



LUTHERAN  
CHURCH OF **HOPE**

By Pastor Merv Thompson

# Pastor's Update

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*"But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be glory both now and forever." 2 Peter 3:18.*

In the best twelve-step protocol, I have a confession to make. I admit I am powerless in this area of faith and life. What is this? I am a "midler." I have this chronic condition which seems to be irreversible. Perhaps if I found the right kind of treatment program or facility it might ameliorate this situation, but so far it is part and parcel of who I am.

Does this condition come from, as in the classic debate, from either nature or nurture? Was it something I inherited in my genes, or was it a learned behavior. Being born Norwegian might argue persuasively for nature as being determinative. But being raised on the frozen Minnesota tundra, in the milieu of "Minnesota nice" and moderation, and graduating from the highly midler-oriented institution of Concordia College (a year or two before Pastor Mike), surely suggests nurture.

To explicate further, I found a term I like better than just that in the middle, rather to be a part of the "radical middle." I saw a recent article with this title. Such a designation may seem like an oxymoron. But I almost always seem to find myself in the middle, rattling around something which seems like an amorphous center. This means searching for middle ground, for some midler certainty.

The problem with the middle often is that it lacks passion, it lacks certitude. Some people would even pejoratively refer to this condition as "muddle," which is not altogether inaccurate. There is considerable muddle in the middle. The middle continues to be shifting, slipping from one side to another. Ambiguity is often its constant companion.

A seminal book of the 1990's was written James Davison Hunter entitled Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America. Hunter's basic thesis was that America is more and more being defined by the extremes. The left and the right have virtually declared war on each other, with no interest in some kind of middle ground. Compromise is surrender. Both sides are seeking frantically to gain control in such fields of conflict as family, art, education, law and politics. Not since the Civil War, Hunter asserts, has there been such fundamental disagreement over basic assumptions about truth, freedom and national identity.

The church, of course, is not immune from the culture wars. For someone in the middle, this has been most

disquieting. For I must admit that both sides scare me, embarrass me and frustrate me.

For example, fundamentalism of all shapes and forms scares me. Religious right icons like Jerry Falwell (The Moral Majority) embarrass me. Someone described a fundamentalist as an evangelical who is angry about something. Angry and often vindictive, demonizing those not as fervent for the cause. Such right-leaning people in the Lutheran community have the unabashed mission of moving the church into becoming the "ecclesiastical expression of the right wing of the Republican Party."

On the other hand, the religious left scares me. Left wing gurus such as Bishop Spong A New Christianity For A New World embarrass me. As I quoted Jim Wallis some weeks ago, many of these on the far left seem to be afraid "that Easter, after all, might be true." The assumption of much of the left is that the Bible is metaphor. The Jesus Seminar decides which passages to take seriously by a "green card-red card voting process. Those on the left within Lutheranism would love to make the church the "ecclesiastical expression of the left wing of the Democratic Party."

Being a part of the radical middle is not a very popular place to be. Both wings often caricature those in the middle as being wimpy, mealy mouthed, indecisive, and at best misguided. If only midlers could see the light. A handy proof text is found in Revelation 3:15ff, *I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! So, because you are lukewarm—neither hot nor cold, I am about to spit you out of my mouth.* But one cannot be both in the middle and passionate about faith and life? That is the question.

I have a specific concern that Lutheranism is squeezing out the middle. The radical middle is being marginalized by both left and right. Some historical perspective may be helpful.

A favorite professor of mine at Luther Seminary was Dr. Kent Knutson. In a class on Ecclesiology, he gave this analysis. There have been three very influential movements in Lutheran history, which have seemed to match up in some ways with conservative, middle and liberal. I paraphrase my notes from his class:

1. The first theological tradition which consolidated its beliefs shortly after Luther and the Reformation was that of "Orthodoxy." Orthodoxy represents the most conservative teachings of Lutheranism, and today is represented by the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS). Basically, Orthodoxy focuses on a perfect theology, a perfect book, a perfect doctrine. In such a theology there are no open questions about which we can debate, agreement on all things is essential. The church is made up of people who have the right doctrine, who agree on all questions of faith and life.

The LCMS says there are only two kinds of churches, orthodox and heterodox. The pure church is orthodox, those which tolerate false doctrine or even ambiguity would be heterodox. A church that ordains women, for instance, is categorically heterodox.

Holy Faith comes in the orthodox tradition when the Spirit arouses terror in us, and creates faith. The church is the gathering of the elect, those in whom the Spirit has worked faith, those who are already saved. The church needs to provide hedges around the true church, protect believers, and strive for purity.

2. The second stream of Lutheranism is that of Pietism. This theological understanding says that faith is subjective, faith is a decision to surrender the will. The Bible does not gain its power by being perfect, but by revealing Jesus Christ and being the story of people's experience of Christ. Evangelism is central, sharing the experience. We have fellowship with all Christians who believe in Jesus Christ

Pietism emphasizes a holy life, faith in Jesus Christ is evidenced by the life that we live. The holy life of Christians is a visible expression of the church. This stream has been most manifested in the former American Lutheran Church, and before that in the old Evangelical Lutheran Church (ELC), in which I was raised. Such churches have always seemed to be in the middle, although that middle ground has been shifting and swaying.

3. The third stream of Lutheranism is what Knutson called "Lundensian," for lack of a better name. The name was chosen because this stream came from a theological school in Lund, Sweden, led by noteworthy theologians Gustav Aulen and Anders Nygren. This understanding of

theology has been most visible in the former Lutheran Church in America.

Lundensian theology teaches that the most important thing about the Christian life is loving one another, agape love. A perfect book or a perfect trine or living a holy life are of little interest. The central focus is not that a person have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, but rather that person be baptized. We are saved through baptism, the most important event in our life is our baptism. We reaffirm this baptism when we participate in the Lord's Supper.

Faith is something which God does, God has already decided for us, we simply need to accept what God has done. Grace is at the heart of the Gospel, by grace we are saved. The mission of the church is faith active in love. Faith without works is dead. The church has a mission to love the world, to reach out to the marginalized, the outcasts, the poor. Inclusivity is a core value.

My own sense is that in recent years the Lutheran Church has lost the middle. LCMS experienced a right-wing takeover in the 1970's (orchestrated by some former members of the old ELC), which has led them much further away from the middle. ELCA, which was formed in 1988, has been moving rather inexorably toward the left ever since the merger. Exhibits A and B would certainly be the "Call To Common Mission" with the Episcopalians a few years back and the proposed vote in 2005 on ordaining gays and lesbians.

Lutherans are more polarized than I can ever remember. So I would argue for a return to the cal middle. God is neither a Republican nor a Democratic. Lutherans don't belong on the extremes of left or right. Most Lutherans by their spiritual and theological DNA are somewhere in the middle, and we need to reclaim our heritage. If structures and systems will not allow the middle to thrive, then maybe we need new structures and systems. This should never be an uncritical middle, returning to some nostalgic Pietism is not the answer. This must be a new creation, incorporating the best of all three of our Lutheran streams, and believing that Jesus Christ makes all things new.