

Signs of the Spirit in the City
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Introduction: On Reading Moltmann

What a wonderful privilege it is to be here at this first Spring Institute on Lived Theology. I want to thank Dr. Marsh, Karen Marsh and all the staff of the Project on Lived Theology for hosting this event and for the honor of being a part. And I want to especially thank Charles for the ways in which he has so graciously supported my work.

The way I first came to read the work of Prof. Moltmann was through the *Spirit of Life*. I started reading the *Spirit of Life* at the beginning of a trip to Hungary, and finished it over the course of the next few days, finding it nearly impossible to put down. My reading was pastoral; that is, I read it through the lens of a church and urban neighborhood. In *The Spirit of Life* I discovered ways of thinking and talking about God, the Spirit, community, and life that opened me to seeing Sandtown and God's work in Sandtown differently, indeed the world differently, and by doing so, engage the urban world in which we live with a deeper hope, imagination, and passion. One reason for this, I think, is that as an evangelical, my understanding of the Spirit's work was framed by the Spirit's work in personal salvation. Prof. Moltmann's approach to the Spirit I found to be much more comprehensive.

I went on to read many other books by Prof. Moltmann, but *The Spirit of Life* - its ideas, language, and passion for God and the kingdom - was uniquely important. Indeed it was transformational. So my debt and gratitude to Professor Moltmann is rather significant (as should be evident in *To Live in Peace*) and ongoing. It should therefore be clear that

I find it a special joy in having received an invitation to this institute. And in what follows, you will hear me draw on number of themes in Prof. Moltmann's work, for I have found in it a number of ways that help name lived theological experience.

In my presentation today I want to reflect on signs of the Spirit in the city, and I want to do so by attending to two very different urban contexts and church communities. The first sign is New Song Community Church in the Sandtown neighborhood of Baltimore, the subject of *To Live in Peace*. The second sign I will speak about is the Church of the Lord (Aladura), an African immigrant church in New York City.

Both New Song Community Church and Church of the Lord (Aladura) have been part of my faith journey. I was the pastor of New Song for a decade and lived in Sandtown for even longer, and in my doctoral research on the African Immigrant churches in New York, I spent nearly a year with CLA. This study of CLA belongs to a larger project where I am looking at the life of a range of African immigrant congregations in New York. Although they're very significant differences between them, I am also struck by some of the convergences, and will take this up at the end of my paper. From the beginning, I will say that both communities are born in the Spirit and resurrection hope of God. Their message is about life, God's life for the world, and the hope of the gospel.

According to Peter's sermon in Acts 10:36-38, "You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ – he is Lord of all. That message spread throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John announced: how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power; how he went around doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him."

Here in this passage from Acts we see the closeness of Christ, the Spirit, and the work of the kingdom. With Christ, Luke's gospel and the account of Acts indicate, has come God's jubilee for the cities that extends to the ends of the earth.

I will first talk about Sandtown and then turn to the Church of the Lord (Aladura), then ask how they both might speak to us.

New Song: The Spirit of Hope

To speak about New Song in Baltimore (and you should know that there is a sister congregation in Harlem) we must begin with the struggle for life and the experience of being forsaken. One encounter still vividly stands out to me. It was one morning when a woman in the community came by the church to talk. Over the past weeks, we had been working together to address her basic life needs. There was a daughter and granddaughter in the house, they had no food, were in danger of having the electricity turned off, and were facing eviction. Keep the lights on or buy food? Such choices were real, and are faced by many people in our inner cities. With tears, as I recall her words from memory, she asked, Has God abandoned me? What have I done wrong? Where is God? Her painful experience was that of being forsaken, cast aside and abandoned. It was also a cry for justice in a city that neglected the poor and imprisoned its young men.

In response to this world of the daily struggle for food, shelter, and life, what does discipleship look like? How might the hope of the resurrection lead the church to respond to such a crucified reality of economic abandonment and social exclusion? How does the church become a community that shares in suffering and also the aspirations for life? These were very immediate and pressing questions.

One response is found in New Song Community Church, an inter-racial Christian community in Sandtown. I have not lived in Sandtown for going on eight years now, so I speak of them today as an observer. The church began as a house fellowship, meeting for years in a crowded living room. They were, in Origen's words, "a rag tag and bobtail" group. There were a few adults, many children. One of the earliest things they did together was pray and think about what their neighborhood should be. So they drew Sandtown as it should be, a vision of God's shalom. The picture included restored

homes, a new health center, the elimination of drugs, local businesses, and new names on the streets. Here is a portrait of the new creation.

The vision it inhabits is the city of shalom that Isaiah announces in chapter 65. “No more shall there be in it an infant that lives but a few days, or an old person who does not live out a lifetime...They shall build houses and inhabit them...they shall not labor in vain or bear children for calamity...before they call I will answer.” This is in contrast the city as it was, described in the first chapter of Isaiah, where the city is filled with injustice against the poor.

The daring act of the drawing in Sandtown recalls, indeed fulfills, the prophet Joel’s promise. “In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams.”

Building together on the life of the Risen Christ and filled with the Spirit of hope, New Song went to work to seek the peace of the city. First they started rebuilding vacant houses through a newly formed chapter of Habitat for Humanity, then they began a school, followed soon by a health center, and joined by a ministry to link people with jobs. Their vision is one of shalom, God’s peace, for the community. New Song is about people – LaVerne Stokes and Allan Tibbels among them who lead Sandtown Habitat – who are working together for God’s peace. I have yet to meet people more impressive in the ways of Christian discipleship than Allan, LaVerne and their co-workers.

An event that captures the power of community rebirth in Sandtown is a house dedication. Block by block, home by home, Sandtown Habitat is gut renovating homes, replacing vacant and burned out shells with abodes of beauty for community home ownership.

Last week Sandtown Habitat dedicated 1709 Presstman Street for Tannya Kimble and her two daughters. I was in the neighborhood and block last week though not present for the dedication. Far too often on the nearby corner one can find flowers and teddy bears, elements of a makeshift memorial to someone who has been killed. But rising in the midst of the abandonment and pain is the resurrection of community. Violence, personal and structural, is being replaced with shalom. At the dedication, as Allan Tibbels shared with me, over 100 people attended. There were tears of joy by Tannya Kimble as she received the keys to her new home. A local church, Episcopal Church of the Redeemer, had providing the funding and worked with her. They were at the dedication. So were homeowners. LaVerne Stokes, Co-Executive Director of Sandtown Habitat for Humanity and a SHH homeowner her self, presented a Bible. A neighbor, who let SHH construction staff have access to electrical power and water for the project, presented flowers. As Allan spoke, he observed that while there are still many challenges on the block, SHH was going to finish it out as it should be.

New Song is not a community of optimism, but a community of hope, bearing witness in its life together to God's hope *in* and *for* Sandtown. The life and work of New Song is a sign of the Spirit – the resurrection of lives and a community. They are doing so based on Christ's resurrection, the "first fruits" of the resurrection of the world, as the Apostle Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians (15:23).

New Song sings God's new songs of reconciliation and justice, their voices raised in choruses of celebration by the Spirit who grants new life. In ways that are deeply costly, a pattern that is also part of Jesus' story, they perform the good news by tangible deeds of justice and righteousness. They love God, their neighbors, and neighborhood. And that is how New Song hears the cry of forsakenness.

Church of the Lord (Aladura): The Spirit of Life

To speak of "lived theology" in North America we have to expand our horizons and bring in the global and world Christian community. So while the Church of the Lord (Aladura)

gathers in the Bronx, to really understand them we have to move across borders and across the Atlantic.

The Church of the Lord (Aladura) in the Bronx is a branch of the Church of the Lord (Aladura) Worldwide, and their headquarters in Nigeria. They are a community of faith, dreams and visions. The Church of the Lord (Aladura) was started in Nigeria in the 1930s, begun by a prophet named Josiah Oshitelu. Real dreams and visions were critical. CLA soon expanded to different parts of Africa, including Liberia. Aladura, a word of the Yoruba language, means “one who prays” or “people of prayer,” and the church is what is generally referred to as an African Independent/Initiated Church. It is a fully Christian church.

How did the CLA come to be in New York City? The story begins with the expansion of Christianity in Africa. At the beginning of the twentieth century, there were approximately nine million Christians in Africa. As the twenty-first century began, there were nearly 350 million Christians in Africa. Simply put, this is historic growth.

The second part of the story is that African Christianity is not simply local, but global. Here the background is a globalization from below, and it is the globalization of the Spirit. This is not to neglect that this era of globalization is a force for new social and economic suffering in the world, but rather to acknowledge that the compression of the world has more than one dimension. Classically an immigrant city, New York’s newest immigrants are not arriving from Europe but Africa, Asia and Latin America. As we look at the African story, many are Christians, and they are bringing their faith and communities of faith with them. There are now between 120-150 African churches in New York.

This experience of cross-cultural diffusion follows the storyline of the Acts of the Apostles.¹ Here in Acts we find a dynamic of the church becoming cross-cultural, new

¹ Here see the reading of Acts 15 as offered by Andrew F. Walls. Summaries are found in Gornik 2005 (a) and 2005 (b).

cultures and voices hearing the good news and embracing Christ in their culture and languages. This was not without struggle, as we find in the Jerusalem council meeting and in the story of Galatians. The result was the cross-cultural impulse of the gospel, which continues today. Here is what we are seeing in New York as the body of Christ is being transformed, not from the top down, but from the grassroots movement and initiative of people from around the world.

In New York, the church of the Lord (Aladura) was started under the leadership of Archdeaconess or Mother Marie Cooper. Her home is Liberia, and she brings the influence of over 40 years in the Church of the Lord (Aladura) in Liberia. (The presence of the Church of the Lord (Aladura) in Liberia is the result of the mission expansion of the Church of the Lord (Aladura) from Nigeria.) The venue where the church gathers is house, officially known as Church of Lord (Aladura) House of Prayers. Here in the basement of the House of Prayer, Mother Cooper and her co-workers have carved out a sanctuary dedicated to the worship of God, prayer, and healing. The leaders where white robes, and everyone takes off their shoes before entering the sanctuary

To encounter the CLA is to encounter a deeply Spirit-filled and prayerful people. Salvation is not just a personal commitment to Christ, an evangelical experience. It is about a new life, a life where God meets needs of family, health, and daily bread. The practices of CLA are intended to line up with God's commitment to them – prayer, fasting, and worship. Healing in its many dimensions, similar to events we read about in the gospels, is quite real and important in CLA. God's new work of the kingdom is not a memory of the past nor a desire for the future, but a hope for the here and now. Christ is "Spirit wrapped in flesh," and it is God the Spirit who brings healing.

The cry for life at CLA is heard in a shout or a groan to God and the posture of prayer. It is a life of dependence on God, the life of faith, for there is no other source of life. Amidst the perils of life in New York – employment, the struggle of raising children, being away from home - the Holy Spirit provides power to keep going and protects against negative/evil spiritual forces and powers. God brings liberation and new

beginnings. In the gathering of the Church of the Lord, God has a place for the struggling and the hurting, and it is a community of love.

For the Church of the Lord (Aladura), perhaps its most distinctive communal event is the Mount Tabborarr season or festival, and it indicates their theology of life. Held annually in August, there are thirteen days of praying and fasting, culminating always on August 22 with a festival that pronounces the thirteen blessings of Tabborarr. The Tabborarr was inaugurated in 1937 in Ogere, Nigeria when the founder, Josiah Oshitelu, was given a vision to go to a site and pray and fast. During this time he received revelations. The site was later given the name Tabborarr, a name with biblical connotations.

Let me describe the Tabborarr as was celebrated in the Bronx this past August. With hand bells ringing, calabashes swirling, and hand drums catching the rhythm, the service begins in the evening with the congregation singing “Tabborarr De o, Tabborarr De o.” In a service with closely ordered components, there are prayers, readings of psalms, and a sermon that all leads to the liturgical centerpiece, the thirteen blessings of Tabborarr.

Question: Whence cometh ye thou hither ye pilgrims in white robes?

Answer: Tabborarr, Tabborarr, the mountain of the Lord.

Question: What is your first request here ye pilgrims in white robes?

Answer: (First blessing) Forgiveness of sins...

The remaining twelve blessings are God’s cleansing, God’s Mercy, God’ Blessing, Perfect Peace, Good children, Victory, Salvation, God’s healing, Joy, God’s Favour, Mighty Power of the Holy Spirit and Steadfastness. They follow a similar pattern of recitation with the rhythms of the call and response opening liturgy, singing, prayer, exposition, and declaration of blessing.

In response, there are a series of choruses and shouts, special intercessory prayers, vows, and testimonies. Voiced with the vow for individuals are the words, “Lord I come to the

Holy Mountain of Tabborarr and I make this vow.” At the conclusion, Archdeaconess Cooper proclaims that this has been “a day of victory” and “by next year we will have a story to tell.” It is now early morning, and we break the fast.

There is much more of course to say about this service, but what I want to stress are some of the recurrent themes of the Tabborarr– the Spirit, life, blessing, and wholeness. This characterizes the Church of the Lord (Aladura), as many African expressions of Christianity. Indeed, the theme of life is a central theme for the African church. In this context of the city, the CLA life together is marked by prayer, testimony, fasting, and by building a community for children, women, men, and the overlooked of New York. They may be small in number and on the periphery of New York’s power, but we can say that in God’s kingdom, they are central and most powerful.

Common Features

These two communities, New Song Community Church and Church of the Lord (Aladura), have I believe much to offer us in our project of lived theology. They are profound sources of faith, hope and love at work. While different in many ways, I see New Song and Church of the Lord as having three common features.

First, they provide ministries of healing and release. This is the mission of the Spirit. Here I return to the passage from Acts 10. “God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power; how he went around doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him.” Luke 4:16-21 is also very important, and we recall Jesus’ sermon begins, “The *Spirit* of the Lord is upon me to bring good news to the poor.” For both churches, the Christian faith is a source of liberating power. For one it is for a neighborhood, the other is the world or nations. We can also see connections with the Spirit, healing, and the undoing of oppression.

Second, they exercise alternative ways of power in urban life. To point to a text that is important for Prof Moltmann, Hebrews 6:5, New Song and Church of the Lord are

releasing the living energies “of the future world.” Such power operates not just in the sanctuary, but also in the body and city.

Third, they are communities of the Spirit that are a fellowship of the “least of these,” and the oppressed. They love Christ and the wholeness of the new life he has given them. Christ’s history of being among the poor is made real, his death speaking to evil and injustice comprehensively.

Conclusion: The Wide Space of the Spirit

In conclusion, New Song Community Church and Church of the Lord (Aladura) are communities that witness to the Spirit of life in the city. As Professor Moltmann has written, “The wide space of the Spirit is the dawn of the kingdom of God.” These two signs of the Spirit embody a new social imagination that pursues God’s kingdom. The wide space of the Spirit finds a home in the city, and these communities powerfully remind us that still, in the words of the Lord to the Apostle Paul that “I have many people in the city.”