



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."

I have returned often to a book I first discovered early in my ministry entitled Grow Or Die: The Unifying Principle of Transformation, by George Land. I do not naturally gravitate toward books with a scientific bent (I dropped out of physics in lieu of speech while in high school), but I was intrigued by the title and his basic thesis.

Land begins by asserting that all living organisms are either growing or dying, there is no sustainable stasis. For obvious reasons, I do not want to think of the implications of this theory in terms of my own body or mind, I simply admit that much anecdotal evidence would tend to support his thesis. Rather I would like to apply this to the church, and thus ask the question, "Is it true that a church is either growing or dying?" Is it true there is no sustainable stasis? Going deeper, what does growth mean?

Land states there are really only three fundamental patterns of growth applying to virtually all cases. The first is "accretive growth", which is the standard practice of most growing organisms, getting bigger and bigger. Accretive growth continues to focus on such growth until it finally reaches a limit, a ceiling, and then it is almost inevitable that it begins the process of dying. Such a model is, needless to say, not very encouraging.

The second pattern of growth is called "replicative growth." What that means is an organization which has been focused on accretive growth must move beyond this model to that of mentoring and spinning off new entities. For a church it is like starting new entities within (Immersion), or creating a new entity without (NorthBranch). Of course replicative growth allows an organization or a church to grow almost without limits.

The third kind of growth is called "transformative growth." This pattern seems to happen when an organization senses it has begun to die, and now seeks to reinvent itself. For instance, a pastor friend of mine was in a church that focused almost exclusively on accretive growth for 25 years. However, the

pastor and the congregation hit some kind of ceiling, and the resulting decision was to transform the congregation into something completely new. Now even growth is defined differently.

Moving into a church context, it is abundantly clear many Christians are highly ambivalent about growth, especially church growth, especially numerical growth. Not surprisingly, most mainline denominations are declining rather than growing. Of course many of these Christians would claim that growth is more than numbers and instead they are growing spiritually and missionally. But the evidence for this is highly unclear.

The Bible seems to be squarely behind the idea and principles of growth, both individually and corporately. While it does say two or three gathering together is a quorum for Jesus to show up, the preponderance of evidence is on the side of growth.

"Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing and teaching."

"You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, and you will be my witnesses to the uttermost parts of the earth."

"There is more joy in heaven when one sinner repents than at any other time."

"Faith is like the mustard seed, which is the smallest of the seeds, but when planted becomes the largest of the trees."

Growth seems to be in the DNA of the seed which is planted, in the church. If we want a manual on church growth, just read the book of Acts.

Obviously growth is part and parcel of Lutheran Church of Hope. We are probably the fastest growing mainline congregation in the country, and it seems like every six months or so we experience another huge growth spurt, usually taking all of us by surprise. In addition, we are probably faced with the most explosive spurt we have encountered when the new worship center is completed, if history is any guide. The only thing limiting our growth in the near future will be facilities and parking.

Yet growth is not an unbridled blessing. Growth

produces huge challenges and frustrations. A common cliché which is mouthed often is, "But it is a good problem to have," and my standard answer is, "True, but it does create problems." Leaders, of course, are expected to solve these problems, but some of them become intractable.

The Bible once again gives an honest appraisal of such issues. Moses in Exodus 18 becomes overwhelmed by the growth and complexity of his responsibilities. Finally his father-in-law, Jethro, tells him that he is doing far too much, he needs to delegate, delegate, delegate.

In Acts the growth of the early church is so explosive, 3000 people baptized in a single day, and the Apostles are overwhelmed. Complaints are pouring in that certain people and groups are being ignored, a common refrain at a time of rapid growth. So the apostles select a group of Deacons to take over the ministry teams, led by Stephen, so they can pay attention to the preaching and teaching.

At least four major issues confront a fast-growing and larger congregation:

1. The larger a congregation grows the more complex it becomes. Vision, staffing, structure all take increasingly sophisticated leadership. All congregations, regardless of size, have grown more complicated in the past generation, just look at the world in which we live. But it is the large church which has the highest degree of complexity. This is why noted business guru Peter Drucker says the three most difficult jobs today in America are president of a university, administrator of a hospital and pastor of a large congregation.
2. The larger a church becomes the more pressure and responsibility it places on the shoulders of the senior pastor. A further difficulty often comes when the senior pastor arrives when the church is small and stays until it is very big; significant numbers of people want his or her role to remain the same as it always was. Thus certain people will be disappointed and tend to blame the growth of the church.

A senior pastor in a very large church needs to constantly refocus so as to spend prime time on only the most important tasks. Just about everything else by necessity needs to be delegated. I was forced early as a senior pastor to give up counseling, give up

teaching confirmation, give up involvement with youth, give up picking church music, give up supervising most staff members, give up most meetings. A church of 1,000 or 5,000 or 10,000 still has only one senior pastor, and unless this pastor delegates just about everything, he or she is going to burn out.

3. Much of the effectiveness of a large congregation is dependent on the quality (not the quantity) of the staff, paid and unpaid. Growth tends to put enormous pressure on all staff. Drucker says, rather harshly, that each time an organization doubles in size, half of the staff becomes obsolete. I am not sure this is true to the same degree in a church, but each doubling does tend to overwhelm certain staff members. It becomes increasingly a trend for many staff to feel each day they are falling more and more behind.
4. A fast-growing and larger church changes the role of the laity. An obvious change is in the structure, as the congregation moves from a committee led to a staff led church, usually causing some early leaders to feel dispossessed. Governance changes from an "ownership" model, everyone votes on everything, to a "trust" model, where the congregation trusts the elected leaders and the senior staff. This eventually leads to a tiny remnant showing up at congregational meetings, which is not a negative thing but an affirmation of the trust which is present.

A natural result of such growth is that many of the laity find it increasingly difficult to "break in" to the congregation and the ministry. This is one reason why most large churches have moved to a small group model. Also it is why some churches have moved toward ministry teams as a way to engage larger numbers in ministry. Our KQ, Alpha and Music ministry are cases in point.

For Lutheran Church of Hope it is quite clear that accretive growth will need to give way very quickly to replicative growth. We can only double one more time on this site, and then we will hit a ceiling. So the growing future will, by necessity, move to the replicative centers, namely the satellite congregations. Our challenge will be to continue to discern God's vision as we enter uncharted territory, and figure out how God's amazing gift of growth can be opportunity rather than a problem.