

Organized Congregation – An Oxymoron? – Part 4 (Finale)

Colleagues,

With this posting I'd like to bring closure to the discussion of the Organized Congregation. Well, at least for the foreseeable future, for there are other things to talk about. Here are some of the remaining responses about OC that came in with an occasional comment from me. Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

-
1. From an ELCA pastor in California. Ed, thanks again for helpful theological understanding of being the church.
 2. Another reader sent me this abstract. "Thou shalt not love all thy buildings" is the title of an abstract appearing in CURRENT THOUGHTS & TRENDS, July 2001, p. 21. The original article is "The Eleventh Commandment," by William Easum in NET RESULTS, April 2001 (Vol 22, No 4) pp. 24-25. Congregations in America are so in love with place, space, and location that perhaps it's time to formulate another commandment: Thou shalt not love thy buildings more than the Lord thy God.

Regrettably, when we think of CHURCH, most of us think of a building. This has led to three big problems.

First, we tend to ascribe to a building a reverence that should be reserved for God. We refer to the building as "God's house." That's why we don't want the kids running

around there and why we're told to be "reverent." In fact, the presence of God isn't located in a space defined by bricks and mortar. The home and the workplace are as sacred as the place we worship. When we set aside the building as the place of God's presence, it is no wonder we fall into the habit of doing one thing on Sunday and another on Monday.

Second, our ministry is too often defined by our buildings. We think our task is to bring people into the building, while it is really our mission to send people out. We build buildings before we have the staff to support ministry. The layout and the size of the building determines whether we can have this class or that second service. The aged can't manage the stairs, the parking lot is too small, and so on.

Third, our love of buildings runs counter to the trend away from structures. Our oldest generation is called the "Builders," and for good reason. Location, location, location was the mantra of the modern era. Now, however, space has moved into cyberspace, where "cyber meets fiber," and the entire construct of space and place is being revamped. With laptops, hand-held devices, and cell phones, people no longer need to meet face to face as they did formerly. Now they can huddle online, or even in their homes. Location is now defined by one's web address.

A new generation is bucking the trend in this worship of space and place. Some churches meet in different locations. The house-church movement continues to thrive. If we love our mission, and our God, we will start to rethink our attachment to buildings.

3. From a reader on the other side of the planet. I am a

Lutheran Pastor in Singapore. First the context. What is US one million dollars when a church here is built at a cost of 16 million Singapore dollars? [Ed: One Singapore dollar = 58 US cents.]

This is the breakdown:

Tender for land: S\$8,000,000 (Churches have to outbid each other if they want to acquire the title deed to the land). Cost of Building S\$8,000,000. Tenure of the land: 30 years. Many churches are willing to pay that amount, except the smaller ones who are unable to raise that sum.

On a more serious note, it is important for the church to maintain its sharp edge as a movement. However, for a movement to continue to sustain itself and perpetrate its distinctiveness, it has to get down to the serious business of becoming organised to consolidate and to strengthen its gain in order for its movement to push forward again.

Unless you are thinking of the growth of Christendom as the lowest common denominator, then you need not be bothered to get organised.

In our Singapore context, pragmatism rules the day. Denominational loyalty is non-existent. As long as your church, regardless of its persuasion, moves into a strategically located place, overnight your church "grows" by 2 to 4 times.

Thus, the bigger and richer the church, it will keep on growing and absorbing members from other churches. Besides they are able to maintain their vibrant edge of being a movement.

The "organized congregation" is a necessity for survival and for passing on your denomination's heritage. The

danger we need to guard against is that, after becoming an institution, we mustn't fossilize. The sharp edge of the church as a movement must always be maintained. When the church loses both, it loses. Peace.

[EHS comment: The competition signalled above measured by the dipstick "bigger and richer" may well indeed "pass on your denomination's heritage," but does it pass on the Gospel of Jesus the Messiah? If that Gospel, as Paul defines it in I Corinthians, is cross not glory, weakness not power, foolishness not wisdom, then "bigger and richer" has got to be an "other" gospel, doesn't it? Even if the word "church" is on the front of the building that proclaims it.]

4. From a reader whose locale I do not know. Ed: On Your "Movement" Thinking About the Church The sociologists who provided [the "movement"] model were simply applying what the field had long known, that "movements" are beginning phases for social phenomena and eventually "mature" into formalized organizations. It's simply part of the maturation process.

. . .

Try this as a way of thinking about the church today given the sweep of historical development and paying attention to what the sciences can tell us about organizations: The church is like those interlocking rings that are a favorite for depicting the Trinity, you know, you can't pick up one ring without getting the other two.

The three rings:

1. The church is a business because it must manage money and personnel to accomplish something (Good businesses today pay a lot of attention to the

- people, both customers and employees.)
2. The church is a social organization responding to people's needs for community, for opportunities for volunteer activity and for help in fashioning a value system. (These organization also pay careful attention to what people are looking for and finding ways to meet those needs.)
 3. The church is the Body of Christ, speaking to the deeper levels of our being through the mysteries of worship and the retelling of the story of Jesus and the power that story holds to draw from us trust, acts of love and a yearning for justice. (The Biblical witness has always been about God's concern for His people.)

. . .

So the answer is not to try to turn a mature organization into a movement, at least not in this country. Better to strengthen the interplay of the three "rings" by helping church leaders to encourage real dialog among the people. The interplay of these perspectives will emerge if the opportunity for open discussion is encouraged.

[EHS: That may well be the sociology of a religious organization. But is that what Christ's church was chartered to be, such a religious organization? And if not, then when it becomes that, is it still Christ's church? that is the question. Suppose Jesus' movement was not at all something that would culminate in what's described in the paragraphs above. Suppose he intended his disciples, the "People of The Way," to REMAIN "just" a movement. That doesn't mean it is an amoebic blob. There are lineaments for his movement, the five items mentioned in ThTh 160, and then the nuclear specs to it all—cross not glory, weakness not power, foolishness not

wisdom. Could you actually structure the “three rings” organization according to those specs? I wonder. It may not be impossible, but the proposal from Singapore above surely could not organize according to those rubrics. My point in hyping the Body of Christ as a movement has been: the organizations needed for the Body of Christ to operate are already there in structures of God’s left-hand managed world. The Body of Christ consists of people already living—as all of us are—in those locales of the Creator’s ordainings. They were already there in these networks of creation when they became Christians. What’s different is that they are now moving in a different trajectory, following a different drummer, in, with, under all these placements that context their daily life. Christ’s Way is a movement within the givens of the Old Creation, not a new organization set alongside them.]

5. A Crossings colleague here in St. Louis sent me this: Ed, When I saw this, I just had to pass it on. Is this a movement???? Cheers!

Subject: Tired of Traditional Church?? We’re starting something new come join us!!!

We’re starting a new kind of church and would like you to be a charter member. CyberChurchOnline will open its virtual doors in 30 days. A church with no doors...no walls and no limits!! We are not bound by a denomination, religious rules or tradition. What binds us is our need for a better relationship with Jesus Christ and the faith to make a difference in our lives and the lives of others.

Are you tired of the same old boring church services Sunday after Sunday? Do you even go to church at all? Well we’re here to offer you something very different! As Jesus

did 2000 years ago, we're here to break religious tradition! We're tired of what we see in traditional churches across the country. We're tired of the judgmental attitude that is so prevalent in the church today. We're not here to judge each other but serve each other!

You'll have access to 24/7 instant chat time with live counselors. They'll pray with you, talk with you, and help you through needs and problems in your life. We'll make it our mission to pray for you, your family and your needs each and every day!

Our chat counselors operate out of a physical church in San Antonio, TX. You'll be able to see live video cam images of our counselors and facilities anytime of the day. You'll be able to attend our services in the same way! You'll have a pastor that is real and that is sick and tired of the fake money hungry televangelist we see every day. Our church is FREE and this isn't about money, it's about helping people!

People are searching for a more fulfilled and happy life! We know we can help you overcome the daily battles and struggles you face. We'll go through them with you! We're starting this ministry to help people that need it and begin a new kind of church that has no boundaries. We're starting this church to be a family to people all over the world.

We'll send you daily devotions and you'll have full access to our website to receive up-to-the-minute changing information and spiritual guidance.

Join chat groups that fit your interests:

Singles/Divorcees/Defeating Depression and

Loneliness/Teens/Seniors/Young Married/ Mom's Club/Single moms/need a job...and many more!

Do you have needs and problems in your life and want someone to pray with you?

Find friends in our church and we'll help you set up your own instant messaging profile to be able to talk with them at any time!

Do you want to experience the victory that a relationship with Jesus brings? If so send an email to the address below and join something truly special. Type "new member" in the subject line and we'll be in contact with you. Quit anytime you want.

6. From a reader in Oklahoma City.Regarding the "oxymoron of an organized church."

Our ELCA congregation is lucky—we have anonymous benefactors who recently gave the church a 58-passenger bus—bathroom on board, AC, the whole nine yards. Another anonymous donor supplied the \$14,000 sound and video system for the sanctuary. (We're without a pastor right now, and part of me wonders if these very well-intentioned gifts aren't meant to lure a "good one" for our church, which isn't a bad motivation either.) So before I opened my mouth, and very likely put my foot there, I thought of the anointing of Christ done by the woman . . . and Jesus' reaction of Judas who complained that the money spent for the perfume could have been given to the poor.

Then I think of these verses from 1 John 3 (paraphrased "If anyone has material possessions and sees that his brother has not and does not have pity on him, how can the love of God be in him? Dear children, let us love not with the tongue and words, but with actions and in truth.")

Don't the blessings of God come through doing his will, that is giving to the "least of my brothers," or is the wonderful generosity shown to our church a way of anointing it? These things are "done deals." It's more for my own struggles with this congregation and my need to find "where I belong" that I'd very much like an opinion. The maiden voyage of the "bus" was a teen mission trip to South Chicago where the kids and sponsors ran a day camp for poor children, a first-time thing. It's not that we're bad people, maybe just self-centered. It isn't the Christian way, however, it is the contemporary American way. Please take just a few minutes to help me see here. Many thanks. Peace.

[EHS: You say: "I'd very much like an opinion." I'm guessing that you're asking for is my "opinion" on what's right or wrong about the happenings in your congregation. And I'm going to refrain from doing so. My precedent for that is Jesus's own words in the Gospel for Sunday after next, Luke 12:14. When asked for his "opinion" on a conflicted issue, he says: "Man, who made me a judge or divider over you?" And besides, even with your poignant description, I'm 99% ignorant of the specs of what's going on in your congregation. But I think I might say this: Donors who give—from whatever motivations—for someone else's benefit are surely following the law of God—and maybe even the Gospel, if it is the "love of Christ" that moves them to this action. Both of these motivators, God's law and/or God's gospel, will remain hidden until the folks themselves speak out to tell what moves them. When such conversation becomes public—one-on-one or in a congregational meeting—it seems to me that you then have the opening to put in your word and witness about the gospel that animates you, "the hope that is

within you," as I Peter puts it.

Even though the ideology of "richer and bigger" ("the contemporary American way," as you put it) infects us all, personally and congregationally, nevertheless the theology of the cross—though weak, foolish, and unglorious to that ideology—is the wisdom, power, and glory of God. In, with and under the structures we live in—worldly ones and churchy ones—wherever a crack opens up for message-insertion, that's what Christ authorizes us to say. It's that simple.]