

The Organized Congregation – An Oxymoron? Part 2: Reader Responses

Colleagues,

Responses to ThTh 157 with its “musings and mutterings” about organized congregations [OC]—quite a number of them—have been coming in. I pass some on to you today, now and then with my comments to the response. There’s still more for a later posting. But—no surprise—responses are also coming in to last week’s item on homosexuality, ThTh 159. So that may get attention next week before we get back to the issue of OC. Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

I. A Lutheran pastor from the Philippines:

Your church plans to spend a one million dollar to renew the building? What’s wrong with the old building? It’s not user-friendly? The real friendly one in church is not the building but the people. It’s not the building that wins people for Christ’s kingdom. The real instruments of God for evangelism are people. People must first be changed and when the church is growing then that’s the time you build a bigger and better building. Not before that. Does your congregation want to be a mega church? Why? I don’t exactly know what are the problems in your church so I can’t perfectly judge what your congregation really needs. One million dollar, however, is a lot of money. It could

make the Lutheran Church in the Philippines self-sufficient. LCP pastors and evangelists haven't been paid their salaries since December 2000 and the employer's contribution to Social Security and the pastors' pension fund have ceased. In spite of this the church continues to grow and the pastors and evangelists continue to work faithfully. I have not heard of anyone yet resigning. When you have people like that the church will grow as it does in many parts of the Philippines. We have pastors serving 4 to 8 congregations and they have to do a lot of walking to reach those congregations. Here in the U.S. church members are thinking of changing the carpet, air conditioning, improving the pew, etc. This bothers me.

II. From Australia, a Lutheran High School teacher:

Thanks for "The Organized Congregation. An Oxymoron?" Isn't it interesting that when we say "church" most people immediately think of church buildings. Our churches are so absorbed with churches! And YES, YES a million dollars is SO MUCH money to spend on alterations when it could do SO MUCH in other countries. I fear Jesus saying "I visited you and asked for money and you spent it on yourselves building grand churches but I was not in the buildings that you built." We recently got a legacy at our tiny congregation of \$50 000. Immediately people thought of ways of spending it. A new organ, new chairs maybe, new toilets etc. But notice how we are really wanting to spend the money on ourselves. I'm glad to say that we have proposed to give 10% of it away immediately to mission work and invest the other 90%; the majority of the interest from this going to projects outside of our congregation and the rest used on non recurrent internal projects.

Sad to say I think what you say about the organised church dissipating money effort that really should be spent on

being a mission church is true. I fear the same for Lutheran schools in Australia; they are great mission ventures in theory but really they are taking energy from the church. My research found that churches without schools actually grow more than churches with schools. I wonder if churches without grand buildings are growing more than those with big building programs.

I also abhor church fund raising. How often do I drive past dying churches in Adelaide and the only big signs I see on their walls are 'Church Fete' ["Fete" is Aussie English for a fundraiser.] Any way it is easy to criticise and much more challenging to put forward the plans of God!!

III. From a Valparaiso University theology prof, a dear colleague of 30 yrs ago:

Thanks for #157 – sort of! At first I was tempted to dismiss it as a documentation for Everyman's occasional lapse into grouchiness. But I thought the better of it, as indeed I think better of you, when I received it as a critique of the church from the ESSE of the Church, without thereby necessarily attacking those gifts of God which belong to the the BENE ESSE of the Church. [Valpo's great organist] Phil Gehring does indeed have an organ in his living room, but it was a great glory to hear the Mozart Organ Sonata with strings in the worship two Sundays ago as prelude and communion music in our Worship Space building at Immanuel. There is indeed such a thing as home-schooling, but your children and mine – and now my grandchildren – enjoy(ed) the training in Christian education that is available in the Christian Day School in a building that now offers education also in science and computer labs in the context of a social setting where

Christ is Lord. Examples can be multiplied, but you get the idea.

COMMENT:

I think I do get the idea, but I disagree, especially on the “bene esse” item. You agree with me that a church building is not of the ESSE [Latin for “essential being”] of the church, but hope that I was not “attacking” church buildings as part of the church’s “BENE ESSE” [Latin: well-being, i.e., not essential, but beneficial even so]. The very point of my mutterings in ThTh 157 was: church buildings these days (and perhaps always since Emperor Constantine standardized the yen to have them for Christians) are not BENE ESSE at all, but MALE ESSE, “bad” for the church’s essential being. Think of the Latin word MALE as in malady, malpractice, deflecting Christ’s disciples from their primal calling. Seems to me that church buildings BLUR our vision (to put it mildly) of what it means to be the church, the Body of Christ. Thus it is these very buildings, as most all of us perceive them—namely, you “gotta” have a building to be a congregation at all—that subversively “attack” (to use your strong verb) the church’s very ESSE. And if our mindset, our habit, of needing a building in order to be church does such blurring, it can hardly be BENE ESSE, i.e., beneficent to the essence of the body of Christ.

Sure, Mozart and the Immanuel organ are great stuff. But they qualify as uniquely “churchly,” seems to me, if and only if, folks departing the premises were re-focused and re-energized thereby for the “care and redemption of all that you [God] have made,” God’s left-hand/right-hand projects in and around Valpo. I’m not saying that that’s impossible. And I know that it’s difficult to determine

whether and with whom such a clarified agenda-focus might have occurred. But that is the dipstick (wouldn't you say too?) to be used to "distinguish" whether this "great glory to hear" came from God's left hand (=good stuff, but not gospelly) or from the right hand (both Good and New, aka, gospelly). Yes, it could also have come via both of God's hands, but that is not determined until it is measured by "the perpetual aim of the Gospel."

Apropos of home-schooling vs. parochial schooling—or my addendum—public "secular" schools. My own experience has been a mixed bag. My 8 years of parochial grade school education exposed me regularly to the Lutheran legalism from which I finally found rescue. I hear similar signals about the parochial school theology my grandchildren are receiving. Once more, to have or not to have a parochial school is not the issue. The dipstick—for whether it is ESSE or BENE ESSE of the church—is whether it actually engages in the Gospel's "redeeming" agenda. If it doesn't, then it's not "church" work. But that doesn't render it perverse, for it may well be doing great "world work," such as the "education in science and computer labs" you mention, the stuff of God's left-hand regime. But that too is measurable by left-hand yardsticks.

Schools need buildings of their own—unless you're in the tropics—to be schools. The body of Christ doesn't to be what it is. Members of that body, of course, need homes to live in, and God's left-hand agencies in all cultures of the world tend to that. But why do they need a "church" building? When they gather to be nourished with Word and Sacraments, to pray, praise, and give thanks, they do need space. But why do they need to build for themselves a covered-space to do this? The fact (I think it is a fact) that post-Pentecost Christians did not build churches at

all for (maybe) 2 centuries, and still were fully church—both ESSE and BENE ESSE—surely says something, doesn't it? I don't think this is romanticism or Schwaermerei on my part. My hunch is that they had a clearer picture of the “left-hand/right-hand work of God” in the world. This made it obvious that God had already provided covered-spaces with his manifold left-hand procedures in their “secular” world, and these were the places and spaces “natural” for their gatherings—on a variety of ad hoc arrangements using existing homes and public buildings. When persecutions—local or empire-wide—inhibited that, they devised other venues, as the persecuted church has and still does in our day.

I have a hunch that the deeper vision, the mindset, of the first Christians [call it the “mind of Christ?”] was that they were not a new religious organization, but a “movement.” Initially they were a movement within Judaism. But then they got evicted. Upon that eviction their next thought was not to set up their own organization parallel to the “organized church” of Judaism in their day. Instead they kept the “movement mentality,” and as Paul said when HE got personally evicted from synagogues, they “turned to the Gentiles.” But they turned to the Gentiles as a movement, now a movement not “in, with, under” Gentile religions, but a movement “in, with, under” the manifold structures—all of them God's “left-handed” creations—in the “orders,” the agencies, the political fabric, the social networks of Greco-Roman civilization. In short, no new organization, no religious organization, to parallel these left-handed entities already on the scene all over the place. The counsel of the apostles in the NT urges Christians NOT to emigrate from the existing structures—marriage, economics, the body politic—of the

“pagan” world. Nor do they urge them to set up “Christian” versions of these entities alongside them. “Stay in,” or if you did leave, “go back into” these worldly networks and “be church, do church” right there on location. Is there any need for a church building to do this? Of course not. It will only deflect you from your primal callings in these locations where God’s left-hand has placed you. Movements move into—in, with, and under—what’s already there.

Movements operate with a blueprint different from those of regular organizations. Yes, they have structure, and there are lineaments for how they are put together, but the organism is different, and thus the way that organism is organized is different too. Back in 1979 I was a reader for the Ph.D. dissertation of a colleague from India. He was examining religious “movements” in India. He taught me what I’m now passing on to you. And what I learned sounds pretty close to what I hear the NT saying when it’s talking about the body of Christ.

1. Movements have “polycephalous” [literally: many-heads] leadership. The leadership is “reticulated” [Latin: reticulum = network].

Comment: That is the paradigm for the body of Christ. THE head is ascended. Leadership on the ground is delegated, diverse and spread out. No one person “speaks for the church” by virtue of any office or appointment. [Sorry, John Paul II.] And that is even more patent in view of the 33,800 denominations [yes, that is the number, 33.8K denominations in 238 countries!] now reported in the 2001 edition of WORLD CHRISTIAN ENCYCLOPEDIA. Leadership is everywhere, though there is a yardstick for what valid leadership is. When

Grandma Schmidt in Left Overshoe, Nebraska speaks what Christ wants someone to hear in her hometown, she "speaks for THE church."

2. People join the movement by face-to-face persuasion. Comment: Church programs, church budgets, church buildings, media ministries, take note.
3. The new member undergoes some sort of "bridge-burning" experience. Call it repentance.
4. There is a real or perceived enemy that the movement is combatting. Call it the kingdoms of this world and the unfaith they nurture.
5. There is an ideology, a story, a rationale that makes sense of all this. Call it the Gospel, or God's law and gospel, or the Story of Jesus.

My Indian friend borrowed this paradigm of a movement from the work of two sociologists at the University of Minnesota, I believe. I can't remember their names. They were investigating the American Civil Rights movement and the Pentecostal movement in the USA. At the time we were in Seminex. And it all seemed to apply to us. Only later did it occur to me that it applied to the whole Body of Christ. I am of that persuasion still. Of course, movement people need space to gather, but they don't build their own buildings for the movement. Their ESSE doesn't need it. And if the ESSE doesn't, then the BENE ESSE doesn't either.

IV. From "Your armchair theologian" in Mississippi:

I still love to read your opinions. This is one of my hot buttons too. I always wondered if there shouldn't be a limit on church size- say, limited to the number of families that could fit in an average living room comfortably. The church as a social service organization

has never really been an agreeable thought to me. Like you, I do try to listen to those who have different opinions, and some of their points seem sensible. The mega church idea is justified by those who like it thusly: because our society is basically pagan, we need to create a place where our families and children can gather with like-minded people to enjoy activities that are wholesome and safe. We need to have a large enough group of people to create a mini-society that will nurture our children and provide them with plenty of different role models. We need to have enough variety that the unattached adults will be able to meet many other christian singles and be able to find a good spouse. We want our parents to have other godly parents to encourage each other in the establishment of christian homes, and have a large enough youth group that the kids can have plenty of christian peers. Kind of an all-things-to-all-people-as-long-as-it's-christian sort of arrangement.

And then the church school issue. Here, the public schools are dreadful and dangerous. Some church schools were opened back before desegregation so that non-catholics could have a religious education choice. Some were opened in direct response to the disintegration of the public schools. And the church schools do have much higher standards of behaviour and dress, and parents are relieved to have a good place for their children to go. SO I still can't make up my mind. If I didn't have young children, I would probably not be as torn. I do take seriously the charge to raise our children in a godly manner, and safeguard their innocence until they are old enough to have some discretion. The world, even in a place like our sleepy little town in Mississippi is WAY different than when I grew up. But probably not nearly as juicy and godless as first century Middle East, Greece and Italy.

So, ambivalence...

V. From a jet-setting woman business person.

Boy, I'm sure this one will generate some response, so I will add mine. First of all, I must say that this is the first TT that I have had confusion, if not disagreements, with some of your opinions. This has led to several questions on my part. First of all, is your church (i.e. building) really inaccessible to those in the community? Are those without standard abilities (poor eyesight, in wheelchairs, deaf, elderly, etc) able to make it into the building? [Answer: yes.][We need] committees and boards [in congregations]. After all, we in America have tons of money wasting on many things, and people are generous. People like to give to churches and charities for many different reasons, and the potential for abuse is huge. Someone has to manage how churches manage their offerings, if for nothing else than to ensure God's work is done. To think a few individuals can do this is a bit naive for someone with your experiences, don't you think? After all, think of the last time one of the congregation members gave a dollar to a homeless man on the streets. Certainly "the least of them", but rarely do even Christians stop to help. Without the guidance of "OC"s, what could be accomplished in America? Our culture simply does not support the efforts you see in Ethiopia. I would even venture a guess that Mr. Caldwell's church [Caldwell = pastor of a large Methodist congregation mentioned in ThTh 157. He said: "Sheep produce sheep. It's not the shepherd." I added "nor the sheepshed."] has committees and budgets for growing and missions.

As for the need of organized buildings and services, once again, I think the American culture stands in the way of

having small group gatherings. The independence preached throughout America is contrary to seeking out small groups for congregation, despite the immense need in people's lives for the word of Christ. The existence of established church buildings that provide fairly consistent service and theologies allow people to seek out the word of God while still feeling they are in no more need than anyone else. This will get people inside to hear the word, because you know that not every member of the congregation is evangelizing to those who need it most.

[COMMENT: Your words: "Our culture simply does not support" signal the problem. To counter this "gospel" of our culture is the very thing Christ calls us to as his disciples. Caving in to culture's specs is not faithful inculturation of the Gospel, seems to me.]

Always a pleasure to read your posts ☐ God bless.

VI. From a member of an English-speaking Lutheran congregation in Berlin, Germany

Thank you so much for this message.

Our congregation is in the process of moving from one building to another. The old facility will not be available for us much longer, and a very dedicated group from our congregation has, with the guidance of the Holy Spirit, found a new church home for us. It's a beautiful turn-of-the-century building. I am sure you can well imagine the charm, the size, and the necessity for renovation of the building. I am all enchanted by the building itself (mainly because it's close to where I was born into this city), but what bothers me is the ambitious plan of remodelling the inside of the building to meet the "have to haves" of our American congregation. The whole

deal is estimated at Deutsch Marks 5.5 million[=3 million plus US].This amount causes me a lot of Bauchschmerzen [tummy-ache], and I aired my concerns. I just wish, I had had this ThTh at hand when I needed it. Nevertheless I consider this ThTh a divine provision at a timely moment. Nobody would have thought me capable of your OC concept anyway, had I tried to argue it publicly. What it did though, was assure me that I have not lost my mind, because I am not all yea for the proposed architectural plans. I am very grateful for the Amazing Grace that lets me read my own gut feeling in a very intellectual and theological form. I guess, I now have to find out, what to do with this gift. Peace

VII. From a Crossings member in St. Louis

Your protest hits me right between the eyes, giving new expression to feelings I've had for a long time but couldn't find the words for, and yet the timing is ironic. Our congregation is also embarking on a similar project, though I don't know the monetary scope of it. . . . Typical comments around our place about 4 years ago were, "we should have a place that looks nice because then people know that we care about God's house and they'll want to come in" – or words to that effect. As I think about it, if one of those folks were to ask me something like, "would you want to worship in a dirty building?" I would respond with, "I want to worship somewhere where the Gospel is proclaimed truly and the sacraments are administered in conjunction with that Gospel, and I don't give two hoots the condition of the floor." I imagined (correctly or not) the response: "Oh, but you are not typical in that regard" to which my response would be, "among all those who are hungry and thirsty for the body and blood of Christ and who need to hear the Gospel every week, I certainly AM typical! If you are thinking of

people who simply want a nice place to visit on Sunday morning, it is our responsibility to redirect the attention of such folk to the message and the food they can receive there and away from the aesthetics of the place. Paradoxically, these folks who normally are against compromising our values with those of the world are nevertheless willing to compromise our mission with what the world thinks a church should be just to increase attendance. I assume you know you are blasting away at people's comfort zone here, including my own? Not that you shouldn't blast away, mind you □ but I think we all find it so easy to assume that OC is the way it is supposed to be. I know I am supposed to be "the church" at Boeing where I work, but typically I end up being "the church" at or near Good Shepherd Lutheran. Being church out in the world is after all something that the prison chaplains of the world do, so it's not like nobody does it, and we send him money to support his work, hence everything is neatly in its place.

You have given me something to think seriously about. Thank you.

VIII. From a Seminary Prof in St. Petersburg, Russia

I'm writing to you this time in response to last Thursday's "The Organized Congregation. An Oxymoron?" I received it early on Friday morning before going in to teach at the seminary. It just so happens I'm teaching a course on Pneumatology/Ecclesiology/Eschatology (I didn't write the curriculum), and we had just finished up with Ecclesiology in the previous lecture. I was impressed with your article enough to march straight into class with it first thing on Friday morning and devote the first half of the class period to it ("We're not quite done with

ecclesiology, gang..."). The students listened politely, and seemed to understand the gist of what was being said, but there wasn't much discussion. Maybe that's because the two students who are most consistent at challenging or questioning what I say in class were away in Germany. At any rate, I wanted to say that although I found your article quite provocative and on balance I agree with what you wrote, I have a few reservations.

1. I have a feeling that you might be romanticizing the situation in China. I say this only based upon my knowledge of the churches in the Soviet period and my experience of the aftermath in Russia today. While churches here survived Soviet persecution (a persecution quite different in nature from those in the pre-Constantinian Roman Empire for both its pervasiveness and endurance), it was hardly an ideal situation for "doing mission and ministry on the street." I suspect the situation in China may somewhat different, but I'm guessing it's still far from ideal, and maybe not the best model. At any rate, what emerges from 70 years of more-or-less consistent state persecution in Russia is a great deal of confusion, even within the church itself, of what the core of Christianity is. If the sacraments survived (mostly baptism, and mostly in secret), I'm not convinced the gospel fared as well. And that brings me to my next point. (Having written all this, I realize that your main point is not to idealize the Chinese church, but to point to a different/alternative way of doing the church thing.)

[COMMENT: Your words "a great deal of confusion, even within the [Russian] church itself, of what the core of Christianity is" sounds like

*Christianity USA without any 70 years of terror.
Question: what really makes for the Gospel's
survival come hell or high water or even
prosperity?]*

2. Without a broader sense of church, without synods, national (and supra-national) church organizations, and seminaries – all those yucky “worldly” things in which the church is often incarnate, how do we concretely provide for the doing of word and sacrament in the churches? Who teaches? Who supervises (in the sense of Superintendents/episcopate)? My concern is not for power, or authority (in its negative sense), but for “quality control” and authenticity. Another way of making this point is to ask how Augsburg XXVIII (esp. 21-28) is conceivable without some sort of organized church. How can we speak of “the office of the bishop to preach the Gospel, forgive sins, judge doctrine and condemn doctrine that is contrary to the Gospel...” or of keeping tabs on those same bishops (23-28) without some sort of organized church? Were the Lutheran Reformers too immersed in the Constantinian church model to conceive of alternatives? Maybe. But maybe not. They had the Enthusiasts on their left showing them other possibilities, and they didn't like what they saw. To paraphrase Winston Churchill, perhaps we could say that the “organized congregation” is the worst model for “doing church”... except for all the others.

[COMMENT: OC, yes, but organized as a “movement,” (see above) not in the gospel-conflicting paradigms of today's churches. Churchill's maxim might fit, if it hadn't been for the church's first several

generations, where they must have had a different model, and it worked. A movement.]

3. How does your vision for the dis-organized congregation (should we call this DOC?) provide for retaining a sense of the church catholic? I'm not suggesting the two are necessarily incompatible, but I see the danger in losing that sense in the DOC and its natural/necessary (not to mention meet, right, and salutary) focus on the local community and the daily life and ministry of its members.

[COMMENT: After 70 yrs of church life in many OCs, I'm still waiting for evidence of "a sense of the church catholic." Catholic meaning not just the Episcopalians and ELCA, but all those 30K-plus groupings mentioned above. Ergo, "kath-olike" meaning spread all around the planet like the old Sherwin-Williams paint logo.]

Ultimately, I guess—for the moment, anyway—I like your vision of the DOC, where C is for congregation (and this was your main point, I think) but I also see the need for the OC, where C is for church. I need to crash now so I can get up and teach. Yours,

IX. From an ELCA bishop:

Thanks for your latest stimulating piece. I passed it on to my staff for our wrestling.

P.S. FYI. Interesting trivia: At last weekend's meeting of the Crossings board of directors we learned from our cyber-guru that the Crossings web site www.crossings.org now gets up to one thousand (sic!) hits per day.