

By Pastor Merv Thompson

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

My favorite church consultant and prophet for the past forty years has been Lyle Schaller. When he speaks or writes—and he has been a prolific writer—many church leaders listen. I still reference often his books, for instance The Very Large Church and The Multiple Staff and the Larger Church are both descriptive and prescriptive for Lutheran Church of Hope.

Somewhere in his writing Schaller made a statement that has stuck with me through the years. He wrote, "Denominationalism died in 1955." Denominationalism as evidenced in mainline churches died in 1955. The implication, of course, is that if this is the case, then we are in the last throes of this phenomenon which began almost two thousand years ago. Denominationalism is dying, says Schaller.

Another way of saying this is to use the language of Christendom and Post-Christendom. During all of the centuries of Christendom, from the fourth century up until recently, perhaps 1955, denominations were the organizational choice of most Christians. Beginning with the Roman Catholic Church, expanding to many more denominations during the Reformation and beyond, exploding to some 300 in America. But if denominationalism died in 1955, where do we go from here.

First of all, ponder the question, why 1955? That almost seems counter intuitive, wasn't it during the 1950's when the church seemed to be on a roll, thousands of new congregations springing up, evangelicalism through Billy Graham's leadership claiming an increased piece of the Christian pie. But while we were celebrating our seeming success, Schaller says the seeds were beginning to grow for our demise.

What was it? Maybe it was Rosa Parks refusing to move to the back of bus, and then a rookie pastor of a tiny Baptist Church, Martin Luther King Jr chosen to lead the bus boycott. Maybe it was that the music of America changed almost overnight in 1955, moving from pop to music with a beat (in many ways an African beat, morphed into an African American beat.)

Maybe it was that television suddenly became ubiquitous, crowding out many religious rituals and values. Maybe it was the incessant movement in America from rural to

urban, where the denominational church never gained the same authority. Maybe it was growing affluence in the 50's, the advent of the mall which replaced the general stores. Maybe it was teenagers become accessorized with transistors attached to their ears. Schaller said, "Denominationalism died in 1955."

Was he correct? Maybe he just had a bad day. Maybe he was crying wolf. I read my usual church publications this week, *The Christian Century*, *Christianity Today*, *Sojourners*, *the Lutheran*, and here are some quotes I discovered. Think about Schaller's comments as you read:

"The Southern Baptist Convention, the largest Protestant denomination in the country, is dealing with plummeting baptism rates, with predictions that the SBC could lose half of its membership by 2050 if it doesn't do more to reverse its image as an aging and mostly white religious body."

"Ex Episcopalians launch rival Anglican church body, conservative Anglicans disenchanted with the liberal direction are creating the new "Anglican Church in North America (ACNA)."

"The Presbyterian Church USA reports the steepest loss in 25 years, nearly 70,000 people have departed in the past year. This decline reflected a recent study on religious affiliation by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life which found that seven in ten former Protestants had left their childhood affiliation."

"U.S. membership of the United Membership church continued to decline, falling by 71,000 people in a recent year. The situation in the Methodist church led a former bishop to write a book entitled And Are We Yet Alive?

"The United Church of Christ, the spiritual descendent of New England's Old Puritans, has lost one million members over the last 40 years, or over 40% of its original membership."

Notice we have not said anything about Lutherans. Wouldn't it be affirming to be able to write that we are counter cultural, rising above the historical or sociological forces at work in other denominations? Unfortunately, our denomination is just like the rest mentioned above,

we are on a negative projectory that shows no signs of abating. In fact, we could argue that the decline most likely will accelerate in the next few years as a result of what will most likely take place at the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America convention in late August, 2009.

The thousand or so delegates will vote on whether or not to ordain gay and lesbians into the pastoral ministry. Since there is absolutely no consensus on the issue, the discussion and the vote will be contentious and disruptive. As in most votes, there will be winners and losers, and some of the losers who are faced with a "fight or flee" scenario, will choose to flee. In my opinion, the propensity of denominations to want to vote on everything, to decide moral and spiritual issues by majority vote rather than by biblical fidelity is accelerating their demise.

Again a couple of quotes from Schaller might give us something more to chew on.

"Usually when denominations merge, two and two does not equal four, it usually is no more than three." When the ALC and LCA merged, two plus two is increasingly equally three, and if current trends continue, will become two.

"More than 90% of newer larger churches are non-denominational. The reason why denominations are not creating such churches is summed up in two words, "intra-denominational squabbles." As long as denominations spend their primary energy and passion on such squabbles, missional endeavors are put on the back burner.

(A Case in Point.) I was senior pastor of a congregation which had dramatic growth each year for twenty years. Except one year. When we looked more closely, that was the year we had substantial staff conflict taking place. I thought we had done a pretty good job of keeping the conflict confidential, not impacting the larger congregation. But in retrospect it became clear what happened, the time and energy and resources of the senior leadership were consumed with the conflict, thus we had nothing left over for mission. We never mentioned this publicly, but people could sense the conflict, and new people avoided us. The more that denominational and pastoral and congregation leaders are enmeshed in dealing with conflict and political infighting, the less energy and passion there is for ministry and mission.)

"The most effective denominations today are around 300,000 in membership." (The ELCA is 5 million.)

"And more caustically, "Maybe denominations need to focus primarily on what they do best, "administering clergy pension funds." I would add, denominations are also quite good at social ministries such as Lutheran World Relief. But for so much else, a bureaucratic structure built for another day simply is scratching where most of us are not itching.

National church structures tend to focus on moving deck chairs around the Titanic, reorganizing, then downsizing, then reorganizing, then merging, then reorganizing. Synods tend to become H.R. departments, trying to keep clergy and others on the roster employed. Neither of these enterprises will reverse the downward drift.

Is there a future for denominations? If we are already dead, then perhaps not. (If your horse is dead, dismount.) Probably our only hope is another Martin Luther, a new reformation, but nothing like this seems to be on the horizon. I wish Schaller would have written a book on what comes after denominations. How does the church organize itself in Post-Christendom?

If Schaller is correct that denominations are dying, then the challenge in the years to come will be to accentuate the new and transformational life we are given in Jesus Christ without succumbing to the forces of decline present in the larger church. Or maybe a cadre of dynamic and growing and effective congregations need to find a way to bring resurrection and revitalization to the denomination.

The status quo will not do it. Denominationalism died in 1955, and so we don't have a lot of time. We need to read Revelation 3:20 again "Behold I have set before you an open door that no-one is able to shut." With God all things are possible, even resurrection. Pray that God will raise up a new vision for the church, so that the future will be filled with life and hope rather than decline and death.