



LUTHERAN  
CHURCH OF **HOPE**

By Pastor Merv Thompson

# Pastor's Update

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*"To the saints who are in Ephesus (and West Des Moines) and are faithful in Christ Jesus: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."*

Robert Wuthnow, Professor of Sociology at Princeton University, one of the leading scholars concerning religious life in America, has written an incisive book entitled [After Heaven: Spirituality in America Since the 1950's](#). I would like to paraphrase some of what he said and then to make some comments:

Wuthnow begins by recalling the spirituality of the 1950's, which many of us remember as formative years for us. He describes the spirituality of that period as "habitation spirituality," or a spirituality of place or dwelling. In other words, spirituality was identified with a place, a dwelling, and edifice.

In fact, Wuthnow says, this spirituality of dwelling has been the predominant view since the beginning of the Scriptures. Both the Garden of Eden and the Promised Land were focused on a spirituality of dwelling. There is specifically a holy place, a place where God is found, a sacred space. Temple worship was another manifestation of this phenomenon, God was found in the Temple.

In the 1950's, those of us who can remember such ancient history found sacred space in three distinct places, or dwelling-places. These were the community in which we were raised, especially small town and rural settings, the local congregation, and then America itself. Each of these was viewed by the prevailing culture as sacred space, a place where God could be found and experienced. In fact, during the 1950's spirituality most often became virtually equivalent with participating in a local church, or being a part of a religious home and family, and even living in a community where religious values and beliefs were honored.

Certainly the 1950's, Wuthnow asserts, were the highpoint of habitation spirituality in America. Compared to the 19th century where less than 50% of Americans claimed church membership, during the 1950's this was anywhere from 60-80%. Church building proliferated; in fact in many communities the church building became the most imposing and defining structure on the visual landscape.

But during the 1950's, some drastic changes were on the horizon. Many people began to question this spirituality, some coming to the conclusion that it seemed rather superficial and surface. President Dwight Eisenhower summed up much of this concern with his oft-repeated statement, "I think the most important thing in America is faith, and I don't care what kind of faith it is." Often in the 1950's it became faith in faith. 90% of spirituality was realized in just showing up. Living in a religious home, living in a religious community and nation, and showing up at church was the foundation of spiritual life.

It's rather remarkable today, in spite of the realization that

spirituality was often very shallow, there seems today to be an ongoing nostalgia for those times. Of course why not? Family life was far more stable and reassuring, America was perceived as being a Christian nation, well respected around the world having just vanquished the forces of fascism in Europe and Asia, and now fighting godless communism, and congregations were bastions of stability and decorum. No wonder that many seem to wish to return to 1956, even though such times are never coming back again. The 1950's is when the church had the most influence, with a spirituality of place.

The disruption began in the 1960's, when many people decided that a spirituality of dwelling was too narrow. God was not confined to such a restricted place. So the new paradigm of spirituality became that of seeking. People became seekers, no longer looking only within their home and family or community or congregation to find spiritual life. Now the whole world became a place for searching, for spiritual experience.

All three dwellings for spirituality in the 1950's, home, country, congregation, began to change. For instance, less than one-third of young people who went through confirmation in the 1960's remained in their religious denomination. After twenty years, half were unchurched. The spirituality of dwelling or place no longer held. Most of these church dropouts still had some religious beliefs and values, but largely pursued spiritual seeking in their own ways.

More startling, a 1978 national study found that those born between 1944 and 1960, roughly coinciding today with what we call "boomers," half were single or divorced, a majority had lived in their present community less than five years, more than two of three had changed residences in the past five years, and only 13% attended a church weekly. What a drastic shift in just over a decade. How shocking to remember that 66% of these people had attended church regularly as children.

Not surprisingly, a majority of these boomers who no longer went to church blamed the church, said it had lost the spiritual part of religion and was too concerned with organizational issues. Only half of these people were now exposing their children to formal religious training. It became the norm in the 1960's and 1970's to pursue spirituality outside of an existing congregation.

For every action there seems to be a reaction. In the late 1970's and 1980's many people grew tired of seeker spirituality. Thus fundamentalism became a huge movement. The religious right argued that they were now waging a war to

correct the excesses of the 1960's. Therefore, during the 1980's this interest in spiritual discipline did make organized religion somewhat more respectable than the 1960's, producing new vitality in some congregations.

But the religious revival hoped for by many clergy and church leaders failed to materialize, except in very unusual settings. Church membership continued to decline, with weekly attendance hovering around 40%. People still pursued spiritual connections, but serious commitment to spiritual life was reserved for a few.

Rather amazingly, the late 1980's and early 1990's has been marked by an exceptional resurgence of interest in spiritual matters. Three of four Americans say they believe in angels, and there is a growing interest in miracles. The TV show "Touched By An Angel" no doubt had a huge impact. National studies say that at least 33% of Americans say they have had a personal encounter with an angel.

In the same study 75% say they have had a religious experience which brought them closer to God. Eight million have had a near-death experience. Some have attributed this renewed interest in spirituality to the New Age Movement, but Wuthnow says that only 15% of the public hold any new-age beliefs. Yet 82% believe that God can do miracles.

Two major shifts in spirituality have occurred in the 1990's. The first is the renewed emphasis on spirituality within. God is not just "out there," but also "within," that still, small voice inside. Thus we have all kinds of emphasis on taking care of our souls. There is more of an emphasis on "heart spirituality" instead of the predominant "head religion" of the 1950's, where spiritual life involves an experience of God.

A second important influence of this past decade has been the exploding popularity of the twelve-step movement. Just recently we have become more fully aware of the presence of so many addictions in society and in us, and learned the hard way that these can be destructive of home and family, of national life and of the congregation.

In response the twelve-step movement has taken root, helping people challenge the power of addictions. And many through this movement have developed a strong sense of spirituality, turning the addiction and recovery over to a "higher power." This powerful emphasis has led many to return to a life of spirituality and religious commitment.

What is next? Wuthnow concludes his book by saying that we must move from a dwelling spirituality and a seeker spirituality to something new, which he calls a "practice-oriented spirituality." He claims that dwelling spirituality is almost impossible to maintain today because of the complex social realities of our time. Seeker spirituality suffers because it requires every person to negotiate and in some ways create our own understandings of the sacred, and then, most difficultly, to convey these beliefs to our children.

I would concur with much of what Wuthnow suggests except that he ignores worship as a spiritual practice. I believe that a person can develop a multitude of spiritual practices in ones life but if one does not participate in worship, in Word and Sacraments, we cut ourselves off from the power source of that spirituality. Spirituality is experienced for most of us in prayer, music, preaching, fellowship, bread and wine.

Maybe what I am suggesting is that we combine the two spiritualities Wuthnow describes, the dwelling and seeking spirituality. Dwelling because we find our spiritual life here in this sacred space called Hope, in the sanctuary, in the chapel, in the narthex, in the classrooms, in the nursery. The building is not in itself holy, but what happens here makes it holy, where God shows up. And we know that this is not shallow and superficial, but often deep and profound and transformative. The church edifice is not the only place we experience spiritual growth and life, but it is an essential place.

We also need to reclaim our homes as a place of spiritual life and growth. The home is a place where we can sense the Holy Spirit working in our family life, in our marriages, in our relationships with children, parents, siblings and extended family. This is true even if we switch residences of communities, God moves with us. Here in this home we can experience spirituality through prayer, love, and service.

I am not sure how we can reclaim America as sacred space, but it certainly needs to be examined. Our reputation today in the world is hardly one of religious or spiritual values, as we continue to see the horrifying images on television these days of prisoners being abused in Iraq. But this is a subject for another time.

And we continue to pursue a spirituality of seeking. Spirituality is never limited to confines of home and church, but it is to be found wherever God is working. Find the spirit at work, in the neighborhood, at the playground or athletic field, in the mall or shopping center, at Veterans Memorial Auditorium or in the restaurant. God is not in a box, but meets us wherever we might be.