



LUTHERAN  
CHURCH OF **HOPE**

By Pastor Merv Thompson

# Pastor's Update

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"Grace, mercy and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord." (I Tim. 1:2).

I read recently that the director and current speaker on the Evangelical Lutheran Church's Lutheran Vespers radio program will be leaving his position at the end of 2004. Walt Wangerin, the masterful story-teller, after ten years on the program will be returning to his Professor position at Valparaiso University. At the age of 60, he says he wants to spend more time with his family and undertake several writing projects.

At the same time it was announced that the new speaker of the program will be Pastor Peter Marty, the senior pastor of St. John's Lutheran Church in Davenport, Iowa. He has agreed to continue to serve as senior pastor of the congregation while adding to his duties the role of speaker and director of Lutheran Vespers. All of this will begin in February of 2005. Also reported was the fact that Marty was highly recommended from many different places, including his bishop, Phillip Hougen, (also our bishop) from the ELCA Southeastern Iowa Synod.

I was especially interested in the news about Lutheran Vespers because my father was in charge of the program for many years when he was the Director of Evangelism for the old American Lutheran Church (shortly before Pastor Mike's dad became the director) and then became the speaker for twelve years. In fact, Pastor Mike's Mom worked for my dad at Lutheran Vespers when they lived in the Twin Cities. Small world.

In the information about the change of speakers the article also mentioned that five people have filled this position since the beginning of the program in 1947. These include:

Founding Pastor Harry Gregerson, 1947-1970. Pastor Conrad Thompson, my dad, 1971-1982. Professor Richard Jensen from Wartburg Seminary, 1982-1993, Pastor Larry Gedde, 1993-1994, and then Professor Walt Wangerin, 1994-2004. Pastor Marty will be the sixth speaker in almost sixty years.

By the way I had a conversation this week with Pastor Marty about the new appointment and what plans he might have for the program. I was surprised that he would take on a new full-time job while keeping the one he had, my dad did this for a year before deciding it was too much. It will be a huge challenge for Marty to come

up with two sermons a week, both geared for different audiences. (I have always had trouble writing one). But he is a very gifted pastor and communicator, and I have no doubt that he will bring passion and integrity and wisdom to the challenge.

I first became acquainted with Pastor Marty when he wrote a most incisive article in the Lutheran Partner's Magazine quite a few years ago. I thought it was one of the best analyses of evangelism that I had seen and so I wrote to him to commend him for his comments. Later on we met when he became a senior pastor of the large church in Davenport, and we were a part of the same senior pastors' gatherings (where I also first met Pastor Mike.) Many will recognize Peter as the son of Martin Marty, surely the leading Lutheran theologian of our time. Also for Minnesota types, Peter's brother John is a state senator who ran for governor a few years ago (also the leading opponent of public financing for a Vikings or Twins stadium). Imagine someone thinking the needs of the poor and children and seniors is more important than that of billionaire owners and millionaire players. A very strange concept.

But I digress. During the past decade Lutheran Vespers has added 69 affiliates and is now aired on 186 stations, reaching an estimated 3 or 4 million listeners a year. The program is heard in the United States, Africa, Australia, Europe, Guam, Puerto Rico and New Zealand. Listeners also can hear the program online, at [www.elca.org/lv](http://www.elca.org/lv).

In Des Moines, Lutheran Vespers is on radio station WHO at 5:30 A.M. on Sunday mornings. Too bad we can't get it on during prime time. Many will remember that Walt Wangerin came to Lutheran Church of Hope a couple of years ago and held a Lutheran Vespers rally, while he was leading a bike tour throughout the Midwest to raise money for the program.

I remember especially in 1997 when Lutheran Vespers celebrated its 50th anniversary and invited all of the former speakers and their families to be a part of the event at Central Lutheran Church in Minneapolis. Unfortunately, most of what I remember about that day is that I had root canal surgery earlier in the day and by

the time the evening came around I was only half conscious. But we were pleased that my father and others could be honored by the larger church in this manner.

I remember little else about the years that he spent as speaker, but fortunately he wrote an autobiography that he left as a legacy for his children and grandchildren (not a bad idea for each of us). And since he died in 2001, this document has become even more appreciated by us. So I returned to his writings this week to see what he said about his years with Lutheran Vespers.

At some point when he was Director of Evangelism Lutheran Vespers was put under the auspices of his department. When the founding speaker retired, he helped put together a task force to find a successor. But after reviewing a large number of tapes from prospective speakers, most of them were found seriously wanting. After many months of frustration, Dr. Frederick Schiotz, his boss and the President of the American Lutheran Church called my dad one day and said to him, "I am nominating you to be the new speaker for Lutheran Vespers." My dad turned him down, several times, he said it would look like he appointed himself. But Dr. Schiotz would not take no for an answer, and so the decision was made.

My Dad writes about these years, *"Lutheran Vespers is a far more comprehensive ministry that most people realize. Preparing the messages, selecting the music and recording where in themselves formidable challenges. But soon I found myself ministering to a multitude of needs in the lives of the radio congregation. Letters by the hundreds, up to 2000 a month, came into our office. Many of these letters requested counsel, guidance and encouragement.*

*Sometimes I would dictate 20 to 50 letters a week. These were people of many different denominations, not just Lutheran. I recall a pastor who wrote to ask how to find assurance of faith. A priest wrote and said that his Sunday work "emptied his soul," but when he listened to Lutheran Vespers he "got all filled up again." "You are my pastor," he wrote.*

*Many respondents wrote about experiencing a renewal of faith. One told about driving in northern Minnesota one night, listening to the program. When it was over, he stopped the car, got out and knelt beside it and claimed Jesus Christ as his Savior. Another wrote and said she was so bitter at someone in her church that she refused to teach her Sunday School class. But after listening to the program she forgave the supposed enemy and again taught the class.*

*Letters came from the old and the young. Some wrote often and others wrote once a year or so. But through the years an amazing loyalty was built up. Many felt that I was their pastor and a personal friend even though we had never met. This became evident after I retired. My wife, Swanee, and I were asked to spend two years visiting Lutheran Vespers' listeners across the country. We traveled mostly by trailer, visiting in hundreds of homes. People were very surprised, they never thought that the person behind the voice would actually come and visit them. We ended up with many unusual and unique stories.*

*Literally scores of them had cassettes or printed copies of the sermons I had preached. One man who said he was a lay preacher had every sermon I had ever preached in my twelve years on Lutheran Vespers."*

Dad closed this section of his life with the story of Sister Speciosa from Milwaukee.

*"She claimed in a letter that her sister Superior did not approve of her corresponding with Protestant pastors. So she sent her letter to an intermediary and she in turn would send them on to me. My answers would take the same route.*

*One time she wrote and said, "You and I have to save my niece's marriage. You type this letter I send you, sign your name and send it to my niece." I was obedient. Some weeks went by and Sister Speciosa wrote again, "We did it. My niece is back with her husband again. And you know what did it? When we gave them hell!" She was a great saint. I called on her in her Milwaukee retirement convent. What a visit! What an exciting spirit!*

*Several books could be written of stories about people I have had contact with through Lutheran Vespers. Listeners did not seem to pay much attention to what denomination was broadcasting. What they wanted and needed was a Christ-centered message calling for commitment and discipleship. Thousands of letters verified this concept and emphases. The Gospel is the power unto salvation to all who believe."*

So we hope that Pastor Peter Marty has a long and fruitful ministry with Lutheran Vespers. The program has a marvelous heritage and can be even more effective in the future. We need many venues to spread the Gospel, and radio needs to be in the mix. I hope that people of Hope will be strong supporters.