

Pastor in a Country Church

Colleagues,

Today's posting is a book review. It's Richard Lischer's book about his pastorate in a Lutheran country church not far from us in St. Louis. Such a rural congregation was the church of my childhood, 200 miles farther north on the Illinois side of the Mississippi River. So I connect to the story of New Cana in more ways than one. ["New Cana" is not to be found on any Illinois map, but we think we've divined its real name.] I've not yet read the book, but I sure intend to. Today's reviewer, Canadian Wayne Holst, brought it to my attention. Now I bring it to yours. Peace & Joy!
Ed Schroeder

OPEN SECRETS: A Spiritual Journey Through a Country Church,
by Richard Lischer. Doubleday: New York, NY. 2001.
239 pages.
\$22.95 US. \$32.95 Cdn. Paper cover. ISBN
#0-385-50217-6.

Reviewed by: Wayne A. Holst

When Richard Lischer saw the community that was to be his first parish—New Cana, Illinois near Alton and across the Mississippi River from St. Louis—the sight reminded him of nothing he had ever seen or imagined. It lacked the traditional accessories that made a town picturesque. The entire landscape of fields and farms had faded badly in the late fall. Its bleached

stillness recalled scenes from an Ingmar Bergman movie: Swedish winterlight exposing rot and depression in rural Lutherans.

He saw no signs of life around the church or parsonage. The house looked about fifty years old and there was nothing fine about it. He could see nothing fine about the church either. The building sported a peeling cupola and a steeple with a copper cross from which one arm was mysteriously missing.

Lischer was struck by the irrelevance of the scene. A few years earlier he, with his seminarian friends, had reveled in the social and religious ferment of the 1960s; never tiring of posing as progressives and announcing like JFK that they wanted to 'make a difference'. Harvey Cox's book 'The Secular City' had reminded this generation of young pastors-in-training that there was a secular world out there yearning to be liberated from religious superstition, and theological activists like they were would be the agents of redemption. Two minutes in this place was a clarifying experience. The spiritual heroics of the secular city had passed him by.

Lischer was a confused young man. With a brand new theological doctorate in hand, he had mapped out a distinguished career for himself; a cutting-edge pastoral call to a socially conscious but not unaffluent congregation. From there it would be a professorship in the flagship Lutheran seminary; a presidency in that seminary and, why not, of the whole church body! He bitterly resented the bureaucracies that had misfiled his gifts and misjudged obvious promise by placing him in rural confinement.

Thus began Lischer's ordination into the holy ministry of the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod, thirty years ago.

After a decade and a half of education in church schools this pastor remained proud of his Lutheran heritage, even if a piece

of it had been discretely repressed and a certain shame over its founder's American exploits had been sublimated into mission crusades, family feuds and interminable quests for 'pure doctrine'.

Lischer's branch of Lutheranism separated itself not only from other Christians but from other Lutherans. They refused to receive communion with Norwegian, Swedish and Finnish coreligionists. They remained resident aliens long after the English, Scots and Swedes had acclimatised to the situation and taken over the city halls and public squares of the Midwest.

In that ethos, to be a pastor was the most noble thing one could do with one's life. The word 'pastor' means 'shepherd'. In the German vernacular 'Herr Pastor' meant leader, boss and beloved dictator. Lischer never doubted there was some unique purpose for his life. God had made a special covenant with him while attending prep school in Milwaukee and he drew a particular courage from that promise. "The quiet clarity of that moment as a call...I accepted...and have never doubted for the rest of my life."

Education in the school system through seminary taught Lischer to speak the System's language. However, he says, it did not disclose the language that "speaks us" by possessing our spirit and shaping us as human beings. The spirituality imparted was the safe spirituality of structure but not of passion or abandonment.

One seminary professor seemed to stand out. Theologian Bob Bertram was "as orthodox as they come, but, unlike my prep school teachers, he had a big picture of the world. He held the tradition up to the light, like a jeweller who patiently turns a stone until it yields its greatest brilliance."

By the mid-1960's the seminary faculty and many of the students

were in rebellion against the aridity of religious orthodoxy. A new spirit – and an inevitable split – was moving through the church. By the time it was all over, everything had changed.

“The endless year of our education had opened a breach between the naive religious faith with which my classmates and I had entered the System and the even more naive secular faith with which we exited it,” Lischer says. He and some of his friends accepted assignments like the Cana church because eight years of theological education had rendered them uncertain of their identity. After years of grooming they were no longer sure what it meant to be a pastor. As reluctant voyageurs, they had neither the imagination nor the courage to jump ship.

So this was the author’s journey into ministry. ‘Open Secrets’ provides the reader with a series of vignettes about growth experiences, often uncomfortable and seldom without some mishap. After a few weeks of preaching – this time to ordinary farm folk, not academic colleagues; and he considered himself a good preacher – he realized he needed a new education. He had tried to disclose a God revealed in the arts and great literature. “Why couldn’t I see the revelation of God in our little church?” he states with pained hindsight. It took him some time to improve as a preacher in that setting but he eventually learned to be more ‘interactive’.

Some of the best parts of the book reveal the author’s love for his people, in spite of certain barriers that existed between them. Lischer reflects on the meaning of gossip in a small community. He also tells of significant encounters with those whose worlds were considerably different from his own. It is to his credit that he shares both his personal triumphs and tragedies.

He speaks of how his marriage suffered because of his excessive

commitment to parish duties with little time invested in spouse and children. He remembers several counselling successes, through which he was able to draw persons into the faith community. He also reports of several notable failures when, resorting to pastoral arrogance, he drove people away. Lischer summarizes this section by quoting the wisdom of a senior pastoral associate: "We have made faith into a work of the mind...what really matters is how we live with one another in the church. The real subject matter of Christianity is not a set of truths but the whole checkerboard of our lives taken as a whole."

Plain speaking is a trademark of rural people and there are many examples of it to be found here. The author's closest parish friend Leonard tells him he'd led a rather sheltered life. Another parishioner declares: "Pastor...you couldn't accept us as we are. No, you had plans for us."

After almost three years, Lischer received a 'peaceful release' and accepted a call to a church in Virginia. The one hundred and twenty-fifth anniversary celebration at New Cana was also the occasion of his farewell sermon. As part of the festivities, the cross was repaired. The cause of decay was found to be dry rot.

'Open Secrets' exposes events and motives that have often been kept under wraps because, as Lischer says "privacy is a smoke screen for a therapeutic model of ministry." The author believes that airing, not hiding problems – be they personal or institutional – is the better way to true healing.

Sometimes Lischer comes across as overly candid; almost exhibitionist. Certain aspects of a church's life are best kept unreported it seems to this reviewer. On the other hand, the author has evolved as a professor and a good many years

separate him from those early experiences and his current work at Duke University Divinity School, Durham, North Carolina.

What comes through the lines, and periodically between them, is the stoic nobility of many parishioners whose lives appear on the surface to be quite provincial and unexciting. This book will appeal to pastors and laity of many denominational traditions because, in the end, New Cana is not that much different from most any other 'first parish'.

Reviewer's Bio: Rev. Dr. Wayne A. Holst was a Lutheran pastor, missionary and church administrator for more than twenty years and is now a writer and instructor in religion and culture at the University of Calgary. He is a member of St. David's United Church in that city.