

Pastor's and Pastoral Associates' National Conference

The House of God's People that We Live In and Out Of

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Introduction

For the past few years, Lutheran World Service has been working alongside Tsunami survivors in the coastal villages of Southern India, slowly rebuilding homes with families who lost everything in 2004. They are building simple, sturdy houses, all of the same design. The only difference is, if you look closely, you'll notice that some houses have ornate, exquisitely-carved front doors. These houses belong to Dalits who are at the bottom rung of the Caste System and are generally known as 'the untouchables.' Why do the Dalits carve their front doors so intricately? Prior to the Tsunami, the front door of a Dalit's house was only one metre high. As a result, the lowest of the low would always leave their house in what was considered to be the appropriate manner, bowed-down, facing the dirt, unworthy to face the rest of humanity. Wouldn't you decorate your new front door exquisitely if you could stand up straight and walk tall through your front door into a world where you saw not only the mud but also the stars? The irony, that Dalits are only now appreciating, is that they themselves had for generations built the houses that had constrained them and held them captive.

Captives in our own home?

Perhaps Dalits aren't the only ones whose houses constrain them, shaping how they relate to others and to the world. What of the House of God's People, called church, that we have built for ourselves? that you and I shape, day-in, day-out? These are important questions but there is one further key question. What **do we allow ourselves to see** as we look out on the world from the home we have built? Prior to the Tsunami, the Dalits emerging bowed-down from their houses, saw mud everywhere they looked, and not surprisingly, even within themselves. What a change, emerging straight and tall through their new front doors, since the Tsunami. Now they see the stars beyond the mud.

What do we see when we look out from the home we inhabit, when we look out on the world from the church we call home? John Calvin, the sixteenth-century Reformer's classic answer, is that, like the Dalits, we see depravity, both within and beyond ourselves. We are trapped in the

mire, like Dalits, unable to free ourselves. In the Reformers' view, Jesus **lifts us out** of this depraved world and removes us from the evil around, even within us. Calvin is partly right. "This **is** a stormy world we live in, and we all of us have been through storms in the past that were almost the end of us."¹ "The world is full of darkness, **but**, at the heart of darkness – whoever would have believed it? – there is joy unimaginable."² In fact, "all the madness and lostness we see around us aren't the last truth about the world, but only the next-to-last word. The last truth about the world"³, the classic Catholic approach, is that the world is both graced, and sinful. The world is not, as Calvin would have it, totally depraved. It is, rather, graced, though deprived. Eugene O'Neill expresses this approach memorably in his play *The Great God Brown*: "We are born broken. We live by mending. The grace of God is the glue."⁴ Rather than removing us from a depraved world, the Catholic approach sees Jesus **joining us** in the mire and transforming us and the world from within. As Frederick Buechner, that most Catholic of Reformed theologians puts it: "For all its horrors, the world is not ultimately a horror show because, as Jesus tells us, the world has the Kingdom buried in it like a treasure buried in a field, like leaven working in dough, like a seed germinating in the earth, like whatever it was in the heart of the Prodigal Son that finally brought him home."⁵

My hunch is that the home the Prodigal Son returned to is similar to "the home" John's gospel tells us that "Jesus made among us,"⁶ and vastly different from the homes Dalits constructed for themselves. It's telling that the Prodigal Son's older brother was so angered by their father's lavish generosity that he would not set foot within the house.⁷ In contrast, Jesus made himself at home among prostitutes and tax-collectors and other sinners. Jesus lived in a home without walls where everyone was welcome. Which, of course, raises an intriguing, even challenging question for us who are intent on shaping pastoral plans for vital parishes. For all our energy, insight, good will and comprehensiveness; what kind of church, what kind of house of God's people are we constructing? What is the dwelling we are living in and living out of? Like Dalits, we end up seeing and relating to the world out of the particular dwelling we implicitly construct, day after day. As Winston Churchill once commented: 'We shape our buildings, then they shape us.' We may opt, metaphorically, to live in or more accurately, to live out of a variety of

¹ Buechner, Frederick (1996) *Longing for Home*. New York: Continuum p165

² Buechner, Frederick (1996) p127

³ Buechner Frederick (2006) *Secrets in the Dark*. San Francisco: HarperCollins p71

⁴ O'Neill, Eugene (1926) *The Great God Brown*. Available online at

<http://gutenberg.net.au/ebooks04/0400091h.html>

⁵ Buechner, Frederick (1996) p113

⁶ John 1:14

⁷ Luke 15:28

dwelling. I mention three that Jonathan Sacks proposes in another context.

Living in and out of a Country House

Country houses, like some churches, emphasise welcome, hospitality, a range of activities from trivial pursuits to earnestly educational, perhaps even favoured projects and charities that improve the lot of others. Country houses may be wonderful places to while away the hours, perhaps for a weekend, at most. Living there full-time would be dispiriting, locked away, retreating from the cut and thrust of the real world, which, for all its flaws and limitations, is God's chosen destination. The Country House's theme-song could be: *Let the Rest of the World Go By*. Everyone is welcome, so long as you make the effort to fit in. Yet, however attractive Country Houses are, one always remains a guest. It's someone else's home, even another generation's. There are insiders and outsiders – those who would never fit in there. Given that Jesus turns outsiders, like the Prodigal Son, into insiders in his house, a self-contained Country House (self-contained in many senses of the word) provides an inadequate blueprint for any church that would seek to be genuinely missional.

Living in and out of a Hotel

Like the older brother, who was unwilling to make room for his black-sheep brother in his Father's house, we may opt to live in and to live out of **a hotel**, where everyone lives their own lives, paying for whatever services they want. "A hotel is where you stay, not where you belong. A hotel is a gathering of strangers who have no reason to become anything other than strangers. Yes, after a while, you (may) recognise your fellow guests. You (may) bid them a good morning. You may discuss the weather and football."⁸ The theme song could be Arlo Guthrie's *You Can Get Anything That You Want at Alice's Restaurant*. Parishes can be tempted to implicitly live in and out of **a hotel** model. Sterling attention is paid to **identity**, with imaginative and all-pervasive 'branding' and a constantly updated parish website. There are efficient processes and **structures** in place (so that the parish hums). Resources are allocated for sparkling, prayerful **worship**. An endless array of **educational** and **outreach** programs are available, advertised, even well-utilised. Yet, **mission** is likely to be more what certain enthusiastic others do, than what every member of the congregation does, let alone what drives every activity in the parish. An efficiently-operating Hotel provides an

⁸ Jonathan Sacks (2007) *The Home We Build Together*. New York: Continuum p14

inadequate blueprint for a church that would seek to be genuinely missional.

Living in and out of a Purpose-Build

The third home in which and out of which we might live is **the purpose-built** house. It is not something that we inherit (like a Country House), nor something that we periodically inhabit (like a Hotel). A purpose-built house is something we build together, taking notice of the setting, imaginatively shaping a space that speaks to what we say we value and how we spend our time, all the while, never ignoring input from trained, experienced professionals. The ABC TV program *Grand Designs* displays the folly of succumbing to personal whims and fantasies, and ignoring rigorous engineering and architecture principles that every structure, purpose-builds included, stand or fall upon, literally. Purpose-builds are seldom built, solely by an individual. Many tradesmen and artisans, working together, each within their own specialty, gradually construct ‘the build’ together. The question every artisan working on a ‘build’ is: how is my work contributing to the quality of what is being constructed here? Is not this the same question on the lips of every member of a missional community? How is my work (not restricted even to paid work, let alone, only “church work” contributing to what God is constructing among us here and now? I’m reminded of a request Bishop Ken Untener⁹ made when he arrived in the Diocese of Saginaw, Michigan. He asked every parish and diocesan meeting, (whether it was a parish council meeting, a liturgy committee, a St Vincent de Paul, a Diocesan Finance Committee, an RCIA meeting); he asked every meeting to ponder the question: how does what we talk about and decide upon, at this meeting, affect the poor? This is a practical example of what it means to live in and out of a purpose-build, rather than a self-satisfying Country House or fee-for-service Hotel model of church. The theme song of a purpose-built home/church could be Louis Armstrong’s *What a Wonderful World*. “I see skies of blue, clouds of white. Bright blessed days, dark sacred nights. And I think to myself, what a wonderful world.” St John expressed it this way: *God so loved the world that he sent his only son so that everyone who believes in him might not be lost but have eternal life.*¹⁰

⁹ See Patricia Livingstone “First the Dying”, *Spirituality for Ministry* (2006) ed Karen Smith. Ligouri: Ligouri Press p26

¹⁰ John 3.16

The church, as a purpose-build isn't the province of whimsical, novelty dreamers, cut loose from the riches of the Catholic tradition, keen to pursue anarchy rather than hierarchy. Hierarchy, from the Greek word *hierarche*, does not refer to levels of command on a power pyramid but rather to the ministry of helping a Christian community to work well together: holy order as opposed to anarchy.¹¹ Church as purpose-build, unlike church as Country House or church as Hotel pays close attention to what is being created, how we thereby see, and value and engage the world around us, how we assume God is active in the world. When you think about it, church as Country House or Hotel resembles pre-Tsunami houses, from which we emerge, if at all, suspicious of what we encounter. There's more likely to be suspicious minds than appreciative enquiry. When we inhabit and look out of church as Country House or as Hotel, we may find ourselves buying in, uncritically, to the often-heard lament that Australia's secular culture¹² is hostile or at least, at odds with the mission of Christ and the Spirit, the two hands of God. A moment's reflection suggests that "secular culture contains much of what is best in the Judeo-Christian tradition: human dignity, fundamental honesty, concern for others, equal opportunity, tolerance of others and their differences, (even) an openness to God and the transcendent. (Indeed), secular culture has even played a major role in re-teaching those ideals to the churches."¹³ Perhaps secularity is less an enemy to be beaten into submission and more like an adolescent child, who like our own teenagers, rebels against authority, all the while, still longing to be accepted and loved. A combative, oppositional approach to the secular world betrays the open-hearted, generous welcome we espouse as Roman Catholics. Ron Rolheiser is right: "The big struggle of our times is not between belief and secularism but between cynicism and hope."¹⁴ If people are not so much ceasing to believe, but rather not coming to join our worship, might it be because we're fighting wars that don't matter to them? Frederick Buechner gets to the heart of what we surrender when we assume a primarily adversarial stance to the world: "To do for (ourselves) the best (we) have in us to do, to grit our teeth and clench our fists in order to survive the world at its harshest and worst – is, by that very act, to be unable to let something be done for (us) and in (us) that is more wonderful still. The trouble with steeling (ourselves) against the harshness of reality is that the same steel that secures (our lives) against being destroyed secures (our) life also against being opened up and transformed by the holy power that life itself comes from. (We) can survive on our own. (We) can grow strong on our own. (We) can even

¹¹ Groome, Thomas, *What Makes Us Catholic* (2003) San Francisco: Harper p29

¹² See Michael Downey, "Consenting to Kenosis" Ron Rolheiser (ed) (2006) *Secularity and the Gospel* New York: Crossroad p117

¹³ Rolheiser, Ronald (2006) *Secularity and the Gospel* New York: The Crossroad Publishing Co p41-42

¹⁴ Rolheiser, Ronald (2006) p47

prevail on our own. But (we) cannot become human on our own.”¹⁵ We don’t have to go to South India and ask the Dalits about that.

Comparing Houses

The **Country House** and **Hotel** models of church are essentially Calvinist, retreating from the world into the cosy life of a Country House or Hotel life where one retains a semblance of control through paying for services one desires. Of course, a **purpose build** may be a more personalised, self-absorbed version of both a Country House and a Hotel, a flight from the world. Equally, church as a build-it-yourself, if it has solid foundations, may be a vehicle for engaging, even transforming the world. Problems arise whenever we forget our theological foundations, and find ourselves unwittingly building a veritable Country House or Hotel, when what we are intending is an Oikunome, an open house of God’s people, where, as Kristen Stendall puts it, we worry about what God is worrying about when God gets up each morning; the mending of creation.¹⁶

There are subtle ways of unintentionally defanging a church of its missionary thrust. For instance, I was at a workshop on contemporary Roman Catholic Ministry sometime ago and heard ministry described as what happens when gifts bump into needs. There’s something appealing about that definition. It’s clear and straight-forward. Pastoral planning entails doing a needs analysis, discerning peoples’ gifts, bringing gifts and needs together, and there you have it, fruitful ministry; what happens when gifts bump into needs. Take a closer look at the definition and it’s not clear if the gifts are mutual or assumed to reside in the ‘minister’ alone, with the ‘other’, the needy one. I’ve been around long enough to know that ministers too can be very needy, and blind about our own needs as well. If on the horizontal, relational level, this definition of ministry as ‘gifts meeting needs’ is flawed, on the vertical level, where and in what ways God’s Spirit fits into the equation, the definition is, worse still, deadly silent. While gifts bumping into needs initially appeals to me, because of its clarity, on reflection, it appals me. It leads us out of open-plan living, back into the confined, seemingly secure house, where church needs for growth and reclaiming “latent Catholics”¹⁷ take precedence over the less controllable, initiating action of the Reign or Dream of God, both among and beyond us. So, “if we live in a broken world, a world shattered by wars, famine, political upheaval,” if “the church too is broken” and if “no one knows better than you and I the

¹⁵ Buechner, Frederick (1982) *Sacred Journey* New York: Harper Collins p46

¹⁶ Cited by Letty Russell (1987) *Household of Freedom*. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press p71

¹⁷ Bibky, Reginald “Beyond Resilience to Renaissance” Ronald Rolheiser (ed) (2006) *Secularity and the Gospel* New York: The Crossroad Publishing Co p191

brokenness of our own lives,”¹⁸ “it is our business, as we journey, to keep our hearts open to the bright-winged presence of the Holy (Spirit) within us and the Kingdom of God among us, until little by little, compassionate love begins to change from a moral exercise, from a matter of gritting our teeth and doing our good deed for the day, into a joyous, spontaneous, self-forgetting response to the most real aspect of all reality, which is that the world is holy because God made it and so is every one of us as well. To live as though that reality does not exist is to be a stranger in a world of strangers, (perhaps even worse off than the Dalits.) To live out of and toward that reality is little by little to become (holy, wholly human).”¹⁹

Living In and Out Of a Purpose-build

When our primary focus is on the Reign of God, on God’s Spirit at work among us, then we attempt to keep our eyes peeled for signs of the Spirit’s prodding, the Spirit’s influence among, within, even against us. Then, we’re more likely to cooperate with, rather than get in the way of God’s initiatives, God’s attempts to gather together the scattered people of God into the biggest purpose-build there is: the fully-realised Kingdom of God, God’s Dream, where it will no longer be human beings in their lunacy who are in charge of the world, but God in his mercy who will be in charge of the world.²⁰ Is it any surprise that, living in such an open-plan house, where we constantly bump into each other, the way we most effectively proclaim the Gospel is by way of dialog. And, dialog isn’t just a matter of words. There’s the *dialog of life*,²¹ where human beings share joys and sorrows, griefs and anxieties; the *dialog of action*, where people work together on issues of communal concern, the *dialog of theological exchange*, where each other’s theological beliefs are explored for better understanding, and the *dialog of religious experience*, where each person’s spiritual treasury and prayers and practices are shared. Of course, few of these gracious, grace-filled dialogs are likely, perhaps even possible, when suspicion reigns among neighbours. In the face of suspicion and threat, people tend to pull their heads in, to reign in what’s best, what they long for in the depths of their hearts, and give free-range to wild imaginings and deep-seated, though lightly-understood fears.

Country Houses struggle to tolerate difference; anyone is welcome, (well not really, but we can fool ourselves that they are) so long as they are like us. It’s predictable who you’d never see in a Country House. Hotels don’t care how different you are, so long as you don’t disturb other guests

¹⁸ Buechner, Frederick (1996) p113

¹⁹ Buechner, Frederick (1996) p120

²⁰ Buechner, Frederick (2006) p157

²¹ See the Pontifical Council for Inter-Religious Dialogue’s 1991 *Dialogue and Proclamation: Reflections and Orientations on Interreligious Dialogue and the Proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ*. #42

and pay your bill. Purpose-builds are constructed with interaction in mind, and not only within, but beyond the environs as well. A purpose-build has two foundations, the best of the East wing and the best of the West wings of the church. Let me speak of the West wing, with which we are most familiar, first.

The home we Roman Catholics lived in prior to the Second Vatican Council was underpinned by a Christological Ecclesiology which emphasises Jesus instituting the church, to which we, the contemporary church, through the persons of our Bishops, have historical links. The truth is, there are no uninterrupted, written historical records, charting unbroken links to the person of Jesus. Keeping a paper-trail of church personnel across two thousand years, from Jesus to today, may fascinate, even attract amateur historians, and those who crave certainty, but the Twelve had neither the resources nor the interest for this. Even so, what, at its heart those 'succession' claims are attempting to remember is that the church isn't a mere human invention; it has real connections, deep connections to the person and to the concerns and to the values of Jesus of Nazareth, connections which we must never forget. Like a Country House full of family treasures, it is passed down, generation after generation, all the while requiring enormous time, money and attention to keep up the maintenance. It can become an end in itself. It can pride itself on collections of antiquities, collectively forgetting what really matters. Ron Rolheiser insightfully comments: "Without the church, we have more private fantasy than real faith. The search for God is not a private search for what is highest (in) oneself. It is a communal search for the face of God - and one searches communally only within an historical community."²²

The Eastern wing of the Church, on the other hand, emphasised the Pneumatological foundations of the Church. Whereas a Christological approach sees Jesus, historically, back then, **instituting** the church, a Pneumatological approach sees the Holy Spirit continually **constituting** the church in history, here and now. Both of these wings, the Christological (historic, tradition aspect) and the Pneumatological (the Spirit-driven signs of the times) are foundational for purpose-builds, for churches that seek to be at the Service of God's mission of healing, sustaining and reconciling in the world today. Country houses value tradition, holding onto what made them great, intent on handing it on to future generations. Hotels, on the other hand, emphasise the spirit of the times.

²² Rolheiser, Ronald (1998) *Seeking Spirituality*. London: Hodder and Stoughton p66

However, the choice need not, indeed must not be **between** the church's Christological or Pneumatological foundations. Iraneus sees the necessity of claiming **both** wings, suggesting that Christ and the Spirit are the two hands of God, at work among us, shaping us as credible, living memories of the Risen One. Choose **either** the Christological **or** the Pneumatological alone, and, as the centuries-long, sad schism between the Eastern and Western wings of the church testify, the church becomes the sound of one hand clapping. When the house of God's people, the institutional church is our primary reference point, then our mission, our ongoing task is seen as bringing people into the church, where they encounter salvation, redemption, Christ the Lord. As Cyprian famously expressed it: 'outside the church there is no salvation.' Outside the familiarity of the home we have constructed for ourselves, the world can take on dangerous, frightening dimensions. If we are homebound, perhaps like Cyprian, even though it may be cramped living, distorting, even blinding you to the graced, beautiful world that lies there alongside the dangers and cruelties and darkness that certainly exist, home is still home. How easy it is for us, like the pre-Tsunami Dalits to be captive, not even realising our captivity, in the home we have built for ourselves. If, as for Cyprian, a cramped home is all you know, then of course a generous heart wants to invite others to the same bliss.

So What?

Peter Phan offers what he calls "a rather simplistic summary: (a Country House and a Hotel model of church) prioritize four realities in descending order of importance: church, proclamation, mission, reign of God. (A purpose-build model of church) prioritizes those same four realities, though in the opposite order: reign of God, mission, proclamation, and church. Let it be noted" Phan adds "that it is not a question of denying any one of these four realities, (either) in the old theology (or) in the new. Indeed, all four elements are present in both theologies, but in very different modes of emphasis and degrees of importance."²³

Hence, the never-ending task before us is to never forget what matters most. In some ways, we've never forgotten. But we have remembered, at times, only partially, selectively, minimally. We Roman Catholics treasure the Eucharist, describing it as "the summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed (and) at the same time, the fountain from which all her power flows."²⁴ At the heart of the Eucharist is

²³ Phan, Peter *Proclamation of the Reign of God as Mission of the Church: What For, To Whom, By Whom, With Whom and How*. Available online at http://dlibrary.acu.edu.au/research/theology/ejournal/Issue2/Peter_Phan.htm

²⁴ Second Vatican Council *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* #10

anamnesis, the calling forth of the mending spirit – bringing two hands together over the gifts, Christ and the Spirit. If amnesia is about forgetting, anamnesis is about not forgetting, about remembering. What is it that at the Eucharist we forget to our peril? That the world is both graced and broken; that, as Iraneus would put it, I am, you are, we are **all held**, though not over-tightly in the two hands of God, Christ and Spirit, and that God lures us, both corporately and individually, into the enlivening dynamic of the Paschal Mystery. We forget or fail to engage the Paschal Mystery to our peril. The Paschal Mystery: with its losses (like Good Friday), a long, interminable time of waiting, sitting with the losses (like Holy Saturday), glimpsing the **promise**, the promise, not yet the full reality (of Easter day), letting go of the pain of the loss, letting it ascend (as on Ascension day) and receiving the gift of a new spirit to live, vigorously, the new life, the new circumstances we find ourselves in (like Pentecost Day). If we are amnesiacs when it comes to the Paschal Mystery, if we limit the Paschal Mystery to events in the life of Jesus, rather than, as well, in our own lives (both individually and corporately), then we condemn ourselves to living, like pre-Tsunami Dalits, in the ill-fitting, constricted country House or Hotel we have constructed for ourselves, somewhat like the disciples before Pentecost; locked behind closed doors, out of fear.

Hence, the question I pose for reflection is this: when you step back to consider what you are implicitly building, as the Conference puts it, building upon the five foundations of Church Life, what is getting created: a Country House, Hotel, or a Purpose Build, at the service of God's healing, sustaining, reconciling mission in the world? Or as Ken Untener would put it; of each discussion and action planned in parish life, how does this contribute to God's mission of mending the world?