



LUTHERAN
CHURCH OF **HOPE**

By Pastor Merv Thompson

Pastor's Update

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

As Father's Day approaches, I am reminded of an ongoing question which challenges the church in a variety of ways; how does one's gender affect spirituality, church membership, church attendance, and church participation. A rather casual observance of the average church usually reveals that women are much more in evidence than men. I noticed this early in life when I saw how many of my friends came to church with their mothers, and it was rare to see their fathers.

Making this issue all the more complicated is the fact that such a pattern seems to be more or less reserved to the Christian Church. In many other religious traditions; Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism or Islam, male participation is as high or even higher than that of females. Such data certainly raises the question of why Christians seem to have more trouble reaching men than other religions.

So much of what is written today about gender is hopelessly dated. We continue to find much of the material resembling the "Women are from Venus, Men are from Mars" approach to spirituality. Of course what happens whenever we attribute certain behaviors or attitudes or tendencies to one sex or the other, we need to spend huge amounts of time spelling out all of the exceptions to the rules.

Further complicating the question is the whole debate about "nature" versus "nurture." Are the actions of men and women arising out of their genes or are these conditioned responses learned from their surroundings. It is my conclusion that the issue itself is a serious one, but most of what passes for analysis is superficial and often sexist.

At the outset I must confess that I have dismissed one noted analyst of such matters, that of my esteemed former Governor, Jesse "The Mind" Ventura of Minnesota. He is the one who made the famous (or rather infamous) comment that "religion is primarily for weak people." He then went on to use his pious and long-suffering Missouri-Synod Lutheran wife as a case in point. His implication, which is readily accepted by many of the elites in the world as well, is that men, being the stronger sex, don't need religion nearly as much as the weaker sex.

A new book just reviewed in the New York Times calls attention to the issue. It is called [Why Men Hate Going to Church](#)

by David Murrow. The book asserts that the gender gap is the elephant in Christianity's living room that almost no one wants to acknowledge or discuss. Unfortunately, while the question he raises is most relevant, much of his analysis tends to fall back upon sexual stereotypes.

For instance, let me quote some of his conclusions: "Men hate going to church because they can't sit still, they want to be outdoors, are hunters and warriors, can't sing, value boldness, love action, tools, technology and competition. Women, on the other hand, tend to be gatherers and child tenders." I am sure this brief synopsis will move many of the readers of this Update to rush out and buy the book.

Yet we cannot dismiss the question. I have had numerous men tell me over the years, "My wife handles the spiritual issues of our family." Is that genetic, typed into our genes? I rather doubt it. Is it nurture, the way men and women were raised in their own family of origin and community? Or is the problem with the church itself, it has become too boring, too predictable, too other-worldly, that it has not found effective ways of engaging men?

Traditional mainline congregations, in which many of us were raised, had very clear understandings of the role of men and women. Pastors by and large were men, most of the church councils and boards of trustees were men. Most of the volunteers, the overwhelming majority of the Sunday School teachers and nursery workers were women.

To be honest, large sections of Christianity are unabashedly sexist. In Roman Catholicism, in much of fundamentalist Christianity, in the Southern Baptist Convention, in the Lutheran Church Missouri and Wisconsin Synods, the basic underlying pattern is that "men lead and women serve." Women are even prohibited by constitution from most leadership roles, most significantly from ordained ministry.

Catholic intellectuals James and Evelyn Whitehead in their book [The Emerging Laity](#) discuss at length what they call "an artificial shortage of leadership in the church." By limiting priesthood only to celibate men, the church has artificially limited the number of leaders it has, and so today there are huge shortages. All of this is to keep power in the hands of the few. They appeal for unleashing to power and gifts of all of God's people, women and men whom God calls into leadership.

Another reason for greater participation of women than men is simply demographics. Women tend to live longer and retain their health better than men. With the average age of Lutherans and other mainline Christians to be well over age 60, many more women are around than men. That particular statistic doesn't have all that much relevancy at Hope, but it is certainly true in many small towns and older urban congregations.

As I have noted in other areas as well, I tend to see Lutheran Church of Hope is being counter-cultural. Much of what is happening at Hope is not common to other congregations. That doesn't make us better than anyone else, but it does mean that some visionary leaders have been very intentional in challenging some status quos.

One of the first impressions I had when I visited Hope was the number of men at worship. I am not exactly sure what the split might be between male and female, but it does seem we have an unusually high percentage of men on Saturday and Sunday, and also at Immersion. (Incidentally, this observation probably has no meaning whatsoever, but I have also noticed that we have more very tall men in this church than I have ever seen before. Maybe it is because we have a very tall senior pastor, maybe it is because men and women grow taller in Iowa than Minnesota, or maybe it is just that I am growing shorter. I really don't know why.)

Thus the question, why is there a higher percentage of men at Hope than other churches? Let me postulate some possible reasons:

We live in a community where the overwhelming majority of people live in nuclear families, most with marriages intact. This would automatically mean more men live nearby than in some other communities.

Growing numbers of husbands and wives see marriage as a partnership, sharing all responsibilities including that of the spiritual life of the family. Hope's marriage and family ministry gives much impetus to this idea.

The Alpha Ministry, which has touched the lives of thousands of Hopesters, has strongly encouraged both men and women to participate and to lead.

Marriage preparation classes (36 couples just completed six weeks together) teaches engaged couples how to worship together, pray together, serve together.

PIGS (Pretty Interesting Guy Stuff) has brought together large numbers of men to pray and study and grow deeper in their faith and life.

Outside movements such as Promise Keepers have generated spirit and friendships and involvements of large numbers of men.

Mission outreach has struck a very responsive chord with men, building cabins at Riverside camp, working alongside other partners in Jamaica and Mexico. Such ministry attracts both men and women who wish to express their faith in action.

I have no data to prove this, but I think that many men prefer contemporary Christian worship rather than traditional organ and hymns. Certainly the twelve bands which lead worship feature many men and women who seem to love the more upbeat music. The only evidence I have is to observe our contemporary services, and see the large percentage of men participating enthusiastically in the worship.

EQV is a highly successful ministry to high school boys, contrasting with so many youth programs which attract mostly girls.

In summary, my answer to the book about men hating church would simple be, "not all men hate church." Instead, large numbers of men are following Jesus Christ and are developing into servant leaders. We still have to work at this, still have to create new visions and opportunities for both men and women. The culture very often pressures men to find meaning in other arenas, but the wind of the Spirit here at Hope is leading men to become the people God meant them to be.

That is good news on Father's Day.