



LUTHERAN
CHURCH OF **HOPE**

By Pastor Merv Thompson

Pastor's Update

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"May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all." (2 Cor. 13:14).

One of the most important developments in the life of the American church has been that of the teaching congregation. Until the past few decades most of the teaching and education opportunities for pastors and church leaders was offered by seminaries, colleges, denominations, and publishing companies. In fact, the prevalent notion was that the only legitimate learning took place in officially sanctioned institutions of education.

But almost under the radar a new phenomenon began appearing sometime in the late 1960's, but then became a full-blown movement in the 1980's and 1990's. Therefore today thousands of church leaders flock each year to teaching congregations, in fact I think it is safe to say that the teaching congregation has become the primary means of educating and inspiring church leaders.

My first experience with a teaching congregation, as it was for many pastors of my generation, was offered by Bethel Lutheran Church of Madison, Wisconsin. Under the leadership of one of my pastoral heroes, Dr. Morrie Wee, Bethel exhibited incredible faith and courage by funding and creating what came to be known as the Bethel Bible Series. My own sense is that the Bethel Series has been the most profound spiritual growth experience in the Lutheran church until the advent of Alpha. By the way, Bethel Lutheran committed \$250,000 to this project at a time when cars cost \$3,000 and a gallon of gas was \$.23.

Almost twenty years would elapse before any other Lutheran congregation had the vision or inclination to create a teaching congregation. The first was Community Church of Joy in Phoenix, AZ, led by a former colleague of mine, Walt Kallestad. The second was Prince of Peace Lutheran in Burnsville, MN, where I served as senior pastor for 21 years. Since that time other congregations have stepped forward; Lord of Life in Anoka, MN., Calvary

Lutheran in Golden Valley, MN. Hosanna Lutheran in Lakeville, MN., (where Pastor Mike's brother Dave helped this effort) and Nazareth Lutheran in Cedar Falls, IA.

Of course as most of us are aware, the most prominent teaching congregations are not Lutheran. After Bethel the first teaching church to gain national prominence was Garden Grove Community Church, led by Robert Schuller. I attended a conference at the Crystal Cathedral in the early 1970's. In the past two decades the congregations which have become the gold standard for teaching congregations are Willow Creek Community Church in Chicago, and Saddleback Community Church in Orange County, CA. (We are using the book Purpose Driven Life, written by the pastor of Saddleback, Rick Warren.)

What is a teaching congregation? It is basically a congregation which has a vision to help other congregations, pastors and leaders. This passion is so strong that the congregation is willing to put its money where its vision is, and to dedicate significant time, energy and money to this endeavor. Three major emphases have been priorities.

1. Conferences. Most, if not all of the teaching congregations hold one or more conferences each year. These conferences center around all kinds of themes; evangelism, stewardship, Christian education, youth ministry, worship, etc. The usual format is a two-or three day conference offering a mix of worship opportunities, keynote speakers, workshops and perhaps one-on-one conversations with others. In the years which I was hosting such conferences, we had up to 300-400 people attending.

2. Create and publish resources that can be utilized by other congregations. A particular feature of most of these teaching

parishes is that they have exceptional talent among staff and lay leaders, and often new programs or ministries are created in that setting. In order to help other leaders appropriate these new ideas, the teaching church publishes the materials. In fact today many of the most creative and innovative curriculums and worship materials are coming out of teaching congregations.

3. On-going consulting or coaching or mentoring relationship with other churches or leaders. Every congregation needs an outside voice at times, whether it be for planning purposes or stewardship or a building program or when there is a crisis, and quite often the teaching congregation has people in place who can offer such help.

When Pastor Mike first contacted me, he peaked my interest in Hope by mentioning that he and the leaders of the church had a strong interest in eventually becoming a teaching congregation. Hope has passion for the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and a passion to help the wider church and its leaders, especially smaller congregations. He also articulated what I have also been sensing, that the teaching congregation for the 21st century is probably going to be quite different from the pioneering efforts of the past. This is a challenge we are already beginning to discuss, what form should a teaching congregation take?

Pastor Mike highlighted this commitment of Hope in his Vision 2007, which he presented the first week of January. In that report there is the exciting description of what he calls the New Millennium Leadership Center, a center to be located at Hope with the vision of helping equip pastors and church leaders for mission. He specifically mentions that this center will provide "conferences, research, communications, and internships." My own sense is that Lutheran Church of Hope will become the next major teaching congregation, an awesome opportunity and responsibility. Jesus says, "To whom much is given, much is required." The teaching church is a powerful way to honor God by giving back to the whole church.

Do You Believe in Miracles?

In a previous parish I worked with a wonderful choir director for many years, his name is Lloyd Hjelle. Lloyd and Sally have three children, two sons and a daughter named Anne. I have not seen them for many years, having lost touch when we moved away from that community.

But I was totally shocked this past Saturday to read in the Minneapolis Star Tribune the headline, "Minnesota Woman, Anne Hjelle, Age 30, Mauled by Mountain Lion."

The story in the paper detailed how Anne had been mountain biking in Orange County, CA., not exactly a remote area, when a huge 110 pound mountain lion leapt from some brush, pounced on Anne's back, grabbed her by the neck and dragged her 100 yards into a ravine. Another article said that the lion had Anne's head inside of its mouth.

Her cycling partner pulled on Anne's legs, kicked the cougar in the flanks and screamed during this life and death tug-of-war. Lloyd is quoted as saying that it looked like the cat was winning. Hearing screams, another group of cyclists pelted the lion with rocks, prompting it to release Anne and flee. She was airlifted to nearby Mission Hospital, where the doctor said it was a miracle she was even alive, with so many deep puncture wounds close to main arteries.

Most recent reports have upgraded Anne's condition almost daily, and she is soon to be released. She will probably need extensive surgery to repair the wounds in her face. But she survived this horrendous attack. Praise God for this amazing miracle.