



LUTHERAN
CHURCH OF **HOPE**

By Pastor Merv Thompson

Pastor's Update

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"Grace and Peace to you from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."

I once heard a speaker repeat the following statement, "Most Lutheran (and other mainline) congregations are getting ready for 1959. The overwhelming majority of congregations are preparing for, anticipating, and expecting 1959 to come again soon. And when 1959 is repeated, they will be ready and this will usher in an incredible time of growth and passion and new life."

There is just one small problem. 1959 is not coming back. 1959 is not coming back anytime soon, most likely 1959 is never coming back. And so all of the current efforts to prepare for 1959 are really an exercise in futility. Many pastors and congregations know that 1959 is not returning on an intellectual level, but emotionally and psychologically they are not able to let go of this powerful vision.

1959 seems to have such an appeal to it, such a sense that these were the golden days for the church. If only we could recapture the spirit of that age. But as Loren Mead declares in his groundbreaking book Once and Future Church, it simply demonstrates that denial is a primary response today of much of mainline. Denial says that what we are going through now is an aberration, a momentary loss of sanity, but if we just wait long enough 1959 is coming back again. Since I graduated from high school in 1959, I wouldn't mind a bit of that pivotal year returned. But there is no way.

It might be helpful to recall why there is such nostalgia for 1959. What was it about? That time period that motivates people to try and bring it back. Let me refresh our memories.

1. 1959 took place in a period of history which Loren Mead calls "Christendom." During Christendom, the church dominated the culture, society deferred to the church, to the clergy. The church dominated much of education, literature, music, even architecture. For instance, in 1959 many schools released students during the school day so they could go to a church for religious instruction. In 1959 Sundays were pretty much reserved for church, most stores were closed, and Sunday morning was sacred time.

William Willimon and Stanley Hauerwas from Duke University humorously describe the day when Christendom began to die for them.

"When and how did society and the church change? Although it may sound trivial, one of us is tempted to date the shift to sometime on a Sunday evening in 1963. Then, in Greenville, South Carolina, in defiance of the state's time honored blue laws, the Fox Theater opened on Sunday. Seven of us, regular attenders of the Methodist Youth Fellowship at Buncombe Street Church—made a pact to enter the front door of the church, be seen, then quietly slip out the back door and join John Wayne at the Fox.

That evening has come to represent in the history of Christendom, South Carolina style. On that night, Greenville, South Carolina, the last pocket of resistance to secularity in the Western World, served notice that it would no longer be a prop for the church. The Fox Theater went head to head with the church over who would provide a world-view for the youth. That night, in 1963, the Fox Theater won the opening skirmish."

It seems as if the world, the culture, has been winning ever since and we are now firmly and irreversible in Post-Christendom.

2. 1959 was a time in which Americans were more or less united in a common vision for America. "In God We Trust" was not only placed on our coins, but also on our collective psyche. We trusted our leaders, most everyone liked Ike and at least for white people all was right with the world. There were no culture wars, no-one was shouting at each other on TV or radio, there was a civility to the culture. America had helped win the big war, and now we were looking forward to a generation of peace and prosperity. How different from today?

3. 1959 was a time when almost all Lutheran churches in the country worshipped in exactly the same way. The red hymnal was almost ubiquitous, with only a handful of die-hards holding out for the old black book. Vestments and robes had worked their way into most of the churches, except for some former Lutheran Free congre-

gations. Music for the most part was classical, traditional and emanating from European background. Today there are almost as many styles of worship as there are churches.

4. 1959 was a time when the church was able to enlist the best and the brightest in pastoral leadership. Clergy in those days had high status, low stress. For the most part the parsonage was the breeding ground for pastors, in my own seminary class a high percentage of us were sons of pastors. For instance, my father had three sons go into the ministry, so did Pastor Tom Housholder. The Rogness family had three sons become pastors, the Quello family had five. All of this created a very powerful feeder system.

There are very few children of pastors going into the pastoral ministry today, for a whole host of reasons. In fact studies show that a strong percentage of current seminary students did not even grow up in the church, they came to faith as adults. So they have not had models in their own home to model for them.

5. In 1959 the youth of American had four predominant influences in shaping their values and priorities; the family, the church, the neighborhood, and the school. For the most part all four of these influences were on the same page, there was a shared value system. It certainly took a village in those days to raise a child and the village was consistent in its messages.

Today, of course, the most important influences on most children are the media and the peer group. Family, church, neighborhood and school have lost much of the ability to shape the youth.

6. In 1959 spirituality was primarily a habitation spirituality, found in a specific sacred space (See November 18, 2005 Update). Huge percentages of Americans joined churches, most the people believed the same thing and honored the respective teachings of those churches. New congregations were being started by the scores, a building boom was on in construction.

But today we have moved, as Robert Wuthnow asserts, to a "seeker" spirituality, people are looking for God in all the wrong (and sometimes right) places. To be spiritual no longer means attending church for many, in fact it often means the opposite.

7. In 1959 our Sunday Schools were filled to overflow-

ing. If you drive through much of the Midwest you will find congregations with new educational wings that were constructed during the 1950's. Huge influxes of children came to Sunday school, confirmation, and vacation bible school. Baby boomers, now threatening many of the entitlement programs, surged through our churches.

No longer. Many of these classrooms now stand empty, and thousands of churches are closing across the country. The percentages of children who are in Sunday school, at least in mainline churches, has dropped precipitously.

8. In 1959 the key educators of church leaders were denominations, synods, seminaries and colleges. Since most credentialing was done by the above, this is where church leaders flocked. Also there was a sense that the denomination knew best. Top-down, centralized bureaucratic organizational charts prevailed.

Today, however, the teaching congregation has become the dominant model of educating church leaders. Thousands flock to Willow Creek and Saddleback, as well as a growing number of newer congregations.

9. In 1959 the church had a surplus of volunteers. They were usually called "women," homemakers who had children at home. Dad went to work, Mom stayed home, where she could be unpaid staff at church or school or in the community. For a whole host of reasons, all of this has changed.

10. In 1959 the church was quite competent at protecting and guarding its message, at controlling what people heard. Pastors were often among the most educated person in the congregation or community and could shape the debate. TV was in its infancy, there were three networks, no cable, and no internet. Just about everyone read the local newspaper. Alternative voices were rarely heard. The change today is dramatic, revolutionary.

Many people nostalgically wish for the past to return, for 1959 to come back again. Especially the church, where a large number of congregations are preparing for 1959. But 1959 is not coming back. Just about everything about the world is vastly different in 2006 than 1959. The only way we will be relevant for today is to discern God's vision for today. A 1959 vision will never cut it in a 21st century world.