

Destination Weddings—A Message to the Church about Place

July 29, 2015

Dr. Doug Hardy
Professor of Spiritual Formation
Director, Doctor of Ministry Programs

Weddings have always been performed in a variety of settings: in churches and other houses of worship, yes, but also on beaches, in parks, in homes, and in judge's quarters. The trend for weddings to occur outside of religious buildings seems to be growing, perhaps best exemplified by the growing popularity of the "destination wedding." In a destination wedding, almost everyone involved travels to a location especially chosen by the wedding couple for its aesthetic qualities and/or its association with significant memories. For many, the hometown of the bride or a church of membership are no longer considered governing criteria for selection of the place of the wedding.

This has me thinking about Christian church buildings and grounds as location. In what ways do our places of worship function as destinations? What qualities enhance or detract people from viewing the church as a destination for sacred events?

As John Inge points out in his excellent book, *A Christian Theology of Place* (Ashgate 2003), Christians tend to be ambivalent about the importance of place in their theology and practice. On the one hand, we devalue particularities of place by virtue of our commitment to the nature of God as transcendent. As Jesus said to the Samaritan woman who wanted to know where the proper place was for worship, "God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth" (John 4:24, NRSV). On the other hand, God's immanence, especially as understood in the Incarnation—God becoming flesh and dwelling among us—suggests that we need to take seriously both the natural and the built environments. Jesus did, as evidenced in the many Gospel references to the sea, the mountains, travel from one region to another, and, of course, the Temple courts.

My sense is that in the free church tradition we have largely taken an approach to our buildings and properties that devalues aesthetics and uses the language of the "spiritual" to rationalize all kinds of location choices that ignore the Gospel of Incarnation. Might the fact that many of our Christian young people do not choose a church as their "destination" for a wedding be a call for us to pay attention to some of the unintended consequences of our ecclesiology (or lack thereof)? Have we in some ways failed to cultivate a sense of the sacred in our churches?

I'd like to suggest two possible lines of further inquiry on this topic:

1. *Recapturing the importance of church buildings and properties as sacred space.* Drawing upon a centuries-long history of Christian engagement with the built environment across many different cultural contexts, how might churches re-energize their

identities as destinations for people who want to ritually enact their faith commitments?

2. *Re-engaging with the natural and built environments outside of the church.* If we truly believe that God's Spirit is not limited to the Church and, in fact, is always "out there, ahead of us," what might God be drawing us toward in the places that couples are choosing for their destination weddings?

Do You Believe in the Bible?

June 8, 2015

Dr. Doug Hardy

Professor of Spiritual Formation

Director, Doctor of Ministry Degree Programs

I attended a worship service recently in which the congregation sang the Don Moen song “Because We Believe.” The lyrics begin with the well-known phrase of the Apostles’ Creed: “We believe in God the Father...” but do not continue with the exact words of the Creed. Like several other contemporary songs, it uses creed language as a springboard for affirming a litany of beliefs that sometimes say more and sometimes say less than what is contained in the three ecumenical creeds of the Church: The Apostles’ Creed (2nd century), The Nicene Creed (4th century), and the Athanasian Creed (5th century).

In this song I was struck by the phrase “We believe in the holy Bible” because there is no reference to the Bible in the three ecumenical creeds other than the Nicene Creed’s affirmation that Jesus rose again “according to the Scriptures.” Although Statements of Belief were developed later by various Christian denominations that typically affirm the Scriptures in an article of faith, no early creed actually calls for a confession of belief *in* the Bible itself. Why?

It certainly is not indicative of an absence of Scripture as a formative force in the life of the early Church. Even though the New Testament canon was in the process of being formed, the Jewish Scriptures (Old Testament) and the oral tradition and early written records about Jesus were incredibly important for their prayer, worship, doctrinal formulation, and discipleship. Scriptures mattered, as they still do to Christians today. Apparently, however, confession of a belief in a clear biblical canon was not as important to them as other confessions of belief—beliefs about God as Triune, loyalty to Jesus, and about the nature and being of the Church. Could it be that the relationship between early generations of Christians and their Scriptures was based on realities other than a belief *in them*? Only later, after the formulation of the Christian canons of Scripture, did different denominations include more explicit statements about the Scriptures in their confessions of faith.

Let me suggest some alternative questions to “Do you believe in the Bible?” that may help you more carefully reflect on the place of Scripture in the Church and its implications for Christian living:

- Do you, with the Church, confess a belief in the Triune God as described in the creeds?
- If, as the creeds affirm, God is the only true Word and Spirit, how can we keep our worship focused on this living God, rather than on the Bible?
- In what ways are the Scriptures a means of grace for the people of God?
- How might your church more actively pray the Scriptures?
- In what ways might God use Scripture to form you in the image of Jesus as portrayed in the creeds—divine and human, suffering and dying, risen, in communion, forgiving?

The community of gospel love that God created in Jesus preceded the formulation of the Bible as we know it. Our use of Scripture, then, must be accountable to this community and the Holy Spirit of God who continues to create in love. Hear this good word from Saint Augustine, bishop of Hippo: “Whoever, then, thinks that he understands the Holy Scriptures, or any part of them, but puts such an interpretation upon them as does not tend to build up this twofold love of God and our neighbor, does not yet understand them as he ought” (*On Christian Doctrine*, chapter 36, paragraph 40).

Amazing!

December 3, 2013

Dr. Doug Hardy, *Professor of Spiritual Formation, Director, Doctor of Ministry Program*

Amazing things happen every day. I just did a YouTube search for “amazing” and it yielded 85,000,000 results! TV shows use the superlative liberally: *The Amazing Race*. *The World’s Most Amazing Videos*. *Amazing Planet*. We know that with another Olympic Games just around the corner, athletes from around the world will soon amaze us with more feats of physical strength, endurance, and skill. Many of us work with, are friends with, married to, or attend church with people who are truly amazing and who do amazing things. I just returned home from attending the annual meetings of the American Academy of Religion and the Society for Biblical Literature and I can tell you there is some amazing scholarship being conducted in the fields of religion and theology. (By the way, the meetings were held in Baltimore—a pretty amazing city in its own right!)

We seem to be easily and repeatedly drawn to the spectre of the amazing. This is true in religious experience as in other areas of life. Take, for instance, the account in Acts 8 of Simon of Samaria who “practiced magic ... and amazed the people” causing them to conclude that “this man is the power of God that is called Great” (Acts 8:9-10, NRSV). The narrator points this out because a follower of Jesus named Philip traveled to the same city to proclaim the good news (gospel). The accompanying amazing phenomena—exorcisms and healings—caused many to pay attention to Philip, including Simon who became a believer and was baptized. We’re told that Simon “was amazed when he saw the signs and great miracles that took place” (v.13).

This brief biblical scenario is instructive in that it notes a similar reaction of people to magic as to the gospel of Jesus; in both cases they were amazed. The new *Common English Bible* makes a distinction (even though the Greek word is the same), translating the people’s reaction to Simon as “baffled” and the reaction to Philip as “astonished.” It seems to me unhelpful to translate them differently if it implies that a non-Christian magical display elicits a different human response than an authentic Christian instance of miraculous healing or deliverance. Not necessarily so. In both cases, people will be amazed and give it their attention.

So, what are we to make of amazing displays in the context of proclaiming the good news of Jesus Christ? Amazement can be an entry point for faith in Christ—it certainly was for Simon—but it can just as easily become a reason for shifting attention to something else. Christians are called, not to fuel an “amazing race” (pardon the pun) by trying to out-do the many other displays in society and culture. Rather, we are to help others (whether they are amazed or not) ground their lives in “the good news about the kingdom of God,” the significance of what “the name of Jesus Christ” stands for, and the community of faith into which they can be “baptized” (v. 12).

It’s Advent. This season anticipates the amazing things that God has done and will do, birthing into the world love, joy, peace, and hope that endures. Don’t be fooled by displays of Christmas (including those in churches) that elicit amazement but fail to re-direct our lives.

Boots on the Ground

September 16, 2013

Dr. Doug Hardy

Professor of Spiritual Formation, Director, Doctor of Ministry Degree Program

As the U.S. Congress debates military intervention in Syria, the phrase “boots on the ground” keeps popping up in the news media. It serves as short-hand for the physical presence of soldiers in a battle zone, and some politicians use the term to argue that having boots on the ground should *not* be a necessary or desirable part of American military strategy in this instance.

We know from experience that getting involved “on the ground” is not only costly but often leads to deeper commitments of involvement. And so we hope that there might be a way of making an attack, making a point, and thereby winning—from a distance. Fly in, strike, fly out.

I don’t know about the wisdom of this approach in war, but I do know there are other areas of life where it simply does not work. My marriage, for example. I cannot truly love my wife unless I am willing to be physically present with her, involved in day-to-day life with her. Marriage requires boots on the ground. Occasional drone attacks of love-from-a-distance will not cut it.

Could it be that all of us—married or single, male or female, soldier or civilian, young or old—have to come to terms with a temptation to avoid committing boots on the ground in an area of life where it seems easier, safer to simply foray from a distance? And might this temptation help us to see where the call to discipleship is leading?

Theologically, the starting place for me is the Incarnation. In Jesus, we see a God who insists that any salvation requires boots on the ground: “And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14, NRSV). No revelation-from-a-distance. No disembodied, spirit strike. No faceless good will.

Likewise, the Church—the Body of Christ—must be a boots on the ground force in order “that through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places” (Ephesians 3:10, NRSV). There is no substitute, no shortcut for incarnational ministry following our Incarnational Lord.

So, let me invite you to join me in considering these questions for reflection, personally and in your community of faith:

- Where is God calling you that it is hard to put boots on the ground?
- What “alternative” approaches of keeping a distance might signal a reluctance to take the incarnational path?
- What might a first step look like toward a more grounded discipleship in the contested places of your world?

The ground on which we humbly place our boots in faithfulness to the God who calls becomes sacred ground, holy ground. On it, we experience the ever-important “threefold relationship between God, his people, and place” (John Inge, *A Christian Theology of Place*; Ashgate:2003, 46).

Be Strong

April 30, 2013

Dr. Doug Hardy
Professor of Spiritual Formation
Director, Doctor of Ministry Degree Program

Boston is a special place for me. I was born and attended college just outside the city. I took my first teaching job at that same college—Eastern Nazarene College in Quincy, MA—and earned my Ph.D. degree at Boston University. My son lives in the city. My two sisters live in the Boston area and many dear friends and colleagues call the Boston area home. So when bombs exploded near the finish line of the Boston Marathon on Patriot’s Day, it hit close to home.

As a follower of the Boston sports scene, I’ve been touched by and impressed with the displays of compassion, solidarity, and resolve highlighted at recent Red Sox, Bruins, and Celtics games, captured most potently by the symbol and slogan “B STRONG” (or “BOSTON STRONG”). Although I’m sure it means different things to different people, I hear in it a desire and determination to not let the infliction of terror or its consequences cause us to betray values of freedom, love, and justice. In other words, we do not need to become like those who would do us harm. Does God have anything to say to us in situations like this?

The phrase, “Be strong!” is biblical. Peppered throughout the Old Testament historical books (Deut 31:7; Josh 1:6; 1 Kgs 2:2; 1 Chron 22:13; Ezr 9:12), the Psalms (27:14; 31:24) and the Prophets (Isa 35:4; Dan 10:19; Hagg 2:4; Zech 8:9), it is used to encourage God’s people to not be afraid or act out of fear, because God is with them and God’s ways (laws, commands) are sufficient for living well. The surest sign of strength, according to these biblical authors, is waiting on and trusting in God. *Easier said than done.*

Jesus goes a step further. In the context of the Jewish admonition to “love the Lord your God with all your ... strength” (Mk 12:30), he asks us not only to not become like those who do us harm (our enemies), but to actually love them (Mt 5:43-44). Perhaps nothing in this life requires more strength.

I, for one, do not have easy answers for the challenging questions facing individuals, communities, and nations under threat. It seems to me, however, that those of us who claim our identity in Jesus Christ need to stay close to the sources of strength marked out by our Christ-following ancestors in the first century. Selections from two New Testament books in particular occupy my thinking and praying these days:

- **1 Corinthians 1:27** *But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the **strong**.*
- **1 Corinthians 16:13-14** *Keep alert, stand firm in your faith, be courageous, be **strong**. Let all that you do be done in love.*

- **Ephesians 3:16** *I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be **strengthened** in your inner being with power through his Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love.*
- **Ephesians 6:10** *Finally, be **strong** in the Lord and in the **strength** of his power. Put on the whole armor of God so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. (NRSV)*

Reflections at the Intersection of Mission and Spiritual Formation

August 28, 2012

As an ordained elder in the Church of the Nazarene I regularly participate with clergy colleagues and lay leaders at District and General Church gatherings. These gatherings, among other things, focus on the mission and purpose of the church with implications for the proper attitudes and behaviors of those of us who lead and influence others. Sermons are preached, goals set, admonitions given, models held up for emulation.

Reflecting on recent experiences at these events, I notice that our leaders and presenters typically emphasize two things: evangelism and prayer. These categories could be broadened, with the former including “mission, witness, compassion, outreach, and church planting” and the latter including “spiritual formation, spiritual disciplines, personal holiness, and devotional life,” but at the end of the day it tends to come down to bringing people to a point of first-time personal decision for Jesus and prayer for those people (or for the motivation to reach out to those people).

It seems to me that this dual emphasis reflects two key strands in the DNA of churches in the Wesleyan-Holiness tradition. Mission, including evangelism, is one such strand that consistently shows up when the church self-consciously reviews its past and casts a vision for the future. I hear it in such statements as, “We need to be passionate about reaching lost and broken people;” “The church is a mission station;” “Every Christian is an evangelist;” “The future of our denomination is in new starts;” “The church doesn’t have a missions program; it participates in God’s mission in the world.” Based on the texts and themes of sermons, the time allotted to and topics of major presenters, and the statistics gathered and shared for purposes of accountability, adding new converts and in this sense growing the church is clearly a primary emphasis.

But prayer is also emphasized and reflects a second strand of Wesleyan-Holiness DNA—life from and grounded in the Holy Spirit. I hear it in such statements as, “We need a revival among us;” “God accomplishes amazing things when God’s people pray;” “You can only share with others what you have received;” “Prayer needs to be the foundation of all the church’s activity;” “Don’t neglect your personal devotional life.” It has a pervasive presence at District and General Church functions, although a more limited role compared to the primary emphasis on evangelism. Occasionally it informs the text and theme of a sermon or presentation, but mostly it is a “preliminary” or “periphery” activity, referred to in brief statements that assume everyone knows and understands what is required. Empirically, its secondary status is confirmed by its absence from data gathered and shared for purposes of accountability.

My particular interest is the intersection and interrelationship of these two important strands of DNA. Along with others who are writing about a “missional spirituality” , I see these two emphases as critically and mutually informing. To encourage further theological reflection on this interplay in our contexts, let me make a few observations from the perspective of one whose life and work emphasizes the second DNA strand, and invite you to think with me about

some of the implicating questions.

We seem ambivalent about the priority of Christian formation and discipleship. The Church of the Nazarene's mission statement of "making Christlike disciples in the nations" indicates a desire to go beyond just making and cataloging converts. Christlikeness is a biblical descriptor for holiness of heart and life, and being a disciple means following the way of Jesus, not just receiving Jesus as personal Savior. But is this what is understood when we hear the words of the mission statement? More importantly, is this what can be clearly inferred from what is said, practiced, reported, and asked for at our review and accountability gatherings? To the contrary, it seems that the meaning and force of the mission statement often gets reduced to leading people to make first-time decisions for Christ and incorporated into the church organization so they can, in turn, lead others to make first-time decisions for Christ. I believe this to be an important and necessary part of the church's mission, but by no means does it capture the full range of functions necessary to make Christlike disciples. I also believe that the work of personal evangelism will ultimately be unsustainable and unfruitful for the Kingdom if it becomes a goal in-and-of-itself, disconnected from the full life of discipleship to which the church is called. Which brings me to a second observation.

Our ecclesiology might be too thin. The Church of the Nazarene as a denomination emerged from a movement that did not originally consider itself a full-fledged church. The Holiness and Pentecostal revivals led to associations that sponsored missional activities in addition to the functions carried out by the established churches. It was significant, therefore, when the Church of the Nazarene finally added to its Articles of Faith in 1989 a statement on "The Church"—an affirmation of the importance of ecclesiology—and significant also that it took so long to do so—a reflection of an assumed understanding of church that was mostly defined over-and-against other churches. Much more could be said about this, but let me draw attention to one feature of District and General Church gatherings that might expose a thinness in our ecclesiology attributable to a failure to take into account the implications of full formation in Christ: the emphasis on starting new works and planting new churches. It's not so much the initiatives in-and-of-themselves that are problematic—they are strategic for ongoing church growth and renewal. Rather, it is the way these initiatives rise to the top of our value system to the neglect of other, equally as important and necessary initiatives. In a North American context the unexamined cultural assumptions are significant: When things start to get old, or complicated, or conflicted, we start over. We prefer new things. We like the prospect of being unencumbered with history or tradition. Might we in the church, in our enthusiasm for the frontline work of gaining new converts and starting new churches, unwittingly devalue the difficult yet critically important backside work of forming old converts and old churches? If we do, then we will continue to lose through the back door most of what is gained (temporarily) through the front door. Spiritual formation and discipleship involves the painful work—Paul in Galatians 4:19 likens it to giving birth—of Christ being fully formed in us, we who have been converted to Christ but now need to be converted again in the midst of the real messiness that all communities of faith experience over time. Which brings me to a third and final observation.

Our default mode of praying appears utilitarian. Change and transformation of individual lives

and of communities of faith is ultimately the fruit of God's grace. We cooperate with but are nonetheless dependent on this gift. And so it is right and proper that we pray whenever we are speaking about, promoting, or practicing mission. I am grateful that prayer is consistently featured in our District and General Church gatherings. I am concerned, however, that in much the same way that Christian mission can be reduced to personal evangelism, Christian prayer can easily be reduced to intercession. In this sense, we use prayer primarily to further our agendas: "Lord, bring us revival;" "Lord, help us to grow our church;" "Lord, help us to make new converts;" "Lord, give us more workers." Might American pragmatism be at work here? Praying for others and their spiritual well-being is vital to missional initiatives, but as Jesus' model prayer (Matthew 6; Luke 11) illustrates, it is not broad or deep enough to encompass Christlike praying. Perhaps the missing piece from our prayer patterns and habits when it comes to mission-oriented gatherings is a willingness to pray in non-performing, non-promoting, non-possessive ways. What if our District and General Church gatherings featured significant times of silently listening together for God? Asking for God's forgiveness and waiting for healing? Going to God for discernment rather than for blessing on an already-figured-out mission? A true sign of a greater integration of our missional and spiritual DNA just might be the creation of space and time for this kind of waiting on God in the midst of and as part of our other agendas.

Filename: Hardy Articles.docx
Directory: /Users/Jason/Desktop
Template: /Users/Jason/Library/Group Containers/UBF8T346G9.Office/User
Content.localized/Templates.localized/Normal.dotm

Title:

Subject:

Author: Veach, Jason

Keywords:

Comments:

Creation Date: 6/16/18 8:55:00 AM

Change Number: 2

Last Saved On: 6/16/18 8:55:00 AM

Last Saved By: Veach, Jason

Total Editing Time: 0 Minutes

Last Printed On: 6/16/18 8:55:00 AM

As of Last Complete Printing

Number of Pages: 13

Number of Words: 3,950 (approx.)

Number of Characters: 22,516 (approx.)