afternoons, though in the summer this tends to shift to Saturdays. We start with a meal. Everyone who can do so brings a food item to contribute, so it is "pot luck."

We don't structure the meeting, but we do expect the Lord to move among us. So sometimes when we gather we will "worship" other times not. Some times we will pull out bibles, but other times not. We virtually always pray for one or another. We may plan a helping event or intervention. Taken as a whole (pull six meetings aside and roll together, add salt and pepper bake 30") and we have a whole loaf. We have miracles, Presence, prayer, word and worship, caring community and LIFE.

At one recent gathering we had just finished our meal around 2 PM when one of our group called to tell us that her car was out of gas, so she couldn't join us. Our meeting was far from over, and would extend that day to 7 PM. Nick and I talked, and decided to head over to her place together, after stopping at a gas station to fill a gas can. It was an "interruption," but it enabled Carey and her daughter to join us. Later Nick reflected as he read in Oswald Chambers,

The institutional church's idea of a servant of God is not at all like Jesus Christ's idea. His idea is that we serve Him by being the servants of others. Jesus Christ actually "out socialized" the socialists. He said that in His kingdom the greatest one would be the servant of all (see [Matthew 23:11](#)). The real test of a saint is not one's willingness to preach the gospel (or hold a worship celebration service), but one's willingness to do something like washing the disciples' feet, that is, being willing to do those things that seem unimportant in human estimation but count as everything to God (Like getting some people together to help move Carey).^{viii}

Isn't it odd that we call our worship gathering a "service," but less readily term our daily acts of service "worship." We have inverted the priesthood and made it something truly divorced from life. We made something sacred into something secular, relegating it to the margins of life. Nick was once a traditional worship leader.. the up front role with guitar or keyboard. Now he recognizes that his real worship leading is a priestly role in acts of service wherever the Lord is working.

Our gatherings have taught us that leadership roles shift when structure is held loosely. Instead of following a plan we try to follow what the Lord is doing. A Spirit initiative may come from anyone, even the newest member of the community. Sometimes the initiative rises out of conversation (ie. "hey, I was struck by this song this week," or, "what did Jesus mean when he told this story?" or "what should I have said to my mother in law?")

Sometimes there is no obvious initiative and we simply enjoy being together. But usually something has happened in our hearts anyway.. we feel cared for, refreshed, encouraged or enlightened. Or perhaps someone has made a plan we hear about later.. to drop in on someone with a gift, to help a single mom with a car problem... to make a phone call on another's behalf and advocate with an agency or individual to obtain some service or benefit. Connections happen when we gather and we share what we have.

Granted, what I have described happens easily in a group of 10-25.. it is more difficult in larger gatherings. Size does matter if the medium is the message and intimacy and community are part of your goal.

Getting There: Unlearning

Chris: People think our focus is totally on culture, that we're synonymous with pop culture. It's the opposite. The churches for postmoderns that we're affiliated with are theological communities, first and foremost. They're asking, "What is God saying to us, and what does it mean to flesh out Scripture, to know God authentically during this time?"^x

When Jason Zahariades and Mark Feliciano of *The Off Ramp* began thinking about founding a new community, they corresponded with a seasoned evangelical leader who had earlier left the well worn trails. He wrote to them,

"Here's a strong statement: most evangelicals, including Vineyard people, are addicted to church culture. Take away their Sunday service, their bible studies, prayer meetings, and five-song worship teams and they start having withdrawals quickly. I think that it is a necessary part of this process to have a detox time... I would suggest a time of at least a year of not doing the 'normal' church stuff. For us, during that time of detachment we only did a few things together – ask hard questions and eat. Those were our corporate disciplines."

".. if your aim is to get people to begin thinking outside the bounds of cultural Christianity, some significantly radical action is required."^x

His suggestion is confirmed by our own experience. My wife and I pulled our family out of a traditional evangelical church community in the fall of 2000, not knowing where we were going. When everything in our lives connected with the church was gone, we found ourselves panicking. Our very identity as believers seemed to be at stake.

The more you see, the less you know,
the less you find out as you go..
I knew much more then, than I do now.
U2, "City of Blinding Lights"

In transitional places, the old answers no longer make sense. We are forced to ask new questions, questions we never dreamed of. And we are confronted with the raw status of our personal faith. Suddenly we are no longer in the mainstream of evangelical culture; we are marginalized, we are exiles.

In order to find the Church, most of us will first have to leave the church. In other words, in order to truly become God's people as he intended, we must abandon our culture's version of organized church. When we take this radical step we will pass through a detox period. Why such drastic measures? Jason continues,

Involvement in an organizational consumer-driven church blinds us to the real state of our lives. By participating in this kind of church I can enjoy inspiring worship, biblical exposition of Scripture, fellowship, small groups, kids programs, service projects, missions, discipleship, books, radio broadcasts, multimedia presentations and virtually anything else I need in my spiritual life. In fact, I can enjoy an entirely alternative lifestyle where Christianity is prepackaged for me – books, music, entertainment, news reports, advice, etc. And as I consume it, it forms a façade over the real condition of my life. The rub is when my true condition actually bubbles to the surface and I find myself troubled, discontent or miserable. Then the church or the pastor or the worship team has lost the "anointing" and I must find a new organizational church that will provide me what I need to feel better about who I am. In this distorted perspective, I fail to recognize that the true state of my life and faith is who I am and what I do in relation to God and his kingdom, not who I am and what I do in relation to the church.

Radical movement is needed when we wish to see in new ways. Mark Bishop quotes NT Wright in "The Challenge of Jesus," that people will put up with all kinds of theological weirdness but *watch out* if you ever mess with their symbols.

"Christians have defined themselves by the symbol of the corporate church gathering (and its physical presence in the building/Temple) – "I go to such-and-such church on Sunday...I'm a member at First Church of My-town...Yeah, I'm a Christian, I went to my Bible study just last night." This symbol has become just as strong in the minds of many Christians as going to the temple was to a Jew.

“However, going to a meeting where Christians are present no more makes you a Christian than going to the temple made you Jewish. Although this may seem obvious to most (especially pastors, who seem to have a very difficult time seeing things from their congregation’s perspective,) it is nonetheless a major stumbling block. Our response should not simply be more teaching. The symbol of “Sunday-go-to-meeting” Christianity will not die easily. Action is required, *symbolic action*.”

Leaving established ways of being to begin this kind of inner journey with the Lord can be shattering to our sense of well being. We begin to battle with demons we didn’t know existed.. they accuse us of rebellion, of being impossible to please, and of harboring a critical spirit. We find ourselves in a desert place..

But God graciously reminds us that His own Son was filled with the Spirit, and then led by the Spirit into the desert. We leave the church to find the church.

Grace, she's got the walk
Not on a ramp or on chalk
She's got the time to talk
She travels outside of karma
She travels outside of karma
When she goes to work
You can hear her strings
Grace finds beauty in everything.. U2, “Grace”

The journey into the desert is risky. It was risky for Jesus. He let behind a community of friends, and all that contributed to His identity as the carpenter’s son. But the only way forward to embrace His messianic vocation was through the desert.

It is dangerous to embrace a new self-understanding, because it only comes from an identity crisis. Crisis and transition define the chaordic (ordered and chaotic) underpinnings of life in our times.

Transitions are difficult because they begin with an ending, asking for a process of grief. Marriage is the end of singleness; a promotion is the end of a former job—and the routines and relationships that went along with it. You are not crazy for feeling disoriented and moody when you start in a new direction of faithfulness in Jesus.

Everyone who leaves something behind is on a journey of discovery to unknown places. New directions raise new questions and bring a new insecurity. Because the journey is a spiritual journey, only the naked can go there.

"People cannot discover new lands until they have the courage to lose sight of the shore."
Andre Gide

My family and I have faced at least three major transitions in the past ten years. Transition invites us to embrace a new level of insecurity; each time we are forced to learn a new level of dependence on the Lord. Jean Vanier, in *Community and Growth*, speaks of the grace of insecurity.

It isn't easy embracing insecurity. It isn't easy leaving our comfort zones, our titles, or our previous understanding behind. Because the goal is a living community we know that the home we seek has no professionals, only amateurs.. "amati" is Latin for "lover" and professionals tend to be hirelings who arrive with the baggage of identity and status.

This is why there will be few organizations that negotiate the transition. Margaret Wheatley comments in “Goodbye Command and Control” that,

"Whenever we're trying to change a deeply structured belief system, everything in life is called into question-our relationships with loved ones, children, and colleagues; our relationships with authority and major institutions. One group of senior leaders, reflecting on the changes they've gone through, commented that the higher you are in the organization, the more change is required of you personally. Those who have led their organizations into

new ways of organizing often say that the most important change was what occurred in themselves. *Nothing would have changed in their organizations if they hadn't changed.* (italics mine). " xi

We'll need the security of lovers, because the false Powers that demand our allegiance and demand that we remain good consumers won't appreciate our resistance to the system. As we leave our addictions behind, stand against consumerism and stand up for issues of justice, it will be obvious that our allegiance is to another King and not Caesar.

For my wife and I, the process of leaving began a process of discovery and learning.

- 1) we heard a new call to "follow," and began a Sunday morning ministry of feeding the poor downtown.
- 2) we discovered a new perspective. Now we were on the outside looking in on the good evangelical activity occurring all over our city. It began to look strange, isolated, and sometimes irrelevant. We began to recognize how strongly the sacred/secular dichotomy was reflected in modern expressions of church life.
- 3) we discovered new mentors. The new questions we were learning sent us on a journey of discovery through books and conversations. Our new mentors, both living and dead, told us we were not alone and we in turn became mentors to others who were asking new questions and walking in unfamiliar places.
- 4) we learned a lesson about learning itself. Learning is never merely a cognitive process, and it is rarely linear. Real learning relates to inner transformation, and requires a whole person response: thought, emotion and action, both word and deed. Truth must be lived out – incarnated - before it is truly stood under.

"When we are looking for help from the right kind of people, "teachers" are not enough... We forget that the nurturing and caring relationship is inherent in effective teaching. Wisdom, after all, is more than data processing. Activism that is devoted to a cause can also be a poor substitute for relationships, because it is too busy to cultivate friendship. The Greek philosophers were wiser when they stated that "thought is not meaningful without action; and action is not meaningful without friendship."xii

We now know that human transformation does not happen through didacticism or through excessive certitude, but through the playful entertainment of another scripting of reality that may subvert the old given text and its interpretation and lead to the embrace of an alternative text and its redescription of reality. xiii

When our security is shaken we can react with fear and attempt to hold onto what we have attained. But to fail to learn and to grow is to admit defeat. We need to depend on God for our daily bread. We need to encounter Him in new and fresh ways in order to move beyond our stagnant and fixed perceptions. We must worship God, and worship Him alone.

As lovers in dangerous times, we must remain weak and powerless. We choose to love God and the things that He loves: creation and humankind in His image. He can find beauty and life even in desert places, just as Jesus found beauty among the poor. He is our example.

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor; he has sent me to heal the broken-hearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty the oppressed, and to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord." Luke 4

The Agenda Driven Church

Some who read this will be saying to themselves, "Thank God that rising songwriters have moved from the subjective dimension to a focus on God, and more and more of them direct our attention away from the human leader toward Him. These changes mean we are back on track."

As important as those changes are, and as healthy a direction, they are not likely to impact environment or ethos. Ethos is more fundamental, so that dropping in a random element of correction becomes like

shining a light bulb in front of the sun and hoping to alter the character of the photosphere. As Marshall McLuhan discovered, “the medium is the message.” The way we gather and the language we use all point to the inherent secularism of our gatherings. Too many communities substitute gatherings for life, lectures for learning, information for transformation. Too many communities remain leader centric, agenda driven and non-relational. Too many gatherings look like university lectures with songs added.

None of this is an argument against gatherings, but against an ethos that makes gatherings the center. I remain critical of environments that communicate through their structure and order that only a few specially trained people are really priests. These environments limit participation and tend to build personality cults even as they disempower the laos of God. Merely rearranging these gatherings is not the answer, but a shift in our understanding of the church itself and her missional nature. We placed the cart before the horse, and need profound change. Read on for more.

Others may object that the suggestion of leaving a Sunday center behind may be targeting a straw man. But some groups manage to deconstruct to find the center, then tweak their structures but remain agenda driven. Gordon Cosby of the Church of the Savior once said that, “vision is the destroyer of essence.”

This is one of those cases where all horses have four legs, but not all things with four legs are horses. When our goal is growth, or attracting new adherents, or anything other than lifting up Jesus and making Him known, we are likely to build a culture that is something less than an authentic community. While we can't operate without vision, we easily become agenda driven and then vision destroys essence.

A growing number of people are leaving the institutional church for a new reason. They are not leaving because they have lost their faith. They are leaving to preserve their faith.
Reggie McNeal, *The Present Future*

Recently I asked a half dozen mature believers who were no longer attending any Sunday meetings why they left. Each of these adults had been involved in ministry in their congregation. Each of them included among their reasons for leaving the inability to find true friendship. Interesting.. nearly all of them are missional in lifestyle.

The struggle in modern settings is to find a place of real connection and significant contribution, based on true vocation and not circumscribed to roles. At an intuitive level we are looking for home and for healing, and we know it will only come when we find real love and acceptance. We also sense that it is not enough to know about God's love, we must experience it through human hands and hearts. And we want all this to be “agenda free,” except for the agenda of love.

The sudden perception of this simple truth can lead in radical directions. After twelve years as a typical church trying to become relevant to the community outside the walls, Robert Girard's community gave their building back to the denomination and started meeting in homes. “*We no longer have the structures of meetings, programs and vision to hold us together as a church. The only structure holding us together is relationships; if we fail at love, there will be nothing left.*” (Robert Girard, “Brethren: Hang Together”) Jim Petersen of the Navigators comments,

We hold strong convictions on the importance of the gathering of the church. “Forsake not the assembling of yourselves together” is our refrain. We are good at congregating. Where we have trouble is with some of the other equally essential functions of the church. God's people are not, in essence, a congregation. They are community. “Congregation” is frequently used in the Old Testament to describe the gathering of the people of Israel. “Community” implies life together, a life of caring for one another that touches the full spectrum of our affairs. ^{xiv}

A friend of mine once commented on his life experience in the church as “rotating serial alliances” rather than friendships. When he was no longer fulfilling an important function, suddenly his “friends” had no time for him. The real measure of the success of a church may well be the quality of relationships that continue during the week when the instruments are packed away and the lights are turned out.

Unfortunately, we have built congregations rather than communities, buildings rather than temples of living stones, and audiences rather than families of faith. Building communities requires completely different skills than building an audience. Clay Shirky writes,

"[Building a community] will require different skills and attitudes than those necessary to build an audience. Many of the expectations you make about the size, composition, and behavior of audiences when you are in a broadcast mode are actually damaging to community growth. To create an environment conducive to real community, you will have to operate more like a gardener than an architect."^{xv}

When we are focused on essence, on being the church rather than doing church, the connection between community and mission is organic. Jean Vanier comments on mission in "Community and Growth":

The mission of a community is to give life to others, that is to say, to transmit new hope and new meaning to them. Mission is revealing to others their fundamental beauty, value and importance in the universe, their capacity to love, to grow and to do beautiful things and to meet God. Mission is transmitting to people a new inner freedom and hope; it is unlocking the doors of their being so that new energies can flow; it is taking away from their shoulders the terrible yoke of guilt and fear. To give life to people is to reveal to them that they are loved just as they are by God, with the mixture of good and evil, light and darkness that is in them; that the stone in front of their tomb in which all the dirt of their lives has been hidden can be rolled away. They are forgiven; they can live in freedom. ^{xvi}

Some will argue that this is moving beyond friendship to a new understanding. I agree. Greg Quiring comments:

"Friendship.

"Sexy? No. Vague? Sure. Hard to "implement?" Absolutely. Something that most of us who have grown up in evangelicalism suck at? Confirmed. Slow in achieving results? Thank God.

"I think that there are two points to consider.

"One is that we tend to oversimplify being missional. Many reduce friendship to simply "hanging out." While I applaud the attempt at pure relationship in the sentiment, I don't believe that missional living is reduced to just "hanging out." Now, hear me out ... I'm not saying that people are a means to an end (conversion), I am simply saying that I think Kingdom friendship is probably different than what most of us have experienced as "friendship" in life. At least it should be. Which means that we probably need to blow up our current models of "friendship" that most of us inherited in elementary school..."

"I guess I view hanging out in a missional context as hanging out with a kingdom purpose and intent. I don't "lick my chops" at my neighbors when I see them taking walks in our subdivision, eager to add another notch on my evangelism belt...but I do try to have purpose in how I relate to them. I try to pray for them and ask God to show me what he is doing in their lives. *I try to bless what I see and I look for where the kingdom is breaking into their lives. And I try to simply get out of the way and not screw it up!*

"Less that sound too utilitarian... understand that my "purpose" and "intent" is really...friendship. How about that for serendipity? My purpose is to enjoy them in the moment and be a part of their lives."

CONCLUSION

There is an age when one teaches what one knows.
But there follows another when one teaches what one does not know...
It comes, maybe now, the age of another experience: that of unlearning.^{xvii}

"Use knowledge as a kind of scaffold by which to erect the building of love, which remains forever, even while knowledge is torn down. Knowledge, as a means to love, is highly useful; in itself, not as a means to such end, it has proven not only unnecessary but even harmful. I know, however, how your holy meditation keeps you safe under the shadow of the wings of God." Augustine to Januarius

In the recent “The Church in Emerging Culture,” Brian McLaren uses the analogy of the cart and the horse to talk about the relationship between mission, message and methods. McLaren argues that the horse is mission, but that we usually put the cart (message and methods) before the horse.

McLaren’s analogy is also useful to talk about the gathering, a structure where believers are called together. The gathering as the center is a non-missional focus, and as such the sentness of the people of God is neglected in favor of a static identity. Yet as James Brownson points out, using the Gospel of John, it is our very sentness that defines our identity as the people of God.

"The sending of the Son expresses something basic about God: that God wants to be known. God’s mission is to know and be known. Eternal life consists in knowing God, and Jesus Christ whom God sent (17:3). It is in Christ preeminently that we discover this—that God wants to be known, and it is central to Christ’s mission that the world know this about God—that God is the one who sent Jesus.

"To be fully united to God’s mission is to be fully united to God. And it is this unity in mission to which the disciples are also invited.

"Jesus’ union with God flows from his fulfilling the mission which God gives to him (17:4)—when Jesus is united to God’s mission, he is united to God; in the same way, the union of the disciples with Jesus and with God flows from their completing the work which he gives them to do. (17:18 “As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world.” And 20:21 “As the Father sent me, so I send you.”) And that work which the disciples are to fulfill is centrally to be the new community – to love each other as Jesus loved them (13:34-35).^{xviii}

If our sentness as a people expresses our unity with the Father, then we desperately need a missional center. We need an identity which is imaginatively rooted in mobility and flexibility, and not in the image of fixed and immobile buildings or temples. We are a people on the move with God. As Darrel Guder put it,

We have the responsibility and the capacity, through the Holy Spirit, to shape ourselves for faithful witness. Our purpose defines our organizational structures—which means that our mission challenges us to re-form our structures so that we can be faithful in our witness.^{xix}

Similarly, Reggie McNeal points out that Jesus did not come preaching the church, but the kingdom of God.

The church was created to be the people of God to join him in his redemptive mission in the world. The church was never intended to exist for itself. It was and is the chosen instrument of God to expand his kingdom. The church is the bride of Christ. Its union with him is designed for reproduction, the growth of the kingdom. Jesus did not teach his disciples to pray, “Thy church come.” The kingdom is the destination. In its institutional existence the church abandoned its real identity and reason for existence.^{xx}

The structures of our corporate life must grow out of and express this missional kingdom dynamic, and be shaped by it. When they do not, or when they represent a faulty ecclesiology, they will restrict our missional identity with powerful messages about who are “clergy” and who are the laos. Remember, *the medium is the message*.

Today we are seeing many new kinds of gatherings, and in unusual places... the church in the bar, at the beach, and in the home. Helpful in moving us beyond sacred and secular dichotomies, the emerging church raises new questions. James Hudnet-Buemler asks, with regard to “Missional Church:”

What kind of accountability do particular communities have to a holistic understanding of the gospel? If we begin recognizing that some special mission churches or movements might be legitimate expressions for our time of God’s sent people, how do we rule some expressions out? I believe if we start asking those kinds of questions, we might further elaborate what One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic mean for the expanded set of movements of people and spirit we would now like to assign the name “church.” Missional Church lays bare the limitations of both a purely functional understanding of larger church structures (where congregations are the only real church) and top down understandings that elevate episcopate above the missio Dei.^{xxi}

Mission describes the church in her mobility. We need paradigms for the people of God dispersed more than we need paradigms for God's people as they gather. We need, as Walter Brueggemann has expressed it, paradigms for exiles rather than for settled communities. As he opines in "The Prophetic Imagination,"

"The prophet does not ask if the vision can be implemented, for questions of implementation are of no consequence until the vision can be imagined. The imagination must come before the implementation. Our culture is competent to implement almost anything and to imagine almost nothing."

As these paradigms take shape they will in turn impact our conceptions of authority and leadership. As we discover new lenses, we will in turn be shaped in new ways.

Two lenses that need more attention are those of incarnational and sacramental theology, a Trinitarian theology that is founded in the story of God and His people in both creation and redemption.

It is about poetry more than prose, and essence more than vision, though mission is guided by a biblical vision (partly described here). Our direction is forming families of faith (a relational and covenant people), and not building better programs. We need to pay attention to organic reality, authenticity and contextualization, and not impose efficient models that worked elsewhere. We need priesthood and service and worship that is rooted in life.

I close with this thought from *The Present Future*, by Reggie McNeal.

Unfortunately, the North American church has lost its influence at this critical juncture. It has lost its influence because it lost its identity. It lost its identity because it lost its mission.

The correct response, then, to the collapse of the church culture is not to try to become better at doing church. This only feeds the problem and hastens the church's decline through its disconnect from the larger culture. The need is for a missional fix.

The appropriate response to the emerging world is a rebooting of the mission, a radical obedience to an ancient command, a loss of self rather than self-preoccupation, concern about service and sacrifice rather than concern about style.^{xvii}

ⁱ Word, Work, Worship: Moving Beyond Sunday-Centric Communities. Mark Bishop and T Freeman in Next Wave Magazine.

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ⁱⁱⁱ Brueggemann, Walter. *Cadences of Home*. John Knox Press, 1997.

^{iv} McKim, Mark. *Evangelical Worship Fosters Secularism*. Faith Today, January/February 1998.

^v Snyder, Howard. *Decoding the Church*. Baker Book House, 2002.

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^{vii} Pagitt, D. *Reimagining Spiritual Formation*. Emergent YS, 2004.

^{viii} Fenn, Nick. Personal Email. February, 2004.

^{ix} Morgentaler, Sally. *Out of the Box: Authentic Worship in Postmodern Culture*. From sacramentis.com

^x Zahariades, Jason. Ibid.

^{xi} Wheatley, Margaret. "Goodbye Command and Control." In *Leader to Leader*, Drucker Foundation, 1996

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^{xx} McNeal, Reggie. *The Present Future*. Zondervan YS, 2003.

^{xxi} Hudnut-Beumler, James. *Missional Church: Initiating a Conversation*. From Gospel in Our Culture Network
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^{xxii} Op Cit, The Present Future