

## **IS THE CHURCH DYING?**

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### **A. A NECESSARY GIVEN**

In wrestling with this rather daunting question for the past months (years?), I find it important to begin the discussion with the recollection of Peter's answer to the question about Jesus' identity and Jesus' response. Peter says:

“You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”  
And Jesus answered him, “Blessed are you, Simon, son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven.”

What follows is Jesus' word of promise, “And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.” (Matthew 16:16b-18). In the midst of anxiety about the well-being of the church, the text directs us to trust in the Lord of the church.

At another time of great turmoil in the live of the church, the framers of the Augsburg Confession and the Apology to the Augsburg Confession were able to take that promise and run with it. In the face of such questions as, where is the church? And, what is the church, they answered:

It is also taught that at all times there must be and remain one, holy, Christian church. It is the assembly of all believers among whom the gospel is purely preached and the holy sacraments are administered according to the gospel. (The Book of Concord, The Augsburg Confession, Article VII, Kolb and Wengert, ed., p.42)

The challenge is to bring that promise to bear on the present anxiety surrounding those who understand themselves to be a part of that church but who, when they survey the present landscape, also find themselves recalling Jesus' words, “...when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth.?” (Luke 18:8b)

### **B. THE CONTEXT FOR THE QUESTION**

Is the church dying? For at least some of us, the question is not new. I suspect that the question most often gets raised when our experience of the church seems to be so contrary to our understanding of what the church is called to be. Thirty years ago the church that I was a part of was clearly unraveling. While I confessed the Apostles' and Nicene Creed with the assertion, “I believe in the Holy Christian Church” the only manifestation or local incarnation of the church that I knew was the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod. At that point, if you would have asked me, “Is the church dying?” I would have answered, “Can't you see? Yes, of course. I don't see the Gospel in what is taking place.” Ironically, that experience thrust many of us upon the bosom of the church catholic as brothers and sisters in Christ made a place for us in their seminaries and their formation houses and, through these rich experiences, gave us some additional clues about the nature of the church.

Though perhaps we had hoped otherwise, the question did not go away with the formation of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Debates about quotas, sexuality, abortion, the death penalty, full communion and other ecumenical relationships, distrust of one another and a lack of clarity about the nature of our own unity, can combine to cause members of the ELCA to ask, Is the church dying?

As if contentious discussion about matters of church polity, politics, and programs are not enough, the experience of pastoral ministry has caused many to ask, Is the church dying? More than one pastor has come to me discouraged, lamenting that so much has changed and doubting that he is making much of a difference. A pastor cannot assume that she will be given respect for the office of pastoral ministry, or that people automatically will come to church when the doors are open or that if one does “good work” congregations will grow. A seasoned and weary pastor commented, “I seem to be working harder for less results.”

Others have documented issues that contribute to the frustration of such pastors and labeled it as indicating, “the end of Christendom”. The steady decline of the mainline denominations, particularly in proportion to national growth, indicates the shrinking influence of what some have called the traditional churches of “entitlement.” I suspect that such statistics fuel the growing anxiety about the church’s future.

Certainly a changed cultural context contributes to society’s questions about the church’s relevancy and claims to ultimate truth. There are other voices in the marketplace. Jewish synagogues, a Hindu temple, and a mosque are all within a few miles of my home in the Toledo area where we also happen to have around 40 Lutheran congregations. The events of September 11 led us to gather together on a number of occasions to reflect a spirit of love and care for one another. Such gatherings are important, particularly in moments of crisis. But they also lead some to wonder about the uniqueness of the Christian proclamation. More frequently we hear variations of, “It does not matter what you believe as long as you are sincere.” Accompanying that sentiment is the perception, sometimes voiced by Christian clergy, that any insistence on the uniqueness of “our guy” (i.e. Jesus) is provincial, judgmental, insensitive, and triumphalistic. In such a situation, it is not surprising that some would ask, Is the church dying?

Here it is worth noting again that it is our particular experience of what is happening in the church, that is, in our own church and those churches with whom we relate, that leads to the question, “Is the church dying?” One would not expect such a question, for example, from a pastor or congregational member of a growing, evangelical megachurch. Neither would one hear the question on the lips of global partners reflecting “mainline” traditions where growing churches have surpassed “mother” churches in the United States and Europe. The fact that the question is not being raised is not necessarily a positive thing.

### **C. IN ASKING THE QUESTION, “IS THE CHURCH DYING?” OF WHAT CHURCH ARE WE SPEAKING?**

There is an inclination for churches to identify themselves with the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church. How could it be otherwise? The difficulty is that a tradition may be given to use language which suggests that the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church ends with its borders without regard to “...the assembly of all believers among whom the gospel is purely preached and the holy sacraments are administered according to the gospel.” (AC, VII)

My recollection of the church of my youth would be that the LC-MS identified itself uniquely (at least

within the United States) as being in continuity with the apostolic tradition. One raised within that tradition certainly was inclined to see all other Christians and churches as being suspect. More recently, if I am reading it correctly, the Roman Catholic Church in the document, *Dominus Jesus*, identifies itself and the Orthodox as being church with other churches being identified as “ecclesial communities.” The implicit (explicit?) assumption is that other churches are in some way deficient or, at least, a little less than fully church—perhaps therefore more inclined to be “dying”, that is, less than faithful to the Lord of the church.

The Augsburg Confession proposed another description. Here the church is recognized by what takes place in the gathered assembly. Thus, the one holy, Christian church is “...the assembly of all believers among whom the gospel is purely preached and the holy sacraments are administered according to the gospel.” Furthermore, “this is enough for the true unity of the Christian church that there the gospel is preached harmoniously according to a pure understanding and the sacraments are administered in conformity with the divine word.”(AC, VII)

In response to those who critiqued this as a useless, idealistic rendering of the church, Philip Melancthon responded:

Nor indeed are we dreaming about some platonic republic, as some have slanderously alleged. Instead, we teach that this church truly exists, consisting of true believing and righteous people scattered throughout the entire world. And we add its marks: the pure teaching of the gospel and the sacraments. This church is properly called “the pillar...of the truth (I Tim. 3:15) for it retains the pure gospel, and, as Paul says, (I Cor. 3:13), “the foundation,” that is, the true knowledge of Christ and faith.

(The Book of Concord, *Apology of the Augsburg Confession*, Kolb and Wengert, ed, p. 177)

Participants in this gathering will be aware that when the confessors speak of the gospel “being purely preached” or “the true knowledge of Christ and faith”, they are speaking of the way in which the preacher/teacher “uses” Christ and his benefits. Recall the description of the necessity of Christ offered in The Augsburg Confession, Article IV:

Furthermore, it is taught that we cannot obtain forgiveness of sins and righteousness before God through our merit, work, or satisfaction, but that we receive forgiveness of sin and become righteous before God out of grace for Christ’s sake through faith when we believe that Christ has suffered for us and that for his sake our sin is forgiven and righteousness and eternal life are given to us. (p.40)

Where is the church? What is the church? It is found where the assembly is gathered to hear God’s word of promise delivered in Christ and where that word of promise is offered at the bath and the table and received in faith. Is the church dying? In the context of the Augsburg Confession, one does not first look at statistics to find the answer. One first looks at the gathered assembly and asks, Can one see the

“marks” of the church in the proclamation of the gospel and in the administration of the sacraments? Are God’s promises in the Word of God made flesh, crucified and risen being delivered, so that the Holy Spirit can create faith in the particularity of this space and time? If so, the church is here. If not, the church, at least in this place, is at risk of dying - no matter the number in attendance, or the evident signs of prosperity. In such an ecclesiology the church existence is dependent upon the Word of God in Christ. It is the Lord of the church and not the church itself who is the guarantor of its existence.

It is interesting to see the manner in which the Lutheran confessors resist speaking of the church “institutionally”. Rather they consistently speak of it as being the sphere of God’s activity in Christ. One catches that thrust in Luther’s discussion of the church in the Large Catechism. He argues for using the word, *communio*, that is “a holy community” instead of “Kirche”. Then he explains:

This is the meaning and substance of this phrase:  
I believe that there is on earth a holy little flock  
and community of pure saints under one head, Christ.  
It is called together by the Holy Spirit in one faith,  
mind, and understanding. It possesses a variety of  
gifts, and yet is united in love without sect or  
schism... The Holy Spirit will remain with the holy  
community or Christian people until the Last Day.  
Through it he gathers us, using it to teach and preach  
the Word. By it he creates and increases holiness,  
causing it daily to grow and become strong in the faith  
and in its fruits, which the Spirit produces.  
(The Book of Concord, “The Large Catechism”, Kolb and  
Wengert, ed. p. 438)

As we wrestle with the question, Is the church dying?, we will do well to begin by turning the focus away from our institutions and ourselves and to the promise of the Lord of the church.

#### **D. IS THE CHURCH DYING?** **A QUESTION TO BE RAISED WITH RESPECT TO OUR ORGANIZATION AND STRUCTURES?**

When we think of the church, many of us most often think of organization and structure. The previous comments may suggest that is where the current reformation needs to begin. My re-reading of the Lutheran Confessions on this theme illustrates an incredible indifference to matters of organization and structure. The critical question seems to be, what will best serve the proclamation of the gospel? Given their context, we can appreciate the reformers suspicion of existing structures. However, the central concern is that church order serves the gospel. Note how the following quote from Melancthon illustrates an appreciation for order but a willingness to abolish it when it hinders the proclamation of the gospel:

Concerning this subject we have frequently testified in the assembly that it is our greatest desire to retain the order of the church and the various ranks in the church-even though they were established by human authority. We know that church discipline in

the manner described by the ancient canons was instituted by the Fathers for a good and useful purpose. However, the bishops compel our priests either to reject and to condemn the kind of doctrine that we confess, or by new and unheard of cruelty they kill the unfortunate and innocent people. This prevents our priests from acknowledging such bishops. Thus the cruelty of the bishops is the reason for the abolition of canonical order in some places despite our earnest desire to retain it. Let the bishops ask themselves how they will give an answer to God for breaking up the church. (Book of Concord, Apology of the Augsburg Confession, Kolb and Wengert, ed., p. 222)

Perhaps the Lutheran reformers would not have framed the question as we have done for this discussion. But their response signaled an intent to critique the existing system from the perspective of what would serve or, conversely, hinder the church's mission to proclaim the gospel.

At this point it may be useful to review the understanding of the church as reflected in the ELCA's synodical constitution. In Chapter 5, "The Nature of the Church", we read:

S5.01. All power in the Church belongs to our Lord Jesus Christ, its head. All actions of this synod are to be carried out under his rule and authority.

S5.02 The Church exists both as an inclusive fellowship and as local congregations gathered for worship and Christian service. Congregations find their fulfillment in the universal community of the Church, and the universal Church exists in and through congregations. This church, therefore, derives its character and powers both from the sanction and representation of its congregations and from its inherent nature as an expression of the broader fellowship of the faithful. In length, it acknowledges itself to be in the historic continuity of the communion of saints; in breadth it expresses the fellowship of believers and congregations in our day.

In Chapter 6, "The Statement of Purpose", we read:

The Church is a people created by God in Christ, empowered by the Holy Spirit, called and sent to bear witness to God's creative, redeeming, and sanctifying activity in the world.

Note the understanding that the church's existence, its "living", is dependent upon God's action in Christ, through the Holy Spirit. Also note that the ELCA has chosen to distinguish "the Church",

referring to the “universal community” and “this church”, the local embodiment covenanted to work together in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. The challenge is to know how and when to distinguish “the Church” and “this church!” The “this church” acknowledges the “human traditions” associated with it and its often penultimate claims. The fact that “this church” sees itself as being within “the Church” recognizes that it is altogether dependent upon the Lord of the Church and desires to be accountable to the whole of “the Church.” The danger is that conversation about “this church” can seem to make it our possession and an idol as opposed to serving as an instrument for God’s purposes.

As a way of reminding us of our identity and mission as “this church” and “the Church”, the constitution goes on to describe our purpose:

S6.02 To participate in God’s mission, this synod as a part of the Church shall:

- a. Proclaim God’s saving Gospel of justification by grace for Christ’s sake through faith alone, according to apostolic witness in the Holy Scripture, preserving and transmitting the Gospel faithfully to future generations;
- b. Carry out Christ’s Great Commission by reaching out to all people to bring them to faith in Christ and by doing all ministry with a global awareness consistent with the understanding of God as Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier of all.
- c. Serve in response to God’s love to meet human needs, caring for the sick and the aged, advocating dignity and justice for all people, working for peace and reconciliation among the nations, and standing with the poor and powerless, and committing itself to their needs;
- d. Worship God in proclamation of the Word and administration of the sacraments and through lives of prayer, praise, thanksgiving, witness, and service;
- e. Nurture its members in the Word of God so as to grow in faith and hope and love, to see daily life as the primary setting for the exercise of their Christian calling, and to use the gifts of the Spirit for their life together and of their calling in the world;
- f. Manifest the unity given to the people of God by living together in the love of Christ and by joining with other Christians in prayer and action

to express and preserve the unity which the Spirit gives.

When we are about such work, there is evidence, perceptible perhaps only to the eyes of faith, that God's life-giving work is taking place among us and through us and that the church is,

...truly the kingdom of Christ" for "the kingdom of Christ is always that which he makes alive by his Spirit, whether it has been revealed or is hidden under the cross, just as Christ is the same, whether now glorified or previously afflicted. (Book of Concord, Apology of the Augsburg Confession, Kolb and Wengert, Ed., p. 176)

Does not the quote suggest that one of the marks of the church, in addition to "Word and Sacraments" is that self-forgetfulness which frees it to give itself, to die, for the life of the world. A faithful dying then may be one of the characteristics of the church which always trusts the Lord of the church to bring new life.

However, within "this church" as within the whole of "the Church", the power of sin, death, and the devil can be seen. Such power can be manifest in a preoccupation with ourselves and our institutions, structures and our own "living", lust for power and misuse of power, greed, gossip/slander, a preoccupation with the marks of success, divisiveness and animosity often promulgated in God's name, a loss of an urgency for being a part of God's mission and so forth.

When such characteristics begin to describe our life together, we may be disposed to observe that we prefer the company of sinners over that of the saints. Unfortunately, we are most inclined to ascribe such characteristics to others and not to ourselves. Nevertheless, the chief problem is our own unbelief which doubts God's promises in Christ.

Now when one asks the question, Is "this church" or the church in this place dying, the answer may well be "Yes, in that those gathered in this place fail to trust the promises of the Lord of the Church." "Dying" then is God's judgment on a church that has chosen not to trust God's promises.

In such moments it may be tempting to seek to bring life into "this church" by resorting to our own narrow traditions, finding a new enemy, opting for a new public relations program, looking around for what may seem to be working for others or opting for a host of other "solutions". To do so will only confirm our dying.

At this point what is most needed is the life-giving proclamation of the Gospel, the re-affirmation of the new life that God gives through our baptism into Christ, and the gathering together in the Lord's Supper to be reformed into the Body of Christ. If there are questions about whether or not "this church" or the church in this place is dying, then the key question is, are the "goods," that is, the benefits of Christ, being delivered? If not, one ought to prepare for a burial. If so, one needs to hear the words, "Fear not!" for God will work new life.

### **E. A CASE STUDY**

Since July 1998, I have been called to serve as bishop of the Northwestern Ohio Synod of the ELCA. The synod consists of 189 congregations and about 107,000 baptized members. Over the years of its existence, the synod has experienced a small but steady decline in membership. A significant number of

our congregations have memberships that are steady or declining. With the exception of the Toledo and Lima areas, the population lives in small town and rural communities. Nine of our twenty-two counties have experienced shrinking populations with the rest of the area being stable in population. Financial support for the work of God's mission through this synod and the ELCA has averaged about a 1% increase per year, significantly short of the average rate of inflation. The figures are roughly comparable to trends in many areas of the ELCA.

The synod is composed largely of middle class persons of European ancestry. Historically, it has not been very successful at reaching out to those of African-American heritage or a growing Hispanic population.

Some would say that such a description reflects a "dying church."

I came to the Office of Bishop reluctantly but also believing that the call of this church was the call of God. In the midst of the many demands and expectations of this office, it has been critical for me to clarify the central goals of my service. What I have said repeatedly is that I have no other agenda than to do my best at encouraging our pastors and other rostered leaders to be healthy and centered in the Gospel of Jesus Christ, to do our best at encouraging our congregations and agencies to also be centered in the Gospel and recognize their calling to be a part of God's mission to the world and a sign of the Kingdom of Christ.

In our diagnosis of this church we have identified a number of concerns. First, knowing our own proclivities to do otherwise, we never take for granted that the benefits of Christ are being offered in the congregations of this synod. If that does not happen than we are, in fact, a dying church, that is a church that is failing to trust itself to God's promises.

Second, we recognize the necessity for our lay and rostered leadership to live and act out of those promises. It is our experience that often laity feel incompetent to speak the faith, even with those with whom they are in primary relationships. Lutheran lips too often have been sealed in home, neighborhood and workplace so that the work of evangelism has been severely hampered. Here pastoral leadership is challenged to convey the faith intelligibly and meaningfully in a way that also unfolds the marvelous "scandal" of the Gospel. An additional concern is that pastoral and lay leadership nurture the laity in the faith in such a way so as to enable the laity, by the power of the Holy Spirit, to live and speak the faith in their own contexts.

A third major concern is that our congregations and agencies recognize their calling to be a sign of the Kingdom of Christ in the world. Too often we have thought of ministry as being primarily that which is done by the pastor on behalf of the gathered assembly (i.e., Word and Sacrament), but have not realized the implications of that action on our response in the world (see the examples earlier referred to in the "Statement of Purpose" included in the synodical constitution, S6.01). The question then can be raised concerning whether or not we have received God's promises in Christ so that by the power of the Holy Spirit they might bear fruit in our lives.

For the above purposes, the synodical staff and I have found it helpful to make use of the ELCA's theme, Making Christ Known. We have understood that to mean: 1) that in the proclamation of the Gospel and administration of Baptism and the Lord's Supper, God is at work making Christ known; and, 2) that in making Christ known to us in worship, Christian Education, and fellowship, God would work through us to make Christ known to the world. Obviously, here we understand that we are using some

code language that repeatedly needs to be “unpacked.”

As a way of repeatedly lifting up these themes we have chosen to use the following vision statement: “We are 189 outposts for mission serving to make Christ known in our congregations, community, and world.”

Despite the initial portrayal of ministry in this synod, God is at work in the congregations and agencies of this synod. It is heartening to see the “life” of our Lord reflected in so many contexts. Our goal is to build on what already has been taking place over the past years.

In seeking to be faithful to our calling to provide pastoral leadership in this synod we are utilizing a variety of strategies some of which include the following:

1. The Assistants to the Bishop and myself use the resources of Word and Sacrament as often as possible in our ministry to the congregations and rostered and lay leadership of this synod. We understand this to be critical so that the Holy Spirit might have “space” to “call, gather, and enlighten” this church;
2. We seek to create opportunities for our pastors and synodically authorized ministers to review their preaching in the light of that understanding of Scripture which necessitates Christ.
3. We are initiating “parish visitations” which will provide opportunity for the assistants to the bishop and myself to review congregational ministry with pastors and lay leadership.
4. We have asked all of our congregations prayerfully to reflect on the mission to which God has called them in their specific context utilizing their specific gifts and to develop specific strategies in terms of responding to their mission. Many pastors and lay leaders have indicated that they have not ever been involved in such processes. It has been heartening in recent months to read the Congregational Mission Strategy Report forms and to begin to hear leadership speak of God’s mission in their situation.
5. We are in the process of developing a Lay School of Theology for Mission to develop a strong, equipped lay ministry for service in the congregation, the synod, and the world. Already we have been receiving an excellent response to Lay Theological Retreats held four or five times a year which were developed as a part of our program for synodically authorized ministry.
6. We are in the process of developing a team of lay evangelists who will resource the evangelism ministries of this synod and its congregations.
7. We are convinced that God has given this synod the financial resources to fully fund the mission. Accordingly, we are seeking to do better work in the area of financial stewardship including estate planning and major gifts.

In, with, and under all of the above we seek to bring leadership to the vast array of other issues we face in a manner that draws deeply from our core understanding of the church’s reliance upon Christ and the promise of the Holy Spirit.

Are there hazards to this work? Indeed, there are many. Sometimes the staff and I rejoice as what we see is faithful, joyful ministry-sometimes in the most difficult of circumstances. At other times, we feel as though the Holy Spirit has abandoned us and left us to our own idolatries. On occasions, we discover

how the Holy Spirit blesses us with peace in the most difficult of circumstances, provides the deepest of consolation and places words in our lips that we could never have imagined. Sometimes we are encouraged by the faithfulness and courage of this church. At other times, we despair of its future and marvel at its pettiness.

On occasion, we feel ourselves to be providing faithful leadership. At other times, we know ourselves to have “sold out” and implore God’s grace and mercy. Sometimes it seems that we are so well grounded in God’s promises in Christ. Then again we know moments when we look around desperately seeking the promise of something that will really work. On rare moments, we experience the sense that maybe we are competent enough to fulfill this calling. Most often, our comfort is in our Lord’s promises that draw us to his good future and remind us that Jesus is Lord of the church.

### **SUMMARY**

Is the church dying? Well, one might answer, yes...and no...and yes...and no, in no particular order. On the deepest level, we have sought to show that the church’s existence is always dependent on the crucified and risen Lord who has promised that “the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.”

We have also sought to show that the church is always in need of reclaiming the gospel and that when it fails to do so, in specific places and times, its dying can be a reflection of its unbelief and the judgment of God. We have alluded and should have said more concerning the truth that the church that is reliant upon the Lord is freed to give of itself in service (i.e. dying) in the fashion of him who gave himself for the church.

We have offered a model of one specific context in which we seek to provide leadership in this church where dying is sometimes a result of unfaithfulness and the judgment of God and at other times a sign of the most vigorous of faith in the most impossible of circumstances.

Perhaps the most significant thing is that the question has been raised.