

Unity in a Diverse Community

*What binds us together as a community,
and do we need to all agree on matters of belief, behavior or practice?*

Our journey is what we have in common. We are all travelers. This is very important to us as a community because often in religious communities, belonging is determined by other things: believing a certain set of principles or theological beliefs, refraining from a certain set of behaviors, or acting a certain way. At Cedar Ridge, we recognize that everyone is different, with unique experiences and perspectives. That means we all set out on our journey from different places and walk unique paths, but we are all moving towards a common place: Christ. This is what makes us a community: not that we are all the same, not that we all believe the same things, not that we all agree about what is the right behavior. Rather, we are united by the fact that we are all in a process of following Jesus.

One way of describing this unifying element is to consider a metaphor from set theory (used in mathematics, sociology and other disciplines). For the sake of this illustration we will look at two types of sets: bounded sets and centered sets.

Bounded Set

In a bounded set, membership (belonging to the set) is determined by a very clearly defined boundary (figure 1). This strong boundary acts as a filter admitting certain people and excluding others (figure 2). This is not necessarily done in an unkind way; it's just how some communities define and determine identity. Boundary criteria in religious communities often require people to believe (or at least publically profess belief) in certain specific things about God, the world, right and wrong, life, people, etc.

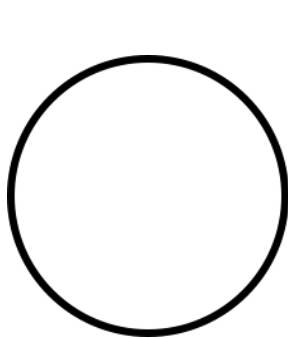


Figure 1: Strong boundary

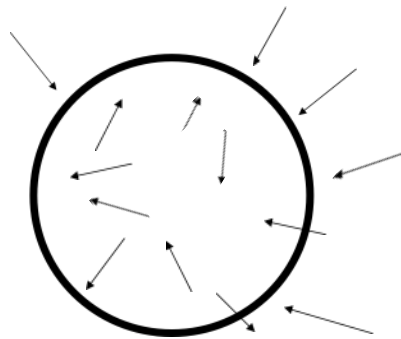


Figure 2: Strong boundary acts as a filter defining who's in and who's out

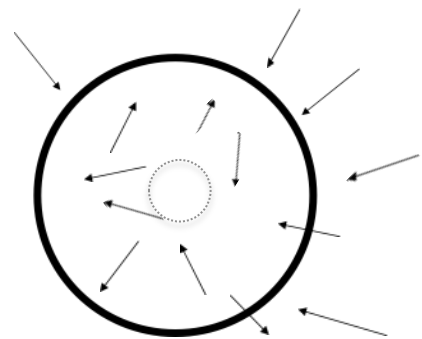


Figure 3: Soft center does not define movement within the set

In communities defined by strong boundaries, less attention is often paid to the "center," i.e., where people are heading once they qualify to get in. Such communities are said to have a hard boundary and a soft center (figure 3). The defining issues are around the boundary criteria, which are about "getting in", rather than on what happens within the community. Action can often be primarily around trying to conform beliefs and behaviors to the commonly understood boundary.

Some characteristics of bounded set communities are the following:

1. It is very clear who is in and who is out.
2. Belonging is usually determined by obvious, externally recognizable criteria.
3. Members form a homogenous group since entry and ongoing inclusion require conformity.
4. These groups tend to be static. The emphasis is on what people are like now (and whether they meet the required criteria) rather than on what they are becoming. The driving force is the boundary, not the center.

Perceived strengths of these communities are a sense of safety, as there is usually little ambiguity or confusion about what is acceptable, and people usually know what to expect. A sense of comfort can be felt in being with like-minded and like-living people. There may be not much complexity to wrestle with, and this can contribute to a sense of confidence and certainty.

Perceived weaknesses of a bounded set are the requirement to meet the standard before joining, and the need to maintain certain standards throughout. Doubt and struggles must be concealed, or when expressed, may be cause for non-inclusion. Certain people are often excluded from or belittled within bounded communities because of their views and practices. There may be very little diversity, or expressed diversity.

Centered Set

In a centered set, membership is determined by a very clearly defined center (figure 4). This strong center acts as a kind of “magnetic north” defining the activity, process and journey of the community. What defines the community is that everyone is moving towards a common center (figure 5).



Figure 4: Clearly defined firm center

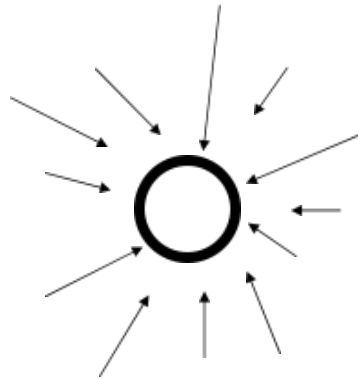


Figure 5: Clear firm center defines movement within the set

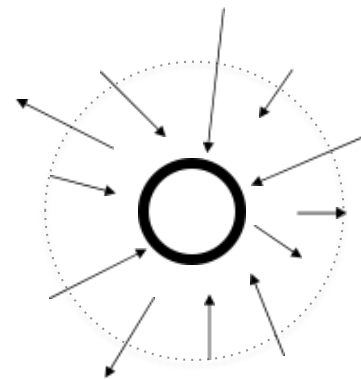


Figure 6: Soft porous boundary keeps set open

There is only a very porous boundary (if at all), so it is open to all (figure 6). What determines whether one is part of the community is not the boundary, but whether one is choosing to move towards the center. People approach the center from very different directions (the boundary is open) and move at very different paces.

In figure 6 above, some of the arrows are moving away from the center: membership is based on movement towards the center rather than on being inside a defining boundary and so people further away from the center but moving towards it might experience a deeper sense of belonging than those closer to the center but moving away. These kinds of groups are also not only easy to join but inherently easy to voluntarily leave.

Some characteristics of centered set communities are the following:

1. It is often less easy to determine who is part of the group.
2. Since belonging is determined by movement and a process (a journey) that is only evident over time, these groups tend not to evaluate people on external criteria (beliefs and behaviors) but create space for inward transformation to work itself out.
3. Members of the group are usually very diverse since there are no standard entry requirements.
4. These groups tend to be dynamic. The emphasis is on what people are becoming, rather than on what they are like now. The driving force is the clear firm center to which the group is moving.

Perceived strengths of these communities are that everyone is accepted and respected and anyone can belong. There is also a built-in dynamic of growth, as belonging is defined by movement towards the center, rather than a static adherence to boundary criteria.

Perceived weaknesses are that the community will be very diverse with lots of different opinions and beliefs, which can lead to conflict. There may also be ambiguity about what the community stands for without clear communication of vision and values. With a porous boundary, there might be a lot of turnover as it is low risk for inquisitive people to enter and spend time checking out the community, with some staying at the edges and others eventually leaving. These types of communities need to work hard at good communication and dealing honestly with conflict.

What kind of set is Cedar Ridge?

You might have guessed already that Cedar Ridge strives to be a centered set. Our community is defined by the following:

- a) **Firm center:** Our center is Jesus. We are a community devoted to following Jesus. Clearly we have a particular way in which we see and follow Jesus, which we call our vision. So in practical terms our center is our vision; this is what unifies us. But we must always keep in mind that our center is not some corporate vision that we have come up with for our own purpose, and that we try to enforce on others. Jesus Himself is the center, drawing us to Him. We are not the guardians of that process; we believe that God is in charge of that.

"And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself."

John 12:32 (New Revised Standard Version)

- b) **Porous boundary:** We accept everyone, no exceptions. That does not mean we all have to agree with each other or accept all behavior as good. But we give everyone space and time to follow their journey towards the center.
- c) **Membership:** We value commitment; commitment to Jesus, to the journey, and to one another. This commitment is expressed in movement towards the center; taking steps on this journey. Commitment is not defined as being at any particular point on the journey at any given time.

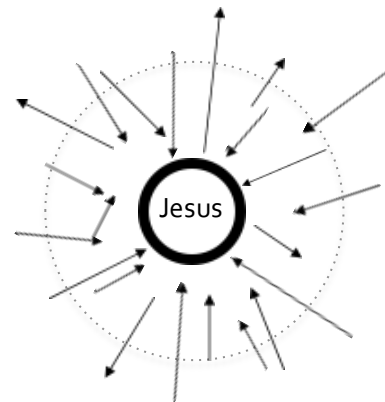


Figure 7: Cedar Ridge is an open community with Jesus at the center

- d) ***Journey to the center:*** There is no time limit. Change is not forced, and we recognize that true change and real movement take time.
- e) ***Diversity:*** We accept people. We don't try to change anyone, but point them towards the center. We don't assume we are always right about everything, and we seek to accept and learn from those who are different from us. This diversity creates a culture of transformation where we are all challenged.
- f) ***Openness and honesty:*** Bounded sets could result in people trying to conceal their real thoughts, doubts, beliefs and behaviors in order to gain entry and acceptance. This often results in a fake church culture where people "pretend to be good." In a centered set we encourage honesty and openness, and accept one another with all our faults and failings. This creates the opportunity for growth and change to happen.
- g) ***Reliance on the Holy Spirit:*** Only God really knows people's innermost beings. We put the pressure on God for change, and trust God for the journey that we are all on. We don't police change, but we do expect an atmosphere where we lovingly challenge one another to grow.

We are intentionally a centered set

Sometimes groups that are very open and accepting might appear to be just vague, woolly and spineless, as though they are just not prepared to be challenging, defined or strong. At Cedar Ridge we are a centered set on purpose. This is not a case of "anything goes;" we intentionally want to create this kind of environment because in it we see the greatest hope for people to follow Jesus. We recognize that many churches and religious establishments choose a different way, and we respect that, but we are passionate and purposeful about creating an atmosphere in which everyone has space to work out their journey.

In many ways being a centered set is much more risky. We have to trust each person is truly following Jesus and making Jesus-centered decisions, rather than demanding a certain set of behaviors or beliefs. It is messier. Maybe the most uncomfortable aspect is that it requires trusting in the mysterious, unseen and often imperceptible presence of God with us and with others, rather than the recognizable neatness and simple order that can come through placing confidence in standard behaviors, a moral code, etc. We won't have the "comfort in conformity" that a bounded set can sometimes bring, but rather, we are certain to be with others who believe and behave very differently. As a result, we will have disagreement and conflict, but we embrace these as healthy things and agents of potential transformation. This means we must be humble and diligent about conflict and not avoid it. This way of community has the potential for incredible transformation and beauty. It is a strong call to commitment, belonging and membership.

Our centeredness is rooted in history

Describing ourselves as a "centered set" is simply a metaphor to help explain what kind of community we are. There is no "centered set" movement or denomination that we belong to; no handbook on "how to be a centered set church." We are just trying to be true to the way of Jesus as we see it, and just trying to use language like this to help describe it. But we are not alone in pursuing Jesus in this way. Many other churches throughout history could be described in similar ways. In fact if we go back to the very early years of the church in the first few centuries, we can see a very similar approach to following Jesus.

Back then, as the early Christian movement grew throughout Europe, two approaches evolved. One, influenced from the church and culture in Rome, emphasized catechism. This meant that before someone could become a “Christian” and a member of the local church community, they would have to go through a series of often rigorous teaching and training in the faith (catechism) at the end of which they would be baptized “into” the community. This approach saw faith as good understanding of and adherence to the precepts of the church before being admitted to the community.

A different approach evolved among the Celtic tribes of Europe, led by people such as St. Patrick. The Celtic movement espoused “belonging before believing.” Rather than putting new members through catechism, they were welcomed into the community with all their pagan beliefs, attitudes and culture, and were able to witness first-hand the reality of what following Jesus meant. Through relationships and experiences, they grew in their own understanding, and had space and time in this diverse community to develop spiritually at their own pace. Ultimately, the Roman approach predominated in Christendom. Although we have great respect for and have gained so much from the Roman tradition, our understanding of community is more like the less common Celtic tradition, in many ways.