



LUTHERAN
CHURCH OF **HOPE**

By Pastor Merv Thompson

Pastor's Update

Mike Housholder & Merv Thompson, Editors

925 74th Street ■ West Des Moines, IA ■ June 4, 2004

"Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." (I Cor 1:3).

Over the past couple of decades I have been invited to do a fair amount of consulting with congregations. Most church leaders would agree that there are times when it is helpful for someone from the outside to come and lead a process of understanding what day it is in the life of that congregation and to discern what God is calling it to do next. I have found this consulting work to be infinitely challenging, for congregations are highly complex and usually the simple answers are the wrong ones.

I have discovered in this work that one of the major influences on a congregation is found in its history of building programs. Almost nothing dominates and shapes a church like going through the process of adding or remodeling facilities. I believe I still have some scars from a few of these in my own pastoral history. It certainly can be the best of times or the worst of times, or sometimes both at the same time. I usually recommend to a congregation that one of the best times to enter into a visioning process is either during a building campaign or immediately thereafter.

Let me describe a hypothetical but not unusual scenario. Anonymous Lutheran Church decides that its facilities are inadequate, both upgrades and new construction is necessary. Maybe it is offices which need to be improved, or educational space, or the sanctuary, or parking, or narthex or nursery. Maybe it is all of the above. Therefore the church council or the whole congregation makes a determination that someone should conduct a feasibility study for a building project.

A committee or task force is established for this purpose. This group looks very closely at the needs of the congregation, it holds open meetings and forums, it interviews key staff and elected leaders, it examines the facilities of other congregations to garner ideas. The more thorough such a study becomes, the longer it takes. It is quite common for the work of this building study committee to take up to a year or more.

Once the final report is written, then it becomes time for the various approvals to take place. Most Lutheran churches have rather complicated constitutional provisions regarding building projects, so much care and diligence must be given. If this involves the important step of hiring an architect, which often happens before any money is raised, this becomes more complex. Once again the congregation can very easily use up another year just going through the various approval processes, holding all of the required meetings

and meeting all of the constitutional provisions. Now two years have gone by.

At this point a building committee is usually formed, bringing together people with special knowledge about construction and furnishings. This group will work very closely with the architect, and will help to fashion a complete plan for this building project. Once again this will involve many meetings and forums, it will require effective communication with the entire congregation. Most likely drawings will be placed in public places, maybe even a model of the new space will be constructed. This process can very easily take another year. Three years are now behind them.

Next comes the very pivotal event of raising the money. A different committee or task force will be established to lead such an effort, a steering committee, many other sub-committees such as communication and dinners and major events, etc. Fund raising companies will need to be interviewed and one of them selected. Approvals will need to be secured for such decisions. Then a very elaborate planning process will guide this fund raising forward. Once again it is common for this to take another year. Now four years have gone by.

Once the money has been raised, then the building committee will need to tailor the final plan to the dollars, which often takes some heavy compromises. The architect will then need to go through the bidding process, to see whether the whole project can come in on schedule. The congregation will need to secure financing, both short-term and long-term. Often times there are roadblocks, someone is on strike, certain materials are not available, the construction industry is backed up. It is not unusual for this to take another year. Now five years are gone.

Finally groundbreaking takes place and the building is underway. A year is usually the minimum amount of time that is allocated, so let's be optimistic in this scenario. One year from the beginning of construction the building is completed, even though some of the furnishings still have to be delivered. Now six years have elapsed during this project.

Six years is a most significant block of time. Many building programs take even longer, especially if one of the two things happens: there is broad disagreement over

the nature and scope of the project, or whether it is needed at all, and if during this time there is a change in the senior pastor position. Either or these can stretch out any building project.

This leads to the point I am trying to make here. Very often, not surprisingly, almost imperceptibly, during this six year process the vision of the church changes to become the new building. Every other potential vision or mission becomes subservient to this incredibly long and arduous process of building. No-one ever admits this, of course, but in practice this is what happens. All other initiatives are placed on hold "until the new building is completed." All new staff hires are postponed. Benevolence dollars are frozen or decreased. The new building is the elephant in the living room, it is the vision.

No wonder we often find that the senior pastor will leave either during the building project or immediately afterwards, he or she has found that the construction has become the vision and wants to do something other than be a building superintendent. The other factor that is so common is that after six or more years everyone in leadership is absolutely exhausted, and there is no energy remaining for anything else. The tendency of such a church is to grab onto the status of quo.

Thankfully, the dynamics are very different at Lutheran Church of Hope. This present building project is only one among several, a new sanctuary is just over the horizon. There is little danger here than anyone will consider this new facility as the completion of our vision, or even that it is our vision. Nor have I seen any evidence in my short tenure that the staff or leadership of Hope has put so much energy into the building project that there is little left over for anything else. Quite the contrary, in the past year or two there has been an explosion of energy and ministry and new programs.

With that said, I think it is helpful to review just what we are doing in this construction phase, especially as so many people have made such financial sacrifices to fund this addition. Some of this is common knowledge for those who have been here for several years, but think of how many of us have come since the building project commenced. In 2002 the congregation voted to spend some \$5.5 million dollars to essentially double the square footage of our facility. Congregational members pledged even more than this amount. The final priorities for this project were to add the following:

- Additional educational space, classrooms, gathering areas, storage.
- Doubling the size of the nursery and child-care space.
- Adding a large commercial kitchen, so food can be prepared on site rather than catered.

- Adding a large multi-purpose room, which can function as a gymnasium.
 - Adding lockers and showers adjacent to the gymnasium.
 - Adding ten new offices and five cubicles for work stations.
 - Constructing a 300-350 seat chapel, which now includes a magnificent Allen Custom Renaissance Digital Computer Organ, three manual, 63 ranks.
 - Adding lower level rehearsal rooms just under the chapel.
 - Remodeling in room 101 for youth area, small café and bookstore for youth.
 - Adding sidewalks outside, also new pre-school play area to east of circle drive.
- New parking spaces have already been added during this project.

Hope springs eternal that the new facilities will be ready sometime in October, with a new worship and educational schedule beginning around the first of November. Every new square foot of space, every furnishing will make it possible for Lutheran Church of Hope to more effectively accomplish its mission.

So celebrate the new space, give thanks to God for providing the resources, but always remember that the building project is not the mission. When the project is completed, that does not mean we are finished. Our vision and mission have not changed.

Our vision continues to be "To be a Spirited, Growing and Christ-centered community filled with hope."

Our mission continues to be "Reach out to the world around us and share the everlasting love of Jesus Christ."

One additional note: I will be participating this Sunday afternoon, June 6th, in the ordination service for former Hope intern Zachary Thompson, who is also my nephew. Zach will be ordained at Shepherd of the Hills Lutheran Church in Shoreview, Minnesota, where his father Nathan Thompson is pastor. We will also celebrate the baptism of Zach and Lexi's son, Soren Jack Thompson, at this service. Zach has been called to be a pastor at Shepherd of the Valley Lutheran Church, 14107 Hudson Road South, Afton, Minnesota 55001.