

# 1) Think Christ. 2) Rethink Church

Colleagues,

We have two items for you this week.

First, yesterday was Ash Wednesday. Forty years and five days ago the late, great Robert W. Bertram graced a chapel service at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, with a stunning little homily entitled "[Pardon My Dying: A Sequel to Ash Wednesday.](#)" If you don't know it, click on the hyperlink in the previous sentence and read it now. It will take all of five minutes. I watched a study group of ten or so long-experienced saints read through it this past Tuesday. Along the way I heard some sharp intakes of breath. A tear or two glistened. At the end I saw faces shining with the look a person gets when he or she has just heard the promise of Christ as never before. No wonder those of us who know the piece well keep returning to it year after year. Shame on us if we let this week go by without passing the treasure along.

Speaking of passing the treasure to others, we bring you as today's Topic Two another installment in our series of the past several weeks on the general subject of mission. So far we've heard from Dick Gahl on books to read; from Paul Jaster on the mission of God as it unfolds in St. Mark; and from Peter Keyel on NFL football as a source for the kind of simile and metaphor that will help deliver the Gospel goods to American ears in 2012. Today's contributor is Pastor Mark Greenethaner of the Lutheran Church of Australia (hereafter LCA, not be to be confused with the ELCA predecessor of the same initials). Mark will argue that to appreciate how the Spirit is delivering the goods in his part of the world today one needs a more expansive

view of “church” than his Australian colleagues are in the habit of entertaining. I’m guessing his argument will find lots of sympathetic ears in America too, especially among those whose pastoral ministry unfolds in settings other than the standard organized congregation.

I might mention that Mark and I share a bit of history, both of us being sons of LCMS missionaries to Papua New Guinea who got shipped off to Lutheran boarding schools in Australia for our high school education. Mark opted to stay Down Under when high school was over. He received his theological and pastoral training at the LCA’s Luther Seminary in Adelaide. That was in the late ’70s. He has spent most of the time since serving in Lutheran schools as a teacher and chaplain, or in his distinctly Aussie way of putting it, as a “schools pastor.” His call these days is to full-time ministry at Good Shepherd Lutheran Primary School in Croyden, an eastern suburb of Melbourne.

By the way, were this a back-and-forth between Mark and me I’d want to press him further on what precisely God wants to see delivered to the secular people he works with in Croyden. That noted, I think you’ll appreciate his astute observations about things those folks in Croyden want a god-like somebody to say to them. It will be interesting to see how this matches up with observations my colleague Carol Braun will be making about spiritual yearnings at a private and largely secular academy in Staten Island. That too is in the pipeline.

Peace and Joy,  
Jerry Burce, for the editors

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For much of the past 17 years, through my involvement in schools ministry I have spent much of my time ministering to those who would be considered as “unchurched,” that is, with children and

their families who have either no significant links with the Church (of any denomination), or who have distant links with the Church that have grown inactive (for example, grandparents or parents who were actively involved in the Church at some stage). My experience of ministering to these people has indicated the following:

- Despite the well-documented fact that there has been an ongoing and significant decline in Sunday worship attendance and other church involvement in our Australian community, I do not think that people generally have dismissed the concept of God, nor dispensed with “grace,” “love one another,” “do good to one another,” and many other concepts which they would use to summarize “the Christian faith.” In fact, I have found students to be very receptive to the teaching of concepts which affirm and validate their own existence, and give them a strong sense of purpose in life.
- People have, on the other hand, dismissed their idea of “the Church” as a contemporary irrelevance and anachronism. To be more precise, they dismiss their conceptualization of the Church in this way. The “unchurched” do not really know what the Church is, but retain an image (or even caricature) of the Church as they “remember” it from the time of their grandparents.
- Such people “dismiss” the Church primarily out of ignorance, not as the result of a deliberate and considered response to the Gospel or to the ministry of the Church. In fact, it may be unfair even to say that they “dismiss” the Church; it may be more accurate to say that they simply have never engaged in thinking about the church, nor its message, nor its leadership, nor its membership. If someone says, “The Church is irrelevant!” it may be that this statement would be more accurately put

as, "I don't really know what the Church is, or how it works these days, or who is in it, and I wouldn't know if it is relevant or not, but I'm not about to say that I am ignorant when it comes to God, the Church, etc., and I am much more comfortable talking about the irrelevancy of the Church than about my own ignorance."

The Church itself has, in many respects, reinforced this sense of estrangement and non-engagement by its own structures and practices. For hundreds of years the Church has assumed an important relationship between itself and other social institutions—particularly the family, government, and, therefore, education and welfare. For hundreds of years the Church has assumed that Sunday morning worship has been appropriate as the key, optimal reference point for most of its ministry for the majority of its members. It could well be argued that these assumptions have been invalid in Australia for many, many years. But the lack of validity has been hidden for various reasons:

- The Australian Church showed significant numerical growth, even though society was changing, during the years of postwar migration.
- The focus on modern issues of race, feminism, globalization, ecology, Third World economics and the like has occupied the Church, as part of the society, in important and significant ways for the latter three decades of the 20th century, at the expense of understanding the impact of these years on common spirituality in our society, especially in relation to what we would consider core, fundamental concepts: e.g., creation, sin, grace, ecclesiology.
- The growth of the Roman Catholic Church in Australia through postwar migration meant a decline in the proportional significance of the Anglican Church, which

possibly masked a concurrent decline in the status of the Anglican Church as the “established” church in Australia.

- The Lutheran Church of Australia, in particular, during the time when the community as a whole was struggling with key social and ideological issues, was positively focusing its energy on the bringing together of the two former churches. It was a time of celebration and thanksgiving, with the strong perception of significant forward movement. The LCA continued a strong and confident overseas mission presence in Papua New Guinea as the highlands were opened following WWII. Furthermore, continuing high birth levels among Lutherans, and postwar migration of northern Europeans (even into the late 70s) suggested ongoing numerical growth. And the economy was booming!

In the past decade what may have been hidden has become very clear. Numerically, the church is not growing (at least not in terms of those who formally identify themselves with the public institution). Sunday is no longer considered a sacrosanct day in the community. Multicultural Australia no longer affords the Christian Church, nor its leaders, any superior status in the establishment. Rather, it openly challenges traditional Christian values and their importance to contemporary Australian society. I would suggest that Australians, at a number of levels, happily act in a fairly immature way with respect to the teachings of the Church, not as a well-considered, studied and debated response, but in a manner that demonstrates the antiauthoritarian and anti-institutional nature that is sometimes offered as a characteristic of the Australian psyche.

In summary, my experience suggests that Australians have big problems with the institution of the Church because

- they are a generation or two removed from it;

- they hold to some inaccurate caricatures based on a vague and distorted memory of the institution of several generations past;
- they have been disconnected from the pattern of life of the church by changes in culture and lifestyle across the whole Australian nation.

Furthermore, the Church has often confused criticism of its structures or practices with criticism of its fundamental doctrines.

I believe that the LCA's Mission At Home policy, together with changes in relation to the place of Lutheran Schools within the mission of the LCA, mark a significant turning point for the LCA. The Church now has committed itself, especially through its schools, to an intentional engagement with the "unchurched." We now recognize that our mission means going to people in the community rather than simply waiting for them to come to us.

I'll put this in another way. (Altogether too simply and crassly, for my comments here do not note the fact that God's Spirit, working through the means of grace, draws people into the Church, doing the hard work! Rather, I am examining the human form of involvement in this process.) Our traditional congregational model sees the congregation as the most accurate representation of a community of Christians. Its existence depends entirely on the voluntary contribution of like-minded people who share a common faith, tradition, and vision of worship, fellowship, service, etc. This like-mindedness and shared commitment is relatively easy to manage. The congregation establishes itself in a community, advertises its existence (sometimes merely with a notice board that gives service times), opens its doors, and waits for other like-minded Christians, or those who have a need and suspect that the congregation can help, or the curious, to come and join in. In a sense, ministry

is perceived as something that can be done to those who have come; mission is perceived as issuing an invitation.

Fundamental to this model of the church is an understanding of the nature of community which pictures the congregation at the centre of a village. Both the village and the congregation are perceived as fairly static institutions. People grow up within the village and within the congregation. There may be a few families that move out or in, but there are always a majority that keep things stable. This high level of stability means that there is a high degree of "ownership" of and commitment to the institution.

Of course, in the LCA the majority of congregations in the cities have used this village model quite successfully in establishing themselves, even in urban growth areas where a small core of families commit themselves to developing a congregation that may provide security and comfort in ministry as they move into a new area. In the short term, small numbers and a shared vision make for a congregational institution that is easy to manage and control, where it is relatively easy to develop consensus, and where there exists an ideal combination of the security of the old mixed with the excitement of the new adventure. There is a strong sense of mission just in the process of establishing a new location—whether or not significant numbers of new families are actually contacted in ministry. Even in a new location there is usually a transplanting of people and forms that provide the stability that makes the congregation feel comfortable and secure.

The reality of urban congregations these days is that although the congregational model is built on a sense of stability and continuity, the wider community is experiencing less and less stability and continuity. People are moving constantly. People are changing jobs constantly. People are even changing partners

and families constantly! There is less and less commitment to identifying with a particular institution for a long period of time.

Instead, people experience community in shorter grabs and are forced to carry with them anything they that value from their past communities, either by finding another community that allows them to hold on to what they have brought, or by developing a fairly personalized community of their own. (I suspect that some of the attraction of small-group ministry lies in this opportunity to create, even within a congregation, a higher level of stability and continuity.)

My experience of the Church active in schools has made the traditional congregational model seem grossly insufficient and inaccurate as a single representation of the nature of the corporate Church today. A community may not be easily and clearly defined as a Christian “church” or “congregational” community, and yet bear the hallmarks of the ministry of the Church. In a school, the initiative begins in offering ministry to the wider community—serving the common need of all families to educate, but linking that service with the specific proclamation and living out of the Gospel. The community may lack a common and consistent level of faith commitment among all who are part of the community and is more likely to be dependent on the common commitment of the community leadership (pastor/principal/teachers/other staff/some parents and children). Indeed, for many, the commitment of faith is likely to grow and develop within the community, rather than being brought into the community.

Contact with a school community is of course limited because students move up and out of such a community. It may be reasonable to suggest, however, that a family with three children, connected to a P-12 school, will experience a high



level of involvement with the school community for about 17 years. This is possibly longer than any of the family members will ever commit to any other community institution!

The lack of a homogenous faith experience and understanding brings with it some real difficulties in maintaining any institutional form. One cannot simply draw on the collective faith and traditions of the past as the foundation for worship, authority, or even doctrine! These must be learned, if important, or even left aside, if unimportant. Increasingly, the Church can no longer assume anything about those with whom it has contact in Australian society.

And I believe that many in the Australian community want to learn what the Bible says about them—even if they don't yet know that they want to learn this! They want to know that they

- exist, not as the end-product of chaos but by benevolent design;
- exist with purpose;
- live in a world which is good, and to be celebrated;
- are loved;
- are empowered to love others and make meaningful contributions to the lives of others;
- can make big mistakes and be forgiven;
- are created for an eternal, not fleeting, existence;
- belong!

The Church can no longer expect that, simply by building a church, advertising Sunday services, and welcoming anyone who comes along, they will eventually get a chance to teach these important things to the whole community. Rather, the Church has to go out into the community and teach this to people in the context of their everyday living. In years past, when the whole community was "Christian," the Church saw the separate activities of Sunday as informing the everyday activities of the

week. Now we have to take the Sunday activities into the everyday activities if we want these to be informed!

What kind of activities will allow the Church to achieve this goal?

- Schools! What better place to teach than in institutions set up to teach, and to practice what is taught in community!
- Tertiary chaplaincy. At the point where young people are engaged in moving from home dependency to independence, we need to have pastors/lay-chaplains walking with them!
- Hospital chaplaincy. The Church has to move to people in crisis, not expect them to move to us.
- Aged care. Not because there is a captive audience but because a focused community, access, and time suggest real ministry possibilities.
- Industrial chaplaincy. If, as a pastor, you live and work alongside people in any industry, you will have plenty of opportunity to proclaim, to teach, to care.
- Retail chaplaincy. I would love to see a pastor established, full-time, for a number of years, working with the staff of a shopping center.
- Welfare/employment/counseling Service. These are still places where people will “come in.”
- Cyber Church? It is probably too early to say, but within a few years use of the ‘www’ may well present one of the most durable opportunities for maintaining pastoral relationships.

Many other activities might be included in this list. The thing about all of them is that people do not have to make a conscious and deliberate decision to find the church, but can be given the opportunity to discover that the Church is interested and involved in the life of the world.

Pastor Mark Greenthamer (29 January 2004)