

Our approach: Centered Sets *Mark Norman*

Recently, I was talking to someone about our church family. This person was thinking about joining us and I felt compelled to warn him about the messiness of hanging out with us. When he inquired further, I told him about our diverse backgrounds (Catholic, Baptist, Brethren...), the different streams of spirituality in our midst: some are people of the Word, they thrive and feel God speaking to them when they study the Bible, others thrive and feel alive when they see and sense the Holy Spirit moving in our meetings, yet others come alive when they are involved in feeding the poor and taking care of very practical needs of people and some thrive on sharing the “Good News” in very direct ways.

I also told him of our attempts to move out into the community, some cells are sponsoring a Coffee House, another, forging relationships in a local bar, one is ministering to the families of prisoners and one is working with children. Trying to describe the diversity of such a small group was pretty interesting. He had a few other questions that were also quite perceptive. He asked me how we dealt with diversity, trust and membership. Somewhere behind these questions, I picked up on a need to feel safe if ever he decided to hang his hat with us.

Here are some thoughts that came to mind following our conversation.

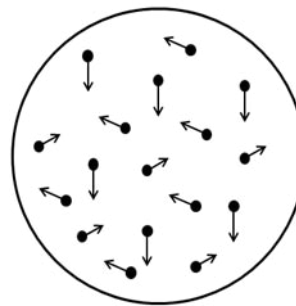
The first is pretty simple and stems from my ecology background: Messiness is a sign of life; too much order is a sign of death. The health of ecosystems is predicated on diversity, when an ecosystem is too uniform, it is increasingly vulnerable to disease and infestations and can disappear. As a mentor once put it to me, life is messy. So I guess there is a lot of life in the Gathering.

The second thought stemmed from my friend’s concern with trust and membership. I can easily see where he was coming from. He may have been looking at us and seeing all of the outward differences and, honestly, having trouble figuring out how to fit in. These questions used to be easily answered. Many of us came from backgrounds in which it was easy to tell who was in and who was on the edge. We just looked at the apparent behaviours and outward signs. In my case, when I came to Christ, the church I was attending had a few ways of figuring who was a really serious follower of Christ. The list was pretty straightforward: Say the sinners prayer, cut my hair, be at the services on Sunday and Wednesday, tithe, wear a suit, add some amen’s and praise the Lord’s to my vocabulary, memorize Scripture and call the music we sang Hymns instead of songs. If I did all of those things then I was in. Not too complicated, but from my immature eyes, these things didn’t have much to do with the Gospel but more to do with cultural preferences that this group felt comfortable with. Little did I know, I was dealing with what is called a “Bound Set” mentality. People cared a lot about the external signs of belonging and used those to gauge my walk with Christ. If you look at the illustration, bounded sets have a clear boundary that is usually well defined.

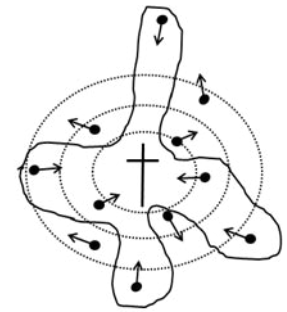
As Alan Hirsch puts it: “In the bounded set, it is clear who is in and who is out, based on well-defined boundaries such as culturally accepted behaviours or very specific theological lines of thinking. But bounded sets don’t have much of a core definition beyond these boundaries. They are hard at the edges, soft at the center like a ranches with fences put up in order to keep cattle in or out.” The focus of

groups that operate with bounded sets is to get you in, once you're in, your internal direction isn't all that critical as long as you maintain the outward appearances.

In my heart, I sensed that Jesus probably loved these people dearly but wasn't excited about the way they were measuring inclusion and growth. In fact, a lot of what we know about Jesus indicates that things like that really upset him. Think of his reaction to people who looked great on the outside but whose hearts weren't oriented towards grace. Think of Jesus' comments to the Pharisees in Matthew 23: 15-28. He actually called them "blind, fools, hypocrites, and whitewashed tombs". He didn't mince words. His main problem with them was the gap between outward religious compliance and the inward disconnect from the grace that flowed from connection with God. Conversely, think of the examples he used to highlight true God centered spirituality. Go back to the story of the Samaritan taking care of his vowed enemy (Luke 10), the father receiving his prodigal son (Luke 15) or the woman quietly making an offering that clearly cost her dearly (Luke 21). To Jesus, the heart mattered so much more than what showed on the outside. The stories he used to teach his disciples what it meant to follow God clearly put an emphasis on hearts changed by grace rather than on behaviours used to comply.



Bounded Set



Centered Set

Here's is a way of looking at it: It's called centered sets. Again, according to Hirsch: "The centered is like a ranch with the wellspring at its center. It has very strong ideology at the center but no boundaries. It is hard at the center, soft at the edges. We suggest that in the centered set lies a real clue to the structuring of missional communities in the emerging culture."

Notice in the illustration how in centered sets, the line of inclusion is related to the direction of the arrows. Those pointing towards the cross are inside the line, those pointing away are outside. This is an attempt to illustrate the concept. In centered sets, the line moves to include the dots based on their direction. In churches that work from the centered set, the emphasis is put on the direction of people's hearts, not on the outward appearance of compliance to lists of do's and don'ts.

How does all of this fit with us? If we are a centered set church:

We seek to encourage people to connect with God in a way that changes and transforms them into the likeness of Christ (see Ephesians 4: 15)

We are, as Mike Frost puts it, "hard on the center and soft on the edges". That is we highly emphasise and hold to the centrality of Christ for our salvation and spiritual vitality while understanding that God is responsible for transforming people. We are all in a process of transformation and exercise patience and humility as we help each other on the journey of drawing near to God.

We constantly check our practices to make sure we don't major in the minors and don't put a higher value on lists of "Christian" behaviours and practices that may have more to do with our preferences than the Gospel of Christ.

We sink wells instead of building fences providing a sustaining connection with water instead of building barriers to keep others out. We allow people to come to Jesus from any direction and from any distance. The Person of Jesus stands...at the center

The result of this approach to faith and church is a lot more messiness but a lot more life, less rules, more focus on Jesus.