

## **A Theological and Social Reflection on Church Signs in West Fargo**

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The fall air is crisp; the trees a gilded gold, the cloudless skies a cobalt blue. It is a perfect Friday in Fargo—September 28, 2007. I have just finished presenting a paper at the Linguistic Circle of North Dakota and Manitoba conference held at North Dakota State University. And as I pensively drive my 2006 silver Malibu on 19th Avenue en route to yet another research project—this one—I cross over the north western border from Fargo into West Fargo, the home of All Nations Assembly of God.

I see it. Integrity Windows.

Integrity Windows is a major supplier of specially designed Marvin glass windows for the Red River Valley. It employs many people here in the greater Fargo-Moorhead area: accountants and sales persons, as well as well as individuals who have entry level job skills. This factory is renowned for its construction of quality Marvin windows for both business and home. Many African refugees, who have limited English yet unlimited desire to provide for themselves and their families, work here. This company until recently employed Pastor Paul for eight and one half years.

“Integrity Windows”, I think to myself, “I never noticed that before—the word ‘integrity’ is a part of the company’s

title. How appropriate. An African refugee named Pastor Paul Agamire once worked here for eight and one half years. Integrity. That, in my opinion, is what his life is all about. Integrity. This man who recounts horrendous stories of a childhood spent in southern Sudan; this man who escaped with his life from there; this man who pastored African people at a refugee camp in Kenya; this man who has been in the United States for at least ten years, and who has sometimes worked three jobs to meet the financial needs of his wife, two boys, two girls, other family and his church—yes, in my mind this man is embodies integrity.”

As I drive past Integrity Windows with its campus sitting just north of me, I almost immediately turn south on a street which will bring me to 45th Street and the church’s neighborhood.<sup>1</sup> I have work to do on this bright, clear, crisp fall day; and in light of the forecasted rainy and blustery weekend (which never came!), I think, “I better get this done today. Now is the time to photograph the All Nations Assembly of God church sign, and to take pictures of other church signs in the three block radius. These other church signs will give me visual and ideological comparisons and contrasts from which to work.”

## **But Why This Thing?**

“But why this thing?” I think to myself.

As I began to silently reflect on the answer to this question, I begin to theorize—a very favorite past time of mine! Generally speaking, “It seems to me that church signs are emblematic. In addition to claims about spirituality, church signs can often provide subtle indicators of socio-economic, political, gender, and cultural perceptions by concretizing the abstracts of a church’s beliefs; while simultaneously illustrating the relationship of itself to the public as promoted by its leadership and laity.”

“I believe, then, that this study should springboard from this observation. It should explore how one culturally rich church sign personally designed by Sudan Refugee Pastor Paul Agamire compares and contrasts both within and without the time and space of its immediate neighborhood and distant world. The focus of my work should be on how something means, and not necessarily what something means”

As I think this, though, I wonder. “Have other researchers ever worked on something like this? If so, what implications and directions could their work provide for me?” Then I suddenly remember that this kind of work on church signs had been done. In fact, an analysis of church signs was part of a study done by University of Iowa Professor, Dr. Heather Hartel (1999). The study funded by the Eli Lilly Foundation was known as The Material History of American Religion Project. In this study, Hartel connected her research to that of Robert Ventori (1976). His study of signs and architecture located in the city of Las Vegas appeared in his book, *The*

*Forgotten Symbolism of Architecture*. In that volume, Ventori spoke of a sign’s denotative and connotative value (Ventori 101). Hartel took some of these cues from Ventori, and additionally demonstrated how church signs of the mid-Twentieth century distinguished themselves by giving glimpses of America’s historical and socio-economic moments. For Hartel,

Signs outside a church in the 19th century told passersby what type of worship occurred inside the building, [but] in the 20th-century churches began to use signs with movable letters to convey a message. The first messages were still in informational nature--who the pastor was, when services met, and what text would be preached on during the coming Sunday, together with, in some churches, a title for the minister's sermon. As advertising and car culture both grew in their social impact throughout the 20th-century, commercial advertisers used signs to glean the attention of potential consumers. (Material History)

Hartel presented church signs as a “20th-century addition to the visual world of American religion.” They are the equivalent of the “barns whose roofs read “Chew Mail Pouch Tobacco”, or “Try Burma Shave.” They fit into a mid-20th century American landscape which has often been used “to sell... entertaining words and images to gather an audience and to entice people into attending their fellowships” (Material History).

So with full confidence in my idea, I continue cruising the neighborhood.

### What Is This Thing?

As I turn westward on Main Avenue in West Fargo, my search for an interpretive context begins. Driving and

looking around, I see at least four kinds of church signs in the small three block radius of All Nations Assembly of God (ANAG). The first is suspended from a

metal support high above the sidewalk at the corner of Main and Fourth Street. It reads “New Beginnings Assembly of God.”



Especially visible to both east and west bound travelers on well-trafficked Main Avenue, this suspended sign serves a directional purpose by curiously pointing the would-be visitor to the entrance of the church. This church is actually located in back of its storefront building. There is nothing noted here about service times, or any indications of who the pastor(s) might be.

The name of the church, “New Beginnings Assembly of God”, is juxtaposed on a simple picture of Calvary’s hill with an orange sun rising upon it. Perhaps the metaphorical church name connotes a hope that the church wishes to offer a casual passersby or an

attendees? At one time this church met in the current ANAG sanctuary, only to move again, and then to ultimately disband for a time. Perhaps, then, the sign connotes the new beginnings of the church, or its belief that a human life can experience new beginnings.

After this, my route brings me to the church sign of the Faith Lutheran Church cornered on Fifth Street and Third Avenue. This church has two signs; one modern painted sign on the western corner of the campus, and one historical, glass encased sign mounted in a brick wall on the far eastern corner.



The sign on the western corner is by far the more recent sign. It seemingly serves a mere directional purpose. My eyes are drawn towards the top and centered word “Faith” which positionally connotes the centrality and importance of faith to this church. Then my eyes see the second line: “Lutheran Church.” Spatially, the phrase “Lutheran Church” connects itself with “faith”, but a different font is used. This causes “Lutheran Church” to appear in a subordinate, subsumed position implying, perhaps, how ‘faith is more important than church’. Appearing beneath both phrases are words denoting the specific kind of Lutheran church that it indeed is. This is an “ELCA” church, affiliated with the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America, a very important distinction for Lutherans. The ELCA is heir to a more inclusive, liberal tradition,

unlike the more conservative Lutheran Church- Missouri Synod. The times for worship appear below the church’s name. These services are called “Worship Hours”. This language implies both service time AND duration. The worship service probably does not exceed one hour.

Finally, as my eyes slide downward, I see how there are three “Reverends”. All three pastors, have regionally common names: “Schmidt”, “Kramer” and “Holmen.” There is even a woman “Reverend”. She is listed at the bottom of the list, and this visually places her at the bottom of the leadership list, as well as the bottom of the sign. Does this spatiality connote the chain of command and power structure within the pastoral leadership of the church?



Once again, I get back into my car, and drive to the location of the other sign. This other more traditional and historical one is located at the easternmost part of

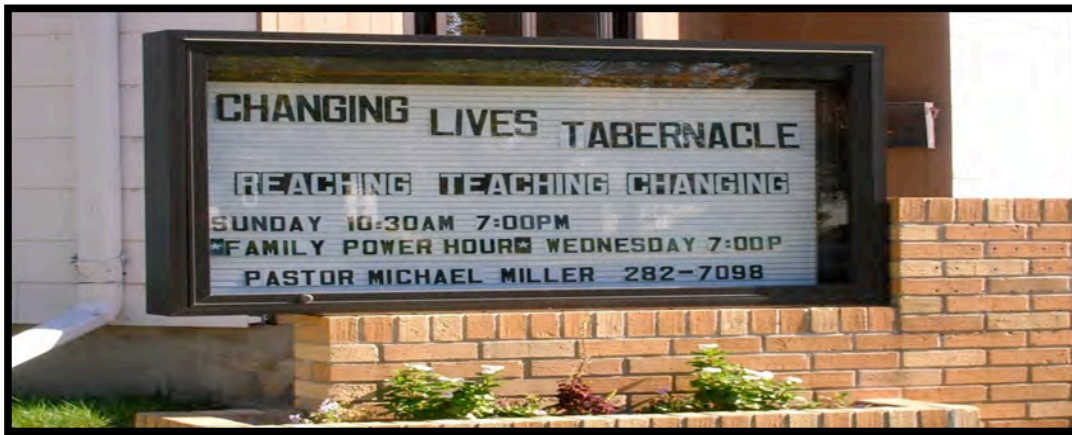
the campus. I see immediately that this sign is capable of displaying a continually changing message. Currently, it advertises: “You are

Welcome!” As my eyes continue to travel from the top to the bottom, it is very evident that this sign is older; that it differs markedly from the more recent one just discussed above. This sign is constructed within a brick framework. It is accompanied by a rust-free metal cross at my viewing right. Maybe this is an economic indicator of the church’s past? This would have been an elaborate design for which to have paid.

Here though for whatever reason, the words “Faith Lutheran Church-ELCA” appear all together on one line, unlike the more modern sign I remember seeing a moment ago on the western part of the campus. Interestingly, the word “church” is boldfaced, and it appears in a different font. The times of the “worship services” are the same as the other modern sign;

but while the “pastors” remain the same, they are viewed together as group quite apart from the appellations of “Rev” found on the other sign. This connotes a possible and historical attempt by this church to make their ministers and ministry more accessible and less foreboding. Perhaps this should be read in correlation with the message at the top of the sign which says, “You Are Welcome!”

I suddenly realize I am blocking the traffic on this street, and so I hurriedly jump back into my Malibu and drive just one block south and east to Fourth Street and Fourth Avenue. I see another church and a sign. This sign reads “Changing Lives Tabernacle”.



My eyes are immediately drawn to the descending staircase of letters comprising the church’s name “Changing Lives Tabernacle.” I immediately suppose that this is probably the only way the long name of the church could fit into such a small space. This glass encased, durable, yet changeable church sign is much younger than the encased Faith Lutheran Church sign I just analyzed. It is less elaborate and probably less expensive having been

mounted on what appears to be a brick handrail. I think that perhaps, in some way, this speaks of the economic conditions of the sponsor. Another kind of mounted sign may have been more expensive. Or, perhaps, it could be just the love of the designer for the practical, it being easier to install a sign on an existing structure.

Black words appear on a white background. There are no artful

flourishes anywhere. This leaves me feeling somewhat empty and cold and with a question, "Where does this say about their creative expression of a vibrant faith?" On the other hand, they may not be able to afford artistic expressions of faith which are so vital for me. I see immediately that there is no denomination affiliation on the sign, even though the congregation is affiliated with the United Pentecostal Church, a non-Trinitarian (or Oneness) Pentecostal denomination. I wonder why the congregation does not advertise its denominational affiliation. Perhaps denominational identity is not important to this congregation. The word "tabernacle" is a very old term made popular in churches that were especially affiliated with United States Pentecostalism (circa. 1910s through 1940s). The term "tabernacle" is also often associated with churches of traditional, non-progressive, purist belief and ways of worship. I wonder if this is in fact true for them? Does this speak of a wariness of the congregation to utilize new ways of worship?

Nevertheless, the name of this church definitely connotes its true mission. With a name like "Changing Lives Tabernacle," I begin to assume that this is at least one of their goals. Below the church name appears supporting evidence of this. It is the words: "reaching", "teaching", and "changing." Spatially, and probably in practice, "Changing Lives" is closely connected to the church's "reaching," "teaching," and "changing" others with its message.

A further connotation of a traditional approach to ministry is further supported by the observance of their common

worship times of a not too distant yesteryear in American church history. Sunday morning (10:30AM), Sunday Evening (7:00 PM), and Wednesday Evening (7:00PM) were traditional meeting times of years ago. Socially, because of the demands on a person's time, some churches now meet less frequently.

I also observe how this church seems to emphasize the "family." There is a "Family Power Hour." This is apparently another word for a worship service which occurs on Wednesday night. This idea might be related to a movement of the late eighties and nineties in American churches. At that time, many congregational churches in the USA began exploring and developing ways busy families could be together more during the Wednesday evening church service.

As I am about to complete my viewing of the sign, I move my eyes move downward. I see that there is one "Pastor" of the church, a "Pastor Michael Miller". His name occurs at the bottom of the sign, and he apparently is the Senior Pastor.

I approach and get back into my car with the full assurance that in thirty minutes I have established a neighborhood context for the text I really came to examine. Skirting within inches of the parked USPS truck to my right, I squeeze out and drive north to Third Street and Second Avenue. I park my car next to the West Fargo Adult Learning Center and look across the street northwards. As I do I see the All Nations Assembly of God sign situated on the northwestern corner of the small church lawn.



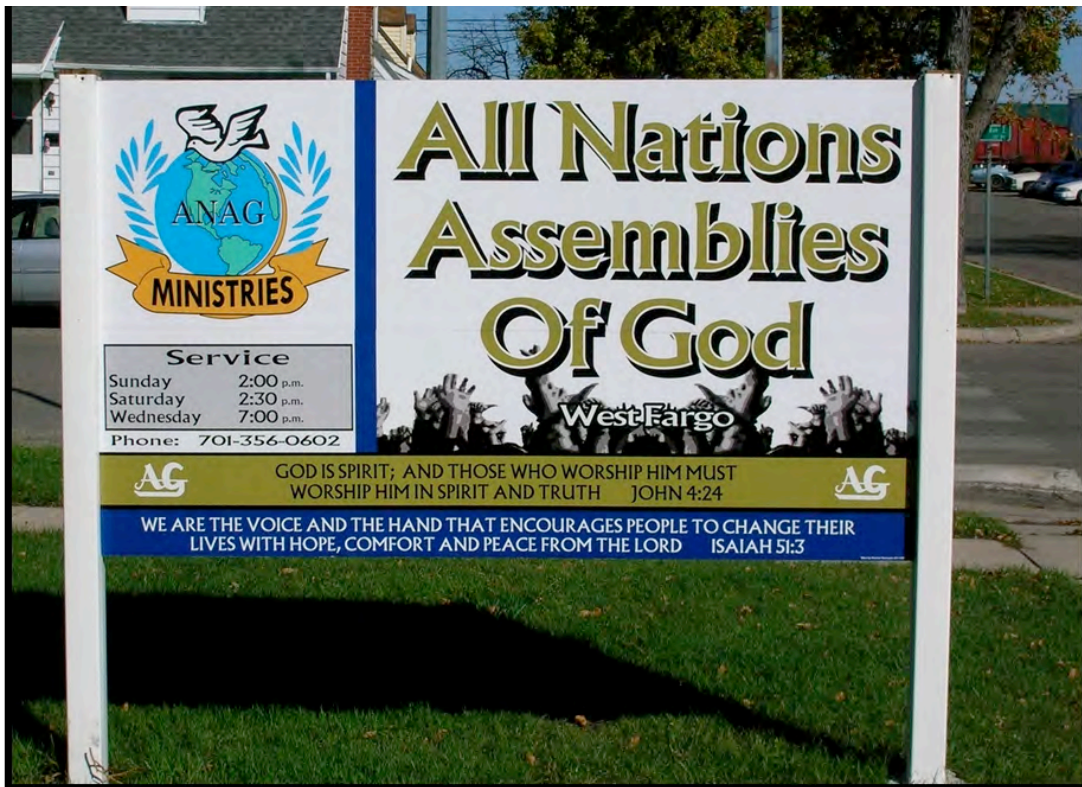
I step on to the northwestern sidewalk, and I notice how this same sign is visible to any observer looking southward. An east to west traveler can see it as well. Its

location speaks its message to the north, east, west, and south, silently extending its broad and big invitation to all.



As I step closer to begin my exegesis, I see a culturally, theologically, politically, socio-economically, linguistically dense text just made for

unpacking especially when compared and contrasted to the just established neighborhood context.



My eyes are at once drawn to the centered and gold lettering of the Church name, “All Nations Assemblies of God.” These gold letters have a shadowed font enabling the gold letters in the church name to be more noticeable against its white backdrop. Symbolically, I wonder, is this gold color working as it might in the ancient in ancient Biblical texts? In those texts, gold is associated with the qualities of durability, purity, and the dependability of the reign of God? I also note the misspelling of the church name in the sign. I immediately think of some denominational purists who might object that the name is misspelled. “The correct use of the denominational name for a church is Assembly of God not Assemblies of God. The latter is used for

the Fellowship as a whole.” I imagine the sound of Grammar Police voices in my ear.

Nevertheless, this misspelling is a connotation of something much important to me. This sign is not the work of a traditionalist. It is the work of a bilingual, bi-cultural person and group. It probably brings a much needed and ethnically different perspective of faith to this predominately German and Scandinavian area.

I also note other linguistic significances. The word “service” is singular, where American Standard English requires a plural as in ‘services’. There is a subject and verb disagreement in the phrase

located at the bottom of the sign: “We are the voice and the hand...”

Again, American Standard English requires: “We are the voices and the hands...” In its plurality, this church views itself as a unity. They impact their world as one, with one hand not many hands, with one voice not many voices. This group is communal and community minded.

Again these uses of language imply that the creator of this sign is someone for whom English is a second language. It implies that its congregants are as well.

As my eyes move immediately below the church name, I see the words “West Fargo.” As I do, I think, “It is very evident that this church is located in West Fargo. No other church signs in the neighborhood have this extra geographical indicator. So why might this be do significant?”

Probably, in the context of the sign, this phrase serves as a global not local locator. The church understands its mission in relationship to the world, and not just the neighborhood it serves. A globe appearing in the upper left hand corner of the sign helps substantiate this claim.

Immediately below the partially juxtaposed “West Fargo” are black and grey uplifted hands, an ancient Jewish and Christian symbol of the offering of praise and thanksgiving to God for something special and specifically done for the worshipper by Him. Right below the upraised hands is a Biblical text: “God is Spirit: And those who worship Him must worship Him in spirit and truth” (John 4:24). This classic text in its original context speaks of the outcast Samaritan woman whom Jesus teaches

about the elevation of all peoples who sincerely and truthfully worship Jehovah. This is, therefore, a connotation of how all people can stand on level ground before God—regardless of race, gender, or socio-economic levels—and worship Him here in this church. This is further substantiated by the name of the church. The church is called “All Nations Assemblies of God.”

The globe is the next place where my eyes go. It appears with a hovering dove above it, along with two olive branches of peace on the left and right sides. I notice how it looks very much like the United Nations symbol! It makes me think of ancient church history and how the dove has served Christian church as an ancient emblem of the special gentle and peaceful presence of God Himself. Perhaps the latter is connotation here?

I also see how ANAG is centered over North and South American continents and the oceans. There is also an orange celebratory ribbon below the globe with the word “MINISTRIES” written thereon. Apparently, celebration accompanies the many ministries of the church.

Interestingly, small views of European and African continents can be seen to the far right. They are in the background; and the Asian continent does not appear at all. What does this say about the global awareness of the congregation? What has been their experience with Asians?

Nevertheless, Africa is visually almost out of sight, but never totally out of mind. As I look at this I wonder if the significance of this image can be expressed with words like these:

“We are from Africa. Some of us have passed through Europe to come to the United States; yet Africa with all of its political, economic, social and personal complications is home and always in the background of our minds. Our current life situation has been sovereignly guided; and our present mission as African Christians is to celebrate Christ in this place, the United States of America.” As I stand in front of the sign lost in thought about all of this, I suddenly recall how many times Pastor Paul has expressed similar words.

As my eye moves downward, I see a grey box containing “Service” times. The three service times are listed: Sunday (2:00PM), Saturday (2:30PM), and Wednesday (7:00PM).

Linguistically, the singular form “Service” appears as a singular collective noun. Standard English would require the plural form, “Services”, but the misuse here grants an insight.

Apparently the designer’s first language is not English, and as such this person and probably church knows at least two languages and cultures. In my mind, at least, this church provides a splash of cultural hue, diversifying and adding to the neighborhood’s German/Norwegian expressions of Christian faith.

The service times are unlike those traditional services previously indicated for the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, or Changing Lives Tabernacle. The Sunday afternoon service begins at two o’clock, not during the morning hours. There are also afternoon and Saturday services. Interestingly, there is no “Worship Hour”, indicating how the

ANAG group operates apparently from a different set of chronemics. The days, hours, and duration of worship are different from the neighborhood churches.

Finally, at the very bottom of the sign I see the mission statement of the church:

“We are the voice and the hand that encourages people to change their lives with hope and comfort and peace from the Lord. Isaiah 51:3. The paraphrased wording indicates that comfort, peace, and hope is the united purpose of “one voice” and “one hand.” Communal impact is the goal of the church. No one person stands out as more important in this statement or the sign as a whole. The community of believers is emphasized. The pastor’s name does not even appear on the sign, only his contact phone number.

After I finish viewing this sign, I return to my vehicle on the northeastern side of the road. As I do, I make a decision to call Pastor Paul and ask him the history behind all the symbolisms and colors and pictures in this sign. One week later I do so. That very moving and informative interview appears in Appendix A.

### **Why This Thing Now?**

So “why this thing now?”

As I sit here on a stormy Saturday evening (October 6, 2007) writing this, I think of the hope that the ANAG sign brings to me. The neighborhood signs mentioned in this study do all the necessary denotational things I need.

They offer a welcome, announce the pastor(s) name(s), and the “worship hours.” They make their churches visible to both me and to the neighborhood, but they rarely use art to communicate their messages.

The ANAG church sign also does many of these things. Yet, this church sign does something more. It artfully, visually demonstrates how one congregation desires to live in unity, and thereby make a positive Christian impact on a needy world—locally and globally. All persons in this worshipping community are celebrated as valued, valuable, equals before God and each

other. Their focus and concern is not just for the neighborhood, but also the world. This is “All Nations Assemblies of God”!

On such a stormy evening in such a stormy world, I am encouraged by the aesthetic I find here that says there is equal access, and equal opportunity in at least one church, and that a global perspective is more than just possible. It is achievable.

Maybe this is why I think that the “All Nations Assemblies of God” church sign is the best church sign in West Fargo!

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1 West Fargo, North Dakota is 5 miles W of [Fargo, North Dakota](#) (center to center) and 218 miles NW of [Minneapolis, Minnesota](#). It is in Cass county. The city is part of the Fargo - Moorhead metro area. The population of West Fargo is 14,940. **The People and Families of West Fargo.** In West Fargo, about 63% of adults are married. **Wealth and Education.** In 2000, West Fargo had a median family income of \$51,765. West Fargo is one of the richer cities in North Dakota. A large stable middle class is one of the strengths of the city. There aren't a lot of poor people in West Fargo. The people of the city can point with pride to the large number of college graduates in the city. **Political Inclinations** Among West Fargo political contributors, George W. Bush was favored among Presidential candidates in 2004, with \$2,252. The Republican party attracted the largest share of donations from the city. **West Fargo Housing** Of the housing in West Fargo, approximately 68% is occupied by their owners. Newer housing units are not uncommon in the city. Real estate taxes per home are higher in West Fargo than most places in North Dakota. **Commuting.** In West Fargo, 95% of commuters drive to work. The city features shorter commuting times than most similar places. The ethnicity is mostly German and Norwegian (38%)(CityTowninfo.com)

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## **Appendix A: Telephone Interview with Pastor Paul Agamire Conducted October 2, 2007)**

**Carolyn:** Pastor Paul, I am doing some writing about our church sign. I wonder. Can you give me your ideas? What was the inspiration behind the sign that you designed?

**Pastor Paul:** You have asked me. I will tell you.

**Carolyn:** Thank you very much. I always enjoy learning from you.

**Pastor Paul:** The sign I designed is inspired by Isaiah 51:3 which appears on the sign. It is our mission statement. In 1992 I was called to go offer prayers over dead bodies at the Kenya Refugee Camp. At that time, my friend decided to escort me. Suddenly he was attacked and I saw his head broken open by a machete. I was then taken captive by eight Arab men. I was mobbed by them at the camp. They had four axes and four knives, and they were determined to kill me. In the Somalian language they said to me, "We are going to cut you up, part by part. We will show you the parts as we do this. Then we will kill you."

They called their Sheik. He was so excited. Then suddenly he changed his mind, "Let him go!"

The Sheik then let me return to the Christian [part of] the refugee camp. Every night after that I could not sleep. It was in this place that God spoke to me and said, "I have spared your life for a reason. That is when the verse from Isaiah 51:3 came in my heart.

**1** The Lord says, "Listen to me, you who want to do what is right. Pay attention, you who look to me. Consider the rock you were cut out of. Think about the rock pit you were dug from.

**2** Consider Abraham. He is the father of your people. Think about Sarah. She is your mother. When I chose Abraham, he did not have any children. But I blessed him and gave him many of them.

**3** You can be sure that I will comfort Zion's people. I will look with loving concern on all of their destroyed buildings. I will make their deserts like Eden. I will make their dry and empty land like my very own garden. Joy and gladness will be there. People will sing and give thanks to me.

That is the mission of our church. We exist to do this.

**Carolyn:** I am wondering if you could give me some insight into the upper right hand corner of the sign with the dove suspended over the earth?

**Pastor Paul:** Yes. That is a reference to what it means to be living in the last days Joel 2:28 which says

**28** "After that, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy. Your old men will have dreams. Your young men will have visions.

**29** In those days I will pour out my Spirit on those who serve me, men and women alike.

**30** I will show wonders in the heavens and on the earth. There will be blood and fire and clouds of smoke. All nations must experience the Holy Spirit.

**Carolyn:** And perhaps you could give me insights into the upraised hands at the bottom of the sign? They are all in black and white.

**Pastor Paul:** Yes. The upraised hands [are people praising God], and this is a picture of John Gospel Chapter 4.

**23**"But a new time is coming. In fact, it is already here. True worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth. They are the kind of worshipers the Father is looking for. **24** "God is spirit. His worshipers must worship him in spirit and in truth."

We must worship God in Spirit and in truth for His goodness to us and all nations. It is a picture of how God is not a respecter of race or gender.