

By Pastor Merv Thompson

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

Just the day before yesterday (1967 if memory serves me well), I was a wild-eyed, bushy-tailed rookie pastor with designs on changing the church and perhaps even the world. At the top of my list of priorities for my urban north Minneapolis congregation was to energize the worship life. Worship for too long had been sedate, traditional, predictable, and even boring. (Hard to believe that worship could be boring).

About 25% of the members showed up on a given weekend (still a typical Lutheran average), with the numbers dropping precipitously in the summer months. I wanted to raise the energy level of all aspects of worship, begin to bring back some of our members who were on prolonged sabbaticals, and even reach out to the legions of unchurched and dechurched who lived in our neighborhood.

My first opportunity to begin the reform meeting came when I had my initial meeting with the Worship Committee shortly after becoming pastor. On the agenda for the evening was planning for the upcoming summer. After spending fifteen months as a student minister in four national parks (Grand Canyon, Shenandoah, Everglades, and Glacier), I naturally thought that summertime might be an opportune time to inject new enthusiasm and innovation into worship. I soon found this was not a sentiment shared by most members of the committee.

The recommendation that emerged basically affirmed the decision made for the past several years-to take the existing worship service times at 8:30 and 11:00am and move them up to 8:00 and 10:00am. When I rather naively asked the reasons for changing the times of worship, I was dutifully informed it was because people get up earlier in the summer, and they like to go on picnics. So the schedule was set.

The response, not surprisingly, was underwhelming. Crowding into the 8:00am service was the organist, the custodian, the office secretary, a couple of faithful ushers and a handful of elderly people who lived within walking distance of the church. (Oh well, where two or three are gathered together...). The 10:00am service matched the attendance of the school year 8:30am service. Bottom line, we were down about 50% in worship, just like the year before and the year before that. (What is the

cliché, "insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results?")

Being sort of a rebellious spirit, not usually satisfied with the status quo, I began to research the subject of worship. I looked at what styles of worship were gaining traction. I looked at how worship was scheduled in thriving churches. The more I studied the issue, the more some conclusions began to crystallize in my mind. I had no way of knowing if the so-called experts were right, or whether I could actually change the dynamic in this congregation, but I was hopeful. Here is what I was learning:

*The conventional wisdom that most people are gone all summer is a myth. People are not gone from home, but they are gone from church.

*Changing the times of services is self-defeating. It takes people at least six months, perhaps longer, to adjust to time changes. Thus to change times in the summer becomes confusing to many on the inside, just think of what it does to occasional worshippers.

*Cutting back on worship opportunities in the summer conveys the message that the church is taking a break; the first team has checked out. Come back in the fall.

*Summer is the time when strangers are most likely to be looking for a church. Most people move in the summer. Most of the time parents are looking to enroll children in Sunday School before fall. Why limit access to people?

*Summer is the time when it is easiest to innovate, try something new, add something that might not work during the school year. But that means taking summer worship seriously and not believing that it is down time for the church.

With some of these new found convictions firmly embedded in my mind as I moved to my second congregation, I wanted to see summer worship as a huge opportunity, not a problem. This congregation had been offering three worship services during the school year at 8:30, 9:45, and 11:00am, but had cut back in the summer to two services at 8:30 and 10:00am.

One huge advantage was that the congregation was only six years old, so traditions had not yet been encased in concrete. So at an early meeting of the worship committee and the council, I proposed that we see summer as an opportunity. I suggested that we continue the school year worship schedule, except that we move the middle service outdoors. I had two compelling arguments. First, it would not cost any money, and secondly, it would attract more youth. How could any governing board resist?

Surprising to many, but not to me, summer worship attendance began to grow. The outdoor worship service was a huge hit. Soon we had as many people worshipping in the summer as in the winter. The buzz around outdoor worship exploded. (Des Moines weather is a bit warm for outdoor, but in chilly Minnesota it was perfect.)

From this time forward, we began adding worship services rather than looking for ways to subtract. We emphasized summer as prime time for youth and children's ministries. Above all, we wanted to deliver the message that we were not winding down in the summer; we were winding up. We are not gone for the summer; we are not on sabbatical. But we are moving full speed ahead. Summer is a pivotal time for God's spirit to be at work. We will never be satisfied with 25% participation in worship. Worship is the most important thing we do. It is when God's spirit feeds our spirit. How can we ever see summer worship as downtime?

Pastor Mike articulates the Lutheran Church of Hope vision for worship in the June 2009 Hope monthly newsletter:

"I've never really understood why some churches choose to reduce the number of weekend services, shut down almost all of their ministry areas and basically take a season off. I realize there is a need for Sabbath rest, vacations and breaks in order to prevent burnout. I also know that lots of people, my family included, spend some summer weekends out of town and/or plan long trips away from home

"Still, the fact of the matter is that the overwhelming majority of church members are in town, regardless of the season, and their need to connect with a holy God does not disappear, nor does the mission of the church. For that reason Lutheran Church of Hope has always embraced summer as an ideal time to open our doors wide, and enjoy some great celebrations, worship opportunities, fellowship events, mission projects and classes."

Amen and Amen. Speaking of Hope, the story has become legendary of how Pastor Mike launched a Saturday night service when the church was still very small. He was never sure anyone would show up for worship. Some nights he could count the people on one hand. But numbers were not the point. The point was that worship is central to the life of the church, and a vital church must offer as many opportunities for worship as possible. Saturday services give people with Sunday commitments an opportunity to worship.

With this vision in place, Lutheran Church of Hope continues to offer all six of its worship services all summer long. This is the same schedule as during the school year. There is one on Saturday at 5:00pm, two services on Sunday morning at 8:00am - one in the Chapel and one in the Worship Center - then services at 9:15 and 11:00am in the Worship Center. The day ends with a 5:00pm worship service.

In addition, two garage door events are planned - Vacation Bible School in middle and late July and Taste of Hope in late July. At the same time mission teams are packing up and leaving for places such as South Africa and Ghana. The Leadership Summit from Willow Creek will be hosted again by Hope in early August.

There is nothing in the DNA or the decisions at Hope that could ever give the impression that summer is vacation time from worship. Because people generally do not get up earlier in the summer or need to get away earlier to go on picnics, the times of services are the same as they are the rest of the year. No one has to be confused about changing times for worship because the times are the same.

We expect hundreds, perhaps thousands of new people to show up this summer. There is a buzz about Hope in the community, and many will show up out of curiosity. If they sensed that we were on break, they would leave just as quickly. If they did not see energy or passion for worship, they would return quickly to the church of St. Mattress. The goal is that when people come, especially new people, they will catch a glimpse of the Pentecost church in action, the Spirit moving throughout worship.

Remember the Sabbath Day to keep it holy. Worship is our lifeblood. See you in church.