

## Home Missions in a New Millennium

A Workshop by David Webber given at The Rural Conference, Balclutha New Zealand, June 25<sup>th</sup> . 28<sup>th</sup> 2009

Session 4: **Liberating the Body of Christ from Concrete & Glass:** Formation of apostolic faith communities for home missions.

### **I. The Made Up Mind**

There was a man who became convinced he was dead.

He was absolutely sure, beyond a shadow of any doubt, sure that he was dead.

And so he called for his wife.

And when his wife came into the room, he said, %Dear, I have some bad news for you. I am dead.+

She said, %No your not. You are not dead. I am sitting here talking to you.+

He said, %am so dead; there is absolutely no doubt in my mind. Look I will prove it to you. I will call on a higher authority. Call our teenage son.+

And so the teenage son was called.

When the teenage son came into the room the man said to him, %am dead.+

The kid said, %No kidding! Can I have your car?+

Eventually the wife and the teenage son convinced him he had better go to the family doctor.

The man said to doctor, %am dead, I am absolutely convinced of it.+

The doctor, being both a good doctor, and a compassionate person, looked at the man and said, %Hmmm,+which is a complicated medical term for, %adon't have a clue what to do now.+

But being a good and compassionate doctor, and not wanting to pass any big psychiatric bills off on the family (because everyone knows psychiatry is where the big money is) he concocted a plan.

He said to the man, %Do dead men bleed.+

The man said, No, dead men do not bleed.+

With that the doctor lunged across the room and stabbed the man in the end of the finger with a very sharp syringe needle.

The man's finger began to instantly and profusely bleed.

Blood was pouring off the end of the finger and dripping on to the floor.

The doctor smiled satisfactorily at his crafty medical quick mind and said, %So what do you make of that.+

The man said, %Well I'd be doggoned. Dead men do bleed.+

### **II. A recap of where we have been**

One of the biggest problems for us in the church is trying to get beyond the made up mind.

Much of what I have been trying to do at this conference is to encourage us to get beyond our made up minds with regards to doing mission in this new millennium.

In session one I spoke about the heart of mission.

I spoke about our changing world and the church.

With the help of sociologists and others, what we discovered is that our mission field is right outside of our doors.

On average, more than any time in our history, over 80% of the people outside our door are not practicing Christians.

And yet, the greatest majority of these folks have an expressed interest and need in the very things that being a Christian brings into one's life: i.e. faith, hope, love, healing, wholeness, peace, salvation and a sense of the meaning of life.

The church of Christ often seems to act oblivious to these people and needs to change by rediscovering a passionate love for them and a heartfelt concern to bring them to Christ to have their needs for life met and their great questions about life answered.

The heart of mission in this new millennium is: 1. Discovering that the mission field is now right on our doorsteps and 2. Discovering our need to acquire a real heart for the people who are right outside our door and who need Christ.

In session two I spoke about the roots of mission.

I said that Christian mission is rooted in the ideas inherent in the biblical word “*apostle*,” which is the Biblical Greek equivalent to the Latin derived word *mission*.+

The biblical word *apostle* and its variant forms has the concepts of *sent one* and *sending out* in it, both of which highlight the function of going outside the faith community.

The biblical word *apostle* has the concept of *proclamation* or *messenger* in it, which in the New Testament primarily relates to the function of conveying the Gospel in word to those outside the faith community.

Christian mission is primarily the sending out of *sent ones* or missionaries as messengers to proclaim Christ in word, illustrated by deed, to people outside the community of faith.

For any other aspect of church work to be classified as a part of mission it has to serve this primary function.

Good works by themselves are not mission and neither is the normal good work of the church caring for, nurturing and administering itself (If you call everything mission pretty soon nothing is mission).

In session three we dealt with who the *sent ones* are  $\tilde{o}$  who the missionaries are.

We took a look at Acts 11.8 and talked about how that apostolic mission was one of being a witness for Christ.

We discovered that since the time of the apostles, the necessary qualifications for the job were human brokenness that is rendered to Christ, absolute surrender to the authority of Christ to receive Holy Spirit power, and obedience to the instructions of Christ to begin right outside our door, that is at home, ~~in~~ Jerusalem.+

Since we all have the necessary qualifications to one degree or another, and since the Risen Christ commands you all will be my witnesses+it places the apostolic work of bearing witness to Christ, right at each of our own doorsteps, and corporately at the door step of our apostolic communities of faith.

We are the apostles, the sent ones, the witnesses, the missionaries  $\tilde{o}$  and our faith communities are meant to be apostolic faith communities.

By way of encouragement, we then shared several stories of how people in our fellowships, and how our fellowships communities are living this out.

In this fourth session I want to spend some time talking about what an apostolic faith community looks like.

I want to speculate about how our churches may need to change how we understand ourselves and how we do things to facilitate being an apostolic faith community, a mission community for the new millennium.

And I also want to muse a bit about how the process of being such a community can have dramatic effects on rural ministry.

### **III. Liberating the Body of Christ from Concrete & Glass**

1. *They joined with the other believers and devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, sharing in the Lord's Supper and in prayer (Acts 2.42). (NLT).1*

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1Holy Bible, New Living Translation, (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.) 1996.

1aThe New English Bible, (Oxford, Eng.: Oxford University Press) 1970

1bThe Message (Copyright by Eugene H. Peterson, NavPress Publishing Group) 1996

2. *They met constantly to hear the apostles teach, and to share the common life, to break bread, and to pray (Acts 2.42). (NEB)1a*
3. *They committed themselves to the teaching of the apostles, the life together, the common meal, and the prayers (Acts 2.42). (The Message)1b*

The passage from the book of Acts quoted above is perhaps the most common bit of scripture that one is confronted with when listening to people talk, or reading what people write, about the church.

Perhaps it is so common that as church we have been inoculated against catching a full dose of what it says.

This kind of biblical inoculation is not unusual in the church.

As a Christian neophyte, when I read the passage as a kind of rural church fanatic, I tend to catch a full dose of what it portrays.

What it portrays, it seems to me, is considerably different from what the church has become and what is considered the norm for the Christian church in this century, at least in my Canadian context.

What it says to me is that our way of "being" Church; our building, ordained minister, congregation, Sunday morning norm, is not the way of the early church.

In fact, I am suspicious that we may have lost The Body Of Christ under a maze of concrete and glass.

What was fundamental for the early church was not a large congregation but sharing the common life; was not ordained clergy but sharing apostolic teaching; was not building but the Eucharist; was not Sunday morning program but constant meeting to pray and take part fully in the life of the apostolic faith community ("daily" Acts 2.46).

It seems to me that if I take seriously the main concerns that are the basis of my reformed theological tradition, I am left critical of the mainline church practice, or ways of "being" church, especially with respect to my rural context.

The fathers and mothers of the reformation were concerned with rediscovering the notion of an apostolic faith community, doing contextual theology and out of that practicing Christ's ministry.

Their task was one of asking the question; "How can the church be the apostolic faith community in today's context?"

Calvin asked the question in Geneva in his time.

Knox asked the question in Scotland in his time.

And, the Reformed Tradition has tried to ask the question in differing contexts through time.

I would suggest, that historically, for the main part it has been successful in this endeavor.

But at this point in history, leading up to and in this new millennium, it seems to me that we are slipping badly.

And I am suspicious that this slippage has had dour consequences for the church, particularly in my context of rural Canada.

The Reformed Tradition is not alone in this slippage, most mainline churches in Canada and New Zealand seem to have a problem with it and are suffering to one extent or other as a result of it.

The slippage I am referring to is the church's fierce clinging to what, for want of a better phrase I will call, its traditional urban structure.

I will be more specific, its traditional urban structure of church building, ordained clergy, preached at congregation and Sunday morning program.

I want to say that church in the form of church building, ordained clergy, preached at congregation and Sunday morning program are not, in the final analysis, what the church is to be about, particularly in the rural context.

If I stand with both feet solidly in my Western Canadian rural community and ask the Reformer's question; "How can the church be the apostolic faith community here today?" one if not all of these urban church structures can be stumbling blocks for the church in its call to be present and relevant in my rural context.

My argument is that the church is to be process oriented not structure bound.

And based upon our scripture for today, Acts 2.42, I am going to define that process as becoming an intentional hermeneutical eucharistic faith community.

An intentional hermeneutical eucharistic faith community.

Don't you just love that phrase?

Doesn't it just sort of roll off your tongue?

Well I admit it is a phrase that could choke you like a turnip could a horse.

So let me see if I can render down that fancy sounding phrase and give it some meaning, for my own sake as much as anyone's.

### **A. Intentional Community**

The last will be first; let's begin with community.

The church is meant to be by nature an intentional community.

It is a community that intends to be defined by faith in Christ.

It is a community that intends to have at its center the mind of Christ.

There is nothing new or earth shaking in such statements.

But I have distinct qualities in mind when I make those statements.

The process of forming intentional communities of faith in Christ has to result in a praying, sharing, serving, learning, reflecting, and evangelizing community ÷ has to intentionally result in these qualities.

This is a process, not structure ÷ and it is a process that does not demand ordained clergy, special buildings, special large numbers of people, special mornings, special programs or special times to exist.

Jesus said, *For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them (Mt. 18.20). 2*

Wherever and whenever two or more meet in faith, potentially the process of intentional Christian community can freely exist, for it is a process of faith and gathering around the promised presence of the Risen Christ, like on the road to Emmaus.

I believe that in the early church, the process of intentional Christian community happened primarily in small groups.

I believe that today it continues to happen best in small groups.

I believe that it is very hard for the intentional community of faith with the qualities of community described in Acts 2.42 to develop outside of small groups.

I believe that without small groups, large congregations tend to promote individuation and drift towards becoming collectivities rather than intentional faith communities.

Perhaps Karl Jung was right when he analyzed large congregations this way, and believed that collectivities resulted in the lowering of consciousness of the individuals within it.

In contrast, small groups tend not to be just collectivities but tend to automatically become engaged in the process of forming community.

Small groups are where people can relate to one another in bonds of community. Communities, where the level of consciousness is at a peak, fueling the intentions that leads to the praying, sharing, reflecting, evangelizing and liberating works of the ministry of Christ. I believe, small groups are the biblical norm for the process of forming intentional communities of faith in Christ, not collectivities or large congregations. I believe, that Christ is the cornerstone of the church and that small groups are the first building block.

I have done a fair bit of reading around this in the past 20 years or so. One of the things that I have discovered is that regardless of the time in the church's history or the region of the world where the church has existed – whenever there has been a revival in the church, whatever else has happened, at least these two things have usually happened. First, central to the revival has been the process of the formation of intentional Christian community with qualities similar to the ones I have alluded to, the praying, sharing, learning, reflecting, evangelizing and liberating works of the ministry of Christ. And second, this process of the formation of Christian community has happened primarily in and through small groups. You can find this in the biblical accounts of the early church. You can find this in the early church writings. You can find this in the monastic revivals of the first ten centuries, the writings of the desert fathers, the revivals of the Reformation, the revivals of the Radical Reformation, the Wesleyan revivals. You will find this in the revivals of the church in 20th century Asia, Africa, South America and even the Jesus Movement of the 60s in North America. What is important here is not that this is just another model for the church to engage in, perhaps to save itself. Rather, here is an important process that the church throughout its history has found to be crucial in its formation and in facilitating the apostolic work of reaching out with the powerful witness of the Gospel of Christ.

In session one we discovered that in Canada and New Zealand approximately 80% of folks these days are not regularly involved with church.<sup>3</sup> We discussed that although people in our society are becoming increasingly individualistic, paradoxically they are also placing a higher value on significant relationships, the very stuff of community.<sup>3a</sup> We also found that when it comes to things religious, the emphasis upon significant relationships is even more important to people. John McNeil in his article on the state of the church in New Zealand quotes one Christian leader as saying, *"People are looking for community, and they are not going to find that at a pub or the mall."*<sup>4</sup> He also quotes US management expert Peter Drucker as reckoning what's happening in the churches that are growing today is, *"... the rebirth of community, which is dying in other places."*<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>Reginald Bibby, *There's Got to be More*, (Winfield BC: Wood Lake Books) 1995

<sup>3a</sup>Reginald Bibby, *There's Got to be More*, (Winfield BC: Wood Lake Books) 1995

<sup>4</sup> John McNeil, Vol . 64 Issue No. 29, *The State of the Church in New Zealand*, Challenge Publishing Soc. Challenge Weekly, New Zealand

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*

Is it possible that as we have focused the bulk of our attention as church upon the building-program-congregation model, upon the stuff of institution, that we have in fact alienated the church from many of these folks?

Is it possible that if we began to focus more on the process of the formation of intentional faith communities, with particular attention paid to the quality of relationships and relevance and personal and neighborhood needs, that a good number of people who have written the church off as irrelevant would begin to find it compelling?

Does this mean that what we should do, if we want to take seriously the 80% of people who do not go to church regularly if at all, is put the emphasis in terms of energy, time and resources into nurturing the process of the formation of intentional faith communities in small groups and not so much into maintaining the building and the program and the offices and the administrative committees of our congregations?

Does this mean that we should be setting up places of faith community formation in our churches, specifically small groups, and telling our people that their first priority is to be involved in one of these ò and their second priority is to reach out to a neighbor to include them in one of these, ò and then, if there is time left ò perhaps get to a larger gathering on a Sunday morning?

My reading of Acts 2.46 is that this is what the first Christian church was doing; putting most of its efforts into Christian community in household groups, and then gathering in larger groups in the Temple.

And it says, *And each day the Lord added to their group those who were being saved (Acts 2.47).*<sup>6</sup>

All this stuff about intentional communities of faith being best formed in small groups should be particularly good news for rural people.

Suddenly it is perfectly possible for them to be the church, no matter how small a group they form. What would happen to rural ministry in New Zealand if the church actively facilitated the gathering of a couple of families to share their life and faith under the roof of a simple farm home, and maintained that this is the church of Jesus Christ.

What would happen?

And suddenly our passion for a rural ministry through the development of house churches begins to be exposed.

The only question is, at least in my Canadian context where we have been doing this for 20 years now in the Cariboo, can the mainline church actually support it?

In Canada, in the Cariboo Presbyterian Church, we are about the only example of doing this within the mainline churches, at least to my knowledge.

It has worked amazingly well, and yet, though Canada is predominantly rural, even my own denomination has struggled to ignore our example or access our expertise.

## **B. Eucharistic Community**

The process of becoming intentional hermeneutical, eucharistic, faith communities.

We just looked at the intentional community part of the process.

Lets look at the eucharistic portion of this process.

Scripture makes it clear that our Christian ancestors formed their intentional communities of faith in small household groups around a meal (Acts 2.46).

Christ did this with his disciples.

They were a meal fellowship as a community ò an eating and celebrating people.

His disciples discovered his risen presence and fellowship in the breaking of bread, even where only two met, like on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24.13-35).

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<sup>6</sup>Holy Bible, New Living Translation, (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.) 1996.

His disciples continued this fellowship with their communities of faith that formed after Pentecost. They ate and fondly remembered their meal fellowship with Jesus, expecting his presence with them as they continued on in faith.

They made a meal the central focus of worship and life around which they remembered and participated in the saving action of Christ.

They made a meal the central focus of worship and life in which they participated in the metaphor of the messianic banquet and anticipated the Kingdom of God, praying; "Maranatha" (Come, Lord Jesus).

They made a meal the central event of worship where in serving the common elements of bread and wine, they looked for Jesus to be present with them as host.

They made a meal the central event of worship and looked to it to proclaim Christ's resurrection and continuing life.

They made a meal the symbol of their spiritual unity with Christ and with one another.

What we call the Lord's Table, or perhaps better the Great Thanksgiving or Eucharist, was for apostolic faith communities the very center of worship and life together – the very center of Faith Community.

They were an eucharistic community...a community of faith gathered by, in and around the Lord's Table.

The Reformers, starting with Hus in Bohemia and continuing with Luther, Bucer, Calvin, Cramner and Knox, all recognized the centrality of the Eucharist to the life and worship of the community of faith.

The Lord's Table related to community and fellowship, not to a church structure or institution.

Their work was to liberate the Eucharist from the institution and clergy and return it to the people and their communities of faith.

I am going to take the position that not only are small groups the most effective for facilitating the process of the intentional formation of Christian community but that the Eucharist rightly belongs in these small groups.

That is, I am going to go way out on a limb and say that wherever else the church celebrates the Lord's Table, it should make small groups the central location.

In a moment you can all take a run at me but let me say this first.

Sociologist Reg Bibby's research indicates that the 80% of Canadian population that is not showing up in our Church buildings on Sundays have some common traits.

One is that they are not looking for another institution or authority in their lives.

Our building-program-clergy dependent structures of church reek of institution.

Bibby's research indicates that people are looking for significant relationships.

It also indicates people are open to and fascinated by the spiritual, the mystical, and the experiencing of God.

Our Reformed Tradition believes that the Lord's Table is all about unity, committed relationships and community.

Our Reformed Tradition believes that the Lord's Table is all about the mystical presence of Christ for the experience of the people through the fellowship of the faith community.

What would happen if we really took action on this belief?

What would happen if we returned the Lord's Table to communities of the Lord's people?

What would happen if we took the small faith community groups, which I maintain should be the main focus of our church, and dragged the Eucharist out of our congregations and our buildings and plunked it down right in the center of each of these small groups and said; "This do as oft as you meet... whether Reverend So and So is there or not!"

And then, what would happen if we called Reverend So and So to the crucial biblical task of teaching and oversight rather than the non-biblical one of exclusive celebrant?

What would happen if we did all of this?

I believe Scripture says what would happen: *And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved (Acts 2.47).*<sup>7</sup>

If we did this it would have a tremendous effect on rural ministry, at least in my Canadian context.

"Why can't we have the Lord's Table as a central part in our lives together?"

So asked one man a while back as we chatted near a field.

He was a new Christian and it confused him why the church refused to let his small rural faith community celebrate the Lord's Table just because they could not afford an ordained minister.

"Does the Bible teach that?"

"Doesn't the church trust us to do it right?+"

"Doesn't the Bible say to do it as often as we meet?"

We chatted for a long time as I tried to justify my church's refusal to allow the celebration of the Lord's Table without ordained clergy present.

I am sure he left with the feeling that he was an eucharistic hostage...strangely like his ancestors in the medieval church.

The truth is, that in Canada at least, rural people often are refused the Eucharist because of the church institution's insistence of who can preside at the celebration.

If the church insists that ordained clergy are the only ones that can preside, and if you can't afford an ordained clergy person every Sunday or any Sunday for that matter, then quite simply you can't come to the Lord's Table ~~as~~ oft as you meet.+

Now I know that traditions other than my own have the option of "Reserved Sacrament"...bits of bread and wine that have been consecrated the last time Reverend So and So came by. However, no matter how you slice it, rural people are often kept from the table of the Lord or served leftovers from it.

It begs the question, "Whose table is it anyway?"

The church is to be an intentional eucharistic community of faith in Christ.

Our liturgy says, ~~the~~ the table is the Lord's and belongs rightly to his people.+

The bottom line is, when it comes to a choice between Eucharist and ordained clergy we must choose the Eucharist.

No person or church institution has the right to refuse access to the Lord's Table simply on the basis of population density, geography or how you earn your living.

The church has the responsibility to fool with its polity and ordering until it can find a way to ensure that rural people have full access to the Eucharist as they gather in their communities of faith, wherever and whatever size they are.

Church ordering and orders are for the sake of facilitating and building up the intentional eucharistic community of faith.

God forbid that they should ever be debilitating things.

For many rural areas where the ordered church refuses to be present, and for many others where the ordered church is only partially there, limiting the Eucharist to a celebration where ordained clergy are present prevents the formation of an intentional eucharistic faith community, and that is tragic.

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<sup>7</sup>The New King James Version, (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers) 1998, c1982.



What would happen to rural ministry in New Zealand and Canada if the church actively promoted small communities of faith meeting in people's homes, sharing their lives and faith and celebrating the Eucharist around the kitchen table?

I wonder, what would happen?

Would *the Lord add to the church daily those who were being saved*'' (Acts 2.47)?<sup>8</sup>

### **C. Hermeneutical Community**

We are talking about the process of becoming intentional hermeneutical, eucharistic, faith communities.

We have so far looked at the intentional eucharistic community portion of the process.

Lets look at the ~~hermeneutical~~ hermeneutical+portion of this process.

Hermeneutics simply put is the discipline of biblical interpretation and application.

In our Reformed Tradition, Word and Sacrament are understood as central to the worshipping community.

Word and Sacrament are understood to be distinct and yet bound together.

The Word informs the Sacrament.

The Sacrament makes visible the Word.

Together they work to facilitate an encounter with the Living Word, Jesus Christ.

All of this is nice sounding theology but in practice in our tradition and I suspect in others a well, it is the Word, more specifically the Word preached, that has become central to the church.

The Word preached has traditionally meant a pulpit over which a preacher suitably ordained is called upon to relate the eternal gospel as set forth in Scripture to the lives of the various individuals and life of a particular congregation.

This understanding of church and apostolic teaching presupposes a structure: a preacher, a pulpit, a dedicated church building and a large group of listeners who we like to call a congregation.

I want to take the position that a preached-at congregation housed in a holy building is not primarily what Christian people are meant to be, with regards to the Bible.

The purpose of good biblical proclamation is to expose the Word of God to the lives of people and the faith communities they form.

The purpose is not biblical education primarily, or telling people what to believe, but facilitating an encounter with the Word of God.

As life, community and Word rub against one another, the process of hermeneutics, or interpretation, begins to happen.

That is, something that was inspired and written long ago in Scripture, is discerned to say something to present lives and situations.

God speaks to us through his Word as we dare to ask the questions: What did the biblical text mean then? What does it mean for us now? How are we to respond?

Preaching ò good biblical preaching ò facilitates the process of listening for what God is saying through Scripture to us today, this is hermeneutics.

As far as I am concerned, one thing is for certain.

The interpretative process I've described is a faith community's task.

It is not the preacher's task alone nor is it the individual's task alone.

The preacher and the proclamation that comes over the pulpit is, at its best, fuel for the furnace of hermeneutics.

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<sup>8</sup>The New King James Version, (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers) 1998, c1982.

The whole community of faith is called to become a community of biblical interpretation and application, a hermeneutical community.

In Christian community, preaching by itself is not enough.

That is a hard thing for Presbyterians to come to terms with, for we love to preach and to be preached at.

A more appropriate form of proclamation for the church is relational proclamation.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer in pre war Germany argued that the ministry of proclamation is a right and an obligation for all Christians.

He wrote, It is the *...free communication of the Word from person to person, not by ordained ministry which is bound to particular office, time and place.*<sup>9</sup>

Bonhoeffer insisted it included speaking, *"...to one another on the basis of the help we need... bespeaking the whole consolation of God, the admonition, the kindness, and the severity of God."*<sup>10</sup>

A hermeneutical community is a process.

A process that goes on under the guidance of the Holy Spirit when we share our encounter with the Word, person to person, in community.

It is a process where we speak the Word of God into one another's lives.

Preaching is not essential to the formation of the hermeneutical community intentionally engaged in encountering God through the Word in Scripture.

Good preaching can help to facilitate this, but it is not essential.

What is essential is taking our lives together to the Word and the Word to our lives.

What is essential is doing this, not on our own, but in the company of others who are about the same process – and speaking the Word to one another within the trusted bonds of love that intentional community builds.

In an hermeneutical community, a community of biblical interpretation and application, the Word of God becomes dialogue.

The Word of God is connected to the act of personally and corporately seeking meaning.

Reginald Bibby's research indicates that those 80% not in church on Sunday morning not only have a need for meaningful relationships and are interested in spirituality and the mystical, but that they are asking all kinds of questions about the meaning of life and God and hope.

They are seekers and questioners on a quest for hope.

A community of biblical interpretation and application is a place of questioning, seeking and finding hope in Christ.

It is a process of rubbing shared life against the shared Word in the search of hope.

The hermeneutical community is a process of speaking and hearing the Word, one to another, and the seeker needs this, for as Bonhoeffer put it: *"The Christ in his own heart is weaker than the Christ in the word of his brother; his own heart is uncertain, his brother's is sure."*<sup>11</sup>

What would happen if we took the Bible and took it out of the pulpit and placed it primarily where I believe the Bible belongs... in the midst of small eucharistic faith communities?

What would happen if we began to give these small groups real tools to dig into their bibles, rather than hiding those tools under the robes of ordination?

And, what would happen if we gave these small relational faith communities permission to begin to really read Scripture, to question it, to share it, to live it?

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<sup>9</sup>Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, (Harper and Row, New York, N.Y.) 1954. P.103

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. P.104

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. P.23

Would the Bible become more relevant to the folk in our Churches?

By speaking the Word into one another's lives in community, would the folk of our churches be automatically trained up for speaking the Word into the lives of people outside the faith community?

Would our faith communities become the loci for the Bible to become open and relevant to at least some of those 80% who are not in church in our countries, and yet who are seekers after the stuff of the divine?

I for one believe so.

And what would happen if we did this particularly in the rural context, particularly ones where we are closing ministry or where there is no ministry now?

Our experience in the house churches in the Cariboo has been tremendous.

The Word has become truly a living Word as we have formed house churches and released the Word into these little communities of faith.

But before we started doing the house church thing in the Cariboo, Linda and I led a small rural church in the agricultural portion of the Fraser Valley.

When we first went to the church and there was an eight person choir and that was about it.

It made preaching a real interesting when the congregation almost entirely sat behind you.

Six years later, we left that congregation to come to the Cariboo-Chilcotin.

There were 50 kids in the Sunday school, 15 young adults in the youth group and the Church was absolutely full every Sunday morning and pretty nearly full on Sunday nights.

Most of this growth was not on the Christian exchange program either, a result of the common trade in Christians from congregation to congregation.

So how did that happen?

I wished I could say it was my brilliant preaching and administration, but I suck as an administrator and I already confessed to not being a brilliant preacher.

All I can tell you is that I can remember early on in that ministry of making the decision that the Bible was not mine but belonged rightly to the whole people of God.

I can remember deciding that the Bible would center all the small groups that would form in the church.

At first there were only two, the session and the choir.

I lead Bible studies at session meetings taking  $\frac{3}{4}$  of our time together to do that.

I tricked the choir into Bible study by insisting that together they pick the hymns for every Sunday service and that all of the hymns had to support the Scriptures being read on Sunday. I gave them a list for each Sunday.

By year four in that ministry, we had 5 bible study groups going in the church, eight if you included the choir, the session, and the youth group.

I led only one of these, the leaders group that met on Monday nights.

Each group had their own leader and studied the Scripture that was preached upon the previous Sunday using good commentary that I provided for them as a resource, along with other biblical tools made available.

I insisted that each person in the congregation commit to a Bible study group and make that their first Church priority, and if there was time left over they could come to church on Sunday morning or get involved in another aspect of the congregation.

How did that little rural congregation begin to thrive?

I can only point to the Bible and the people.

It's called a hermeneutical community.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

Linda and I are dreamers.

We dream a lot about the church as we push into this new millennium.

We dream about an apostolic faith community committed to bearing witness to Christ in a huge mission field that exists on its very doorstep.

In our dreams we can see what this apostolic faith community looks like

It is church that is process oriented not structure bound.

Our dream is about a church that would see the possibilities of becoming a process oriented church engaged in the formation of what I have called tonight an intentional, hermeneutical, eucharistic, community of faith in Christ, which can exist wherever a two or more meet in Jesus name.

Our dream is that the church would risk what has become its model-structural norm of today, even its polity and its ordering, to encourage the formation and nurture of these communities ...wherever there are people with the need of Christ.

Our dream is for a church liberated from concrete and glass, that the wonders of the Rock of our Salvation, Jesus Christ would save and change the lives the strangers in our midst.

Our dream is for a regional congregation of house churches, a rural network of house churches that are in the process of intentional formation and mission after the manner we have been describing.

Our dream is coming true in our rural area of the Cariboo Chilcotin region of BC, Canada.

We invite you to share in our dream, but in your own rural area.

## **V. Questions, Insights and Story Telling.**