



LUTHERAN
CHURCH OF **HOPE**

By Pastor Merv Thompson

Pastor's Update

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

We are in a period of history where the church is faced with incessant and even revolutionary change. Of course the Christian community truly has no choice in the matter, since the world around it is also in the midst of accelerating change.

I remember a friend who once said, "the world is changing so fast, everything is changing, why can't the church just be the one place that stays the same." I reminded her that if this was the standard we would still be speaking Norwegian at worship. Most of us would like to calibrate the changes, responding to some and ignoring others. But for the most part we don't have a vote in all of this, change happens whether we want it to or not and we have to decide how to respond.

Peter Drucker, who was the dean of America's business and management gurus, writes in his book Innovation and Entrepreneurship that what is needed today are entrepreneurial leaders, those who can find innovative ways to respond to change. In fact, he says the definition of an entrepreneurial leader is one who embraces change, or as he puts it, "the entrepreneur always searches for change, responds to it, and exploits it as an opportunity." While man wrings their hands over change, an effective leader needs to look directly at the change and see how it can afford opportunity for ministry.

One of the problems we have when change comes so rapidly is that pastors usually have been educated and trained in a different generation, and much of what they learned is no longer applicable. Futurist Joel Barker puts it in stark terms when he says "when a paradigm shifts, everyone goes back to zero." When rapid change happens, everyone goes back to zero. And only the pastors and leaders who find ways to adapt, or as Drucker says, to exploit the change, will be effective.

I am a good example of such a dinosaur. There is no

question that I am a product of the "flannel graph" era, blackboards and flannel graphs were the multimedia of the day. I did not even see television until I was 10 years old and we did not have one in our home until I was a teenager—and for a time that was just one channel. I now am amazed as I watch Pastor Mike use movie clips, power point, various kinds of graphics and pictures. All of that is far beyond my level of competence, I have no ability to even think visually, I am strictly a printed page and spoken word devotee. I am a relic of a far distant past.

A leading interpreter of change in mainline circles has been a Methodist by the name of Kennon Callahan. In his book, Effective Church Leadership, Callahan describes one of the most dramatic changes to affect the church:

"The day of the professional minister is over. The day of the missionary pastor has come. These are the words of gentle confirmation, not striking prophecy. A few who read these words of quiet declaration will say they are startled. They will get caught up in a futile, romantic longing for a church culture. Some may protest, wonder out loud, if this startling, bold prophecy will come true. I can assure you that it will not come true in the future—because it has already happened. These two statements describe what has taken place, not what may occur.

The professional minister movement did not end with a noisy bang. It ended quietly, suitably, and decently enough a few years ago as professional ministers experienced a gridlock of meetings, desks stacked high with papers, calendars filled with appointments, and declining worship attendances in their churches. There was no climactic event, no dramatic conclusion. The professional minister movement born in the church culture of the late 1940's simply ceased to be functional in the mission fields of the 1980's. That way of being a minister worked for nearly forty years.

But it became dysfunctional. It no longer worked. The symptoms of its demise are self-evident in the decline of some of the “mainline” denominations of our time. It is no accident they are hemorrhaging and dying. The way (or essence) of being a professional minister—with its understanding of the nature of leadership and the related attenuated behavior patterns, values and objectives, may be functional in a reasonably churched culture. But that way of doing ministry is lost in the mission field. It is doomed.

Professional ministers are at their best (and they do excellent work) in a churched culture. But put them in an unchurched culture, and they are lost. In a churched culture, they do a reasonably decent job of presiding over stable and declining churches. They maintain a sense of presence, dignity, decorum, and decency, with a quietly sad regret, much like a thoughtful undertaker who sees to keeping things in good order throughout the funeral.” (So writes Kennon Callahan. His more famous book, [Twelve Keys to An Effective Church](#) is almost the gold standard for judging the effectiveness of a congregation and its leadership.)

When I review the above I am reminded of the time in a previous parish when I sat in with a group of women having coffee in the church lounge. They asked me if I had just seen the man who walked into the building, he was wearing a suit, and, as one of them commented, “he looked like he was either a pastor or an undertaker.” I am not sure how to take that, but maybe Callahan is right, many of us pastors look and function like undertakers, presiding over the decline and ultimate death of many congregations.

I have a friend who is a bishop of the Southeast Synod of the ELCA in Atlanta, Georgia. He often makes the comment, “We only call missionary pastors in this synod. Professional ministers do not work in Georgia.”

What is a missionary pastor? My grandfather was a missionary to Madagascar in the early part of the 20th century, so it is helpful to read what he had to do. He had to be entrepreneurial, creating something completely new in order to reach people.

He had to learn the language, the culture, to understand the everyday concerns and sorrows that the people had. He had to spend most of his time out in the community, not in an office. He had to find a group of people and help them create a compelling vision for the future, one which would capture the imagination of the people. He needed to try and change cultural and community practices which were harmful to the people, he needed to echo Jesus’ words about how important children were to the kingdom, “Let the little children come to me and do not stop them.” He needed to gather together the incredible musical talent found in that culture and help them learn Christian music. He needed to start new churches, new ministries, new opportunities for service and caring. He certainly understood the words almost 100 years ago, the day of the professional minister is over, and the day of the missionary pastor has come.

Kennon Callahan sums up this section. “We need a new understanding of leaders. On a mission field, leadership is best understood as focusing outside, in the world, not inside, in the church. We need an understanding of leadership that is more intentional and less passive, more relational and less organizational, more missional and less institutional. The day of the churched culture is over, the day of the mission field has come.”

Lutheran Church of Hope is one of the best examples of how to respond to these changes. Our goal is never just to build a great church, but to transform the community. Our goal as pastors is never just to be professionals, but to be missionaries. All of this is very different from the training I had in the 1960’s, and unfortunately, is still the basic model of equipping seminarians even today. What we need is a way to lift up the whole orchestra of missionary pastors and entrepreneurial leaders.