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## Collision of Perspectives

The twenty-first century is an era of paradox for the local congregation. On the one hand, most homes in the United States have Bibles and revere them as the word of God. On the other hand, most adults in this country do not read the Bible. Most of them form their understanding of what the church believes through either the exaggerated exposés of the media or through limited personal experience. The spiritual hunger of our time is, I believe, great—but few adults identify the local congregation as a place where that hunger can be met in a spirit of acceptance and nurture. When the experience of the local church fits these two together, there is a combustion of the Spirit. Those who have experienced the welcome, acceptance, and nurture of their spiritual journey in a local church share it with their friends. This is the challenge and opportunity before us.

### **New-World Episodes**

I met a couple in our New Member/Disciple Class and I assumed they had decided to join. I was surprised when, after the class, they shared they were just interested in learning more about our church.

One week later, I received a phone call from him asking whether I would be willing to meet with them. We met that week, and as we chatted I learned that he had become a Christian while serving two tours of duty in Afghanistan. She was raised Roman Catholic, including parochial school. They were looking for a place to worship and bring his two boys from a previous marriage. Then the conversation moved into our theology of marriage and sacraments. Neither felt comfortable taking the Lord's Supper, they said, but they would continue to worship.

Some months later, I learned they had already volunteered in our Wednesday night programming for children, and a few weeks after that I was pleased to see them come for Holy Communion for the first time. We met in anticipation of their joining, and I learned that he had never been baptized. He was taking the Lord's Supper without baptism! I wasn't sure what to do, but I knew our Lord would not want to exclude him. Just before receiving them into our congregation I had the pleasure of baptizing him.

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“We have a problem, Pastor Mike,” Shannon said. “Two of our new member/disciples<sup>1</sup> have never been baptized.”

1. At St. Mark we adopted the use of member/disciple in our Constitution and By-Laws. This was a conscious decision by our leadership for two reasons. The first is that we wanted to affirm the faithfulness of our members who had led us to that point in our history. We wanted to show that the direction we were headed was not discontinuous from our past. The second reason we adopted this form of referral to our people was to make it clear that we would be a disciple-making ministry. Everything we did would be done with this goal in mind. Having come to the conclusion that the old “membership model” for ministry in the Protestant churches in the United States was no longer adequate for the challenges before us, we nonetheless wanted to acknowledge our history while pointing to our future. We recognize that this may seem cumbersome. On the other hand, we decided that it best expressed our gratitude for those who brought us to this place and time as well as point to the future we believed God was calling us to.

“We’ve already received them,” I said. “I guess I’ll have to call them and set a time for their baptisms.”

“I’m sorry about that,” Shannon continued. “When they turned in their data sheets they left the baptism information blank. I just assumed they didn’t know. But when I called them, they told me they had never been involved in church before and hadn’t been baptized.”

“Well, we’ll have to ask new questions, won’t we?” I replied. “At least we’re not just shuffling transfer papers with other congregations! But this means we have to set aside our usual assumptions.”

“I guess so,” she replied.

I called them and shared with them that in order to be a member of St. Mark Lutheran Church they would need to be baptized. I later met with first one and then the other with her fiancé. In that meeting, I learned that not only was she not baptized, but she wondered whether I would be willing to baptize her mother. I found out that her mother was attending a Christian church of another denomination but had never been baptized. When her daughter decided she was going to be baptized and asked her mother to attend church for it, her mother asked if she might be baptized at the same time.

Three weeks later, we had a wonderful experience of baptizing both mother and daughter in one of our regularly scheduled services. The following week, the other new member was baptized as well.

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“Do we have non-member weddings here?” our new staff member asked. “Yes, we do,” I replied. “But first we need to see if the date and time they want is available. Then they’ll need to meet with either Pastor Dick or me to see if we will marry them. Then the wedding date, time, and pastor will be locked in.”

“Oh. But his father is a Lutheran pastor and they’d like to have him perform the wedding.” “In that case,” I said, “get the information and I’ll send a letter of invitation to him to perform the wedding at St. Mark. But they’ll have to work with our wedding coordinator.”

The letter was sent. The wedding was scheduled. Then, I received the call that the bride-to-be would like to be baptized and become a part of our congregation. A week later, after our last worship service had ended, the three of us stood at the font of God’s love and she was baptized.

### **Old-World Habits**

I often wonder what my bishop would say if he knew these things were going on. My ministry training prepared me for a much more traditional approach to membership. I was used to other Lutherans transferring into my church or practicing Christians from other denominations entering membership. Then, it was simply introducing them to Lutheran theology and the practices of a particular congregation. Until the past six years, I never worried about whether new members were baptized; I simply assumed they would be.

Nor was I prepared for the conversion to faith that we have experienced. People who have little or no biblical knowledge—with limited theological understanding—come to experience God and find the spiritual wherewithal to make it through the next week. Fractured families, couples cohabiting, personal crises—these are the stuff of the new world for which my old-world habits have simply not prepared me.

But I am not alone. In the past twenty years, according to official ELCA information, we have lost more than 50 percent of the attendance of children in our Sunday schools and vacation Bible schools. The average age of mainline Protestantism varies from sixty

to sixty-five, and is aging. According to sociologist Robert Wuthnow, only about one in three of the young people we have confirmed are still in our denomination, and only 8 percent are attending any church at all! No wonder we are getting older.

Not only have we been unprepared for the twenty-first century, our churches cling to old-world habits like sailors clinging to any piece of timber after a shipwreck. I was recently startled when a layman from another Lutheran church, hearing that we have both traditional and contemporary worship at St. Mark, replied, “Well, we’re going to do the Lutheran liturgy right until the last person in our church shuts the lights out.” And they probably will.

At a conference I attended, Russell Crabtree of Holy Cow! Consulting challenged a group of pastors and spouses with the results of his significant study on congregations and satisfaction. This study found that the satisfaction level of a congregation is lower when the pastor is focused on pastoral care than when the pastor leads! The satisfaction level also increases with flexibility and decreases with social or theological rigidity.

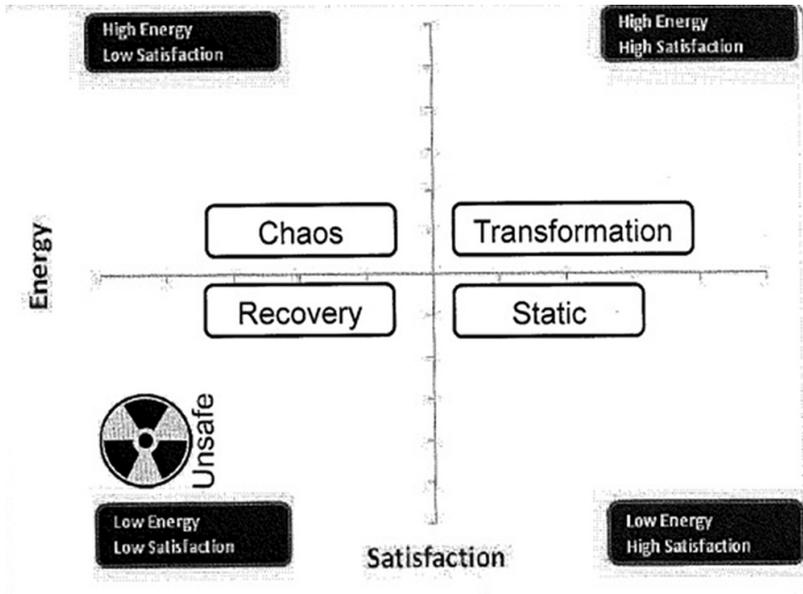


Figure 1

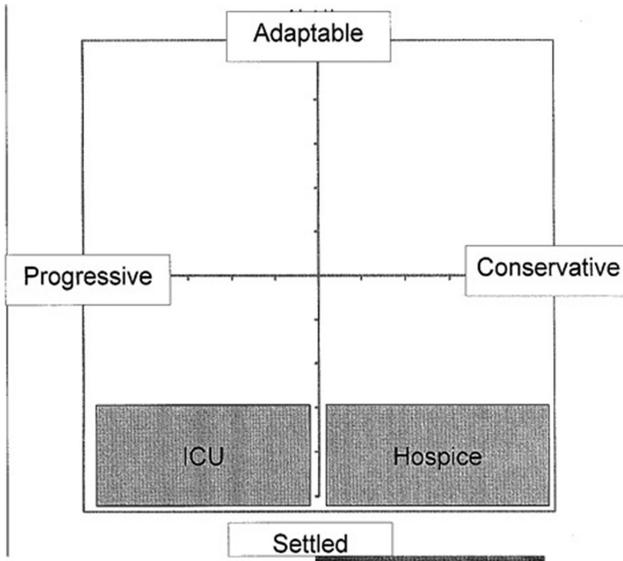


Figure 2

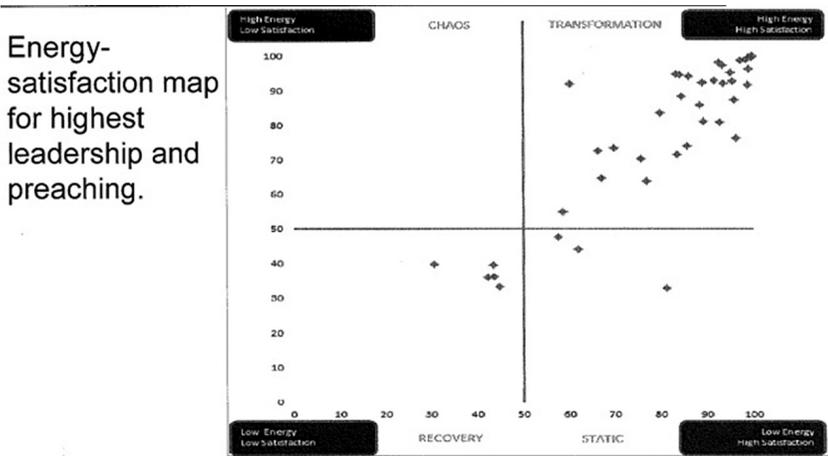


Figure 3

Our old-world habits were to focus on pastoral care as the major day-to-day function of a pastor. We were taught that theological clarity was critical for the well-being of our congregation. Neither Crabtree nor I are suggesting that pastoral care should be neglected or that theological clarity is unimportant. What his research suggests is that there is a collision between our old-world habits and effective ministry in this new age.

At St. Mark, our average age is thirty-six and we are growing younger. Our Sunday school has doubled in two years. Our average worship attendance has doubled as well. We are facing the challenge of limited resources (though giving has increased significantly!) and the need for adequate physical space. We have grown, with 60 percent of our new members coming from unchurched or dechurched situations. (The unchurched are those who have no formal or official Christian background; the dechurched are those who have attended a Christian church as children or adults but have not for ten years before coming to St. Mark.) The number of adult

baptisms has been steady and strong, and we have had to move from three new member classes in a year to four. This is surely the work of the Holy Spirit!

We have not abandoned our theology. We have two traditional and two contemporary worship services each week, with one on Saturday night. We celebrate Holy Communion at each service every week. Our sermons last from eighteen to twenty minutes or more. We steadfastly keep our worship length to one hour, except on Wednesday night when we have an extended teaching service. We have a growing two-year confirmation ministry to which our young people habitually invite their friends.

What we are doing differently is opening up ministry to all of God's people. We are celebrating Luther's affirmation of the priesthood of believers. Both pastors make hospital calls, but the fabric of hospital care is woven by trained lay visitors and other members of our church. We encourage new ministry teams to come into being for the sake of a particular need and, when that need is met, to simply stop. We are committed to ongoing evaluation of our ministries. And yes, we "kill" ministries that are dead or dying.

We have found it necessary to be clear about our mission, vision, and values. These guide our decision making. We begin every staff meeting or church council meeting with a Bible study and read together our core values (Discipleship, Integrity, Community, Excellence), mission ("Grow in Faith, Share Jesus Christ, and Serve Others") and our vision ("Growing disciples across generations with real faith for real life"). And we welcome anyone that God sends to us, no matter where they are on their spiritual journey.

There are no cost-free decisions, and the decision to grow and reach out beyond the old-world habits that worked for a number of generations has not been without cost. We have lost members. As we have grown, the church has not remained the same. We

have become more complex, and the expectations of our members have increased as we have become clear about our mission, vision, and values. The old ways of doing things no longer work. They didn't before, either, but the measuring stick then was not vitality but the comfort of those already present. Such a measuring stick only postpones the inevitable: growing smaller and older, with the dissatisfaction of knowing, unconsciously, that the congregation's days are numbered.

When we embarked upon our first building campaign, we lost a family. The reason was obvious: they didn't want to give any more. As we have worked hard to increase the value of our ministries—moving confirmation from a faith *information* system to a faith *transformation* system—we lost families. They nostalgically held the old catechism- and pastor-led preparation to be the litmus test of effective teen education. The fact that we retained few or none of our young people after confirmation had little bearing on their value for the “tried and true.” When we moved to a more relationship-based confirmation, with the doctrinal information in the second year and the faith formation and biblical literacy in the first year, we began to build a bridge for our young people from confirmation into our senior high ministry. The goal was to make Christians, not just little Lutherans.

With the four-service schedule on weekends, there are those who complain that they don't know everyone anymore, that they don't see all their friends anymore. Yet our value of community has spawned a fellowship time between Sunday worship services that has exponentially increased the participation we now have. We have a single congregation with many expressions. But, frankly, any church that includes more than forty to fifty people already has more than one expression of their ministry; they just don't want to acknowledge it.

The breakthrough for ministry at St. Mark grew out of the partnership between the pastoral leadership and the congregation. The desire was for a church that could be a place where individuals and families would meet our God in worship, have opportunities to grow in faith and service, and develop Christian relationships. This desire compelled us to move beyond the historic activities or perspectives of the congregation. Lay leadership not only embraced but championed change. With congregations around us in serious decline or going out of business, the people of St. Mark made the conscious decision that they did not want that to be their future. We have worked hard to encourage everyone to move with us into the future. We have worked equally hard to make certain that our future was not held hostage to a particular individual or family with convictions or inclinations that went counter to who we believed God was calling us to be and become. Sadly but predictably, not everyone has chosen to be a part of this emerging future.

Leadership will be required in the twenty-first-century church to make these difficult choices. Clergy and laity will need to forge a partnership in mission based upon clearly identified and stated core values as well as a vision that leads into the future the Holy Spirit is calling the church to. Simply accepting the continuing decline and aging of our churches is neither biblical nor faithful. We are called to reinvent, with the Holy Spirit, the Protestant church in America. The only question is what is required of us and how we shall do it.

## **Two Necessary Convictions**

The Christian church in the twenty-first century faces new opportunities and challenges. The confidence of congregational leaders for this new era of ministry will, I believe, be based upon two necessary convictions. The first is that, as the revealed truth of God, the gospel of Jesus Christ is the single most hope-filled, joy-

producing, and faith-enriching message in the world. The second is that, apart from the basic faith tenets outlined in the Apostles' Creed, we no longer have all the questions, let alone answers, for effective ministry. For the sake of the timeless truth in Jesus Christ, we have to subject our methods and practices to critical evaluation and action. We must think of the congregation as a learning organization, able to test and respond to our changing context.

When we discovered that some of those we had already received as new members were not baptized, it challenged us at St. Mark to consider the possibility that our usual practice of receiving people was no longer adequate. Frankly, the question on our data form was assumed to be for information only. Historically, we assumed our new members had been baptized—usually as infants. So, leaving the baptismal information section blank was assumed to mean that they needed to talk to their parents to find out dates and locations. The experience I related above has been replicated at least twice since that original event. We have now learned that the questions we had asked were not sufficient to this new time of ministry. Since that time, we have had numerous adult baptisms—including one at a local lake because the young man of faith desired to be immersed. When he asked if that was something Lutherans did, I laughed and told him that the amount of water didn't matter. It was the water and the Word that mattered. Engagement with this young man and his faith led to articulating our understanding of the sacrament of holy baptism in a different language—but it was still the historic witness of our faith.

Such opportunities to serve and connect our faith to the lives of others will always be a collaborative process. This is true not just with those who are entering our congregations but also with leaders, members, and staff.

A young organist and choir director once asked me, “Do you really ask your choirmaster and organist to pick the hymns for your worship?” The question emerged out of a workshop hosted at St. Mark for organists and choir directors in the central United States, with participants from Iowa, Kansas, and Nebraska.

“Yes,” I replied. “I learned a few years ago that I want to involve our musicians in the planning of worship as early as possible. I want their input in the shaping of things—whether that is our contemporary or traditional worship leader.”

“But what if they have a different point of view or disagree with the direction you’re taking?” she continued. “Wouldn’t you just make a decision and put an end to it?”

“Well, I want to have the conversation. We are clear about authority and responsibility, so I know that they understand the decision is finally mine. But I want them to have ownership of the direction, too. Being a pastor is hard enough without having to be perfect and make all the decisions. After all,” I continued, “what if they’re right and I am wrong?”

There was silence. Then one of the organists said, “Most of us here have never heard our pastor suggest that they might be wrong.”

For collaboration in ministry to succeed, the parties involved have to admit that they need one another, that no one has all the answers, that all are learning together. Christian partnership has the added benefit of acknowledging that each is gifted, and those gifts ought to be available for the sake of the ministry of the church. This is Luther’s understanding of the priesthood of all believers.

I am convinced that the pastoral perspective on worship will be enhanced by the gifts and understanding of capable musicians. In my own ministry there have been countless times when, without having seen the hymn or praise song beforehand, I have been lifted up in worship by the music chosen by our music leaders. The melodies or

lyrics fit so powerfully with the theme of the day that I lose myself in worship and, for just a moment, forget that I am leading. More importantly, I am grateful that I do not work alone but with others committed to giving their best for the sake of worshiping our God. In those moments, I know I couldn't have done as good a job as they did.

For the sake of God's truth in Jesus Christ we must begin to think of the church as a learning organization. We are in a time like no other. We cannot possibly know what the issues will be, let alone the answers to them. When we think of the church as a learning organization we begin to open ourselves to God's future. We don't expect perfection of ourselves (a denial of grace!), but strive to grow through our mistakes and successes. The church as a learning organization embraces grace: we are not perfect and we will not pretend to be. When this happens, we no longer need to defend our tradition or methods. We are open to asking about the goal, and how we can best achieve it in Jesus' name.

This grace-filled attitude begins as the soul work of the pastor who is the chief leader in the church.