

19th and 20th Century Congregations
in a 21st Century World
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Planting new congregations is a proven, excellent tool for reaching unbelievers in the 21st century, as it was in the 1st century. Yet the Holy Spirit also works through the ministries of our older, established congregations. How do our older congregations meet the challenges of the emerging culture? Research conducted for my recent dissertation provides some food for thought.

My research indicated that a focus on values, vision and mission (VVM) in a planned, sequential process helps a congregation adjust to the changing world and leads to revitalization and renewal in the congregation. The VVM process has been shown to benefit congregations for the sake of the Gospel and the blessing of God's people.

While the VVM process is on the right track, I have discovered that we need to move deeper into the subject of community, especially in exploring the glue that holds community together in our congregations. The desire and the need for community are paramount among those outside the church who are spiritually seeking. Moreover, the church should be the place where seekers find community. In the Large Catechism, Luther suggests that "communion of saints" in the Creed should really be translated "community of saints."

Why is it that great numbers of those seeking a relationship with God do not seem to be finding it through the church? I looked at this question from the mega-perspective of the 2,000-year history of the western church, and the older history of the people of Israel as the Old Testament church, and also from the micro-view of the history of a local congregation. My conclusion is that, over time, the glue that is found in a Spirit-caused community is weakened by a reliance on kinship ties as the basis of community. In other words, the church weakens when bloodlines replace the blood of the Lamb as the glue of relationships.

We see this most clearly in the Jews of Jesus' day. "We have Abraham as our Father," they said in answer to the challenges of both John the Baptist and Jesus Himself. John responded that God can make children of Abraham out of the stones. Jesus told them that their descent from Abraham does not mean that they are not slaves to sins.

Lutheran congregations meeting the postmodern challenge benefit when each member asks him or herself, "What is the glue that binds me to my congregation? Am I a member because I've always been a Lutheran ('I have Luther as my father')? Or am I a member because 'the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel'?"

While these two possible answers may sound very similar, the reality is that the first answer is relying on bloodlines while the second is relying on the blood of the Lamb. A congregation held together by bloodlines will have a very difficult time accepting the seeker, making room in the fellowship for someone who is not related, not like us, in some physical way.

How do we increase our reliance on the blood of the Lamb rather than our own bloodlines? Through what we do best, Word and Sacrament ministry, but with increased understanding of what God does in that ministry regarding community formation. We are blessed in our understanding of the power of God in Word and Sacrament to connect the believer to his heavenly Father through the Son. However, do we really see that same power as the means by which community is formed?

It is important that we bring the power of Word and Sacrament to the horizontal, community dimension as effectively as we bring it to the vertical, individual relationship.

We hear today about the need for a return to apostolic leadership. Books and articles abound on the subject. This return is overdue in the planting of new congregations. Existing congregations might be better served by a return to pastoral care and concern for the community; pastoral care not only for the individual, but for the individual in community and the community itself as the living, breathing body of Christ in that place, bound together by the blood of the Lamb. Such a community concern not only strengthens the existing community, but also makes it an desirable, accepting destination for the seeker.

“From Him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.” ■