

Mission Theology for New Congregations

Colleagues,

Fifty years ago this fall I entered a classroom at Valparaiso University on the teacher-side of the desk for the first time ever. This fall, a half-century later, our local Lutheran School of Theology, an agency of the St. Louis Metro Coalition of Lutheran Congregations, asked me to try it again. But this time I didn't need a lesson plan, didn't even need to prepare for class. It's a piece of cake called "Conversations with Ed Schroeder." Five sessions. Thursday mornings. A handful of folks actually registered – an ecumenical mix of Methodist, Lutheran and Roman Catholic conversationalists, half of them church-workers, half of them "world-workers." They set the agenda. We talk.

One item for considerable conversation last week was Mission Theology for New Congregations. Topic-proposer was Pastor Robert Downs, ELCA "mission developer" a few miles east of St. Louis at Highland, Illinois. Conversation was so lively, and Bob so articulate, that I asked him to write up the discussion, add some more, if he wished, ship it to me so I could pass it on to you. He agreed to do so. Here it is.

Peace and joy!

Ed Schroeder

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Recently I read an article by Sally Morgenthaler entitled "Worship as Evangelism" dated September 4, 2007. I don't know Sally, but she apparently is a church leader who has promoted contemporary worship as an evangelism tool and ran a website named Sacramentis for this purpose. But she has grown uneasy with her experience of what has happened in churches that have used contemporary worship – particularly mega-churches. She claims it has created a sub-culture of "worship-driven churches" that promotes a self-absorbed narcissistic kind of Christianity that avoids the hard work of a more authentic kind of Christianity.

She goes on to cite many statistics that show that worship-driven churches really do not reach the unchurched, as many believe, but are actually reaching the presently churched – mostly disgruntled people from dwindling mainline denominations.

She also wrote about how the mega-church contemporary worship model for church planting had peaked around 1998. As she put it: "Contemporary church plants that hadn't reached critical mass (300 to 400) by the end of the '90s were in deep trouble." People have become wary/weary of the slick church starts with catchy logos, contemporary worship, and portable churches meeting in schools and strip malls. The heyday of that model of church planting is over.

She shows that already established mega-churches (which are still growing in numbers exponentially) are most successful in the Bible belt region of the US and that their success is due

largely to the high quality and great variety of programs they offer to church shoppers. She goes on to cite statistics that show that the number of people attending worship in America continues to decline, even in spite of some growing mega-churches and that mega-churches are not successful in reaching the unchurched.

She also cited the 2003 film "Saved" – an exaggerated satire of the whole phenomenon she is despairing – as an example that depicts much of the hypocrisy of this brand of Christianity. She also cites a long quote from an un-churched journalist who attended a mega-church worship service in which nothing positive was said about the experience. The point of this quote seemed to be that mega-church contemporary worship is contrived, theologically weak, emotionally flat, and aesthetically pallid.

Her conclusion is that the best way to reach the unchurched is to get out of church buildings and away from the worship services altogether and do some form of ministry where the people are at in the world. She fails to explain to the reader what this may be. She dismisses completely the whole idea of reaching the unchurched through worship services – of any kind/style/variety – but especially contemporary worship.

She concludes her article with the words:

"I am currently headed further outside my comfort zones than I ever thought I could go. I am taking time for the preacher to heal herself. As I exit the world of corporate worship, I want to offer this hope and prayer. May you, as leader of your congregation, have the courage to leave the "if we build it, they will come" world of the last two decades behind. May you and the Christ-followers you serve become worshippers who can raise the bar of authenticity, as well as your hands. And

may you be reminiscent of Isaiah, who, having glimpsed the hem of God's garment and felt the cleansing fire of grace on his lips, cried, 'Here am I, send me.'"

As I reflected on this article, it seemed to me that Sally is a woman who has discovered that her god was made out of wood. There are no silver bullets or magic pills in evangelism – and to think that contemporary worship will save the church or save anything else for that matter is rather naive. The question is whether it is sometimes helpful. I believe it can be, in limited ways.

I know that in the 23 years I served as a pastor of three traditional Lutheran congregations, I could probably write an equally scathing and depressing critique of the hypocrisy that went on. Instead of the "worship-driven church" I could write about the "family-driven church" or the "clique-driven church" or worst of all, the "budget-driven church." There were many self-absorbed, disconnected, and smug folks who enjoyed traditional liturgies as they did fine wines and who boasted at being a friendly church, just so long as you agreed with most of their opinions – about everything. I've seen how evangelism was considered more as a practical way of increasing revenue than as the mission of bringing the gospel to those who haven't heard it. People are money and money is good because it takes money to run a church – it's as simple as that. And then, in the midst of all this hypocrisy, there were always some genuine saints.

The mega-church dilemma described in this article simply sounds like the church got sucked into the powerful vortex of American consumerism. The mission congregation I am attempting to start, Living Waters, is too small to even be a player in that game – although it is sometimes tempting to want to become a player in

such a game! To become a big church, with big money, big crowds, big productions, a big building, big everything – a great big success – with me as the glorious leader – a big shot. Yes, to become a player in the world of big Christianity is always a temptation. But quite frankly, I’m getting a little too old for all that and I don’t think my heart could take the stress that would be involved.

I think the article is correct in pointing out that people are wary of the church. At least, in my brief experience as a Mission Developer, I have gotten the feeling that many people are wary of a new church start.

Sometimes, as a mission developer, I feel like I’m supposed to create something “different.” And that I need to tell people: “Living Waters is different… it’s unique… it’s not like what you’ve experienced in the past. Living Waters is authentic – we’re the real thing.” To which they will reply (if Sally Morgenthaler’s insights are correct): “That’s what they all say.”

In a world where being different is the same, where creativity is old hat, where relevance is irrelevant, where new is old, where everything has been said before and nothing works, and where our best ideas are never good enough – I suppose you might wind up praying a prayer like the one Sally Morgenthaler wrote at the conclusion of her article – hoping beyond the hopelessness of it all. Like Isaiah’s vision in the temple, praying: “Here am I, send me” with the same resignation as a kamikaze pilot. (Sorry, but I think her retreat into mysticism at the conclusion was a little overstated).

When it comes to worship style, I don’t believe chanting the liturgy and wearing vestments will help Living Waters share the promises of God any more effectively than singing contemporary

Christians songs – if I did, I'd go Gregorian in a heartbeat. Also, I don't believe contemporary worship songs are vastly more effective than traditional songs and liturgies either. What I do believe is that no matter what style of worship we pursue, there will always be hypocrisy – not because of the worship style but because of sinful human nature. Bongos and guitars will not save us from this. Neither will pipe organs and Bach chorales.

I believe Jesus summarized it best when he taught:

“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven. On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many deeds of power in your name?’ Then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; go away from me, you evildoer

On a more hopeful note, Jesus also taught:

“I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.” John 15:1-5

I can sympathize with Sally's anguish over church decline (I feel the same anguish – that's why I became a developer in the first place) and I have no reason to doubt the statistics she

has put together. I don't even find myself at odds with some of the caustic characterizations of mega-church contemporary worship that she described; however, I still think some form of corporate worship is essential even in a mission start. The promises of God must be heard and received in order to be lived and applied; and you can't send people out unless you gather them in. How else will we find the courage to go out into this world of pleasure and pain – of plenty and want – and make any real difference?

I have been using mostly contemporary music at Living Waters for many reasons (some better than others). Here are the reasons:

- 1. Because everyone advised that this is what would work in a new church start.*
- 2. Because, in the congregation I served prior to accepting a call as a developer, our contemporary worship service did attract some new people.*
- 3. Because contemporary worship does not require people to learn how to reenact the Middle Ages in order to participate.*
- 4. Because I believe most people do not get much meaning out of the very meaning-filled hymns that are in traditional Lutheran hymnals (they are too busy just trying to figure out the unfamiliar melodies and strange harmonies).*
- 5. I thought by doing something different, we might accomplish something different (but Sally has made it clear that what I'm doing is not different at all).*

(Note: I have recently added some more traditional songs to our worship gatherings). But I do what I do out of the freedom that comes from the gospel. If I find better reasons for anything at Living Waters – including song selections and worship style – I'm willing to change. I'm just not willing to scrap worship

services altogether.

So far, Living Waters is too small to develop its own subculture – “worship-driven” or anything else – we’re just driven and trying to find a way to break through to people with the Good News of Jesus Christ. It is not easy and some of the signs of burnout are already present in our small group. Some days I need to remind myself of what God promised: “For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.” Isaiah 55:10-11