



Pastor's Update

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LUTHERAN
CHURCH OF **HOPE**

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By Pastor Merv Thompson

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

I was a newly ordained 26-year-old rookie pastor, three months into my first call as an associate pastor of a congregation of 1200 members in north Minneapolis, when the senior pastor suddenly resigned and left. Before a call committee could be formed, the bishop came out and met with the church council and told them they should call me as the senior pastor. I have no idea why he did that, except that he said something about having nothing but trouble with this particular congregation in the past, and he didn't want any more controversy to erupt. I am not sure why he thought I wouldn't add to his troubles.

At any rate, I was almost totally unprepared for this new role. I must have appeared like a deer in the headlights, completely disoriented. Fortunately, I had worked at this church for two years as a youth director and pastoral assistant while I attended Luther Seminary, so I understood the congregation pretty well and had a relationship with the leaders. Thankfully I also had a father who had pastored a large church who could advise me and a wonderful partner in my wife, Jackie, so I was not all alone in this.

But what this pushed me to do in spades was to read every book on church leadership, go to every seminar and workshop I could find, and to enroll in clinical pastoral education for my own spiritual and emotional growth. I truly felt I was under qualified for this position. To add insult to injury about that time my first church fight broke out, and as anyone can tell you who has been in such a fray they can be particularly nasty.

The central issue was a vital issue for Christianity, for the future of western world—that is, whether we should usher people out on Sunday morning after worship. In other words, should the ushers continue to walk up to the front of the church and usher people out row by row, or do we let people leave on their own. We finally resolved with a Solomonic (is that a word) solution, we split the baby in half. At the early service we ushered people out, at the latter service we did not. I think we only lost two or three families over that issue.

At several of the aforementioned seminars I began to hear for the first time about what was called "the 80% rule." The 80% rule. Church consultants almost treated this rule as equivalent to the golden rule. What is the 80% rule? If a

worship service is 80% full, it is for all practical purposes full, for that is how it will appear to anyone who comes later, especially those who have not been in the church before. 80% full is truly full, and it means that worship attendance will not grow beyond that point.

Eighty percent mandates a congregation choose one of three options. One is to do nothing. Most churches in the country do not wish to change the status quo, so if the church is 80% full, they are happy. The fact that worship attendance will never grow beyond that is not a problem for them. We attend a church in northwestern Minnesota which is often 80% full, but they do not add a service because they fear it would split the congregation. So attendance will never grow.

The second option is to add worship services so that people have more options. So instead of having one worship service, the church can have two. If they have two and one of them is 80% full, they can go to three. The third option is to add more space, either by building more worship area, or by renting or buying new space.

Lutheran Church of Hope is rather unique, of course, when it hit 80% shortly after Pastor Mike showed up, the congregation has always sought to expand worship opportunities. I have never seen a church add more worship services than Hope, right now we are up to ten services on a weekend. At the same time the church has continued to add more worship space, and will do so again in the near future.

Of course anyone who attends the 4:30 pm worship on Saturdays and 9:30 am and 11:00 am on Sunday knows that we have more like 120% than 80%. This fall we added two new services in the gymnasium during 9:30 am and 11:00 am in order to alleviate some of the overcrowding in the worship center, but after a month the services in the gym are almost full and the worship center is still overflowing. We basically have blown right through the 80% rule. It doesn't apply here at Hope, but we now need to address the 120% rule.

Another stark reality faces us in terms of worship space. Lutheran Church of Hope continues to welcome 500-600 new members each year, and there is no indication this growth will slow down anytime soon. With the present facility there is no way we can continue to meet the needs

of those who wish to come and worship. Thus the advent of Building Hope 3-D.

A bit of history is in order. Just three years ago the congregation decided to basically double the building size, and pledged some \$7 million to do so. Many new classrooms were constructed, as well as a large gymnasium, commercial kitchen, 350 seat chapel, new offices and music rehearsal rooms. The worship center was not a part of that expansion program, but a commitment was made to address that issue three years hence. So that moment has arrived.

What is being proposed (the pictures are displayed in the gathering area by the worship center) is a new worship center seating about 2500 people, located just to the north of the present facility. About 1600 seats will be on the floor, the other 900 will be in grandstand-like seating around the back. The ultimate goal is to keep everything close and intimate, so that the front of the altar area is no further to the back than it is at the present time.

Also it is important to remember the present worship space will not stand idle, but will be used even more than it is presently. Coffeehouse worship will take place in this space similar to our gymnasium services at present. During the week it will become Café Hope with small groups, Alpha, fellowship events, conferences, and workshops. In addition, the prayer chapel will be expanded and be available 24/7.

Not surprisingly, a major challenge in the future, as it is in the present, will be parking. Some 500 spaces will be added in this phase to the 700 we already have. But it probably will not be too long before we need to look seriously at shuttling a certain percentage of our worshippers from nearby parking lots. Many congregations around the country have done this quite successfully. Studies show that many families drive more than one car to church on Sunday, some as many as three cars. Parking will always be a challenge.

The other major strategy that Hope is launching in 2006 is the satellite congregation. Please refer back to the October 14, 2005 Update for a much more detailed look at this phenomenon. Our first satellite congregation, located in the Ankeny-Johnston area, will be led by staff members Mark Brandt and Molly Juntunen, and will begin on February 5, 2006. Several more satellite congregations are planned for the years to come, as we continue to reach out with the everlasting love of Jesus Christ.

Above all, we want to look at this growth and challenge from God's perspective. From a strictly human point of

view we can easily say, "We have this huge problem, we are running out of room!" A problem? I think God would say it is a rich blessing, not a problem. Also we might ask, "why are we being asked to give sacrificially to provide space for people who are not even here yet?" God might answer that he wants the room to be full, there is always room at the banquet, and so many people need yet to hear the Gospel.

To raise \$10 million is easy. All you need is one gift of ten million. Or 10 people each giving a million would do. Or how about 100 gifts of \$100,000? Another way would be 1,000 gifts of \$10,000 each. Or 10,000 gifts of \$1,000 each. Realistically, it will be a combination of the above. But we believe that God has given to all of us the resources needed to carry out His vision.

Make sure you attend worship each week this fall, as Pastor Mike continues to unfold God's vision for Hope in the present and the future. Make sure you attend one of the sessions explaining Building Hope 3-D, be a home visitor or welcome such a visitor into your home. Put Sunday night, November 13, on your calendar for the huge celebration to be held at the Polk County Convention Complex. And pray that God might do a mighty work through us.