

The Areopagus:

Conversations on the Mission Frontier

Mission today: Part II I'm finished with "the church"

"I'm finished with 'the church'," he said. He was eating lunch at the Better Blokes Camp. Our tablemates looked on in hungry wonder, "What do you mean?" He continued, "I'm tired of the fights. Tired of the same songs, the same sermons, the same liturgy, the same people making the same decisions year after year. I'm finished waiting for things to change." He was looking for a group of guys to meet with regularly, to pray for him & hold him accountable in his walk with Jesus. He wanted a small group to help him disciple his family, to find ways to serve the world in the name of Jesus, & to worship without being told what he found joy in doing wasn't "Lutheran." But he was finished with "the church," or at least the experience of "the church" he had lived for the 40 or so years of his life.

**"I'm finished with
'the church.'"
"Me too."**

It didn't take long... "Me too," said another. "Count me in... I mean out too," said still another. Over the long weekend I heard at least a dozen younger men share that they were headed for the congregational exits.

Their stories were different, but their experiences were similar. They desperately wanted the place they called their spiritual home to be a *home*: warm, welcoming, a place where family & visitors alike could find space to share life in Christ together.

That was not how they described the congregations of the LCA where they had grown up or now worshiped. What they described was endless bickering about irrelevant things, pastors bullied into ill health & early departures (from a parish or ordained service), fear of spending money for new ministry, controlling personalities, no relevant ministries for children & youth or no real interest in kids except that they sit quietly & not be a disturbance, countless excuses to blame others for the church's death throes, outdated forms of worship & children's education, no passion for adult discipleship or service to the community...

It's not just the guys in the pews

I write from the perspective of someone who stands "in the pulpit." For 21 years I've done what I think I do most passionately: proclaim God's saving love in a public way; hold out God's offer of new life from the midst of life; call people to the joy of being transformed by a living relationship with Jesus.

I've lived & worked around pastors all my adult life. More & more are feeling that they can serve & grow Christ's kingdom as effectively & joyfully, if not more so, from *OUTSIDE* the institutional church than from within.

I'm blessed to know many young pastors in the LCA. One asked at our

last Pastor's Conference, "Do any of you guys ever feel like quitting?" Most everyone in the room said "Yes."

Quite frankly, there are days when for a dollar I'd give you the keys to the building & next week's sermon text. A young woman I know, who grew up in an LCA manse said, "My dad's rule was stay 5 years & leave before they lynch you."

Sit at a table of LCA pastors while they eat, & watch the number of maintenance medications that are taken with each meal. Ask about their physical, emotional, & spiritual health. If they're honest, they'll describe the frustration, the low pay, the bullying, the lack of support from district and national offices, blood pressure problems, sleeping issues, psychological trauma, family relationship stress...

How did we reach such a state?

Trevor Ruthenberg has shared some troubling statistics:

- Almost 50% of LCA members are not committed to daily prayer & Bible reading
- Nearly 60% aren't engaged in their congregation's mission beyond Sunday morning
- At best, only around 40% of our members show up in worship in a given weekend, & the truth is probably much worse for most LCA churches

How did we reach this point where the children our church has birthed from it's own womb are fleeing the family spiritual home & where our leaders are beaten down & burned

out almost from the start? How did a church born in a devoted passionate encounter with God's Word reach the stage where our adults rarely read their Bibles, more rarely still study the Scriptures, & where a life-long member described insisting congregational leaders be part of a Bible study as "onerous"? When did we abandon prayer as our lifeline to the "living water" of the Holy Spirit? When did we exchange devoted discipleship for "59 minutes & a cup of tea" once a week if we can make it? When in our history did a Great Commitment to the Great Commission & the Great Commandment become optional? When did a time-bound notion of "being Lutheran" trump the ever-renewing breath of the Holy Spirit of Jesus?

**If not now, when?
If not me, who?**

I'm not sure we can effectively answer any of those questions, nor do I believe we'd find adequate solutions even if we knew the answers.

What I do know is that all it takes is one person in one congregation to act in faith & obedience to make things change for the better, & by God's power things will change.

If one person decides right now that they will daily begin reading their Bible & praying for their pastor & their church's ministry things will change. If that one person then invites one more to join them...and if they then invite one more...

If one group of praying growing Christians decides they'll serve one real need outside the walls of their congregation...If one congregation sets their heart on reaching the people in their town that are not now being served by the church...If one church

decides they're going to serve just one of these groups: children, the homeless, the elderly, youth, families,

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truckies, bikies, teen mums...It doesn't take lots of people or heaps of money. Believe me in 21 years of ordained service I've seen large churches in big towns fade & die, and I've seen small churches in tiny communities thrive.

The key is to act in obedience to Jesus' command to carry his love to all nations & live in faith that Jesus will provide what you need for his mission. Pastor Mike Slaughter says this in his book, *UnLearning Church*, "We are not here to build sanctuaries of belief, but armies of action."

I know of an LCA congregation that is wrestling over issues of the suitability of their buildings for expanding their ministries. They're facing a lot of difficult decisions...demolition & reconstruction are never easy...

But 20 years ago they were already beginning to note the problems that are now becoming "mission hurdles." 20 years...20 years!...that's a loong time...that's a generation of missed opportunities. I'm sure they're not unique in the LCA. The burning question continues to be: "If not now, when? If not me, who?" How many more generations and how many more sad departures before...

Before...what?

There's a phrase I've heard thrown around in church consultant circles for years: "We're only one generation away from the death of the church."

Rubbish. The church of Jesus Christ is promised to withstand even the gates of hell, but that promise does not extend to any single congregation. It may be that we see the closing of hundreds of congregations before I retire...about 15 years from now.

What about your congregation?

Project your congregation out that far. What do you see? Thriving mission in the name of Jesus? Dwindling numbers & dilapidated buildings? A vacant lot where a vibrant ministry once stood? What do you see? Honestly. What do you see?

"We are not here to build sanctuaries of belief, but armies of

What are we waiting for?

One of my favourite Bible passages is 1 Samuel 14:1-23. In that chapter, obedient, faithful Jonathan & his armor bearer attack a vastly superior Philistine army, and win the battle.

They act on the basis of 2 things:

1. God's promise that He would rescue them from their enemies &
2. The hope that now was the moment they could participate in God's deliverance

So...Two men, only one of whom is armed, commit themselves to the Lord's purpose for His people & they rout a persistent enemy.

In obedience & faith they stir not only a sleeping Israelite army but recapture the hearts & hands of a nation that had run from the fight. In their active faithfulness, God too participates in driving out the enemy army. (vs 15) God proves faithful as his people prove obedient. Like David would later say, "*The battle belongs to the Lord,*" as God works through His people in their trust & obedience.

So now what?

That's a good question...Maybe you should talk to some of the younger families you know & try to discover what's on their hearts. Maybe one conversation can open a door to a new relationship & a new chance to serve your community & build Christ's Kingdom. Find someone who'll read Scripture with you & pray with you & search out opportunities to serve in your town. Start praying for your pastor & genuinely caring for him & his family in generous ways. Whatever you decide...don't let another generation slip away before you do something. If not now, when? If not you, who?