

By Pastor Merv Thompson

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

At the annual meeting of a congregation in another part of the country, an elderly saint stood up and exclaimed with unmistakable pathos, "Why are we spending so much time, energy and money on people who are not even here yet?" Why are we spending so much of the focus in this congregation on people who are out there rather than on those who are already here?

Of course, that is the question for the ages. That is always the question facing a congregation. How much time and passion should we spend on people who are not here yet? Shouldn't we be spending 99.9% of our energy on people who are already here, those who are members, and those who pay the bills? Why are we spending so much effort on people who are not here yet?

How do we answer this question? I suppose, to be as simple as possible, it is to say it's because of Jesus. This is not another attempt to avoid answering tough questions by saying that the answer to everything is Jesus. But in this arena, truly the answer is Jesus. Jesus is the one who told us about the good shepherd who left the 99 and went searching for the one who was lost. It was Jesus who said that there is more joy in heaven when one person is lost and now is found.

It was Jesus who told us the story about the sowing of the seed and how we need to make sure that we are sowing seed in good soil. It was Jesus who told us that we are to plant the mustard seed of faith out in the field, so it can grow and in fact become a huge tree, which will bring comfort and shelter to the world. It was Jesus who told his disciples that the Holy Spirit would give them power to be witnesses to the whole world. So the answer to the question about why we care so much about people who are not even here yet must be Jesus.

This answer to the eternal question provides a backdrop for the opening of the Lutheran Church of Hope new worship center. One question could be, "How come we have spent so much time, energy and money building a facility for people who are not even here yet?" If it would have just been for us who are already here, we could have gotten by. We could have offered 13.5 worship services through the week, meeting in several different locations. Or we could have announced either verbally or non-verbally that we are full, and that everyone who is

not already here should go somewhere else.

But instead we are now opening a 2500 plus seat worship center the first weekend in March of 2008. Why are we doing this? The answer is Jesus, who gave us both the great commandment and the great commission. This worship center reflects both mandates of Jesus, to make disciples of all nations, and also to share the everlasting love of Jesus Christ. The more we are doing both of these, the more, it seems, people flock to worship.

The New Testament describes two different concepts of time. In fact the Greek language has two separate words for time. The first is "chronos," which is chronological time. The second is "kairos," which means God's time, the right time, the fulfilled time. The Bible explains that chronological time is important, it is where each of us has to live, and of course it is unmistakably finite.

But it is kairos time that transforms us and inspires us. It is the kairos moment that defines our life, and each of us can point to many such moments in our own life. For Lutheran Church of Hope, this spring is kairos time; it is a pivotal and miraculous time in the history of this congregation, the community and the city. Nothing will quite be the same again when this worship center is dedicated to the glory of God. In the remaining part of this Update, I would like to reflect on how this kairos moment will change us.

1. The first thing the new worship center says to the larger community is that we are open to new people, to those who are not here yet. Word was getting out that we were full. Now we are open again. Even if we have 1500 people per service as we did last Sunday, we still will have more than a thousand empty seats. We finally have room. Church analysts say that when a church is 80% full, it is perceived to be full. We have been full for a long time, but people have continued to flood our overflow areas.

I recently was a consultant to a congregation which had just built a new worship space. Some of the leaders told me that they really did not want to grow. I told them that it was too late; this new space has already told the community that your vision is to reach people who are not here yet. You have spent a lot of time, energy and

money to reach those who have never been here before. It is too late to change your vision.

I attended a seminar many years ago where the speaker said that a growing church should have five key ingredients:

- A. Compelling vision for growth
- B. Visibility in the community
- C. Accessibility
- D. Surplus parking
- E. Surplus seating

Hope now has all five. Pastor Mike for the past fourteen years has articulated most effectively a strong vision for growth - a great commission church. It has high visibility, both by location and also by very visible programs and ministry. It has accessibility, situated on two major roads and near a major freeway, but also with handicapped accessibility and an openness and welcome to new people. It has surplus parking for the time being. Although the time will come, when we will have to shuttle from nearby parking lots.

But now we have the fifth ingredient, surplus seating at prime time. This disappeared some years ago. The new building says to the unchurched and dechured, "Y'all come." Like the parable of the great banquet, Jesus says that there is still room in his house. Go out and announce to the world, "There is still room." Our new worship center makes this announcement loudly and clearly.

2. Secondly, it reinforces the message that worship is central to our life together. There is nothing that is more important for the Christian church today than worship. I see so many churches for which worship is a necessary inconvenience, as they mostly go through the motions. Small groups are vital, personal devotions are life-giving, serving others is essential. But nothing has the impact and potential for transformation as does dynamic and effective worship.

Pastor Richard leads large teams of people who orchestrate the worship events. Pastor Mike and other pastors proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ and administer the Sacraments. Hundreds of volunteers show up to park cars, lead worship, serve meals, prepare coffee and treats, usher at worship, teach children, care for little ones in the nursery, serve communion, provide media, and many other activities. It takes a whole village to prepare for worship. Why do we do this? I suppose the answer is Jesus, but you have heard this before.

A new worship center gives us an opportunity to provide even more inspiring and life-changing worship. A space designed for worship is usually much better than a space designed for education or fellowship. Winston Churchill once said, "We share our buildings, but ever after they shape us." This new space will shape this congregation for many decades to come; nothing will ever be quite the same again. Some of the message will be verbal, but much of it non-verbal. In the new space the centrality of the cross, the importance of the baptismal font, the enhancement of music, the quality of the aesthetics will all lead us to better worship.

3. A third message will be that this is a signature event in the life of Des Moines and beyond. This will be the largest such worship center in the entire ELCA, and our worship attendance of what will quickly grow to more than 6000 on a weekend will be the largest as well. We do not take credit for this; this is a God thing. But Hope will now emerge as a flagship congregation in the wider church. People will visit us from all over the synod, the denomination, the city, the state and the world. Choirs and orchestras will want to perform here. National gatherings will want to partner with us. We truly have the opportunity to be a resource to the wider church and the wider community.

An absolutely essential message that we will have to work to affirm, in spite of our joy in this kairos moment, is that we understand that the building is not the mission. The completion of the building does not signify the completion of our mission. Quite the contrary, the mission is only just beginning. The building will help in implementing the vision, but the building is never the vision. Too many congregations spend years preparing, financing and building a new worship center, and then coast for the ensuing years out of both exhaustion and pride.

But our mission is never a building. Our mission is both great commission and great commandment. Our mission to reach people who are not here yet, as well as to equip those who are already here to be servant leaders. The answer, of course, is Jesus, who will never let us move to automatic pilot, but continues to challenge us to "reach out to the world around us with his everlasting love." So this is a kairos moment, a defining moment, an "aha" moment, a transforming moment. Celebrate it, rejoice with it, give thanks to God. But then return to the mission that God has given to us, to reach out to people who are not even here yet.