



Northwestern Minnesota Synod

Connections



Connecting the Congregational, Synodical, and Churchwide Expressions of the ELCA

In Healthy Congregations people respond graciously and truthfully

“And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth.... The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.”* John 1:14, 17

The newborn Jesus, the Word-made-flesh, enlightens us with God’s great gifts of grace and truth. Grace and truth don’t merely **enlighten** us, though. They also—literally—**lighten** us, reduce our burdens, permitting us to “travel lightly” in this world. Without grace and truth, we are weighed down, heavy, lead-footed, stuck.

This is the 10th of an 11-part series on the marks of healthy congregations. Bishop Larry encourages congregation councils or other parish leadership groups to use these articles for their opening devotions.

Grace Lightens the Load

Without Jesus’ grace in our lives, we are dragged down by sin—our sin and the sins of others who have done us wrong. We know what this means for our individual lives. If we are unable or unwilling to forgive someone else it is (as a pastor friend put it recently) “like *you* taking some poison, in the hope that it will kill *the offender* who has hurt you.”

But what does this mean for a whole congregation? What if a whole community of faith is not “lightened” by the grace of Jesus Christ? What does that look like?

It looks like a community weighed down by grudges, stalled by resentments and obsessed with keeping score. Certain ideas or topics are deemed “off limits.” This sort of condition is truly “heavy” for a community, so burdensome that a congregation can grind to a halt in following Christ and doing God’s work.

A former colleague in synodical ministry once put it this way: “I wonder if the folks in that congregation are actually using the *Brief Order for Confession and Forgiveness* during Sunday worship. To listen to how they’re at each others’ throats, you’d think that sins hadn’t been forgiven around there for years!”

Sound familiar? When folks in congregations are not living in the gracious forgiveness of Jesus Christ, everything goes sour. Well-laid plans and good intentions are ineffectual. The reason is that when we aren’t regularly for-

giving one another, we are cutting ourselves off from God’s future. Martin Luther wasn’t kidding when he wrote in the catechism: “For where there is forgiveness of sins, there is also life and salvation.” We have a future together—“life and salvation!”—when we walk in the forgiving grace of Christ.

Truth Unburdens Us

Walking lightly in God’s grace, we also are willing to face the truth. Truth-telling is another weight-reducing practice in the community of Christ. Failing to be truthful in all things introduces another layer of “weight” in our common life.

It’s not just that occasionally church-folk tell fibs or even whoppers. It’s that we also like to “shave” the truth, hold back some knowledge, or cultivate secrets. A congregation will be weighed down to the degree that it allows clandestine meetings, permits some to be insiders and others to be outsiders, or fosters a cult of secrecy.

Peter Steinke suggests that such “heaviness” shows up when a congregation

- Values a rigid hierarchy, with lots of power at the top;
- Tries to “manage” or “spin” the truth;
- Puts on a “happy face” religiosity or a cozy unanimity; or
- Has a history of punishing or shunning truth-tellers.

A congregation that lives in the grace and truth of Jesus Christ will insist that all its members learn the gentle art of “speaking the truth in love.” Perhaps no text is more helpful than Jesus’ method (Matthew 18:15-22) for bringing “grace and truth” to bear in the web of relationships that make up a congregation. In short, if a congregation is so weighed down that things have ground to a halt, it’s probably time to cultivate both **truth** (“speak directly with one another”) and **grace** (“win back your brother or sister”).

- Recall and share with others a time in your life when forgiving someone re-opened the future for you.
- Where in your congregation’s life are you experiencing the “weight” of sin, holding you back from fearlessly following Jesus?
- What issue is most difficult to talk about in your congregation? How might truth-telling in this area “lighten the load” in your congregation?

Bishop Larry Wohlrabe



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