

***Being Church, Now & Then:
what the church of the future might look like...perhaps?***

The presentations (and conversation) will be (hopefully) a musing, imaginative, forward-looking thought experiment about what “being church” and living God’s mission might look in the future (and the future may be now). The presentations will include material from a few provocative thinkers and writers, like theologian John Caputo and essayist and poet Wendell Berry, to stimulate and inspire our thinking and imagination.

Presenting Thesis: *any consideration of or conversation about leadership from a Christian theological perspective needs to be couched or nested in an ecclesiology.*

Unlike my first sabbatical in 2007, I didn’t write a book during my most recent sabbatical in 2014 (though I did write a few things); rather I served as pastor pro tem and teacher, respectively, among the people of God at New Hope Lutheran Church in Farley, IA, and St. Paul Lutheran Church, Davenport, IA. I am a pastor by vocation in this church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America that has called me to be a teacher of the church. Early in 2014 I was invited to write about a version of the topic of this paper (the current form of which is a manuscript summary) with friend and colleague Professor Cheryl Meese Peterson from Trinity Lutheran Seminary, (“What the church of the future will look?”), and could do so as a pastor called to teach and a teacher who returned to parish ministry, ensconced at both New Hope and St. Paul. In other words, I could think carefully and contextually about what it means to be church—both today and tomorrow. And so, to that end, “Being Church, Now & Then: what the church of the future might look like...perhaps?”

The framing question with which I began the book that I wrote during my last sabbatical was this: What does it mean to *be* church today? The question that I wish to pursue now is a bit riskier, maybe even a little sketchy, but definitely more fun: “What might it look like to be church tomorrow or next month or next year?” I first met Brian McLaren when we served together on what was then called the “table of twelve” in the

nascent emergent/emergence/emerging church phenomenon that eventually morphed into the Emergent Village—and now has become, in common parlance, emergence Christianity. I immediately took a liking to Brian—he was smart and kind and generous and immediately challenged any sense of uniformity that I thought I had about a “modern evangelical Christian.” In fact, he helped me to re-frame the “modern evangelical Christian” caricature with which I had been operating. Shortly thereafter, when I first heard him speak publicly he posed a provocative combination of question and assertion that I’ve heard him repeat many times subsequently: “If you have a new world, you are going to need a new church. Guess what—we’ve got a new world.”

Please let me qualify this a bit. I don’t believe that Brian meant (nor means)—and I certainly don’t mean—new as in trendy or newfangled or *new, new*. I believe that the core ecclesiological task is not necessarily to **find** or be something *new*. Rather, the core task of church in any day is to find a usable future in the past, by mining the Great Christian tradition as well as our little traditions, and by *adapting*—which involves innovation, freshening up practices, and no small amount of careful and calculated risk—to new cultural contexts. This demands a profound, if not radical commitment to contextual ministry, as opposed to culturally comfortable ministry. Add to this the reality that many people today are “culturally commuting, and, well, you have the conundrum in which so many of us find ourselves today.

Let’s take a quick side trip and look at one of the best articles that I’ve seen about the cultural commute. This was written a few years ago by Pastor Keith Anderson (Upper Dublin Lutheran Church outside Philadelphia) and author of the recently released [The Digital Cathedral: Networked Ministry in a Wireless World](#). Keith has spoken, blogged, and written a great deal about the cultural commute.

(NB: The following excerpt is from an article published by Pastor Keith Anderson 2011-12 that is no longer publicly available.)

“People sometimes drive many miles to church on Sunday -- but that's not the only commute they have to make. They also have to make a cultural commute. They

commute from our present-day culture to a predominant church culture largely created 30, 40, 50 or more years ago.

When many people drive into our parking lots and enter our buildings, they largely have to leave their cultural reference points, experiences, struggles and questions at the door. For those of us who didn't grow up in this conventional church culture, it is a disorienting experience -- like waking up and finding ourselves in Pleasantville. Not always, but very often, something like this is the cultural commute that happens:

Many people come...

- from increasingly diverse neighborhoods and workplaces to a homogeneous congregation;
- from flat-screen TVs and smart phones to no technology at all, except for a decades-old sound system;
- from an increasing awareness and appreciation for the gifts of different ethnicities to a focus on one particular ethnic tradition;
- from everyday conversational language to specialized church language;
- from digital media and contemporary art to images, art and banners that are decades old;
- from contemporary, shared, cultural reference points to stories, events, images, music and movies that happened before we were born; and
- from a majority of society supportive of LGBTQ rights to conflict or silence about it in the church.

And the crazy thing is that fewer and fewer of us in the church have actually grown up in that church culture -- but since that's what church is "supposed to be like," we support and participate in a church culture that's not actually native to many of us!" ***End quote***

As case in point, note that the predominant approach in the life of many of the churches today is this: only a few (read: the professionals) create, produce, and contribute to what takes place publicly (for instance, in worship), while most (read, the majority) are passive (and generally willing) recipients. Contrast this, say, to the ever-increasing

emerging technologies of social and new media (Facebook is passé, so Twitter, Tumblr, Instagram, Flipagram, Snapchat, Yik Yak, and now Kik Messenger) where the great majority of people can not only actively participate, but can create, produce, and contribute. Now granted, there is a LOT of junk, fluff, chaff, but that material eventually gets filtered out in a mostly tacit communal process of interpretation and either affirmation (like, share, re-tweet) or denial (dismiss, ignore, block). New media (social media) can flatten the playing field and allows more people to be creators, producers, and thus contributors.

In my estimation, here is one bottom line: many (most?) of the churches today—many of us here today—are trying to “play a game” that we really love, in which we deeply believe—that is, to be church—but on a new playing field, aka the emerging cultural and ecclesial landscape, using old rules (see prior comments on the cultural commute). One of the core cultural realities today is that the playing field has changed, and we deny or ignore it at our own peril and demise. And ignore or deny we have done—and are doing—pretty well.

A bottom line needs to be followed up with a thesis, right? Here is one: Lutheran Christians, among others, have the theology for this new day, or the new coming tomorrow, but we are beholden to—or perhaps in bondage to—deeply entrenched values and practices created by a church, for a world, that is quickly disappearing—yet the vestiges of which still hang on, tenaciously in places.

So, what’s a church (or a synod or seminary?) to do? Among other things, learn and live adaptive leadership that works toward second order change—systemic change, culture shift—rather than constantly settling for first order change—which generally is mostly technical and superficial. There will be a cost to living and leading in this way. It will demand openness, risk, imagination, and innovation. Indigenous, missional apostle/servant/poet leaders such as the ones that are being formed here at Wartburg Seminary will inspire, galvanize, mobilize, authorize, and deploy the *laos* for witness and service.

Having said all of this, what will the church of the future look like? When invited to write and speak about this the past few years in response to the prompt I was first given I was definitely intrigued. Instead of, “Will the Church have a future?” or “What is the future of the Church?” I was asked, “*How the Church of the future might look?*” In other words, the Church *will be*; the more figural question is: What might it *look like*?

This question has been engaged by the likes of Douglas John Hall (cf. *Has the Church a Future?*, 2009) and one of our own contemporary Lutheran sages, Timothy Lull (cf. “The Church of the Future and the Prospects for Ecumenism,” *Word & World*, Vol. XVIII, Number 2, 1998), in whose company I felt humbled to contribute my own thoughts.

I don’t mean to be snarky, but I want to begin by stating the obvious: insofar as both the Church and the future belong to God, the church of the future will “look” like whatever God intends or desires it to. As followers of Christ, we trust and live and worship and serve and do our best to discern what “church” the world needs as the future unfolds—trusting the Spirit’s agency along with ours. And, because we know that “the church doesn’t have a mission, God’s mission has a church” (to quote my friend and colleague Cheryl Meese Peterson, who teaches at Trinity Lutheran Seminary and with whom I have collaborated on various projects recently), the church is and always will be called to witness to and participate in God’s mission, all the while knowing that the “mission” as well as the “future” does not belong to the church, but to God.

I am no seer, so what I offer here is some imagination about what the church of the future will look like—at least in this (North) American context. To start with, I certainly believe that God intends the church of the future to be more than a system of belief or a commodity that can be programmed, packaged, marketed, and tweeted as the ever-elusive new and improved quick fix. Christian beliefs and practices are intended to foster a way of life as followers of Jesus Christ that *in turn* send us into God’s world to imitate the forgiveness, mercy, and love of God. Claimed by God in baptism and drawn

by the Spirit, we are invited to participate in the life and mission of Jesus Christ within community and in God's world. This is a gift to which the Spirit calls people; it is not something we create or can force.

So, what might this look like? With Lull, I believe it needs always to have a global horizon as well as an ecumenical orientation, as the "...the great question for Christians in the twenty-first century is likely to be what it means to be a Christian—rather than a Lutheran or a Presbyterian or an Episcopalian—in a world of many Christian groups, many religions, and widespread indifference to religious affiliation" (Lull, 170). For me, this means bringing our distinctive Lutheran voice while recognizing the gifts that other traditions and global communions have to offer to the common mission we share as members of the one Body.

Indeed, I believe it will be less about being tied to a building and more about participating in a way of life, a life of discipleship. It will mean an understanding of "church" that is more nimble, more agile, perhaps more mobile, yet deeply rooted in God's Word of promise in Jesus Christ. If we are to be the gathered and gathering community as the people of God, then we need to learn better how to go out the out door. We need to learn how to be an authentic, welcoming community in a place yet leave our church buildings and live God's mission, practicing Christian hospitality in café's, music lounges, pubs, coffee shops, and virtual gathering places enabled by social media. (NB: here is an opportunity, for instance, to deploy those who are gifted and called for such work and ministry, the leadership principle being—if you can't do it and it needs to be done, then find someone who can and will.) We are called to bear good news in God's world. In fact, a characteristic mark of evangelical living is and will be the need to live the good news before attempting to speak it. We gather as God's people, we listen to God's Story, we leave because we are sent to "become what we receive," the Body of Christ, listening to others, loving our neighbors—especially those on the margins--living out God's Story.

God's church of the future will not be afraid to experiment and embrace the practice of faithful innovation. The essential premise is that during periods of significant transition, human beings need not more rules, but more stories (really, when was the last time that you were inspired by a rule?). Alternative approaches or practices that fit the ethos of a particular community will generate new stories and allow people to seek an authentic experience of God within community. And such stories can inspire and empower others in their own place and in their own way. This is not a "whatever" approach to being the church—whatever works or whatever people want or whatever seems to be the latest thing. However, alternative approaches or practices will be needed to function and intelligibly communicate the Christian message in the future. Oftentimes, these approaches or practices represent nothing "new," but rather a retrieval of the very old. This entails a deep mining of the Great (Christian) Tradition, re-claiming ancient values and practices and contextualizing them in a community for a new day. If more experiential and participatory worship practices are more valued, there may be communal *lectio divina* instead of one person reading the text, walking/using a visual prayer labyrinth during the time for intercessory prayer rather than the a prayer-and-response approach, practicing communal midrash after the sermon, or something as simple as the practice of silence after preaching and before the singing. The practice of testimony may be reclaimed in the church of the future to allow more of God's gifted people to share their faith with others and authenticate their Christian witness.

It could be that the church of the future, in many of its forms and expressions, will need to look and feel more like a Twelve Step meeting than a club providing religious goods and services. In The Great Emergence, Phyllis Tickle writes that the Twelve Step approach (and Alcoholics Anonymous in particular) was arguably the most significant sociocultural event in the twentieth century affecting North American Christianity and its shifting relationships with spirituality. (see Tickle, The Great Emergence, Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 91—93). There is a realness to Twelve Step meetings that is virtually absent in the life of many (if not most) churches. Yet God is real, and really present in a Word that can be seen and heard and touched and tasted. So many of the people who don't have much to do with conventional church life—the so-called "nones" or "dones"

or the “spiritual but not religious” folks—call them what we will, so many of them are looking for a realness, a real encounter with the Triune God of the Judeo-Christian Scriptures that they often don’t find in churches. Diana Butler Bass and Reggie McNeal both suggest that many spiritual seekers are not finding the authentic community they seek in conventional congregations. In fact, Reggie McNeal proposes that is because most mainline churches are more secular than the culture that surrounds them. McNeal goes farther to argue that most mainline church culture (emphasizing membership over discipleship) is not “spiritual enough” to help people with the questions they are asking about life and God: “The problem is that when people come to church, expecting to find God, they often encounter a religious club holding a meeting where God is conspicuously absent.” (The Present Future: Six Tough Questions for the Church, San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 2003, 59)

It’s not uncommon in a Twelve Step meeting to see and hear from a person who was literally taken from death to life and will testify to this fact. Are Lutheran Christians too afraid to talk about or testify to an experience or real encounter of God? Luther’s tower experience (among others) was itself a testimony to a life-changing experience of God opening up his world. How can the church of the future inhabit places where people experience, in a palpable, powerful way, the God who is really present, instead of feeling that God is conspicuously absent. Granted, experience can never have the last word, but many human beings are open to, in fact hungry for a transformative experience, a transforming encounter with the love and power of God in Jesus Christ.

The church of the future will need to be Spirit-breathed, and evince a more passionate spirituality rooted in the cross of Christ. Dying and rising each day, individually and collectively, will mean removing obstacles: changing worn out patterns, letting go of old resentments and fears, stop fighting the same old battles while hoping for a different outcome, surrendering the need to be right, to be in control, to be bigger or better or trendier than some other place. Life on the Way with the living Christ in the future will mean giving up the comfort of the club, the complacency of the conventional—in short, removing “the church” from the center of things—and opening

ourselves to God's in-breaking Reign in unexpected or unbidden ways. We need to stop building and hoping they will come and instead galvanize our resources and energy around a focus on the call to "go." Go—a short and seemingly simple word, yet bearing the weight of Christ's daunting and daring call. The church of the future will empower and release the baptized to witness and testify and serve and in all ways "bear God's creative and redeeming love for all the world."

I wish to give our pastor, teacher, and friend, Tim Lull, the last word: "The church of the future will not be the kingdom of God. It will have new problems that we cannot yet see, to say nothing of the old problems of sloth, division, and limited understanding of the breadth and scope of God's intention. But it will be the next stage along the pilgrim way, and it will seldom be a boring community or one that is scarcely visible because of its quiet passivity. Yet it too will be scanning the horizon, wondering in the midst of its rich common life about the church of the future of the twenty-second century." (Lull, *Word & World*, 169).

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