

By Pastor Merv Thompson

---

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

Some twenty years ago or so futurist Joel Barker popularized the whole concept of paradigms. By way of definition, Barker says that a paradigm is the "basic way of perceiving, thinking, valuing and doing associated with a particular vision of reality." Or more specifically, a paradigm is a set of rules that define boundaries and tell you what to do to be successful within those boundaries.

A paradigm shift, a paradigm change is when someone creates a new set of rules. Paradigm changes usually happen whether we want them to or not; we don't get to vote on them. The problem we have in this period of history is that change is accelerating. Thus paradigms are changing more rapidly than ever before, and we are often discombobulated.

Loren Mead, the former president of the Alban Institute, applied the concept of paradigms to church history. He asserted that there have been basically three paradigms in church history, each a very different period with different rules and perceptions.

The first of these was the Apostolic Age which took place during the first three centuries after Jesus died and rose again. This was marked primarily by huge tensions between church and state, with Christians suffering intense persecution, but yet witnessing of their faith in such a way that the church experienced dynamic growth.

The second paradigm took place when Emperor Constantine decided to become a Christian and thought it might be a good idea if his subjects followed suit. In fact, he insisted on it. Now the church dominated the culture, and being a Christian was synonymous with being a citizen. The church dominated everything: science, art, music, architecture, education, war and peace. Of course the European church brought this to America, and most of us grew up in the paradigm of Christendom.

But during the past generation, says Mead, we have suddenly moved into the paradigm of post-Christendom. The church not only no longer

dominates the culture, in many ways it has become irrelevant to the culture. Just consider Europe. Living in post-Christendom changes everything for the church; it is truly a "paradigm shift." We did not get to vote on it.

Mead suggests the radical nature of this change; "we are on the front edges of the greatest transformation of the church that has occurred for 1600 years. It is by far the greatest change that the church has ever experienced in America: it may eventually make the transformation of the Reformation look like a ripple in a pond." (Other than that, it is no big deal, right?)

Mead then documents how most people, including church people, deal with paradigm change. The first response often is denial. "This just cannot happen. If we wait it out, it will go away. It is just a fad." The second response is to try and return to the glory days of the past. "Give me that old time religion." Or as I have stated in an earlier Update, it seems like many Lutheran congregations are trying to go back to 1959. I loved 1959, but the church of 1959 will probably not do well in post-Christendom.

I learned first hand about paradigm change in the late 1970's. I was coaching our son's little league hockey team, and I went to a coaches meeting to get a copy of the schedule. When I looked at the fine print I saw that we had four Sunday morning games at 10 am. The commissioner was a member of our church, and so I went up to him and showed him the schedule and mentioned to him that worship was usually scheduled for that time. He kind of looked at me in a funny way, and if he had understood Loren Mead he probably would have said to me, "Pastor Merv, don't you know we have moved into post-Christendom? You are really out of touch."

I would fulminate that I didn't get to vote on this shift, and he might have answered, "that is the way with paradigm change." I tried for a time to stand in the way of post-Christendom taking root in our community, but it rolled right over me without even slowing down.

The third response is to accept that a paradigm has indeed changed, and we need to respond proactively. To quote Peter Drucker, "an entrepreneurial leader is one who sees change as an opportunity."

Barker also made two other observations about paradigm change which have not been as widely disseminated. I think they are especially relevant to the church today. His first statement was that "paradigm change almost always happens on the edge. Dramatic shifts hardly ever come from the center."

Practically speaking, computer software did not come from multinational corporations but from Bill Gates' garage. Google did not come from the center but from the dorm room of its founders. Higher quality and smaller automobiles did not originate in Detroit, but in Japan. Change comes from the edge, the fringe, not the center.

To me Lutheran Church of Hope comes from the edge. It is not located in Chicago in the shadow of Lutheran bureaucracy. It is not situated in Iowa City down the street from the Bishop's office. It is not located in the Twin Cities, the designated center of Lutheranism for the past 100 years. Nor is it in northern Iowa, which has a rich ethnic Lutheran heritage. We are in West Des Moines, only an hour or two north of a part of America that has never seen a Lutheran. Many old paradigms never even made it to Des Moines, so we have been on the edge.

Another part of the edge has been to experience the development of a mega church in the past decade. Who would even believe it? But mega churches for the most part have all come from the edge, hardly ever from the center. (By the way, a clear and present danger for mega churches in the future will be if they begin to be perceived as at the center, then something new will need to come from the edge).

Barker's second observation is that when a paradigm changes, everyone goes back to zero. Think about that for a bit - when a paradigm changes, everyone goes back to zero. When the automobile was invented, nothing the horse and buggy people could do to improve their product would work. When the paradigm changes; everyone goes back to zero. When the airplane began offering long distance travel, the railroads could not do anything to challenge the new paradigm.

We could find many parallels in the church. When post-Christendom arrived in America, in Iowa, in Des Moines, everyone went back to zero. What had worked previously no longer worked. No matter how much we might try to rev up old paradigms, it is an exercise in futility. Everyone has gone back to zero. This will affect denominations, seminaries, publishing companies, church colleges, and congregations

I tend to see myself as an anachronism. I was raised in Christendom, trained in Christendom, did my most effective work in Christendom. But when the paradigm changed, everything went back to zero. When our grandchildren want me to demonstrate some expertise in the digital world, I can only tell them that I come from the flannel-graph era. I was really proficient with flannel-graphs and blackboards, as well as slide projectors, but when the world changed, I was left behind.

Post-Christendom is a huge paradigm change. Huge. We have no idea how it will work out, except that we believe that the Spirit of God will grow the church. This is why it is fun to spend a few days a month at Lutheran Church of Hope because here is a congregation that is being creatively proactive about the revolutionary change taking place all around us. Jesus was talking about these shifts when he said; "You cannot put new wine into old wineskins."

So let's stay a little bit edgy and continue to see changing paradigms as an opportunity. When we find something that no longer works, assume that we have gone back to zero in that area and need to find a new vision for a new time.