



Pastor's Update

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Vacation Bible School

By Pastor Merv Thompson

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

As Pastor Mike announced this past weekend at worship, there is really nothing like it in the whole church, in the whole world. What at first blush may be perceived as an overstatement "there is nothing like it," in retrospect, may be an understatement. Having been a rapt observer (and reluctant participant in one skit), I would second the emotion. There is really nothing else like it anywhere. It is Vacation Bible School.

If you have ever participated in the Lutheran Church of Hope Vacation Bible School extravaganza, if you have ever surreptitiously crashed the party just to get a glimpse of this phenomenon, you know of what I speak. More than three thousand children between the ages of 3 and 12 showed up once again during the "dog-days" of July in order to blow the roof off of the church, to release tons of energy in the praise of Jesus.

Now one might assume that this VBS ministry has just reached its present level of energy and effectiveness because of the increase of facilities, staff and volunteers. Wrong. Wrong. VBS has been blowing the trumpet, beating the drums and shouting praise to God for just about as long as Hope has been in existence.

Mike and Sally Housholder had this transformational vision right from the beginning of their tenure at Hope, believing that if the children are excited about Jesus and the Bible and Church, this will shape their entire family and future, and color how they will forever view the church. They have incarnated the words of Jesus from Mark 9, "Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them, for of such is the kingdom of God." And they do come; in all sizes, shapes, colors, and backgrounds. It is almost a picture of what heaven must be like, children everywhere, deafening noise and passionate participants.

A favorite church analyst of mine, Kennon Callahan, once wrote a defining book entitled [Twelve Keys to an Effective Church](#). For many years this was the preferred textbook for church consultants. In this book Callahan declares that the most effective congregations in the land are those which have "two or three programs or ministries which are highly valued by the community." The key assertion here is "highly valued by the community" not just congregation members.

Certainly VBS is one of those kinds of programs, with astronomically high acceptance and participation from the wider community. Thousands of children have been a part who are not a part of Hope, but have been invited by one of the thousands of evangelists we have within, probably one under the age of ten. Of course the most effective witnesses are the children, they bring their friends, and then they bring their parents.

To amplify Callahan's thesis, Hope is fortunate to have quite a number of programs and ministries which are highly valued by the larger community. For instance, Alpha, Celebrate Recovery, Meals From The Heartland, Mission Riverside, Taste of Hope, Satellite Congregations, etc. While many congregations have similar programs to these listed above, I do not believe that anyone provides anything even close to our VBS experience.

Mike Housholder is transformed in front of our eyes into "Bible Training Dude," Mike Horstmann becomes "Christian Rock Dude", Mark Brandt became "Captain Crunch" and just about everyone else takes on the persona of everyone from Noah to Elvis. For instance, in the opening skit "Bible Training Dude" was at a secret location when he heard about what was happening at Hope, and the next scene is of the helicopter depositing our senior pastor in our parking lot. As he ran toward the building and in the front doors, a thousand plus children in the worship center are jumping up and down and cheering him on as he entered. You had to see it to believe it. When Mike Horstmann was lowered from the ceiling and fell into the lions den, we couldn't believe our eyes either.

I remember when I was in the sixth grade and attended VBS our teacher was determined to teach us the books of the Bible. It was hard work, with some of us who could memorize easily shining, and those who had trouble in this arena struggling. After a whole week, most of us could name most of the books. At Hope VBS, it is all in a song. The books of Bible are in a catchy song and even first graders singing along, fun, fun, fun! Why didn't they think of this when I was young?

(By the way, an aside to those who are from other congregations and are reading this Update. I would strongly recommend that you dispatch a representative or two to rush to West Des Moines next week, VBS

continues one more week, both mornings and evenings. There is no way on paper to describe the energy, to experience the burgeoning excitement, to feel the passion. You have got to be here!)

In reflecting on the VBS, some observations seem to be in order:

*For our senior pastor and his bride to put forth this kind of leadership and energy and time for the little children says volumes both about their heart and the heart of the entire congregation. If a senior pastor shapes the climate of a congregation (which is part of the leadership task), then the message of Hope is that this is a church for children.

*Preparation plus execution makes for effectiveness. VBS at Hope is a lesson in excellence, planning and implementation. Cindy Manning and her team begin work on VBS right after Christmas, and in the immediate weeks before the two sessions are running on overload. So much of church life seems to be haphazardly planned, and people sense the "mission drift" immediately. Even worship in countless churches seems to be just thrown together in a few minutes. But VBS (and worship) at Hope are planned, rehearsed, often reworked and re-imagined, and then brought to fruition with attention to every detail.

*Among the thousand or so volunteers there are a very large group of shepherds, ages 12 through 19. These are, for the most part, junior and senior high school students. What a thrill it is to watch them modeling for the younger children, watching them experiencing on-the-job leadership training. This enlistment of the older youth will bear much fruit for the church and the kingdom in the future years.

*The Hope facilities and technology transform the overall experience. While a microphone and power point can have some relevance, when you turn loose all of the sound and visual aspects of the new worship center, all of the senses are engaged. The new beat at Hope is omnipresent, surrounding and lifting and inspiring all who are participating.

*VBS is both great commission and great commandment. On Monday each child was encouraged to bring someone the next day, by Wednesday 130 new kids has been brought by those already here.

(Some of you saw the video of Shawn Johnson, the Olympic gold-medal gymnast and Dancing with the Stars winner, which was shown both at VBS and at worship a

year ago. In this she relates how she came to VBS as a child, even though her family does not belong to Hope. She talked about her joy at being a part of this experience and invited the kids to have "a great week and remember that Jesus loves you.)

The great commandment is also an integral part of the week. Students are taught again and again about Jesus overwhelming love and the challenge to them to love others. Part of that love is demonstrating by bringing food items for poor children in Des Moines and surrounding areas.

*VBS is rooted and grounded in the Scriptures. Music is not chosen because of the beat, it is selected because it reveals the Bible and the people within the Bible. Each day a different biblical figure is portrayed, from Noah, to David, to Daniel. Bible passages are given for the kids to memorize and carry with them. The event is not for the sake of having fun and games, it is to proclaim Christ and his sacrifice and his victory.

*But underlying the whole event is the conviction that responding to God and the Biblical truths does not have to be a grim duty, carried out with clenched teeth. To praise God means just what it says, it is about rejoicing, celebrating, dancing, jumping, moving, clapping and singing. Why should the fans at the sporting events have all the fun? The Psalms talk a great deal about praising God with our entire selves, not just our minds.

Remember to pray for Vacation Bible School, volunteer, send children and grandchildren, and to thank Mike & Sally, Cindy, and so many others for their tireless love for children.