

By Pastor Merv Thompson

"Grace, mercy and peace from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ ."

As you have been participating in the ministry and worship of Lutheran Church of Hope, as you have been overhearing what is happening in the larger church, as you sense the currents and crosscurrents which are swirling around the body of Christ today, you quickly understand that some rather substantive changes are in the air. You can easily discern that in many ways the old is passing away, and the new is coming, although we are not clear on what the new shall be.

C. Peter Wagner, formerly a professor at Fuller Theological Seminary, describes perhaps the most profound change taking place in the church, the shift from denominational to post-denominational. He documents how denominations were the new wineskin; the exciting new experiment some three hundred years ago as people began flocking to the new world of America. State churches did not work in America, but denominational structures seemed to correspond to the very DNA of the country.

In fact, Americans have loved denominations so much that they have created hundreds of them. I have a book in my library with the title The Religious Bodies of America by F.E. Meyer which killed a lot of trees with its 598 pages just documenting the denominations of American religious life.

I remember the apex of denominationalism, the 1940's and the 1950's; the movement was truly on a roll. It looked like this would be the "denominational century," as especially mainline churches were rapidly increasing. Thousands of new congregations were being established in new communities created by the thirteen million new homes built during the 1950's.

Seminaries were full (men only, of course), and clergy were often preaching from pulpits which were literally and figuratively "twelve feet above contradiction." In fact pastors were often the most educated people in the room, and many times were a part of the bourgeois, the power structure of the local community.

All of a sudden, everything changed. The 1960's and the 1970's brought appletart upset. Denominations in

almost the twinkling of an eye became old wineskins rather than new, and the skins began to leak. Young people left in droves to affiliate with evangelical churches. Another large group of teens and twenty-somethings walked out and never returned to any church. The evangelical zeal of the 50's was soon hindered by the church's immersion in the political upheavals of the period; the war in Vietnam, Civil Rights, The Woman's Movement, the sexual revolution, etc, in a sense the Great Commission was overwhelmed by the urgency of the Great Commandment.

The most common way to understand this radical change is to identify that we have moved from Christendom to Post-Christendom. During Christendom, says Loren Mead, the church dominated the culture. The church dominated much of the music, the architecture, the education, the science, the family life, and the recreation of the nation. Students were even released from school to attend religious classes, simply because the church requested it. Most communities mandated that stores be closed on Sundays out of respect for the churches; no-one would dare schedule events on either Sunday morning or Wednesday evenings. The church dominated the culture. What a heady time!

Suddenly, as we moved into Post-Christendom, everything changed. The church no longer dominated much of anything, although it tried rather desperately to hold onto its perks. Now Sunday morning and Wednesday evenings were in play for every organization in the community. I as a parish pastor tried to fight some of the changes, but got steamrolled by Post-Christendom.

Once we truly understand that we have been overwhelmed by Post-Christendom (much of the church has been in denial about this for decades) it is a much shorter step to admitting that we have also entered a Post-Denominational world. Denominations were inextricably linked to Christendom. Once Christendom went away it was just a matter of time that denominations began to wane. I document some of this decline in my August 14, 2009 Update. (Look online at [www.hopewdm.org/pastors\\_updates](http://www.hopewdm.org/pastors_updates)) We

did not get to vote on this paradigm change, but the truth is that we have moved from Christendom to Post-Christendom and Denominationalism to Post-Denominationalism.

Now perhaps if denominations had taken enlightened and inspired actions right in the beginning, they might have avoided at least some of the most devastating results of this radical shift. However, it appears as if they have exacerbated the crisis, making a series of unforced errors which continue even today.

One popular notion that came out of the industrial revolution and continued into the middle of the twentieth century was that bigger was automatically better. A denomination of five million people was infinitely more effective, more influential, and, strangely enough, more biblically faithful than a denomination of one million. (John 17 says that we should all be one.) This led Lutherans and other denominations to enter into a whole series of mergers (and acquisitions), in a sense mirroring the business culture.

However today we might ask General Motors, AIG, Time-Warner, Enron, and Citibank how this has all worked out. Large organizations seem to demand large bureaucracies which eventually lose touch with regular folks and are seen as aloof and even dysfunctional. We see it everywhere in our society, why do we think the church would be immune? Sometimes it might be prudent to be counter-cultural rather than climbing aboard a questionable premise.

Another strategy that denominations have cranked up in response to some of the chaos that naturally emerged in the move from Christendom to Post-Christendom is to double down on the command and control structures. At the very same time that liberation movements have been pulsing through our society, denominations have consolidated power into national and synodical structures, leaving congregations with decreased influence and voice.

As clergy have moved from high status, low stress to low status, high stress, thus diminishing the numbers of clergy candidates dramatically (if it were not for the move to woman clergy, we would have a similar shortage to the Roman Catholics.), denominations have ramped up the credentialing processes for clergy and lay leaders. The very minimum a pastor must spend in preparing for ministry is eight years beyond high school and many of those who teach must spend ten, twelve or even more years. While denominations have expanded the credentialing requirements,

congregations are asking more and more for competence rather than credentials. It is almost where the denominations (if they move beyond denial) would have to issue a terse "whoops" when evaluating how clergy and lay leaders are equipped.

And then most visibly of late, denominations have become highly politicized, functioning like legislative bodies voting on the most difficult issues of the day. Some denominations seek to become the "ecclesiastical expression of the right wing of the Republican Party and others seek to fill the same role in the left wing of the Democratic Party." Politics, as Phillip Yancey comments, tends to be ungrace. Thus it seems at times that the operating ecclesiology of denominations today is that of ungrace, creating winners and losers, focusing on controversy rather than what unifies.

What does Post-Denominationalism look like? We really have no idea. Just as Loren Mead wrote that we probably would not be able to describe Post-Christendom anytime soon, we had to live through it first and see how it played out; something similar could be said about Post-Denominationalism. We might have some hints as to how it might look, but much of our response will be guess work.

As a preamble, however, it would seem that there are two things it is not. First it is not non denominational. Non-denominational churches are everywhere; Willow Creek and Saddleback are the most prominent. That is not who we are. We are Lutherans, we accept the Augsburg Confession, Luther's Small Catechism, and the Reformation constructs of "Grace Alone, Faith Alone, Word Alone, and Christ Alone." We will not spend any time at all trying to go back to the first century, or trying to create something out of nothing, or start voting on whether we should have infant baptism. As oxymoronic as it sounds, we are both Post-Denominational and Lutheran at the same time.

And the second dynamic is that whatever we do create will not be "denominational lite." Some initial responses to the crises in denominations seem to be putting together structures which seem very much like new denominations, just with a happier face. Post-Denominationalism demands an entirely new expression (I rather doubt that anyone who pines for a bishop position in the new post-denominational expression will ever realize the dream.) Denominations do not work in Post-Christendom, thus the organizational structure must be radically different.