



# Taking Down the Walls That Border Our Churches

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Institutionalization is inevitable in any group that means to last, to be established. With institutionalization comes the codification of successful experiments, and here there can be a threat to community. For its self-preservation, the communitarian spirit has constant need of revitalization.

Leonardo Boff<sup>1</sup>

**A**t a time when the United States is undergoing a major demographic shift due to the arrival of immigrants, the church is called to love the stranger (Deut 10:19). Often, our focus is on how the church can influence policy and public dialogue to positively impact the lives of immigrants and refugees. Our churches also want to be places of welcome. However, in my work as a pastor among Latin American immigrants in Boston, I have learned that many established practices around church structure and governance in the congregation are inadequate to honor the

<sup>1</sup> Leonardo Boff, *Ecclesiology: The Base Communities Reinvent the Church* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1986), 6.

*New situations often require new models of thought and action. The experience of ministry in new immigrant congregations is calling for new models for how we understand and do church in the twenty-first century. We can learn from these new congregations about more effective ways to live out our mission and work together as Christian communities.*

cultural and spiritual needs of immigrants and refugees who may be part of our communities. I propose that a Lutheran confessional ecclesiology describing the church as the assembly of saints gathered around the gospel and the sacraments might provide us with a starting point for reforms.<sup>2</sup> I then call upon the church to examine what kind of the community the Spirit might be creating in our midst so that we might make room for that church in the institutions that are defined by our governing documents. Finally, I will provide a case study that demonstrates how a community might go about discerning appropriate institutional structures.

We are living in a time of great tension with regard to the treatment of people who were not born in the United States. Recent waves of immigration, as with all previous waves, have increased our country's diversity in ethnicity, experiences of oppression, cultural expectations, and religious orientation. There are some who feel threatened by this most recent infusion of diversity. There are many others who wish to celebrate a more diverse society, including some who are vocal and resistant to any cultural or legal movements to further exclude and oppress immigrants and refugees living in this country.

Many Christians have become adept at lamenting the injustices of the current national conversation around immigration policy and the treatment of immigrants and refugees. We host forums in our congregations about gang violence in Latin America, poverty in Africa, and war in the Middle East as we strive to better understand the complexities that would drive someone to leave behind everything that is familiar and come to a country where poverty and rejection will be, at times, insurmountable barriers to prosperity. We pray for compassion in our centers of political power. In some instances, our congregations take action, joining marches, hosting refugees, accompanying individuals to immigration hearings, and even offering sanctuary in our churches to provide space for justice to emerge.

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These activities are important steps. In order for justice to proliferate in our society, we must have justice to take root in our relationships. As more and more immigrants and refugees move into our communities and our churches, the national conversation about justice for immigrants must cease to be abstract as it is embodied in people we know. These people bring with them different experiences

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<sup>2</sup> This essay is based on experiences in a ministry of the ELCA and proposes Lutheran ecclesiology as a starting point for reform. Christians of other traditions are likely to find resonance in the issues raised here and are invited to dip into the wells of their own traditions in search of resources to address the challenges of being the church in a changing context.

and expectations of what it means to be the church. It is incumbent upon our congregations to figure out how these experiences will shape the way we are the church together. It is hypocritical for us to resist the construction of border walls around our country if we are unwilling to take down the walls we have constructed around our churches and our hearts.

In a recent article, Lutheran theologian Leila M. Ortiz described the experiences of Latin American women with a Pentecostal background worshipping in a Lutheran context, as an ecclesial estuary. In this between space, the women live simultaneously in the spiritual experiences and theological realities of both their Pentecostal history and their Lutheran present.<sup>3</sup> Ortiz calls for Lutherans to allow themselves to be submerged in those same waters, so that their own experiences of Christian spirituality can be transformed by the witness of people whose faith journey appears different from their own.<sup>4</sup>

It is necessary that this submersion transform not only our worship style or our outreach ministries but also the structures that determine who belongs and who has power. At present, what a leader looks like in many congregations has little to do with the gifts of the Holy Spirit and much to do with one's ability to speak the language of the educated, professional class in the United States. Many of us unconsciously expect our leaders to be comfortable with Robert's Rules of Order and have some facility with email and Doodle polls. We assume that a hybrid form of democracy is the best way to make decisions in the body of Christ. We do not necessarily question whether our church constitution is comprehensive enough to make room for a diversity of practices around church governance.

On the surface, these may seem like unimportant, perhaps dull details of church polity. In fact, these details determine who has power, whose voice is heard, and whose vision is carried in our churches. As long as we continue to allow for our processes to go unexamined in our congregations, we are unwittingly perpetuating classist, racist, elitist systems of decision-making. Leonardo Boff describes the church that is oriented toward judicatory structures as the "grand institution" of the church. "This model of the church generally finds its sociological and cultural center in the society's affluent sectors, where it enjoys social power and constitutes the church's exclusive interlocutor with the powers of society."<sup>5</sup> He proposes the base Christian communities as an important alternative. While we cannot make a one-to-one comparison between Latin American Roman Catholicism and North American congregationalism, there is a degree to which the North American congregation embraces so-called mainstream culture. The decision-making protocols that have been codified in the church privilege those with high levels of literacy who are culturally at home with parliamentary procedure.

The intention of this essay is not to advocate that we throw out our structures altogether. Governing documents and decision-making processes can

<sup>3</sup> Leila M. Ortiz, "A Latina Luthercostal Invitation to an Ecclesial Estuary," *Dialog* 55 no. 4 (2016): 313.

<sup>4</sup> Ortiz, "Latina Luthercostal Invitation," 314.

<sup>5</sup> Boff, *Ecclesiogenesis*, 8.

provide important guidelines in our communities to prevent chaos and abuse of power. However, when we have come to serve the structures rather than allowing the structures to serve us, it is time for reform (Mark 2:27). It is time to take an honest look at how we make decisions and to wonder how new ways of organizing the church as an institution might better affirm the church that the Holy Spirit is creating.

The Lutheran Reformers described the church as “the assembly of saints in which the gospel is taught purely and the sacraments are administered rightly.”<sup>6</sup> The elegant simplicity of this ecclesiological orientation has allowed for much freedom and flexibility in Lutheran settings. It has made room for liturgical reforms that allow Lutheran congregations to experience worship in the way that is most meaningful to them. The creation of the ELCA is indebted to a flexible ecclesiology as three denominations with different historical authority structures were able to work through their differences in recognition that they were all in agreement about what the church is.<sup>7</sup>

At the point at which we find ourselves, this simple proposition of what it means to be a *Lutheran* church has become obscured by the expectations of what it means to be a *North American* church. The congregation, in the imagination of most North Americans of European descent, is a self-sustaining nonprofit organization. The organization is governed according to some sort of constitution, bylaws, or canons. One becomes a member voluntarily, often in a public ceremony, and then maintains that membership by attending worship and contributing to the financial well-being of the nonprofit organization. Members gather occasionally to elect a body of people to represent them. They tend to the property and finances and work with the staff to discern and carry out the vision and mission of the congregation through worship, education, outreach, and other ministries of the church. The lead pastor functions as an executive director of the organization and is responsible for leading the overall vision-casting and overseeing the day-to-day operations of the organization. Different denominations and settings will have variations on this model; the size and number of committees, the degree of formality around decision-making, and the authority that the denomination has to influence what happens within the congregation will vary based on the culture of a given congregation.

<sup>6</sup> “The Augsburg Confession: Latin Text,” 7:1, in *The Book of Concord* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 43.

<sup>7</sup> In his report to the first ever ELCA Churchwide Assembly in 1989, Bishop Herbert Chilstrom pointed to Lutheran ecclesiology as being foundational for our ability to engage in mission as one body. “We also say, however, that we are a Lutheran church—and again without apology and very forthrightly, a Lutheran church. And, in that Confession of Faith, we say that among the confessional writings we point especially to the Augsburg Confession as our guide book. In that Augsburg Confession, we define the Church. And, so by embracing it, we say indeed that the Church is to be found where the Gospel is rightly proclaimed and the sacraments are rightly administered. And, finally, that Confession of Faith comes to a conclusion with a declaration that the Gospel, the good news about Jesus Christ, is what creates and sustains the church and is the basis for our mission. At the beginning of this assembly, it is important for us to recognize that this church is built on a rock-solid confession. In fact, the Church is built on Jesus himself, the Rock.” Herbert Chilstrom, “Address to the 1989 Churchwide Assembly” (speech, 1989 ELCA Churchwide Assembly, Chicago, IL, August, 23, 1989).

You may be thinking that the model described above sounds like a large, affluent, suburban congregation. This is not unintentional. While not all congregations are located in such settings, this is the church many of us expect and strive for. These structures are not innately wrong nor are they unfaithful in the places where they continue to work. In the places where they do not serve the needs of the people who utilize them, they are, at best, a roadblock and, at worst, a means of perpetuating oppressive systems in communities where only a few can easily navigate the established structures. Some congregations may be better served by a different organizational structure, such as a cooperative, a community covenant, a consensus model, a base community, an open steering committee, a parish model, or a network of unincorporated house churches. In fact, many communities already function in these ways but uphold at least the appearance of the constitutionally mandated structures in order to maintain legitimacy in the eyes of the wider church. Because the established models are not appropriate in these places, the congregations are often viewed as “struggling” or “failing” by outsiders even when they play a significant role in proclaiming the gospel in their communities. These faith communities are real churches. Lives are transformed there. We need to recognize them as legitimate.

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The time has come for the church to take a look at our governing documents, and our expectations, as we discern how to make room for new models. In the case of the ELCA, embracing the simple definition of *church* as the people of God gathered around word, font, and table has the power to shift energy from maintaining the institution of the church as we know it toward being a body that creates spaces for people to have an encounter with Jesus, no matter what the organizational structure is that makes that space possible. To do so will mean letting go of *some* expectations around what it looks like to be the church so that the multiplicity of cultural and religious experiences represented in faith communities are considered equally legitimate expressions of church. Doing this hard work will not only make room in the center for immigrants, refugees, and other groups who have been marginalized. It will also open up all Christians to a renewed understanding of what it means to be the gathered body of Christ.

Iglesia Nuevo Amanecer is a new-start ministry in the neighborhood of East Boston, Massachusetts. Located inside the building of Our Saviour’s Lutheran Church, Nuevo Amanecer (New Day) seeks to create spaces for encounter with Jesus among the poor and working-class communities of East Boston with

particular attention to Spanish-speaking immigrants. I was called by the New England Synod in 2015 to explore the potential for a Spanish-language congregation. We had no expectations that this congregation would look different from a “typical” Lutheran congregation in North America. We would likely operate in Spanish, but other than that, our liturgy, our catechesis, and our council meetings would not be distinguishable from what we saw in other ELCA congregations.

Deeply embedded in our approach to establishing relationships with the community was an openness to the work of the Holy Spirit. We would design small experiments that allowed us to meet our neighbors in authentic relationship: a prayer vigil planned with local residents in response to escalating youth violence, a dinner and presentation by family members whose children were among the forty-three missing students from Iguala, Mexico, a popular mass to commemorate the death of Archbishop Oscar Romero.<sup>8</sup> Building on Our Saviour’s long history as a church with open doors, Nuevo Amanecer became known as a ministry in solidarity with oppressed immigrant communities in East Boston. This developed into meaningful partnerships with several community-justice organizations, including a group that organizes tenants to resist abusive practices by landlords, a group that advocates for workers’ rights, a faith-based community organizing school, and a fledgling soup kitchen. As a result of these relationships, neighborhood residents began turning to Nuevo Amanecer for prayer and spiritual support, especially in times of crisis.

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The Spirit was creating community. It is a beautiful, diverse community of people from El Salvador, Honduras, Mexico, Guatemala, Puerto Rico, Colombia, and the United States. We are old and young, wealthy and poor, housed and homeless. As we sought to be a Christ-centered community, we began to read the Bible together. Encountering God’s word broke open our expectations of what kind of church we were called to be. The church the Spirit was creating was made up of people who could not read but had a profound connection with biblical Israel’s experience of exile. These people had never led a meeting in their lives but had been leaders in their communities for decades. They had little money to put in the offering plate but could effortlessly organize a meal to feed the neighborhood in a matter of hours. They might not be able to tell you when the Reformation happened, but they could pray in such a way that a stranger off the street experienced

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<sup>8</sup> To learn more about this approach to church planting, see Dwight J. Zscheile, *The Agile Church: Spirit-Led Innovation in an Uncertain Age* (New York: Morehouse, 2014).

the liberating word of God and wanted to be part of our community. While this church does possess the skills to fill the council seats of a typical ELCA congregation, we are a complex and spiritually gifted manifestation of the body of Christ. We have wisdom to teach the broader church.

Nuevo Amanecer's ministry began to take form as our relationships with community organizations grew deeper. The people who were worshipping with us became chaplains to the soup kitchen, and we began gathering together for prayer, Scripture study, and, eventually, Holy Communion between soup kitchen meals. We were also becoming more deeply involved with the community-organizing school that shares our building, helping the leadership to root their curriculum more deeply into the wisdom of Scripture and Christian practice.

We have discerned that Nuevo Amanecer's mission is to provide community, leadership, and spiritual support for the organizations that share our space, so we have embraced a structure that allows us to do this efficiently. Because Nuevo Amanecer is (1) comprised of primarily Latin American immigrants, (2) rooted in direct service and community organizing, and (3) committed to local leadership, we decided to turn to the base Christian communities in Latin America for guidance on the organizational practices to govern our church. We are currently using a discipleship resource developed by Rev. Alexia Salvatierra known as "peer chaplaincy" to help our leaders experience liberation, understand systems of power and privilege, identify their spiritual gifts, and, based on that discernment, choose a ministry in the church to which they will commit themselves.<sup>9</sup> These peer chaplains are responsible for gathering the whole community, including all of the congregations and nonprofits that share our building, for a monthly liturgy, a meal, and a time for sharing joys and sorrows. The peer chaplains are also responsible for calling quarterly open steering committee meetings as well as an annual meeting of the community.

Because we operate out of a building that is host to so many important community organizations, Nuevo Amanecer has teamed up with our partner congregation, Our Saviour's, to create "Friends of Our Saviour's," a new organization with the mandate to care for the physical plant, to assist in fostering good relationships between the organizations that work there, and to ensure the ongoing development of new leaders for a changing community. Should things continue down our anticipated path, Friends of Our Saviour's and Nuevo Amanecer will work together to create a faith-rooted community center in which Nuevo Amanecer operates to create spaces for prayer and reflection as well as leadership development. The community center will likely be governed as a cooperative of the member organizations who share the space.

<sup>9</sup> Rev. Alexia Salvatierra's peer-chaplaincy curriculum is not currently published. Nuevo Amanecer leadership has learned the approach through a variety of trainings, including a #DecolonizeTheBase training that was hosted by #DecolonizeLutheranism at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, April 13–14, 2018. Pieces of the curriculum can be found in Alexia Salvatierra and Peter Heltzel, *Faith-Rooted Organizing: Mobilizing the Church in Service to the World* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 2014).



While we hope that our community partnerships will make it possible for us to become a financially sustainable nonprofit cooperative, we are currently dependent upon grants and partnerships with the synod and other congregations. Our survival requires these partners to see our work as church.

While we might not look like what one might expect of an ELCA congregation, Nuevo Amanecer is a community of believers rooted in God's word and sustained by the sacraments of the church. Wouldn't it be wonderful if communities like ours could have a voice and a vote at synod and churchwide assemblies?

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Nuevo Amanecer is one model. From the New Testament until today, we encounter countless others. Many congregations out there, among immigrants and refugees, in rural and urban settings, on college campuses and in suburban neighborhoods, in office buildings and coffee shops, are discovering new and renewed ways of being the church together. It is past time for the church to stop viewing these Spirit-filled ministries as fringe movements and make room for them to be heard in our centers of power. At a time when so many in the United States are looking for ways to be more inclusive of immigrants and refugees among others, the witness of at least one congregation of immigrants asks us to consider what comes to mind when we think of the church. Is there room for us in your church? May the church be a place where the Spirit is leading. May it be a space where the cultural expectations and religious backgrounds of the people in our midst are brought into conversation with our commitments around what it means to be the church in order that all people might have an encounter with Jesus. ☩

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