



Pastor's Update

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By Pastor Merv Thompson

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

Millions on Easter gathered around the world to shout the abiding refrain, "Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!" In spite of wars and rumors of wars, in spite of economic recessions and depressions and in spite of countless personal burdens and challenges that we all have to face, Easter was a time to remember that Jesus Christ is the hope of the world.

The stone has been rolled away, the grave is empty, and our Savior and Lord has overcome the power of sin, death and the power of evil. Just like Mary Magdalene, we heard that God calls each of us by name to follow him and serve him. After such a long and enduring Lenten season, what incredible joy was experienced on Easter as Pastor Mike dramatically preached the Easter theme, "The Greatest Comeback Ever."

As Lutheran Church of Hope prepared for weeks and months for a celebration at Easter, we kept in mind that numbers are not the main thing. We believe that our main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing, and that is not how many people show up. Yet numbers are important in the Bible, and so they are important to us. Each number represents a person for whom Christ died, and each number is a person who needs to hear the transforming message of Easter.

In the book of Acts we are told that 3000 people were baptized on a single day, connecting Pentecost with the growth of the kingdom. We believe that it is more cause for celebration if a thousand people show up for Easter rather than a handful, although we also believe that where two or three people are gathered together in his name, Jesus is in the midst of them. But given Hope's history, we needed to anticipate huge numbers coming and to be ready to welcome them.

Easter has a storied history at Lutheran Church of Hope even though we have been in existence less than twenty years. Our peripatetic congregation has been on the move at Easter (and the rest of the year) and thus far, we have worshipped in six different locations. If you include the two satellite congregations, this adds up to eight different Easter sites. In fact, members at Hope can largely trace their longevity here by how many of these different locales they can remember.

Living History Farms was the first Easter site, followed by Grace West, Valley High School, Vet's Auditorium, Wells Fargo Auditorium, and now the present worship center at Jordan Creek Parkway and Ashworth Rd. In addition, NorthBranch welcomed worshippers at the Ankeny Middle School, and CityBranch joined together at Hubbell Elementary in Des Moines.

Planning Easter celebrations at Hope is a very long and complicated process. Looking back at 2008, some 13,100 people worshipped on Easter weekend, giving rise to the expectation that the numbers would go up once again. We were especially cognizant of the fact that both our worship attendance and our membership has gone up by more than a thousand in the past year, and so we could expect Easter attendance to follow suit.

But many questions always challenge the leaders of Hope in the planning process? How many worship services should we offer? How do we know when people will worship? What happens if everyone shows up at the same time? How can we continue to offer meals when we need the space for overflow seating? How can we provide parking space for a crowd that could conceivably be double what a normal attendance is on Sunday? What happens if we end up with gridlock, with more people than the building can accommodate?

The planning team also needed to make sure that hundreds of volunteers were ready to host the Easter throngs. Prayer teams were enlisted to invoke the power of the Holy Spirit to bring large numbers of unchurched and dechurched people to this event. The food service team prepared more than 3500 meals to be served on Saturday night, early Sunday morning and then again on Sunday evening. One thousand spring catalogues were printed so that visitors could find ways to plug into the various ministries. In addition, 18,000 gifts—a cross key chain—were assembled to be placed on all of the chairs, a cross key chain. Additional parking was reserved at Wells Fargo, and shuttle buses and golf carts secured to ferry people right to the front door.

Two major decisions were made early-on. The first was to increase the number of seats. The present worship space has room for about 2600, thus five hundred more seats were crowded into every nook and cranny. The

Bridge across the hall from the worship center can hold 1000 chairs, so that was designated for overflow on Easter Sunday, but not Saturday night. The chapel holds 350, and the gymnasium has room for 450 for an additional 800 seats. And then, just in case, two large classrooms were made ready with 600 seats and video capability. If you add the numbers, that means that 5500 people could worship at one time.

The second major decision was to try and encourage members of Hope to worship at times other than prime time Sunday morning, especially Saturday evening. For several weeks before Easter, the announcement went out, "Please consider worshipping on Saturday evening at 5:00 or 7:00pm." Ultimately this plea proved to be almost too effective, as at least 5,000 people showed up at 5:00pm on Saturday evening.

As elucidated above, we had more than 5,000 seats available, however there was one problem. The Bridge was organized to serve a meal on Saturday night, in fact 2300 people had dinner at the church, thus it was not available on Saturday for worship. Take the 1000 seats of the Bridge away, and we did not have enough seating. But people scrambled, more chairs were set up and eventually all were seated.

When another 1500 people came to the additional Saturday worship service at 7:00, this meant that 6500 people had already worshipped even before Sunday arrived. Now the question remained, how many would show up on Sunday morning? Would they all come at the same service, or would they spread out over four Sunday services?

The 7:00am service on Easter Sunday, (a sunrise service in effect) hosted 1367 people, a wonderful turnout that early in the morning. Then to our delight, the two prime-time Sunday services had almost equal response: 3288 at 9:00am and 3157 at 11:00am. Given the goal to move large numbers of members to Saturday night, Pastor Mike's observations were fascinating. "I knew about 80% of the people who worshipped on Saturday evening, and only about 20% of the people on Sunday morning." Truly the hope that Sunday morning would be reserved for visitors was realized.

When the Sunday evening 5:00pm worship gathered 1252, it meant that more than 15,600 people came to Hope on Easter weekend. That was at least 2500 people more than one year earlier. Of course we cannot ignore the two satellite congregations. NorthBranch, led by Scott Rains, welcomed 892 worshippers. While

CityBranch, led by Jon Anenson, celebrated with almost 200 in worship. That brought the total of Easter worshippers to somewhere in the 16,700 range. Praise God.

I would guess that it will not be very long before Lutheran Church of Hope will be adding more venues to Easter worship if people continue to respond to the invitation. With America becoming increasingly secularized, and the unchurched population soaring, celebrations such as Easter are desperately needed. Thanks to all of the staff and volunteers at Hope that coordinated such a gigantic effort. Thanks to all Hope members who invited visitors and strangers to come. Thanks to God in Jesus Christ who created Easter in the first place, and who invites us to live in the power of the resurrection. That is the most important take-away from this Easter.