

Community. .. and brokenness.. these themes seem to run together. The connecting point is something like this:

Community is the place where the healing of our lives becomes the foundation for the healing of the nations.

But there is also another connecting point.. Henri Nouwen talks about it in "Lifesigns." He writes on John 15..

"When Jesus says, "Make your home in me as I make mine in you" he offers us an intimate place that we can call home. Home is that place or space where we do not have to be afraid but can let go of our defenses and be free, free from worries, free from tensions, free from pressures.

"Home is where we can laugh and cry, embrace and dance, sleep long and dream quietly, eat, read, play, watch the fire, listen to music, and be with a friend. Home is where we can rest and be healed.. a good place to be, it is the house of love.

"But in this world millions of people are homeless. Some are homeless because of their inner anguish, while others are homeless because they have been driven from their own towns and countries. In prisons, mental hospitals, refugee camps, in hidden-away apartments, in nursing homes and overnight shelters we get a glimpse of homelessness.

"Speaking of himself as the vine and of his disciples as the branches, Jesus says: "Make your home in me." This is an invitation to intimacy. Then he adds: "Those who remain in me with me in them, bear fruit in plenty." This is an invitation to fecundity. Finally, when he says, "I have told you this so that your joy may be full," he promises ecstasy.

"There are two houses in this world: the house of fear, and the house of love.

"We are so accustomed to fear that we do not hear the voice that says, "Do not be afraid..." Yet it is this voice that announces a whole new way of living..."

Spiritual formation is the work of the Spirit in creating a new community ..a living temple ..of His loving presence in the world.

There is a great deal of theological work that can be done around these themes. Recently Larry Perkins remarked to me that he has lived all his life in the Canadian context, but he still doesn't know if he could identify a Canadian consensus around the meaning of community. I like Henri Nouwen's direction, and I think the good news is that God invites us all to *come home*.

So what would it mean to become a new community.. a living temple of the loving Presence of God for the sake of the world? What biblical stories anchor this idea?

The OT tabernacle pictures a pilgrim people with their God, always on the move, always flexible, always adapting to a changing environment. In his Gospel John recalls that symbol of Presence in a way his readers can understand when he says of Jesus that he dwelt (Greek: "tented") among us. In using this metaphor John points to Jesus as incarnating the divine Presence.

Where the tabernacle was God's idea, the Temple was David's idea (2 Samuel 7: 5-7). Detailed blueprints come from Yahweh for the tabernacle, but not for the Temple

The Temple was fixed, permanent, and inflexible. The Temple pictures a movement which has stopped moving.. a movement become a museum, a church buried in ritual, method, and managers. The Temple pictures isolation and insulation, fear of change and fear of cultural engagement

Although the Temple wasn't ordained by God, it becomes part of the story of God's dwelling with His people. When Solomon built the Temple and dedicated it, it was filled with the cloud that veiled God's presence.

Later the first-century Jews continued to worship in the Jerusalem Temple, lamenting the lack of God's glorious presence. Instead of a living reality, the Temple seemed a place of mere memory. Luke retells the story of the day of Pentecost with the intent of awakening these memories of God filling the Temple with his glory. Wright continues,

The rushing of a violent wind filled the house where the apostles were sitting, and flaming tongues of fire came to rest on each of them. That phrase is so well known that we lose, perhaps, its immediate and vivid force. Imagine a dragon with a red, fiery tongue reaching out to lick you.

Then imagine that the dragon is just outside the window and as its tongue reaches through it turns into a dozen tongues and everyone in the room is being licked with fire. That's the picture. And Luke, writing the story, wants us to think: this is the glory of the Lord coming back to fill the Temple! This is the pillar of cloud and fire coming to lead the people through the wilderness! This is the restoration we've all been hoping for!¹

On this long expected day, the Lord would restore Israel's fortunes. On the day when he would renew the Temple, the nations would flock to Zion to hear the word of the Lord. God's power and grace would reach out and summon people from every nation under heaven.

Luke wants us to understand that *this is that*.. the prophesy is fulfilled. Parthians, Medes, Elamites and all the rest are coming to Jerusalem to hear God's word. Pentecost is not merely the renewal of Torah, but the fulfilling and renewing of the Temple. This fulfillment comes in a way the Jews did not expect, much as Jesus Himself arrived with His glory veiled. Wright comments that,

¹ NT Wright, *New Law, New Temple, New World*. Sermon for the feast of Pentecost. Sunday, June 20, 2003. Reprinted at ALLELON.ORG

The apostles are constituted as the new, true Temple: not now a building of stone and timber, of bricks and mortar, but as a community of living, breathing, worshipping human beings.

Just as in Judaism the Law and the Temple belong closely together, so now at Pentecost the renewed Law and the renewed Temple belong even more closely together. Both of them speak of men, women and children whose lives are being transformed by the living presence and power of the one true God. ²

When God's Presence comes, the ordinary becomes extraordinary. Ordinary flesh is sanctified and takes on immortality. A burning bush becomes a sign and a wonder. The impossible becomes possible. Darkness conquers light. God indwells mortal flesh.

When Betty and I started hosting meals with the poor in Kelowna we met Carey. He had spent time in a residential school so he had good reasons to hate the church. Our group didn't call itself a church, though it was that for us. One evening after a meal in our home we told him about a different Jesus than the one he thought he knew.

He let us pray for him, and when the Holy Spirit came on him he looked a lot like a drunk Indian.. but for the first time in his life he wasn't drunk with wine.

A group in Kelowna right now is thinking about creating a third place downtown.. a neutral space in a café for music, conversation, and films.. where spiritual seekers can meet Christians in a safe place. We take the light out into the darkness, we don't hide it under a cover. We spread the salt out so it can do some good. Jesus entered our world.. we have to become Jesus out there on their turf

When Jesus ascends to the Father it becomes possible for him to fill all things. He sends His Spirit so that the church, His body, becomes the living tabernacle.

We are "God's house," (Heb.3: 6; 1 Tim.3: 15), a "holy temple," (Eph.2: 21; 1 Cor.3:16; 2 Cor.6: 16), a "dwelling of God in the Spirit" (Eph.2: 22; 1 Peter 2:5), a building not made with hands. We become the embodiment of God's Presence in the world.

In Acts 7 Stephen is stoned when he argues that God does not live in buildings made with hands but in His people.

There is a lovely scene in John 20 where Jesus enters the room. The doors are shut, its evening, and the disciples are in hiding. Suddenly the risen Christ stands among them.

“Peace be with you.”

When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so send I you.”

² Ibid.

Jesus does three things in this passage. First, He speaks *shalom. Peace be with you.*

Next, he demonstrates that He is not a ghost, but the Risen and incarnate Lord of creation.

Third, He commissions them into mission and breathes the Spirit upon them. What Jesus is doing is recapitulating the promises of God in the OT around the formation of a new creation. The breath of the Spirit re-enacts the Spirit's moving over the deep in *Genesis* to form creation.

In other words, in that locked room among frightened men and women, Jesus re-constitutes God's new creation for the sake of the world. The key point is that the Spirit of creation - new creation - is poured out among the ordinary men and women who comprise what we call the church.

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a living temple ..of His loving presence in the world.*

How do we incarnate the loving presence of God in the world? We have built so much of our being in the world around our fortresses, hoping that people would come to us. Jesus went out among the people. . If we aim at ministry we don't have time for mission; but when we aim at mission we are forced to do ministry. There are so many people who need Jesus who will never feel they can enter the doors of a church..

Remember, it isn't the church of God that has a mission in the world, it's the God of Mission who has a Church in the world.

If our lives as God's people are to be lived out in full view of the world, we need to take conscious, deliberate steps to be sure this is happening. This is why God is breaking down our definitions and resetting the boundaries.

A visitor to an Australian outback cattle ranch was intrigued by the seemingly endless miles of farming country with no sign of any fences. He asked a local rancher how he kept track of his cattle. The rancher replied, "Oh that's no problem. Out here we dig wells instead of building fences."...

Becoming missional has to do with where the boundary markers are being placed as we define the church. What is in-bounds? What is out-of-bounds? The boundary markers for the church should be determined by where the gifts and callings of God's people take them.

If believers were encouraged and enabled to seize the opportunities God brings their way in the neighborhood and across society, and if they could proceed confident of support from others in the body, the church would be redefined. It would change from being a bounded set to being a centered set. Now what does that mean?

Bounded Sets and Centered Sets

We are accustomed to defining the church within a certain circle. We work at clarifying who is in, who is out; what the leadership structure is to be and not to be; what we believe and do not

believe; which activities belong, which do not; and what behavior is appropriate and what is not. So the line between insiders and outsiders is clearly drawn.

Paul Hiebert calls this kind of thinking "bounded-set thinking." That is, there is a boundary that sets the standard. One either qualifies or is rejected; it's pass or fail. We need to move from bounded-set thinking to what Hiebert refers to as "centered-set thinking" in our understanding of the church.

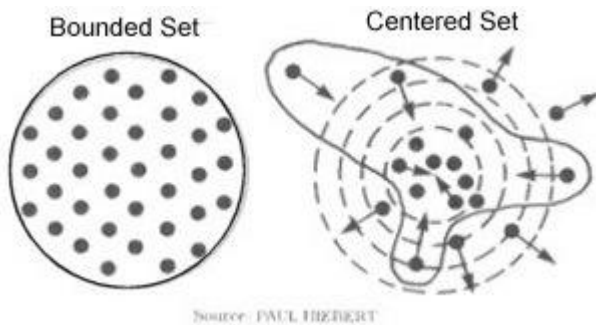
In 2001 we needed to leave our faith community because more and more it had become Christian theatre. We didn't know where we were going or what we would do, but we heard him say "Come, follow Me." We ended up doing a different kind of church among the poor in the downtown core.

In a centered set, what counts is how each member is moving in relation to the center (Jesus). The focus is upon the center, and each individual is in dynamic relationship to it. Belonging, in this case, is not a matter of performing according to an agreed-upon profile, it is a matter of living and acting out of commitment to a common center.

The focus is on the center and on pointing people to that center –Jesus. Process is more important than definitions. Centered-set thinking affirms initiatives that would otherwise not find a place.

We need to reward initiative and creativity, as opposed to fearing it. Jesus said, "My sheep hear my voice," We need to be teaching people to listen for Gods voice, day by day, to be sensitive to opportunities where they live and work... we need to encourage each other not to wait for someone to tell them what to do or for a program they can fit into.

It is not that bounded sets are always bad and centered sets are always good. Boundaries do exist. Salvation is a bounded set. One is either in Christ, or not in Christ. Discipleship is a centered set. To be a disciple is to be constantly moving toward the center, which is Christ.



Source: PAUL HIEBERT

What we are talking about can be visualized by the following diagram.

Bounded Set and Centered Set and the Church

If we use this model, our understanding of what is the center must be very clear. The church is not that center. The center is Jesus: the Head of the body. All members of the body are to function in relation to the center:

Christ.

Remember Pentecost? God's people are those who are indwelt by the Holy Spirit, who is transforming their character and giving them gifts they are to use in reaching out to a lost world. Exercising our gifts and functions, according to the enabling of the Holy Spirit in response to needs and opportunities, will determine the boundaries.

I'm not advocating everyone moving in whichever direction he or she pleases, doing whatever strikes him or her as a good idea at the moment. I'm talking about the difference between form and function. In the New Testament ministry was accomplished by believers exercising certain functions. Form and structure followed, giving substance and permanence to their efforts. It is that process that needs to be repeated and reproduced, not the existing forms

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Water gives life, but water, the same as words, is shaped by its context. Water takes on the form of the container. The church had one kind of form in the modern world, it needs a new form in the new culture. We need new wineskins.

In the bounded set, it is clear who is in and who is out based on a well-defined boundary --usually moral and cultural codes as well as credal definitions.. but it doesn't have much of a core definition beyond these boundaries.

The bounded set is *hard at the edges, soft at the center. It's like the traditional ranch with high fences*. Fences keep my cattle in and keep everyone else's cattle out. Fences are mostly about possession.

The centered set, on the other hand, is like the Outback ranch with the wellspring at its center. The Outback ranch has no fences, just a water hole. We know that we don't have to control the animals... they always come back for water. The centered set has very strong ideology at the center but no boundaries. *It is hard at the center, soft at the edges*. In the centered set lies a clue to the structuring of new missional communities in pm culture.

The traditional church makes it quite difficult for people to negotiate its maze of cultural, theological, and social barriers in order to get "in.".. and by the time newcomers have scaled the fences built around the church, they are so socialized as churchgoers that they are not likely to be able to maintain their connection with the social groupings they came from... So we lose contact with non believers and we lose the ability to relate to them.

Instead of building walls or fences we need to sink wells. If you sustain your connection with the water sources, you will find a whole host of people relating to Jesus from different walks of life. We allow people to come to Jesus from any direction and from any distance. The Person of Jesus stands at the center.

In Kelowna right now we have one of the larger churches talking about selling their building and decentering their life and ministry with a house church structure. They want to find ways to get outside the walls and out with their neighbors.

Another group has moved from a weekly meeting to twice a month. They are looking for ways to free up their time from meetings and programs – ways to decenter their life and ministry so they have time again to be God's people out among the hungry and the hurting.

A couple of years ago in Vernon, just half an hour north of Kelowna, the Salvation Army sold a “church” building and used the money to fund ministry to the poor. You can bet that they were sowing seeds of trust with that action, seeds that they have reaped for the life of that town, and at the same time they were getting away from their dependence on a structure that was limiting their impact in the world.

I began this short article by quoting Henri Nouwen on two kinds of houses: one of fear, and one of love. So much of our action in the world as God’s people seems determined by the former, by fear: fear of change, fear of loss, fear of being alone, fear of rejection and more. But what would it be like if we really lived in the house of love? What would become possible for us? What would we let go of.. and what would we embrace? In what new ways could we identify ourselves with the interests of Jesus?

In *The Forgotten Ways* Alan Hirsch quotes a letter from pastor/theologian Karl Barth. He recognized the need for adaptation and change when he gave guidance to a pastor in Marxist Germany in the 1950s...

“No, the church’s existence does not always have to possess the same form in the future that it possessed in the past as though this were the only possible pattern.

“No, the continuance and victory of the cause of God which the Christian Church is to serve with her witness, is not unconditionally linked with the forms of existence which it has had until now.

“Yes, the hour may strike, and perhaps has already struck when God, to our discomfiture, but to his glory and for the salvation of mankind, will put an end to this mode of existence because it lacks integrity.

“Yes, it could be our duty to free ourselves inwardly from our dependency on that mode of existence even while it still lasts. Indeed, on the assumption that it may one day entirely disappear, we should look about us for new ventures in new directions.

“Yes, as the Church of God we may depend on it that if only we are attentive, God will show us such new ways as we can hardly anticipate now. And as the people who are bound to God, we may even now claim unconquerably security for ourselves through him. For his name is above all names...”³

For further reading..

Jim Peterson, *Church Without Walls*, NAVPRESS
Missional Church, Darryl Guder, ed. Eerdmans
Frost and Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come*, Hendrickson

³ *The Forgotten Ways*, Alan Hirsch. “Letter to a Pastor in the German Democratic Republic,” in *How to Serve God in a Marxist Land* (New York: Association Press, 1959) 45-80