

LITURGICAL ACTION

THE CHURCH

LESSON NOTES

FOCUS: CHURCH SPACE AND INNER SPACE

- **AN "AFTERWARDS" LESSON, ONE OF THE LESSONS ABOUT WHAT HAS TAKEN PLACE IN THE CHURCH SINCE THE TIME OF THE SCRIPTURES**

THE MATERIAL

- **LOCATION: IN A DEVELOPED CLASSROOM THIS LESSON SITS ON ITS OWN SHELF BETWEEN THE PENTECOST SHELF AND THE COMMUNION OF SAINTS SHELF. THE MATERIAL ITSELF SITS ON THE TOP SHELF WITH A BASKET FOR PARTS OF THE CHURCH MODEL BELOW. IN ADDITION THE LOWER SHELVES HOLD PICTURES OF VARIOUS KINDS OF CHURCHES, BOOKS ABOUT STAINED GLASS WINDOWS, THE BUILDING OF CATHEDRALS AND OTHER RELATED SUPPORTING MATERIALS.**
- **PIECES: THE MATERIAL SITS ON A BASE AND INCLUDES PIECES THAT FORM FIVE SHAPES FOR THE CHURCH. A SMALL TABLE TO REPRESENT AN ALTAR (TABLE), WHICH IS MOVED WITHIN THE CHURCH SPACE AND REMOVED AT THE END OF THE DECONSTRUCTION BEFORE REPLACING THE TABLE AND REBUILDING THE CHURCH MODEL.**

BACKGROUND

Jesus did not say much if anything directly about the church that was born at Pentecost in a simple room in Jerusalem about 33 AD. The word "church" (*ekklesia* in Greek) is used only twice in the four Gospels, which are, of course, written in Greek. The first use was in Matthew 16:18, referring to the "church" being built on Peter, the rock. The second use was also in Matthew at 18:17 and refers to a situation when someone sins against you. You are to confront them in private, but if they won't listen in private, you are to tell it to *the church*. If that does no good, then ignore the person's actions. Jesus did communicate, however, by word and deed about the established religion of his day, which was focused on the Temple in Jerusalem. So, by implication we can surmise what Jesus might say about the established church of our time.

When the New Testament is considered as a whole the word *church* is used some 115 times, mostly in Acts and the letters. On at least 92 occasions these are references to a local congregation. The rest of the time the word is used to refer to the church in general. For example, references to the general church may be found in Ephesians, calling it the household of God with Christ as the cornerstone (2.20). This letter has something to say about the church in nearly every chapter.

The most famous and dynamic metaphor for *the church* is that it embodies Christ. This “body” lives in a way which expresses unity and diversity—as described in Romans 12, 1 Corinthians 12, and in Ephesians (1:22-23; 2:19-22; 4:15-16). The core metaphor for this lesson is about how the many dimensions of Christ’s “body” can be found in various shapes of churches, which can be internalized by those who gather there to shape their spirituality, as the search for the elusive presence of God continues beyond Scripture. This core metaphor is especially evoked by the wondering question: “Now, what do we really need to have, to have a church?”

The early Christians met mostly in homes (Acts 5:42), probably around the table. They met the day after the Sabbath, on the first day of the week, in recognition of Christ’s resurrection on a Sunday. In 1 Corinthians 16:2 we read that on the first day of the week Christians were to put something aside for the needy. They also prayed (Acts 12:12), read scripture (James 1:22), broke bread and shared the cup (1 Corinthians 11:20-29). Acts 2:42 says, “They devoted themselves to the apostles teaching and fellowship, the breaking of bread and the prayers.”

In this lesson the People of God continue following God’s elusive presence, hidden and yet revealed. In the past God’s presence was mediated by the Tabernacle and then the Temple. It was then mediated for Christians by the Risen Lord, who *is* the church when it *is* the church. After the Romans destroyed the Temple and the city of Jerusalem in 70CE there was no choice but to meet in homes, as the Jews and Christians did. The Jews also began to build synagogues for community worship, even in Jerusalem where they were no longer welcome, and the Christians began to develop their own places for community worship as well.

God’s presence is not contained in a place. It may be found in any place and among the people who gather in God’s name. What a church building provides is a powerful symbol of Christ’s indwelling presence to support and guide our inner life and to give shape and identity to our common lives. Sometimes, however, churches can be something larger.

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin S.J.—the theologian, philosopher, paleontologist and geologist—spent many years in the Gobi Desert studying the origins of the earth and human beings. He was instrumental in the discovery of both the Piltown Man and the Peking Man. He once wrote in this geographical and intellectual vastness, “Since, Lord, once again...in the steppes of Asia, I have neither bread nor wine nor altar, I will raise myself above these symbols up to the pure majesty of Reality and I, your priest, will offer You upon the altar of the Whole Earth, the labour and the suffering of the world” (Quoted in Robert Maguire and Keith Murray, *Modern Churches of the World*, 8). The church, then, might be the whole universe. The altar within it becomes “the altar of the Whole Earth.” Teilhard de Chardin also wrote about the universe as a “living host,” the bread of Holy Communion. Much closer to home, we might also find such vastness and symbolic richness in the circle of children we serve.

This brings us back to Solomon’s question, which was included in the lesson on the Ark and the Temple. At the dedication of the first Temple he stood before the altar and spread forth his hands in prayer. “But will God dwell indeed with man on the earth? Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain thee; how much less this house which I have built. Yet have regard to the prayer of thy servant and to his supplication, O Lord my God...” (2 Chronicles 6:18–20). Solomon’s question is always *the* question about churches and the shape of our encounter with the living God. The answer

to Solomon's question is "Yes" and "No." *Deus absconditus atque praesens*. God is hidden and yet present. Even in God's apparent absence, God is there, playing hide and seek with us, where the goal of the game is for *it to continue*, not for God to be so well found or so well hidden that the game is over.

Samuel Terrien has observed in his book *The Elusive Presence* (1978) that when God's presence is guaranteed, as by the clergy in a particular building, it is no longer a living presence. God's presence cannot be domesticated. The way he put this was to say: "The proprietary sight of the glory destroys the vision, whether in the temple of Zion or in the Eucharistic body. ... In biblical faith presence eludes but does not delude (476)." This is why the church remains a holy place in absence as well as presence, sometimes an aid and sometimes a distraction, as we move forward with the God who is beyond in creation, beside us as Jesus our redemptive companion, and within as the Holy Spirit.

During the presentation the model is taken apart step-by-step to suggest the church's many forms and the continuing search for the One who is both hidden and revealed within its walls. Once the model is deconstructed to its base showing the destruction of the Temple, it is then built back so that the wondering question that follows King Solomon's prayer can be asked: "Now, what do we really need to have, to have a church?"

NOTES ON THE MATERIAL

The material is a model of a church sitting on a large, wooden base. As it is taken apart, other shapes for churches are found, roughly tracing the story of church shapes and theology back to the first century. When the lesson continues the model is rebuilt in the opposite order to return to the present. As the model is taken apart, the removed pieces are placed on either side of the storyteller. Here are the pieces in order of their removal:

1. The towers.
2. The high walls and their supporting structures (the flying buttresses)
3. The transepts (the arms of the cross-shaped space)
4. The basilica (the curved end, called the apse, and the rectangular walls)
5. The round church
6. The table
7. The empty base evokes the desolation when the first Christians and the Jews sought God's elusive presence after the destruction of the Temple and the city of Jerusalem

As the model is put back together from the base, the story of the various shapes of churches is expanded, leading to wondering at the end, after the towers are replaced, about what we really need to have to make a church. The variety of shapes also suggests changes in the theology and spirituality of the church. The placement of the altar (table) provides an invitation to explore such questions in the context of the children's own church and the inner space of their own spiritual life today.

SPECIAL NOTES

This lesson sits on its own shelf, which is not as wide as the other shelves and is a bit taller. This is so children can stand and look into the church model through the front door or in through the windows at their eye level. The shelf is only a bit larger than the model. Below the top shelf, where the model of the church sits, are shelves that contain pictures of churches, books about stained glass, and other things of interest related to churches.

The model is heavy and the towers are likely to fall off when it is carried, so the children need help to get this lesson set up on the floor to work with on their own. This needs to be done on the floor or a large, low table, because, as the church is taken apart, space is needed for the removed pieces to be placed until they are used again when the church is rebuilt.

WHERE TO FIND THE MATERIALS

The shelf on which the model of the church sits is best placed near the Pentecost shelf and the shelf where the lessons about the saints are kept. This implies a fully developed Godly Play room. Creativity is needed to make adjustments when this is not the situation in your Godly Play program.

Sometimes the artifacts for this lesson will be purchased by one's diocese or other judicatory and can be borrowed to give the lesson. Larger churches with developed programs may also share this lesson with smaller parishes. When such sharing takes place you might begin the lesson for the day with the assembled church already in the middle of the circle.