

REDEEMER VISION PAPER #3

BUILDINGS FOR COMMUNITY

The cruciality of community

On the night before his death (John 13ff), Jesus said that the purpose of his death was to form a new community. His disciples were to become a new humanity which was to be a 'demonstration plot' of the kingdom of God. In their relationships to one another, and in the way they related together to the rest of the world, they were to be a sign that Jesus is the Lord who is going to redeem all of creation. Christian community is a comprehensive and distinct way to be human in deep relationship with others who have been transformed by the gospel.

The quality of our community is the real secret of Christian mission. When those outside see exceptional *community* it convinces them of the truth of Jesus' message, and it attracts them personally toward joining those who follow him. In John 17:23 Jesus says that via Christians' loving unity *'the world will know that You sent me and have loved them even as You have loved me.'*

In addition, the quality of our community is the real secret of Christian growth. Jesus did not educate his disciples in a classroom. A classroom is just one part of your life. Classroom relationships bring students together mainly at the cognitive level. But Jesus incorporated his disciples into a community of persons who lived together, ate together, and therefore were in contact with one another's personal, social, emotional, and spiritual lives as well. Communities are places not just for information-transfer but for modeling and growth in wisdom. Only in that setting will the gospel be worked into the fabric of our daily lives and into our hearts.

The physicality of community

Community, then, is much more than coming together for events in which we exchange data, or share social activities or even give one another temporary emotional support. Community is *life together*. It is conducting the daily activities of life with other believers. It means preparing and eating meals together and then cleaning up afterward. It means doing the innumerable practical tasks of household maintenance, and helping one another develop homes that are real havens. It means walking, talking, and exchanging counsel. It means spontaneous as well as structured time together. It means play.

Technology has transformed our ability to transfer information to each other, but you still can't have a meal together by e-mail or cell phone. We are embodied beings, and ultimately, community between embodied beings means being in the same place, sharing the same actual space, or else our relationships 'thin out.' For Christian community to happen, then, believers need to inhabit the same space where they eat, play, work, learn, and serve together.

Hospitality and community

In modern English, the word 'hospitality' conveys little more than the thought of 'entertaining,' but in the Bible it is something important and radical. Christians are constantly called to hospitality (Rom 12:13; 1 Pet 4:9; Heb 13:2; 1 Tim 3:2; Titus 1:8). Contemporary western culture leads us to think of our home as a private enclosure, only to be shared with a few intimates. Yet, the New Testament called Christians to see one's home as neither strictly private nor public space, but a place where we routinely share the safety and comfort we have to nurture others. Hospitality is essentially treating others as family. It incorporates newcomers into household, common, daily activities such as eating a meal, sharing a cup of coffee, or painting a room. It treats peers as brothers, sisters and cousins. It treats older people as fathers, mothers, aunts, and uncles. It treats children as sons, daughters, nieces, and nephews. Since the original word for hospitality -- *philoxenia* -- literally means the 'love of strangers,' Christians were being called to an attitude of

welcome not only to other believers, but also to those who are 'outsiders.' It meant being quick to include and accept people, meeting practical needs with our goods in a spirit of love and welcome. Why is this so important? We were strangers when God accepted us (Lev 19:33) in the ultimate act of hospitality. Jesus died for us to make room in the *household* of God (a great word that combines the material idea of a house—with its shelter, food, warmth, and safety—and the idea of a family).

Hospitality entails bringing one another into our common life. We are to eat together, play together, and pray together. Many aspects of city life make this difficult. In New York City we have but very small living spaces that can hardly fit a small group. And we also find that the nature of city life means that even if we stay in New York, we have to often move to different apartments and different neighborhoods within the city. What are we to do?

Buildings for community

Why is Redeemer planning to purchase a building in the city? (In fact, over the years, we hope to purchase several. See Vision Paper #7- The Future of the City.) Why are we seeking to do this? We can put the reasons under three headings—stability, flexibility, and community.

1. Building for stability. Since the late 1990s we have done a very thorough search for all possible large meeting spaces in our part of New York City. We have found that there are no similar-sized alternative spaces available to us on a weekly basis in our ministry area than the ones we have now. We hope for a long lasting relationship with all the hosts from whom we currently rent space, but if we lost any of these places, it would make it impossible to sustain our current ministry. We would have to leave the center city area in order to continue. It is not responsible to have no contingency plan, to expect that in this fast-changing city our current arrangement will last indefinitely. We believe that a strong Redeemer will continue to be crucial to the movement of the gospel in New York City for some time. The only practical way to assure that Redeemer's ministry continues into the future is to secure buildings.

Buildings can also be a key to financial stability. We currently pay over a million dollars a year in rent for both worship and office space. By converting that money into assets owned by our movement and ministries, we will be providing for the long-term economic stability of our churches.

2. Building for flexibility. Buildings would not only make Redeemer more stable but more flexible in its ability to minister to people. That may seem counter-intuitive to many, but let's reflect. We would have the ability to add or change worship service times and design the auditorium according to our needs. Currently we cannot make any of these changes, even though some are acutely needed. More importantly, Redeemer is currently hampered by a lack of space for mid-week ministry. Though we are a church of over 4,000 weekly attendees, the only 7-day a week space to which we have access is in our office space, and it seats no more than 80-100 people. With round-the-clock space for large group meetings and break-out sessions, we could begin an enormous number of new programs that would help people get connected to small groups, meet the needs of families, singles, and youth, and provide training for ministries, all of which is currently impossible. Many of these new ministries (e.g. after school programs, daycare, performing arts space) require 7-day a week space. To rent enough space for all these activities would be prohibitive.

3. Building for community. Though the practical need for stability and flexibility is acute, ultimately the most important reasons for seeking secure space in the city has to be driven by our understanding of the gospel. In light of all that we have said above about the importance of physical space for community, we must see a building as a new opportunity for deepening our life

together—both with ourselves and with our neighbors. In a city more than anywhere else, Christians need space in which to share common life with our brothers and sisters and engage in radical hospitality with our neighbors.

First, think of our neighbors. Owning a building means that for the first time in our history, Redeemer would have residential neighbors. These are people to whom at last we can say, “How can we make this neighborhood a better place to live because we are here for *everyone*?” Traditionally, churches have seen their buildings as ‘our sacred space.’ But we want the building to be shared community space, a place of hospitality. We want to say to our neighbors, “This space does not only belong to us—what uses will benefit the whole neighborhood?”¹ In a place as suspicious and tough as Manhattan, that message will probably take some time to get through. But that is the message. Having our own space will be like putting down roots. We will be able to serve and welcome our neighbors in ways that were previously impossible. We will be able to open our doors to the community and say, “Welcome.” Hospitality to strangers will be possible.

Second, think of our own relationships. Think of all we have said above about the importance of sharing the same physical space. A building would mean greatly enhanced opportunities for common life together such as eating, talking, playing, learning, praying, and counseling one another. Such intentional community is possible if we acquire buildings with a vision for gospel community. We want Redeemer’s space to be an extension of our (tiny!) homes, where we can share the tasks of household life together. It will not simply be a place for ‘meetings’ but for living together in a city where space for such life is small.

¹ Many today call not for churches without buildings nor for traditional church buildings, but for church buildings that serve as ‘proximity space’ in which believers can meet, live with, and know their neighbors. See Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come: Innovation and Mission for the 21 Century Church* (Hendrickson, 2003.)