

The Areopagus:

Conversations on the Mission Frontier

“Come follow me & I will make you fish for people...As the Father sent me so I send you...Receive the Holy Spirit, if you forgive anyone’s sins, they are forgiven. If you do not forgive them they are not forgiven...make disciples of all nations baptizing them in the name of the Father & of the Son & of the Holy Spirit teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you...You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem & in Judea & in Samaria & to the ends of the earth.”

That’s just a small example of how Jesus did “succession planning:” the handing over of leadership, authority, & responsibility for his

reconciling the world to himself, no longer counting people’s sins against them. And he gave to us this wonderful message of reconciliation.”

We don’t often talk about “succession planning” in the church. We don’t think about who will assume the roles of leadership until those roles are vacant. Jesus clearly thought differently than we do. He specifically chose each of those first 12, he poured his life into them & shaped them for how he knew each would serve his Kingdom.¹ Perhaps now would be a good time to start thinking like Jesus.

Why should the church think about “succession planning,” about who will assume the mantle of leadership in the church, even before a position is empty? Well, if you’ve been paying close attention to our LCA, 5 (and perhaps 6) of 8 key leadership roles in our church will change hands in 2009. That’s right. By the time 2009 draws to a close, we will have selected a new Western Australia District President, a new Queensland District President, a new New South Wales District President, a new Secretary/Board for Mission Director of the LCA, and a new Australian Lutheran College Principal. We will also have an election for LCA President at our General Synod in Melbourne. By

the time 2010 rolls around there could be a very different face to our LCA.

Have we thought *seriously* about that?

Have we asked with any intentionality what sort of leaders our church needs as we face the challenges of the 21st century? Do we have a clear idea of what kind of leadership the body of Christ requires in the Western world where Christianity is seen as but one of the lesser options among many spiritual experiences?

Ask your pastor & the people in your congregation & I’ll bet you get the same answers I’ve received when I asked, “What kind of person might be a good District President for our District?” Here’s what I heard: “We need someone who can be a good pastor to the pastors.” “We ought to get someone who’s a good theologian.” “We need someone accepted by the other pastors.”

Let me offer some perspective on those responses. I’ve been a pastor for 20 years. I’ve been a part of electing 4 District Presidents, although we called them ‘bishops’ in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, & I’ve heard those same answers in the run-up to *every* election.

By the time 2010 rolls around, there could be a completely different face to our LCA...Have we thought seriously about

church’s mission here on earth. After a short intense apprenticeship, Jesus gave over to his followers his Father’s mission: proclaiming the good news that *“God was in Christ*

In truth, that's the same kind of person we always try to elect...pastor to the pastors, good theologian, someone accepted by the pastors. What I think that really means is we want a candidate who is most agreeable to the most people. We don't often ask about other criteria like vision for the church, passion for mission, depth of discipleship, leadership skills...

And what happens? We get wonderful faithful people into leadership positions. They serve dutifully, often through difficult circumstances. They are called upon to make decisions no one else wants to make & quite often receive more enmity than prayer for their efforts.

And where are we? The church keeps getting smaller. We recruit fewer pastoral candidates to the seminary. We close more congregations than we plant. We send out fewer missionaries. We squeeze to meet budgets. We see our children & grandchildren leave the church. But what might happen if we sought to be as intentional as Jesus when we select people for positions of great responsibility in our church?

For instance...Maybe we should be asking a different set of questions.

What if, for significant leadership positions, we sought those...

1. ...with a vision for mission in the Name of Jesus who could clearly set out that vision with a passion that energized the church or the district to which they were called?
2. ...with a track record of leading congregations through difficult times toward vibrant life & health?
3. ...with a proven history of focusing on personal & corporate discipleship so that the people under their leadership are drawn into a deeper relationship with Jesus?
4. ...with the ability to ask the hard questions & hold pastors & congregations accountable to the mission given to us by Jesus himself?
5. ...with the courage to appraise congregational viability & encourage honest discernment of ministry options for declining or non-viable settings?

What if we asked potential candidates for leadership roles in our church to share their vision for & approach to mission, discipleship, & leadership well before we gathered to pray & cast votes? What if we as a church had several weeks or months to pray over & consider the path Jesus was laying before us, instead of just a few days or mere minutes before casting a ballot? If we were ever going to attempt this sort of intentionality, now would be the time.

Perhaps now *would* be a good time to start thinking like Jesus.

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¹ Acts 9:15-16, John 1:50-51, Matthew 16:17 & others

Some Resources:

- a. ReJesus—Michael Frost & Alan Hirsch
- b. Why Should I Believe You? - Tom Bandy
- c. Velvet Elvis—Rob Bell

Questions for congregations:

1. What sort of person is our church trying to produce? Read Ephesians 5:8-18 & discuss this question based on Paul's charge.
2. What sort of church will produce that sort of person? Read Matt. 28:18-20 & explore how well your church discipled its people.
3. What sort of leadership will produce that sort of church? Read Eph. 4:11-18 & discuss how your church equips people for mission & models a lifestyle of apprenticeship to Jesus.
4. What sort of pastor offers that kind of leadership? Read 1 Cor. 3:10-11 & talk about the "environment" or "atmosphere" of your congregation. Is your church fellowship consistent with living in imitation of Jesus? If not, what needs to be changed?
5. What wider church systems (seminaries, professional development & support, district leadership) will raise up those sorts of pastors?

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