

Foreword

In 1976, Robert C. Worley, a professor at McCormick Theological Seminary in Chicago, published a book entitled *A Gathering of Strangers*. The title of Worley's book suggested a significant change in how the church was being experienced. I grew up decades ago in a rural community where my father was the pastor, like the rural communities where my grandfathers had been pastors before him, and everyone in those congregations knew everyone else. There were no strangers in the corporate worship of the congregation. The people who came together on a Sunday were people who lived as long-time neighbors, who were doing their farm work in the same rhythm of the seasons, who helped each other in emergencies and in harvest time, who met each other on trips to town and always on Saturday night, whose children were in the same school, who celebrated together and mourned together, and who had bonds of community that came to expression in Sunday worship. Community and church were co-extensive.

Today, even when we know the names of many of the members of our congregations, we still meet as strangers. We do not work together during the week. We may not live in the same residential communities. We often do not have common interests. We live in different school districts so that our children do not attend the same schools. We have little in common except that we gather once a week, more or less, in the same building for a religious ritual. We are "a gathering of strangers."

Over many centuries the very understanding of the nature and purpose of the church has encouraged this development. The two sociologically operative "models of the church" in Western culture have been highly individualistic. In the first model, the church in medieval culture understood itself to be primarily a "salvation institution," boxing and packaging people and marking them for shipment to eternity, in Søren Kierkegaard's bitter observation. They needed no relationship with each other, since salvation itself was thought to be a highly individualistic matter. That kind of church could be transferred to the North American continent with little difficulty. Salvation could be marketed either in medieval-type sacramental rituals or in the 19th century revival tent. In either case it was the individual's personal involvement in the sacraments or the individual's personal acceptance of Jesus as savior that was essential. It might take place in a crowd, but it was really "a gathering of strangers."

In the wake of the reform movements of the 16th century a second model emerged as the "service church." The rulers of that era saw religion as one of the services that they were obligated to provide for their citizens. The clergy functioned as quasi civil servants, and their duties included Sunday "services" as well as baptizing, marrying, and burying all citizen/church members who were in reasonably good standing. This model, too, could be transferred to the North American continent with little difficulty. It could be marketed in terms of the "services" which the clergy and the staff of a

congregation could provide the members – education, counseling, interest groups, self-help sermons, and whatever else could be made to appeal to a clientele. Relationships with other members were optional, and the Sunday event was still “a gathering of strangers.”

Why challenge this? It seems to “work.” American society has congregations that are more vital and “alive” than those in any other countries in Western culture. It doesn’t seem to matter that they are “a gathering of strangers.” However, the question for us is whether this kind of religion is “church” in any authentic sense. The challenge is to ask what the church is called to be in terms of its participation in God’s intention for humanity.

There is little doubt that the images of the church in the writings of the New Testament are essentially communal images. The image of “people of God” is taken from the prophet Hosea (2:23) and employed by Paul in Romans 9:25-26 and by the author of I Peter 2:9-10. The problem here is that we often use the concept of “people” as persons in general, the aggregate of individuals involved in or present at an activity. But in the biblical writings it is a pregnant and powerful term for that community which gives the individual her or his identity and personhood. To be a “people” is to have separate and cohesive actuality.

Paul’s image of the “body of Christ” is rich in identifying the connectedness of the “members” of the body. Paul admonishes the Corinthian church that the members cannot authentically participate in the ritual meal of the body of Christ and selfishly ignore and humiliate the poorer members at the same meal, (I Cor. 11:17-32). Community is so organic that “if one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it” (I Cor. 12:26).

Most significant is the language of the Ephesian letter, where the writer states that Christ has broken down the wall of separation and hostility between Jew and Gentile and has made the church the vanguard of a new reconciled humanity, (Ephesians 2:14-16). “So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.” (Eph. 2:19-22). This is the foundation for the great appeal to maintain “the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace,” (Eph. 4:1-7).

This unity does not mean creating a kind of religious *cosa nostra*, where we can be more or less intimately connected with “our kind of people” and where we can do “our thing” in splendid isolation from the world around us. The vision of the New Testament writings is that we are called to be community as essential to the church’s mission and for sake of the church’s mission. That mission is quite simply to serve corporately the Reign of God,

God's "project" for the world. That project involves nothing less than the eventual gathering of all alienated and hostile persons and groups into one reconciled and communal humanity. The church is to embody that vision, to be the bearer of a ministry of reconciliation and gathering, to embrace the needs and hopes of all in a community in which God is finally "everything in everyone," (I Cor. 15:28).

Because this vision of the church as community defines its authenticity in both its being and its mission, the question of HOW to be community in the face of "a gathering of strangers" is both timely and urgent. Robert Worley's book is about living with and making the best of the new reality, that churches are and will remain "a gathering of strangers." This *LifeCrossings* course, *From Here to Community*, is about changing that reality. It is designed to be a resource for moving individuals and congregations from being "a gathering of strangers" to being community. The authors, Dick and Judy Reuning, have created a course with a companion Leader's Guide that enables the participants to grasp the vision and to take concrete positive steps towards its realization. They have drawn on a rich reservoir of sociological, psychological, and above all theological sources. The twelve sessions invite participants on a journey complete with "food for the journey," "encounters along the way," and "notes for the travelogue."

The "travel guides" include religious sociologists Robert Bellah and Robert Wuthnow; theologians Loren Mead and Marva Dawn; biblical scholars Gerhard Lohfink, Karl Donfried, and Howard Clark Kee; Christian historians Martin Marty and Henry Chadwick; Christian ethicists Larry Rasmussen and Dietrich Bonhoeffer; and pastors Eugene Peterson and Norman Theiss, just to whet your appetite. *From Here to Community* contains quotations from their writings for reflection and discussion as well as references for digging deeper. There is a fictional congregation that is anything but fictional. It could be your own, and attention to its dynamics keeps things real, concrete, down to earth, focused. There are action exercises together with opportunities for prayer. There is serious encounter with biblical texts set into a context that has theological depth.

You cannot work through this course without being challenged, affected, changed. What is more, your church has the opportunity to become community, that is, to become the agent for and the witness to God's vision for humanity. In 1985, before the wall came down that had separated East from West for nearly half a century, a student in East Germany's Leipzig told me, "The church is an island of truth and freedom. Coming here is like emigrating without leaving the country." Indeed. That "freedom" was not freedom from the world, but freedom for the world, Christ's own freedom. Helping the church to become such an island of freedom to be community to the world is the goal and intention of *From Here to Community*.

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