

It's time to TALK TURKEY . . .

Bishop Duane C. Pederson, Northwest Synod of Wisconsin

One of the joys of growing up in Montana was the annual trek with my dad into the mountains to hunt elk. For two weeks each fall, we'd disappear with my father's hunting partners into the expansive forests above the Spotted Bear River. It was special time—time with my dad, lots of male bonding, outdoor living—a significant “timeout” from life.

We always had a base camp that was fairly plush by most camping standards. The 12' x 16' tent had a plywood floor, five-foot walls, a large cook stove, and cushions on which to sleep. It was toasty warm, even when the temperature was below zero, and hearty meals, cards, and joke-telling took place in our home away from home. We even constructed a corral of lodge pole rails so that the horses had wandering room at night. The base camp was so nice and comfortable that we hung a sign on a tree that read, “Trail Creek Bar and Grill.”

From base camp, we rode horses for two hours, tied the horses to trees, hunted all day on foot, returned to the horses at dark, and rode two more hours back to camp. It was somewhat grueling and I occasionally had to remind myself, “This is fun!” After a long day of riding horse, hiking for miles in knee-deep snow, and trying to stay warm and dry, it was always good to return to base camp.

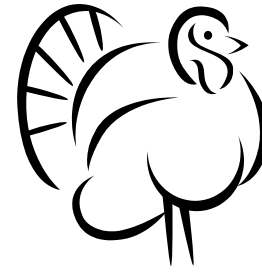
But sometimes, we set up a “spike camp,” a small, rustic camp far away from the base camp and high in the mountains. This location would eliminate the daily four-hour horseback ride to get to and from the best hunting spots. At a spike camp, once you flipped open the tent flap and set foot outside, you could immediately hunt because you were already in the middle of elk country. Starting and ending the day where the elk herds fed and bedded down was precisely where a serious hunter wanted to be.

The contrast between “base camp” and “spike camp” was sharp. Base camp was where we settled in to be comfortable, where we enjoyed each other's company, and where, if a blizzard hit, we were content to stay put—safe, warm, cozy, secure. The spike camp, on the other hand, was where we were more intent on hunting. This camp was sparse in furnishings in case we wanted to move its location quickly. We traveled light, covered lots of hunting territory, and were very successful in filling our elk tags.

As I think about the church, the distinction between “base camp” and “spike



(Over)



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camp” is very apropos. Too many congregations see themselves as base camps where the comfort and convenience of their members is paramount. The unstated mission of most base camp churches is to preserve and maintain “the tent;” to have a nice building. Church is the place you go to, rather than the place from which you are sent. “We’re a friendly congregation,” base camp churches say. That’s because the members all know each other and they enjoy one another’s company. But just ask someone new, or from the outside, how difficult it is to break into the fellowship. Maintaining “what is” is frequently the goal that drives congregational activity. Base camp churches tend to be content to go it alone; no need to network or be partners with others for the sake of mission.

Missional congregations, however, see themselves as spike camps—light in institutional trappings, nimble and ready to move to where and to whom God calls them. Keeping members comfortable isn’t nearly as important as comforting the neighbor who needs to be touched with hope and support in the Lord. Membership has minimal meaning; discipleship is what is valued. Disciples don’t just “go to church;” they are sent from church to be the presence of Christ in God’s world. Missional spike camp churches intentionally witness and serve. They live outside of themselves. And since they live outside of themselves, they already find themselves in God’s mission field. For them, *that* is church!

All congregations have both “base camp” and “spike camp” attributes. Do an inventory of your congregation’s ministry, examine where you invest your time and resources, assess the goals of your congregation—both stated and unstated. What in your ministry leans into a base camp mentality and practice? What parts of your ministry are driven by the passion of being a spike camp? Or, ask of every aspect of your communal life: “How does this build up God’s kingdom?” If the answer is, “It doesn’t,” then why are you doing it as a community of faith?

The extent to which we are a missional church will likely determine which congregations will thrive, witness and serve, and which faith communities will struggle, decline, and die.

Where does your congregation fall on the continuum of “base camp” and “spike camp?” Take a long, hard look and prayerfully discern how God might be calling your congregation deeper into a missional identity and purpose.

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