

By Pastor Merv Thompson

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

When pondering the history of Lutheran Church of Hope, one refrain continues to flood my consciousness, "You are just one new idea away from transformation." You are just one new idea away from transformation.

If one new idea can bring transformation, then what can *twelve* such ideas bring? In a rather intensive look backward at the beginnings of Hope, at least twelve new ideas are in evidence right from the get-go. If one new idea can bring dramatic change, twelve new ideas can bring...well...Lutheran Church of Hope.

1. The first idea did not come from Hope, or anyone at Hope. The leader of the Southeastern Iowa Synod in 1993 was Bishop Paul Werger: he was not happy that the initial start of Hope two years earlier had not taken root, and was determined to change the situation.

Ignoring all the usual protocols of investigation, self-study, interviews and consultations, Werger basically decided he was going to find the new pastor for Hope all by himself. Soon it was clear that he had set his sights on a rookie pastor in rural Huxley, Iowa by the name of Housholder. Picking up the phone, he told Pastor Mike that he wanted him to come to Des Moines and rescue this flailing ship.

When Mike listed reasons why he was not ready to move, (we just arrived, we have doubled our worship attendance, we love the people, etc.) the bishop replied, "What part of "I want you *here*, don't you understand?" Housholder fought the pressure for a time, but finally gave in to the bishop's repeated overtures and accepted the call. I have not seen a bishop disregard his own rules so flagrantly since a similar situation happened to me 26 years earlier in north Minneapolis, but that is another story.

2. When Pastor Mike arrived at Lutheran Church of Hope, the congregation was meeting in an absolutely dreadful place for worship, an office building that was almost impossible to find. The first thing he did was look for better worship space. The new idea arose, how about Living History Farms? It is on the freeway, it has enormous visibility, a chapel already is constructed, and it is empty on Sunday mornings. What's not to love? The move to the new space changed everything.

3. Hope established the protocol immediately that worship was "come as you are." You are welcome in your sweatshirt, shorts or jeans. For centuries up until about 1965 or so, most people dressed up when they attended worship. I remember growing up that Saturday night was bath night and our outfits on Sunday were our "Sunday finest." Dress codes were changing. A new congregation could easily set the new parameters right from the beginning, most older congregations had a great deal of difficulty dealing with this issue.

4. An effective leader has an attitude of abundance, rather than scarcity. It would have been easy for Pastor Mike to see the little flock out in front of him and to think scarcity. But instead he looked carefully to see what kinds of resources were already present. One of the first Sundays he looked carefully at his tall, skinny, hair-deprived piano player with the sheepish grin and decided right away that he had a partner in comedy.

And so the skits began, two six-foot, five inch giants acting like four-year olds, with the congregation falling apart as they observed. In a congregation where laughter and smiles had been in short supply, suddenly people began to laugh so hard they began to cry, they began to clap, and they found that coming to church was truly fun. Pastor Mike repeated the refrain over and over, "We take the gospel very seriously, but we do not take ourselves seriously."

In essence, Pastor Mike found that Mike Horstmann was quite a sandwich, about one half ham and the other half baloney. When Vacation Bible School came along, the M & M show went into overdrive. Today they are absolutely nuts, flying through the air and descending from ceilings. When Mark Brandt showed up a few years later the skits became even more over-the-top.

5. Just after Hope restarted, Pastor Mike called together a few of the new leaders and suggested that a vision be put together. There were just a handful of people and most had never done this before. Before the night was over they had developed the Hope Circle. There was an expectation of people who came to Hope; to move from hearing to believing to bearing fruit, all the while being a servant leader.

Sixteen years later, the church has not changed one word, one comma from the original document. The Bible says that without a vision the people perish, but with a vision, a church can blossom. It is very clear that the group accurately discerned God's vision, and the power of that vision has propelled the congregation into an incredible series of open doors. Pastor Mike has spent sixteen years articulating the same vision over and over again, and just about everyone gets it.

6. The new congregation decided at its inception to go with ministry teams rather than committees. Committees have been around forever, how can you function without a committee? Hope, however, decided that leaders would much rather do ministry than talk about it, much rather serve others than legislate. Kennon Callahan once wrote that people join a church in order to find community, not committees. Amen!

7. A few months after moving into Living History Farms, with the building rapidly filling, Pastor Mike mentioned that the church was going to go to two services on Sunday morning. Many believed that there would now be two half-filled services. Hardly! A few weeks later both services were full. Soon the church started a Saturday evening service and although the attendance was light in the beginning, it eventually began to build.

Why create all these new worship events; so that more people can worship, of course. Today this

seems to go against the grain; even very large congregations have far too few services. I know of one very large congregation in the Twin Cities that has one worship service on Sunday morning. Tragic! The message is definitely out; worship is secondary in this place. Now Hope has six services each weekend, which is one of the new ideas which has helped shape the worship life and the growth.

8. The congregation agreed right from the beginning to feature primarily contemporary Christian music. The beat of American music changed in the mid-1950's, church music began to shift in the early 1970's. New Christian music was being led by such people as Amy Grant, Michael W. Smith, Andrae Crouch, John Ylvisaker, and many others. By announcing that one service would be traditional Lutheran worship, the other worship services would be contemporary music, Hope avoided all the "music wars" which have dominated recent church history. Thus today Hope has five contemporary worship services and one traditional service every weekend.

9. The decision was made early-on that Lutheran Church of Hope would be a church for children. In fact the senior pastor and his wife invested themselves body and soul and spirit wholly into the VBS program, leading the worship, the skits, the programs, the message. Sunday School programs were launched and nursery care was given the best location and a professional staff. A week day nursery school provided high quality education for pre-schoolers under the leadership of Jan Hoyt. Everything for the children.

10. Preaching was given an entirely new understanding. During the early 90's many people were questioning the validity of the sermon. Attention spans are decreasing; can anyone hold the attention of a congregation for more than ten minutes? In fact the largest Lutheran Church in the nation, located in the Twin Cities, is known for having 8 minute sermons in the midst of a 40 minute worship service. It is a source of pride of both staff and congregational members.

Also many Lutheran sermons tended to be theological treatises, something to challenge the mind. However, Hope was not about to give up on preaching. Pastor Mike expanded the sermon time at worship to often 30 to 40 minutes or more. How

counter-cultural! But sermons were not theological treatises; rather they were graced with movie clips, power points, skits, music, and Hope stories, all not ends in themselves but ways to interpret the Word of the Lord.

The bottom line was that sermons were directed at real life for real people, rather than being at 30,000 feet. People have commented for more than a decade that they have never learned so much about the Bible as they have from the preaching at Hope, nor have they ever been engaged so directly by the Spirit of God. Preaching at Hope is unlike almost any other Lutheran congregation in the land, and a major reason for its growth.

11. Not long after Hope was established, the ministry of Alpha was begun. To offer Alpha means a congregation begins with some presuppositions: We have moved from Christendom to Post-Christendom, not everyone grew up learning Luther's small catechism, not everyone knows what the Bible teaches, not everyone has heard of the Holy Spirit, and other shocking assertions. For those who have been immersed in Lutheran traditions, Lutheran faith, Lutheran teaching from infancy, Alpha may not be for you. For everyone else, it might just help, it might just bring life change.

Years later many thousands have gone through Alpha, it is at the heart of the DNA of Lutheran Church of Hope. Any true history of the congregation needs to understand the profundity and the power of this program.

12. The final new idea came the first day Pastor Mike and Sally visited the 4 plus acres the ELCA had purchased for the Lutheran Church of Hope site. The land was okay, but it was too small. It was on a major road, Ashworth, but not on a corner where it would have huge visibility. It was near the road, but tucked away so it was hard to see from the street. It would accommodate a moderate sized building, but right across the street was the huge Catholic Church which would dominate the landscape. Parking would always be severely limited, and there was no possibility of purchasing any more land. But driving on just a bit further, the Housholders

came to the 25 acre site on the corner of Ashworth and 74th (later to be changed to Jordan Creek Parkway). Immediately Mike could see that this is where God wanted the congregation to be, he could see the glow of the Holy Spirit over the land. From that moment on he led the congregation in pursuing the land, and when one of the three owners agreed to donate his third to the church, it happened. In an age when most churches are looking for five acres, Hope purchased twenty-five, land which was visible, accessible and would provide surplus parking. This has to be one of the best sites for a church in the entire country.

We are only one new idea away from transformation. Twelve new ideas help shape the congregation in its infancy, but the ideas have just kept coming. How many new ideas can you count since then?