
ECCLESIOLOGY

Focus

Ecclesiology is talking and thinking about the church (Latin: *ecclesia*, from Greek *ek-kalein*, “to call out of” and *logos*, “word”). This includes talking and thinking about such things as: the nature of the church, who belongs to the church, how do we recognize church, how do we organize church, what do we expect from church, and many other questions. To have this holy conversation about ecclesiology is especially important for MCC for two reasons. The first reason is that we are a young denomination. As such we do not have centuries old traditions and models. MCC is something new and unique and we therefore have the responsibility and the opportunity to be church in many new ways. The second reason is that the people who make and build our church, all of us, come from very different backgrounds and church experiences. There is no consensus or even a common language when we talk about church. When we talk about church we might mean many different things. Yet we all live in this one body, this one church in many congregations around the world in many languages and cultures. There are many ways to be MCC. Therefore we have to engage in this holy conversation again and again.

Some Testimonies About Ecclesiology

Finding a Home

Contributed by Axel Schwaigert

I “found” MCC at least two times. I had read about this church in America that was predominately gay, but I had never actually experienced it. The first time I met actual people from MCC was on the “Kirchentag” in Germany, a large biannual gathering of protestant Christians and churches. About 150,000 people gather for four days of discussion, sharing, meeting, service and celebration. One of the information booths was from MCC Hamburg, a small congregation about 600 miles away from my hometown. Finally there was an opportunity to really meet MCC, in the flesh, so to speak! But instead of going straight to the table, talking to the people there, I started to circle the booth. Again and again I walked past the place, where several young women and men stood, talking to people. I was afraid to actually approach them. What would I say? What would they ask, say, think? Should I out myself as gay man? What if they were not nice or not welcoming? Finally I gathered all my courage and went over. I was greeted with friendliness, openness and welcome. This was a place where I could belong, where I was welcome. This could be home for me. I spent the remaining three days of the gathering at the information booth of MCC Hamburg. I finally had found a place where I could be in church and totally myself.

The second time I “found” MCC was a few months later on a vacation to Key West, Florida. We had planned to visit MCC Key West and arrived just in time for the beginning of the service. I cannot remember the sermon or the music but there is one thing I will never forget: my first Holy Communion in MCC. It was the first time that I saw two men, two women, holding hands while receiving communion. I saw small groups of people and couples approaching the altar in the fullness of who they are. I remember my tears and in that moment I knew this church would be the church of my future. In the tradition I came from people only talked about inclusion and openness. But they did not provide for the opportunity to receive what I understand as the center of my worship experience together with the person I love. I knew that I needed a place where I could come into the presence of God with all that I am, including the person I would love. Church for me needed to be the place where I am understood, where I am welcome, where I can grow and where I can bring my entire life with all its aspects to God.

**The Founding of Metropolitan Community Churches
From Rev. Troy D. Perry with Thomas L.P. Swicegood in
Don't Be Afraid Anymore**

... I lay on the bed in my room upstairs, tired from a night without rest, but nevertheless unable to sleep. I said, “Lord! You know I’ve prayed and I know you love me. You’ve told me that. I feel your Holy Spirit. What should I be doing? I can’t help but thinking of Tony [a friend who believed God hated him because he was ‘queer’], alone, bitter, cut off from talking to you. I wish I could find a church somewhere that would help him. I wish there was a church somewhere for all of us who are outcast.”

Suddenly, as if there was an electric spark in my head, I began asking myself, “What’s wrong with Troy Perry? Why are you waiting for somebody else?” Then I prayed a little later that same morning, harder than ever before, and in the sort of talking I do, I said, “Lord, you called me to preach. Now I think I’ve seen my niche in the ministry. We need a church, not a homosexual church, but a special church that will reach out to the lesbian and gay community. A church for people in trouble, and for people who just want to be near you. So, if you want such a church started, and you seem to keep telling me that you do, well then, just let me know when.” Whereupon, I received my answer to an impossible dream. A still, small voice in my mind’s ear spoke, and the voice said, “Now.” ...

On October 6, 1968, twelve people attended the first service of Metropolitan Community Church, [which I had advertised in *The Advocate*]. It was held in the right half of the little pink house in Los Angeles that Willie Smith and I called home. Instead of a suit and tie, I departed from Pentecostal fashion and wore black robes for the first time in my life. The change was initiated because of an older friend, Reverend Revel Quigley, a gay Congregational minister, knew that my outreach would attract people from a wide spectrum of very different religious backgrounds. ...

As I prepared to receive people for worship early on that Sunday afternoon, I had two fears. Worst was my fear that nobody would come. My other fear was that people would attend for a week or two, and then everything would collapse. ... Beginning the service, I told our gathering what Metropolitan Community Church was going to be, and I told them I would preach what God had told me to preach, a three-pronged gospel:

SALVATION – God so loved the world that God sent Jesus to tell us that whoever believes shall not perish but have everlasting life; and “whoever” included me as a gay male, unconditionally, because salvation is free – no church can take it away.

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COMMUNITY – for those who have no families who care about them, or who find themselves alone or friendless, the church will be a family.

CHRISTIAN SOCIAL ACTION – We would stand up for all our rights, secular and religious, and we would start fighting the many forms of tyranny that oppressed us.

(NOTE: The following is excerpted from Troy Perry's book *The Lord is My Shepherd and He Knows I'm Gay*.)

I offered communion. Only three came forward to take the bread and wine, but they were weeping. And then I served communion to myself. We dismissed with a prayer of benediction. Then I invited everyone to stay for coffee and cake. We gathered and we just couldn't quit crying. We all sat around and said we had felt the Spirit ... One young man came up to me, and said, "Oh, Troy, God was here this morning! I haven't been in church in eight years. And even when I left the church, the one I'd been in, I never felt anything like I felt here this morning, in this living room." ...

As we started to grow and attract people from all kinds of different backgrounds, I knew that we would have to get down to cases about settling problems of organization, administration, doctrine, and the church services. They had to be settled soon, so that everyone would be able to know and rely on the church, to really be a part of its body, of its identity.

I knew that I was not starting another Pentecostal church. I was starting a church that would be truly ecumenical. I had asked the religious backgrounds of those first twelve. They were Catholic, Episcopal, and various Protestant sects. I fervently sought to serve a really broad spectrum of our population. ... But it is not the mechanics of worship that we were concerned with. It was the substance of the act of worship that was the core of our service. We did have diversity. We needed that. Ours was a working church, an active, growing church. We knew that the worship of God comes from the heart. So we were always free to move and grow. That's the way it has always been. We felt that the diversity and the freedom and the real sincerity of worship would bring us together in unity. ... When we finally obtained our charter, it was the Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches. In that organization we establish missions and new congregations, and our whole program of social, economic and political action.

Some Centering Quotes on Ecclesiology

"Our bread was given, not earned. We had nowhere else to go and nothing else to do but sit there together, saying sonorous words in unison, listening to language we did not hear anywhere else in our lives. *Take heart. Go in peace. Bear fruit.* ... We also sang things we could more easily have said. *The Lord be with you. And also with you.* None of us would have dreamed of doing this in the grocery store, but by doing it in church we remembered that there was another way to address one another. *Lift up your hearts. We lift them up unto the Lord.* Where else did any of us sing anymore, especially with other people? Where else could someone pick up the alto line on the second verse of "Amazing Grace" and give five other people the courage to sing in harmony? Sometimes, when we were through, we would all just stand there listening until the last note turned entirely into air."

(Barbara Brown Taylor, *Leaving Church*)

“It is a reading of the past that makes sense to those seeking certainty in an uncertain landscape. But it is also a political agenda to convince Christians that God has a particular future in mind for us—a future that, not surprisingly, looks exactly like a policy statement from the religious right. Theirs, however, is not the only version of history available to spiritual nomads. Other Christians are remembering the past differently, reaching back to the ancient wisdom of the village church, a tradition, that, at its best, both grounds a community and opens its doors to wayfarers. Two colleagues of mine once referred to this as ‘porous monasticism,’ a kind of Christian community of practice that is both spiritual and open at the same time. Its doors are not barred by threats of eternal damnation. Rather, signposts of Christian practice—the things people do together in community for the sake of God and the world—mark its sacred space.”

(Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity for the Rest of Us*)

“[T]he Church, capital C—is not really a ‘thing’ or entity so much as it is a network in exactly the same way that the Internet or the World Wide Web or, for that matter, gene regulatory and metabolic networks are not ‘things’ or entities. Like them and from the point of view of an emergent, the Church is a self-organizing system of relations, symmetrical or otherwise, between innumerable member-parts that themselves form subsets of relations within their smaller networks, etc., etc. in interlacing levels of complexity.”

(Phyllis Tickle, *The Great Emergence: How Christianity is Changing and Why*)

After Her Death

I am trying to find the lesson
for tomorrow. Mathew something.
which lectionary? I have not
forgotten the Way, but, a little,
the way to the Way. The trees keep whispering
peace, peace, and the birds
in the shallows are full of the
bodies of small fish and are
content. They open their wings
so easily, and fly. So. It is still
possible.

I open the book
which the strange, difficult, beautiful church
has given me. To Matthew. Anywhere.

(Mary Oliver)

Holy Conversations: Exploring My and Our Understanding of Ecclesiology

Points of Reflection (Small Group Discussion): Which tradition do you come from, if any? What aspect of church is personally important to you?

Points of Reflection (Small Group Discussion): What are your own images and words for “church”? What images and words do you find helpful, which are unhelpful or problematic?

Points of Reflection (Large Group Discussion): With so many traditions and images for church in MCC, what makes us ‘ecclesia?’

Biblical Passages and Additional Thoughts About Ecclesiology

Contributed by Axel Schwaigert

There are many ways to talk about church. The way we engage in this conversation depends on the tradition we come from and the specific question we want to discuss. One way to talk about church is to distinguish between the invisible and the visible church. Church is always both: the Body of Christ (Eph. 1:23; Eph. 5:30; Rom. 12:5 ff; 1 Cor. 10:16 ff, 12: 27 – 31; Col. 3:15 – 17; 1 Cor. 12:12 – 31), and the Communion of Saints. (Eph. 2: 19 – 20; Col. 3:12) The church is a mystical and spiritual gathering that ultimately surpasses our human understanding.

The church is built out of real humans with strengths and weaknesses. It is an organization with different historical, cultural and regional forms, with rules and regulations, sometimes living in peace, sometimes fighting. (Acts 2: 42 – 47; Acts 4:32 – 37; Acts 5:1 – 11)

As the Body of Christ in the world we are deeply connected to God. We are called out of the world, out of the nations to be a holy and royal priesthood, (Exodus 19:6; Rev. 1:6) the people of God (1 Peter 2:9; Rev. 21:3). The old language of the Nicene Creed calls the church “one, holy, apostolic, catholic.” These words can have many different meanings. “One” can mean that in front of God the church is one, one Body of Christ, united from all her different forms into “One” by the love and grace of God. “Holy” can mean that through this love and grace the church is already today called out of the sins and separations from God into the triumphant, celebratory and ecstatic moment we will see on the last day. “Apostolic” can mean that the church is called into the inner circle of Jesus’ friends and disciples, sitting at the table of the great feast in heaven, together with all the saints past and present. “Catholic” (worldwide) can mean, that the church is called to the whole world, that no part of the world--be it regional, national or personal-- in body and spirit is left out of it.

As the Body of Christ we are deeply connected to the world. We are sent forth into the world, to all nations to change the world and be God’s people in the world. (Mark 16:15ff) We are called to be sisters and brothers, helpers, healers, teachers. As such we live with the need to organize ourselves, to give the church a structure and develop ways of living together. There are many ways of organizing church. None of them is perfect and they all have their specific place in time and in cultures. It is again and again the task of the many

parts of the Body of Christ to find the right way of being. Some of these structures need to be large, some are small and local. Some are better suited for a certain situation than others, but none is better or worse out of itself.

There are different ways being church manifests. Some see signs of the church when the sacraments are administered and the Gospel is proclaimed. Some see signs of the church when the Spirit is moving the people. Some see signs of the church when a certain organizational structure is present or the connection to a certain office or hierarchy is maintained. Some see it where good deeds and social action take place and others see it where there are buildings and times of worship and meditation. The church is also a place of community. Some might come because it is a place to meet friendly people, because it is the one place and time a week where people are welcoming and smile at you.

Holy Conversations: Seeking, Sharing and Stretching

Points of Reflection (Small Group Discussion): How did you find MCC? What was important to you, what did you enjoy? What is important to you about MCC today?

Points of Reflection (Small Group Discussion): What 'signs of the church' are important for you? Why?

Point of Reflection (Large Group Discussion): Based on the additional thoughts above, how would people who are 'not church' recognize MCC as a church?

Points of Reflection (Large Group Discussion): Which ideas in this conversation have been most helpful to you in thinking about the church? Which have been most challenging?

Pulling it All Together:

Reflections on the Church as a Living Tree

As the church, as a denomination, as a congregation, as a group we are like a tree. Planted by God we have our place and time in the life of the world. Roots grow deep into the soil of our own history and the history of others. We are rooted in the thinking, talking and believing of those who went before us. Some of the ground we stand on is good, fertile ground, some is hard rock and our roots have to grow around them. But we need both: the light soil that gives us nourishment and the hard rocks we can hold onto when storms shake us. And even the roots of the smallest plants can break the hardest rock. In this foundation we drink the living water, which is Christ.

We have a trunk, lifting the leaves high in the air, connecting them to the ground and the water. And even if the trunk sometimes seems dead and immobile, with a lot of dead bark around it, it still lives, supports, grows and protects the whole being. Without the trunk, all that holds us together and lifts us up in the church, we only would be a bush, blown away by the winds of time.

And we have a branches and twigs, leaves and blossoms. Each one is unique and different from the other, and yet all are the same, part of one tree. Together they form the crown, being seen from far away, that shelters the birds in the air and gives shadows in the heat of the day and safety in the cold of the night. Where the branches and the leaves grow, we do not know, the Spirit of God calls and leads us, every branch and every leaf. And the Spirit calls us to bear good fruit, our fruit, different from others, yet all precious for those who hunger.

And together with other church trees, large and small, tall and wide, in different colors and with different names, we form that forest that is the Creation of God.

Closing Ritual

For a small group, where people know each other quite well: A ritual of appreciation.

Provide small objects, one for each participant. These objects should be similar, but different. For example: different colored stones, real or artificial blossoms or flowers, differently colored tea lights, simple Origami objects in different colors. For this ritual the group should, if possible, be gathered in a circle. The objects are placed in a basket or on a beautiful piece of cloth in the middle. It is important that this center is somehow decorated and looks beautiful and precious. For this ritual we take something out of a treasure to give it to others. Each participant is now in turn invited to take one of the objects and give it to one other participant, telling the other person very shortly why she/he is important to the church, what he/she is doing for the church, why the church is a better place because of that person. "I am glad that you are part of MCC /of our church/of this group, because ..." Each person should receive only one object. The participants can take the objects home as a reminder of how important they are to the church. The leader should make sure that everybody is appreciated. Close with a prayer of blessing for all that are present and for the church.

For a larger group, where people do not know each other well: A ritual of good wishes for the church.

Provide small objects, one for each participant. These objects should be similar, but different. For example: different colored stones, real or artificial blossoms or flowers, differently colored tea lights, simple Origami objects in different colors. For this ritual the group should, if possible, be gathered in a circle. The objects are placed in a basket that can be handed from one to the other. In the middle of the circle provide for a centre, a piece of cloth, a burning candle. It is important that this center is somehow decorated and looks beautiful and precious. Each participant is now in turn invited to take one of the objects and place it in the centre of the circle. With this he/she is invited to formulate a good wish or blessing for the church/denomination/congregation. "It is my good wish and blessing for MCC/our church/this group that it may grow/ meet again/ have enough money to finally fix the leaking roof..." Close with a prayer of blessing for all that are present and for the church.

Additional Resources

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