

## **Church Fantasies**

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Earlier this year I went on vacation and I took the opportunity to visit a place I'd never been, Synod Sixty-Six in Region Ten. I attended three very interesting congregations, and I'd like to tell you about them.

### **Disciples Lutheran**

The first Sunday I attended Disciples Lutheran. This is a large, growing, congregation. The building included a sanctuary and an education wing, both easily identified from the parking lot. The building was clean and tidy, but plain. The location was off the beaten path a bit, probably to lower costs.

Once I got ushered to my seat, I began to look over the bulletin. That usually takes about 30 seconds, but something was different about this one. The description of the service was quite short, listing only the parts that changed each week. Most of the bulletin was taken up with meditations on how to live as a Christian in the world, inspirational quotes and some very beautiful Christian images. The back page was titled "Orientation to Disciple's Lutheran." In a series of bulleted points it explained that the mission of this congregation was not to have programs at the church, but to help its members live out their vocation in daily life during the rest of the week. Members were expected to spend two hours a week at the church, one for worship and one for education. Leaders were asked for an additional two hours a week; more than that, and the church had to pay you for your time. If a group wanted to meet during the

week, they could, but the congregation made no effort to organize midweek programming other than to match times and interests of its members. It also said that each member was expected to tithe, or to have a plan to work toward it. "We ask that you give 5% of your income to this congregation, and another 5% percent to be given as you wish, to the congregation or other causes." There was also a brief summary of the congregation's budget, indicating that they gave 20% of their income to the synod and ELCA, and another 20% to other missions and charities locally, nationally and internationally.

After worship I cornered a couple of members and asked about all this. Were they serious about tithing? "Oh, yes," one said, "why you're not even permitted to be on the council or to chair a committee unless you've made it to 10%." I looked astonished, doesn't that cause a lot of resentment for being exclusive? "Just the opposite," another said, "it cuts down on conflict. I can't remember when we've had a real argument or conflict. Those were always started by people who never gave anything, anyway. And if they can't stir up the council, they don't even try."

What's this about two hours for leaders? "Well, Worship and Education is two hours plus two on leadership is four, and four is 10% of 40, so that is sort of tithing your work time. The two hours for leaders are also mostly on Sunday. The council and committees meet for 30 minutes each Sunday over lunch - they rotate topics so in a month they get to everything. No exhausting two hour meetings that make everyone mad."

The other piped up, "you probably don't know about this. We have a rule; the pastor can't do any administration. His job is to be a spiritual leader, not run sign up lists and call volunteers."

“Yes,” the other said, “We call it the anti-job description. Says the pastors must spend at least 90% of their time on preaching, leading worship, teaching and being with people as they do their vocation. We use volunteers and part time staff for everything else. This way the pastors and worship staff have time to really dig in to how to be Christian in the world and we get inspirational worship and great teaching that we can really use every single week. Makes it worthwhile to come to church.”

What about this ‘no church run programs’ I asked.

“Any one can organize a group on any aspect of dealing with their ministry in daily life, a pastor often comes, but he can’t administer the group.”

“The pastor has to be free to listen, to study, coach and teach and you can’t do that if you’re trying to promote and lead the group at the same time.”

“Besides, the pastors need time to visit people and learn about their vocational issues, and they can’t do that if they have to be doing paperwork and programs just to have programs.”

Based on something one person implied, I asked what other parishes thought of Disciples. "They don't like us a bit, claim we steal all their good members." When this was said, another person rolled their eyes.

"I guess I'm one of those," he said. "The truth is we wanted to do more at that other church, but people resented that we were always out in front. We tried to talk about tithing, but people thought we were bragging. Even the pastor told us we had to understand that people were pushed these days. So we came here where we can talk seriously about following in Christ's way."

Later I talked to the senior pastor. I wondered if they were doing any service ministry, or

were they just focused inward. I expected a list of activities like doing web sites for non-profits, or going into to the inner city to work soup kitchens. The pastor gave me a surprising answer. "Not all our members are in management, we've actually got a real diversity. But our members are often making decisions about hiring people, training and promoting people. We have police, lawyers, a judge, social workers, psychologists, you name it. Our members decide on books the city library buys, we're at the hospital, the symphony, museum, social service organizations, the school district and we teach at every level. Our members work for the government, lobby the government, and report on the government for the media. Of course, many work in corporations. Many are in positions that work with the public, answer questions, help people. Then there are the neighborhoods each member lives in – to say nothing of their own families!

“Each day our members make a thousand decisions about treating people fairly and using Christian principals in their decisions. Every day the gospel message of facing sin, repentanting, forgiving, starting anew is lived out. Each day they have opportunities to try to take the lead in solving conflicts peacefully, and to build up. Each day they witness to the world that there is more to life than just the bottom line. In the course of a normal week our members are faced with every significant social issue there is. They come here on Sunday to recover spiritually from the bruising they take as they live their vocation in the world, to learn how to be a witness more effectively, and to support each other. Our mission occurs in the actual lives of our members. We think that in sum, we are having a tremendous effect on the institutions, companies, neighborhoods and families of this city. We're the leaven. Serving soup once a month is good ministry, but so is what we do.”

## **New Hope Lutheran**

The next week I went into the city to attend New Hope Lutheran. This congregation operates out of a bar. They have service Friday evening at 8. The worship is a sort of free-flowing affair. A band, whose members change from week to week, plays whatever their skills support, one week its blues, the next rock, the next country. The pastor pays some attention to the season of the lectionary, but picks texts more in accord with the mood on the street and the ebb and flow of lives. It appeared that worship planning was being done as the service progressed. The pastor had a sermon, at least in plan, but he got interrupted by questions and comments from the congregation and was clearly adapting to what he was hearing. The prayers went on for a long time, and was punctuated by conversation among the members as one would explain to the others what they needed to pray for, and others would ask questions.

After worship, I stood and waited for him to finish talking to someone who was apparently a newcomer. As the pastor took his vestments off, he continued listening to the man. Taking him by the arm, he brought him over to a large, balding guy wearing a t-shirt and a leather vest. After a brief conversation he left the visitor there and came to me. "Guy needs help with alcohol, he knows he's an alcoholic," the minister said. And the other guy, I asked? "The biker? He's been through all that." I watched the pair. The biker was talking vigorously, waving his hands, shaking his finger at the man, thumping his hand on a big leather-covered Bible. He put his arm on the shoulder of the newcomer and it was not a gentle grip.

"Tough love?" I asked.

"The only kind that works," the pastor said, "it's what God uses on us. Would have been so much easier if God told us we were OK."

I explained my interest in these different parishes. We got to talking. The pastor told me that his week basically consisted of drinking beer in the bar with a cell phone at his side. He had a regular table near the back. Word had gone around that if you wanted to talk over your problems and be listened to, you should show at this bar. The pastor used the cell phone to make connections with various social service organizations. And the bar owner approves of this? I said. "He figures he's making money on it three ways. He gets more customers and they buy food while they're waiting to talk to me. His problem customers get calmed down, and the police like it also."

"The police?"

"They have problems too, and I've spent time counseling them as well. So the free beer the owner gives me pays off, he thinks."

What does the synod discipline committee think of a pastor taking free beer, in a bar, as part of the job?

The pastor's answer was basically unprintable. It's content was that Jesus would have the same problem. "I don't drink that much beer, one lasts hours. The sick need the doctor, and where would we be if ambulances wouldn't go to patients because they were too sick?"

I told him that I noticed they seemed to offer communion every week. "Does that really appeal to people on the street?"

"Once they understood Communion was taking a meal with Jesus, it probably meant more to them. I use the 'family of Christ' as much as 'the body of Christ.' Their families are pretty messy for the most part, so yea, it appeals. I don't know why we think the actual Christian message won't appeal to broken people. And as for being Lutheran? I had a seminary prof once

say that 'you had to have failed at something before you can appreciate Lutheranism'." The pastor spread his arms to indicate his flock and smiled.

I wondered if the pastor was one of these getting by with no pension and a minimum salary, but he said he was almost at guidelines. "We don't spend all our money on the building, the parking lot, insurance, supplies, the overhead projector, the van, the organ and all those things that most parishes spend all their money on. We have enough."

We talked about the relations to the synod. Apparently, church officials try to be supportive, but the inability of this parish to fill out forms is sometimes a problem. The annual report is pretty much a work of fiction. That and all of the "benevolence" is done "off the books." "If someone's got a problem and needs money, I just talk about it during the service. People open their wallets and we gather cash, and we give it to the person. Makes it look like we don't do anything cause it doesn't show up in the statistics."

### **St. Olaf's Rest Lutheran**

My final week, I went out of town into the prairie to visit St. Olaf's Rest Lutheran. This congregation had followed a familiar pattern. A once vibrant rural parish, it had died along with the rural area. Smaller and smaller groups of people had gathered each Sunday; year after year one program after the other had shrunk until it had to be abandoned. Pastors didn't stay long, vacancies got longer and longer.

But a few years ago, things turned around. This parish had decided to convert into a retreat center. "It's really a monastery," the pastor said as she showed me around, "but you'll never get Lutherans to use that word."

I asked her to explain the retreat center. "I hate that word, it's so secular. It sounds like we're replacing the busy blur of city life with an even more frantic round of lectures, events, and other things. 345 rules for doing less, or junk like that."

She showed me the former Sunday school rooms that had now been converted into small, neatly appointed guest rooms. "You notice that there is no telephone, no TV, no secular books or music. We're out in the country, so there are few distractions from thinking about God. We have nine miles of walking trails around the church. Some lawyer worked out how the farmers could donate a strip of land at the edge of their fields and wind up making money on it."

"We used to feel so bad because we had nothing. Then we realized what an asset that was for people with too many things, too many tasks and too many distractions. Basically, people come here because there is nothing here. Here you have time to pray for an hour, or read a Bible chapter ten times over. You've got time to walk two miles into town for a meal and walk back again and think about everything you are seeing. For those who are too frightened of silence and open space to do that, they can take meals at a local farmhouse. And, to be fair, some really need that contact with a family."

The guest rooms were booked for weeks in advance on weekends, but it was still possible to get in during the week. The pastor held worship twice a day during the week, and once on Sunday morning. She did spiritual direction with those making private retreat, led some prayer groups, and tended to her regular members. She refused to offer workshops. Those few remaining regular members of the parish came on Sunday. "They say over and over how blessed they feel that they know they will be able to continue worshipping here until they die and how much they love it when guests bring children with them. Our giving from the members has

actually gone up for three years in a row, even though our numbers continue to decline slowly."

Apparently a few women kept up a circle and still sewed a few blankets for global missions.

"But they can just enjoy it now, because there isn't pressure to make a program support an entire parish, or the entire salary of a pastor and staff."

How does the town react to all these "city-folk" invading their place? "There have been some adjustments, that's for sure. You know, the division between city and farm is probably as old as civilization itself. The farm thinks the city is decadent and unnecessary, the city thinks the country is backward and the source of every psychological dysfunction. We can't overcome that all at once, but as people actually encounter each other in the coffee shop, as they listen to each other and come to know each other as individuals, we grow together. It was really funny to watch city people discover that country people also have too many things to do and get stressed out. We share that. And it was a bonus when people who'd been here from that city congregation arraigned for that man and his family here for a month while he was recovering from being tortured. It was the first time that issue became real to some of the local folks. Isn't that what Christianity is about?"

Well, I ventured, this is great, but it isn't a solution for every rural parish.

She sounded exasperated. "I'm sorry, but I hear that from all the workshop presenters. It isn't intended to be a solution for every rural church. Where did the idea come that every rural church is identical? There is as much diversity among our conference as anyplace else. We have churches with hundreds of members and small ones, we have happy places and places that are always fighting. We've got rural areas that need agitators and organizers, and places that need chaplains. Every parish has to find its own way to proclaim the gospel."

As I left, I felt her parting words summed up my experiences. These three had found their own answers and each seemed to be working.

THE END  
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