



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.

A church I served created a new mission statement, which centered in three pivotal words. The words were "belonging, believing, and becoming." Just about everything we did as a church could be identified under these specific words. Belong, believe, become.

The major debate we had was the order in which to list the words. Should not believe come first? But the planning group came to realize that the major reason why the majority of the people came to our church was to belong, to be a part of a community, to be a part of a group, as the Cheers theme song echoes, "who know your name and are glad you came." We sensed that believing came out of an experience of belonging.

David Luecke in his classic book, Evangelical Style and Lutheran Substance, describes two basic kinds of churches in America. The first he calls a "village church," a European model, transplanted to white frame edifices all over America. The village church was literally and figuratively the center of the community, people belonged even before they believed (we call this infant baptism.) Most of the time they belonged for a lifetime, being baptized, confirmed, married in the church and then buried out back.

The other model, much more urban model, was that of "camp church", where large groups of people gathered to experience God. And because most of these camp churches became considerably larger than the village churches, the need to belong led to the establishment of small groups. People wanted to find a community, and the larger a church became, the smaller it needed to be.

My hometown magazine is called, not surprisingly, "Minneapolis-St. Paul." A recent edition focused on the issues of finding friendships. What the editors had been hearing was that people from somewhere else who moved to the Twin Cities were having difficulty breaking in. Thus the article listed scores of places

where people could meet people, from health clubs to interest groups to volunteer opportunities.

Most disturbing was the fact that the church was never mentioned in the article. The Twin Cities have many great churches, but for some reason they were not even on the radar of the writers of the article. Maybe we have to pay more attention to the whole issue of belonging, of community.

Three different writers of late have reflected on the issue of community. I wish to paraphrase them for this Update.

The first comes from a wonderful new book titled Claiming Your Place At The Fire: Living The Second Half of Your Life On Purpose, by Richard Leider and David Shapiro. In this book they focus on the image of fire, how in certain cultures elders sit closest to the fire, sharing wisdom. Amplifying this image they cite four flames essential for purposeful aging: The flame of identity, the flame of community, the flame of passion and the flame of meaning.

I want to focus on the flame of community, entitled "Refinding Our Place." So many people aged fifty and above are asking the question, "where in the world do I belong?"

Each one has to decide whether to move or stay, cling or renew. The authors suggest we all ask what truly sustains and renews us. They assert that the hunger for a place is among the most deep-seated of our emotions. We are willing to put up with a lot during the journey if "the promise of home lies ahead."

The authors state that in order to belong we need to be seen by others, where our contributions matter, where we are making a difference and touching the lives of others. As we ponder the world and our place, we must ask the question, "where are we most needed?" I would recommend the entire book for those of us "of a certain age."

A second article is found in the September 2005 edition of Christianity Today, The Holy and the Ivy.” Surprisingly this article is not about Christmas music, but about the status of Christian students at Ivy League Universities. The gist of the article is that small, loving, Christian communities are transforming the landscape. That something powerful is happening in places where often religion and faith have been denigrated.

In fact, says author Collin Hanson, the key to the upsurge is that these small group communities have become the frontier for evangelism. “Community is a huge draw for this generation, even more than 10 years ago. Community is a stronger draw than anything apologetic anymore for most students.”

For example, at Harvard the evangelical student movement has more than doubled in recent years. The growing edge of this explosion has been Alpha, which has reached both modern and postmodern sensibilities of today’s students. New Christians are eagerly inviting their friends to participate, and the gospel spreads through relational networks, as people experience belonging.

Our experience at Lutheran Church of Hope is similar, people primarily experience community and belonging through small groups, small loving faith communities. Alpha has also been that key at Hope, launching a whole small group movement involving much of the congregation.

In the Apostles Creed we affirm our belief in the communion of saints, which is another way of talking about community. Word and Sacraments bring us into communion with God and with one another, we become a community. Belong, believe, become.

The third article is by Pastor Peter Marty in the August 21, 2005 Christian Century. Marty is the senior pastor of St. Paul’s Lutheran Church in Davenport, a sister congregation in the Southeastern Iowa Synod of the ELCA. He is also the speaker on Grace Matters, a radio program formerly known as Lutheran Vespers.

His article is entitled Breathing Together: Community As A Way Of Life. He mentions that while large numbers of people gather together in worship each week, a richly textured communal spirit is often absent. While we may sit next to one another, experiencing social togetherness and friendliness, this is not the same as participating in and being “deeply entwined in a spiritually grounded community.”

He defines community as people “who are deeply in touch with one another, faithfully interacting, learning from each other.” Broad friendship, mutuality of purpose and abiding care for one another are all by products of a spiritually grounded community. He then proceeds to cite the importance of the pastor in helping to create community. Nothing in a pastor’s portfolio is more important than molding a communal identity.

Effective pastors, says Marty, will have God’s people “breathing together, modeling a common way of life which is good for the world.” I like that, as a church we are to be breathing together, modeling a common way of life which is good for us and for the world.

Where do we experience community? Where do we find deep friendships and spiritually grounded communities of faith? Lutheran Church of Hope has many different places for this to happen, where we can be with people who love us, care for us, pray for us, and want the best for us. For those who have not yet taken Alpha, here is a wonderful place to start. But the need for community does not end when Alpha ends, but we need to find new places to belong.

This becomes even more important the older we are, as many of the relationships we had earlier in life have ended. Have you found a place to belong? Are you experiencing community? That is a crucial question as we seek for meaning and purpose in life.