

Editorial: Tornado Alley Ecclesiology

Lois E. Olena (D.Min., 2006)

Assemblies of God Theological Seminary
Encounter Editor

Visiting Professor of Practical Theology and Jewish Studies
D.Min. Project Coordinator

Several years ago, in preparation for teaching an undergraduate theology class, I went looking for Jesus on the Internet. This Google Image-based quest resulted in a rather amusing and yet insightful exposé of the various ways Jesus is portrayed in contemporary American society.

A similar search recently, looking for “church” at Amazon.com, revealed an array of adjectives in the book titles, such as: *Total Church*, *Simple Church*, *Transformational Church*, *Deep Church*, *Growing an Engaged Church*, *Vintage Church*, *Essential Church*, *The Irresistible Church*, even *Sticky Church*. One book title suggested that Jesus needed to be *saved from* the church. Another answered the question of why people—and there’s a book just for men on this topic—*hate* going to church. One wondered, *Who Stole My Church?* While yet another suggested we “reimagine” church and pursue the dream of an “organic” Christianity. Also offered was a *third way* beyond *emerging* and *traditional*, a way to function as a “comeback” church, and find the road to avoiding “mad church disease.”

An alien visitor to our planet logging in to Amazon.com for the first time to find out what “church” is, would read that congregations need a “new scorecard,” that leaders and their constituents need to find new ways to stop *doing* church and start *being* the Church again. The little green men would hear a clear call for a *radical reshaping* in order to somehow discover *God’s process for making disciples*.

All this makes one wonder: does it really have to be so complicated? Yes and no. We live in a

world where the ministry terrain can alter as quickly and drastically as that of a Midwestern town ravaged by a tornado or a New York City skyscraper brought down by a terrorist attack. Just as tornado victims emerge from the basement of their home and can no longer recognize the neighborhood they knew so well, each day ministry leaders face the challenge of handling everything from apathy to apocalypse. As they do, the question continually arises: How is the Church to live and move and have its being in this kind of world? And what must its leaders continually seek to understand in order to lead in such a way that more and more human beings can know God’s love and glorify Him in the earth?¹

Although it’s possible that writing about what the Church is—and about how to *be* and *do* it—is simply a trend, it’s just as likely that God has moved those with the gift of writing to help believers re-examine their *raison d’être* in the face of proliferating global groanings. As I write, those groanings are all too real in nearby Joplin, Missouri, where thousands of people are picking up the pieces from the worst single tornado on record. To date, the death toll of 139 is expected to rise because of the number of people still missing. Nine hundred have been injured, and 8,000 buildings were damaged or destroyed as a result of the EF-5 monster that roared through town on May 22.² In similar places across the United States, people are hurting and suffering unimaginable grief from these terrible storms of 2011, all while on the other side of the ocean Japan tries to cope with its three-fold earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear

disasters and the list of upheaval and strife from around the world could go on and on.

Yet somehow, at the point of such overwhelming need, what the Church *is* and *does* requires no complication, as people simply love, give, feed, clothe, and sow the Good News of hope in tears—all in the name of Jesus.

In the face of such storms, and in the context of the changing terrain of ministry in the twenty-first century, this issue of *Encounter* provides

opportunity to reflect once again upon what it means to be the Church and carry out God's purposes on this planet. Yet these reflections do not come from non-engaged observers but from scholar practitioners who know that in all its musings about identity and purpose, the Church must not forget her best and most timeless marketing tip: simply, to love one another (John 13:35).

¹See "Soma Communities" at <http://vimeo.com/22754743> to catch a glimpse of a community attempting to do just that—radically reorienting their lives as "sent" missionaries to their own neighbors, loving one another as brothers and sisters, and loving those to whom they are sent as if they were God's "lost children." This Tacoma, Washington group of believers is striving to be a "healthy family on mission," committed to multiplication (not just addition) in terms of the congregation's spiritual reproduction. "My exhortation to church planters," says Pastor Jeff Vanderstelt, "is that if they don't have that kind of love for the people God has put around them, they need to ask God for a bigger heart, 'cause this isn't about them. It isn't about their church or about their success, but about God's glory; it's about lost people who don't know the love of the Father."

²2011's Tornadoes by the Numbers, Weather.com and Associated Press, http://www.weather.com/outlook/weather-news/news/articles/tornado-toll_2011-05-25 (accessed May 31, 2011).