

By Pastor Merv Thompson

"Grace, mercy and peace."

It is often said, "We have only one chance to make a first impression." We might extend this statement to churches which also have just one opportunity for a first impression.

First impressions shape much of our lives. Malcolm Gladwell in his book Blink, argues that snap judgments are often made in the blinking of an eye. In addition he argues that "decisions made very quickly can be every bit as good as decisions made cautiously and deliberately." This assertion certainly is counter-intuitive to me; I have often rued snap judgments. As one wag wrote, "It was love at first sight, then I took another look."

Lately I have had conversations with several Hopesters which centered around first impressions. Statements sounding something like this:

--We were basically de-churched, raised in the church but had tuned out. Then one day we showed up at Lutheran Church of Hope and ...

--We had just moved to Des Moines, and we were doing the usual church shopping. One day we came to worship at Hope and ...

--My fiancée and I had just been engaged. We began looking for a church where we could be married and eventually raise a family, so we visited Hope and ...

--My wife was a lukewarm Lutheran, and I was a comatose Catholic, and we had not found common ground. Then one day we visited Hope and ...

The manner in which the above statements were completed sounded like this, "Within five minutes of walking into Hope, we knew we had come home." I thought that it would be the worship service which was the most important part of the visit, but time and again people said that they had made up their mind long before walking into the worship center. In the blinking of an eye, in the first impression, decisions were made.

Naturally, when I heard such Hope stories, my first question had to do with these first five minutes. What was it about Lutheran Church of Hope that caused people to want to stay? What kinds of first impressions did they experience at Hope? Why is a "blinking" first impression so powerful?

Perhaps it can be understood in the negative. My wife Jackie and I visited a congregation in the Twin Cities recently where almost all of our first impressions were negative. Not just mildly negative but dramatically negative. We had no desire to return soon or ever. How many people are turned off, sometimes for years and years, by experiencing negative first impressions in a congregation?

With the above as background, I would like to then revisit what the first impressions might be at Lutheran Church of Hope and provide these with some kind of interpretation. Granted, not all people experience things the same, but there must be some kind of consistent response at Hope if more than a thousand people a year are becoming new members, and even larger numbers are showing up for the first time.

*The Buzz. Before most new people even darken the door of Hope, they have overheard the buzz about Hope out in the community. Members, visitors and family members are talking about Hope. Information has leaked out about the Easter services in past years at Wells Fargo, or the Feeding a Million in Forty Days, or VBS, or Taste of Hope. It is the buzz that often has made people curious about Hope and triggers their visit. The more buzz there is in a community, the more people show up.

*Parking Lot. A major concern of first-time visitors is that when they arrive at a new congregation, they will not know where to go, or to park, or to find the front door. In the back of their minds, they are worried about doing something that might embarrass them. But the first thing they see as they drive into the Hope parking lot is the vest-wearing car parker, dedicated to helping all people find an open place to park.

Immediately new people are reassured that someone has been preparing for their visit. This congregation is well organized and welcoming to strangers.

*Entering the Building. Greeters stand at the entrances, offering a smile, a handshake and a welcome. The first glimpse of the crowds of people is that they are smiling; there is an atmosphere of joy present. A huge nursery is right inside the door, demonstrating a priority for children and families. People are dressed casually; there is no hidden dress code. The architecture is friendly, inviting, not ostentatious or intimidating. Information is on flat screens, heralding a modern church. High quality art work is on the walls.

*Energy. What many people have mentioned is that as soon as they entered Hope, they felt the energy in the place. Later they would interpret this as being the Holy Spirit touching their spirits. There is positive energy flowing, bouncing off the walls and ceilings and floors. Energy is more often caught than taught.

*Information Center. Right in the middle of the gathering space is a large circular information booth. People are present to answer any questions and to offer written materials about any pertinent subject. Café Hope is right next door offering coffee and goodies, approximating the experience so many get when they stop for coffee. An adjoining bookstore offers browsing space. Everything in the gathering area is clean, well-organized and people-friendly.

*Brunch. Of course the Hope secret weapon spreads its aroma even into the parking lot - the wafting smells of bacon, sausage, eggs, potatoes, pastries, and coffee. Atheists and agnostics are complaining that this is not a fair fight. Who can resist the smells of breakfast? 1700 people share breakfast at Hope each Sunday, sitting around tables with family, friends and strangers.

By this time, most of the people to whom I talked said that they were already convinced, ready to sign up. Something about the ambiance was uplifting, inspiring, comfortable, hospitable and contagious. But then as they entered worship, in the blinking of an eye, the first impression was solidified.

*Worship Center. Walking into worship, they were greeted by ushers and greeters with smiles and a

bulletin. Looking up they saw a huge screen or two running announcements of upcoming events, immediately conveying that this is truly a 21st century church. They saw people bringing coffee cups and water bottles into worship - a radical departure from the experience in most other churches. Uplifting music greeted them.

The pastor began the service with the words, "We want to welcome all of you visitors today. We do not believe that it is any accident that you are here. We have been praying for you." Then people rise, shake hands with those around them and prepare to sing some uplifting, singable songs, the words clearly placed on the large screens. Then Pastor Mike steps up to the front and hits it out of the park.

I once heard a powerful sermon on the parable of the prodigal son. The pastor asked this question, "What if the returning prodigal son would have met the older brother first? What kind of reception would he have received? Rejection, indifference, hostility, all of the above? Would he have determined that since the older brother felt this way, the father would as well? In many ways, we are that older brother or sister, and the first person the stranger encounters is us. Do they see in us the attitude of the Father or that of the older brother? What is the first impression of the stranger?"

We have only one opportunity to make a first impression. People often make a decision about whether they will return after an initial visit to a church in the blinking of an eye. We must do all we can to make sure that the first impressions are inviting and welcoming. Each week we need to watch for first-time visitors and make sure that they feel the energy, the spirit, the joy, the friendliness which is a part of Hope.