



LUTHERAN  
CHURCH OF **HOPE**

By Pastor Merv Thompson

# Pastor's Update

Mike Housholder & Merv Thompson, Editors

925 74th Street ■ West Des Moines, IA ■ Feb. 6, 2004

*"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.*

Lyle Schaller, the leading church analyst, consultant and author has written the definitive book on larger churches entitled The Very Large Church, Abingdon Press. In the book he identifies the five types of congregations today based on size. His conclusion is that size makes a most significant difference in how that congregation functions. The five types are as follows:

<u>Size</u>	<u>Average Worship Attendance</u>
Small Church	Up to 100
Midsized church	101 to 350
Large church	351 to 750
Very large church	750 to 1800
Mega-church	1800 plus

What is startling about these five types of churches from our perspective is that Lutheran Church of Hope has been all five types in the past decade. Rarely if ever has one congregation experienced such different sizes and types as has this congregation. Let me review our history.

In June of 1993 when Pastor Mike was called, Hope was averaging about 30 people in worship. That made it very definitely a small church in every sense of the word.

In September of 1993 when the congregation moved to the Living History Farms, it averaged 66 in worship, which still qualified it was a small church.

In June of 1994 the congregation moved into a new facility at 6820 Ashworth and during that year worship attendance skyrocketed to 174 per week, moving the congregation from a small church to a midsized church.

But Hope did not stay a midsized church very long, for in 1995 the average attendance of 397 put it into the large church category. In other words, the congregation went from a small church to a large church in two years, a remarkable feat.

1996 saw the congregation remaining a large church, with weekly attendance growing to 572 per weekend.

But in 1997 Hope moved into the Very Large church category, as it jumped to an average of 861 each weekend. It remained a very large church through 1998, 1999 and 2000, growing in weekly attendance to 1085, 1308 and 1701. In other words from 1997 through 2000 the attendance more than doubled.

In 2000 the congregation moved into its new facility on the present location, and with the move it jumped into the Mega-Church category with worship of 2216. 2001 jumped to 2548, 2002 to 2548 and 2003 to 2877.

A rather remarkable thing has happened at Hope since the first of the year of 2004, there has been another huge growth spurt in worship attendance. Since Christmas we have been averaging 3553 in weekend worship. If you add Immersion to those totals, and Immersion is a worship event, that would add another 355, making a total of over 3900. That almost makes Hope a Mega-Church times two.

Peter Drucker, the leading management consultant, says that the advent of the mega-church is the most important social phenomenon in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Lyle Schaller says that there are about 100 ELCA congregation which average 800 or more in weekly worship. I think there are less than five which average more than 3000.

Leith Anderson, pastor of Mega-Church Wooddale in Eden Prairie, MN. reports that there are only about 400 such churches in the U.S. out of 400,00 congregations.

Schaller then asks the question, "Why do certain congregations become mega-churches? What are the reasons for such explosive growth? He lists a

few usual characteristics:

- ◆ A dynamic and effective preacher.
- ◆ Most members born after 1955
- ◆ A huge worship center and acres of off-street parking.
- ◆ A congregation founded after 1960
- ◆ A high priority given to missions
- ◆ If it is a denominational church, carry that label lightly.
- ◆ The current senior pastor is born after 1952.
- ◆ An emphasis on contemporary Christian music.
- ◆ A location on the conservative end of the theological spectrum.
- ◆ Use of electronic channels of visual communication in worship.
- ◆ Reliance on bands or orchestras, rather than pipe organs.
- ◆ Scheduling of at least two different styles of worship each week.
- ◆ Leadership of a long-tenured senior pastor.
- ◆ Located in a suburban community where median income higher than metropolitan area.
- ◆ Priorities in allocation of resources determined by a passion for evangelism.
- ◆ Most of the program staff are specialists, few are generalists.
- ◆ Most active members report their primary social network is within the congregation.

Any or all of the above could have contributed to Hope's movement from a small church to a mega-church. But Schaller says that in his opinion the number one point of commonality is absolute clarity about the belief system. The proclamation of the Christian Gospel is centered around certainty, not ambiguity. The various worship experiences each week may vary greatly in style, but not in substance. The visitor departs convinced they know what the people in this congregation believe and teach. Theological pluralism and large numbers of worshippers seem to be mutually exclusive. Schaller then lists the both the advantage and the challenge of the mega-church. He writes that if the primary goal is to reach, attract, welcome, serve, include, assimilate the generations born after 1965, then it means a congregation must do the following:

- ◆ Excel in presenting the gospel in what is perceived as relevant terms.
- ◆ Be able to earn a reputation for high quality in worship, teaching, training, and other

- ◆ Aspects of congregational life.
- ◆ Provide people with a broad range of attractive choices in worship, learning, involvement in doing ministry, facilitating their individual personal spiritual pilgrimage, helping them rear their children, and finding a sense of community.

This three-fold emphasis on relevance, quality and choices requires a large base of resources.

Of course there are questions which always arise in a mega-church. Three specific questions always confront us (I faced these at Prince of Peace in Burnsville, Mn.

- ◆ How large can a church become? What are the limits to growth, to worship attendance? I once asked a friend of mine how large a church could grow? His answer, "As large as the Holy Spirit wants it to grow." Great answer. But there still are some limits to growth, where are they?
- ◆ How does a mega-church keep from moving along the continuum from mission to maintenance? Most churches as they become larger and more complex spend increasing time and energy on institutional maintenance and administrative machinery.
- ◆ And then the question Schaller raises in every mega-church where he consults, what about succession? Pastor Mike will not be here forever, although he is fifteen years younger than just about every other mega-church pastor in Lutheranism. How does the church prepare for the day when Mike leaves to manage the Chicago Cubs? All mega-churches need to face succession issues, if poorly done a church can move right back down the scale of types we list above.

In summary, Hope is a God-thing. God has planted and watered and grown this congregation in an amazing way, moving from small to mega in less than a decade. The challenge will be to continue the same passion and vision and enthusiasm and faith in the decade to come.