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Laura Callarman  
laura.callarman@gmail.com

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# It Doesn't Feel Like Church To Me

Laura Callarman

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One Sunday night in early October of 2014, members of the three branches of the Restoration Movement gathered at First Christian Church (Disciples) in Abilene, Texas, for fellowship and conversation about the past and future of our respective tribes. It was quite an enjoyable gathering—full of beautiful liturgy, meaningful words, friendly faces and hugs, as well as heartfelt service from all who contributed. It was truly a wonderful event.

But I must confess that after the gathering was over, I drove home with my husband, Rosten; sat down on the couch; did a bit of reflecting on the experience; and grappled with the irony of the situation. The discussion that evening had referenced the emergence of new forms of church that might not look or feel like church to most people. (This was to be the topic of conversation for the next day's continued dialogue.) These new forms of church are the realm in which I have lived for the past few years and, largely because of my experiences in that realm, what I had experienced that night at First Christian Church did not look or feel like church to me.

That is not a judgment statement about that the value of that evening or the gatherings very similar to it that occur on a weekly basis in our church buildings. It is simply that as wonderful as the event was, it held very little in it of what I have come to know as church. To help you see what I mean, please allow me to share with you some about my own experience, as it relates to both traditional churches and emerging forms of church.

## **My Story—the Story of Many**

While the gathering at First Christian Church that evening did not look much like the church gatherings I have engaged in and come to cherish over the past few years, it looked very similar to the church experiences of much of my life. My heritage is in the Churches of Christ, where I was raised by faithful Christian parents in the context of two congregations, one of around sixty people and the other of around six hundred people. I had some wonderful experiences in these congregations, particularly in the youth group and in my college campus ministry. Over the years, I was formed in some very significant ways by this context and heritage.

Yet I increasingly found that what I had been taught was church (primarily the emphasis on “right” doctrine and the Sunday morning classes and worship services) felt very little like truly good news to me. I found very little deep community in these settings. I as a person did not seem to matter much; aside from my role as an elder's daughter (acting right because of my visible position), I was only one in a sea of faces. I went through years of hiding my thoughts and feelings because I found (or at least anticipating finding) no support in this context for who I *actually* was—as opposed to who people *thought* I was. No one knew that I went through years of questioning my faith both before and after deciding to become a Christian. There was no one who was safe to talk to and engage with at the level of my questions and concerns. I went through years of doubting myself, of hiding or suppressing my gifts because these congregations held the traditionally conservative views you might expect from most Churches of Christ and thus as a woman I was not supported in my gifting for and calling to ministry. As a result, I suffered alone through years of depression, extreme social anxiety, and cynicism and bitterness about the church and community. And I covered it all over with a

façade—doing and saying the right things while avoiding doing and saying the wrong things. I was lonely and scared and full of shame. I did not feel seen or important. And I simply did not know what else to do.

My understanding of church was shaped significantly during those lonely, searching years, largely through experiencing a *lack* of good news in the context of Christian community. But despite the fact that church felt too churchy for me—too formal, too distant, too rote, too lacking in intimacy and opportunity to use my giftedness—I followed God’s leading to pursue a graduate degree in ministry and missions at Abilene Christian University (ACU). I know that some members of my congregation and my family feared (and likely still do) that I had “gone astray”; they simply had no idea how far “astray” I already was.

I learned during my graduate studies that my story was similar to the stories of many others. I was not the only one who felt alienated by traditional church culture and practices. As we can see from the statistics that are so often perceived as indicating the demise of the church, quite a few people (especially those around my own age) have been leaving traditional churches. It simply does not make any sense to them or have any meaning for them. One pertinent question raised during the Stone-Campbell Dialogue discussions of new church forms this year was “Are we as traditional churches modeling something that is compelling?” Sad as it is, my experience was that, no, we are not, in so very many ways.

### **Experiments in Good News**

While my initial response to the emptiness I had experienced in church was, I am sad to say, cynicism and bitterness, God has done much good in me in the past few years to heal me and draw me into making a positive contribution towards a better future for the church. Much of this healing came specifically *through* being able to make a positive contribution towards that future; this work is where my heart and my calling in ministry align.

Over the past five years I have been privileged to participate in and guide a number of kingdom experiments in new forms of church, experiments in finding and living the good news as a Christian community. As I tell you more, I hope that you can appreciate one particular aspect of any good experiment: the opportunity to try and fail and learn and try again. I have certainly come to believe that failure, when reflected upon, is one of our greatest teachers and thus ought not to be only mourned but also celebrated.

### **The St. Ann Community**

In my first year of graduate school, I teamed up with a group of six other young adults to form what was called the St. Ann Community. Our dream was to move into a lower-income neighborhood in Abilene and to pour ourselves into relationships with our neighbors. We had aspirations of doing asset-based community development, as well as an ambitious plan to renovate the long-abandoned St. Ann Hospital building and use it for the benefit of the neighborhood.

As one year turned into two, though, and we found ourselves making very little progress towards any of our stated goals (and driving each other half insane in the process), we began to realize that we had very widely divergent viewpoints on where to go and how to get there. We were passionate, yes, but in different directions. We were full of exciting ideals and plans, yes, but we were often too arrogant to accept the wise counsel a few tried to offer us to slow down and deepen our roots rather than make a big splash with our sensational goals. We loved one another deeply, yes, but we had very little idea of how to healthily sustain that love for the long haul in a community of vulnerability and intimacy.

There were good times too, certainly. Many of my favorite relationships and memories (not to mention my marriage) emerged from my time in this community. And God unquestionably accomplished some great work in us as individuals, maturing us and teaching us so much about how to do community well—and badly. After a time, though, God began drawing us each further down the ministerial path we were best suited for. For some this meant simply attending to the responsibilities and opportunities God set before them at school, at work, and at home. For others this meant developing a nonprofit to address the root causes of poverty.<sup>1</sup> For still others (myself included) this meant pouring themselves into understanding what it really means to be a true, intimate community as the people of God.

1. “Thrive,” Thrive Abilene, accessed January 15, 2015, <http://thriveTogether.us/>.

## MRNA & ML

Concurrently with our involvement in the St. Ann Community, Rosten and I (along with some others from the community and our graduate classes) sought training in the ways of house church and house-church planting. We committed ourselves for two years to the Missionary Residency for North America (MRNA, for short), led by Dr. Kent Smith, a professor in the Graduate School of Theology at ACU. In this apprenticeship we studied, practiced, and processed what it meant to be the church together in some ways that looked unusual to us at the time: listening for the voice of God, developing intimacy through mutual self-disclosure, and engaging vulnerably together in community at every level—including the smallest form of church that exists, two people.

Though I confess I engaged this opportunity less than perfectly, I was still amazed to see the depth of relationship that could be built in our small, intimate community of just over a dozen. I was surprised at how much we could grow in relationship with one another and with God, in ways and to an extent that I had never before seen in a church of sixty or six hundred—or even in a small group from a church of sixty or six hundred—simply because the culture and the expectations were different. In this group, too, we learned from conflict and mistakes, for those are bound to arise when imperfect people share their lives and hearts with one another. We learned how badly we could hurt one another, particularly when we chose not to talk about our fears, disappointments, and sins. But we also learned how magnificently the multifaceted grace of God could be displayed in the varied personalities, gifts, and contributions of the beautifully diverse people of God.

As the two-year MRNA apprenticeship drew to a close, some of us who had found our experience particularly powerful chose to team up to offer a similar opportunity to the undergraduates on ACU's campus. We formed the Missional Life team and for three years worked together to extend the culture of intimate, meaningful Christian community to students who had been seeking but not yet finding it. Cohorts of undergraduate students were led by their coaching teams to practice being a community together and to explore aspects of what that could mean: shared rhythms of life, purposeful stewardship of resources and gifts, communal vision and calling, and so on.

There were a great number of challenges within the Missional Life experiment, particularly finding how to sustain the attention of a very busy and distracted group of people, and eventually the experiment came to a close due to insufficient resources and availability. Yet even these hardships indicated the necessity of sustained focus on developing and nurturing new forms of community that are compelling to an otherwise unenthused and unengaged portion of the Christian population. And in the cases when we were able to grasp and retain the attention of our students—most significantly through a residence hall-based cohort and through the program-linked course that I developed and co-taught with Kent Smith one semester—we were pleased (but not too surprised, given our assumptions) at how quickly and deeply a random group of students could be transformed into a meaningful community in which people knew one another deeply and were being distinctly formed into the image of God. In other words, they were becoming the church together, in ways we rarely saw happening in the context of traditional churches. What an exciting prospect!

## House Church & Eden Community

As the St. Ann Community and MRNA both drew near their end, Rosten and I began sensing God's desire to draw us into something new. We had a deep longing to be in intimate Christian community, even to help initiate that kind of community with others who were also seeking it. And we were beginning to catch a vision for running a retreat center to equip and minister to Christian leaders. Over the past three years, God has graciously led us into exactly those two things.

Our house church developed surprisingly quickly and has proven to be a source of incredible encouragement, sustenance (literally and metaphorically), and direction in the lives of all involved. We began with six people who had all experienced deep hurt and a lack of meaningful relationships in traditional churches of various denominations. And over time we have grown to the point that we now have eleven adults and three children. This may seem like a small, perhaps even insignificant community to a world and a church that still have faith in the myth of bigger meaning better. But we have found the smallness of our community to be one

of its greatest strengths, for it is only in a small community that each person can have substantial relationships with everyone else involved.<sup>2</sup>

As a church we have dedicated ourselves to sharing our hearts and lives together in a wide variety of ways. We celebrate birthdays and milestones. We pray over one another. We listen to God and one another for discernment about jobs and struggling marriages. We eat lots of really good food together. We have been present together at the birth of a child (literally in the room until a C-section was required). We have butchered rabbits and made homemade beer and soap together. We have offered our homes to one another not just on a daily basis but *as home* in cases of financial need. We have shared our deepest emotions and the experiences of God (or the seeming lack of God) in our lives in extremely vulnerable ways . . . We have come to be a true family (for no one needs a metaphorical family, as my husband likes to say), each of us closer to one another in many ways than we are to our biological families. Together we have experienced challenges and fears, yes, but we have also (often through those things) experienced the healing and growth and grace of God in ways we cannot begin to fully express.

Partaking in a daily culture very much like the house church culture I have just described, the Eden Community developed as three families discerned God's invitation into life and mission together. However, this particular community has an additional long-term focus. Our God-given dream and intention is to build and run a missional retreat and training facility through which we can model and train others in a way of life that looks drastically different from the frenzied, distracted lives most Americans, including American Christians, now lead.

Our aims for that way of life are many. We intend to create and invite others into a physical space that demonstrates and opens us up to experiencing God's immense beauty and glory. We want to demonstrate and train others in a life of simple, deep connectedness to God, one another, and the earth. We want to honor God's wisdom and creation by using the principles of permaculture to develop an approach to food and life that is productive and beneficial not only for us but also for the earth and its many other inhabitants.<sup>3</sup> We want to live in and for God's joy as a vibrant family of Jesus so that other communities of wholehearted believers are cultivated within close reach of everyone, geographically and culturally.

God has given us the passion and the gifts necessary to do this kind of work well, and God has also consistently gone before us to help us make significant progress toward this vision. We are in the process of both purchasing land outside of Abilene and fundraising to help this dream become a reality. Our goal is to be operational by the spring of 2017.

### Re-evangelizing the Church

Because of what I have experienced and learned over the past five years in these various experiments in good news, my understanding of and measuring stick for what church is has changed drastically. I now can see that church is not merely something you do on Sunday mornings; Christianity is not merely a religious commitment you make or a checklist of items you complete because you are supposed to. No, church is the vibrant people of God, living in and for God's joy. They live in deep community and as a healthy multigenerational family, sharing their hearts and lives together on a daily basis. They honor Jesus as their head and the Spirit as their guide—and it is clear from their lives that they really mean that. Bound together and sustained by God's love, they are a fully alive people who strive to cultivate the glorious gifts they have received.

With this kind of joy and vitality at the heart of my own faith and faith community, it is impossible not to want to see others join in on the goodness of what church really can be. I am reminded of a quote from Bryan Stone: "The most evangelistic thing the church can do today is to be the church—to be formed imaginatively

2. The formula  $n(n-1)/2$  can be used to calculate the number of discrete relationships within a group. Within our church of 11 adults, there are 55 total relationships. Add to that the 3 children, and our church contains a total of 91 relationships. Even this number of relationships can be challenging. Consider, though, that in a church of 75, which many Christians would consider small, there are 2,775 relationships. In a church of 500, which is not uncommon, there are 124,750 relationships—impossible to maintain!

3. For a quick reference to the principles of permaculture, see "Permaculture," *Wikipedia*, accessed January 15, 2015, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Permaculture>.

by the Holy Spirit through core practices such as worship, forgiveness, hospitality, and economic sharing into a distinctive people in the world, a new social option, the body of Christ.<sup>4</sup> I agree. It is the vibrant family of God that demonstrates good news to the world. And while that has not, at least in my experience, been what traditional church has often been like, there is certainly room for growth and change—for the people of God to be re-evangelized so that they all are experiencing and thus radiating the joy of being a distinctive people in all the right ways.

It is to this kind of hope and work that Rosten and I find ourselves continually drawn. We are often surprised at the various forms in which it shows up in our lives: Planting and nurturing house churches in the Abilene area. Consulting with mission teams and traditional churches about how to cultivate more vibrant forms of intimate small community within their own context. (Ask me sometime about the summer we spent working with an amazing church in Sullivan, Indiana; I truly wish I had space here to tell you all about it!) Developing and pursuing innovative small business ideas in order to help ministers and house church communities re-envision what financial stewardship and kingdom work can look like.<sup>5</sup> With the Spirit in the lead, there is no telling what re-evangelizing the church and evangelizing the world can look like. We only know that there is an immensely deep need for something different, not because there is nothing good in who the church has been, but rather because we want to see the best in who the church has been and can possibly be extended to the entirety of a world so desperately craving good news. I have no idea how God will continue to shape my story and the story of the church in the coming years. I only know that with the God of good news in charge, I am privileged to participate and excited to see what happens!

**LAURA CALLARMAN** IS A HOUSE CHURCH MINISTER AND MISSIONAL TRAINER IN ABILENE, TEXAS. SHE ENJOYED BEING ABLE TO SHARE HER NEW CHURCH EXPERIENCES THROUGH THE DIALOGUE AND ENCOURAGES ALL THOSE REDEFINING CHURCH FOR THEMSELVES AND OTHERS (LAURA.CALLARMAN@GMAIL.COM).



4. Bryan P. Stone, *Evangelism After Christendom: The Theology and Practice of Christian Witness* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2007), 10.

5. Rosten and I are currently in the process of purchasing a twelve-unit apartment building in downtown Abilene as part of an experiment to discover how real estate can both support and provide a context for missional engagement. The vision is for the apartments to provide sustainable income for our own work as ministers while also serving as a place for an embedded intentional community to live, learn, and serve. We'd love to tell you more!