

By Pastor Merv Thompson

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

A generational shift has been underway in the church over the past three or four decades. The shift has to do with how pastors, staff, and lay leaders learn and grow in their understanding of ministry. For centuries most of the learning came in seminaries, colleges, denominational events and, most recently, from publishing entities. Expertise is found primarily in people with impressive credentials, usually numerous academic degrees, and national or international reputations.

Today, however, the overwhelming majority of church leaders are turning to teaching congregations for learning and inspiration. Teaching congregations tend to be creating much of the new curriculum; they are the repository for many of the new ideas; they have specialists who are reinventing various aspects of congregational life; and, and, and, they are willing to share what they are learning for the sake of the whole church. Willow Creek and Saddleback are the two most prominent examples of the teaching congregation, and many of our staff members and leaders have attended events at both places.

There is no question that Lutheran Church of Hope is going to be moving in the direction of becoming a teaching congregation. In some sense, we already are. Alpha leaders from around the state and nation are targeting Hope as a source of learning. Pastors and lay leaders are surfing our web site, showing up on weekends for worship, and calling staff members throughout the week to get a sense of what is happening in this place. We have not quite figured out how we should shape the teaching congregation part of our ministry, but we are inextricably moving in this direction.

One small example of our teaching congregation opportunities came this week when representatives of seven very large congregations in the Twin Cities came to spend a day at Lutheran Church of Hope. Some seventy-five pastors and staff members got up very early in the morning, drove to West Des Moines, spent much of the day with us, and then drove home the same evening. The Hope staff met them when they arrived, provided hospitality and refreshments, orchestrated an abbreviated worship service, served them lunch and then spent several hours in a mutual sharing of ideas.

The congregations which visited us included:

- Hosanna Lutheran Church, Lakeville, MN - Bill Bohline, Senior Pastor.
- Shepherd of the Hills Lutheran Church, Shoreview, MN - Nathan Thompson, Senior Pastor.
- King of Kings Lutheran Church, Woodbury, MN - Ralph Olson, Senior Pastor
- Shepherd of the Valley Lutheran Church, Afton, MN - Steve Kramer, Senior Pastor (Zach Thompson, Associate Pastor and former intern at Hope.)
- Easter Lutheran, Eagan, MN - Jim Borgschatz, Senior Pastor.
- Transfiguration Lutheran Church, Bloomington, MN - Vern Christopherson, Senior Pastor.

(Calvary Lutheran Church, Golden Valley, MN visited us last year, but they sent two people back again this year, primarily to study our Alpha Ministry.

The basic premise that we have at Hope is that we are a learning community. We do not have all the answers; we do not do everything well; we love to hear what others are doing in ministry; and we are thrilled when other congregations are thriving. So we enter into such a day with the idea that we will probably learn more than we can share. Although those coming have similar thoughts.

As I reflected on the day, I had a number of disjointed thoughts. Let me ramble a bit:

*It is abundantly clear that we are being called to be a teaching congregation. We do this very well, and the response of those who traveled a long distance to be with us is enormously affirming. We should never see this as an interruption of our ministry but as central to what we are doing. We are called to build up the whole church, to share what we are learning, to discover the best ideas from other churches, and to build networks with our sisters and brothers in a common ministry.

*Our staff is exceedingly gracious and open. I was once again so thrilled to see the way our staff members were willing to take most of a day to be hospitable and open to these strangers from the north. Pastor Mike and Pastor Caroline led the group on extensive tours of our facility. Mark Brandt and a worship team made up primarily of Hope staff members led worship. Our food

service group provided an excellent meal, and our staff members connected with their counterparts from the other churches in profound ways. Pastor Mike took all of the senior pastors to his office and spent more than two hours in dialogue and honest sharing of both joys and burdens.

*Worship is at the heart of Hope. We really cannot experience Hope without being involved in some kind of worship event. The power of the music was most evident, and even though our numbers were small in relation to the size of the worship center, we filled the place with our voices. Pastor Mike shared some biblical insights about the challenge of ministry, of running the race, of keeping on keeping on, and of not letting all of the obstacles discourage us or destroy us.

*We learned again that we are better together. When pastors and staff members and church leaders sense that they are all alone, and that they are facing things that no-one else is facing, then ministry becomes a very lonely enterprise. But when you are together with highly motivated and talented and excited people, that spirit is contagious to all. In so many church meetings people spend far too much time asking the question, "Why are we here? What are we supposed to be doing?" No-one asked that question the entire day, Everyone knew why they were here and how we are so much better together.

*We got a sense once again of how the Holy Spirit is at work. The Spirit is working differently in each congregation, but we heard amazing stories of growth and transformation happening in other places. It is always good to be reminded that our God is a universal God. Good things are happening not just in our own setting. It is so easy to be caught up in what we are doing that we do not listen for the evidences of the Spirit all around us.

*We also learned what we already know. Road trips are often very good for church leaders. It is always good to go visiting other congregations. We can study web sites, we can make phone calls, we can read about other places of ministry, but there is nothing as moving or personal for us as to actually walk the buildings and grounds of another dynamic congregation. Much of what you learn is caught, not taught, as you see and feel evidences of the Holy Spirit in the midst. This is what the churches which visited us sensed, and what we also sense when we visit such places as Willow Creek, Saddleback, Resurrection Methodist in Kansas City, and numerous other Lutheran congregations.

*We have much more to offer to larger congregations than we do to very small congregations. So often conferences that we have held in the past attract many from very small churches, and it is good that they come. But I do not know how much we can teach them, or what we can learn from each other. Our contexts are so different, so radically different. We seem to do better with congregations which have a host of staff members and specialists who are working in a wide variety of ministries. Then they can connect with people on our staff who are doing the same ministry, and the bonding is immediate.

We will keep trying to discern how best we do this.

*A final personal note. I wrote in the December Update that our daughter Deanna had been diagnosed with metastatic breast cancer at the age of 42. It has been a very difficult six months for us. But this past week we experienced a miracle. During her six month tests; CAT scan, MRI, and bone scan, everyone was shocked to find that the breast tumor had disappeared. Gone! Kaput! We shouted and wept and praised God. We thank everyone who has been praying for Deanna, for God does answer prayer. Thanks especially to Pastor Richard and the prayer team at Hope for such faithful prayers.

Deanna is still not cancer free; it is still in several parts of her back. But at present it is contained, and we are praying that these spots will disappear over the next few months, just like the breast tumor. As Deanna wrote, "Tamoxifen and prayer are the answer so far." Thanks for your wonderful support and prayers. We are very grateful to everyone at Hope.