

“Church of Joy” theology—right here in St. Louis

Colleagues, The feature article on Religion in the St. Louis Post-Dispatch for Saturday May 10 carried this headline: SYNOD AIMS TO SPREAD FORMULA FOR SUCCESSFUL CHURCHES. Sub-head: “Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod [LCMS] is starting a program where growing churches will serve as mentors for static churches.”

Major mentor in the program is the LCMS flagship mega-church in St. Louis, whose five services each weekend now bring in thousands where once there were but hundreds. The pastor is quoted as crediting their success to our “postmodern worship.” Which is described thus: “multimedia presentations in the sanctuary underline sermons and Scripture readings. A ‘praise’ band leads the music.”

LCMS president Kieschnick himself initiated the project. He’s sent letters to 240 LCMS congregations that have shown “growth.” Each of them will be trained to mentor 4 additional congregations. Kieschnick’s senior assistant says: “It’s all very objective, based on statistics.” Statistics found the 240 growing parishes. Statistics will carry through—like this: “If the plan works, one-fifth of all LCMS congregations will get mentoring. Both the mentoring parishes and those mentored will be audited for growth.” Audited for growth.. Hmmm. As Luther says in the Small Catechism: “What does this mean?”

“Auditing” is a good word, literally “listening for.” Which then raises the question: What are you listening for? For growth? Why not listen, first of all, for FAITH, faith in the Gospel? Isn’t that what Christ himself was “listening for,” with his frequent words of commendation, “Great is thy faith!” There is

not a word here, of course, about the Gospel, or faith in that Gospel. Maybe you shouldn't expect Gospel-talk, faith-talk, in a secular newspaper. Yet the pastor of the St. Louis flagship church gets close to that subject when he says there's no "doctrinal aberration" here (I'm guessing he'd also call that "no Gospel aberration"), "we're just serving people who think traditional worship is boring." The formula is Missouri's 'same doctrine' in new wineskins. More about this below. Wouldn't it be something if LCMS "started a program where Gospel-grounded churches served as mentors for those that aren't?" Wouldn't it be something if the ELCA did that too? If all denominations did that?

I have never been on hand at this LCMS mega-church for worship. I need to do so. So I've never heard what kind of Gospel, what sort of "no doctrinal aberration" gets proclaimed there. [But you know that I'm suspicious. I wonder what sort of wine gets offered in those "postmodern" wineskins.] So I'll just stick to the Post-Dispatch article. The language coming from the LCMS headquarters in that story does not encourage. "It's all very objective, based on statistics."

Why didn't Jesus mention that in any of the "Mission Mandates" we have in the N.T. Gospels? There are three major ones: "Go and make disciples of all nations—baptizing . . . and teaching them what I have taught you." (Matthew) "That repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in My name to all nations." (Luke) "As the Father sent me, so send I you." (John)

In these primal mission axioms it's hard to find the LCMS one: "It's all very objective, based on statistics." Jesus seemsd not to know that the growth of the church, HIS body, was "all very objective, based on statistics." He did indicate that it might amount to a "little flock" and that "tribulation" might well be in the mix. But "poor statistics" was not one of them. Didn't he

even caveat a policy where “all folks speak well of you”? Not that he urged his ambassadors to be nasty. But the merchandise they were handling was bizarre. They were to invite folks to die—with Christ, of course—in order to live again. What are the statistical projections for such a venture? In any age? If the growth of the Body of Christ is “all very objective, based on statistics,” then Jesus’ own un-success does not fit the formula. He needed the mentoring that the LCMS program will provide.

Once more, this is not a pitch for un-success in mission outreach. Not reverse statistics: smaller is better. It’s urging outreach, while asking what are you offering in that outreached hand. Of course, I’m skeptical about what the LCMS offers “officially” with its outreached hand. Still within the memory of some of you readers (but not of others since it was 30 years ago) is the LCMS hand that reached out and pitched out of the LCMS 45 of us seminary professors. And the verdict was that the Gospel we were teaching was “not to be tolerated in the church of God, much less be excused and defended.” That verdict about “aberrant doctrine,” our intolerable Gospel, was never rescinded. In church politics it’s hard to envision how that might ever happen.

Yet checking for aberrant Gospels is very worth doing. Comes on recommendation from The Chief Himself. And the first one to check is the one you are promoting. Missouri excels in measuring the Gospels of other folks—and “other Gospels” do indeed abound. Their name is legion. But that’s also true in Missouri, as we’ve seen these past months in the LCMS brouhaha about “praying with pagans.” Although the alleged villain has now been juridically vindicated, the alligators are not stopping. So which Gospel, whose Gospel, is the errorless one and which one is “aberrant?” It’s a very intra-Missouri question. And everywhere else too—in all the churches.

Missouri's "objective statistics" program is bad enough, but adding salt to the wounds is the information in the news story about who is paying for this. Guess. It's THRIVENT, the newly merged fraternal insurance company created from the earlier Aid Association for Lutherans and Lutheran Brotherhood, the former "mostly Missouri," the other "mostly those other Lutherans."

Guess what the price tag is. Four Hundred Thousand Dollars! 400K! Marie and I now have three policies in that outfit! So our nickel or dime is bankrolling this LCMS venture into new wineskins with no evident concern for the wine! We're thinking about pulling our money out. Other thoughtful policy-holders might think about it. To us it's a case of putting your money where your Gospel is—and not putting it where the Gospel ain't.

Yet it's not just "them" in the LCMS. It's also us, the ELCA crowd.

We've got "mega-church-itis" too. Remember that "-itis" = infection. It's here in our ELCA congregations in St. Louis too, though none of ours is anywhere near as mega as the LCMS flagship one. In ELCA congregations, too, "static" is the status quo. Numbers are not increasing. Many of us are "running scared." It's a matter of survival.

The LCMS formula in that news story is what some ELCA congregations around here are following too. We ELCA-ers regularly distance ourselves from the LCMS, especially from its gosh-awful claim to be "THE true church." Despite that, we're joining them where it counts, where the rubber hits the road. We too want to "grow" our congregations—as the new lingo puts it—"all very objective, based on statistics." For us too, Wine-testing—checking for THE Gospel—in all this gets precious little attention. It's a given, taken for granted. "Of course, we're OK on the Gospel. No problem there. Why do you even raise the

question?”

So “Lord, increase our faith” is not prominently prayed. It’s
“Lord, grow our church.”

More about our local ELCA infection next time—a case study.

Peace and Joy!

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