



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 8, 2005

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

I love task forces. I love task forces because I never know where it will lead, never know how God will surprise and challenge us in new ways. Part of the fun comes during the extensive learning phase in which we engage right from the start. We believe that the more we learn the more dynamic and expansive the resulting vision might be.

Such has been the experience of the Leadership Center Task Force. For instance, in our visit to Hosanna Lutheran Church in Lakeville, MN, Senior Pastor Bill Bohline highly recommended a book he was reading. It was entitled The Church of Irresistible Influence and was written by Robert Lewis. None of us on the task force had heard of the book before. First one person bought the book, then another, then the whole task force began reading the book, and it became a dramatic "aha" for the entire group.

Since the subject material of the book is applicable to a much wider audience than just the task force, I thought I would review some of the highlights of the book and encourage those who are interested in this subject to read it. You can purchase it through our bookstore if you wish. At the risk of condensing too much, let me try and elucidate some of the basic themes.

Robert Lewis is Pastor of Fellowship Bible Church in Little Rock, Arkansas. While he is writing primarily from an evangelical perspective, I found that just about everything he said applied to mainline churches as well. After a number of years of quite dramatic growth, he describes how his church reached a crisis. The excitement which had been so pervasive started to wane.

What they discovered was that they had been focusing almost exclusively on equipping people for ministry and service. Hundreds of people were active in small groups, again being equipped for ministry. But when they surveyed the people the same question kept emerging, "Equipped for what?" If the church is equipping people, for what are they being equipped? Most of the people could not answer the question, they did not know for what they were being equipped.

Lewis says that this three word question, "Equipped for what?" was like a bomb going off within the church walls, one which led to a complete revisioning and restructuring of

the congregation. The survey also determined that if the church continued on its present course, it would eventually function, like most other churches, as a refuge from the world, a sort-of Christian club that exhausted itself trying to keep its members happy. It would be focused almost entirely on inward needs. Success would be measured not by biblical standards of courage and faithfulness, but by personalities, numbers, entertainment value, money and facilities.

So the congregation decided to move in a radically new and bold direction. Matthew 5:16 became the benchmark of this vision, "*Let your light so shine before others that they may see your good works and glorify your Father who is in heaven.*" Let your light so shine before others that they may see your good works. What good works? This was the question that confronted this congregation.

Larger sociological studies also challenged them to create a new vision. For they found research was saying that Christianity is not a dominant social force in our country, even though a majority claim to be Christian. In fact, six out of ten people in the country believe that the church is basically irrelevant. In addition, a growing sense of isolation and powerlessness pervades much of the contemporary church.

Researcher George Barna confirmed this sense when he compared the lifestyles of Christians and non-Christians, using 131 different attitudes, behaviors, values and belief measurements. In the end he found that there was no visible differences between the two groups. And Barna makes the rather disturbing assertions, "America will not be won to Christ by establishing more churches like the vast majority we now have."

Lewis describes how Fellowship Bible Church developed a new mission statement, "A community of people who stand firm in the truth over time against raging currents of opposition and who present living proof of the loving God to a watching world." The new idea which emerged was that this church, and eventually many partner congregations, would become an irresistible influence in that community, a catalyst for change. He said it was entirely consistent with Jesus big idea for Christians, that they be the light of the world and salt of the earth.

The basic vision is spelled out with the following description, "Fellowship Bible Church is moving from being served to serving, from finding community in the church to impacting the community as the church, from retreating to influencing, from isolation to engagement, from the church of my needs to the church of good deeds."

Lewis then includes several chapters of stories of people in his congregation who took this new challenge seriously, that the role of Christians is not to retreat from the world but to become a part of irresistible influence in the world. Many of his members became transformational leaders in the community at large, dealing with the enormous problems which any urban area exhibits.

Lewis also helped put together a coalition of congregations which took this mission one step further. Each year they focused on one weekend when thousands of Christians would let their light shine and they would do good works in the community. For instance, he describes the results of one of these weekends, called ShareFest, with over 100 churches participating.

26 public schools renovated and refurbished.
\$400,000 of manpower and materials invested in area schools.
8,000 Christians gathered at the arena to pray for school principles, teachers, students.
Two Habitats for Humanity homes built and \$80,000 collected to pay for them.
2500 Children's coats collected.
4,000 new toys collected.

This leads Lewis to the following questions for congregations to consider:

- *Can you imagine the community in which you live being genuinely thankful for your congregation?*
- *Can you imagine city leaders valuing your church's friendship and participation in the community, even asking for it?*
- *Can you imagine the neighborhoods around the church talking behind your back about how good it is to have your church in the area because of the tangible witness you have offered them of God's love?*
- *Can you imagine a large number of your church members actively engaged in and passionate about community service, using their gifts in a way never imagined possible?*
- *Can you imagine the community actually changing*

because of the impact of your congregation's involvement?

- *Can you imagine the spiritual harvest which would naturally follow if all this were true?*

Our task force members were also vitally interested in a chapter on the Fellowship Bible Church commitment to leadership development, both lay and clergy. So much was directly applicable to our own plans and dreams. Like Hope, Lewis's congregation has both a vision of planting new churches and also equipping leaders to lead in the future. Their four fold vision is as follows:

- *Implement a one-year residency program where young seminary students would come and gain personal insight and practical leadership skills.*
- *Strategically plant congregations and revitalize others through a leadership network.*
- *Develop a church consultation arm to respond to specific and ongoing requests for help.*
- *Create a national church conference to influence churches broadly and help identify potential partnerships.*

During the next fifteen years Fellowship Bible Church has determined that they will need at least eight full-time staff members to be effective, to accomplish the following:

- *Directly plant 100 congregations with visionary leaders who embrace the vision of Fellowship Bible Church.*
- *Directly influence 1000 congregation leaders who would join with them in this vision.*
- *Generally influence 10,000 church leaders through church conferences and consultations.*

Our vision may not end up being the same as this, but I am sure some things will be similar. But certainly [The Church Of Irresistible Influence](#) is a book well worth reading, especially for those who wish to help us dream great dreams for Lutheran Church of Hope.