



Healthy congregations accept differences

By Bishop Lawrence Wohlrabe

Perhaps you've seen these *Signs of a Healthy Church* in a church newsletter:

- People are constantly expressing disagreement, and they do it right out in the open.
- New groups keep cropping up and bumping into each other over schedules and competing over volunteers.
- The kids are noisy and all over the place, including during worship.
- The hymnals are wearing out, the coffee hour is crowded and noisy, and the electric bill is over budget.

This is the first in a year-long series on **the marks of a healthy congregation**.

Is that how you'd describe a *healthy* church? Most of us want our congregation to be safe, secure, serene. A good annual meeting is short and sweet—without any tensions or disagreements. “No problems here,” we say. “We never have any differences of opinion.”

But does that really describe congregational health? No! A church without differences of opinion has probably lost its passion for the gospel. A congregation that never has squabbles may well be a community whose zeal for Christ's mission has been slowly extinguished.

Peter Steinke, a pastor and counselor who has studied how congregations are like family systems, declares that the first mark of a healthy congregation is not the absence of differences, but rather **the ability to accept differences**. In a healthy church people constantly express disagreement, and they do it right out in the open—without allowing their differences to separate them from one another.

The Book of Acts and Paul's epistles (especially the letters to the Corinthians) hint that from right from the start Christians have had differences with one another—differences expressed rather openly. How should we care for our widows? How can we best welcome and receive the gifts of Gentiles, slaves, women and other marginalized folks? What's the proper way to worship and celebrate the Lord's Supper?

Sometimes our differences concern central matters of faith. The gospel itself may be imperiled. Mostly, our differences have to do with lesser things—and we can too easily get drawn into destructive, distracting conflict.

Pete Steinke urges us to reflect on the *source* of our differences with one another. He believes that many of our

differences arise because of the tension between our need for *separateness* and our need for *closeness*. We're always trying to balance these needs in our life in the church. We need to identify ourselves, to be clear on what makes us unique wondrous creatures of God (separateness). But we also need to be in relationship with one another as God's children (closeness).

When a healthy congregation accepts differences,

- Church members don't paper over or smooth off the differences that are there.
- Disciples recognize how the natural tension between our needs for separateness and our needs for closeness bring differences to the surface.
- In times of disagreement, persons speak for themselves—openly, directly and respectfully. They define themselves while remaining connected to all their brothers and sisters in Christ.
- Church members understand anxiety. They find ways to respond thoughtfully rather than simply reacting automatically when anxiety rears its head.

The first mark of a healthy church is that **people are constantly expressing disagreement, and they do it right out in the open**. But what else would you expect from a community whose life is centered in the reconciling Cross and future-opening Resurrection of Jesus the Christ?

Some questions for reflection and discussion:

- How does your congregation deal with differences?
- Think of someone you know who is good at dealing patiently and creatively with anxiety. What does this person do to help keep anxiety in check?
- What could you do to help your congregation grow in its ability to accept differences?

About Our Synod

The Northwestern Minnesota Synod is a geographical designation and a Church arrangement for carrying out the Church's mission. We are part of Region 3 of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

Connections is a publication of the Northwestern Minnesota Synod, ELCA designed for congregational use. For more information, contact the synod office:
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