



LUTHERAN
CHURCH OF **HOPE**

Pastor's Update

Mike Housholder & Merv Thompson, Editors

925 Jordan Creek Pkwy ■ West Des Moines, IA ■ Jan 12, 2007

By Pastor Merv Thompson

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

During the halcyon days of old when the ELCA was birthed in the late 1980's, pastors usually assumed that when The Lutheran Magazine printed a substantial cover article on a pertinent subject that most of the leaders and many of the members of their congregation would have already digested the material. In the beginning many synods had an "every-member plan" for The Lutheran Magazine, which meant that each congregation was assessed a certain dollar amount each year to cover subscriptions to the magazine for every member of the congregation.

However, when subsequent surveys demonstrated that the actual readership of The Lutheran Magazine by the rank and file of the congregation was miniscule, church councils quickly raced to "defund" the program. In the Twin Cities alone, where I was serving, I heard that the subscriptions to The Lutheran Magazine went from over 80,000 to somewhere around 15,000 almost overnight. So this is a meandering way of saying that I am assuming that very few people at Lutheran Church of Hope saw the rather important article that appeared in the most recent Lutheran. Let us summarize the highlights.

Freelance writer Diana Dworin from Texas named the article, "Yes, Some ELCA Congregations are Growing." Adding to the timeliness and import of the material, Presiding Bishop Mark Hanson amplifies the conclusions of the article in his regular column. The combination here of Dworin and Hanson is quite effective in elucidating the actual situation of growth or decline in the ELCA (paralleled of course by all of the other mainline denominations.)

In order to rather shamelessly grab the readers' attention, the first thing that needs to be said is that Lutheran Church of Hope is featured quite prominently in the article, which we might expect when

anyone is considering the subject of church growth. No Lutheran congregation has experienced greater growth than Hope over the past decade. The quote by Dworin reads as follows:

"Worship attendance has doubled during the past six years at Lutheran Church of Hope, West Des Moines, Iowa, where more than 4600 gather for worship. (5100 last weekend, 12,000 for Christmas). Programs include missions to countries including Ghana and Jamaica, and sermons are available on the Internet by pod cast. The homilies do not shy away from topical social issues—in September it's pastor, Mike Housholder, delivered a forty minute sermon on sex, love and marriage. (I don't know what is more controversial for Lutherans, the 40 minute sermon or the teaching on sex, love and marriage.)"

The article goes on to cite a number of anecdotal stories of congregations which are experiencing some level of growth, from very tiny parishes to very large. All told, the article claims that some 3,000 ELCA congregations are growing, nationwide 3 of 10, but among congregations of less than 150, three of four have dipped or held steady. The author tries to understand why some congregations are growing. "Growing churches usually have strong leadership and a clear sense of identity. Many share a broad concept of evangelism, which inspires even the little things they do. Some churches, after extensive soul searching, gain ground as they pursue with finer clarity their unique sense of mission and call. Others blossom as members explore fresh, new ministries."

"At growing churches it is typical for lay leaders and pastors to describe their congregations as inviting, friendly, and caring. And it is typical for researchers to describe these churches which embrace, though not always easily, the concept of change."

David Roozen, director of the Hartford Institute for Religious Research, has studied church growth trends for more than 30 years. He writes, "Growing churches are changing churches. The world is filled with changing styles and generational changes. If you haven't changed, you're probably not connecting to the life experience, expectations and habits of people today. (Or as the cliché goes, "Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results")."

Bishop Hanson says that we are sometimes tempted to explain the membership loss of 80,000 in the ELCA during 2005 as only the results of population trends in the U.S. Or perhaps we might think it is just a matter of congregations doing a better job in cleaning up the rolls. But by attempting to make our membership losses understandable, we imply that they are acceptable."

"Others in the church (here I think that Bishop Hanson waxes eloquently) seem to explain our decline as somehow a sign of our faithfulness as disciples of the cross. In today's consumer oriented and competitive religious marketplace, it may be tempting to proclaim self-help or prosperity gospel rather than the radical gospel of God's forgiving, saving, and reconciling mercy in Jesus Christ. Let us now, however, conclude that a membership decline is neither desirable nor admirable. (Amen!!!) Many congregations have proven they can be faithful and also be growing in membership."

Bishop Mark continues, "I wonder if we are becoming a complacent church of low expectations. We don't seem to expect much from the Spirit. It is the Spirit at work through the gospel who brings us to faith in Christ and sets us free to be Christ to our neighbor. When the pastor preaches, do we expect that the Spirit will add believers, as in Acts 4? We don't expect much either from church members. We don't seem to expect our pastors to be evangelical leaders of congregations in mission. What if pastors and members took up the call to proclaim the good news of God in Christ, through word and deed?"

Experts say there is no guide for growth which offers a sure fire, never fail plan. One pastor is quoted as saying, "To me it is a mystery sometimes

and that, in the end, is how the Spirit moves and works."

Professor Pat Keifert from Luther Seminary says more Lutheran congregations would be poised for growth if they tapped into a single asset, the Christian imagination. "When it comes down to it, we don't play well in the word of God. We don't imagine well. We're not willing to dwell in God's word and use our Christian imaginations. You need to have an intentionality that grows out of Christian imaginations."

(Our imagination at Lutheran Church was tested this last weekend when we prepared for 200 new members to join and more than 300 showed up.)

Pastor Ann Komeir writes, "You cannot keep the energy growing without the Bible and prayer and acknowledging God. This is God's church and God has called us to this place. Those things that happen, they just don't come from people. They come from God working through people, and the Holy Spirit does wondrous things." (Well said)

Bishop Hanson puts the punctuation mark to close the article, "Telling and living the radical truth of God's mercy in Christ for the whole world is not easily heard or done, but it is our baptized calling through which the Spirit will be at work, maybe even adding 5,000 to our number."

I was very glad to see this in-depth article in the Lutheran. A couple of months ago another article seemed to suggest that the reason the Lutheran church was declining was because of a falling birth rate among Lutherans. It seemed to be suggesting that if each of us had four or five children like a generation ago we could again regain our forward momentum. I found such an argument specious at best. This article by Diana Dworin was an excellent corrective.