

The Ecology of the Gathering

The design of a space is never neutral; it always communicates some specific value. For example, what does it say about someone's values if they set their living room T.V. off in a corner, while all the furniture is turned towards a window looking out into the back yard? The way a room is set up communicates certain values. Physical spaces have a way of shaping our feelings and behavior. When the church gathers to worship, it is no different.

How we design the physical space of our worship gatherings matter. How does our gathering space shape us for mission? How does it shape us for community? We already ask interrogating questions in relation to preaching since we are so intensely an information-transaction-culture. Yet we often forget to inspect the mediums we are using to communicate those messages. What if the medium we use has a message of its own?

The very spatial mediums we use to communicate those messages shape and architect us in powerful ways. In fact, as a medium, the literal physical spaces we use may actually subvert the very messages we are preaching. What if the arrangement of spaces are actually speaking louder than what we are saying in our sermons?

Trained by the Climate

This exploration into how physical spaces shape us is called an *Ecology of Gathering*. Ecology is the branch of biology that looks at how organisms relate to one another, and to their physical surroundings. If we apply this field of study to our worship gatherings, then the non-living components (abiotic) of a worship gathering would be: the stage (if we have one or not), the positioning of the chairs, the instruments, the volume of the instruments, the symbols, the place where the communicator stands, the video screens, the lighting, the communion elements etc. The living components (biotic) would be the people who are present at the gathering, including the collective vibe created by group dynamics. The premise of an *Ecology of Gathering* is that the non-living components dynamically interact and stimulate the living components (biotic), creating a living spiritual climate. This climate communicates a message, and over time, this climate controlled message trains us into a certain way of thinking and behaving.

The Early Jesus Movement

The 1st Century Church had an *Ecology of Gathering*. Over and against the Jewish Temple-centered practices and the Greek Mystery Cults of the first century, there was an *Ecology of Gathering* unique to the early Jesus-followers. The early Church went through a new but vital transition that did not allow them to rely on public temples as the primary space for gathering. Meanwhile, the Mystery cults were primarily clustered together by shared social interests and were characterized by a volume of impressive rituals.

The early Jesus movement was not bonded together by mere social or political rituals. In 1 Peter 2:5 we can see the transition from the Old Testament model where only a certain group of people (Levites) could dictate the gathering, to a more participatory model where every person is considered a priest, opening worship up to the priesthood of all believers. T

he clearest picture we have of an *Ecology of Gathering* is found in I Corinthians 10-14. Paul guides the Corinthians into a rhythm that centers The Lord's Table, the expression of spiritual gifts, and the essential-ness of community. Paul was not only concerned about what they did, he was also concerned about how they did it. As an architect, Paul was paying attention to an *Ecology of Gathering*.

Clash with Consumerism

The gathered church does not cultivate an *Ecology of Gathering* in a vacuum; it will always be formed in the midst of the wider culture. Consumerism is the current we swim in, and is potentially the most exalted god in the Western context. We must become aware of how our approach to gathering has been shaped by the dominant cultural forces.

The doctrine of Consumerism states that whatever dazzles us with words, with personality, with brilliant production, is worth our time. We measure our experiences by the immediate emotional return these things offer us. Consumerism is not so much an action as it is an underlying belief system, a narrative that tells us that meaning comes from the things we consume; what we take into ourselves. Consumerism sends us hunting for products that impress, productions that inspire and personalities that captivate in an effort to deliver us from our unsatisfying and bored existence.

Churches often unintentionally end up playing into this powerful narrative when they seek to find the relevant hot-spots for what people want, and then use them to design their "services" and "market" it to church "shoppers." The stage, the sermon series, children's ministry that acts more like a glorified Disney Land-type babysitting service, all become covert tools to keep us coming back for more. This places all the emphasis on the veneer of the gathering not the ethic of the gathering.

When we primarily design our gatherings around these marketplace sensibilities, the controlling questions end up being "Will people like what we produce?" "Is it quick and easy to access?" "How do we compete with other 'service' providers?" We have to be cautious about how our gatherings can unknowingly malform towards consuming spiritual inspiration. Our worship gatherings must embrace an ecology that introduces frustrations to this stealth, rabid impulse to consume and judge the "presentation" purely based on how the experience makes us feel.

Discerning and Designing

As an architect of community, you have to begin to grapple with an *Ecology of Gathering*. This means asking questions and making choices based on the end goal of re-shaping people into a new narrative of self-emptying love, others-oriented community and costly mission (Philippians 2:1-11). We can no longer simply adopt what has "worked" in the past, what works at a popular church, or what works down the street. Just because something appears to be "working" doesn't mean it's actually working for the good. The medium is the message, which means every aspect of your gathering is either supporting your message, or subverting it.

How can we design our gatherings in ways that build in a measure of resistance to the cultural forces of consumerism? The following are three overlapping categories for discerning and designing that help in the diagnostics of the *Ecology of your Gathering*.

Form

- How is the room arranged?
- What values does it communicate?
- What is central in the room? What is peripheral?
- Is the furniture arranged for consuming or contributing?
- How is technology used in the room? What does it amplify? What does it reduce?
- Does the room communicate one group's values over another?

Function

- What is the purpose of the gathering?
- Does the order of worship encourage watching or participating?
- Does the liturgy perpetuate autonomy or community?
- Does the content reflect being sent people?
- Does the communication exalt one person or the priesthood of believers?
- Does the worship communicate God's transcendence and Immanence?

Frequency

- How often do you gather for worship? Every week? Every other Week? Monthly?
- What does the frequency communicate?
- How is the frequency of this gathering situated in the life of daily community?
- Is this our primary expression of being the church?
- Is this a service to attract the curious? or to gather the People of God?
- Is the marketing around our gathering sensationalized or over promising?

It is unhelpful to prescribe exactly how you should construct your worship gathering. The missional church is not a cut and paste model. As architects of community, we have to enter into deeper, ongoing reflection as to how the Form, Function and Frequency of our gatherings are shaping people's imagination about what it means to be the church.