Organized Congregation – An Oxymoron? – Part 3

Colleagues,

I'd like to bring this topic to closure. But Garrison Keillor says some stories do not end. So here's a batch of responses from you readers, and some thoughts of mine about what you said. Still to pass on to you are responses from a Lutheran pastor in Singapore, another one about the 11th commandment: "Thou shalt not worship thy buildings," and still another one that says movements MUST eventually evolve into institutional organizations and the church is no exception.Cheers!
Ed Schroeder

I. Several of you heard me saying "no organization at all" for Christians congregations. Here's one like that. This one's from a Seminary classmate of fifty years ago, later my Seminex colleague, and now in his retirement years an ELCA global mission volunteer.Ed,
   Your piece on The Organized Congregation. An Oxymoron? Surprises me. Certainly, I can agree with you in being disturbed with the dubious decision of your parish putting such big bucks into buildings. The problem in general is poor decisions, seemingly unconnected to sound biblical faith and an apparent insensitivity to the staggering needs and opportunities in church support beyond our shores, if not in our own our backyards. The demon however is not "organization" or organized congregations. On this

side of eternity, what's the alternative? Where two or three gather in Christ's name, they must inevitably ask: what now are we to do together with what we have in the Name of Christ? That's organization.

Protestant sectarians and even romantic Lutherans have dreamed of a church that somehow would be disconnected from the stuff of creation – buildings, power and power groups, church politics and political processes, organization, and downright disagreeable people.

I am not sure it meets the definition of oxymoron, but the biblical description, "in the world, but not of the world," is in order here. People gathered in Christ's name, called to mission, are simply, as you know too well, in the world. However, faith's challenge is to discover how the STUFF OF CREATION is shaped differently by virtue of who we have become in our baptism by the Spirit.

In the seventies, many of us (I was one) spoke against the church's "buildingolatry." We looked with favor on those churchly efforts to organize a congregation dedicated to mission without a building. One in Burlington, VT. (a Congregational mission) attracted national attention by their strong commitment, even set forth in their organizing statement: They would be church without building. In the late eighties, I preached at the dedication of an educational wing of a Lutheran Church in Burlington. I commented, the church indeed cannot escape SPACE AND PLACE, that the issue was how would we use the SPACE AND PLACE God entrusts to us. I mentioned the commitment of a congregation in their town that had elected to exist without a physical place, and casually asked: "whatever happened to their commitment"? From the assembly came a response: They built a church building! It

was one of the few times someone ever shouted out a response to a question of mine from the pulpit.

In fact, Ed. Isn't it the very Incarnation that speaks against your effort to separate certain aspects of the creation from another, assuming one is evil, not subject to reclamation by the reign of God's Spirit in this age. Rather, as I know you believe and teach – everything in this life, fallen and broken by sin, has been redeemed by Christ and our struggle in Christ is to make ALL THINGS NEW, even the annual budget and the agendas of our parish decision bodies.

Even though I seem to disagree with you on this one, I like what you do. You keep me thinking.

> *EHS Comment:*
> *I don't want to be saying "no organization." My pitch is for Christians to be "organized as a MOVEMENT." Seems to me that so it was at the beginning and through the first several generations of church history. No wonder that in the Book of Acts they are called "The Way." That's a movement metaphor, isn't it? In John's Gospel Jesus claims that very noun for himself, along with "truth" and "life." He initiates the movement. He is what the movement is. Following him puts people into the movement. Thereafter the anatomical specs of a movement (mentioned last week in ThTh 160) become the organizational specs for how it proceeds. How many OCs these days are organized like that?Seems to me that the OC in current American church life is organized as a distinctively religious institution alongside the many secular institutions in society. Not at all organized to be a movement within—"in, with, and under," to use the "Lutheran" prepositions—all the organized structures of*

God's secular "left-hand" world. No wonder even Christians talk about "separation of church and state" in the USA. Both entities are considered to be the same kind of realities, but with distinct jurisdictions. And their organizational structures mirror each other: constitutions, officers, boards, buildings. Separation means: don't overlap. Christ-followers ought not to accept that shibboleth so glibly. Jesus's words: "As the Father sent me so send I you" is an assignment to "under-lap" [and "with-lap," and "in-lap"] every institution where Christians find themselves. Not to turn "secular" entities into "church," but to re-enter them as agents of the movement, "the care and redemption of all that God has made."

How to pull that off? I know of no master-plan, no "one size fits all." But if the participants are conscious of, and committed to, being agents of The Movement, their own personal callings are to find such ways. And they will. It's learning by doing. And the author and finisher of The Movement promises to be on the scene as resource. But things will have to change in the old style OC.

One idea that seems plausible—at least at this computer keyboard—is that the current members of my congregation be "organized" in terms of their work worlds, and their assignment in the movement be specifically focused there. Example, these five are committed to the care and redemption in the world of the Boeing corporation, St. Louis branch, their 9-to-5 turf from Monday to Friday. Public school teachers tend to the C&R of the school where they teach. Ditto for folks in other turfs of the old creation, including those turfs where you don't get paid for what you do: parenting, volunteering, homemaking. Perhaps others to "the C&R of the world of

retirees here in town." You get the picture.

If they are novices in such a mode for being church—and who among us wouldn't be—there may well be goofs and miscues. No matter. Huddling each weekend in the "gathered congregation"—wherever space is available—they talk shop, compare notes, learn from their mistakes, plot new strategies for the "C&R" of their callings "out there"—and of course, get re-fueled with word and sacrament for their life in the movement, for keeping the movement moving. And they've got this promise from the movement's Author and Finisher: "Behold I am with you to the end of the age."

II. This same dear colleague sent another to which I responded directly. Here are both pieces.Ed, I like your comments, specifically:
"So it's 'world work' not 'church work' to which Christ sends us. It is not church buildings that are 'the street address where you find the body of Christ.'"

However, you seem to be downplaying that "gathered community, the Body of Christ" that is the ultimate witness to the presence of the Holy among us. Sure indeed Christians witness in all they do to the resurrection and do so practicing the love of Christ in the work place, but they do that in concert as you say amid the structures of this age and as such their love witness is hardly distinguished from all other love witnesses (and there are other great lovers of justice out there besides Christians).

The crucial place for the public witness IN THE NAME OF CHRIST is the gathered community at worship and at

proclamation, at a place and at specific times. Certainly, we might question the negative witness we give at some of our Places and Times, etc., but we cannot escape giving attention to that place and time…. Could they not be more Quaker like, Mennonite like? Yet, their places of worship often reflected their culture/life style. Sadly, that is what we mainline folks do today, we reflect our lifestyle, culture. Expensive tastes, etc., in both home and church. Keep working at breaking up that expensive taste in our homes and in our churches.

EHS comments:
You say: "However, you seem to be downplaying that 'gathered community, the Body of Christ' that is the ultimate witness to the presence of the Holy among us."I don't think so. Yes, the community does need to gather. Absolutely essential. But they can do it in other people's buildings—homes of their own members or larger public spaces (that's what a basilica was, I think, in the Greco-Roman world of the early church) available for doing just such gatherings. And for the entire first century, maybe even through the second century—Fred Danker says—that is exactly what they did.

So, were they "church"? "Gathered?" "Witnessing to the presence of the Holy among us?" Of course. If that were not so, the church would not have made it through the first century, and there would not even have been a second century of church history. God provided "gathering spaces" in/with/under the institutions of his LEFT-HAND "good and godly" agencies. These are what Luther called God's "Ordnungen," not rules and regs, but the many institutions in society, "ordained" by God to carry out God's preservation and justice agendas. And he still does so today. 'Course they are not perfect, they are

blemished too. But they ARE there—waiting.

I think it's dicey to say that the "ultimate witness" to the faith is in the gathering. I think it's in the scattering. Since the gatherings are in-house events among the believers, there is scant evangelistic witness to outsiders, since they aren't even there. Methinks the "ultimate witness" is "faith active in love" out on the streets. You need the gatherings, no question, to get the folks re-fueled with faith & love, but the refueling event is not really the witness-giving to the outside world. It is done for the sake of the witness-giving, but that happens (just as when you tank up your car) in order to get out on the road.

"The crucial place for the public witness IN THE NAME OF CHRIST is the gathered community at worship and at proclamation, at a place and at specific times."

Here again, I doubt that "The crucial place for the public witness IN THE NAME OF CHRIST is the gathered community at worship and at proclamation." I'll take a look at a couple of your terms.

"Crucial place:"
Punning I'd say: Crucial place is where you get crucified. Ergo, out on the streets in the manifold networks of God's other "ORGANIZED" worldly entities: marriages, families, clans, civic identities, neighborhoods, work and economic structures, Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, political parties, maybe even a "Tarsus-citizens association" for folks like St. Paul!

"Public witness:"
"In house" gathering for word and sacrament—absolutely essential, of course—is not "public witness IN THE NAME

OF CHRIST." It's definitely not "public" to the pagans who aren't there, even if they are aware that the Christians were doing their thing over there this morning. And if none of "them" are there, then they have no inkling that it is THE NAME OF CHRIST that is being hyped, do they? How could they? Until Paul named that name, e.g., out in the public arena in Athens, none of the folks had a clue as to what THE NAME was that he was hustling and that folk of his movement were worshiping. Word-and-sacrament liturgy as "public witness?" Hardly. It is a "public preaching, etc." but in this sense "public" designates "not-private" (just me and Marie at family devotions), but all the congregation. That is the "public" who is actually present. It's not the public out on Mars Hill.

III. From a student at the Lutheran School of Theology here in St. Louis:Ed, In ThTh 157 you say:
"Ownership of a congregation's ministry means ownership of all those secular callings out there in the world where Christ sends these members, where care and redemption are needed."

Actually, this part I can see people finding agreeable. They DO want to believe that everything done in the church is for the purpose of spreading the Gospel, so if one can show them how it's not happening, they would be open to alternatives, I think.

Again "The bane of the OC is the inward focus, the inevitable primary focus on keeping the OC going, and only incidentally/secondarily – if at all – the call to 'keep the world going' via care and redemption."

This, on the other hand, would raise their ire. I know, it’s come up at our congregation before. They insist that both foci are being attended to equally, and what’s wrong with that? We can’t have worship services without electricity, can we? (Don’t answer that

Again “It may be true in baseball mythology, but it’s not true in Christ’s mission that “if you build it, they will come.”

AMEN!!!!! Even in a baseball context I have come to hate that phrase. It is used these days to talk about new ballparks typically built with taxpayer money so as to increase the value of the franchise for the private owners, otherwise known as corporate welfare, but let’s not go there ….

Actually, our problem is that Church USED to be like this and for some folks in their own lifetime it was like this. All we had to do was find a site in October of 1958 and as soon as the building became a reality, the people came. But we are in a different era now, that’s for sure.

IV. From a Seminex grad giving bibliographic info on that book I mentioned last week about movements—and then a cheering word about his congregation’s own movement-model:Ed: In 1991 I did a sabbatical leave from the parish on the topic: Exile as a Metaphor for the Ministry of the Laity. I did this sabbatical in “exilic” style using mentors as my teachers. The book on movements that you suggested to me then is this one: Gerlach L.P. and Hine V.H. PEOPLE, POWER, CHANGE: MOVEMENTS OF SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION (The Bobbs-Merrill Co., Indianapolis, 1970). It has been a “model” for me since.
Church buildings are a symptom, of course. Legalism is the

real culprit. Church buildings are add-ons to the gospel. We think that we cannot exist without them. The real difficult one in the parish however is constitutions. Can we exist without them? I am currently working as a Pastor-Redeveloper and the first thing we did was suspend the constitution. I am here to say that we are existing fine as the church in its “esse” and “bene-esse” forms. Without the constitution, we are finally free through the gospel to be for others in the world individually and congregationally. This of course causes some anxiety. It is awkward to live this way – but it is the only way.