

By Pastor Merv Thompson

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

Donald Miller, Professor of Religion at the University of Southern California, has written a timely new book, "Reinventing American Protestantism: Christianity in the New Millennium." The basic thesis of the book is that there is a revolution or a reformation taking place among Protestant churches. I am sure that anyone looking at Lutheran Church of Hope these days would concur.

Miller says that while mainline churches are in sharp decline; that is Lutheran, Presbyterian, Methodist, Episcopalian, United Church of Christ, etc..., church attendance as a whole is not in decline. Instead, he says, a new style of Christian Church is being born in the United States, a new kind of church which responds to the fundamental cultural changes that began in the mid-1960's. With my historical interest in the 1950's, I would quickly add that most of the cultural changes have roots in the late 1950's.

Nevertheless, he calls these new congregations which are springing up all throughout the nation as "new paradigm churches." New paradigm churches, he claims, have discarded many of the common attributes of established religions. Appropriating contemporary cultural forms, these churches are creating a new genre of worship and ministry.

For instance, these churches are pioneering new forms of church music, again emanating from the late 1950's. They are restructuring the organizational character of institutional religion, and they are "democratizing access to the sacred by radicalizing the Protestant principle of the priesthood of all believers." Some of the earliest stirrings of this new paradigm came in the "Jesus people" movement on the West Coast, which would begin both the movement toward contemporary music and also toward non-denominational churches.

In a rather strange way, his analysis is similar to what we often do when we are helping a congregation or organization try to figure out a new direction. We suggest that there are three parts to the process; vision, structure, and staffing. In a sense the new vision is bringing the good news of the Gospel and appropriating new cultural forms to communicate it better. It is creating new structures for the Christian community which is more effective and streamlined, and then

creating a staffing situation which is overwhelmingly centered in the laity, rather than the clergy.

What the new paradigm churches are leading in America, says Miller, is a post denominational Christianity, reflecting the general cultural disillusionment with bureaucratic hierarchies and organizational oversight. While many new paradigm churches remain within existing denominations (Lutheran Church of Hope), they have adapted many of the attributes of the new, including worship and organizational style and the empowerment of lay ministry.

Miller goes on to describe how these new paradigm churches are truly confounding much of traditional sociological wisdom. A number of scholars predicted that religion would virtually disappear by the end of the 20th century; it simply would not be able to withstand the rise of reason and science. But while these prophets of doom were certainly wrong, Americans are still a highly religious people, no-one could have predicted the new paradigm church phenomenon.

Miller, who has his own religious history in traditional denominational Christianity, says that he found two most surprising conclusions from his study of these new churches. The first was that he found how much power the new contemporary music had to communicate the sacred. Centuries of tradition suggest that it is classical music led by organ and choir which primarily have such power; he says that new paradigm churches are giving testimony to a very different reality.

Secondly, even though not having a similar experience in his own life, he said he was dramatically moved by the ever-revealing stories of personal transformation and healing. What he is finding in these new churches are countless numbers of people who have come out of the most dysfunctional, toxic situations and life-styles, and through the power of Jesus and the Christian community they have found new life. It is very hard to disparage that kind of miraculous change, and Miller is awed by it.

He writes, *I believe that we are witnessing a second reformation that is transforming the way Christianity will be experienced in the new millennium. The style of Christianity dominated by eighteenth century hymns,*

routinized liturgy and bureaucratized layers of social organization is gradually dying. In its place are hundreds of new paradigm churches, which are appropriating stylistic and organizational elements from our postmodern culture. This reformation, unlike the one led by Martin Luther, is challenging not doctrine but the medium through which the message of Christ is articulated.

A truly radical statement by Miller for me was the following, *What makes this reformation radical is that the hope of reforming existing denominational churches has largely been abandoned. Instead these leaders of the new paradigm churches are starting a new movement, unbounded by denominational bureaucracy and the restraint of tradition.*

All of this does not bode well for mainline congregations, which, according to Miller, are often trying to ignore this entire revolution in American Protestantism. While they have been in denial, recent studies suggest that many of these denominations have effectively lost an entire generation, and there is little reason to speculate that they will be any more successful in regaining market share than many of the industries in the rust belt.

He lists the following characteristics of the new paradigm churches:

1. They were started after the mid-1950's
2. The majority of the members were born after 1945
3. Worship is contemporary
4. Lay leadership is highly valued
5. They have extensive small group ministry
6. Clergy and congregants dress informally for worship
7. Tolerance of different personal styles is prized
8. Denominational seminary training of pastors is optional
9. Pastors tend to be understated, humble and self-revealing
10. Bodily, rather than mere cognitive characterizes worship participation
11. The gifts of the Holy Spirit are affirmed
12. There is Bible centered teaching and preaching

Overarching all of these characteristics is a spirit of joy and celebration that contrast sharply with the sterner Protestant tradition. Miller concludes by saying that there are three basic cultural understandings that the new paradigm churches practice:

1. **Therapeutic** Many who come to new paradigm churches come with broken hearts, broken lives, and the church offers a recovery movement. There is an emphasis on healing, on transformation, on Jesus making all things new. Yet these churches are not pushing a new narcissism. It is not self fulfillment but God fulfillment that is sought.
2. **Individualistic** That is, it is emphasized that every person needs to live out the faith, to worship, to pray, to study God's Word, to serve the neighbor. Individual responsibility is not relinquished to the rules of an institution or a leader. Each person has the right to question and interpret meaning of religious truth. Yet there is much emphasis on personal accountability, as a Christian we do not live for ourselves.
3. **Anti-establishment** Members of these new paradigm churches tend to be suspicious of bureaucratic structures, and reject many of the external symbols of organized religion. They place a high value on community; often the church is the center of their lives. Institutions are valued as long as they are loving and caring places.

Lutheran Church of Hope has a much more ambiguous position as both a denominational church and a new paradigm church.