



LUTHERAN
CHURCH OF **HOPE**

Pastor's Update

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By Pastor Merv Thompson

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

There seems to be something fascinating about a list. Hardly a day goes by without a major publication containing another list. Who are the top billionaires in the world? Which is the best college or law school or teaching hospital? Who are the most powerful people in sports, or music, or politics or business? What are the best songs of all time, or the best selling books or the best movies? We have the top 50 here and the top 100 there. Nothing seems to sell a magazine by publishing the latest list.

There is something that seems to love a list. Even the disciples at the last supper seem to be about lists. Look at Luke 22:24; Jesus is trying to prepare his disciples for his death, he has given to them the last supper, he has told Peter and Judas that they are about to betray him and what do the disciples focus on? Who is number one, who will be the most influential and important disciple in the kingdom of God. When the list is published in the Jerusalem Times about who is at the right of Jesus, where will each disciple be found? Jesus showed disdain for this kind of comparison, but the desire to rank everyone seems to be in our DNA.

So I was not surprised to see the latest list of prominent Christians in the country. Quoting the church lady, "Isn't that special?" You must have been breathlessly awaiting this particular list, who are the most influential evangelical Christians in America? The envelope please, the drum roll. Who is up and who is down? Of course the Grahams are on the list, Billy and Franklin. So is Rick Warren and Bill Hybels, pastors of the two most prominent evangelical churches. I'm sure many will be sad that Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson slipped off the list; Falwell will probably blame the Tella Tubbies.

I immediately wondered if there was a corresponding list of the most important or influential mainline Christians. But no amount of "googling" could

discover such a list. Are there no influential mainline Christians? When I thought about drawing up a list, I could only think of three people and they are all eighty-year-old men: Martin Marty, Lyle Schaller and Robert Schuller. What does that say? Evangelicals seem to have stars galore, but mainline Protestantism seems to have no such list.

I was thinking about this dichotomy when I attended a leadership conference a few weeks ago. More than anything else, this conference was organized around the drawing power of celebrity. The way to draw a crowd within evangelical conferences, and sometimes mainline as well, is to line up the hottest celebrity, the person with the best selling book or the creator of the latest fad. Big stars bring big crowds.

Maybe I have just grown weary of the cult of celebrity, but I have increasingly found that the more a person becomes a star, the less they seem to have to offer to rank and file pastors and church leaders. Most of the stars on the traveling circuit no longer do such mundane things as make hospital calls, meet a church budget, officiate at funerals or struggle with the challenges of the local congregation. They seem to be most interested in selling their latest creation or wowing us with their connection to other celebrities.

(I remember at one conference I attended one of the speakers was talking about a recent trip where he and his team had been hobnobbing with kings and princes. After his talk, the presider, who picked up immediately on what was going on, made a most insightful remark. He said, "I am just so impressed with what this speaker has been doing, cavorting with royalty and world-famous people, while I spend much of my time trying to relate to the guy down at the Exxon station.) I almost shouted "Yes," but I restrained myself.)

Why do evangelicals seem to create and even glorify stars, putting them on a pedestal? Part of it, no doubt, is driven by our celebrity culture. Evangelicals who are on television have often had the highest visibility, although the foibles of both Jim Baker and Jimmy Swaggert tarnished just about every televangelist. Also best selling authors seem to move to the top of the list, such people as Rick Warren, Robert Schuller, and Tim LeHaye. And pastors of the biggest and most prominent congregations also are moving on up.

In this sense, mainline Protestantism is almost counter cultural, where celebrities and stars are often denigrated rather than praised. The only people we tend to put on a pedestal is a noted theologian or teacher, such as Martin Marty or Jim Nestigen. Anyone else who might tentatively poke their head above water is usually cut down to size very quickly. If I would be asked to make a list of prominent mainline leaders today I would hardly know where to begin.

There is an upside and a downside to both traditions. The upside to evangelical's embrace of celebrity is that gifted leaders are often recognized and emulated. Evangelical congregations such as Willow Creek or Saddleback have inspired countless other leaders. Evangelical publishing companies such as Zondervan have put millions of spiritually-based books into the hands of both Christians and non-Christians alike—note Warren's selling more than 20 million copies of Purpose Driven Life.

The downside is often what it does to the celebrities. Too often they begin to believe their own press notices. Absolute power does corrupt absolutely, even among Christians. Thus we have seen so many stars self-destruct, brought down by some form of hubris. And it also has a negative effect on followers as well, who sometimes tend to put absolute faith in people with clay feet. A sense of betrayal is never far away.

The upside to mainline Protestantism's refusal to countenance stars is that it empowers us to focus more on the Gospel than the messenger, more on Jesus Christ than the present leader. Servant leaders have a much easier time retaining integrity and

credibility and transparency than someone who is worshipped by adoring fans. Little energy is spent on trying to being number one, on climbing the list.

The downside of mainline is that gifted leaders are often discouraged, even disparaged. Jealousy and envy of effective pastors often is corrosive of the body of Christ. An especially effective pastor or church soon becomes the target of character assassination. A very fast growing church is often an inviting target, as Lutheran Church of Hope has already discovered, as many mainliners seem to be much more comfortable with mediocrity and blandness than with creativity and growth. I once had a bishop say to me in so many words, "A large church is a small church that got out of hand." The ideal in mainline usually tends to be small, quiet, and loyal, and leadership gifts which might help the larger church are stifled.

Novelist William Faulkner, perhaps speaking about mainliners, says it well, "That which is destroying the church is not the outward groping of those within or the inward groping of those without, but the professionals who control it and who have removed the bells from its steeples." Lovett Weems adds, "Many are listening for their pastors (and other leaders) to ring out a clear and sure message of faith and hope."

In summary, it seems like the church would be most healthy if it would combine the best from evangelicism and mainline. In some ways the emerging church which was featured in the Update recently is moving in this direction. Evangelicals are at their best in empowering leaders, appreciating God's manifold gifts to people. Mainline is especially helpful in emphasizing servant leadership, collaboration and partnerships. It also senses intuitively that a leader is meant to serve the church, not the other way around. A sense of balance of these two traditions seems to be desired.

Christians should always be somewhat wary of lists.