



Pastor's Update

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LUTHERAN CHURCH OF HOPE

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By Pastor Merv Thompson

"Grace and peace to you from the God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."

Two years ago, October 14, 2005 to be exact, the Update took a closer look at a growing trend in American churches, creating satellite congregations. *Christianity Today Magazine* reported that some 1,000 congregations have launched such satellites and the trend seems to be accelerating.

In a sense, this sounds a lot like back to the future. At one time many new congregations were birthed by mother congregations; this was also true in the Des Moines area. But then about fifty years ago with the growth in denominations, it seemed logical to turn over the task of starting new congregations to synods and national church offices. But in recent years such entities have suffered from a declining revenue base, and thus the creation of new congregations by denominations has slowed to a trickle. Thus the return to an old model, the creation of the satellite church.

The Update mentioned that there are basically three models of satellite churches. The first is the two site idea, which usually means one congregation, two sites. This is quite common in Lutheranism, championed by such congregations as Hope Lutheran in Fargo, Easter Lutheran in Eagan, MN, Mt. Olivet Lutheran in Minneapolis, Good Shepherd in Bismarck, ND and Peace Lutheran in Rogers, Arkansas. These are almost like two-point parishes of old, with a shared staff, budget, governance and programs.

The second model originated from Wooddale Church in Eden Prairie, MN, where the vision has been to start a new satellite every two or three years. Usually a pastor is called to spend a year at the mother church, learning the DNA, doing planning for the new satellite and recruiting a critical mass of people from the mother church to become pioneers in the new venture. This new church begins as a satellite, with a common staff, budget, program, but within three years is completely independent.

The third model is best articulated by Willow Creek Community Church in Chicago, certainly a flagship church for all of Christianity. Willow Creek faced two pressing issues, overflowing worship space, and people driving further and further distances to church. They decided to set up new sites closer to where many of the

long-distance commuters live. Each site is designed to remind people of the mother church, bulletins, logos, music, etc. But most importantly, sermons emanate from the mother church via video, so that everyone still gets to hear the well-known pastor each week.

Several years ago Lutheran Church of Hope decided to explore the idea of a satellite church. Pastor Mike put together a task force to look closely at the vision and logistics of such a start, paying special attention to location, demographics, and growth patterns. Interestingly enough, all three of the above models had something to add to the mix. So the decision was made not to go with just one of the models but to incorporate the best of all three.

When Intern Molly Juntunen moved to become Pastor Molly, she was assigned the responsibility of launching the new satellite, helped by Student Ministry Director Mark Brandt. They organized a series of teams to begin the planning process, everything from worship to children's ministry to hospitality. The first service took place on Saturday April 22, 2006. The amazing news to report is that less than two years later, 350 people showed up last Sunday at NorthBranch.

I want to emphasize how incredible this is. Lyle Schaller, the leading church analyst, has a chart on the size of congregations:

<u>Size</u>	<u>Average Worship Attendance</u>
Small Church	Up to 100
Midsized church	101 to 350
Large church	351 to 750
Very large church	750 to 1800
Mega church	1800 plus

In other words, in less than two years NorthBranch has become a midsized church moving into a large congregation. It also means that it is entering into the top 10% of congregations in the country in terms of size. I would not be surprised if the church doubled again in the next couple years, which would launch it into the very large church category. In no time it will become the second largest Lutheran church in Des Moines.

(Interestingly enough, at this point NorthBranch is growing faster than Hope did in the first years of Mike Housholder's ministry, but of course Mike was just a rookie.)

What are the reasons for the growth? Why has this model succeeded so well when so many new congregations flounder and even die? Let me suggest eight conclusions that I draw in looking at NorthBranch.

1. First and foremost, this is a God-thing. Nobody at Hope is smart enough or discerning enough to orchestrate this phenomenal story. It is God's vision, God's timing, God's Word and the power of the Holy Spirit.
2. The preliminary work done by Pastor Molly and Mark Brandt and the many teams of volunteers was invaluable. The cliché is still true, "If you fail to plan, you plan to fail." So often new congregations end up being one-person ventures, but NorthBranch had at least 100 people involved in planning and preparing for the start of the new church.
3. The connection with Lutheran Church of Hope has been absolutely pivotal. The traditional model of church planting has been to "parachute" a mission developer pastor into a new community and let him/her sink or swim. Usually that model has not worked. But NorthBranch began with the incredible support of the mother church, providing people, finances, music, vision, pastoral support, office space, secretarial and workroom resources, etc. NorthBranch has also joined with Hope at such seminal events as Easter services at Wells Fargo.
4. The decision to partner with Resurrection Lutheran Church in Ankeny was also an "aha" decision. That congregation was between pastors and located right in the heart of the area where NorthBranch wanted to locate, so the timing and setting were almost perfect. Again the timing was almost perfect. This spring Resurrection called a new pastor, and NorthBranch outgrew the space and was ready to move to a new place for worship. A year earlier or later and this partnership may not have occurred.
5. The calling of a pastor to focus exclusively on NorthBranch was a critical decision. Our launch team of Molly and Mark brought incredible energy and spirit to the start-up, but their primary ministry was found at the mother church. So at the right time God brought to us Scott Rains, a highly personable and talented young pastor. Since Scott has become the

resident pastor, the consistency and pastoral leadership have become very pronounced. You cannot build a growing church without a strong and effective (and permanent) pastoral ministry.

6. The worship life has incorporated much of the spirit, life, energy and musical innovation of the mother church. Led originally by Mark Brandt, one of our very best worship leaders at Hope, and now by Erik Carlson, the worship life has been inspired. When you have strong preaching by Scott, or occasional guest preachers Mike Housholder, Molly Juntunen and others plus outstanding worship and music, growth is inevitable.
7. Earlier this year NorthBranch hired Amy Drefke as Children's Ministry Coordinator, demonstrating the congregation's huge commitment to children. The wisdom of this decision was shown last Sunday when the amount of children who showed up for Sunday School doubled from last May, now up to 80 children. When you provide ministry for children, their parents will rush to your doors.
8. And finally, another critical event took place this past spring. Just about the time that NorthBranch had run out of room at Resurrection, a large congregation which had been worshipping at the school just across the parking lot from Resurrection, moved to a new facility. So, for the first time in eight or nine years, that school was open to a new church, and NorthBranch moved to its new location.

With the freedom to now have worship on Sunday morning because it is no longer sharing space with another congregation, NorthBranch began with one service last spring and then went to two services this fall. Now NorthBranch meets at 9:15 and 11:00 am each week, with plenty of room for parking and plenty of room for growth in worship attendance and children's ministry. Almost always when a growing church goes from one to two worship services, attendance multiplies. It was the right time for NorthBranch.

All of us at Hope are thrilled with the story of NorthBranch. We hope over the next generation that there will be many NorthBranches. The fields are white unto harvest.

Praise God.