Concrete Communities

Developing the theoretical foundations for a materially and spatially sensitive practical theology in a discipline with a long tradition in dealing with pastoral practice in an academic environment of theoretical reflection is not an easy task. Especially at a time when the problems of both church and society are so pressing that they demand immediate action instead of allowing ourselves the luxury of "musing" (Pierce) in the realm of architecture, art, as well as the history of technology companies (primarily in the United States), parliaments, and social movements. But there are practical consequences which arise out of this "musing."[1] To make a case in point, I want to address a typical theme of pastoral theology, the church community, its recent history, and its role in society today, from the perspective of a materially and spatially sensitive theology. As we will see, focusing on materiality offers new perspectives on the subject.

A Definitional Conundrum: Parish or Community?

To define what a church community is and how it relates both to the church – especially in Catholicism with its centripetal tendencies – and to society as a whole is a difficult task, given the diverse shapes and forms church communities took on over the history of Christianity. For the Catholic world, at least, Erich Garhammer makes a suggestion. He argues that there has been a movement from house communities in cities in the times of early Christianity to territorially defined parishes during the middle ages and up to the

1 Whether that warrants the term "abduction" in the Piercean sense cannot be the focus of our debate here. I would like to refer to Hans-Joachim Sander who has commented on the role of abduction in the process of doing theology (cf. Sander 2019).

19th century, towards a renewed interest in the community aspect of church in the 20th century. To make his point, the author tells the story of pluriform beginnings and a network of house churches, which, like the antique cultic associations, occupied private houses converted to seat up to 70 people (cf. Garhammer 1996, p. 49).[2] From the 7th century onwards, Garhammer suggests, the increasing de-urbanization and Christianity's spread in rural communities required a different organizational approach, that of the territorially defined parish. From then on, each parish had its pastor, who provided the whole spectrum of spiritual care to all people living in his territory. The system reached its pinnacle in the 18th century with Josephinism's territorial pastoral planning on the drawing board. At the same time, the old structures frayed at the edges, most prominently and controversially with the liturgical movement at the beginning of the 20th century. This shift happened as a cultural change, Garhammer argues, in that such movements provided an alternative, based on voluntary association[3] and personal commitment to deepening one's life of faith, to the parish, to which one belonged automatically. Garhammer notes that while one could deduce a movement from house community to parish and back, especially given the renewed interest in small associations – the family[4] or the base ecclesial community – since the Second Vatican council, organisational forms from history do not suit as a model for the present. A return *ad fontes* does not mean that we should uncritically adopt the early house churches as authoritative for our time.

> Historical study does not want to show that it has always been this way but it sets the variability of history against the actualistic claim to exclusivity of the factual. Employing the different understandings of community over the course of the centuries one can thus study how Christian tradition and concrete societal circumstances influence one another* (ibid., p. 45).

2 Despite their relative independence, these houses sought to integrate and establish a "commune", i.e. social, doctrinal, as well as financial relations, as the story of Paul's collect amongst the Roman house churches for their suffering brethren in Jerusalem tells us (cf. Romans 1:26).

3 The chasm between voluntary association and parish can be traced back as early as the 11th century with the establishment of the mendicant orders in the cities and their pastoral care as an alternative offer for city dwellers (cf. Garhammer 1996, pp. 59–60).

4 Cf. AA 11 or LG 11 where the house church is mentioned but, in contrast to Christianity's beginnings, encompasses only members of the household (cf. ibid., pp. 50–53).

Nonetheless, the idea of a life of faith and an active role of all community members – not just the priest – in the building up of the local church was a powerful mental image for church members as well as officials in the 1960s and onwards. I want to particularly focus on the theology of community that Karl Lehmann develops in his contribution for volume 29 of the series *Christlicher Glaube in moderner Gesellschaft*, Christian faith in modern society, from 1982. This encyclopaedia of 30 volumes harks back to the comprehensive handbook idea that we have explored at the beginning. Not only was it conceived at the Herder publishing house, its editors and authors were also prominent figures of Catholic as well as Protestant theology, who sought to define theology's role in church and society 17 years after the Second Vatican Council and seven years after the Würzburg Synod ended, both prominent dates at least for the Catholic contributors. Karl Lehmann stands in this tradition as a systematic theologian, assistant to Karl Rahner during the Second Vatican Council, and on his way to become the bishop of Mainz just one year later in 1983. His text tries to define what a (parish) community is and, while written in the spirit of change of the 1960s, it already exhibits the beginning conflicts of the 1980s, which would influence Catholic communal ecclesiology in the future. I want to highlight two aspects here that further develop Garhammer's historical observation and that help us to understand how church communities saw themselves from the 1960s onwards.

1. Utopia: Right at the beginning, Lehmann mentions that the word "community"[5] has gained prominence in the years after the Second Vatican council when theological theory as well as churchly praxis were concerned with the question how Christians live and pray together. Such "a change in speech convention often points towards a shift in awareness"* (Lehmann 1982, p. 8), away from the abstract idea of church hovering above reality and towards the concrete individuals sharing a life of faith. Yet a "communal ecclesiology" is much less defined than concepts like "parish" or "local church."

   Thus the principle "community" has been so much charged with a plethora of pastoral expectations, that this concept of a social form turned into a real

5 Lehmann uses the German word "Gemeinde" here, which translates differently, depending on the context. I choose "community" whenever I talk about the voluntary or house church character and "parish" when I talk about the institutional or territorial form of church.

utopia: A community of the highest unanimity and radical equality in intentions, the abolishment of all differences, the renouncement of any primacy, "a community free of power," at the same time a "small herd" and a universally open community* (Lehmann 1982, p. 10).

But official church doctrine, or the execution thereof, has also contributed to great expectations towards the local communities. The old ideal of the parish providing the full extent of spiritual as well as social care to its members (cf. ibid., p. 53) has been also applied to the community and has certainly contributed to the decisions of the *Common Synod of the German Dioceses* of 1975 with its demand for mobile pastoral teams and professional charitable services (cf. ibid., pp. 54–55). But Lehmann himself is also not innocent when it comes to utopian ideals. For example, he speaks about the priest as the "good shepherd" who holds the community together (cf. ibid., pp. 54–55).

2. Locality: The second area of both progress and conflict that Lehmann often refers to is the local character of the parish and the question how the community concept still refers to that. Perhaps the most interesting angle[6] the author pursues is to link the churchly parish to the political municipality. To understand why this link can or cannot be made, we have to look at the German word "Gemeinde" again. As mentioned before, we could translate this either as (voluntary) community or (administrative) parish. But there is a third meaning; "Gemeinde" is also the word used to describe a local political municipality, i.e. a term stemming from the world of political administration.

   If we focus on the community, then such a voluntary association has little to do with the political realities of an administrative district. But if we look at the parish as an administrative entity, then there are many similarities with the realm of local politics. In fact, the divergence into politics brings new prominence to the concept of the parish. In both cases there is an underlying administrative rationale that tries to handle the complex realities of people living together by mapping and grouping them together. This administra-

6 At least the students in my lecture on the subject commented on this most often when reviewing Karl Lehmann's text.

> tive concept then in turn influences the social reality (cf. ibid., p. 12). The most important aspect of parish or municipality as a local community is, however, that
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> [t]he constraint to need to live together in a physical space is an important factor when conflicts are dealt with or interests are being balanced* (ibid., p. 14).
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> According to the author, communities in the sense of a municipality or a parish must include a diverse range of people – not just those with aligned interests – living together for some time – not merely sharing a few weeks on a campground together (cf. ibid., pp. 14–15). This conflictual living together of diverse people is what makes the idea of the parish as a somewhat forced community so attractive for Karl Lehmann. One cannot escape one's surroundings, neither Catholic parishioners with diverging beliefs nor the whole spectrum of society from different social and cultural backgrounds that live in the vicinity of the church.
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> The parish community proves its unconditional love especially where it not just meets brothers [and sisters] in faith. It does its Samaritan deeds undiscriminatingly even for someone who does not belong to it. Nowhere can it prove better that it is the sign for God's love for all human beings.* (ibid., p. 30).
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> What the concept of the parish therefore upholds is that it forces its members to be a part of the whole community, not merely an elite of kindred spirits.

On that basis we can now look at how churches actually embed themselves locally and what that tells us about their embodiment of the definitional conundrum I have mentioned here.[7]

7 It should be mentioned, however, that this short introduction to church as community or parish is by no means exhaustive. Already in 1948 Karl Rahner published a contribution to the subject matter with his "Peaceful Considerations on the Parish Principle"* (cf. Rahner 1948).

Concrete Typologies

As the other parts of this book already suggest, I approach this question from an architectural perspective, looking at what and how church communities have built. I particularly focus on the building's materiality and then discuss how it relates to the self-image of that particular local church as well as to the broader discourses of community concepts at the time. Albeit the descriptions will remain brief, they are exemplary in character, aiming to define elements in a church building that transcend the individual locale and that would eventually lead towards a typology[8] of *concrete* community concepts that is, however, beyond the scope of this book. I will therefore limit myself to the churches I have visited and photographed during the completion of this book and that have influenced my teaching of the subject.

Beginnings

The 1960s were a time of great optimism in Western Germany. The economy as well as the population were growing[9] and development areas sprung up on the outskirts of towns and cities. Building a house and owning a car became a symbol for individual advancement in the years after the war. The city of Fulda is a case in point. Situated on the fringes of Western Germany, in the east of Hessen close to the inner-German border – actually the economically underdeveloped area adjacent to the Soviet Zone –, it profited from the same trends that took place in other cities as well. In the north end of the city a new district, Ziehers North, was developed on the greenfield, which included not just terraced houses but also kindergartens, schools, and businesses. From 1953 onwards, its population quickly rose above 3,000 inhabitants. In a predominantly Catholic city like Fulda it is small wonder that within this development area a Catholic church community started forming, which quickly exceeded 1,200 members. In the first years, a provisional space was found in the assembly hall

8 Cf. the aforementioned Bernd and Hilla Becher's architectural photographs and August Sander's project *People of the 20th Century* (cf. page 29).

9 From 1950 to 1960, the population in Western Germany grew from 51 to 56 million people. From 1960 to 1970 a similar increase, from 56 to 61 million could be noted, marking both decades the fastest growing since the Second World War (Statistisches Bundesamt 2011).

of a vocational school before a church building association formed in 1964. Only three years later, in 1967, the local bishop Adolf Bolte consecrated St. Paul. Not only had most of the people living in Ziehers North donated for the building, the leaflet for the inauguration also lists 75 advertisements from commercial supporters, such as the local grocer or the city's mutual savings bank (cf. Katholische Kirchengemeinde St. Paulus 1967).

Figure 33: St. Paulus, outside view. Photo by the author.

The building design which won the architectural competition was a modern plan in form of a square base with an octagonal roof that resembled a tent. The architect Herbert Rimpl, a well-known architect in the post-war[10] period, placed the structure on a plateau overlooking the district with the octagonal

10 Rimpl was classified as "exonerated" during the denazification processes. He was, however, active during the Third Reich, building, amongst others, the Heinkel aircraft works. In contrast to the architect's arrangement with the powers that be, the streets and places in Ziehers North are named after resistance fighters during the NS regime. The church itself

roof, clad in aluminum, towering high above the adjacent single-story community center and the small bell housing. Right from the start the building was designed for a growing community, the community hall could seat 180 people, the kindergarten had room for 100 children, and below the ensemble there was a basement which, amongst others, would house a hobby room for the church's youth group which, as the writers of the inaugural leaflet tell us, would edit the movies they shot of the many church festivals. Everyone was convinced that the church would grow further and that it would be a pillar of the community:

> Today we would call this a city quarter. […] One wanted to give the people who moved here a home, one wanted to give them opportunities to meet one another. […] There were many families with children who built their own house here […] in the terraced housing which was more affordable for people back then. […] People stood together* (MF 2020).[11]

To understand what version of church community the building expresses, I want to take a closer look at the interior, in particular one specific view from the altar towards one of the exterior walls, and point out three details of the building.

1. Abstract lead glass windows in the gables of the octagonal roof are the only opening openings of the church towards the outside. They are, as the leaflet for the inauguration tells us, conceptualised in reference to both Impressionism and Expressionism. As the whole building, their formal language stands for a break with the architecture of the National Socialist era, which the builders of the church shun as "pseudo-monumentality"* (Katholische Kirchengemeinde St. Paulus 1967, p. 24). The church, like the new city quarter around it, would stand for the modern Germany that had left the atrocities of the past behind it.
2. The walls are clad in travertine, a stone from the quarries near Rome. As much as the church is staged as a modern building, it seeks to integrate

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is located at the "square of the White Rose," named after the Scholl siblings, who founded a student resistance group in Munich.

11 MF is St. Paul's lay administrator. I interviewed him on site.This and the following interview with FD was conducted during my research for a lecture on ecclesiological concepts in practical theology in early 2020.

Figure 34: St. Paulus, inside view. Photo by the author.

itself in the Catholic tradition, in this case through the material that connects St. Paul with the churches of Rome. At the same time, the folded stone cladding changes the acoustic properties of the interior. Together with the pinewood ceiling it minimises reflections and optimises the audibility of speech and music. According to Michael Will, who regularly worships in the church, the atmosphere of St. Paul is subtly different from other churches: There is a "warm harmony between speech and music. It just feels more homely"*[12] (MF 2020).

3. Finally, we notice a window made of angled glass panes that separates a chapel from the rest of the church. This room is called "mothers' chapel" both by the inauguration leaflet and by my interviewee. Young mothers

12 The arrangement of the benches around the altar also contributes to that "homely" feeling of the church's interior, seating people closer together and allowing for eye contact between the participants. Cf. also Sacrosanctum concilium's (1964) demands for modern church buildings fostering an atmosphere of "active participation" (SC 124).

> were supposed to sit there with their children during mass. This glass wall stands for the self-understanding of this church community between tradition and new beginnings. On the one hand, it is a high-tech solution as it acoustically seals the chapel off from the rest of the church while loudspeakers in the chapel transmit the sound from the main room to it. It is designed for convenience, allowing mothers, as the inaugural leaflet tells us, to participate in "the holy mass without disturbing it. There is even room for a stroller"* (Katholische Kirchengemeinde St. Paulus 1967, p. 13). On the other hand, it displays a traditional understanding of a separation between the "holy mass" and the profane noise of children. It also allocates young mothers to the role of watching their children in a room separated from the centre of events.

What can we say about this building from a spatially and materially sensitive practical theological perspective with our eye trained at laboratory buildings and parliaments? First of all, we notice the modern concrete, glass, and aluminum architecture. We remember how optimistically these materials were used and how they stood for a growth-oriented, anything-is-possible mindset in architecture. We recognise that attitude not only in the building of the church but the whole development area where modern materials allowed people to build fast and economically – the aluminum roof of the St. Paul is a case in point as it replaced the copper in the original design since the church building association could not raise the funds for such an expensive material. We are sensitive to the active role of the material as well, as we notice how the walls, windows, and ceiling change the feel of the room, playing an active role in the overall experience of the community's celebration on Sundays. But we also notice the material's double character: the glass, for instance, that separates the chapel from the main room suggests transparency and visual participation, yet seals off and excludes a group of people that might potentially disturb the ordinary course of things.