

# ISSUES

IN CHRISTIAN EDUCATION

Fall 2011

Vol. 45, No. 1

## **Revitalizing** *community* **Congregations:**

**A High Priority?**

*learning*  
**restoring**

*change*

*connecting*  
**relationships**

**demographics**

**URGENT**

*spiritual growth*

Fall 2011  
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# ISSUES

## IN CHRISTIAN EDUCATION

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# reflections

What do the following numbers mean, and what do they have in common?\*

- \* I. The year in which Lutherans will celebrate the 500th anniversary of the Reformation and the year of meeting the LCMS convention-adopted goal of praying and working for the mission revitalization of at least 2,000 congregations.
- 2. The number of churches participating in the Transforming Churches Network.
- 3. The number of members needed to pay a pastor's full salary and benefits.
- 4. The percentage of congregations that report no growth in annual worship attendance.
- 5. The size of an average congregation.
- 6. The percentage of congregations that have not baptized or confirmed a single adult in the past year.
- 7. The percentage of people who attend worship services in the USA in a given week.
- 8. The number of community outreach events in a year which often lead to revitalizing a congregation.
- 9. The USA's rank as a mission field—the third largest.
- 10. The marks of the Church: where the Gospel is proclaimed and the sacraments are rightly administered.
- 11. The one and only Savior of the world: Jesus.



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TYPEFACES USED IN THIS PERIODICAL  
Titles set in 22 point Mrs. Eaves Roman (Emigre of Sacramento). Tracking normal.  
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- 1. 2017
- 2. 500+
- 3. 121
- 4. 80
- 5. 75
- 6. 50
- 7. 18
- 8. 4–6
- 9. 3
- 10. 2
- 11. 1

The meanings of the numbers are found in the articles and editorials of this edition of *Issues in Christian Education*. I hope the list of numbers will tease you into reading the entire journal in one sitting! (To “get you going,” the meaning of each number is listed at the left.) Once I began reading the articles, editorials, and book reviews, I couldn’t stop. I was inspired by their focus, clarity, practicality, and biblical mandate of the revitalization of God’s churches and people by the power of the Gospel.

This edition of *Issues* could well be called a “Great Commission” issue! Throughout the edition, you will read of both the opportunity and the challenge to faithfully, confessionally, fervently, immediately and passionately proclaim and live the Good News of Jesus Christ, the one and only Savior of the world. Today, as much if not more than ever before, God has chosen you and me as His people to “proclaim the praises of Him who called us out of darkness into His marvelous light” (1 Peter 2:9).

I love the mission statement of St. John Lutheran Church in Seward, Nebraska, my home congregation. It reads simply: Our mission is to “proclaim and practice the love of Christ!” At the proverbial end (or beginning) of the day, it is the love of Christ and His all-atoning sacrifice on Calvary’s cross that revitalizes congregations and sinful human beings. Revitalized, He calls you and me to be His hands, feet, eyes, ears and voice to proclaim and practice His love in the communities and congregations where He places us!

Imagine: God desires to use us in the most important work in the world—the work of eternal salvation! Revitalizing congregations is the work of eternal salvation! It is your work! It is my work! It is urgent! It is priority number one! Read on!

Brian L. Friedrich, President

## Paying Attention to Vital Signs!

Periodically many of us visit a medical doctor for a physical examination. The doctor says, "Let's take a look at your vital signs!" Parish leaders, professional church workers and congregations need to do the same. Those that do often become aware of the realities, changes, improvements and emphases that will create a healthier parish, mission and ministry life!

Some congregations and schools in our church body have been involved in a "revitalization" process that involves taking a look at the "vital signs!" Sometimes, it's not easy to ask the questions or do the insightful examination, but it is worthwhile and meaningful! It's often easier to "keep doing what we have always done" while forgetting that we'll also "get what we've always got!"

What is vital for a Christian? (Matthew 4:19) For a Christian congregation? (Romans 12) For fulfilling the Great Commission? (Matthew 28:18-20) For reaching those who do not know the Lord Jesus Christ? (Acts 2) For nurturing, equipping, supporting those who do? (1 Peter 4:10)

The USA is the third largest mission field on the planet. In the USA, about 18 percent of the people attend a worship service in a given week. While there are some large congregations, the average church size in the U.S. is 75. The LCMS and many other Protestant groups are on a plateau in reaching new people for the Lord. They also show a decline in their numbers over the last two decades.

In 2011 – 2020, how many congregations may be facing serious survival issues? What does our Lord call us to be and be about? Do we need to examine our "vital signs?" What do they tell us?

Some of the major issues discovered by those who are involved in "checking the vital signs of a parish and its leadership" include: a strong inward focus; a minimal emphasis on being "the body of Christ"; strong control by a few; resistance to variety and change; aging leadership; traditional governance models; unwillingness to re-examine finances; few spiritual growth groups; very few community support events; and a "let the pastor/staff do it" attitude.

Some parishes involved in a process of "examining our vital signs" through the TCN (*Transforming Churches Network*) have been blessed in their life together with the Lord **by taking an in-depth look at** three aspects of their congregational life and leadership.

1) Our mission & ministry **vision**. For example, "Where are we? What year is it? Why are we here? How is it going? Who needs us? Can we strengthen our efforts? How?" These questions and strategic planning often lead, with the help of District guidance, to even more questions ... and also to improved solutions and situations!

2) The current level of **spirituality** among the members and how our relationships with Christ are being lived out, individually and corporately, in the community around us! Who and how many are involved in Bible study, family and/or personal devotion time, sharing the Gospel, inviting relatives and friends to worship, small groups, servant events, personal growth activities, etc.?

When do we have, promote and facilitate times of prayer, confession, forgiveness and reconciliation for the members and the community? Can we repent and re-focus on the future?

3) The changing **demographics** of the greater community in which the church is

based and the members live or work. What has changed in the last decade? Who has moved away? Who has God sent to our neighborhoods? Who are our co-workers and new friends? How are we reaching others with the kindness, compassion, care and Gospel of Christ? Are we different from the non-Christians who also influence the newcomers? How? What seems to be working best?

In parishes, the "revitalization" process brings a new and renewed spiritual vitality that is addressing the need for a congregation-wide attitudinal change from an "inward" to an "outward" focus! This can happen when: our organizational structures are improved; *a renewed sense of mission begins to grow; we discover ways to equip and care for one another; a giving of Christ-like love leads others to want to know more about the message of the church and the Savior.*

Meeting human needs and planting Gospel seeds show a vitality that causes new rejoicing to rise up to God! The "outward focus" shows itself in a warmer welcoming of guests and formerly drifting members who have been touched and helped by a caring fellow Christian to return.

Clergy, educators and lay leaders who take time to meet regularly for "coaching and learning" sessions discover new insights for using their skills more effectively and learn, for the first time, that "the gifts are in the people." The biblical understanding of the "priesthood of all believers" (1 Peter 2) comes alive! That followers of Jesus are "the body of Christ" becomes more clear! (Romans 12; 1 Corinthians 12)

It is VITAL that we continue to be that Gospel-based, renewing and renewable body that He has made us! Yes, it is truly vital!

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## URGENT!!

The United States is the third largest mission field in the world! India and China are the only two countries that have more unchurched people. Surprising, isn't it? For most of us, we were brought up to believe that the United States is a Christian nation. It is amazing how things change in forty years.

We could come to the conclusion that we have become the third largest mission field because of all the immigrants that have moved into this country in the past 25 years. In reality, what has made our country the third largest mission field is the Anglo-population becoming disconnected from the Christian church. Organizations that poll our country claim that on any given weekend, only 18 percent of our country attends a Christian worship service. The mission field is our moms and dads, brothers and sisters, aunts and uncles, children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren, neighbors, classmates, co-workers, and even our enemies. The mission field is no longer only overseas, but is now in our living room.

Since the United States is a mission field, the buzz word you are hearing today in Christian circles is revitalizing or transforming the church. *The Encarta Dictionary* states that the meaning of revitalization is "to give new life or energy to somebody or something." Transformation is defined as "a complete change, usually into something with an improved appearance or usefulness" as well as "the act or process of transforming somebody or something." The commonality of the two words is change. Revitalization/Transformation is a process to help churches change from being focused on people inside the church to being focused on people in and outside of the church.

For Christian churches and especially The Lutheran Church Missouri Synod, we celebrate the past and the blessings God has given us. We celebrate the Word and Sacrament ministry that has taken place in our churches. We celebrate the blessing of Christian education, especially our preschools, elementary schools, high schools, universities, and seminaries. With all the changes around us, we need to cling to Hebrews 13:8, "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever."

As the church moves into this new mission field that is our community, we should never change our passion for Word and Sacrament ministry and Christian education. We need to seek God's wisdom on how we take these blessings He has given us to people who don't know Him.

Revitalization starts by learning from our missionaries how God used them to develop the overseas mission field. Two main things happen before they ever move to a Word and Sacrament ministry. They learn the culture, and then build personal relationships with the natives. They spend hours in the new culture asking questions, listening, and learning from the people. After observing and listening, their next move might be developing human care ministry. When they have built trust with the natives, they start connecting God's Word to their lives.

The change needed in our church through revitalization is for the church to be out in her community—to listen, learn, and build trust with the unchurched and disconnected individuals in the community. The church needs to be building relationships and asking questions in relating to people community leaders. Examples of leaders include a mayor, city council, school board

members, teachers, a superintendent, principals, law enforcement officers, community service agencies (such as Child Protective Services), planning and zoning officers, and health care professionals.

In meeting with community leaders, the church can be asking questions, such as:

What are the greatest strengths of the community?

What challenges do they face in carrying out their jobs?

What are the pressing problems facing people living in the community?

How can the church partner with them to improve the community?

Visiting with community leaders allows the church to build relationships with them and teaches how to connect with their mission field, their community.

The good news we hear from God's Word is that He is a change agent. 2 Corinthians 5:17 states: "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!" Romans 6:3-4 says "Or, don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life."

Revitalization is URGENT!!! We live in a mission field! There is joy in learning about your mission field and watching God revitalize and transform people's lives!

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## Why Church Revitalization is Needed

During the first few sessions of a class I teach at the seminary, "Pastoral Ministry," I share with my students a useful First Article/created order insight that I pray they take with them into their respective ministries. That insight is this: It is possible, on the basis of a congregation's average Sunday worship attendance, to know and understand a lot about what that congregation is actually like. My point is this: A congregation that has an average Sunday attendance of 20 is not just a miniature version of a congregation that has an average Sunday worship attendance of 120. They are, in fact, "different animals," so to speak. They will have and display differing habits, priorities, values, structures, and procedures for operating within that structure. "The wise and discerning pastor," I tell my students, "finds out what kind of 'animal' he's shepherding, and then he uses this insight and knowledge in order to become as effective a minister of the Gospel of Jesus Christ as he can in that place."

It is also during those first few sessions of my class in Pastoral Ministry that I nonchalantly write the number 121 on the blackboard, and then proceed with my lecture. Sure enough, in time, someone becomes inquisitive enough to ask what the significance is of that particular numeral. What follows, then, is a candid and sobering description of the challenge that faces most of my students who are placed, right out of the seminary, as sole pastors of congregations.

"It takes," I inform the men in my class, "an average Sunday worship attendance of 121 to afford one full-time pastor's salary and benefits and still have a little money left over for programmatic use. So if your first call is to a congregation that has an average Sunday attendance that is less than 121, then chances are very high that you are (monetarily speaking) in an unsustainable situation. This is your problem," I tell my students. "Own the problem and determine to do something sanctified to fix it!"

For well over a generation, most congregations in our church body have plateaued or been in decline in terms of

average Sunday worship attendance (some say that the percentage is as high as 90 percent). At the same time the population of the United States has grown. In other words, there are more people around us now than ever before who desperately need what the church has to give, that is, the Gospel in Word and Sacraments. However, for a host of reasons, it appears as though most Lutheran congregations are unwilling or unable, or both, to reach out into their communities with that Gospel in ways that lost people can actually hear, see, understand, and believe.

How does a brand new Lutheran pastor begin to address this challenge? What does he do? Where does he start? To be sure, this is a spiritual and theological problem that requires a pastor who is formed and normed by the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions. It requires that he has the ability to "rightly divide the Word of truth." It requires a willingness, on the pastor's part, to view his church as, in C.F.W. Walther's words, "the most precious and beautiful place on earth." Beyond these basic and necessary fundamentals, however, a pastor can find additional wisdom, insight, and direction in the church transformation and revitalization movement that is taking place throughout our church body.

In a nutshell, church revitalization is necessary because most plateaued and declining congregations have a certain amount of dysfunction at work in them that keeps them from turning outward, looking beyond their walls, and seeing the opportunities for mission and ministry that are all around them in their communities. There's a sinful part of every church culture that seeks to take the Gospel light that has been given to them and "hide it under a bushel!" When the consecrated pastor addresses and "takes on" this dark aspect of his congregation's culture, he's in for some real spiritual warfare and needs all the sanctified help he can get!

This is precisely when and where organizations that specialize in congregational revitalization, such as the Transforming Churches Network (TCN),

can be so useful. TCN walks with pastors and congregations who desire to be God's faithful church on earth, and it supports these pastors and congregations with learning communities, coaching, and prescriptions for outreach and healthy, positive change.

Some time ago a friend and classmate of mine led his congregation through such a revitalization effort. Today, as he'll readily tell you, he is finding more joy in ministry than ever before. The Spirit of the Lord is at work in his church in tangible ways. They've planted a new and growing daughter congregation, they're raising up new pastoral leadership in their congregation through Synod's SMP (Specific Ministry Pastor) program, and their SMP vicar is already conducting Bible classes for the coaches in the nearby public high school, while their predominantly Anglo congregation feeds the predominantly African-American football team before every home game. My friend observed that his congregation is reaching out to the people in the community with the love of Jesus in ways that, before revitalization, would not have been possible.

The local church is the hope of the world, and the local pastor, as the means of the Means of Grace in that place, determines, to a very large degree, the health of the local church. If a congregation is to become and remain a healthy and flourishing congregation, a pastor will need to be intentional about doing and saying the things that lead in that direction. He'll also need help in doing so. Today that help, for LCMS pastors and congregations, is more available, more affordable, and more effective than ever before. In fact, it's just a few keystrokes away: <http://transformingchurchesnetwork.org/>

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JEFFREY MILLER

## Demographics and Transforming Congregations

The church is where the Gospel is preached and Sacraments are rightly administered. If those were the only qualifications we cared about, this article would not be necessary. As members of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS), we definitely care about whether our congregations and schools do well, and we want our Synod to survive, thrive and grow. We definitely care about people in the pews, chairs and desks.

One of the most impactful trends we have been seeing in the LCMS is the decline in attendance in many congregations and schools. The latest LCMS statistics show that over 50 percent of LCMS congregations have not baptized or confirmed a single adult in the past year. Unfortunately, that statistic has been repeated for many years. How can we reverse that decline and renew our mission to reach out and bring the Gospel message to more people, so that our congregations may have the opportunity for growth by the work of the Holy Spirit?

Through demographics, we can take an in-depth look at those who live around our

churches, schools and ministries. Data can provide clarity on how to reach them, thus equipping us to possibly reverse the trend in diminishing membership and enabling a discovery of new mission fields.

### Why Use Demographic Studies?

The state or condition of the church, specifically the LCMS, has been a point of discussion for at least the last forty years. That is how long I have served as a church worker. I can also remember my parents having discussions about their own congregation and wondering how energized it was.

The following observation is known to many. In many rural and urban areas, the population has slowly left the community, some by death and others by seeking employment. Sometimes those same communities had populations replacing those who moved out, but they were unnoticed or not cared about.

In September, 2011, *USA Today* carried a number of articles describing demographic changes in the United States. As with most news stories, these were broad surveys of the data. Local newspapers followed up on that information with localized stories. In demographic terminology, it was simply decadal updates of the U.S. Census findings. The observations made centered on communities becoming more multi-ethnic with a higher concentration of Hispanics. Drive across the United States and observe our communities. Even small rural communities show definite signs of a multi-ethnic population. But what else is happening in our neighborhoods?

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It may be true that smaller communities are declining in terms of population, but often the population mix of communities is changing and congregations are slow to respond positively to address the change. Quite often there is a population that replaces those who have left. A process to address this issue honestly and objectively within the LCMS is called “revitalization.” The technical title is *Transforming Congregations*. At a mission meeting in St. Louis, this process was called “refreshing” by the new synodical leadership. Whatever the title, the mission of the church is still local, and the application of Scripture and data is best done locally.

The Rev. Dr. Terry Tieman, Director of Transforming Congregations Network (TCN), a recognized service organization of the LCMS, emphasizes that congregations *can be* revitalized. That is, they can once again be energized and moved by the Holy Spirit to see that the members of the local congregation are God’s missionaries to their community. God’s mission is local, and the congregation is God’s instrument to reach the people He wants reached (Acts 17). Tiemann says that one of the first steps necessary for a congregation to be involved in revitalization is to understand what the real community surrounding the church looks like.

At the top level of a demographics study, data demonstrate the reality of the size of the community surrounding a congregation, with the data then being related to the membership of the congregation. For example, in downtown Fort Wayne there are four Lutheran congregations within eight blocks of each other. The community is dense and the congregations are—or were—large. Today, the numbers in those congregations are one-half of their former memberships. In such a community, congregation members may think they know everyone in town. But often a demographic study shows characteristics and numbers of population that are surprising to longtime residents.

To gain the best “snapshot” of the area, demographic information provides a congregation or school with additional data related to the broad population mix

and density. Members can look at trends in income, education levels, ethnic mix and other segments which provide perspectives on current conditions.

The best aspect of demographic data is that it is objective. The numbers and the characteristics are not someone’s interpretation. When the data are left to speak for themselves, they will tell an interesting story. These data have a history. They capture today’s population and characteristics. They show how the community or neighborhood has grown or declined. For example, when a congregation was presented with a demographic study by the Lutheran Church Extension Fund (LCEF) resource known as MissionInsite, leaders of the church were surprised at the income level of their community and their membership. They did the math and determined that their offerings amounted to only 1.8 percent of residents’ income. The congregation began talking about spiritual giving and stewardship of one’s blessings.

In the Twin Cities metro area, one congregation operates a school which has students from a variety of ethnic groups, but the membership of the congregation does not reflect that mix. In another congregation where facilities are large, available, and usually near empty, the community around it is busy with activity and desirous of the facility. However, the congregation keeps its doors locked.

Congregations take a ministry direction because it seems like the proper thing to do. Sometimes the congregation researches and strategizes before it takes actions. Here is an experience one congregation had with a demographics study. Members proceeded to plan how they could best serve community members in need. With the data, they saw that 98 percent of community residents earned 32 percent above the median income level of the entire state. The same congregation also was busy with family ministry. The study showed that the family program served one-half of the community. The other one-half of the population consisted of upper-middle class single people. The congregation’s intentions were



wonderful, but without proper research, the time, expense and human resources directed to initial plans would have little ability to fulfill its mission.

One congregation on the East Coast was surprised to know that it had four millionaires within its membership. A number of congregations in the Midwest report that their knowledge of the community fits closely with the demographic data. But one cannot be sure of that knowledge without demographic data.

### Uses for Congregations and Schools

Again, I'd like to share the experience of a congregation. Members were concerned about the decline in enrollment at the congregation's parochial school. The usual questions were asked, such as: "Are our members' children attending?" "Can we afford to keep the school open?" "How long can we pay for staff if this continues?" When asked if the congregation had looked at its community, the answer was "No, that costs money." When asked if the school had ever done marketing to let the community know that all children are welcome, the answer was again, "No, that costs money."

Demographics help school leaders understand how many children in the community are available to attend and how many are reachable. An aspect often overlooked when considering a demographics study and its true value is the lifestyle patterns that emerge. Recently, two LCMS districts began gathering data from schools to determine the lifestyles of the families of elementary school students. The purpose was to help determine the number of potential students in the community. One District LCEF vice president described an experience:

One urban school is located in the heart of a changing community. Income for the school and enrollment numbers have been on a declining trend. Interpretations and answers to the struggling income and enrollment varied from person to person. The impressions of community transitions that surround this school were often subjective in nature. This led to internal debate and doubt. The

school's participation in a demographic study of plotting students and comparing their school data with what has been found through a state-wide survey of nearly all District LCMS schools resulted in an end to the questions, doubt and interpretations. Now the discussion is centered on "What God would have us do."

The ministry of a congregation might be affected by something as simple as geography. One congregation is a 30-45 minute commute to a metro area, which is a strong indicator that evening meetings and long term commitments to traditional board structures will not work, since many members made that daily commute to work. With the identification of that issue, the congregation can change how it does its business and determine when to start evening or afternoon programming.

The best use of demographics by a congregation is for development of vision and mission statements. In addition, the demographics data will assist with strategy implementation and tactics used for community involvement. A classic example is the congregation that invited a District LCEF vice president to describe how a demographic study could help a congregation understand its community. Members wanted to start a preschool and child-care program. The demographics showed that there were few children, but they could consider elder care, because that age group was increasing. The congregation thought that yesterday's solution (get more children which brings parents) would be the easy solution to their declining membership. They now needed to adjust their vision and ministry plan by integrating hard data.

A staff that leads congregations through the revitalization process often makes the comment that the most difficult procedure for a congregation is to admit that it is no longer faithful to God's mission of reaching the lost. In terms of Lutheran ways of thinking and practicing, this is the time when the individual or the whole congregation is led to repentance. Instead of involving just one individual, this is the time for the congregation to realize its

need for repentance because it has focused God's resources on itself and has not paid attention to the mission field that God has placed around and among it.

A biblical example of the value of paying attention to people and their community is described in the Book of Nehemiah. God provided the vision for the rebuilding of the walls of the city, but Nehemiah had to get the attention of the people in Jerusalem focused on the need to rebuild. Once the need was acknowledged, implementing the vision became the enjoyable part of ministry.

### **Preparing to Use the Results of a Study**

When a congregation prepares to enter into a full study of itself, the congregation should listen to an experienced person explain what the data mean. Most District offices have Church Extension Fund or LCEF staff members who are familiar with the MissionInsite tool. LCEF has purchased the rights to provide demographic data to LCMS districts through MissionInsite, with most districts being able to access the data in their offices and then grant permission for use by congregations, schools and other ministries of the LCMS. Congregations, schools and other ministries can download demographic data for their own use in their own offices and can consult with District staff for interpretation. The data integrate U.S. Census data that are refreshed every six months with other resources that cover other factors, such as retail and real estate markets being available.

Once the data have been explained by a District staff member, the membership can go back into their community to verify the data. Often, specific community members can be of assistance, such as local business leaders and realtors. City leaders like mayors, city planners, police and firefighters also are knowledgeable. From this grassroots information, congregation

members can begin to understand who lives in their community and determine their opportunities for ministry.

There are a number of other benefits to using demographic data. They include, but are not limited to:

- Determining income levels
  - Calculating the percentage of income that members are giving to the church
  - Determining the number of young children available for childcare or early childhood education
  - Identifying potential students for an elementary school or high school
  - Assessing the need for older adult care
  - Identifying the ethnic mix of the community
  - Determining growth and decline in employment opportunities
  - Evaluating available social services
  - Naming the community's level of education
- Demographics help to give a realistic view of the population of the congregation and the surrounding community.

### **Considerations When Using Demographics**

Some cautions need to be mentioned in using demographics.

- Data taken selectively can prove most anything. All the data, like the whole biblical text, need to be taken together.
- Long-time residents who believe they know everyone and everything about their community can openly and forcefully give a negative impact to use of the data. Some folks do know their communities well. Let them be helpful but not "determiners."
- Occasionally there are church members who believe God is speaking to them now and telling them what the congregation should be doing. These "revelations" may sound bona fide, and these persons may be persuasive and forceful. A situation like this can derail a study that is intended to be helpful to a congregation.

- Bad decisions are often made in light of the facts. Remember when Moses sent out the 12 spies. They all reported what they saw. Ten saw the communities through the eyes of fear. Two spies reported what they saw through the eyes of faith. Treat demographics similarly.

It is important to understand that demographic studies do not tell a congregation or a ministry what to do. That is the responsibility of the congregation who takes the data and discusses findings in terms of mission and ministry. A healthy and productive congregation is the entity that looks at the community through God's eyes so that it can see what God sees. The result can be similar to listening to the report of the 12 spies. A question is, "Do we hear the report through our own fear, or do we listen in faith?"

### The Urgent Need for Community Understanding

Why is this topic important or even an urgent issue in the Lutheran Church today? Attention only needs to be given to the Lutheran Annual. In the 2012 edition, one can review the charts and ask, "What is God blessing?" The data can tell us just how urgent revitalization is for our churches. We speak in terms of God's blessings through Word and Sacrament. We can pay attention to the numbers or average numbers of people attending worship where the Word is preached and the Sacraments are administered. Another question that can be asked is, "How do God's people respond when the Holy Spirit moves them into action?" Evidence is given in the Book of Acts. We read about people being baptized and gathering for study, for prayer and for fellowship. Martin Franzmann, in his *The Word of the Lord Grows*, wrote: "The Church grew as new Christians scattered and shared the hope they had in Jesus Christ."

LCMS statistics not only provide information on the number of baptisms

recorded annually and the decline in worship attendance. We can reflect on the average number of people attending Bible classes and ask, "How can God bless His people when a majority is not in the Word of God and not letting Him speak to them?" These categories are important because they demonstrate opportunities when the church preaches and teaches the Word of God, and it is through that Word that the Holy Spirit works faith in the hearts of people. In the book of Revelation, St. John speaks about the seven churches of Asia Minor. Some loved themselves too much, some loved other gods too much, but the church of Philadelphia was known and blessed because of its deeds and because it persevered for the faith. Jesus commands in Matthew to "make disciples." That is what brings life back into congregations—being disciples of Christ and making disciples of Christ by teaching.

Remember the biblical reference to Acts 17 earlier in this article. Paul was in Athens, and before he began to preach the message of Jesus, he walked the community and the market. He was doing a demographics study—he was studying the people and what made these folks different from the people in Thessalonica and Berea. After his research, he proclaimed the Good News of Jesus. In verses 26–27, the Word records an interesting thought: "And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place." It seems that God has placed church and non-church people in our communities for His purpose. It is our responsibility to see the people God has placed around us so that we can share the joy of salvation we have in Jesus Christ with them.

Demographics can demonstrate where the hope for reaching people lies. But the real hope that must be revitalized is the hope we have in Jesus Christ.



DR. ROBERT NEWTON

## Revitalization: A God Idea!

Profound changes in our American society have come fast and furious, catching many of our LCMS congregations off guard. They seemingly went to bed one evening in a world in which Christian churches truly mattered only to wake up the next morning in one in which they don't. Once vibrant and growing congregations begin to question whether they will be able to continue their vital ministries to their members and their communities. They fear they are fighting a losing battle to remain faithful witnesses of the Lord and His Word while they grieve over their many children and grandchildren who have accommodated their faith and values to mesh with the secularism and religious and moral pluralism of this age. In addition to real concerns regarding their own viability, pastors and people express growing frustration over their inability to proclaim the Gospel to their communities that seem increasingly indifferent to its saving message. In short, congregations across the LCMS face incredible challenges presented by the Post-Churched<sup>1</sup> mission context in which our Lord has called them to serve.

In order to assist congregations to minister faithfully in this Post-Churched world, our Synod in convention resolved to "adopt a goal of praying and working

for the mission revitalization of at least 2,000 existing LCMS churches by 2017."<sup>2</sup> A revitalized congregation, according to the then Board for Mission Services, "is regularly and consistently making new disciples who make new disciples through the power of the Holy Spirit."<sup>3</sup> This revitalization effort became a key element of the Ablaze! initiatives adopted in convention in 2004<sup>4</sup> and affirmed and reaffirmed in the 2007 and 2010<sup>5</sup> conventions respectively. Since 2004 several LCMS districts have focused on the revitalization of their congregations for missionary outreach. I commend the editorial committee of *Issues in Christian Education* for committing an entire edition to this critical need and for addressing it in very practical ways, including our Lord's thoughts on the matter as recorded in His Word. He has a great deal to say regarding the revitalization of His churches and people, for the matter lies at the center of His heart. Revitalization is a God idea.

### Congregational Renewal: Three Factors

Our Lord made "revitalization" the central theme of His ministry to His people, Israel. The opening words of His first recorded public sermon were "*The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the Gospel*" (Mark 1:15).<sup>6</sup> His words point to at least three factors essential to a biblical perspective of congregational renewal: 1) that we know and embrace His will for the

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world; 2) that we embrace our vocation as co-heirs with Him and, therefore, co-participants with Him in His mission to and for the world; and 3) we rely on His resurrected power to inform, empower, and keep us faithful in what He has called us to be and do in and with Him.

First, congregations revitalize when God's people know and embrace His will for them in relationship to His will for their larger community (the world in which they live, work, and worship). In order to know what God wants them to be, and be about in the world, they need to know what God is doing in the world. God has no desire to keep His work a secret. St. Paul stated that among the many blessings God lavishes upon us in Christ is "[making] known to us the mystery of his will," specifically, the restoration of all things in Christ, "according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time (*xairos*), to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth" (Ephesians 1:9-10).

Jesus prefaced His call to congregational revitalization with these words, "*The time (*xairos*) is fulfilled and the kingdom of God is at hand.*" He was announcing that God had deliberately, personally, and immediately moved his eternal plan for cosmic restoration into high gear. It's happening now! And it's happening in Jesus of Nazareth. St. Paul wrote to the Galatian Christians, "*But when the fullness of time (*chronou*)<sup>7</sup> had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons*" (Galatians 4:4-5). God Himself had come to set the entire world free from the power of sin and death (the curse of the law).

Secondly, God wills that we play an essential role in His cosmic plan. St. Paul continued in his letter to the Galatians: "*And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba! Father!' So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God*" (Galatians 4:6-7). We primarily identify the gifts of eternal life and heaven as the sum and substance of our inheritance in Christ. The Scriptures, however, speak of an inheritance that is not only life in heaven, but life in and for this present creation. Regarding Christ's

inheritance, the Old Testament declares that He rules the nations: "*I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession* (Psalm 2, see also Daniel 7:13-14). In short, our Lord Jesus inherited all the nations, and He rules over them forever. We share that inheritance as heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ (Romans 8). We will rule with Him in heaven; we also rule with Him on earth, bringing His restoring grace to His present broken world.

St. John tells us that through Christ's blood we have been made "*a kingdom and priests to our God*" and that we "*reign on earth*" (Revelation 5). We "*reign*" by sharing in our Lord's ministry to the world. He calls us to participate in the Divine Service of "*[delivering them] from the dominion of darkness and [transferring] them to the Kingdom of [God's] beloved Son*" (Colossians 1). Immediately following His call to "*repent and believe the Gospel*," He called His first disciples with the words, "*Follow me, and I will make you become fishers of men*" (Mark 1:16). New life in the Gospel and fishing with Jesus for the hearts of people go together.

Finally, God personally effects the "revitalization" of our churches and their members. "Repenting and believing the Gospel" is the work of His Spirit in us. He redirects our hearts and minds away from ourselves (and our sin) and toward Him (His saving work on the cross) and His love for the world. Repentance is a God inspired and empowered action of our hearts and minds. His call to repent is not unlike the "recalculating" feature of my car's GPS.<sup>9</sup> When I get off the course my GPS simply adjusts itself to direct me from where I am (lost) to where I need to be. It doesn't become frustrated or give up on my inability or unwillingness to follow its lead. It simply recalculates based on our present position, keeping the original goal in mind of where we ultimately want to be. It never says, "Listen, if you keep getting off course, I am not going to help you." Nor, "If you had listened to me in the first place, we would not be lost." Nor, "You first need to find your own way back to the original route; then I will take it from there." It simply says, "Recalculating." There is no guilt, no reprimand, no long conversation about what

went wrong. My GPS orients itself from the place (off route) that I took, recalculates the best route to our chosen destination, and begins leading us once again. Following its lead I eventually hear it speak those wonderful words, “Arriving at destination.”

### **Jesus’ Call and Role in Revitalization**

For “congregational revitalization” to be grounded in God’s Word, we need to hear Jesus’ call to “repent and believe the Gospel” from this “GPS” vantage point. More perfect than any GPS, Jesus is able and willing to find us where we are—off course and lost—and lead us personally and corporately to our Father and His Kingdom. Consider the many times our Lord spoke through His prophets the reassuring word, “Recalculating,” when Israel went off course in its faithfulness to God and its service to the world. Finally, He spoke that word in His Son. His Son comes looking for His lost disciples, finds them where they are, and declares with His clear, gentle voice, “Recalculating. Let’s begin from where we are at this moment and proceed to where *our Father has called us* to be.”

Jesus’ personal role in the revitalization process cannot be overemphasized. Note the Gospel accounts of the first Easter. They divide into two distinct sets of activities. The first set focuses on Jesus’ disciples faithfully traveling to His tomb where they expected to find His lifeless body. Women disciples arrived there very early that morning only to find the tomb empty. Upon hearing their report, men disciples—Peter and John—made a hasty visit to the tomb to see it for themselves. Later that morning Mary Magdalene returned in search for His missing body. We can’t blame them for their fixation on His tomb. That’s where their Lord had been laid to rest, thus, their point of focus. The point, however, was that He wasn’t there any longer. He had finished His business with death and moved on. In order for the disciples to find Him they, too, had to move on from the place of the dead. The problem is they couldn’t. Mary was stuck in her grief (John 20:11), Thomas in his

doubt (John 20:25), Peter in his guilt (John 21), others in their fear (John 20:19) or in their confusion and inability to understand God’s Word (Luke 24:13 ff.). All of them were stuck, unable to do anything about it. Grief, fear, confusion, even guilt—this same sense of “stuck”—describes where many of our congregations find themselves today.

That’s where we encounter the second set of Easter activities. Jesus went looking for His disciples at their “tombs,” that is, where life and ministry had stopped for them. He personally sought each of them—some on the road, some in the upper room, one back at the tomb, another on the seashore. He found each “dead” disciple, and with His word brought each back to life. “Mary,” he said, and her grief turned to joy. He told Thomas, “Do not be faithless, but believe,” and doubt turned to confession of faith. His “Shalom” put fearful hearts at peace. (John 20). Hearts burned within confused disciples as the Lord opened His Word and their minds in order to understand it. Peter’s guilt lifted as his Lord spoke with him by the sea. The revitalization of God’s people then and now is Jesus’ personal work. It’s anchored in Him—initiated, animated, and accomplished by His resurrected person and power.

### **Jesus’ Revitalizing Words to Seven Churches**

With the above three factors in mind we turn our attention to our resurrected Lord’s revitalizing words to His seven churches in Revelation, noting both His encouragements, admonitions, and promises. What He spoke to the seven, He speaks to all of His churches, even today.<sup>10</sup>

Jesus began with the church at Ephesus. Louis Brighton in his commentary on Revelation suggests that Ephesus may have been the oldest or foremost church of the seven and as such is addressed first.<sup>11</sup> Within the priority of order also stands the significance of what our Lord commends and admonishes, not only for Ephesus but for all churches: their faith and love.

Jesus places faithfulness in doctrine and practice as highest priority. Prominent in all

seven letters is the need to remain steadfast to and in His Word. He commends His churches for being ever watchful of false prophets, teachers, and apostles (Ephesus, Thyatira), for not compromising or denying the church's confession even at the price of suffering and death (Smyrna, Pergamum), and for relying solely on the power of Christ's Gospel for ministry in the world (Philadelphia). Likewise, he admonishes them for tolerating false teaching (Pergamum, Thyatira), forgetting or abandoning His Word (Sardis), even depreciating and despising it (Laodicea). Christ-inspired congregational revitalization requires above all else a radical return to His Word and a complete dependence upon it. He says to all who would follow Him, *"If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free"* (John 8).

Equal to faith is love, not as two distinct priorities in our Lord's mind, but as inseparable to Him. Thus, Ephesus' loss of its "first love" becomes the locus for all manifestations of unfaithfulness.

You have left your first love" (2:4) is the chief sin, from which all the others mentioned in the following six letters evolve and result. How the church had left her first love is not mentioned, but the sins and failings mentioned in the six following letters indicate what she had done to manifest her loss of it.<sup>12</sup>

"You have been faithful in keeping my Word," the Lord commended them, *"But I have something against you. You have abandoned your first love. Remember from where you have fallen and repent and do the first works"* (Revelation 2). Commentators divide on the intended meaning of the word "first" as the modifier of "love" and "works." Is "first" a temporal reference for the love and good works that marked the Ephesian Christians in their early days? Is it a positional reference for a love and works that are above all others? Knowing St. John's ability to use the same word to mean more than one thing at the same time, both interpretations are possible.

Regardless, both interpretations depend on God being love's author—both defining it

and creating it in the hearts of His people. *"In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another"* (1 John 4:9-11). God's love is first, that is, preeminent. It precedes all other love (1 John 4:19) and exceeds all other love in both scope—the entire world (John 3:16), and depth—He laid His life down for us while we were yet sinners (John 15:13, Romans 5:8). God's "first love" cannot be stated more clearly, *"God so loved the world ..."*; His church's "first love" cannot be other than that.

Thus, Christ inspired revitalization requires above all else a radical return not only to His Word of truth but to His heart of love for the world. Our Lord's words to the church at Ephesus might need to speak more loudly to our LCMS congregations than all of His other words to the churches, especially as so many of us continue to struggle over the issue of how to maintain faithfulness to His Word and at the same time engage in serious missionary outreach to our Post-Churched world. Elsewhere I described this "Ephesian struggle" as follows:

The struggle centers in large measure with the church's inability to ... become permeable in regard to its own boundaries in order to penetrate the boundaries surrounding the unchurched world. Such permeability seems inappropriate, or worse, unfaithful in light of our Lord's call to His Church to remain true to Him (in the world but not of it). Intuitively, faithfulness seems to require the thickening and sharpening of the church's boundaries in order to protect itself and its confession from the assaults of secularism and religious pluralism.

So how do Christian churches become permeable ... and remain faithful? Is it possible to surrender the boundaries (the protective walls) without losing the essential

life and integrity of the faith? Our Lord thought so. As He looked to His own death, by which He would gather the nations to Himself, He told His disciples, “*Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit*” (John 12:24). What has to die in the seed is not its essence, just its protective husk. Missionary permeability and doctrinal integrity are not biblically exclusive. However, from the New Testament until today, churches desirous to be faithful have struggled with meshing the two. Confessional and missionary faithfulness requires that we wrestle with these Gospel essentials in the light and for the sake of our Savior’s purpose in coming into our world.<sup>14</sup>

Along with this struggle, our Lord identified several other congregational issues that needed His revitalizing touch. Space permits us to look briefly at two of them: fear and apathy. He exhorted both the church in Smyrna and Philadelphia not to be afraid, either of the great suffering they would have to endure at the hands of unbelievers, or of their little power in the face of overwhelming and virulent unbelief. In each case He assured the churches that they need not fear the world; He had already overcome it. Suffering might be intense but was limited by His authority. Defensively speaking, in Him they cannot be conquered, even by death itself (Revelation 2:10-11). Offensively, no human or worldly barriers can be erected that can keep God or His people from proclaiming the true Gospel to the ends of the earth (Revelation 3:8).

The Lord did not want their fear either to cause them to shrink back into theological or moral compromise with the world or to shrink away from taking full advantage of the evangelistic opportunities that He was personally providing them. Our churches today need to be revitalized by our Lord to avoid both of these extremes. It is especially not the church’s jurisdiction to determine when mission outreach to the world has or

should be concluded. Such decisions belong solely to the Lord, who opens and shuts doors as it pleases Him.

Our Lord employs His most vigorous revitalizing language toward those churches that have grown apathetic toward His Word and His mission in the world (Sardis and Laodicea). Whether dead or indifferent, they risked losing their own faith and its eternal rewards. The church in Sardis, like the ancient great city in which it resided, lived in the glories of its past rather than in the present world in which Christ had placed it. Furthermore, they substituted the outward forms of faith (“*reputation of being alive*”) for genuine faith. Brighton observes, “The church, while still outwardly performing *rituals of godly pretence*, has lost faith and heart toward Christ and God, or at least is in danger of doing so. Are the Christians of Sardis living in the glory of a once vibrant faith ... Have they deceived themselves into thinking they still have what they lost?”<sup>15</sup> Jesus offers a sober word to the “Sardis” congregations of today that have allowed their buildings, traditions, or laurels of past accomplishments to eclipse their willingness or ability to minister to the broken people in their communities.

The church of Laodicea, on the other hand, was not living in its past so much as it was simply living for itself. Genuine faith toward God and love for His world were not on the radar screen. To make matters worse their double sense of entitlement and self-sufficiency caused them to become impervious to either the crushing Law or healing Gospel. Tragically, the Word they were choosing to ignore alone possessed the power needed to bring them back to life. How much of the Laodicean spirit (especially in our middle-class world) wages war against us as churches and individual Christians? Have the church’s wealth, power, and privileged place in our communities lulled us into a spiritual complacency that God detests? We need Christ’s revitalizing word.



The Good News is that Jesus comes to us with His revitalizing word. Crucial to note is that Jesus ended each of His words (letters) to the seven churches with a promise. For the life to come He promises heaven, eternal life, divine identity and authority, recognition and standing before His Father. For the present life He promises Himself: “Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me” (Revelation 3:20). He promises to be with us “to the end of the age” to revitalize, lead, bless, and keep us, that we be and remain His blessing to the world.

## Footnotes

- 1 There are three primary mission contexts in which the church serves: Pre-Churched, Churched, and Post-Churched. Pre-Churched refers to a context in which the church has not been established, so the primary culture is wholly unchurched. The Churched context finds the church firmly established (maybe even in charge) in the community and culture. The Post-Churched context finds the church’s significance in the community and culture waning while cultural forces and values reminiscent of the “pre-churched” context increase. For a brief discussion regarding the ministry of LCMS congregations in this present “Post-churched” context, see my article in *The Lutheran Witness*, January 2010, “Missionary Churches: Navigating in a Post-Church World.”
- 2 Resolution 1-01A To Support Revitalization of LCMS Congregations, 63<sup>RD</sup> Regular Convention of The Lutheran Church Missouri Synod
- 3 Resolution 1-01A To Support Revitalization of LCMS Congregations, 63<sup>RD</sup> Regular Convention of The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod
- 4 Resolution 1-05A To Establish Ablaze! National Goals, 62nd Regular Convention of The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod
- 5 Resolution 1-01A To Support Revitalization of LCMS Congregations, 63<sup>RD</sup> Regular Convention of The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod; Resolution 1-02 To Provide Guidance for Future Direction of Ablaze!, 64<sup>TH</sup> Regular Convention of The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod
- 6 Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture passages are quoted from the English Standard Version of the Bible.
- 7 God’s eternal plan of world restoration (xairos, beyond but including all time and space) which our Lord announces in Mark 1:15 comes to fulfillment by God personally entering human time and space (chronos) as Paul explains in Galatians 4:4.

- 8 Note the universal dimension of “born under the law” (Romans 3:19, “Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God.”)
- 9 This comparison of repentance with recalculating is adapted from a newsletter article published in 2008, “Recalculating,” *CNH In Touch*, October 27, 2008.
- 10 The universality of Jesus’ words (to all of His churches across time and space) is suggested by His statement, “He who has an ear, let him hear what Spirit says to the churches.” (See L. A. Brighton, *Revelation*, pp. 57-62, for further discussion.)
- 11 L. A. Brighton, *Revelation*, 59-60.
- 12 L. A. Brighton, *Revelation*, 68.
- 13 Author’s translation.
- 14 R. D. Newton, “Missionary Churches: Navigating in a Post-Church World,” pp. 10-11.
- 15 L. A. Brighton, *Revelation*, 87.

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TERRY TIEMAN

## How Revitalization Can Happen

Do you remember the old Fram Oil Filter commercial? The spokesman is in an auto repair shop, where a mechanic is overhauling an engine that has been damaged because the lubrication system failed. He holds up a Fram Oil Filter and says, “The choice is yours; you can pay me now, or you can pay me later!” Of course, the implication is that if you spend just a little more on a premium Fram Oil Filter now, you can save a lot later by not having to spend big bucks on an engine overhaul.

The concept of paying now or later also could be applied to American churches. With 80 percent or more of all LCMS congregations reporting no growth in annual worship attendance, there is no doubt that at some point in time these churches will have to deal with the consequences of their inaction. The only question is: “Will the payment come now or will it be later?” But make no mistake about it; there will be a Day of Reckoning. Such a congregation must decide to do something today, or sometime in the future—maybe next year, maybe in 20 or 30 years. If nothing is done, the doors of the church can be closed forever, because there won’t be anyone left to open them!

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Of course, survival is not the best motivation for Church Revitalization, although it is the place where many of us begin. The potential reality of seeing our beloved church close can fill us with anger, frustration, and sadness. And yet, it doesn’t have to be that way! I can say that because in the past four years TCN has worked with over 500 churches across North America, the vast majority of which were plateaued or declining and are now being revitalized.

And yet, knowing what to do and actually doing it are the answers to different questions. Knowing what to do answers the question of how. “How Are Churches Revitalized?” is certainly a good question and an important question but not the first and most important one. That distinction belongs to the why question: “Why should my church undergo revitalization?” Or to put it another way, “Why should revitalization be a high priority in the mission of LCMS congregations?”

### The Mission of the Church

Those are good “why” questions. Having a good and God-pleasing answer for why we should do something is much more likely to translate into actually going and doing it than just having a set of instructions. For instance, having the instruction manual in my hands for putting together a new bicycle on Christmas morning has little value unless I also have an eight-year-old son, whom I love, and who has been dropping hints

since Thanksgiving that he wants nothing more than a new bicycle for Christmas! The motivation for purchasing that bicycle and then staying up late and assembling it on Christmas Eve began long ago in the heart of a loving parent.

And so it is with revitalization. The motivation for wanting churches to be passionate about “Building Community to Reach Their Community” began long ago in the heart of a loving God. Our Heavenly Father’s passion is that “all people be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth” (1 Timothy 2:4). That’s why He sent His Son, Jesus, to be our Savior, by living a perfect life in our place and dying for our sins on the cross. And that’s why He established the Church and promised that it would be “so expansive ... that not even the gates of hell will be able to keep it out” (Matthew 16:18 MSG). Thus, it is clear from the Scriptures that God’s mission is to seek and save lost people (Luke 19:10) through His Son, Jesus, and that Jesus has called His followers to go into all the world and carry out this holy mission of making disciples (Matthew 28:18-20).

Unfortunately, somewhere along the way, many of us who have been called to be Jesus’ disciples have gotten confused about the mission of His Church. We think that our local congregation is just for us, that it should serve us and our needs, that it should cater to our whims and preferences, and that its primary function is to nurture us and our families. In so doing, we have said, “To hell with the lost!” Well, we don’t say that literally or out loud, but that has often been the result of our actions. By concentrating on ourselves and by spending our resources on those already inside the church, there simply isn’t much time, energy, or money left for those outside the church.

So unless and until we understand that the mission of the Church is to reach lost people with the Good News of Jesus, Church Revitalization cannot happen in any substantive way. Only when our hearts begin to resemble the loving and compassionate heart of God will we truly care about lost

people and reaching them with the Gospel. Only when we are compelled by the why of Christ’s love (2 Corinthians 5:14-15) for us can we start to answer the question of how to live out that love through our church and in our community.

## **Jesus is the Only Door into the Church**

Assuming, however, that there will be people motivated by Jesus’ love and empowered by the Holy Spirit inside our churches, there is absolutely nothing that God cannot accomplish through His Church, including lost people pouring through the Church’s doors.

*How* that happens is explained very simply in John’s Gospel, where Jesus says: “I am the door; if anyone enters through Me, he will be saved, and will go in and out and find pasture” (John 10:9 NASB). In this verse, Jesus makes it very clear that the only way to salvation, and thus, entrance into the Invisible Church, is through Him. He is the only Door into the Church. The LCMS has always taught salvation by grace alone through faith in Christ, and, I believe that our people understand that. What is often misunderstood, however, is what we are supposed to do after we become Christians and how we are to live out our faith.

For instance, our natural inclination is to stay inside the church where it is safe and warm and comfortable. But that is not the illustration that the Good Shepherd paints for us. No, Jesus says that two things happen to His sheep when they enter through Him. First, they will be saved, and second, they will go in and out and find pasture. That is, they don’t stay inside the sheep pen! Rather, they continue to follow the Good Shepherd wherever He goes, including back out into the pasture. What that means for us as Jesus’ disciples is that once we start following the Good Shepherd, we will continue to follow Him wherever He leads us, including back out into the world.

How does Church Revitalization happen then? It happens when God’s people, who

have been brought inside the Church, through the power of the Holy Spirit working through the Word, go back outside and show and tell others about the Good Shepherd. It happens when individual congregations begin to realize that they must get out of their buildings and out into their communities. It happens when the sheep truly understand that while there is only one Way into the Church, there are many doors that lead back out to where huge flocks of lost sheep can still be found!

### **Hinge Factors**

In other words, Revitalization happens when the church doors begin swinging both in and out. Of course, for a door to open, it has to be equipped with hinges. Without hinges, church doors are nothing more than walls! Equipped with hinges, however, the doors of the church can open unlimited opportunities for reaching people with the Gospel. What churches need, then, are many doors with well-oiled hinges, so that the sheep can easily move between the sheep pen and the pasture, that is, the church and the community.

So what are those well-oiled hinges? In 2009, Transforming Churches Network (TCN) conducted surveys with 1,000 worshipers from 32 LCMS congregations, identifying eight impact factors or “hinges” for opening the doors of the church to the community. The one that we found that has the greatest missional impact is Community Outreach. Community Outreach is exactly what it sounds like. It involves regularly mobilizing church members to serve their community by demonstrating the love of Christ in a meaningful way. What we know from our experience is that when a congregation conducts four to six Community Outreach events a year, it almost always becomes revitalized.

For instance, Messiah Lutheran Church was in desperate straits when it first approached TCN in 2007. Worship attendance had declined from about 240 in the mid-1980s to less than 100. Their parochial school had closed, the building and property needed some major

improvements, the area was suffering from “white flight” and a group of about 30 core members had just decided to leave and start a new church further out in the suburbs.

Following a consultation with TCN, it was decided that Messiah needed to get out of their building and start doing Community Outreach. The first step was to target a group of underserved people in their community. They chose a local fire station, where they already had some connections. This fit in well with their stated vision of “giving the Bread of Life to our community and the world in Word and deed.”

Their first Community Outreach event was a Valentine’s dinner for the firemen and EMTs from the station they had adopted. About a dozen of the men from the fire station were able to come to this inaugural event held at the church. In addition to the nice meal that the church had catered through one of its members, the congregation gave each of the firemen an electric air pump for his car. Twelve firemen attended the dinner, and 33 air pumps were distributed. (Some of the men were unable to attend or were working their shift during the dinner, so the extra pumps were taken to the firehouse.) The air pumps were bought from a supply company for just a few dollars each. The total cost of the event was \$100.

From this first event, one fire fighter started attending Messiah every Sunday. The exciting part is that he often arrives in a fire truck or emergency vehicle and almost always brings a trainee with him. Two of those trainees subsequently have gone through an adult confirmation class. The first time he arrived in his fire truck after the Valentine’s dinner, some of the members thought the church was on fire. And I suppose, in a way, it was!

The second event was a yard sale. This event had been held regularly at Messiah for a number of years, with large numbers of people attending from the community. However, previously, it was always done as a fund-raiser for the church, rather than as an outreach to the community. That all changed with Church Revitalization. On the day of the event, members of the church



personally filled out contact cards for everyone who would give them information. Two-hundred-and-fifty people attended the event, and 50 contact cards were filled out. The incentive to fill out the card was a prize drawing. Most of the participants were African American or Hispanics and would not fill out the card until they were told that the drawing was FREE. They were accustomed to churches in the area charging a fee to be in the drawing!

The yard sale was on a Saturday, and the prize drawing was the next morning after the regular Sunday morning worship service. A woman and two of her children came back on Sunday for the service and the drawing. As it turned out, the woman's sister won a \$50 gas card. The other winners were called on Monday, and all but one came by the church to pick up their prizes. The woman who returned on that first Sunday, her three children, her sister (who won the gas card) and her mother all attend Messiah and have gone through the membership class. The total cost of the event was \$185 for ten gift cards.

The third event was a Diabetes Workshop, sponsored by Methodist Hospital. Forty-one people from the community attended the event. Many said they had never been in the church before and commented on how beautiful the inside of the church was. Some said that they were impressed that a local congregation would host such an event. The total cost of the event was \$0.

The fourth event was a Thanksgiving basket distribution. This is when Messiah really began to tie all the previous activities together. Working with the Red Cross and the local Fire Station, they made a list of names of fire victims from the previous year. Ten families were identified, and all were given a large basket of food for Thanksgiving. Members of the congregation took the baskets to the families' homes the night before Thanksgiving. These families were really touched by this act of kindness, and they began to think of Messiah as their church home, even though they had never attended before.

## The Christmas Tree Project

The final Community Outreach event for the year was the Christmas Tree Project. All of the names of the fire victims were gathered and hung on a special Christmas tree, decorated in the narthex at Messiah. Thirty-five presents were purchased and placed under the tree on the Sunday before Christmas. The families were all invited to come to a special Christmas dinner when they received their presents. The children also sat on Santa's lap and had their pictures taken. Thirty-five guests came to the dinner.

Of course, they were all invited to come back on Christmas Eve to worship the baby Jesus. In fact, 50 of the 150 people in worship on Christmas Eve were first-time guests, including 16 children who were invited to play in the hand-bell choir and participate in the children's Christmas service. The director had invited them to come just one-half hour before the start of the service for rehearsal. She knew that most of these children would not be able to come for regular practice because they did not have anyone to bring them, or, they were simply not accustomed to being asked to be reliable. According to all accounts, it was the best children's Christmas program the church ever had!

Valentine's Day is again fast approaching. Guess who will be invited to the dinner this year? That's right—those same fire fighters from last year, the fire victims, the Red Cross volunteers, the folks from the new Bible study that just began at a local retirement home, and the guests from the Christmas Eve Service.

Less than a year after that first Valentine's Day dinner was served with such humble expectations, Messiah's prospect list has grown from 5 to 219, the Adult Instruction Class has grown from two to nine, and the optimism of the congregation has gone off the charts. As a predominantly white church in a growing black neighborhood, Messiah had traditionally had a difficult challenge reaching the people living close by. Now, Pastor Schmidt says, "We have had more African Americans attend our church in the past month than the previous forty years combined."

Isn't it amazing what God can do when His people understand the importance of following the Good Shepherd out of the building and into the community? Maybe even more amazing is how excited God's people get when they see lives being changed for time and for eternity in front of their very eyes.

## Opening Doors to the Community

While Messiah is only one example from over 500 churches in the TCN network, its story illustrates how Church Revitalization can happen. To that end, TCN has developed a simple process designed to assist local congregations in becoming more effective in reaching their communities with the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Based on biblical principles, worldwide research among effective mission movements, and pilot projects field-testing strategies and resources over the past five years, the TCN Revitalization Process includes four major components and a number of ancillary resources. The four door-openers for getting out of your church and out into your community include:

1. Hinge Training Events\*: One-day workshops designed to open new doors into your community. A great way to begin transforming your church!
2. Learning Communities: A safe place for pastors and church leaders to learn the dynamics of change and to begin promoting behaviors and practices that focus on reaching lost people.
3. Coaching: Working with a trained TCN coach who will assist you and your congregation in leveraging your strengths to reach your community with the Gospel.
4. Consultations: A customized process led by the TCN experts that will assess your strengths and challenges and give you specific instructions on how to start a new life cycle for your church.

## The Choice is Yours

So, the choice is yours! Will you take seriously Jesus' command to "Go and make disciples of all nations," and experience the joy the angels feel whenever even one sinner repents? By investing yourself and your congregation in a Church Revitalization process now, you can be sure that, by God's grace and power, there will be those that will not have to pay later for their sins in hell, because they will come to know the One who has paid for everything by giving His life for us all.

So, is that a great deal, or what?

\*All highlighted resources are explained in detail and are available through TCN's website.



## book reviews

**Transitions: Leading Churches  
Through Change.  
Edited by David N. Mosser.  
Louisville: Westminster John  
Knox Press, 2011.**

The 32 contributors to the book, its 26 chapters, Foreword, Introduction and the four summaries of the contents of the four parts that make up its organizational structure are both assets and liabilities. Given the intended purpose of the book, to address the subjects of transition and change, there is a clear underlying focus in all the content of the book. However, because of the multiple authors, there is some unhelpful repetition. Almost every author offered an observation about the constancy and rapidity of change. The content of the chapters offers varying levels of useful information and represents varying levels of quality. There are examples of thoughtful analysis, creative uses of intellectual structures and paradigms, frequent references to other books that address similar subjects, and footnotes that enable the reader to pursue subjects of interest in greater depth.

The content of the chapters entitled “Led by a Pillar of Fire,” “Leading Through Anxious Times and Situations,” “Preaching,” “Responding to Resistance during a Change Process,” and “When the Center Doesn’t Hold” in a general sense are the most helpful to a reader because they help to interpret what is happening in a given situation. The contents of other chapters are much more specific in focus. Examples are “Preaching to the Elderly,” “Divorce and Marriage for Christians,” and “Embracing our Neighborhood in Transition.”

Some of the chapters are composed primarily of sermons that were preached in a variety of settings and circumstances.

From the vantage point of Lutheran preaching, which emphasizes Law-Gospel proclamation, the sermons seem long on analysis, but the Gospel, in the narrow sense of the word, and applications are either not present at all or are far too limited. Among the sermons, the one that comes closest to the model of preaching Lutherans would expect to hear or preach is “The Power of Disruptive Innovation,” based upon Jeremiah 1:4-10 and Luke 4:21-30, written by Rod Wilmoth.

The primary value of the book can be found in the chapters that offer analysis and theoretical models by which congregations in transition can understand better what is happening to them and why members of the congregation are acting as they are. Thus, a well-chosen theoretical model can be a very practical guide for the leaders of a congregation to assist them as they develop strategies by which to lead effectively and manage institutional change. It is unfortunate that the chapters and sermons written to give practical illustrations of what could be or was done were not examples of how congregations used effectively the theoretical models presented in other chapters of the book to manage the changes they were facing. There is an obvious disconnect between the content of the chapters that offer analysis and the content of the chapters that offer practical examples of addressing issues of transition and change. That disconnect is the unfortunate “Achilles Heel” of this book, and the “Achilles Heel” of most books written by multiple authors.

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## book reviews

**Steering Through Chaos.**  
**Scott Wilson. Grand Rapids:**  
**Zondervan, 2010.**

Mapping a clear direction for your church in the midst of transition and change is Pastor Scott Wilson's desire as he seeks to help congregations, pastors, and God's people anticipate the need to move forward in ministry. Believing that God hasn't called us to build buildings but to partner with Him in transforming lives, Wilson believes that our ability to change and grow has a lot to do with the pain threshold of those who lead. What he means is that in order for change to happen, we as leaders need to be on our knees asking God to change us by renewing and refreshing us with His word of forgiveness, and then through the direction of His Spirit to show us what He would have us do to impact the lives of others for Christ.

What Wilson is saying is that our vision for the future is to be tempered by the stunning reality that change will require hard decisions that will create tremendous pain for us, our families, our staff and the lay leaders of our churches. Because this is a reality, it is our task as leaders to pursue God diligently with the eyes of faith as we seek to receive God's vision for His church while being ever mindful that the job of a Savior has already been completed by Jesus! Thus, the author encourages leaders to be shepherds of God's flock engaged in prayer and time in His Word and not generals in His army.

Believing that many congregations and its leaders make changes only out of necessity (usually when things like church attendance is on the decline or buildings have become too small or in disrepair), Wilson proposes that we constantly anticipate the need for change, and that we seek to make transitions during times of growth and gain. He calls this moving from "chaos to chaos". Seeking to eliminate the roller-coaster ride that so many churches experience, the author advises that we make significant change, going through major transitions when things are at their peak, with the hope of capturing momentum before it declines. Using a sigmoid curve, Wilson encourages leaders to evaluate where their congregations are, and in so doing, to remember once again that the vision of our Lord's church is not about buildings and budgets. Instead, it's about reaching lost people and building believers into strong men and women of faith. Wilson is also quick to remind readers that this system of going from "chaos to chaos" is not some kind of slick business principle; rather, it's about being in the Scriptures while observing the events and trends around them.

In sharing his strategy for change in the Lord's church, Wilson encourages leaders to seek out the help of those who have already been through major transition and change, entering into a relationship with those who

have been through the pain of "chaos" and listening to their counseling. But above all, the author urges leaders to have a deep abiding relationship with Jesus as their Savior and to seek in faith His will for their lives, the lives of their families, their staffs and the people they are blessed to serve.

Even though Wilson is currently serving a large congregation in a growing urban setting, I truly believe that he shares some valuable insights that will be helpful to leaders regardless of the size of the parish they are serving. Throughout his book, Pastor Wilson gives some very practical insights concerning how to steer a congregation through the daunting challenges of transition. His willingness to expose both his triumphs and failures under the shadow of the cross of Jesus is not only encouraging, but also very helpful to those who are attempting to lead God's people through the power of the Holy Spirit closer to Him.

**The Rev. Brad Evan Birtell**  
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## **A Door Set Open: Grounding Change in Mission and Hope.**

**Peter L. Steinke. Herndon,  
Virginia: Alban, 2010.**

Growing up as a member of a rural Lutheran church, attending a two- room Lutheran school, and living in a community where it was assumed most everyone was a Christian is no longer the norm in most communities today due to many changes in past decades.

We now live in a post-Christian society in which more than 50 percent of the population do not profess to be Christian. Even fewer ever attend a church. These are the topics that Peter L Steinke addresses on the basis of many years of experience in working with congregations throughout the country.

This book offers healing and hope to hurting churches, and it gives advice to healthy churches trying to become healthier. Steinke stresses the necessity for congregations to see the church as a mission, to enjoy the hope that is grounded on God's promises, and to realize that the church is on a journey to a new heaven and new earth. The book stresses the importance of church leaders responding to God's mission, "For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him, should not perish, but have eternal life" (John 3:16) rather than reacting to the emotions of members who fear change. Congregations must remain faithful to God's

Word and know His promises as they reach out to their neighborhoods which are filled with people who are disengaging themselves from the church.

Some may contend that his book puts more emphasis on human efforts and not enough on Christ's work of redemption. Others may question Steinke's stand on "the new earth" and how the Lord is moving His church toward His new creation here on earth. In the book he notes that "at the day of resurrection, God will bring all believers to live with Him forever on a newly created earth." He quotes Isaiah 55:17: "Behold I will create new heavens and a new earth ..."

Christian churches cannot focus on themselves as so many churches tend to do. This often occurs when members are promised earthly benefits for being faithful, when mega churches and numerical growth become the focus, or even when pastors preach only justification and exclude sanctification. Steinke relates in his book that Martin Luther—the great advocate of 'grace alone' and 'faith alone'—repeated in his sermons: "After you have learned to believe in God's grace—think of nothing else except doing to your neighbor as Christ has done to you ..." This mission moves us toward a world of healing and restoration, secure in

the hope God has given us as we are called to our neighborhoods to offer hope and healing to a hurting world.

Peter Steinke speaks to the church today. By the power of the Holy Spirit, the Christian Church of this postmodern age need not fear or give in to anxiety in the midst of shaping forces so prevalent in our culture. He encourages by reminding us of the line from the hymn, "Our God, our help in ages past, our hope for years to come." A risen Lord promises in Revelation 3:8: "See. I have placed before you a door set open that no one can shut."

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