

## May 24, 2026—“Hope Lives”

As we launch into another *Hope Lives* morning, I’m wondering: how many of us know what that means? What do we do in these services, and why do we have them?

Come to think of it, there are concepts around here like “Anchor Causes”, or “Missional Living”. Where do those concepts come from? Why are they so common? And—most importantly—what difference are they supposed to make in our lives?

Today, we want to review, in the most basic way, why we do, value, and focus on this stuff so much around here. It all starts with how we understand the word “church”.

We know that Jesus is the Head and inventor of His church. In Matthew 16:18:

***... On this rock (Peter) I will build my church...***

Jesus declared that, on people like Peter—who recognized Jesus for the Saviour-sent-from-God that He was—He would establish this thing that He called His “church”.

Appreciate that the word “church” in the original language was not a new term—the word was “**ecclesia**”, which means “**assembly**”. Jesus was building His assembly.

Here’s where things get interesting, though: there are *two* definitions of the word “assembly”. One, involves **convening people together**—like a school assembly, or the assembling of Parliament. The other, involves the **piecing together of parts into a complete unit**—like a car assembly line, or the assembling of Lego. One is a *gathering* you convene; the other is an *entity* you put together. So here’s the real question today: when Jesus says He’ll “*build* His church...” (as opposed to *convene* or *gather* His church), which definition of “assembly” is He referring to? And, if He’s imaging piecing together parts—like people like Peter—what’s He piecing people together to become?

Starting at the most foundational level, let's remember the very nature of God:

***God is love.***

God is not described as tenets of faith. God is not described as loving on occasion. At His very core, the God of the universe—looking to relate personally with you and me—is defined, at His very core essence—as love. Love is who God is and what He's about.

Now consider that Jesus came to earth to perfectly reveal who God is to people:

***Jesus is the image of the invisible God.***

Jesus came to earth to physically, visibly, tangibly demonstrate the nature and represent the very core essence of God to the world (making the invisible and spiritual real).

And, since God is love, love is what Jesus ultimately came to perfectly embody in human form. That's more than just teaching on love (although He did that often, specifically through His summary of the Greatest Commandment). And it's more than just "hippy love", being easy-going with people all the time. In fact, Jesus introduced what God's love would look like through His life when he launched His public ministry through reading OT prophecy, and then proclaiming that, in Him, this had been fulfilled:

***The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.***

Jesus' kind of love—a love that perfectly revealed the heart and nature of God—was a **sacrificial, self-emptying, privilege-leveraging-for-those-of-less-privilege kind of love, that comforted the afflicted, often to the affliction of the comfortable.** Jesus' love consistently centred people society had pushed to its margins to otherwise ignore.

So, when Jesus invited people to follow Him—to learn of Him, to live like Him—and then enabled that way of life through the forgiveness and empowerment His death and resurrection provided, what was He imagining piecing together that these followers would become as His “church”? What was this entity Jesus was seeking to assemble?

Just like in His conversation with Peter, Jesus was seeking to assemble aspiring followers of His to follow Him together, so that together—collectively—they would reveal and incarnate His way of life in the world. And in the same way that Jesus sought to reveal what God is like, Jesus’ vision for His collection of followers is they would reveal what He was like—which is why the church is often referred to as the “Body of Christ”:

***Jesus makes the whole body fit together perfectly.  
As each part does its own special work, it helps the  
other parts grow, so that the whole body is healthy and  
growing and full of love.***

Jesus’ invitation to Peter is Jesus’ vision for every would-be follower of His: to not just seek to resemble His life individually, but—pieced together with other followers—to embody Jesus collectively. And, ultimately, when it comes to resembling Jesus—who came to reveal what God was like, who, at His core, is defined by love—when followers of Jesus are put together, they’re put together to become a growing expression of love.

This is how we understand Jesus’ vision for His “church”. We understand the church to be **followers of Jesus being fit together to become love**—a sacrificial, self-emptying, privilege-leveraging-for-those-of-less-privilege kind of love, that comforts the afflicted, often to the affliction of the comfortable. The church is to collectively embody Jesus, who perfectly revealed God, who is perfect love. Jesus’ “assembly” wasn’t about convening gatherings, but the piecing together of followers to collectively become love.

Here's the thing for today: when you understand that Jesus' definition of "assembly" involves the piecing together of followers to become something—and not the convening of a gathering—and when you understand that the "something" Jesus desires to piece together is collective love, and when you understand that the kind of collective love Jesus desires to put together is a specific kind of love—the kind of love Jesus perfectly demonstrated when He sacrificed His life for humanity on the cross, perfectly revealing the heart of God—it changes everything. This creates a completely different definition and direction of "church" than most people understand these days.

When I started in ministry, I didn't understand this. I lived with the mentality of church as a gathering, and—like the National Football League—invested everything I could into this hour on Sunday. But after a few years of experiencing 40% year-over-year-over-year numerical growth, our group of young leaders were left wrestling with whether we were even being a church, while onlookers assumed we were a good one.

Without this sophistication of language at the time, God led us to move. Where people assumed it was to grow numerically, we knew it was to put ourselves in proximity to the kinds of people Jesus most centred. That led to the opening of a 24-hour, 365 days/year homeless shelter in our building. A few years later, we considered becoming a multisite church—again, while many assumed it was to reduce the drive time to Sunday services for people across Niagara—it was to establish "Shelter-equivalent" in places where our people live. We now call those Shelter-equivalents "Anchor Causes".

Over the years, this shift in focus has been dramatic. Consider, even financially, when I started in ministry and we invested zero dollars into compassion & justice activity. Now, our Anchor Cause work represents over 80% of the dollars we spend.

I hope you can appreciate why—why we moved, why we opened a shelter, why we went multisite, why we have Anchor Causes, and why we invest financially the way we do. When you understand Jesus’ idea of “assembly” wasn’t convening gatherings, but the piecing together of followers to collectively become love, it changes everything. A drastically different *definition* drives a drastically different *direction* of a “church”.

Think about our **Vineland location** as an example. Desiring to assemble collective love in the Lincoln area, we established an adopt-a-farm system with our Southridge Life Groups and the Caribbean community. As friendships formed, we’ve enjoyed social nights together—the cricket nights and domino tournaments being the biggest hits! As things have matured, we’ve been able to deepen love through an after-hours medical clinic, a thrift shop, a social lounge, and legal aid. All of these steps have sought to move our community in a single direction: to collectively become love.

Now you might be wondering: if that’s our definition of “church” (and, more importantly, our understanding of the definition of “assembly” Jesus has in mind), then why do we have gatherings? If gatherings aren’t a church, why does a church gather?

To me, this is one of our greatest challenges in pursuing this vision. On the one hand, the first-century church we read about in scripture *did* gather—in fact, they gathered as frequently as every day! But what’s critical to understand is that the early church gathered to *inspire their assembling*; their gatherings weren’t their assembly:

***Let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.***

What’s the bottom line here? Again, it’s not *attending a gathering*, but *becoming love*!

I hope you can appreciate the challenge this creates. Because with every gathering (just like right now!), the medium that is the message can mistakenly reinforce the wrong use of the word “assembly”, and, as a result, a reduced vision of “church”. And, worse: every time we offer a free gift as a thanks for *attending*, or every time we close a service with, “See you *next week!*” we mistakenly reinforce an NFL game day version of “church” that takes all the power out of Jesus’ vision for collective love.

So, here at Southridge, we’re constantly working to fight against that gravitational pull. Coming back to our **Vineland location**, as an example, we’ve wrestled for years with the reality that very little of the love we were becoming together with our Caribbean community was able to take place during Sunday mornings, so, if you showed up at a gathering on a Sunday, you could very easily mistakenly assume our definition and direction of church was our gathering. So, a couple years ago, we made the risky move to cancel occasional Sunday morning gatherings into order to convene together with our Caribbean community on a Sunday evening. Then last year we considered how to do that in a more family-friendly way, so young kids could be part of the action too.

Last month, I was able to attend one of these **evening events**—that included dinner together, and socializing in the lobby and lounge, all while the medical clinic, thrift shop, and legal supports were buzzing. As part of that experience, we had a worship gathering—in a beautiful blend of Canadian & Caribbean style—and it was incredible to watch the gathering serve as *one of* the contributors to this larger collection of pieces being put together to become love. To me, this was our church “at its best”—like a Friday night at **Harvest Kitchen in Welland**, or a Thanksgiving or Christmas **community dinner in St. Catharines**—because these are our best experiences of collective love.

This is what we're inviting you into: a definition of "church" that fits together followers of Jesus to increasingly become a collective expression of Jesus' sacrificial, self-emptying, privilege-leveraging-for-those-of-less-privilege kind of love, that comforts the afflicted, often to the affliction of the comfortable. We use these weekly gatherings to encourage that kind of love and good deeds, and particularly, we want to use these *Hope Lives* mornings to regularly remind ourselves and recalibrate around this much rarer understanding and definition of "church", that drives our direction around here.

One thing in particular we've been working on lately is sharpening the clarity around our model for becoming collective love, specifically through our Anchor Causes. In order to piece all of us together in that way, we want to provide much clearer next steps—from this *invitation*, to *orientation*, to *facilitation* of an experience in our Anchor Cause, to *reflection* on how Jesus is growing you through that experience of love.

These days, we're specifically hoping to improve the pathway to where you can be oriented to the Anchor Cause activity in your location. So, coming out of today's *Hope Lives* service, we hope you'll take advantage of the "Discover" offered at your location—including the kid and family-friendly events being offered in St. Catharines.

Here at Southridge, we are inviting you into a very specific definition of "church", not a *gathering* you attend, but *collective love* we can become together as Jesus assembles us. To show you what this can look like, we're going to close with a video of some people in this location who've embraced this definition of "church". These are people Jesus is fitting together to increasingly become love. These people are our church at its best—not through attendance, but lives following Jesus that He's piecing together to increasingly become love. Our hope is that these people can include you!