

The Areopagus: Conversations on the Mission Frontier

Just over an hour's drive from where I am sitting, two LCA congregations are closing. Where once there were worshippers and ministry of Word and Sacrament, there is now a realization that they will have to serve and be served in a different way. The pews are almost empty. One group will link with nearby Lutheran ministries, the other with Christians of other denominations. One building is for sale. The other will be used for Bible Study and fellowship functions for awhile. In both cases there is significant grief and sadness.

How does this happen? Not just in *these* cases, but how does a ministry decline to the point of congregational closure? And why are we seeing more closures than new "church plants," as they're commonly called today? Why does one ministry thrive and another struggle or fail to survive?

If there was one answer that fit every instance, it'd be easy to diagnose and treat the illness that seems to have hit our church. But the causes are much more diverse and difficult to address. However, we *can* make some observations.

Thriving congregations...

First & foremost, thriving churches are led by someone with a vision for mission

that assumes the local congregation has a role to play in God's eternal saving plan for all creation. This vision for mission shapes *EVERYTHING* the congregation does. Participants in the ministry are familiar with the story of Jesus and look for opportunities to share that story with others. They also search for needs in and beyond their community that the congregation can serve. The size of the community or the size of the congregation are irrelevant. What matters is a leader who has a vision for mission in the name of Jesus and a community of faith that encourages that leader to lead and to equip more leaders for mission.

Secondly, thriving churches develop an intentional adaptability and sensitivity to their community's circumstances and needs. Thriving churches understand that nothing on this earth lasts forever; not even their favourite church "thing." As a community changes over time, so do the ways the community can be served. Music styles, worship styles, buildings, teaching methods, worship times, and ministry offerings are *ALWAYS* adaptable in thriving churches. In fact, look at your church. Are you still doing some things the same way you did 10 years ago? Are the same people filling the same roles? Does your building look the same from the outside? Does it look the same on the inside? It's likely past time for something to change.

Change for the sake of change?

No, change for the sake of mission...for communicating to the community that the God whose love and mercies are "new every morning" is keeping his promise to make "all things new:" **especially** his church.

Next look at your worshippers. Are they all about the same age, or do they reflect the diversity of your community? If you're an average LCA congregation, there are likely more people in worship over 70 than there are those under 40. We've seen two generations grow to adulthood in Australia that have a strong resistance to all things "church." Thriving congregations have a heart for those missing generations and are adapting their ministries to serve them. Even preaching can be tailored to speak to the needs of these generations in a substantive way.

Thriving congregations are also passionate about discipleship & have clearly defined ways for all ministry participants to deepen their relationship with Jesus. They understand discipleship

is more than some general biblical or theological knowledge, an understanding of grace and forgiveness, or an adherence to Lutheran doctrine. Discipleship is simply growing in closer imitation of and resemblance to Jesus. Too many churches allow their members to think that one hour of involvement per week is the same thing as being a disciple of Jesus Christ: **It isn't.** Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, "Christianity without discipleship is Christianity without Christ." Thriving churches insist that those who are selected to lead within the congregation are actively pursuing deeper discipleship. Those who aren't willing to be led, disqualify themselves from leadership roles

Fourth, thriving congregations exhibit a passionate hospitality. Their decision making works like this: "guests and visitors first, members last." When it comes to developing a new ministry or a new building, thriving congregations think of the needs of potential or actual guests **first.**

When there's money to be spent, the driving question is "What will it take to serve the needs of the people who aren't here yet?" Thriving congregations generously release money toward mission and ministry fully aware they may never see a "return on *that* investment" in their lifetime. Visitors are sought, welcomed and encouraged to participate fully in thriving congregations. "Hospitality" includes things like fresh, clean and modernized toilet facilities, comfortable seating and atmosphere for worship, quality coffee and tea for the after-worship fellowship, and a warm greeting by the pastor and other worshippers. It also involves intentionally planning church activities to make the most of wider community schedules so that the church is seen as a significant participant in the community.

A final "must do"

There is though, one "stopper" that can cripple any congregation and will thwart even the best efforts to thrive in mission in the name of Jesus:

UNRESOLVED CONFLICT.

Multi denominational consultative research reveals that unresolved conflict will derail everything else a congregation does to reach its community with the gospel. Too many congregations are beset by a person or group who firmly believe they are or should be in control of every decision, every dollar, and every thing with regard to the congregation's ministry. They are the same people who habitually plague pastor after pastor with complaints, work behind the scenes to undermine progressive congregational action, pass on half-truths and rumours as truth, and do all they can to stall or stop the congregation from genuinely making a difference in their community...often telling themselves and others they are doing the right thing. These people need to be called to repentance and reconciliation. This is not just the pastor's role, it is also important for those in the community of faith who want to see friends and family brought to faith in Christ and the congregation thrive in faithfulness to Jesus to call these conflict-causers to account.

Any congregation can thrive!

Note well that everything listed here can be pursued by congregations large or small, in rural communities or big cities. None of these integral characteristics require massive financial outlays, although thriving congregations seem to find ways to be generous and to effectively use their gifts. Interesting too that at least four of the five can be done in the absence of a pastor.

It's time to stop blaming sports on Sunday, declining rural populations, lessened Lutheran connectedness, drought, working Mums, Pentecostals, or any of the other host of causes to which we reflexively attribute congregational decline, and start honestly assessing our own ministries and begin to move toward thriving health and growth in mission in Jesus' name for the sake of the world.

Question for discussion:

For each of those listed characteristics, evaluate honestly, "How are we doing?"

Be especially serious about the conflict issue. How are you doing as a community of faith with conflict and conflict-causers?

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Why does one ministry thrive & another struggle or fail to survive? What makes the difference?

Discipleship is simply growing in closer imitation of and resemblance to Jesus.