



Northwestern Minnesota Synod

Connections



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

Healthy congregations accept differences

By Bishop Lawrence Wohlrabe

“I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me.” Philippians 4:12-13

During 12 years of service on the staff of a neighboring synod I witnessed congregations that endured catastrophic losses. I think of the rural Grove City congregation whose building was destroyed by fire in the early 1990s. I recall the two Comfrey congregations whose buildings were severely damaged by an “F-5” tornado a decade ago.

This is the second in a series of articles on the marks of healthy congregations. Bishop Larry encourages congregation councils or other parish leadership groups to use these articles for their opening devotions.

Either of these parishes could have tossed in the towel. But instead both rebounded from tragedy and wound up in a better place. The Grove City folks invested their insurance settlement in forming (along with two other small congregations) a new, merged congregation that continues to thrive. And in Comfrey, the two congregations joined forces, replacing their two aged, inaccessible buildings with one modern mission center.

In both instances, tragic loss led to congregations being renewed in God’s mission. Why? Because these congregations focused on their strengths. They kept their eyes peeled, not on what they had lost, but on what they still had. They acted in the confidence that, with God’s help, their assets always outweighed their liabilities.

Peter Steinke, a Lutheran pastor and counselor, puts it this way: “When a congregation focuses on strength, it will look to the future and increase the potential for change or renewal. Focusing on strengths, a congregation will

- Look at options
- Take stock of resources
- Seek out support

- Ask a variety of questions
- Affirm the ability to reach goals
- Make clear, thoughtful decisions.

We’ve all seen individuals and groups that fail to follow this path. Congregations can become obsessed by what they don’t have or have lost. They can start to see themselves as weak, ineffective, unlikely to flourish—and soon, their assessment becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. Like Winnie the Pooh’s glum friend, Eeyore, their favorite song is: “Always look on the dark side of life.”

The Apostle Paul, however, knew the deeper truth of the matter when he wrote to the Philippian church about how he could “do all things in [Christ] who strengthens me.” It’s as if Paul were reminding us that we and God always are a majority.

As congregations focus on their strengths rather than their weaknesses, several wondrous things start to happen:

- They see themselves as flexible, not brittle—able to **learn** something from each new situation
- They are able to **reorient and reorganize** themselves after experiencing a significant loss
- They live in God’s grace—**exhibiting graciousness** in their dealings with one another and with those outside their church.

Leaders—pastors, staff, officers, council members—set a mood and tone that says, “God has given us everything we need to be about God’s mission.” Their confidence is catching. As Dr. Steinke likes to say, “Morale always flows down.”

Questions for reflection and discussion

1. Think back over the history of your congregation. When did a time of grief or loss lead to renewal in God’s mission?
2. What strengths or assets do you see in your congregation? How are you building on these strengths? What assets could be utilized even better?
3. Recall a leader you have known whose confidence was catching. What effect did this leader have on the congregation or organization he/she served?

The Northwestern Minnesota Synod

901 8th St. S. Moorhead, MN 56562

218-299-3019 800-452-3692 www.nwmnsynod.org

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