



Pastor's Update

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By Pastor Merv Thompson

"Grace and peace to you from the God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."

There is something new in the air. Do you sense it? Do you have this feeling that we are on the edge of something profoundly and dramatically new? No, I am not talking about the weather. I am instead listening and observing the buzz that is growing at Lutheran Church of Hope. When God said, "Behold I make all things new", I don't think most of us realized just how seriously he meant it.

Something very new is just on the horizon, and it seems as if God has been preparing the congregation for this new thing to happen for the past fourteen years. It seems as if the Holy Spirit is about to break through in ways that we have not seen before, that will challenge us, inspire us and surprise us beyond our fondest imaginations. Something new, exciting and breathtaking is ready to come into our midst. The question that faces us is this, "Are we ready?" Are we ready for the new?

There is always something about the human condition which seems to fear the new, to cling tenaciously to the old, the tried, and the tested. While there is much about the past that is worth remembering and important to retain, God is always about the new. God is always about change, transformation, new life, reformation and revitalization. God never rests on the status quo. Of course, Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever, but the ways in which we worship and serve constantly must change.

The Bible seems to be especially bullish on embracing the new. Remember Jesus in the upper room instituting the Eucharist. "Behold this is a 'new' covenant." This is brand new; this is not the same-old, same-old; this is radically new. Remember that the part of the Bible which tells the story of Jesus and his life, death and resurrection is called the "new" testament. It completes the old, but it is dramatically new.

We are also told in II Corinthians 5 that the essence

of the Christian life is to become new, "If anyone is in Christ, he or she is a new creation, the old has passed away, behold the new has come." We cannot be any clearer than that. Christ came to make all people new. We see Jesus teaching about the wine and the wineskins, "You cannot put the new wine of the gospel into old wineskins. The new wine will burst the skins and the wine will be lost." You have to put new wine in new wineskins.

Lutheran Church of Hope has been all about discovering new wineskins for the new wine of the gospel. But we ain't seen anything yet. We are on the edge of something very new.

Maybe it started in earnest with the Feed the Million Campaign last spring, which quickly leapfrogged to 1.6 million. None of us had ever seen anything like this, the way the entire congregation was energized and motivated to serve, the way the entire city was talking about it, the way the grocery stores were engaged and running out of food. Have you ever seen so many people with a common vision come together at one time for such good? If we are only one new idea away from transformation, then last spring we were transformed.

That was only a foretaste. This fall the newness is growing and expanding. Did you notice how the walls are coming down? Every week walls are crumbling and new space is being created. In our newly created worship space, we are doing as the Psalmist insisted, "Sing to the Lord a new song", and the Lord says, "I will put a new song into your hearts and mouths." Everything is new about worship this fall.

We should not become too comfortable though, because everything is going to change in a couple of months. We are going to see an explosion of worship attendance like we have never seen, as we finally have enough room for everyone who wants to come. We are already up some 500 worshippers

this fall, to more than 5000 on a weekend. When the new worship center opens, we will have a huge jump, maybe double at times. God is doing something entirely new here; we need to catch the wave.

The September Update highlighted one of those new things: NorthBranch, Hope's satellite congregation in Ankeny. It is over 400 people in worship each week, as the new wine of the Gospel is being offered in new wineskins. This kind of response is almost unprecedented. I have heard of three other large congregations which have started satellites in the past year, and all three are shutting them down for lack of response. For some reason God is giving Hope this enormous momentum; God is doing something very new in this new start.

By all measure, by all logical figuring, Alpha should be winding down, consolidating, reaching fewer and fewer people. With the numbers it reaches each year, some 1000, we should be running out of people to take the course. There is only a limited pool from which to draw. Wrong! Wrong! More than 300 are enrolled this fall. Barb Crist says they may go to 500 the next time around now that we will have more facility space.

Can you imagine that, 500 people in one session of Alpha? Alpha is bringing transformation and new life to so many people, and now it is expanding. Something new is happening in our midst, and we are just along for the ride. Alpha is also planning on starting another Alpha emphasis, Alpha Marriage, in the spring, and that also has the potential to be huge. Most congregations truly struggle to have any kind of effective adult education and discipleship ministries, but Hope is literally bursting at the seams. There is something very new taking place.

Pastor Molly showed the plans for the new congregation near downtown Des Moines. She has a huge chart in her office which shows scores of Hopesters who have committed to both the vision of this start and also to use their gifts and talents to lead. There is something very new in all of this. Most satellite churches are placed in new communities, but God is leading us to something very new. The vision, structure and staffing of this new congregation continues to evolve; this is a

work in progress. We can hardly wait to see what God is going to do in this new setting. Remember this is the same God who said, "I make all things new." Go, God, Go!!!

For several years now a very talented and visioning group has been meeting to help shape a leadership center at Hope. We are all aware of the crisis of leadership both in the church and in the world today, so this group has sought ways to raise the leadership level to a higher place. This is something very new. We are now poised on the edge of creating something that has not been created before. This is the cutting edge, the leading edge, and it is going to happen soon. 2008 should be the year of breakthrough, and we can hardly wait to see where the wave will take us.

The new is breaking out in every area of congregational life. Spend some time looking over the catalog. The fact that we revolve around a three-year preaching cycle contributes to this reality of newness. This year our emphasis has been "getting connected, better together." Next year it will be missions, and the year after will be focusing on the Bible. Getting connected, missions, and Bible. Each of these introduces many new ways of growth and involvement. God is always up to something new.

If you do not sense the excitement or see that something new is coming, then you need to open your eyes and look around. You need to listen, observe and be engaged in this new day. Something new and dramatic is happening right in our midst, and once it catches fire the wind blows where it wills and it will spread. There is something new that is being revealed to us, that is drawing us in. Let it happen in us. I can hardly wait.