



Pastor's Update

Mike Housholder & Merv Thompson, Editors

LUTHERAN
CHURCH OF HOPE

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By Pastor Merv Thompson

"Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." (Phil. 1:2).

Parking lots overflowing. Traffic directors pointing the way to a diminishing number of empty parking spaces. Buses meandering in and out. People jamming sidewalks and byways. Lines of cars backing up on the access roads of Jordan Creek Parkway and Ashworth. Helicopters buzzing overhead with TV cameras blazing.

Sound familiar? Could be just about any weekend at Lutheran Church of Hope, except for the buses and helicopters. But this was early Wednesday morning. What could possibly be causing such crowding? Had Hope started another worship service, its 7th or 10th or 21st depending on how you parse what is a worship service? Or had PIGS (Pretty Interesting Guy Stuff) grown into a cast of thousands? Perhaps Pastor Mike had scheduled a new member class for 7 am in the middle of the week and crowds started showing up at daybreak.

Alas, it was none of the above. Instead the rush was signaling the opening of the new Jordan Creek Town Center, located just a few short blocks south of the Hope campus. Most of the employees of the new mall were advised to park somewhere else on opening weekend, leaving the 8500 parking spaces adjacent to the mall for visitors. With half a million people expected to visit over the weekend, such planning was well taken.

In contemplating the opening of the new mall, some thoughts quickly come to mind. Having observed similar goings-on in my previous life, I would venture to guess that forever after we will chronicle the history of West Des Moines as pre-August 3, 2004 and post-August 3rd, 2004. Nothing will ever be quite the same again for residents or visitors.

(A case in point is the name change from 74th Street to Jordan Creek Parkway. We thought Hope Drive had a nice ring to it, but we didn't get a vote.) Whether our perceptions of this dramatic change in our community are positive or negative will mostly come from the eye of the beholder.

One thing is for sure, the new downtown of West Des Moines has been established. I lived in a community in Minnesota where most of the population oriented north; but once the new Burnsville Center was completed the entire community turned around and faced south and west. The same experience will no doubt happen in

West Des Moines. Large malls have enormous influence on the habits of the populace, as evidenced by the 134,000 people who showed up the first day.

One common fear with the advent of a new megamall is that older and smaller malls will be squeezed, or in some cases, put out of business. A national study found that some 7% of all malls in the U.S, 140 in number, are for all practical purposes dead, and an additional 250 are on life support. So malls tend to divide themselves into winners or losers, although as I will mention later those malls closest to the Mall of America are thriving.

One of the first impacts of the new mall which we will feel as a church and also as residents is the traffic crunch. Estimates are that 40,000 cars will journey to the mall each day, a large percentage of them will be exiting Interstate 80 at Jordan Creek Parkway and driving right past the church. Officials say that the new six lane roads are designed to handle three times as many cars as are expected at this time, so we will quickly discover whether those estimates are accurate.

What is absolutely clear is that the new mall is humongous, one of the largest in the U.S. More than one billion dollars is being spent in construction and at least 16,000 jobs will be created at the mall and surrounding area within three years. Jordan Creek Town Center, Wells Fargo Home Mortgage and five other nearby developments will add more than 6 million square feet of primarily retail and commercial construction. Meanwhile, developers are considering two projects which could each add 1,500 to 1,800 single-family homes and townhomes nearby. (Consider the impact on Hope).

Of course anyone from Minnesota has no right to critique the rather recent phenomenon of shopping malls. Malls are us. The first recognized mall in America was Southdale Center, located just south of the Twin Cities in Edina. Built by the famed Dayton family, it was one of the first attempts to create a wide variety of shopping and eating opportunities under one huge roof. (Alas, Dayton's is no more, absorbed by Marshall Fields.)

In addition, Minnesota is also the home of America's largest mall, the indescribable Mall of America, located in Bloomington. To understand the scope of the megamall, it is 4.2 million square feet, spread over land the size of 78 football fields. More than 40 million visitors show up at the mall each year, more than the total of visitors at all of our national parks and monuments.

I must admit, as one of those curmudgeons who questioned the sanity of state officials who first proposed such a mall, I have mellowed over the years. Now I have found the megamall a perfect place to walk in inclement weather, I can walk for hours and never go down the same path twice. In addition, our grandchildren love to go to Camp Snoopy; it's like the state fair all year long—climate controlled, under glass. At the same time the closest mall, Southdale, has just reinvented itself with new restaurants and theaters and is absolutely booming.

A very positive benefit of a mall is the opportunity for people of all ages and economic levels to come and walk, probably the most healthy exercise yet devised. In the frozen north the more affluent often join health clubs, but the mall provides great walking paths for those who cannot afford such a membership. I continually am amazed at how many seniors meet at the mall early each day to walk and find a sense of community with others—all without cost.

On the other hand, many critics of such places would assert that malls have supplanted churches as the symbol of cultural values. For many centuries both in Europe and also in America churches were the most prominent buildings in a community. Now it has become the mall, especially the megamall. And Americans now spend far more time at the mall than at church or even with our family; one study shows that we spent six hours a week shopping and only forty minutes a week playing with our children. More seriously, too many people see the mall as a natural destination to fill up a life which has become bored and empty. And what kind of impact does the megamall have on our children and teenagers, especially those who find it "a home away from home."

For instance, the best-selling book of a few years ago, Affluenza says that 93% of teenage girls rate shopping as their favorite activity. Another downside is that the average American now carries more than \$7500 in credit card debt, which is obviously not caused all by malls, but certainly they have a strong influence with their ability to encourage "impulse buying."

Affluenza suggests that many of us suffer from "possession overload." Huge shopping malls are so invit-

ing for us to just accumulate more stuff. How much stuff do we need is the question? The authors assert that shopping can make us feel better, but only for a short time. As Richard Swenson writes, "tragedy is wanting something badly, getting it, and then finding it empty."

An especially perceptive and academic look at the phenomenon of malls has been written by Jim Farrell, Professor at St. Olaf College. Farrell teaches American Studies and was a favorite professor and mentor for our daughter Deanna when she attended college. His book is entitled "One Nation Under Goods: Malls and the Seductions of American Shopping." If you are interested in the aesthetics, economics, ethics and politics of malls, his book addresses these issues. Farrell both celebrates and critiques the mall.

For Lutheran Church of Hope, suddenly there will be many thousands of people driving by the site on any given day. We will be far more visible in the community than was previously true. No doubt we will attract many more visitors in the future, people whose curiosity is piqued simply by seeing the campus. Perhaps there will be some partnerships which we can establish in the years to come with Jordan Creek Town Center, as we both try to accommodate ever-growing numbers.

So the mall is in some sense what we make of it. It can be an incredible place to walk, to eat, to meet friends and family, to shop, to be entertained, to work, even to find educational or cultural activities. It can also be a place where we spend money we cannot afford, or waste time which could more productively be spent elsewhere. Jesus says nothing about malls, but he does make the statement, "*do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven... For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.*" Good words to live by.