

BEYOND CONGREGATION: CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY FOR TODAY'S SEARCHERS

PETER NEILSON, MISSION CONSULTANT, EDINBURGH

TRIGGER POINTS

James Hopewell: Congregation – Stories and Structures

Sometimes you stumble on a phrase or a sentence which spins your mind out of its usual orbit. James Hopewell's magisterial work on *Congregation: Stories and Structures* did that for me. One sentence stood out rather awkwardly from the main theme. It was as though I had been walking on the beach and stubbed my toe on an invisible rock:

Common as they are in several religious traditions, congregations have never dominated the totality of the world's religious organisations ... The congregation is not as inevitable as church members might assume.¹

For one who had grown up in congregations, ministered in congregations, encouraged and consulted with congregations and was part of a denomination – and nation – which equated the local expression of church with the language of 'congregation', this sentence made me realise that I was living within a cultural cage. 'Congregation' was not the only way of being church.

Every time we use the word 'congregation', we import a whole culture of assumptions about the way that church life will be expressed – from the physicality of buildings, seating and pulpits to the patterns of membership, belonging and participation in worship and service, through to the assumed roles of leadership, whatever names are given to the professional or voluntary leadership groups.

Hopewell's book is a brilliant plea for patient understanding of congregations, whom he describes as a 'thick gathering' who over time have woven an intricate 'web of significance':

A group that possesses a special name and recognises members who assemble regularly to celebrate a more universally practised worship but who

¹ James F. Hopewell, *Congregation: Stories and Structures*, (London: SCM Press, 1987), p. 12.

communicate with each other sufficiently to develop intrinsic patterns of conduct, worship and story.²

While his book alerted me to the profound issues of identity which must be respected and understood if we are to adapt and adjust our congregations for the missionary challenges of a post-modern and post-Christendom era, that distinctive and disruptive sentence opened my mind to the fact that the congregation is itself a culture-bound model of Christian community. Perhaps the reconfiguration of our culture may require more than an adjustment of the congregational model. Perhaps it requires alternatives, parallel structures, complementary models, multi-faceted expressions of Christian community that can inhabit the multi-layered networks of our de-centred culture.

Our culture has been described as a spiritual centrifuge: ‘an apparatus that rotates at such tremendous velocity that existing densities break up as new densities emerge.’³ We live at a time when the task of leading a congregation is becoming old technology. The task for the coming decades is learning how to build Christian communities in many different forms.

In times of profound change, the learners inherit the earth, while the learned find themselves beautifully equipped to deal with a world that no longer exists.⁴

James Thwaites: The Church beyond the Congregation

Five years later I came across the writings of James Thwaites, *The Church beyond the Congregation*, in which he presses the case even further.

Thwaites’ thesis is that Western theology and ecclesiology have been affected by Greek dualism that divides spirit from body and sacred from secular. He claims that this has led to an overemphasis on the congregational gathering point as the focus of our time and energy. He calls for a Hebrew view of life where we are released from inherited mindsets into a ‘re-evaluation of our present congregation-focused approach to church life’.

² Hopewell, pp. 3-12.

³ Richard Foster, *Prayer – Finding the Heart’s True Home*, (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1992), p. 268.

⁴ Al Rogers, quoted in Leonard Hjalmanson, *Kingdom Leadership in the Post-modern Era* at [www.Christianity.ca/church/Kingdom Leadership in the Post-modern Era](http://www.Christianity.ca/church/Kingdom%20Leadership%20in%20the%20Post-modern%20Era).

He traces that dualistic split through Plato and Aquinas and the rationalism of the Reformation and on to the Enlightenment and the Age of Reason. He then identifies how we embody the split in our use of buildings. He points out that the Early Church had no public church buildings until Constantine used pagan temples as the base for Christianity as the imperial religion. He claims that buildings are a handicap:

In a post modern time it is becoming more and more obvious that the Christian's split universe, mostly expressed in and from a building we have named church, is benefiting the saints less and less. It is not attracting the attention of the un-churched tribes, heading into the diverse and desperate post-modern mosaic of the 21st century.

I believe that our focus for divine meaning and mission on the church gathered is a major strategic error on the part of the Christian church. It must be overcome if we, as the body of Christ, are to enter into and impact a post-modern world. The Greek split has triumphed by detaching the church from most of the saints' life and work in creation. The reality we face at this time is that a kingdom divided cannot stand, a people divided cannot act, so a church divided cannot build.⁵

Thwaites suggests that we heal this split universe by listening to the voice of the Spirit in creation. Based on the image in Romans 8 of the creation groaning and waiting for the liberation of the children of God, he argues that the church finds its true identity when we hear creation's cry and are released to respond. The world will know the church when the cry is answered by the people of God as we move out from our buildings into what the Puritans called the various 'spheres of creation'.

He says that unfortunately

we continue to listen mostly to our own voices echoing off the walls, defining and redefining us again and again. And we are left wondering why the people don't come.

It is time to look again and locate the new people in Christ that make up the church. It is time to release them from their church containment set in place by the Greeks and send them into God's creation that, to this day, still knows and calls their name.⁶

The Flight of the Raven

Between reading Hopewell and Thwaites came a watershed experience of ministry in the centre of Edinburgh, based in the Parish Church of

⁵ James Thwaites, *The Church beyond the Congregation*, p. 37.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

St Cuthbert, with the mandate to develop appropriate mission strategies for that part of the city centre – which turned out to be a mix of residents, businesses, homeless people and the entertainment industry. Each of them needed a distinct form of Christian community dispersed around the central hub of the mother church.

Hopewell alerted me to the need to explore other options beyond the congregation. Thwaites allowed me a lens to look back and read the map of an uncharted journey. We had been answering a call of the Spirit in creation to become dis-embedded from a congregational model and learn how to embed communities of faith in the various spheres of the life of the city.

The most challenging and radical of these journeys was our exploration of church for the club culture. That forced me to tear up all my mental maps of congregational experience in order to ask what church might look like for these young people who found in the clubs the experience of transcendence through the music and a community of intimacy in the friendships of the clubbing scene; people who processed communication electronically, sonically and bodily, for whom community life was active rather than passive, and for whom democratic participation was their mode of relating and making decisions.

We moved through three phases over a period of eight years: a project phase, a phase as a living community, and then a period of dispersal. The first phase explored patterns of worship in pubs and clubs which mirrored the dynamics of nightclub life – some dance worship with DJs and visuals, other contemplative worship reflecting the club's chill-out room. We explored the Celtic monastic tradition for rhythms of prayer and wholesome living, and generally wrestled with people who had been deeply damaged by church life which had suppressed their questions and given little space for their creativity.

Beyond the project phase a small community of Christians formed called the Raven Community – based in a flat in Lothian Road with a weekly rhythm of meals and worship, of prayers and personal involvement in some of the challenging areas of city life – from refugees to sexual health and concerns for prostitution. The flat became one of Edinburgh's 'boiler rooms' where 24/7 prayer was focused for particular seasons of the year.

Migration, illness, lack of funding, dispersal of key individuals and the sale of the flat meant that the Ravens flew the nest by 2005. Looking back it is not clear that the community of Christians became a Christian community. That remains one of the areas to be explored further in the light of the many new models of community which are appearing around the country and across the post-Christendom Western World.

The intentionally missional community became more of a therapeutic community for people struggling to recover lost faith or redefine it. It was an honest community – often painfully honest, but much to be preferred to the superficial politeness of much congregational politics. We were only at the edge of something, but we did touch the hem of Christ's garment, and some were healed.

Liminality and Communitas

It has been said that we learn most on the border of order and chaos. This period was a time of living in what Victor Turner calls 'liminality' – living through a threshold moment, a transition from one phase of life to another. In such a time we need what he calls 'communitas'⁷ – a form of supportive community that facilitates transition: from one stage of life to another, from one phase of faith to another, or from one cultural period to another.

We had hoped for a church that would be marked by permanence, and found we had simply offered community for a period of transition. We struggled with issues of leadership as we found previous experiences not translating easily to the new context, but perhaps being more diffident than we needed to be. Before we had the language we had experienced 'communitas' – and perhaps stumbled on a pattern of Christian community that is essential for today's spiritual searchers.

TODAY'S SPIRITUAL SEARCHERS

Types of Searchers

Let me turn now to say a word about the spiritual search that is around in our culture. In an Edinburgh Summer School in 2005 for Doctoral Students from Columbia Seminary, John Drane suggested that the spiritual search today could be grouped into three categories:

- those in search of a more *disciplined spiritual life*, whether through Buddhist meditation or Ignatian Exercises or the rise of the new monasticism. We only need to look at the extraordinary response to the BBC reality TV show 'The Monastery' – generating massive interest in the monastic life of prayer and a search for depth in our superficial culture, suffering from the diseases of 'affluenza' – 'a contagious

⁷ Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process* (Chicago, IL: Aldine, 1969), quoted by Ben Edson, leader of Sanctus 1 in Manchester, in *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church*, Vol. 6, No 1, (2006), p. 30.

middle-class virus causing depression, anxiety, addiction and ennui'.⁸ There are various groups exploring this such as the Community of Aidan and Hilda based on Lindisfarne who describe themselves as: 'A worldwide pilgrim people reconnecting with the Spirit and the scriptures, the saints and the streets, the seasons and the soil.'

- those who are simply looking for *common-sense wisdom for everyday living*. These would include the self-help books, the growing industry of life-coaching, the fascination with personality profiling. My wife does life-coaching, personality profiling and spiritual direction, and she has around 15 people who are meeting with her on a regular basis, many of them finding that church life does not touch their deep questioning and spiritual search for identity and new paths for spiritual growth.
- those who are into the more *bizarre aspects of popular spirituality* from crystals to tarot cards, astrology and spiritual auras. Much of the popularity of that is down to good marketing and gullibility. Nonetheless, behind the New Age search is a genuine quest.

Rob Frost is a Methodist evangelist of 30 years experience who has published the book, *A Closer Look at New Age Spirituality*. He opens with these words:

For too long the church has seen the New Age movement as a threat, an enemy, and a source of evil in the world. I began to write this book as a diatribe of Bible verses and theology condemning it.

I repent.

Since meeting some of those involved in New Age activity, hanging around their bookstalls and fairs and hearing them talk of their genuine quest for reality, I've changed my perspective. Now, I'm asking: what can I learn from the emerging New Age spirituality? What can it teach me? How can it help me?⁹

A number of Christians are now finding ways of being present in the Psychic Fayres to offer a Christian presence: listening posts, prayer for healing, the meaning of tarot (explaining the scriptural images), foot massage and prayer, interpretation of dreams, and ... Psalm Reading! Choose a number between 1 and 150 ... and be surprised at what you learn!

⁸ Oliver James, *Affluenza*, quoted by Nick Spencer in *The Affluenza Epidemic*, London Institute of Contemporary Christianity's 'Connecting with Culture' comment 2 March 2007.

⁹ Rob Frost, *A Closer Look at New Age Spirituality* (Kingsway, 2001), p. 9.

In the light of our question about the nature of spiritual community for spiritual searchers, we have to ask how far the congregational model helps those who are looking for a more disciplined spiritual life, or offers people accountability groups to apply the practical wisdom tradition of Scripture as God's guidance to everyday living, or begins to connect with the spiritual tourist who needs gentle guidance and a 'soul friend' to become a pilgrim in search of Christ.

Spirituality among Scots

In a recent seminar at the University of Glasgow, Dr Eric Stoddart of St Andrews University, introduced some of his ongoing research into spirituality in Scotland through examining the Scottish Social Attitudes Survey of 2001.¹⁰ I hesitate to use it because it is a work in progress and I am not sure that I understood it all, but a number of relevant themes emerged from the presentation and discussion.

This research is an attempt to reach behind the usual reading of the spiritual temperature in Scotland through church affiliation, and to look instead at attitudes to spirituality and levels of spiritual awareness. The survey asked questions related to

- The impact that religious practice had on daily life
- The range of other spiritual practices which people had engaged in
- The levels of awareness people had of spiritual influences

Only 20% said religious affiliation affected their lives to a significant degree. 55% were engaging in some other form of spiritual practice (e.g. astrology or horoscope) and 75% displayed some awareness of a spiritual dimension in life. There is a spiritual hunger out there.

Eric was working on a formula that pulled all the data together into a 'composite spirituality scale' in which 35% of respondents emerged as 'very low'. In relation to our issue about congregation and community, 33% of those in the 'very low' category were Presbyterian! This underlines the disjunction between our inherited models of congregational life and the spiritual quest in society today.

¹⁰ Presentation in the School of Divinity to a gathering on Religious Decline in Scotland, 9 March 2007.

Spiritual Revolution?

Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead are authors of *The Spiritual Revolution – why religion is giving way to spirituality*.¹¹ Based on research in Kendal, their thesis is that there is a movement in our culture from ‘life-as’ religion (i.e. ‘life as’ a wife or mother or doctor or minister) where the roles are given and understood by the conventions of society, to ‘subjectivity’ where we operate by feeling and intuition. Their study divided the spiritual quest into ‘congregational mode’ and ‘holistic milieu’ mode. They discovered that 7.9% of people express their spirituality in congregational mode and 1.6% in holistic milieu mode. While the figures were small, the immediate conclusion is that the spiritual revolution has not yet occurred. The congregation seems to be holding the ground.

However, at a lecture in New College in April 2005, Professor Heelas made the prediction that with the rate of decline of congregational life in UK and the rise of spiritual quest, he expects that by 2025 the holistic milieu will overtake the congregational model. If the ‘congregational mode’ reduces by half (to 3.9%) and the ‘holistic milieu’ doubles (to 3.2%), we will see a crossover point by 2025. Since he is basing his figures on England, and we usually follow about 10-15 years behind England in terms of culture shift, then we may expect the same change of focus in Scotland by 2040. Once again we are challenged not to place all our spiritual eggs in the congregational basket.

The Back Door

Add to that prediction the stark observation of Stuart Murray that we are losing many people through the back door of our churches: ‘A recent estimate is that a million Christians no longer belong to churches and that is the fastest growing part of the Christian community.’¹²

The New Zealander Alan Jamieson has done research into post-church groups which reveals that these groups are made up of people in mid-life (average age 40-45), married with families and typically well-educated. High percentages had been in leadership roles in the church. Their reasons for leaving were related to two areas:

- the structure and orientation of the churches, e.g. shallowness of format, manipulative or controlling leadership, personal burnout

¹¹ Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead, *The Spiritual Revolution – why religion is giving way to spirituality* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005).

¹² Stuart Murray, *Church after Christendom* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2004), p. 45.

- the need for space for personal and spiritual growth, e.g. the church was like a ‘stuck record’, too narrow, cutting them off from ordinary people.¹³

Jamieson argues that we are seeing people move through various ‘stages of faith’ such as those described by James Fowler. This same movement has been described by David Lyall in *Integrity of Pastoral Care* where people move beyond conformist-conventional faith to an individualive-reflective faith and then to a conjunctive faith with the ability to live easily with paradox.¹⁴ Lyall sees this being consistent with our cultural movements from pre-modern to modern to post-modern culture. Jamieson goes further to use this progression as a clue to the elements of community life which will nurture and sustain people on their journey.¹⁵

CHURCH WITHOUT WALLS

In the midst of all these explorations and cultural adaptations, where are our theological anchor points? A Christian community is called to reflect the image of the God we worship, trust, serve and to whom we bear witness in Jesus Christ, God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

The Church of Scotland report on *Church without Walls* offered a simple descriptor of the church taken from the stories of the Gospels: ‘people with Jesus at the centre, travelling where Jesus takes us’. It may not be sufficiently sophisticated for some theologians, but it does have the virtue of affirming the core identity of Christian community, and dislodging a settled church into its destiny as a movement ‘to the ends of the earth and the end of time’, as Newbigin reminds us. In theological shorthand, we are called to a Christological embodiment of the *Missio Dei*.

Church without Walls suggested that churches be shaped by four elements: by the Gospels, by our context, by friendship and by the gifts of God’s people. Interestingly, recent research by Eddie Gibbs and Ryan Bolger¹⁶ on new patterns of church in UK and USA shows that across the spectrum of 50 new communities there is a primary focus on ‘identifying with Jesus’ – a return to the Gospels as the measure of personal and

¹³ Alan Jamieson, ‘Post-Church Groups and their Place in Emergent Forms of Church’, *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church*, Vol. 6, No 1 (2006), p. 71.

¹⁴ David Lyall, *Integrity of Pastoral Care* (London: SPCK, 2001), pp. 111-14.

¹⁵ Op. cit., pp. 74-5.

¹⁶ Eddie Gibbs and Ryan K. Bolger, *Emerging Churches – Creating Christian Community in Postmodern Cultures* (London, SPCK, 2006).

community life. Of course, each Gospel has a different perspective, and each Gospel writer would shape a community differently.

From my observation, most congregations would be close to Matthew's model – rooted in history, orderly and with strong issues of legalism running through it, but finally capable of being liberated into disciple-making mission. Many of the new communities, however, would align more closely with one of the other Gospels: with Mark the activist, with the questioning disciples as confused at the end as at the beginning; with Luke the charismatic Spirit-alert adventurer, concerned about including the outsiders, and challenging attitudes to wealth and poverty; or with John focusing on a ministry of incarnation ('The Word became a human being and moved into the neighbourhood'¹⁷), recognising signs of God at weddings and funerals, and encouraging more of a contemplative, reflective community. Jesus at the centre – travelling where Jesus takes us.

To be shaped by our context – both local and cultural – is an invitation to earth our following of Jesus in the neighbourhoods and networks where we live, work or play, so that we 'transform secular space' by reclaiming God's world in the name of God's kingdom. When this engagement is combined with a commitment to the 'kenotic' ministry of Christ in Philippians who 'makes himself nothing' to come as servant, and the 'cosmic' ministry of Christ of Colossians 'by whom, through whom and for whom all things were made', then we are released from the ecclesiastical agoraphobia and paranoia that erode our missionary confidence. Jesus at the centre – travelling where Jesus takes us.

'Friendship' is a key word in the *Church without Walls* report – and it is a key word in all the literature about post-modern Christian community. It includes the spirit of hospitality to the stranger, a quality of community life marked by authenticity, honesty and generosity, as well as Christian witness and discipleship through faith accompaniment as a fellow traveller on the Way. This kind of friendship is rooted in Jesus' words in John 15 about calling his disciples 'friends' rather than servants: giving to them all that the Father has given to him, and laying down his life for them.¹⁸ Jesus at the centre – travelling where Jesus takes us.

The final *Church without Walls* shaper is: 'shaped by the gifts of God's people'. Each of us is a gift from God to be given away to the world. So much church life is about finding people to plug the gaps in our ecclesiastical systems and to shore up what is struggling to survive. The New Testament speaks of many gifts being given so that we can be the multi-gifted Body of Christ, representing Christ in the world. When we listen

¹⁷ John 1:14 (*The Message* translation).

¹⁸ John 15:13-17.

to the dreams and passions of people we will be surprised at the gifts God has planted in them by his Spirit. God is not caught out by our particular phase of history. He has already given the gifts that are needed for the work that he wants to be done.

Gibbs and Bolger discovered an immense range of creative gifts being released generously in these new communities, a desire to be producers rather than consumers, and patterns of leadership that allowed people to have a voice in the process of discernment about the future shape of the community.

Recently I met a young man who has a passion to connect with the punks and Goths in the alternative cultures of our cities. His love for their music came when he was converted. Up till then he did not even like their music. The spirit of Jesus did. We are his Body. He has given us more gifts for the mission than we know. Jesus at the centre – travelling where Jesus takes us.

These few theological pointers do not amount to a fully worked out ecclesiology, but they do allow us to respond to the call to follow Christ. Perhaps this is a time to travel light rather than not travel at all.

CONTOURS OF COMMUNITY

As we travel into our post-Christendom world, Christian community beyond the congregation will require to attend to three contours of community life:

- ***We will require to explore patterns of Christian spirituality*** that recover contemplation, question and the mystery of silence, offsetting the inherited tendency to wordiness and offering tidily boxed answers. It has been said that Jesus was asked 183 questions, but only gave direct answers to three of them! There will be a clear practical focus on the Jesus of the Gospels and aiming to live faithfully as his followers amidst the realities and ambiguities of our times.

We will see worship that will be multi-voiced and de-centred from the single dominant leader, leaving space for interaction and dialogue around the Word of God. The art of story-telling will be recovered and there will be a re-imagination of the sacraments of baptism and communion as multi-sensory occasions shaped by creative liturgists who can use the symbols and communication skills of our time.

We will need Emmaus Road evangelists who walk alongside the questioners, hear the pain and set the mess of life in the mystery and meaning of the Messianic story, offering searchers the hospitality of the supper table where the Risen Christ reveals himself.

Sanctus 1 in Manchester has been exploring these themes and has developed a significant presence in the centre of the city for people on that spiritual search. Contacts are mainly de-churched people aged 20-40, young post-modern professionals working in arts, attempting something new because they have been hurt by church. They stay because of community, inclusiveness, creativity and sacred space for reflection.

Sanctus 2 is on the second Sunday of the month and is intergenerational with a café, prayer, film and creative space. Nexus operates as a night café between 2 and 4 a.m. offering coffee, chat, film and the arts for the night population of the city.

- *We will require to express authentic Christian community* that is honest and healthy, living out the courageous integrity of grace and truth. We will be clear about our centre in Christ, but allow for a movement of people around him like the ebb and flow of Gospel crowds – some committed disciples and others curious observers, investors and consumers. Community life will require to be simple but sustainable.¹⁹

Jamieson suggests the need to offer support to move through to James Fowler's 'fifth conjunctive stage' of faith, and uses the fascinating imagery of 'dual parentage' drawn from 'mother church' – the full Christian tradition of Scripture and church history; learning from 'father culture' – the symbols, language and media of today.²⁰ Leonard Sweet would describe such a culturally connected community as EPIC – experiential, participatory, image-based and connected or communal.²¹ The metaphor is similar to the idea of 'double listening' and an 'ancient-future' faith, which recognises that the call to incarnation involves marrying transcendence and immanence.

Coracle is a small community in Edinburgh led by two Episcopal priests. It began as a young adults' group for people in their 20s and 30s, and has grown into another example of 'communitas' basing the rhythm of their life on three phases in the year – the journey inwards (prayer and spirituality), the journey outward (learning to live counter-culturally in the face of media manipulation, consumerism

¹⁹ Stuart Murray, *Church after Christendom* (Paternoster Press, 2004), p. 217ff.

²⁰ Jamieson, p. 74.

²¹ Leonard Sweet, *Post Modern Pilgrims – first century passion for the 21st century world* (Broadman and Holman, Nashville, 2000).

and ecological challenges) and the journey together (reflecting on the health of relationships in the community). The relationships are now spiralling outwards towards, firstly, offering 'godly play' for children, and, secondly, a group of men exploring male spirituality.

- *We will require to engage with society in the slipstream of God's mission of grace* to transform people, place and planet as his Kingdom comes on earth as in heaven. People are looking for a faith that makes a difference and are open to joining hands with allies of good will who are working for a more just, equitable, peaceful and sustainable world. There is impatience with the religious divisions which create congregational competitiveness, duplication and self-absorbed use of resources.

Over the past year, 30 or 40 people in their 20s and 30s have met on four occasions for 'Dream Days' where people share their dreams of influencing the city of Edinburgh for the sake of the Kingdom of God. These dreams include work among the Goths, prayer networks, film production that teases people about city life, and a group of girls moving into the poorest areas of the city offering nutrition classes and dress-making skills to young mothers.

They have dreams that are not supported by their busy congregations – and some have now disconnected. They need another kind of network of support and some kind of spiritual framework to help them understand their sense of vocation. They resonate with James Thwaites' invitation to find their vocation in God's creation rather than in a congregation which saps time and energy into being self-sustaining. They respond best to questions rather than solutions. They need old heads to come alongside and listen, encourage and affirm them. They need to be healed of the sacred/secular schizophrenia and be given confidence to move into God's world and meet Christ on the streets.

These are now my companions on the Way. I am apprenticing myself to their dreams, and learning to be a learner, a beginner again, a follower rather than leader – always asking the question about how we might wrap supportive and challenging Christian community around these dreamers? What spiritual disciplines will sustain them for their journey?

They are below the radar of most church statistics and church strategies, but they are inhabiting a new cultural landscape as searchers, dreamers and activists – speaking of a new Galilee where the Risen Jesus is ahead of us, waiting for his disciples to meet up with him.

BEYOND CONGREGATION

I stand at the door of my congregation. An angel meets me and says:

Don't be alarmed. You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth who was crucified. He has risen! He is not here.... But go, tell his disciples and Peter, 'He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.'

Of course, we meet in Jesus in our congregations. But many do not, and he is moving on to meet them where they are. It is time to go.