

From Westside Church to Centre Church

Written by: Brian Yau

Preface

In 2013 Westside Church relocated from Kitsilano (the “westside”) to the downtown core of Vancouver. At that time, there was some desire to change the name from ‘Westside’ but for the sake of continuity it was decided against at that time. Since then the desire to change the name has continued to grow in us as elders. Particularly, in the last couple of years as we grew and witnessed God renew this local church body into deeper spiritual fervour, the current elders’ disposition became more favourable towards a renaming of the church. After years of discussion, months of prayer and seeking the wisdom of trusted and godly ministry partners, we are incredibly excited to share this vision with the membership of this church for approval. The aim of this article is to provide more insight into the rationale and catalysts that propelled the desire to change the name of this church from “Westside Church” to “Centre Church.”

A Biblical Perspective on the Changing of Names

“What’s in a name?” is a commonly used Shakespearean phrase to indicate the general irrelevance of naming something a particular name. However, this is certainly not the Biblical worldview nor is it realistic or pragmatic to relegate the power of naming something as something relative or unimportant. In fact, even in the very first chapters of the Bible, God names His creation and then gives Adam the authority and the responsibility to name the animals. In doing so, He places weight on names and throughout the rest of scripture, we see how the names of people or places mattered to God. In the Bible, there are various instances and reasons why name changes occur and each one only serves to highlight why names are important. We will look at two such examples, one from the Old Testament and one from the New Testament.

In Genesis 17, Abram’s name was changed to “Abraham” and God instigated this after making a covenant with Abraham to “multiply [him] greatly.” The name “Abraham” means “father of many nations” which of course comes to pass beginning within his immediate lifetime but also later spiritually as all Christians are made a part of Abraham’s family by faith (Galatians 3:7). In naming Abraham as such, God essentially communicated to Abraham that the covenant He promised him “is as good as done.” In this case, God uses the renaming of Abraham to reassure him that He will make good on His promises but also to encourage him in that He will indeed use Abraham to do it (even with all of his flaws). God communicates both His faithfulness to Abraham and His sovereignty to fulfill His promises by changing Abram’s name. In the same vein, as we seek to change the name of this church, we are asking God to make good on His promise to build up the church as we centre ourselves on Jesus (Ephesians 4:15-16). We know and believe that He is faithful and has the sovereignty to do just that.

In the New Testament, we see that the author of Acts, Luke, changes Saul's name to Paul. While the generally held thought is that Saul was the apostle's Hebrew name and Paul was his Romanized name and that he was probably called by both names, Luke preferentially uses the name "Paul" after Acts 13:9. While we do not know the exact reasons, one commonly held position is that Paul would introduce himself with his Roman name when conducting missionary work to the Gentile peoples he was sent to. To support this notion, it is interesting to note that just seven verses before, in Acts 13:2, the Holy Spirit sets apart Barnabas and Saul for the specific work of ministering to Gentiles. From that point forward, Luke refers to the apostle as Paul preferentially over Saul. This provides credence that Paul would have likely introduced himself with his Romanized name as it was more fitting contextually for the communities he was ministering in. Likewise, as our church has shifted geographically from Kitsilano to downtown and the constituency of the church has changed over the years, we hope to more accurately contextualize our ministry to the community around us. We believe that renaming to "Centre Church" will help with that process of contextualization.

Another suggested reason as to why Paul went by this name preferentially is because of its meaning. "Paul" means "small" or "humble" which is certainly a far cry from how he is introduced earlier on in the book of Acts. In fact, much of Paul's letters consist of passages where he recapitulates the earthly accolades and glories he attained and how he considers them worthless compared to knowing Christ (Philippians 3:8). In some ways, to identify as "Paul" more than "Saul" is to leave his old life behind and to show who he is becoming now that he is in Christ. Whether this is truly accurate to the reason why he went mostly with the name "Paul", the point stands that the meaning of names can be important in guiding the formation of that entity. With the renaming of Westside Church to "Centre Church," we are again emphasizing the importance of what it looks like to make Jesus the central focus of our worship, nay, our very existence. As Paul grew more humble in accordance with his name by following Jesus, as our church follows Jesus, we desire to centre ourselves more deeply on the pursuit of His heart and His glory.

In summary, while there is no strict necessity placed on a church to change names because of a change in geographical location, we believe there is biblical support and wisdom in guiding our motivations to rename. While our survey of scripture in this matter was not exhaustive, as per the examples above, we want to step forth with the confidence that God can likewise use the renaming of this church for His glorious purposes. With "Centre Church", we entrust ourselves to a God who is faithful and sovereign to fulfill all His promises just as Abraham came to experience. Like Paul, we also hope to communicate the perceived need to contextualize our ministry as a church placed in the centre of the city. Mostly, we want to glorify God by keeping primary things front and centre - namely, the lifting up of our Lord Jesus Christ. As the Lord helped Paul live into his name, may the Lord help us live into this name and all that it aims to communicate about the people we are becoming as we follow Jesus deeper into the centre of His heart.

To be clear, the renaming of Westside Church is not to dishonour or forget what God has done through Westside Church up until now. We are thankful for the many saints that have

gone before us who have laid such a strong foundation and who have left a rich heritage of faithfulness to God. Yet, God's modus operandi for our spiritual lives is to continually make all things new and we desire to capture, in a name, what that seems to be at this juncture of time. With "Centre Church", our ultimate desire is to celebrate what God is doing at the present and to embrace what we want Him to do with and through us as we make Him the central focus of our existence.

Contextual Reasons for Choosing the Name: "Centre Church"

Now that we have surveyed some of the biblical principles that undergird the renaming of this church, it is important to more specifically address the questions related to the choosing of the name: "Centre Church." What does this name aim to capture and communicate? What shifts in the ecclesiology of this local church body have led to this moment? Why now?

There are three main contextual reasons that explain how we got here and why we are excited about "Centre Church" as the name being proposed. These reasons, to be expanded upon below, are: (a) the centralized location of the church geographically to the downtown region and its implications for the city (b) the centering of the church's spiritual dynamics on both the creedal (Word) and charismatic (Spirit) aspects of the historic Christian faith and *most importantly*, (c) the unwavering centrality of Jesus as the Head of the church, to whom is due all worship and glory.

(a) Centre Church: A Confluence – *the implications of a centralized geographical location of the church in downtown Vancouver (Acts 17:26-27)*

The definition of a "confluence" is "a coming or flowing together, meeting or gathering at one point." This is a perfect word to describe the nature of the church. It is the gathering of saints from all walks of life, cultures, backgrounds, locations under the glorious gospel of Jesus. This is, of course true on the scale of an individual church body and with "Centre Church" we desire to be that central gathering place to equip and strengthen the saints for His work. On a larger scale, with "Centre Church" we aim to communicate the desire to be a church that will facilitate a confluence of all the churches in the city.

We believe that time and space matter to God and scripture tells us that God Himself places Christians exactly where they need to be at any given time (Acts 17:26-27). Moreover, we see in scripture that God chooses to make His presence manifest in physical locations, such as the time when he appeared to Jacob, leading Jacob to name that place Bethel (Genesis 28). In the New Testament, Jesus said that where two or three are gathered, His presence is with them (Matthew 18:20). This of course means the weekly gathering of the church is one of God's primary ways of manifesting His presence in any one particular space.

Since it pleased God to place a church in this downtown performing arts building, with the name “Centre Church”, we want to recognize the importance of our geographical location and the implications of the manifest presence of God specifically in this place at this time. Despite the needs for repairs and mortgage rate hikes, and the thousands of dollars to remain in this location, He has continued to make it clear that a church should occupy this space by providing for every need. The elders of this church have seen His faithfulness poured out time and time again and sense His favour to remain here for the foreseeable future. We believe that it is not by accident that we are in the downtown part of a metropolitan city, otherwise known as the “city centre.” Likewise, it is not an accident that we are located in the centre of the city centre, to the west the glamorous neighbourhood of Coal Harbour and to the east, the destitute community of the Downtown Eastside. We desire to see the confluence of people from all walks of life come and experience the love of Jesus and the abundant life He offers. In response to His favour on us to remain where we are, we desire to be faithful with using this physical space as best as we can to reach our community and become a central meeting place for the churches of this city.

Though this had no bearing on the choosing of “Centre Church” it is hilariously ordained that we would occupy a building previously known as “The Centre for the Performing Arts.” As a quick aside, one of the most significant backlashes against this church moving into this space in 2013 was the misconception that Christians did not care about the downtown arts scene and community. Dispelling this, we have poured in funds to improve the space’s performance capacity and have regularly welcomed and hosted the arts including film festivals, plays and ballets throughout the years. Instead of sabotaging the arts community, by hosting them in this centralized location, we hope for a confluence of the unbelieving world searching for beauty in the arts to enter a space where they will meet the original Artist and Creator of everything.

Finally, while a church does not cease to be a church if it is without a building, we believe it honours God for us to currently occupy this very visible building in downtown Vancouver. With the renaming to “Centre Church”, we hope that the physical space given to us will facilitate the confluence of vivacious Christians with the lost people in this city who seek the kingdom. We hope to facilitate a confluence of the churches of the city; to be a gathering place that can galvanize Christians from all denominations to unify under King Jesus, for witness and to worship. “Centre Church” is a name that recognizes the privilege of occupying a place that is central in location and the resulting responsibility to be a place of increased access for all to experience the presence of Jesus as we come together into one space.

(b) Centre Church: Convergence – *the centering of the church’s spiritual dynamics on the Word and the Holy Spirit (John 4:24)*

While the word “convergence” is commonly understood as a synonym for the word “confluence”, it has a more specific meaning from a theological angle. It still refers

to the merging point of two lines, but in reference to spiritual life, these lines are the Holy Spirit and the Holy Scriptures. If you read the Bible or have been at this church for any given time, you will have inevitably heard of this dynamic duo – the Word and Spirit – as the source of power for the abundant Christian life. Jesus was clear in His teaching but also in His living example that we must centre our worship on the Word and the Spirit. He taught that “God is Spirit and those who worship Him *must* worship in spirit and truth” (John 4:24).

The “Word” of course, also known as “the truth,” is the entirety of the sufficient and infallible scriptures we call “The Bible.” We fully believe and live under the truth of 2 Timothy 3:16 – that all scripture is “God-breathed and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction and for training in righteousness.” Jesus taught that to be spiritually “clean” and have spiritual power, His word must “abide in you” (John 15). When Jesus was tempted by the devil in the desert, He overcame the devil by applying truth from scripture. We are called to test prophecy and the spirits and Hebrews 4:12 tells us that the word of God is “living and active ... discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.” To be a church that relies upon and submits to the Word is to derive our strength and instruction for victorious Christian living from the unchanging truths of God. We believe that putting a strong emphasis on the faithful teaching of His word honours God and that only preaching the true gospel can lead to salvation.

As for the “Spirit”, we are taught that at the moment that we believe the “word of truth” and are saved, the Holy Spirit becomes the “seal and guarantee” of our faith (Ephesians 1:13-14). From this sequence of events, we see that the Word and Spirit are inseparable and indispensable for the authentic Christian life. Any spiritual growth in our relationship with God must be empowered by the Spirit and based on the Word. Any overcoming of the fleshly sin nature in our lives to become holy like Jesus must be done by the power of the Holy Spirit and the flesh is of no use at all (Romans 8:1-11). While there are different theological camps when it comes to exactly how the Holy Spirit acts in the life of a Christian, none deny the essential truth that to belong to Jesus is to have the Spirit of Christ (Romans 8:9).

In this church, we believe that the outpouring of the Spirit is displayed in Christians through the bearing of spiritual fruit and the practice of *all* the spiritual gifts. This effectively places us in the camp of “continuationism” and while we have always held this conviction, we have operated functionally as “cessationists” for many years as a church. In praxis, this means that we make room for the Holy Spirit to grow us through practicing the gifts of teaching but also those of prophecy and miracles and all of the gifts in between. It means that we relate and submit to the Holy Spirit as the third person of the Trinity and aim not to quench or grieve Him. It means we depend on the Holy Spirit’s power to make this church according to Jesus’ will for His glory.

For brevity's sake, we will not explore the ins and outs of being “continuationist”, but it is essential to mention our position on this matter for the reason of explaining

convergence. Over the years, we have become a church that aims for convergence; we desire a centring on *both* the Spirit and the Word. We recognize that to lean only on the Word can lead to legalism and a pharisaical heart. We would know biblical truths but without the power of the Spirit to live it out, we would live frustrating and defeated spiritual lives. On the other hand, if we were to detach from the Word and live solely on spiritual experiences, we can easily deviate into sensationalism. Without God's unchanging truth to test our spiritual experiences, we will tend to pursue "good spiritual feelings" while possibly ignoring foundational truths and fall away from orthodox faith altogether. Neither legalism or sensationalism in a church honours Jesus. We believe that pursuing Jesus through convergence is the way to become a more spiritually healthy and biblically accurate church. We believe the abundant life and spiritual power over darkness that Jesus promised comes from faithful adherence to the Word and from walking in step with the Holy Spirit.

The "spiritual dynamics" of a church refers to the forces that bring about change and progress in that church. Some churches' spiritual dynamics lean heavily towards the Word and others lean towards the Spirit; sadly, sometimes they are seen to be at odds and incompatible. But we are convinced of the need for convergence to be the spiritual dynamic of this church. In the book of Acts, we see this as the biblical model given to us on how the church ought to grow and function. If we are to experience God and grow in relationship with Him, it must come by the Word and the Spirit. As we seek to be both a "charismatic" and a "creedal" church, practically, it means that we practice the spiritual gifts orderly while we also regularly engage in spiritual disciplines.

As it is, the move towards convergence in this church body is not just a vision but already a reality that we are seeing. It is exactly because of this that the name "Centre Church" is entirely appropriate. With this name, an emphasis is placed on the importance of centering the spiritual dynamics of the church around the Word and the Spirit. We are committed to a centred approach that does not despise prophecy and miracles but also tests them against the scriptures. We are committed to becoming worshippers of Jesus who worship in Spirit and in truth. To pursue convergence is how we, as a church, can live into the mission to "know Jesus and make Jesus known". To rename as "Centre Church" is to become, through convergence, a church that is "biblically grounded and Spirit empowered" (a descriptor borrowed from the Convergence Church Network website). It is our prayer that in this manner, the good Lord will continue to lead us deeper towards the centre of His heart.

(c) Centre Church: Christ the Centre – *the unwavering mission to know Jesus and make Jesus known by placing Him at the centre of church life (Colossians 1:15-23)*

Though this point is being mentioned last, it is for the reason that we want to finish strong and leave this final point as the most poignant reason for renaming to "Centre Church." That is, the Church and this church has been and always will be

entirely about making Jesus the point of all that we are and do. Jesus is the centrepiece of our faith, the very reason why churches exist at all. “Centre Church” is a name that perfectly captures the essence of what our mission statement says: “to know Jesus and to make Jesus known.” If we make anything else more central to the church than the glorification of Jesus, we will cease to be a church altogether.

Specifically though, we desire for the name “Centre Church” to express our aim to centralize the church on three main pursuits, all pertaining to Jesus, who is the Head of the Church. Firstly, we want to centre in on our pursuit of relationship with Jesus for out of relationship with Him comes spiritual vitality and vibrancy. Secondly, we want to centre in on our pursuit of holiness as a church as Jesus’ love language is obedience and purity. Thirdly, we want to glorify Jesus in our pursuit of unity with other churches under the headship of Jesus.

As above, we firstly want to centre in on our pursuit of relationship with Jesus. When we gather as a church, we are not doing so to make some transaction with God and receive blessing from it. We do not attend a gathering, read our Bibles, fast or pray in order to earn from Him. We gather as the church to know Him and to seek His heart; we gather for the sake of relationship. If relationship with God is not central to our existence as a church, it is mere religion. If mere religion is what we have, Jesus’ interactions with the Pharisees of His day shows us exactly what He thinks of mere religion. He detests it, condemns it and harshly judges those who boast a semblance of righteousness but know nothing of Him. It is an entirely terrifying thought to entertain that people can cast out demons and prophesy in His name and yet be told, “I never knew you; depart from me” by the Lord (Matthew 7:21-24).

Naturally, an intentional pursuit of relationship with Jesus translates to a church-wide emphasis on prayer because communication with God is one of the primary ways relationship with Him is built. Several years ago, we saw God begin to move in response to intercessory prayer and we believe this has been the primary catalyst for growth in this church. While a practice of prayer has always been present, we have seen increased regularity and intensity in engagement – from Sunday morning response prayer to dedicated intercessory prayer teams for the different ministries or multi-church prayer and worship gatherings. As we believe that prayer is critical to the development of an intimate relationship with Jesus, we desire for prayer to become increasingly central to our ethos as a church. Indeed, we are continuing to change from being a “church that prays” to being a “praying church”. In accordance with this shift, this church is regularly witnessing the Lord’s work in response to prayer with stories involving the confession of sins and the receiving of freedom, of salvation, healing, deliverance and much more. We believe the name “Centre Church” adequately captures our desire to pursue an authentic and intimate relationship with Jesus. We believe that making prayer a central focus will deepen our relationship with Jesus and proceeding from this will be a church that is spiritually healthy, growing in maturity and ministering with power.

Secondly, we want to centre in on our pursuit of holiness as a church. As it pertains to holiness and following God, we have the repeated sayings of not “turning to the left or to the right” in the scriptures. The very picture of holiness in the Bible is remaining central on the straight and narrow path that Jesus lays out for us. No doubt, it is a challenge as we deal with temptations from the world, our sinful flesh and the devil to deviate from that path. In a sense, many try to remain on the narrow path by employing a “boundary set” mindset by staying within certain boundaries of the Christian faith; using hard doctrinal lines to guide them. It is true that historic Christianity is somewhat “boundary set” by certain primary doctrines that cannot be denied, such as the existence of the Trinity or that belief in the gospel is the only way to salvation. However, we believe the biblical model Jesus gives us is to be “centre set” on the person of Jesus and when we know and submit to Him, we need not worry so much about the boundaries because abiding in the vine naturally produces fruit in the branches (John 15:5). Jesus, the Head of the Church, desires a holy bride in His church. He is actively working towards this by sanctifying us and washing us pure with the Word (Ephesians 5). The name “Centre Church” is a recognition that at the centre of Jesus’ heart is a loving relationship with a holy and unblemished people that He calls His own who proclaim the “excellencies” of Jesus (1 Peter 2:9).

Lastly, we want to centre in on our pursuit of unifying the churches in Vancouver under the person of Jesus Christ. As mentioned above, we believe the building that we have been given by God is to be used for the purpose of being a central meeting place for the churches of Vancouver. Yet, having a common space is not enough to unify churches of different denominations and practices. Only submission to Jesus alone, who has the central authority and power in the Church, will bring us together in worship and mission. In the past, to the chagrin of the now elders, this church was known for drawing hard lines on who we partner with when it came to ministry. There seemed to be a necessity for congruence on secondary doctrines if any meaningful ministry were to take place alongside another church. It is not so now. By renaming this church to “Centre Church,” the goal is to communicate our aim to keep primary things as primary and to unify with other churches under the headship of Jesus for the good and salvation of the lost in our city. We believe this pleases the heart of Jesus and therefore, we will continue to keep Him at the centre of our interchurch relationships while still maintaining our distinctives and convictions.

If there is anything to take away from this article, it is that the name “Centre Church” is all about making Jesus the centre of our very existence. As in the subtitle, we have seen His faithfulness over twenty years of drawing us deeper into the centre of His heart. It is evident that His heart for us is more and more of Him for the next twenty years and the next twenty and even more after that until He comes again. May it be that “Centre Church” and all that it attempts to capture in its meaning becomes an abiding reality. And in that reality then, when Jesus comes again, we desire that He finds this church to be a holy bride with zealous love for Him.

We close with an “Amen” to the words of Revelation 1:5-6: “To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father, to him be the glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.”