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What does “church” look like?  
Wesley Mimico United Church  
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by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Matthew 18:15-20

During my time in seminary, I wrote lot of papers. And usually, my wife Marjorie would read them. What was even more special is that she would often grade them before I submitted them. And I remember two things about letting Marjorie read my papers. For one thing, my professors always gave me better marks than Marjorie did. But the other thing I remember is that Marjorie always edited my use of the word “church”. In every case, when I used the word “church” in a paper, Marjorie would circle the word “church” with a fat pen and write a note to the effect that she wasn't sure what I meant by the word “church” in that particular context. The fact that the word was sometimes capitalized and sometimes not didn't help either. But it was instructive to me to know that even intelligent thoughtful people are confused by the word “church”. And that confusion is legitimate because “church” does in fact mean many different things.

*[ask - what does the word “church” mean]*

The word “church” can mean: the building, the worship service, the local congregation, the United Church of Canada, the global Christian community. Any others? I wouldn't be surprised if we had not already - during this worship service - used the word with multiple meanings. Yesterday we were invited to participate in a “church clean out”. But we only cleaned out a building, we didn't clean out our membership. “Church” does mean different things.

For all that the word “church” carries so many meanings, that does not mean that labels are not important to us. Today, as you walked into the library, you came in expecting a church service because you had been told to expect that. But what if you had not been told that was what was going on and came here expecting to borrow a book?

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Deen shared a wonderful story with me over the summer. The story is about a subway musician - you know - one of those people who play live music in subway stations and the hope of earning a few coins. I myself remember many subway musicians - particularly at Finch subway station. The TTC makes them audition, you know, so they have to have some amount of skill. But of course it's a tough crowd to work. People are scrambling to get to work. People are already focused on the demands of the day ahead. And at Finch, most people who are reaching into their pockets for coins are planning to stop at the Tim Hortons outlet, not give it to a musician.

Anyway, in this story, the Washington Post had planted a musician in a subway station just to watch what happened. They planted Joshua Bell, a world-famous musician. This is a musician who - the night before - packed and thrilled a theatre where the average ticket price was \$100. This is a musician who played on a violin valued at \$3.5 million. This is a musician who played very interesting and challenging musical selections in spite of being in a commuting environment.

The organizers expected that a crowd of 30-40 people would form to hear - for free - one of the best violin musicians in the world. Genius is always recognized, right? And what do you think happened? Well, not much happened. The musician played for a full 45 minutes, and over 1,000 people passed by. But of those 1,000 people, only 2 people stayed to listen. One person recognized the musician by his face. The other person recognized the rare talent and stayed to soak it up.

The organizers of this experiment were surprised. The musician was surprised too - partly because nobody stopped to listen, but he was particularly stunned by what happened when he stopped playing between songs. Because when he stopped playing, there was no response at all from anyone. People who had not noticed his playing did not notice when he stopped playing. After decades of enjoying expressions of praise and acclamation when he let his bow come to a rest, the only response when he stopped playing was that the music stopped. Normal life just continued to go on as it always does.

In this story - clearly - context was everything. Joshua Bell playing his violin in a

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musical hall generated a completely different response than Joshua Bell playing his violin in a subway station. His playing was the same, but the outcome was vastly different.

So what does that say about “church”. Or to be more specific, what does that say about our worship service here in the library? Does our location matter? This week, I've tried to create a worship service in the style that we are used to. The bulletin is familiar, the service outline is familiar, my poor quality jokes are familiar. This service is very similar to what we have experienced as Wesley Mimico United Church - at least since I've been here.

But the question remains - does it feel like church? Does being in the library make a difference? Is the word of God different here? Is truth different at 2 station road, or at the library, or at the Canadiana, or the GO station? Is this what church looks like? I suppose that depends a bit on what definition we are using for “church”. If “church” is a building, then perhaps being in the library makes a huge difference. But if “church” is the congregation, then frankly, I don't see any difference at all. And if “church” means relationships, then ... well, let's go back to the reading from Matthew.

I wonder if Matthew's words speak to us today. Today as we continue our transitional life as a congregation by moving our worship into this space - not to mention other transitions we are all living through right now. Professor of theology and spirituality Min-Ah Cho has this to say about today's reading from Matthew: “Figuring out what is right or wrong is not the primary concern for Matthew. Rather, the text describes carefully making space for members to enter in, moving from little ones to other members, and finally to the entire community. This procedure is designed to prevent a premature and overactive use of authority, while respecting the agency of assembly members to speak for themselves or to correct their own faults. In this fashion, members are granted a chance to grow together through a conflict, instead of relying on authorities to remove it. Matthew's suggestion on how to handle conflicts demonstrates a way in which the members of a community, regardless of their status, can break open the complex and strict power structure.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> [www.sojo.net](http://www.sojo.net) member materials

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Matthew stresses that congregations should be places where good relationships are considered important. He even outlines some strategies for how to manage those relationships. We talked a fair bit about all this at Bible study this week. For me, the take home messages at these:

All relationships take work. All real relationships anyway. But it's worth it. Because building authentic relationships is not only important for its own sake, but real relationships are the foundation for real community too.

Listening to people is important. But it's equally important that people speak. Obviously, people will not openly speak their true feelings if the environment they are in is not seen as safe. But churches can be places where safe environments are created, and over time people do feel free to speak their own deep truths.

People can be in healthy mature relationships even if they don't agree. In fact, one of the crucial signs of mature relationships is that the people in groups do not all agree. People only agree - or seem to agree - when sharing is at a shallow level. But churches can be places where mature relationships are valued and nurtured.

In interpersonal communications, we often have to make the choice between being loving, or believing that we are right all the time. That is a conscious choice that we all make. We can choose to be loving, but not if we insist on being right.

So, are we still a church now that we have moved out of our historic building? Well, it's up to us. According to Matthew, we are a church to the extent that we value and develop mature relationships. To the extent that we value each other and each of our opinions. To the extent that we value deep sharing and the willingness to let people have their own ideas and be themselves.

What does "church" look like? Perhaps it looks like this!

*Amen.*