

## **Toward a Missional Spirituality by Len Hjalmarson**

"Today's church is in serious trouble.... I am suggesting that the 21st Century Church looks little like- and has far less power than- the church as it formed in Jerusalem in the Book of Acts. "[Some] might say that the church is on the verge of some radical transformation. And so it must be if the church is to ever regain its power, its edge, its robust health, its life-changing and world-changing mission." [i]

My generation was raised with religious life revolving around buildings: a Temple spirituality. Buildings represent settled religion: they are immobile, lending themselves to predictable forms. It was a spirituality of the center, where religious life was influential and expected. It was a spirituality for the familiar places, well-traveled paths and a way of life that was not strongly in contrast to the dominant culture. It had an established priesthood, mostly well trained professionals who did the spiritual work for us. The priests dominated the action.

Our own spirituality was primarily personal and inward, and its outward expression was secondary. Temple spirituality was all about forms and gathered expression: it was a liturgical and cultic spirituality. It was a dualistic spirituality: Monday to Saturday was secondary in comparison to Sunday, and the physical world was less real and less important than the spiritual world.

### **A New Diaspora – Temple to Text**

Suddenly we face a new diaspora. Since 1991 the population in the United States has grown by 15%. During that same period of time the number of adults who do not attend church has grown from 38 million to 75 million... a 92% increase! [ii] We are moving from Jerusalem to Antioch, and facing incredible challenges of translation. The Temple culture is collapsing, pushing us away from Temple spirituality toward a mobile spirituality – a spirituality of the road.

In times of transition we become flexible and mobile, or we become irrelevant. As we lose the center ground,[iii] we need a spirituality for exiles and a spirituality for the margins. As we lose the center ground, we need a spirituality of prophets rather than priests.

We now live in a culture where authentic faith and christian values are marginalized. Christianity is simply one option in a long list of options, and christian leaders have lost their voice in the culture. The Temple culture is increasingly isolated and defensive. As fear and uncertainty increase, and as

the Temple priesthood feel threatened, their isolation increases. The Temple will continue to exist until that generation passes on, but for the emerging culture Temples will become an anachronism, a testament to a bygone era.

When Christianity moves from the center to the margins we have moved from temple to text, says Walter Brueggemann (Cadences of Home). Those who recognize the limits of Temple spirituality recognize at the same time the increased relevance of Scripture, and the increased need for a strong spiritual life. They have discovered that Temple priests don't have the answers in times of transition. As a result, exiles are no longer looking outside themselves, but are digging deeper within. They are learning a new dependence on the Spirit and the Word.

*A church which pitches its tents,  
Without constantly looking out for new horizons,  
Which does not continually strike camp,  
Is being untrue to its calling ...  
[We must] play down our longing for certainty,  
accept what is risky, live by improvisation and experiment.*  
Hans Kung

Let's face it.. the Temple culture has its own attraction. The Temple is a safe place compared to the road. These are dangerous times, where we leave safe places and become pilgrims. In the Temple we know what to expect. Outside the Temple the roads are not well traveled, and frequently we are off the map.

Priests are for Temples, and prophets are people of the road. As fixed places of worship become less important, the priestly caste itself is threatened. Priests live in Temples, where they can celebrate the cultic life. When the Temple is no longer at the center, the role of the Priest diminishes in favor of the Prophet. When travelers seek the road prophets have the advantage: they are already mobile. They tend not to rely on buildings or predictable forms. They are in touch with culture by definition of their mobility. They are already rubbing shoulders with change and they are friends of transition.

Prophets are comfortable with a degree of insecurity, just as Jesus "had nowhere to lay his head." As the center of authority moves from Jerusalem to Antioch and from Temple to text, from outward forms and places to inward awareness, authority itself is decentralized.

Authority becomes less about position and role, and more about relationship and identity. We move from a narrow definition of priesthood, the Temple definition, to something more universal. We move from places of power to

empowerment, from a method to a movement. What was tame and predictable becomes wild and dynamic. Authority moves from earthly spaces to the Throne room above.

For all this change we need a spirituality of the road, a missional spirituality. This is a spirituality that is self-authorizing, decentralized, sacramental, personal, connected, creative, incarnational and storied. It is a spirituality for the road.. a missional spirituality.

- Missional spirituality is self-authorizing and egalitarian. Priesthood is functional not positional.. all are priests, all are sent Jn.17:18 (cf Roland Allen The Spontaneous Expansion of the Church)[iv]
- Missional spirituality is sacramental and decentralized. God is God of the journey. Moreover, God is at work all around us on the road. Every place is potentially sacred space.
- Missional spirituality is personal and communal. We no longer rely on priests but on the Word and the Spirit. At the same time, we recognize the voice of God and kingdom vocation in others around us.
- Missional spirituality is creative and innovative. We can't rely on fixed forms, and history doesn't hold every clue for the way forward. We become careful observers and listeners.
- Missional spirituality is incarnational. We take God with us; he is not limited to a sacred space where we must bring others. It is physically among and present.
- Missional spirituality is insecure and comfortable at the margins. We continually put ourselves at risk or cease to be relevant. It is wild and untamed and subversive.
- Missional spirituality is connected and communal; it creates places of belonging; it values love and Spirit.
- Missional spirituality is storied and poetic. It is connected to the larger sweep of God's kingdom building work in history. It values beauty and the imagination as places where God makes himself known. It values alternate modes of knowing.
- Missional spirituality is cruciform; it sacrifices personal comfort and security for the sake of the kingdom of God.

From the Center to the Margins: From Security to Insecurity

Human beings don't naturally embrace insecurity and change. When Moses led the people of God out of slavery, their strongest inclination was not to go forward but to go back! Remember the movie "Chicken Run?"

*"In a tragic scene, she [Ginger] is trying to share her vision and stir up another escape attempt when she realizes that most of her fellow hens have*

*no concept of freedom. For them, this is the way it has always been. Why try and change it, when, as one hapless chicken claims, "This is a chicken's lot - to lay eggs then die." Ginger is a real hero because she refuses to give in to the prevailing consciousness of the prison camp. She's a prophet and visionary and a darn good leader. At risk of her life and by enduring incarceration and suffering she eventually succeeds in organizing the most daring escape by building the most extraordinary flying machine... Without being too dramatic, this is precisely what is needed for missional leaders and radical disciples who know that the urgency of the day requires a significant shift from the predominant image of "church."*

Frost and Hirsch, "The Shaping of Things to Come"

How do we survive the transition from Temple to text, from the center to the margins? How do we become a people free from addiction to the culture, even from the church culture, out on the open range, a people comfortable with the insecurity of freedom?

A couple of years back someone gave me a copy of Margaret Wheatley's article, **"Goodbye Command and Control"** from Leader to Leader magazine. An insightful look at shifting paradigms, this was just one gem I found there:

*"Whenever we're trying to change a deeply structured belief system, everything in life is called into question - our relationships with loved ones, children, and colleagues; our relationships with authority and major institutions... Those who have led their organizations into new ways of organizing often say that the most important change was what occurred in themselves. Nothing would have changed in their organizations if they hadn't changed.."*

Wheatley helps us understand why it is so HARD to explain why we need change. We can have some ideas about the need for change, and we may think we even understand a new place without being there... but we are deluded.

Looking at the map gives you no real experience of the Grand Canyon. Not until you step outside your normal world or practices into a new world and new practices do you learn new questions, new truths and see things you never saw before. All your senses become engaged, and then even your self-understanding will change.

Consider the building of the Temple in the Old Testament. Before the Temple existed, God instituted a tabernacle (which was actually a tent). The Mosaic tabernacle was assembled at the command of the Lord to Moses:

"Let them make me a sanctuary, that I may dwell in their midst" (Ex.25: 8).

The core idea was God's habitation with His people. The mobility of the tabernacle accurately symbolized God's dynamic nature, and His desire for both flexibility and dependence on the part of His people.

*"17 And whenever the cloud was taken up from over the tent, after that the people of Israel set out; and in the place where the cloud settled down, there the people of Israel encamped. 18 At the command of the LORD the people of Israel set out, and at the command of the LORD they encamped; as long as the cloud rested over the tabernacle, they remained in camp.... 22 Whether it was two days, or a month, or a longer time, that the cloud continued over the tabernacle, abiding there, the people of Israel remained in camp and did not set out; but when it was taken up they set out. 23 At the command of the LORD they encamped, and at the command of the LORD they set out; they kept the charge of the LORD, at the command of the LORD by Moses." Numbers 9:18-23 (RSV)*

So the tabernacle was flexible, impermanent, mobile but the temple was fixed and immovable. The tabernacle was God's idea. But the temple was David's idea. God sent word to David: "Would you build me a house to dwell in? I have not dwelt in a house since the day I brought up the people of Israel from Egypt to this day, but I have been moving about in a tent for my dwelling. In all places where I moved with all the people of Israel, did I speak a word with any of the Judges of Israel, whom I commanded to shepherd my people Israel, saying, "Why have you not built me a house of cedar?" (2 Samuel 7: 5-7).

God allowed the temple to be built, but not by David. David made the preparations, and Solomon did the building. In contrast to the tabernacle, the blueprint did not come from Mt. Sinai. God was not the architect this time.

The tabernacle was the true sign of the presence of God with his people, and it correctly symbolized his nature and his character. The Temple, in contrast, was an accommodation that the Lord never wanted. The tabernacle is a truer picture of how God relates to His people, and the New Testament moves us an even greater distance from Temple religion.

Church Which is Not the Church

Today we have "churches" which are not the church, since the church is a people. When we adopt a Temple religion, our buildings create us in their

image. We lose our flexibility, and our ability to respond to change. We become dependent on priests. The medium is the message.

We say, "The Temple of the Lord!" but our Temples do not depend on what God is doing; they remain in place whether God continues to ordain them or not. We can't risk "ending" a Temple because we have a mortgage and priests to support.

The inertia of large buildings is often like the cruise ship traveling at 25 knots; God cannot quickly take us in new directions. God is allowing Temple religion to fall down while raising up small groups of people who are flexible, who are less tied to human leaders or to tradition, and who are not afraid to venture to unknown places.

*Our temples are territorial. They cause us to ask questions about "who is in" and "who is out," and to worry about the other temple down the road lest they gain more adherents than us. They support competition and division in the Body. They cause us to dwell in fear and to regard people as our possessions instead of the Lord's.*

Jim Peterson, Church Without Walls.

On the morning of February 4th, 2000 I was reading in Nehemiah and Ezra, thinking about the church in the new millennium. The Lord was helping me pull some pieces together when I had to leave to meet some friends for coffee. I drove to Nick's home and picked him up, and he began telling me about a dream that another friend's nine year old son had had early this same morning. The boy's name was Joshua.

In his dream Joshua was standing outside a temple and God was standing beside him. God spoke to Joshua and told him that the temple had to be destroyed because the people were not worshipping the true God; they were worshipping other things. God told Joshua to kick the temple with his heel.

Before he did so, Joshua yelled at the people inside, warning them about what was going to happen. Some began running out of the temple, but there were some that stayed in the temple and who wouldn't come out.

Joshua then kicked the wall. The people who remained inside were standing under their idols when the temple started to collapse. Joshua saw the idols that they had made fall on the people and crush their heads.

The Lord is moving His people out of Temples and back to tents. Before I stood outside the Temple I didn't understand the meaning of the movement from tabernacle to Temple. I had read some things about change and about

religious culture, but always missed the heart of it. I was like a Martian trying to understand green grass. Once you've seen it, tasted it, smelled it and rolled in it... you know what green grass really is.

From the Temple to the Wilderness

*"If you want to build a ship, don't drum up the men to gather wood, divide the work, and give orders. Instead, teach them to yearn for the vast and endless sea."* - Antoine de Saint Exupery

The tabernacle was built for the wilderness, and the wilderness is a metaphor for danger. It is a place of sudden changes in weather, animals and bandits, unpredictable and wild. The spirituality of the Temple will never carry us through the wilderness, and the wild places are where we need to be as we reach toward the city we haven't seen.

A spirituality for exiles is predicated on insecurity because we no longer need outward points of reference... buildings, rituals or even necessarily designated leaders. We want to live in spirit and in truth, and we share a common Leader.

It's a subversive spirituality, a communal spirituality and a spirituality of emergence. As Walter Brueggemann put it,

*"A new church means reformulating the faith in radical ways in the midst of a community that has to begin again. For Ezra, as for Moses, new church starts do not aim at strategies for success, but at strategies for survival of an alternative community. What must survive is not simply the physical community; what must survive is an alternative community.."* (Cadences of Home)

The subversive community's mission is not to bring the kingdom of God from without; we can't stand apart from the culture in comfortable groups. We can't hope to be merely attractational and encourage people to come in. We must be among; we must release the kingdom of God from within. Subversives live and do their work 'undercover' where the world lives and breathes. Their goal is not escapism (trying to build a Christian utopia), but to show people how they can lay hold of life as God intended, in his Kingdom.

Eugene Petersen comments about subversion that, "the status quo is wrong and must be overthrown if the world is going to be livable. It is so deeply wrong that repair work is futile. The world is, in the word insurance agents use to designate our wrecked cars, totaled."

Let's face it, we don't arrive at these places without pain and struggle. We aren't going to get there if we are still sitting in a traditional Sunday gathering, smiling at the back of other heads week by week. Transformation happens in furnaces, not in clean and brightly lit foyers.

*"Apart from personal transformation we are likely to simply become a new problem. The head answer may be right, but the soul is not. The need to be in power, to have control, and to say someone else is wrong is not enlightenment. There's nothing new about that. That's the old paradigm. I wonder if Jesus was referring to this phenomenon when he spoke of throwing out the demons (leaving the place "swept and tidy") and then seven other demons return making it worse than before (Matt. 12:45). We need less reformation and more transformation."* Richard Rohr, *Everything Belongs*

While some will act as subversives, others will embrace revolution. There are those around us who need encouragement to leave the safe places and move forward; it is too easy to sit back and let others take the risk. Frost and Hirsch advocate encouraging holy dissatisfaction:

"... provoke a basic discontent with what is and so awaken a desire to move toward what could be. The old Marxist slogan "Rub raw the sense of discontent" is brilliant. Early Marxists knew how to create the environment of insurrection, or revolution, of movement. We must not be afraid to be unpopular, to be seen as revolutionaries, if we want to really effect the missional-incarnational paradigm in our time. The real revolutionary, or perhaps the only one, is the person who has nothing left to lose. Rub the discontent raw and then throw salt on it -- our times are urgent; Christendom must be brought down and apostolic faith and practice established if we are to be true to our call as followers of the revolutionary Jesus in our day." Frost and Hirsch, "The Shaping of Things to Come"

We will have to become comfortable working on the margins. The main force of the church in society today is the group who inhabit the large and visible Temples. These Temples are like cruise ships in a narrow channel.. the force of their ponderous movement through the water draws many smaller vessels in their wake. Trying to move against that flow can seem hopeless and futile. We can't turn those huge ships around.. they may be traveling on engines that no longer run, but the force of an ocean liner in motion remains substantial.

The religious climate of Jesus day was little different. The main spring of religious culture unwound slowly and inexorably; Jesus life and teaching



were at the margins, with marginalized people. Did he know something we don't know?

*"Change agents are more likely to be pioneering church planters who have no congregational history to deal with and who are immersed in the cultures of the people they endeavor to reach."* Eddie Gibbs, from "Churchnext: Quantum Changes in How We Do Ministry"

*"We need to watch the margins of our society - the inner cities and the rural areas where creative approaches are emerging, often born in despair. And so when desperation forces us to let go of the old ways, God can bring new life."* Ann Wilkerson-Hayes in "New Ways of Being Church," GOCN

Change will not come from the established priesthood, who have a vested interest in maintaining the life of the Temple. Change will come in small ways, but like leaven in a lump, it will grow in force and in power.

We need leaders who will sacrifice their personal advancement to inspire the risk and sacrifice necessary to bring change. These are people unafraid to risk moving against the tide, who aren't tempted by the rewards offered by impressive cruise ships who are moving with the tide and dragging smaller vessels in their wake. We need dreamers and visionaries who understand how dangerous a dream can be. We need people who are comfortable with the margins, with smallness, with ambiguity, and with obscurity.

## CONCLUSION

All people dream, but not equally.  
Those who dream by night,  
in the dusty recesses of their minds,  
wake in the day to find that it was vanity.  
But the dreamers of the day are dangerous,  
for they may act their dreams with open eyes to make it possible.

T. E. Lawrence ("Lawrence of Arabia"), *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom*.

We need, like Ginger the chicken, to inspire a vision of real freedom founded in love.

When the Gospel first went from Jerusalem to Antioch, the Temple began to lose place as the center of Messianic faith. The diaspora we are seeing in our own day, with increasing numbers of believers not claiming any traditional church institution as their home, is divinely orchestrated by God to move us from a Temple religion toward incarnational and missional communities. We

need to support that movement and the hunger for authenticity even as we encourage a new dependence on God and a 24/7 life of discipleship outside traditional forms.

We aren't going to move forward by designing new programs. We are no longer in Jerusalem where religious methods are established and expected. There is no longer a religious center to our culture. Instead, we have many tribes and great diversity of thought.

One of the incarnational efforts we are seeing locally is a pub church. Others include parties and bbqs where believers can mix casually with unbelievers. This kind of initiative by believers.. community centers, pub churches, gatherings of people around special interests.. are likely to result in believers mixing with non-believers in new and effective ways, and new impact for the gospel.

The direction of this article has not been missions per se, but a new spirituality to support a biblical vision. As Temple religion dies, and as believers increasingly mix with unbelievers in outside-the-walls contexts, conversations and conversions will happen. The church will expand, and will increasingly move from a ministry oriented culture to a missional culture. We need to support these missional-incarnational efforts by encouraging faithful, self-authorizing tribes and communities and decentralized networks that support innovative kingdom cultures.

But how do we gather non-traditional believers and move them forward? Under what banner will they be organized? Under the Name of Jesus and under their own banners, and around the spontaneous organization that arises from the vision that takes root as they are obedient to the Holy Spirit. These new churches need support and encouragement, but not centralized control. They need to find ways to gather that supports their unique expression of kingdom life.

At the end of their seminal work, Frost and Hirsch talk about herding cats. No one who has ever tried this has experienced much success! They note that cats, unlike cattle, are fiercely independent. But cats always know where the food dish is. If we recognize the hunger for experience, the hunger to know God, and the hunger to be connected authentically in community, and if we create places where these hungers can be met, we can gather tribes of people and move them forward.

Finally, instead of sending new converts to a central location for nurture (Jerusalem, John 4), we need to encourage them to sink wells where they live. An infinite water source is available wherever Jesus is.

[i] Tim Clinton, President of the American Association of Christian Counselors. Christian Counseling Connection, 2003, Issue 1 [ii] The Barna Group, The Barna Update, May, 2004. [www.barna.org](http://www.barna.org) Barna defines people as unchurched if they have not attended a Christian church service during the past six months, other than for special events such as weddings or funerals. [iii] See Walter Brueggemann's fascinating discussion of "testimony as a decentered mode of preaching" in *Cadences of Home*, cited below. [iv] See also Frank Viola, *Who Is Your Covering? Present Testimony Ministry*, 1999. The point is that Jesus authorizes church planting; we don't need human authorization to do this. The "covering" doctrine has been a means of institutional control and maintenance, and has not been generally used to advance the kingdom

<http://www.the-next-wave.org/missionalspirituality> Downloaded: 3/18/08.