

Commentary...

The church is not a building – but we need to gather

By Lisa May
Columnist

The coronavirus pandemic has disrupted nearly all of our life routines and the weekly rhythms of the church have not been exempted. Leaders at every church location have been forced to make decisions about how to continue worship, teaching, and fellowship in light of concerns over spreading the virus.

Here in Sisters we have seen YouTube services, Zoom meetings, Facebook livestreams, church at the rodeo grounds, parking lot services, and backyard church gatherings. Because we are being forced to innovate, I would like to invite others to reflect on defining church, not just in the midst of a pandemic, but in the best sense going forward.

A dictionary definition of *church* would indicate it is: “a building used for public Christian worship.”

But if this discussion is about the Christian church, the source of the definition should not be cultural — but instead the source for defining all of the Christian faith, the Bible. The word *church* appears 111 times in the New Testament. All of those occurrences are translated from the original Greek word *ekklesia*.

The New Testament never uses the word *ekklesia* to refer to a building. *Ekklesia* is defined as “a calling out, especially a religious congregation; assembly.” Church, or *ekklesia*, is a group of people. Sometimes the word is used in Scripture to refer to all believers in Jesus, for all time. For example, Jesus said to Peter, “you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church.”

In this sense, the church explodes beyond the confines of the walls of any building and stretches across the globe. As I discussed this

topic with other Christians in Sisters, Katie Keranen shared that, when her husband was killed in an accident while they were living as missionaries in Malawi, “friends of friends of friends reached out to do things for us and help us.” The help was not limited to those who worshiped with them in Malawi or in Oregon, but the wider church around the world.

Sometimes the word *church* is used to refer to a specific group gathering in one place at one time: “Aquila and Prisca, together with the church in their house, send you hearty greetings in the Lord.” In this sense, the church can be a small group of people with a common goal of encouraging one another and growing in their faith. Karen Williams of Sisters said that meeting in a Bible study group for the last 5 or 6 years has “changed the course of my life.”

Regardless of where or when they are meeting, the Bible uses *church* to refer to the people that are meeting and not the place where they meet.

This is not a minor discussion of semantics, but a crucial point in Christian doctrine.

In the Old Testament, the people of Israel worshiped God at the temple. God’s presence was encountered in the holiest chamber of the temple, but only the high priest could enter there. In contrast, the New Testament teaches that those who place faith in Jesus Christ are God’s temple and God’s Spirit dwells in them. In the same way, Jesus promised, “For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.”

Believers in Jesus do not need a large gathering in a building to find the presence of God. He is present among them wherever they are.

Along with the definition of church, we might consider the goals for the church gathering together. Again, we should turn to the Bible for answers. Hebrews 10:23-25 says, “Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.”

Many turn to this verse to point out the importance of meeting together, and this is true. But notice that the end goal of the passage is not meeting together. The gathering is a vehicle to accomplish other goals, namely, stirring up one another to love and good works, as well as encouraging one another to hold fast the confession of our hope. Another goal of gathering mentioned often in Scripture is instruction in the Word of God, the Bible.

Everyone interviewed agreed that love, encouragement and instruction can take place in smaller groups outside of the church building. In many cases smaller groups are *more* effective for these goals. There is value added when small group members are able to interact on the teaching. Rebecca and Andrew DeKeyser are worship leaders at Vast Church in Sisters. Rebecca pointed out that Jesus provided a model for small groups in His ministry. She said, “Jesus had His

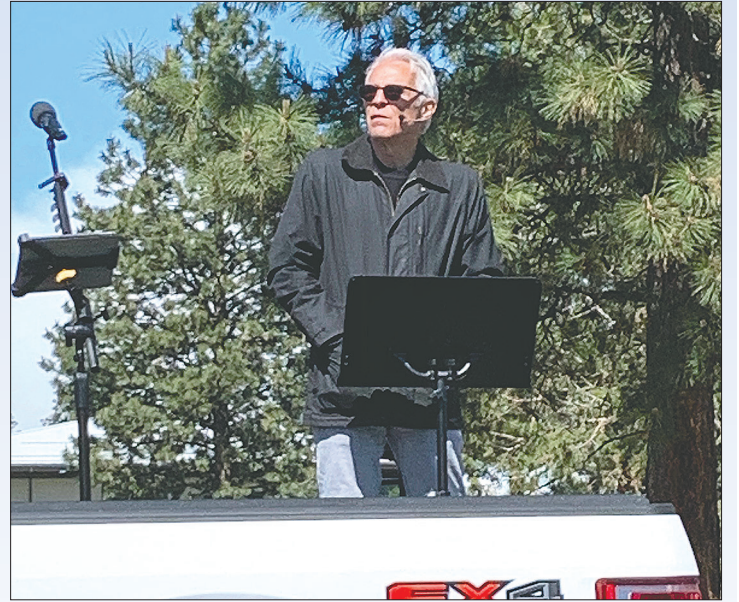


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Sisters Community Church has been conducting parking lot services for several weeks, with Pastor Steve Stratos addressing people in their cars through a limited-range radio broadcast.

group of disciples that he did life with — caring for each other, sharing joys, hopes, and hurts.”

So why do we need church buildings at all?

Can’t we accomplish all the goals of gathering together through Zoom meetings and small groups?

Look for more in Part 2 of this column next week.

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