



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).

Iowa has been at the center of the universe these past weeks. News organizations from around the globe have flocked to Des Moines, political operatives have been ubiquitous throughout the entire state. With the local economy ringing up more than \$60 million dollars in "over and above" revenue most of the populace is able to echo a common refrain, "What not to love?" With the race on the Democratic side being the most competitive in sixteen years, the interest and attention of the nation is extraordinary.

At the same time that we celebrate the overwhelming benefits of living in a democracy, with all of the freedoms we enjoy, we also become aware of the accompanying annoyances. We can see clearly the almost obscene amounts of money being spent on political organizing and advertising at a time when much of the world is in desperate need. A headline this past Monday highlights another reality of the political process, "With Hopes Out and Elbows Out, Democrats Give Iowa Their All." Of course we all know that in the general election it will be more than elbows that will be thrown, rather we can anticipate what has come to be known as "the politics of personal destruction."

For some reason which is not absolutely clear to me, the climate within church denominations today is beginning to look more and more like the political process we witness each two or four years. In one denomination after another we can see increased evidence of political machinations taking place. As we speak articles flood our newspapers and periodicals about the Episcopalians, the Presbyterians, the Baptists, and not surprisingly, the Lutherans, all of whom are embracing political intrigue. Thus we see church bodies spawning caucuses, special interest groups, lobbying efforts, delegate recruitment. At times it almost seems as if the political side of the church threatens to crowd out the spiritual side.

A brief history lesson amplifies this concern. In the late 1960's, a former ELC Lutheran named Jack Preus left his denomination and ended up after a series of mergers within the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod. He found his new denomination not too his liking (too moderate, there are no liberals in the LCMS), and so he led a political coup. By out organizing and out politicking the moderate wing of the denomination, he orchestrated almost a hostile takeover which continues unabated until today. Soon moderates were purged from seminaries and colleges and denominational offices and the whole affair became quite nasty. Elbows were thrown with little regard to whom was hurt.

A similar story took place in the Southern Baptist Convention some years later, when an ultra-group of fundamentalists out-politicked the more moderate wing of the church. Again there were purges within Southern Baptist institutions, even the relative limited number of women clergy were harassed and in many cases dismissed by the hard right leaders. Former President Jimmy Carter became so disillusioned that he led a walkout of those who could not abide by the rightward drift.

The latest denomination to go through such chaos, of course is the Episcopal church, which moved in quite the opposite direction of the aforementioned denominations and voted to install a gay bishop in the Diocese of New Hampshire. Since the vote was taken last summer, there has been a huge brouhaha within the church. All of the pivotal issues of a church have surfaced; issues of Scriptural integrity, of mission and vision, of morality and justice, of governance and authority. This division is so serious it is questionable whether the Episcopal church will even survive in anything like its present form.

What is alarming to many of us is that the same time bomb is ticking within the Evangelical Lutheran

Church in America. At the national convention in 2005 a vote is scheduled to be taken on whether we should ordain gay and lesbians, and whether we should bless same-sex unions. If this vote actually goes forward at the appointed time, there is no compelling reason to believe that this vote will not have at least as a volatile result as the one which took place in the Episcopalian church.

In talking to a number of bishops and other church leaders, it is clear that many of them are trying to cancel the vote in 2005, to find some way which is not legislative and political to deal with this and other controversial issues. The problem we have, however, is that denominations tend to see themselves as political entities, organizations which seek to vote on just about everything, to legislate even moral issues. Robert's Rules of Order, which is no-where to be found in the Bible, seems to be driving the process. Unfortunately what usually happens when the church votes on divisive issues is that it creates winners and losers, although such a vote in 2005 will most likely mean that everyone loses, including the denomination.

Phillip Yancey, a favorite author of mine, has some helpful imagery in his book "What's So Amazing About Grace." His basic thesis is that the most important mission of Christians in this world is to dispense grace. He quotes Gordon McDonald who says that "the world can do anything the church can do except one thing, it cannot show grace."

But then Yancey extends his teaching here by saying that politics by its very nature is so often characterized by "ungrace" rather than grace. In the political realm we so often see people trying to win at any cost, throwing elbows, consistently demeaning and impugning the motives and character of the opponent. Yancey asserts that whenever the church gets involved in politics, in the political process, it has a strong history of turning grace into ungrace.

My own sense is that if the ELCA does go ahead and vote on these two highly explosive issues in the summer of 2005, we can predict without fear of contradiction that for many years following the church will be filled with ungrace. Our ability and

opportunity as congregations and pastors and leaders and members to share God's grace will be severely limited, because we will be in the midst of ongoing political wrangling and debate. Almost no congregation will escape the implications; this vote will be an equal-opportunity train wreck.

The past week some of us met with Bishop Phillip Hougen of the Southeastern Iowa Synod, and we had a thorough airing of this issue. What came out of the meeting was a very strong plea to the bishop from most of the participants to head off the vote in 2005. I also have learned that most of the 65 bishops around the ELCA agree with this conclusion, that a vote in 2005 would be most harmful.

A friend from seminary days, Professor Marc Kolden, has a better idea. He suggests that the best thing for the ELCA is to rally around issues and causes where there is overwhelming consensus among Lutherans and congregations. He comments that we could do great things if we were united in mission, rather than divided by political infighting.

Some of the areas in which Lutheran congregations could agree almost unanimously:

- Supporting the world-wide mission of the Christianity
 - Working to alleviate world hunger.
 - Equipping and supporting congregational and cooperative ministries for and with children, the elderly, the marginalized, the sick, the homeless, the hungry.
 - Helping to start and support new congregations and new ministries in cooperation with local congregations.
 - Helping to revitalize congregations that need to refocus on mission,
- Supporting new forms of ministry needed to address new challenges and opportunities.

So our prayer is the ELCA will begin acting more like a church and less like a political organization. The Augsburg Confession reminds us that the church is to be found "where the Gospel is preached and the Sacraments are administered." Grace is what we are sent to bring to the world, political divisions too often lead to ungrace. Pray that 2005 will be a year of grace, not the beginning of decades of ungrace.