



LUTHERAN
CHURCH OF **HOPE**

By Pastor Merv Thompson

Pastor's Update

Mike Housholder & Merv Thompson, Editors

925 Jordan Creek Pkwy ■ West Des Moines, IA ■ July 22, 2005

"Grace to you and peace."

Bishop Peter Rogness from the St. Paul Area Synod of the ELCA wrote a powerful editorial recently in the Minneapolis Star Tribune. I quote a part of his article:

"Great movements in recent history have arrived suddenly, unannounced and unanticipated, movements as varied as civil rights, the rise of feminism and the fall of communism." I think—and I hope—that another strong and world-changing movement is gaining strength; a global consensus that the deadly grip of poverty must end.

Signs of this consensus are emerging. As host of the G-8 summit, the United Kingdom set the agenda and determined that ending extreme poverty would be the focus on this meeting of the world's most powerful nations. In advance of that gathering, rock stars and religious leaders alike convened to declare that the time has come; in the words of the United Kingdom's grassroots campaign—Make Poverty History.

Most of these nations have indicated their increased commitment to these goals. The United States continues to lag behind the commitment of other nations, but even here there are significant stirrings. President Bush announced that he will ask for \$1.2 billion over five years for health and education in Africa, which is noteworthy. His administration has shown more muscle in this effort than any other in the last 20 years.

Recently I joined a remarkable gathering of religious leaders from the U.S. and the United Kingdom to make a public appeal to governments to step up. What was remarkable wasn't our advocacy, religious folks are supposed to care about the poor. What was remarkable was the makeup of this delegation. Religious bodies that have stood together publicly on little else were unified.

Jim Wallis, an evangelical activist, convened a dozen people representing not only mainline Protestants and the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, but also rep-

resentatives from mainline evangelical bodies, including the National Association of Evangelicals and the World Evangelical Alliance. The leaders of the Bread for the World and World Vision joined in. These groups vary widely in history and tradition, theology and positions on a host of issues.

But on poverty, we stood together. On the need for our government to take strong action, there was urgency and passion. I think this movement is, at its heart, a religious one. Perhaps the time of claiming exclusive religious certainty that polarizes and vilifies is waning, finally a new movement stirs, a recognition that at the heart of our faith is the simple claim that God is gently but surely guiding us to live lives of compassion and solidarity with all who live in the grip of poverty.

We spent billions for the equipment of war, seeking to establish our security, and the unstable regions of the world view us as the world's strongest power. We would be far more secure if we were viewed instead as the world's most compassionate nation, seeking to provide education, health, food and shelter to the world's children. We have the means to eliminate poverty. What we have lacked is the moral will to make that happen." Thus writes Bishop Rogness.

In a recent sermon I made much the same point in talking about Rick Warren. I mentioned that Warren, pastor of Saddleback Church in Orange County, California, is probably the most influential pastor and evangelical leader in this country. His book, which we used a while ago called Purpose Driven Life has sold over 22 million copies.

When I first heard he was selling so many books I immediately became worried that he would take the path so many other Christians have taken when they suddenly become rich and famous and begin to build monuments to themselves. Too often celebrities, even Christian celebrities, begin believing their own

press notices and soon begin to think it is all about them, not about the God they are supposed to be serving.

But I have been impressed with what Warren is doing with his new found fame and fortune. He and his wife have decided to give away 90% of all of the proceeds from his books, and has set up foundations to seek to alleviate poverty in Africa. Warren has joined with Jim Wallis in defining poverty as a moral issue and to say that it is absolutely immoral that a few in this world have so much and billions have so little.

Thus Warren is seeking to mobilize millions of people and thousands of congregations to help in this campaign. He has challenged the 2500 small groups in his own congregation to each adopt communities in Rwanda, one of the poorest of the poor countries. I admire him for stating over and over that he has no interest in participating in the cultural or religious wars of today, but he believes that God is calling him to lead this campaign on behalf of Africa.

Warren says, "I deeply believe that if we as evangelicals remain silent and do not speak up in defense of the poor, we lose our credibility, and our right to witness about God's love for the world. It is a moral issue, it is a compassion issue and because Jesus has commanded us to help the poor, it is an obedience issue."

In this vein next month Pastor Pat Quaid from Hope will lead a group to Ghana in Africa in order to find ways that we can help alleviate poverty and hunger and despair. It is a way to join with Christians all over the world to respond to Jesus command.

All this reflects Paul's words in Romans 13 when he says, "Love your neighbor as yourself." Love does no harm to one's neighbor. Love does no harm to one's neighbor. The urgency is clear, we are trying to make up for past centuries when we have done inestimable harm.

Several months ago I wrote an Update about the emerging church. I explored how one of the major themes of the emerging church is that we follow

both the "Great Commission" and the "Great Commandment." Mainline churches have seemed to focus almost exclusively on the great commandment and evangelical churches have been primarily concerned with the Great Commission. What is radical about the emerging church is that it is focused on both of these directives of Jesus.

What is the Great Commission, "*Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing and teaching.*" What is the Great Commandment? "*You shall love the Lord your God with all of your heart, soul, strength, and mind and your neighbor as yourself.*" The emerging church is concerned with both evangelism and justice, both concern for people's souls and for their bodies, both for Jesus as Savior and as Lord.

So pray that Bishop Rogness and Rick Warren might be right, that there is a growing consensus in the world that poverty is immoral, that Jesus has called us to care for the poor. Or as Jesus says in Matthew 25, "*Whatever you do, whatever you do for the least of these my sisters and brothers, you do it for me.*" It's about time.