



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 Timothy 1:2.*

At a recent ELCA pastors' conference for the Ames-Des Moines area, Bishop Phillip Hougen gave a brief but very instructive history of the birthing and growing of new congregations in the area. For most of our history, the prevailing model was that larger existing congregations would create a vision for a new site, gather together the resources and eventually help start a parish in a growing area of the city or surrounding area. He mentioned several congregations by name, both the mother churches and the new ones which had emerged.

But about fifty years ago, he said, the model shifted, and now starting new congregations became almost the sole responsibility of the denomination in partnership with the local synod. Existing congregations had almost no responsibility or voice in this process.

The advantage of this new way of doing things was that the national office often had expertise and experience which the local congregations did not have, in addition they could generate significant financial resources and even purchase land for the new starts. Another advantage was that the denomination could plant a new church in an area of maximum growth, avoiding some of the natural resistance of neighboring churches.

A downside also was evident in this model. Because of the adversarial relationships which often emerged, it meant that nearby congregations would rarely offer support or partnerships, since they saw themselves as left out of the process. The result is that many new starts have struggled for years just to survive, as mission pastors have been "parachuted" into a new community without any support system being in place. Certainly the first couple of years of Lutheran Church of Hope are a case in point.

But now, according to Bishop Hougen, the ecclesiastical landscape has shifted again. With the incessant downsizing taking place among most mainline denominations, with a corresponding lack of funding, new congregational starts have slowed to a trickle. While each year the national church articulates a vision of starting large numbers of new churches, the reality each year of late is far less. A friend from another large Midwestern city told me this week that the national church has not started a new church in his town for 21 years.

With necessity being the mother of invention, the new model which is emerging is going back to our roots, with larger congregations being the primary resource for giving birth to new congregations. Contrary to the patterns of past decades, now the denominational leaders are starting to encourage this kind of entrepreneurial spirit among the large congregations, certainly this is true in our synod. So the biblical words are coming true, "the old has passed away, behold the new has come."

Three particular models of recent church plantings come to mind. The first is represented by another Hope Lutheran Church, this time located in north Fargo, ND. Led by Pastor Dave Johnson, a good friend of mine, the people saw that most of the new growth was happening in south Fargo, and thus decided that a new congregation was necessary to serve that community. Neither the synod nor the national church had funds to make that happen, so Hope Lutheran created Hope South to go along with Hope North, a two-point parish, so to speak. The two Hopes now have a common council, staff and budget, and have remained one congregation with two sites.

A second model is Wooddale Church in Eden Prairie, MN. (our Leadership Center Task Force visited this congregation last year). Led by Pastor Leith Anderson, Wooddale has been starting congregations for more than a decade. A pastor is called to the Wooddale staff to spend a year learning the DNA of Wooddale, and also recruiting 100 to 150 people to go along to start this new church. The second year is the formation of the new church, with worship and education beginning at a different location, usually in a school.

During the second year the new church is still a part of the mother church.

But in the third year the new church is on its own, responsible for its own ministry, budget, governance. The new church also takes a new name, different from Wooddale. Thus on a given weekend Wooddale can have up to 25,000 people in worship, less than 20% of them at the mother church. The new churches still have close ties to Wooddale, but they are independent (the largest of these is in Chanhassen, the nearest suburb to the south of Eden Prairie.)

A third model is Willow Creek Community Church in suburban Chicago, Illinois. Led by Pastor Bill Hybels the congregation started its first satellite church in 2001 as a response to what it calls "the 30 minute problem." Research found that once people have to drive more than thirty minutes to church, their involvement falls off dramatically. More than one-third of Willow Creek worshippers were driving more than thirty minutes. This meant that most of them were not joining small groups or inviting friends and neighbors to come with them. This was undermining the church's vision.

So new satellites are being established near clusters of people who have been driving more than thirty minutes to church. Each site is designed in a way to remind people of the mother church, using the same bulletin, logo, parking lot uniforms, etc, and average about 1,000 in worship. Much differently from the two churches mentioned above, Sunday sermons are videoed in from the mother church. Willow hopes to have 10 such campuses in the Chicago area by 2010.

Christianity Today in its September, 2005 issue has a timely article on satellite churches. According to author Bob Smietana, there are now almost 1,000 congregations in the U.S. which have launched a multisite approach. Many church analysts see this as one of the leading innovations of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Many of the new congregations are using the Willow Creek model, providing worship and music locally, but bringing the sermon on video from the main campus.

Lutheran Church of Hope is making plans to become one of these larger churches creating satellite congregations. Two reasons are driving this decision. The first is God's vision for Hope, that we continue to reach out with the everlasting love of Jesus Christ. Something life-changing and transformational is happening at Hope, so it naturally follows that we would seek to share this experience in other communities as well.

The second reason for the satellite church is that our land and facilities can only accommodate a finite number of people. Even after the completion of the new worship center, we can probably only double one more time in attendance, after doubling several times in recent years. In other words, if we average 4,000 people on weekend at present, it is possible we could accommodate a maximum of 8,000. Even that number would probably necessitate some off-site parking, with a shuttle system. But we will be running out of space.

Thus the vision for a satellite congregation has been emerging. Over the past year or so a task force has

been meeting regularly to pray and vision and plan this new start. What has gradually emerged is a clear vision to begin the first new church in the Johnston-Ankeny area, a fast-growing population that is north and west of Des Moines. Student Ministry Director Mark Brandt and Intern Pastor Molly Juntunen will serve as the staff for this new ministry, and a leadership team is being created to oversee the effort.

Specifically this new congregation will follow the worship style of Immersion, hoping to reach unchurched, dechurched and postmodern generations in that area. There will be no attempt to compete with traditional Lutheran congregations for members. Also the worship service will look very much like the services now taking place in the gymnasium on Sunday mornings. At first, preaching will be a mix of video sermons from Pastor Mike, and also live preaching from Mark and Molly. Children's ministry and nursery care will be available from the very beginning.

At the initial meeting for interested people a couple of weeks ago, a large group of more than 70 people showed up, with many more expressing interest who could not be there. There is a strong hope this new community might start out with a couple hundred people from Lutheran Church of Hope and as these pioneers invite others, it could quickly double.

The opening date will be Sunday, February 5<sup>th</sup>, which happens to be Super Bowl Sunday. Activities will be planned for after the service as well, perhaps even a Super Bowl party. The exact location for opening worship is yet to be determined, the staff is looking closely at several different sites in Ankeny.

Please pray for this important new dimension in the life of Hope. Also be reminded that a portion of the 3-D campaign now underway will be used as seed money for this congregation and for more satellite churches to come. And if you or someone you know would be interested in being a part of this exciting new venture please let Mark or Molly know.