

The Organized Congregation. An Oxymoron?

Colleagues,

The voters assembly of our congregation recently voted—with one “no” vote, I’m told (I wasn’t at the meeting)—to move ahead on a building project of nearly one million dollars to improve our physical plant. The goal is to make our building more user-friendly. That means for us who use it all the time (regular worshippers and our church and school staff) and new folks—guests or seekers—who show up on a Sunday morning.

I’m a dissenter. I don’t think it is a good idea, maybe not even a godly one. But most folks think it is both good and godly, and they are dear folks, thoughtful Christians we’ve come to know and love from the 30 years that Marie and I have been members here. So what to do when the fund-raising team comes to visit and get our pledge?

Even with help from the congregation’s investment portfolio (I wonder: can such things be Gospel-grounded?), the pledges will have to be substantial, 15 to 20K from each of the 40 or so of us who constitute the congregation’s financial base. But that’s our problem, not yours.

Marie urges the counsel of Gamaliel (Acts 5): If “this undertaking is of men, it will fail; but if it is of God, it’s unstoppable.” The committee who has been working for three years on the project, the brightest and best—and dearest—of our congregation, has not accented the “is it of God?” question, as far as I know. What I do know comes primarily from the printed material we’ve received and conversations with members, since I haven’t been present at most of the meetings. Frequently

mentioned is that we want to “make our building more welcoming to the community, as we reach out in mission near and far, as we minister to one another.” It is this supposed link between “better building” and “better mission & ministry” that I don’t believe. So what to do when we have the pledge card placed before us? Does Gamaliel’s counsel help? If so, how?

During the Lenten weeks when the issue was coming to a vote, we had that Sunday gospel text about Mary “wasting” expensive ointment on Jesus instead of selling it and giving the money to the poor. Since it was Judas who proposed the option for the poor and got Jesus’ putdown for his efforts, it takes some chutzpah to take Judas’ position vis-a-vis the committee’s million dollar proposal. But I think it can be done.

Spending a million for our church building is not giving it to Jesus. He makes that perfectly clear with his words (Matt. 25, parallel Luke 4) that attending to the rejects of society is attending to him—at least after Easter. Even if we were committed—erroneously, in my opinion—to put such money into bricks and mortar, why not rather build churches for others? In the places where Marie and I have been as global mission volunteers in recent years, that kind of money would build—from scratch—complete church buildings for 20 to 50 congregations in the two-thirds world. One ELCA congregation in Florida we’ve heard of did embark on building at home, but they also set aside one dollar to build “churches for others” for every dollar they spent on building their own.

But I digress. I didn’t really want to argue about our congregation’s decision. To do so fairly would require “equal time” for those who voted yea. What I want to focus on here is what this has led me to think about. It’s not church buildings as such, but the issue of “the organized congregation.” Seems to me that it’s next to impossible for us to think of an “organized

congregation" without a building. Put bluntly: I think the "organized congregation" is a mistake. I.e., as we know them today "organized congregations" are oxymorons for Christian mission and ministry. They are a hindrance, not a help.

Parallel to the goings-on at our congregation I continue to have ongoing conversations with my ThTh co-editor Robin Morgan about her dissertation topic. She's working on the origins of Lutheran social ministry in St. Louis and the theology undergirding it. Ancient guru for this was a pastor named Friedrich Wilhelm Herzberger, called a century ago by the Missouri Synod to do pastoral work among the rejects of St. Louis society. One of the specs of his assignment was that he NOT organize a congregation among such folks, but "merely" do pastoral and diaconal ministry among them. All of the above prompts this:

1. Maybe the "Herzberger-Hindrance" forbidding an "organized congregation" [hereafter OC] was right.
2. The notion of OC, uncontested in denominational America, and celebrated to the hilt in America's mega churches, may well be passe', especially for the church's 3rd millennium generally and very especially for the church's 3rd millennium in apocalyptic venues. [Question: and where is it NOT Apocalypse Now, even in the USA?] The wave of the church's future is something other than OC. My hunch is that the underground church in China is one model of that wave: no church buildings (they're illegal, so the faithful gather at other existing structures, "meeting-points"), no synods, no national organization or headquarters, etc. They do their mission and ministry on the street between their times of refreshment at the meeting points. They lead us to ask: Aren't OCs part and parcel of the Constantinian "Christendom" model of a Christian civil society where the church was the caretaker of the society's religious needs? Thereby it became an

entity on its own, distinct from the worldly agencies and structures, but hardly a reality “in, with, and under” the systems that ran the world. Thus it may be that OC was never right despite its near universal (I’m not sure about this) practice on the planet once Christianity became kosher in the Roman Empire.

3. What then instead? “Coming-together-groups,” the original literal meaning of “con-gregation.” Christ-confessors coming together for Gospel and sacraments (punkt!) and then going back to their worldly callings in God’s non-churchy old creation. Doesn’t the same meaning inhere in the Greek term syn-agoge, a coming-together group, and (inversely) in the NT term for church, ek-klesia? I think so. Ek-klesia = the called out group; called out of the world for Gospel and sacraments and then sent right back there with no OC to deflect their attention from the primal Christian calling, aka “care and redemption [hereafter C&R] of all that you [God] have made,” aka the world.
4. Ergo, no OC life at all (!) other than whatever organization it takes to “do” gospel and sacraments on the Lord’s day. No budget, no reports to synod, no cathedral. Collections (if any) for the sake of the poor among the members or in the surrounding world, but not for the OC itself nor its even more organized super-structures. Spending believers’ money on a building? It’s unknown in the NT documents—and that covers most of the church’s first hundred years of history. So what to do if you already have a building? Well, you might sell it, and rent it back for those few hours needed each weekend.
5. After Sunday’s church-creating, church-re-creating gospel and sacraments, plus mutual huddling among the members for their coming week’s agenda out there in the world, the congregation for the rest of the week is in diaspora.

There is nothing going on at all “at church,” because THIS congregation is geographically elsewhere doing C&R stuff, being church in the world. They are out in their secular locations, the structures of God’s old creation. That “organized” world of the Creator’s ordainings is what Bob Bertram calls the C2S2, the creator’s critical support structures, chaotic though many of them may be. So after the Sunday gathering is over and until the next one, if someone should ask: “Pastor, show me your church,” she’d have to say: “I can’t. Today is Monday. They’re all over.” Thus Blessed Paul would be working with canvas all week. The congregation at Berea and those at other venues had no Monday to Saturday reality other than what each and all of them were doing in their world work—and in whatever ad hoc intersecting with each other that came while they were on the street.

6. The Sunday stuff of Word and sacrament is “sufficient” for any group of Christ-confessors to be “full” church. Augsburg Confession 7 says the same thing. That doesn’t prove that it’s valid, but that someone else once thought it was enough to constitute any group of people as church.
7. Further organization, local leadership, even local “ownership” of the congregation’s ministry is adiaphoron. Sometimes beneficial (maybe), sometimes counter-productive. “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. If there is no OC, what else is there to own? Any sort of congregational organization beyond what’s needed “liturgically” to get the folks organically partnered into their Lord via Gospel and Sacraments—again and again—must be tested by Christ’s own rubrics for his own flock.
8. Hardly any of us can conceive of a “real” congregation, I

imagine, without its internal officers, boards, programs, committees, budget, and above all, the church building. Yet Christ calls his disciples to be church “in the world.” “As the Father sent me, so send I you”—into the world. Their only need for space is a gathering-space for huddling about those worldly callings and for re-fueling to get back at them. The first century Christians found that world had space-available in its already existing buildings for such gatherings. And in the western world that’s especially true on Sunday mornings.

9. 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.
10. Our congregation’s project wants “to make our building more welcoming to the community, as we reach out in mission near and far.” What I’m suggesting here is that there’s no positive correlation between building and mission, but more likely a negative one. Seems to me to be a very simple axiom: the more resources—time, money, energy, strategy—we devote to the building, the less we have available for “care and redemption of all that God has made.” It may be true in baseball mythology, but it’s not true in Christ’s mission that “if you build it, they will come.”
11. Mission is a mindset: people conscious that as the Father sent Christ, so Christ sends us. It’s “tongue-tied believers,” as Jerry Burce shows us in his book “Proclaiming the Scandal,” who need to be rehabbed for mission. Rehabbing already-existing Christians to get a mission-mindset is a monumental piece of reconstruction and renovation. I need it too as much as anyone else. It’s akin to conversion. Akin to Paul outside the walls of Damascus being stopped in his tracks and turned around 180

degrees.

12. The mindset for mission is not “inviting people to come to church,” It’s giving people we intersect out in God’s world “the reason for the hope that is in us.” It’s not the sheep shed that welcomes strangers into Christ’s flock. It’s folks already following the Good Shepherd, and while doing so talking to these “other sheep.”
13. Two short news stories in the April 2001 issue of THE LUTHERAN are relevant here. Kirbyjon Caldwell, pastor of the largest United Methodist congregation in the USA (Houston, TX) with 13,000-plus members, describes their mission strategy very simply: “Sheep produce sheep; shepherds do not produce sheep. Our members go out and evangelize. It’s not a committee, but it is a lifestyle.”
14. The Ethiopian Evangelical Lutheran Church Mekane Yesus added 776,000 new members last year, moving from 2.5 to 3.3 million. Their mission mindset is: If you’re baptized, you’re a missionary. We should send a Macedonian call to them: “Come over and help us. Help us get that mindset.”
15. I don’t anticipate that these mutterings and musings will generate a wave of For Sale signs on church buildings. So if Christians’ edifice complex is so ingrained that we cannot shake it (yet), we might at least brainstorm church architecture that ejects us out into the streets instead of nudging us to stay inside behind the closed (or even worse, locked—at least, implicitly locked) doors.
16. It is Jesus himself, we need to recall, who spoke the grimmest words about church buildings—not one stone left upon another. That was not because he detested buildings. Rather he’s critiquing the edifice complex about religion and offering himself as a replacement building, a structure with no granite or grout in it at all. “Religions” probably HAVE TO have buildings in order to function, but the Gospel is something different. It

doesn't. Yet you may use building metaphors to talk about it: Christ the cornerstone, the rest of us body-bricks oriented to that corner—and (here it gets eerie) it's growing. But there's no ZIP code. You find it out on the streets, the highways, the byways, even the hedgerows, he said.

17. Could we still believe that about THE church and yet have a brick-and-mortar building of our own? I suppose it's possible, but it would take a lot of re-novation and re-construction—primarily in our heads. Just this week I heard about one such. A new book on church architecture (I've only seen a review) talks about "the paradoxes of Christianity, not least among them that of having church buildings at all." Even so the author, Margaret Visser, celebrates one 1400-year-old church building, St. Agnes Outside the Walls in Rome, whose very floor plan, she claims, moves you outside the building onto a journey. She writes: "The church as 'journey' recalls the words of Jesus: 'I am the way, the truth, and the life....' And so the building [St. Agnes] erases itself before what it represents, namely Christ himself, who now 'is' the temple and the path we are to follow. These bricks, marbles, and mosaics were set up in full consciousness that all they can do is point to what they mean."
18. If organized congregations will doubtless be around for a while, the organizational elements need to be tested by the same axiom: "set up in full consciousness that all they can do is point to what they mean." And if they don't, then we need to fix 'em so that they do. That won't be easy. But it has promise. Namely, His.

Peace & Joy!
Ed Schroeder