
Hope, Renewal, and Re-Rooting



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Walking Together: A Congregational Resource Event

March 26, 2011

“Sunday’s Coming” [You Tube video](#).

At last year’s Walking Together event, I talked about how much of what we know as church is passing away, literally dying. A significant number of congregations are working hard or hanging on by tinkering with the institutional machinery, creating snazzy worship (like the video), adopting the newest quick-fix program, or seeking to be attractive to outsiders in an attempt to compete for their time and commitment. Good, faithful folks have worked diligently to “do church” better and better, with more and more program, with greater and greater excellence, and yet membership and resources continue to decline. Many are tired and discouraged because what they knew as church from their growing up years isn’t working very well in the church they know today in spite of heroic efforts.

I quoted Reggie McNeal often last year because we had arranged for him to be a keynote speaker at our last synod assembly. Reggie shook us up, as I knew he would, and he inspired us to reimagine what it means to be the people of God in this time in the mission field in which God has placed us. In fact, I should contact Reggie and demand a cut from the sales of *Missional Renaissance*, his latest book, because I’m certain our assembly created a spike in sales!

These days, books, articles, websites, and blogs that address the emerging missional church are countless, and at this Walking Together event, I want to invite you into the conversation that is happening everywhere regardless of denomination, theological orientation, or size of faith community.

By a show of hands, how many of you were at last year’s “Walking Together” event? Welcome back! And to those of you attending for the first time, I’m glad you are here, because we are exploring what it means to be the people of God in a rapidly changing world in an ever more complex culture.

Today, I’m going to touch on three things:

- Hope and God’s abundant gifts
- Spiritual renewal—does Jesus really matter?
- The missional church as outwardly focused

This presentation with bibliography is posted on the synod website: www.nswi.org.

I. Hope and God’s Abundant Gifts

I have noticed, particularly among smaller congregations, but among many other congregations as well, that talk of the “missional church” can create significant anxiety or discouragement. I’m told, “We don’t have the resources to move out into the world the way you describe.” And I think, Really? You’ve got nothing? God hasn’t graced you or your congregation with any gifts that might make a difference to someone outside the four walls of your church? Really?

Sometimes I get the sense that many have given up

and buried their diminishing church before they’ve even given the Spirit a chance to work in their midst.

Obviously, those who conclude they have no resources for mission are burdened with feelings of defeat, of experiencing decline in the church they love, of working harder and harder without bringing life back to the people of their beloved church. My heart aches for such faithful saints who see little or no hope. I also ache for those who conclude, “Our church will never be able to change in such dramatic fashion,” or leaders who worry, “I have no idea, nor am I equipped, to lead the church I serve into a real missional future.”

Perhaps you’ve seen this. Read it silently in your mind: **GOD IS NOWHERE**. Those who are defeated and discouraged often see GOD IS NO WHERE. Those who are filled with hope will likely see GOD IS NOW HERE.

Peter Steinke in *A Door Set Open*, writes,

“Hope provides a new angle of vision. When things look bleak or unmovable, hope sees more than what is there. If congregations are to respond to the challenge of change, halfhearted actions will not achieve what is desired. Victim thinking will only reinforce a sense of powerlessness. Hope can carry a congregation over the threshold of ‘can’t.’” (p. 3)

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land had an online 2010 [Advent Calendar](#) called, “Fear builds walls—Hope builds bridges. How true! Without hope, we circle the wagons and try to fend off the world around us, we retreat into ourselves, we squelch creativity and imagination, we cling to correct doctrine like a security blanket, we identify what is threatening and call it “enemy” instead of “opportunity,” and finally our fear builds walls, all kinds of walls.

But hope builds bridges. For the church, hope is the Spirit-reach into our lives that inspires, strengthens, and sends us confidently into the world. Where a congregation is at on the continuum of fear and hope will determine its openness and ability to be missional.

“Mission drift,” that’s what Steinke calls what he sees in most congregations—congregations who are limping along without a focus. Steinke notes:

“When consulting with churches embroiled in conflict or paralyzed by passivity, I always ask the congregation, ‘Does this congregation have a clear sense of its mission?’ Typically responses range from ‘poor sense of purpose’ to ‘running in circles,’ from ‘lack of vision’ to ‘our mission is not to have a mission.’ Questions like, Who are we? What is our primary focus? go begging for answers. Then when I ask individuals what they think the mission is, the answers are rote: ‘spread the word,’ ‘support the church,’ ‘love everyone,’ and ‘preach the Bible.’ No one has ever said, ‘Our mission is to turn the world upside-down,’ or ‘to let the world know that the resurrection means the

world has not seen the last of Jesus Christ.’ Some members believed their congregation had a sense of mission because they had a mission statement. Sad to say, few knew what it was.” (p. 66)

And then Steinke writes:

“Based on my experience, congregations in mission drift will at some point:

- engage in conflict
- suffer a malaise of spirit,
- decline in some statistical manner,
- adapt to their most immature members,
- fail to mobilize people’s gifts and energy,
- surrender to apathy or complacency,
- do little planning,
- become turned in on themselves,
- blame outside forces (perhaps one another) for their depression,
- be unable to make effective, appropriate changes” (p. 67)

Again, if a congregation doesn’t know who they are as the people of God, and if a congregation has no clear purpose or sense of their part in God’s mission, mission drift results and the body will be crippled. Steinke finds descriptions of the missional church to be confusing, so he spells it out clearly:

“Because God has a mission, a church arises. Apart from mission, the church is meaningless. The mission has churches.” (p. 68)

So, your church is small and struggling. Steinke suggests that you latch on the hope that is yours in Christ and become part of God’s mission. A small pinch of salt flavors an entire pot of stew. The addition of leaven makes the whole loaf rise. A small candle illumines the darkest of rooms. Clearly, salt, leaven, and light transform in spite of their size! God has made *us* to be salt and leaven and light, and who God has made us to be as followers of Jesus is all we need “to love, to serve, to preach, to teach, to heal, to liberate.” (Bosch, p. 412) This is *God’s* mission, and if we are not engaged in God’s work, we are not the church!

If salt stays in its shaker, and leaven remains unmixed, and a match is never struck so that it sparks into light, the church will clearly be in deep mission drift, for hope and mission are at the heart of what it means to be part of God’s activity in the world.

Our five-year-old granddaughter likes to turn off all the lights in the house even though she is a somewhat afraid of the dark. But she has a miniature flashlight that she uses to move about and find grandpa when he hides. That small light illumines what she fears and she confidently moves about in the darkness. People of God, is not your refrain, “This little light of mine, I’m gonna let it shine?”

I love the parable of the Dishonest Manager in Luke

16, even though some pastors shudder when it appears in the lectionary (16:1-8). The manager has squandered his master’s property and knowing he is about to be fired, arranges deals with all those whom the master does business in order to find favor with them and to ensure his own future. He’s sneaky and conniving, and he’s entirely motivated by self-preservation. The master learns of the manager’s shenanigans and *commends* him, not for his dishonesty, but for his shrewdness, “for the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light.”

If God is calling us out into the mission field, why not be children of light who are equally shrewd? Why not be creative, industrious, and passionate about God’s mission in the world? Not about the preservation of the institution, building, or nostalgic past for which we hanker, but about engaging a rapidly changing world in a complex culture for the sake of those who are being ground up by life. God is even now present in the lives of those outside of our church walls, and we are called to be part of what God is already doing there. Remember, “For God so loved the world;” it doesn’t say, “for God so loved the church.” God so loved *the world!* (John 3:16) You and I are sent to love this same world: “As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” (John 20:21b) We are sent to be a blessing in the world God loves enough to give his only begotten Son. Let’s get creative as we engage in this mission of blessing.

You see, as salt, you are an agent in helping people taste God; as leaven, you are part of feeding God to others; as light, you are illuminating God to those who cannot see.

You’ve got ample God-given gifts to be a sent people. God has seen to that!

You’ve been claimed and named a child of the Kingdom. God has seen to that!

You’ve been made to be salt, leaven, and light. God has seen to that!

You have been sent to join this God who is tending to the whole world, not just the church; this God who is on the move, and we are the church only when we are on the move in the world, too.

There is a scene in the movie, “A League of Their Own,” when baseball manager Tom Hanks yells at one of the players on his all-female team, “Are you crying? There’s no crying! There’s no crying in baseball!” Remember? Well, because God has *already* graced you to be salt, leaven, and light for God’s mission in the world, there will be no whining about the lack of resources or opportunity. “There’s no crying in baseball,” and there’s no whining when it comes to the mission of God!

Barbara Brown Taylor writes in *Leaving Church*:

“All these years later, the way many of us are

doing church is broken and we know it, even if we do not know what to do about it. We proclaim the priesthood of all believers while we continue living with hierarchical clergy, liturgy, and architecture. We follow a Lord who challenged the religious and political institutions of his time while we fund and defend our own. We speak and sing of divine transformation while we do everything in our power to maintain our equilibrium. If redeeming things continue to happen to us in spite of these deep contradictions in our life together, then I think that it is because God is faithful even when we are not. When we are able to trust the gospel that our human love of God and one another is the sum total of what we were put on earth to do, and that we have everything we need to be human, then redeeming things will continue to happen, both because and in spite of us. They will happen because God loves life so much that even at the grave we make our song Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia . . .” (pp. 220-221)

We have reason to be people of hope, and God has graced us with all the gifts we need to be engaged in God’s mission.

II. Spiritual Renewal—Does Jesus Really Matter?

I can’t stand “decision theology,” because it’s not about us deciding to accept Jesus as Lord; it’s about Jesus the Lord deciding to accept us. Even though I balk at such theology, I still honor those who say that they “found Jesus and accepted him as their personal Lord and Savior.” Here’s why. I did much of the background reading for this presentation last December in Bayfield, and during that time I met and had dinner with a delightful couple. He is a former Lutheran; she a former Roman Catholic. As they talked about their faith journey, neither, they said, were fed spiritually in the congregations in which they grew up. Knowing I was a Lutheran bishop, he confessed, “Growing up Lutheran I could not tell if people really thought that Jesus made any difference in their lives. Jesus is my Savior and there is nothing more important in my life.” To tend to their spiritual lives, they joined an evangelical church with a theology that I think is lacking, but where they are among people for whom Jesus really matters.

It would have been easy to come to the defense of our congregations, our Lutheran grace centeredness, our rich understanding of Word and Sacrament, etc. But I think I understand what this man was saying. When congregations are busy offering programs, activities, and events—the marks of a successful church for many—I wonder if something is lost when it comes to spiritual development?

The following video clip is one that totally grabs my heart: [A Matter of Life and Death](#),

Wearing seatbelts is a matter of life and death. It is of ultimate importance because life itself is at stake.

Do we believe that Jesus is a matter of life and death for us and for all whom we meet? This is what was behind the man’s conclusion when he said, “Growing up Lutheran I could not tell if people really thought that Jesus made any difference in their lives.”

In Malawi, Jesus *is* of ultimate importance, and trusting him *is* a matter of life and death. Spend 15 minutes with a sister or brother from our global companion church in Malawi, and you will hear a passion and spiritual depth that we don’t experience very often here. It permeates every part of their lives. I fully realize there are cultural differences—after all, Norwegians don’t express passion for much of anything; you know, Ole loved Lena so much that he almost told her. But when our congregations are so oriented to being service providers for its members, it is remarkable that there is any spiritual depth or understanding of discipleship at all. Praise God for the work of the Spirit in spite of our efforts to make members instead of disciples!

We measure our churches in terms of the variety of programs we offer and the number of people who attend. Perhaps better measurements include such things as the depth of spiritual maturity, the level of intimacy with the biblical narrative, the role of the home in passing on the faith, and the profound place of prayer in the lives of Jesus believers. For without proficiency in spiritual practices, without knowing and trusting that Jesus is Savior and Lord, how can we be disciples representing this Savior to a hurting world? How will we be able to understand the Lord’s calling that leads us to engage in God’s mission? Grounded in Scripture, nourished by bread and wine, steeped in prayer, committed to relationships—these are the building blocks of discipleship shaping and deepening faith.

In *Reclaiming the “C” Word*, Kelly Fryer writes,

“If Jesus showed us anything, he showed us that God is willing to do whatever it takes to love and bless the world, to reconcile it and save it and set it free. That is God’s mission. And our job—our call—as Christians, is to participate in that . . . *evangelical* mission.” (p. 2)

Think about your congregation. What specifically does your congregation do to help people deepen their spiritual journey? How are disciples formed in your community of faith? What in your communal life would encourage and support a vibrant relationship with Jesus? Mind you, I’m not talking about creating a new crop of “me and Jesus” people. But the missional church will be vitally interested in creating “me and Jesus *and neighbor*” people, for depth in such relationships will provide the food we need for the journey into the world to engage in God’s mission. This has everything to do with “loving God, and your neighbor as yourself.” My hunch is that far too many still haven’t connected with the “loving God” part yet.

Do we really believe that Jesus is the Son of God and

do we trust every dimension of our lives to him? Does Jesus really matter?

Reggie McNeal writes:

“No one can legitimately claim that our current model produces vibrant disciples. North American church attendees lack the caliber and character of disciples that we see in many other parts of the world where the movement started by Jesus is exploding, where the focus is on developing people, not just processing them.” (p. 12) “We must change our ideas of what it means to develop a disciple, shifting the emphasis *from* studying Jesus and all things spiritual in an environment protected from the world *to* following Jesus into the world to join him in his redemptive mission.” (p. 10)

A friend recently wrote to me with these words, “There was a knock on the door this morning. I opened it to find a young man standing there who said, ‘I’m a Jehovah’s Witness.’”

I said, “Come in and sit down; what do you want to talk about?”

He said, “Beats the hell out of me, I’ve never gotten this far before.”

If you were to sit with someone to tell them about Jesus, what would *you* say?

Bottom line: If we don’t know who we are as the redeemed of God, how can we know what we are to do in the work of God’s mission of redemption?

III. The Missional Church as Outwardly Focused

In Milfred Minatea’s book, *Shaped by God’s Heart*, a pastor is described in a typical congregation where ministry is going reasonably well. The members are more than happy with their church and the leadership he provides. But the pastor is overwhelmed by the activities, prep time, and effort it takes just to make the machinery of the congregation operate smoothly. He knows his members are also overwhelmed in their lives, so he is amazed that they somehow manage to squeeze in church commitments. Sitting in his office one day and reflecting on all of this, he notices how unsatisfying this church life is and deeply senses that something is missing. Minatea writes:

“[The pastor] is not alone in his feelings. This question of what is missing plagues a lot of today’s church leaders. The sheer quantity of activities involved in a church can wear everybody out. Such churches may be excellent social organizations, whose members enjoy relationships with one another, but they have little transformational impact within the local community.

“When the activities of a church focus inward, the church has exchanged its mission for maintenance. There is a great difference between

focus on mission and focus on maintenance, and there is a great difference in the impact each has in God’s kingdom. At its core, it is not the number of activities a church is involved in that defines success, but whether those activities result in accomplishing God’s mission for His church. True success can only result when the activities of God’s body reflect what is in His heart [The] *missional* church: a reproducing community of authentic disciples, being equipped as missionaries sent by God, to live and proclaim His Kingdom in their world.” (p. xvi)

Once again, we have a definition of the missional church as outwardly focused, the body of Christ sent to do God’s work in the world.

So how does a congregation become more missional in its orientation? Stephen Bouman, ELCA Executive Director for Mission Advancement, talks about congregations “re-rooting” in their communities. It means that instead of trying to woo people through the church doors to become members and participate in programs, congregations will leave the safe confines of their building and become engaged in the mission field in which God has placed them.

Recently, I heard two sociology professors at Augsburg College talk about how they teach their students about what makes for a healthy or unhealthy neighborhood. While I have no doubt that the classroom content was interesting, it was the student field experience that captured my attention. The class gathers in the center of a town and divides into four groups. Each group walks briskly for 10 minutes in four different directions. Then, they turn around and walk slowly back to the starting point, and as they walk, they observe all the dynamics of the neighborhood; things like: the condition of the buildings, words on signs, demographic makeup, restaurants, education opportunities, economic realities, city services, commitment to the arts, road conditions, types of businesses, garbage service, new construction, the price of a cup of coffee, everything! Then, the entire class reassembles and pools their observations. Not surprisingly, the students can precisely describe the makeup of the people who live there and what their lives are like. In other words, they quickly learn to intimately know that community.

Often, churches are so busy with their own programmatic activities that they don’t even know their own neighborhoods. And if they don’t know their own neighborhoods, they will likely never become a missional presence in those neighborhoods. If you’re going to re-root in the community, you’d better find out what God is already doing there and become part of God’s mission.

Listening would be a good place to begin. What if your members spent time at the coffee shop, grocery store, implement dealer, and school playground listening to people in the community? “What are your greatest

joys these days?” “What are your greatest challenges?” “Tell me about your kids.” “What do you love most about living in this town?”

What if that listening included a conversation with the country board chair, a school guidance counselor, a realtor, the sheriff, a nurse, the food pantry coordinator, a social worker, a banker, or any number of people who *are* deeply rooted in the community? What could you learn from them about the mission field God places before you?

I am eager to access the data from the 2010 census; it is now available. What trends in your community do you need to pay attention to? Who is moving in? Who is moving out? How do changes since the last census affect your wider community, your neighborhood, your church? Who is milking the cows at your dairy farms? How have income and education levels changed? What opportunities and challenges are suggested by the data?

From your listening and observations, like the Augsburg College students, what did you learn about the community in which God has placed you? What would it mean for your congregation to re-root in this mission field? How can your congregation move from being a club which caters to its members to becoming a mission outpost such that congregational life is not shaped by the number of activities that take place in the church building but how the congregation lives out its calling in the neighborhood?

Careful listening will provide a host of possibilities for re-rooting in the community. You will come to know where the transforming power of Christ is needed and you will identify where “God’s work. Our hands.” can be faithfully lived out.

You’ll then be able to identify who your partners will be in this re-rooting. It might be other churches, or mosques or synagogues, or businesses, or health care provider, or farm coop, or government agency, or social service, or school. Alliances to bring about change will emerge, and empowerment to bring transformation to the lives of people will arise. You will find yourself immersed in issues of mercy and justice, and you won’t be satisfied any longer just putting band-aids on problems; you’ll want to pursue root causes that bring harm to people. You will be plunged back into the Scriptures for nourishment, strength, and encouragement, for the Word is about God embracing the world, about being an Incarnational presence, about making what is broken whole and lifting up those who have been pressed down. The mission direction “to go” will become clear. You will be drawn into this God-work, and you will taste the joy of what it means to be sent in the name of Jesus.

Is such an outward focus easy? No way! An outward focus will severely disrupt the comfort of tending only to the flock whose names are on the membership rolls. It will confuse and anger those who want the church to serve *them* instead of their neighbor. It will lead to significant change in where resources are

directed, how congregational priorities and goals are set, what staff is needed, how leadership is conducted, and what the expectations are for those who affiliate with the congregation. It will cause conflict. Being outwardly focused will require every Spirit-filled ounce of energy the community of faith can muster. Resistance is a given because we are self-centered and sinful.

To be a missional church means that your congregation will be radically transformed, “membership services” will be secondary to community engagement, and every church will be challenged to deal with the problem of high cost buildings and expensive professional clergy. Yes, I say, “problem,” because both often inhibit rather than enhance what is possible in transformative re-rooting. If buildings and clergy are seen primarily as servicing the members of the club, a missional orientation may not be possible. If buildings and clergy are leveraged as assets for community outreach, then they are worth the investment. Every community of faith will need to wrestle with this issue in the years to come.

The reason I am thrilled that you are here today is that you are at least in on this conversation, because once you come to grips with the changing cultural landscape and what this means for the people of God, once you’ve caught a glimpse into the direction the church of the present and future needs to move, once you’ve been exposed to missional thinking, you can’t look at your congregation, who it is, and what it does, in the same way ever again!

Reggie McNeal says, “The missional church engages the community beyond its walls because it believes that is why the church exists.” (p. 6)

So, what are you going to do about this? Does your congregation have any idea *why* it exists? What would be helpful for your congregation to reclaim its place in God’s work? What are *you* going to do? Is there a strategy your congregation can employ to begin building the critical mass necessary to affect change in a missional direction? What needs to die in order for your congregation to arise as a *sent* community? Are there specific intentional goals that can be established that will begin to move your congregation to be and do church within a more missional framework?

Watch this [You Tube video](#). This guy had a vision, set a goal, developed a strategy, and was willing to risk in order to accomplish his task.

What goals and strategies will your congregation pursue to become a part of God’s mission in the world? How will you set forth a vision that matches God’s vision as expressed in Scripture and lived out fully in Jesus? How will you respond to the beckoning of the Spirit to join in?

I want to address one more thing before I conclude. I know that there are a few who are critical of some of what I’m sharing today because it seems to diminish the importance of what takes place within the church

building, as though you should close, sell your building, and hit the streets—although that might be very helpful for some congregations!

There is a distinction between trying to *get members* who will stay put in the church to support the institution and *receiving new members* so that they are fed, equipped, and sent. There is a difference between engaging in programs that serve primarily those who hold membership, and deepening faith such that vocation is understood as living faithfully in all of life, not just church life. There is a difference between coming together as a social club or closed family, and gathering around the gifts of Word and Sacrament to be steeped in God's grace.

You see, it's not that the gathered congregation is unimportant, quite the contrary. It's just that we need to be clear why we gather and for what purpose we join a fellowship. If we gather around Word and Sacrament so that our baptismal identity and vocation is shaped, our biblical imperative clarified, and our discipleship strengthened, then we are gathering for missional reasons. It's not a matter of *gathering over* and against *sending*; it's not either or, it's both and. The emphasis of a missional church reminds us that we've got some of the gathering part down pat. It's the sending where we tend to fall short, because we didn't feel we needed to be a sent church when we were still part of the dominant culture. Again, clarity about identity and purpose are crucial as we seek to be missional in a Spirit-inspired sense.

So, I'm not suggesting, "out with the old and in with the new." Quite the contrary. Much of what is old—our history, theology, liturgy, spiritual practices—is being rediscovered such that it is new again. This is an oft repeated pattern throughout all of Christian history, and that pattern is unfolding in in our time, too.

Let's bring our time to a close. McNeal says:

"So how do we pull all this together in coming to an understanding of what the missional church is? My answer is that the missional church is *the people of God in his redemptive mission in the world*. This understanding of the church is both liberating and sobering. It is liberating in the sense that we realize we don't have to manufacture the work of God in ourselves or in the world. God is doing the heaving lifting! This means we can quit trying to drum up a breeze by generating a lot of frenetic church activity and instead hoist our sails to catch the breeze that's already blowing.

"At the same time, this understanding of *who* we are as the church (not *what* we are—a place or a religious vender) carries great responsibility. Our job is not to "do church" well but to be the people of God in an unmistakable way in the world. We are to be the aroma of Jesus in the cemetery of decaying flesh. We are to be different in the hope we offer, in the grace we exhibit, and in the obvious sacrifice of love we display in dealing with others." (p. 24)

Kelly Fryer puts words to the journey I have been on, the journey we are *all* on:

"In some ways, in talking about what it means to be the church in a changing world, it feels like I'm trying to hit a moving target. Plus, *I'm* changing. Every day it seems like I learn something new, hear something I haven't heard before, and see things differently than I've ever seen them until now. I blame that on the Holy Spirit (or credit it, depending on my mood) and, mostly, I think that's right." (p. viii)

Today, I hope your head hurts just thinking about all of this. I also hope that you are energized by the possibilities of joining God's mission and how the Spirit breathes new life into we who have been called as disciples of the Crucified One. May the Spirit blow mightily in our midst, so that we "hoist our sails to catch the breeze that's already blowing."

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