

Help, Hope and Home by Glenn A. Lucas

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Have you ever wondered what guests are looking for when they come to your church? I don't mean those with long histories in church who may be visiting from out of town. I mean those who don't have a church home or don't regularly attend the one they have. Do these guests come for the same reasons as those who regularly attend your church? Do you know why guests return to your church — or don't? Do you know why those who are regular in attendance keep coming back? It is important to understand why people come to our churches and what brings them back.

Our family attends Bethlehem Lutheran Church in Santa Clarita, California. It happens to be the closest LCMS church to our home but that's not why we joined and are regular in attendance there. When we moved to Santa Clarita we, like everyone else, had a choice of where to worship. We spent several months visiting different churches. We chose Bethlehem because the worship is celebrative and engaging; the preaching is relevant, helpful and hopeful; and, it feels like home. I don't think my family is unique in our search for a church home.

I believe most people who come to our churches for the first time are looking primarily for one or more of the following: help, hope and home. I know that most people who come to our churches expect us to address spiritual things and rightfully would leave disappointed if they did not hear or experience them but I believe they want to experience things spiritual in the context of help, hope and home.

Help

“Then the King will say to those on His right hand, ‘Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: for I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in; I was naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and you visited Me; I was in prison and you came to Me.’

“Then the righteous will answer Him, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see You hungry and feed You, or thirsty and give You drink? When did we see You a stranger and take You in, or naked and clothe You? Or when did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?’

“And the King will answer and say to them, ‘Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me.’”

Jesus, Matthew 25:34-40 (NKJV)

The church has historically been viewed as a place where one can find help with life's difficulties. Members of our churches often encourage family and friends to contact the church when they are experiencing crisis or difficulties in their lives. They hope that their loved one will find someone who will listen and help. The help may come in various forms--counseling, financial assistance, encouragement, etc. The help the church offers needs to be time and context sensitive.

Of course, the greatest form of help the church offers comes in the proclamation and application of God's word in the context of a person's life. People need to hear a helpful application of God's word to their lives, both law and gospel. It is important to recognize that people who come to our churches seeking help are experiencing the law in their lives even if they don't recognize it. They may need to hear God's word in a way that gives them a perspective on their life experiences. It is important that we not leave people trapped by the law without the sure and certain hope of the gospel.

The help the church offers is often personal and one-on-one. But it is important to note that the first exposure people have to our ministry is often through our public preaching and teaching. These, therefore, need to be practical and applicable to be helpful. People who need help need to hear and know that there is hope in the midst of their difficult situations. Help must lead to hope.

Hope

*But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts, and always be ready to give a defense to everyone who asks you a reason for the **hope that is in you**, with meekness and fear;*

1 Peter 3:15 (NKJV)

People visit our churches to hear a message of hope in a world that is too often dark and discouraging. Some are feeling overwhelmed by the constant barrage of negative news. The seemingly constant focus on crime, violence, tragedy and terror in the media leaves many wondering if there is anything good and worthwhile in this world. Personal tragedy and hardship can drive people to despair. Many of these people come to our churches longing to hear that there is hope, not just in the world to come, but here and now, in this world.

Our worship services, preaching and teaching must communicate the hope that we have in Jesus Christ and the truth that God is concerned about us here and now. It is important that we clearly and joyfully proclaim the constancy of God's love manifested in Jesus that is the same yesterday, today and forever. People need to hear from us that God is approachable and engaged in our lives. They need to know that he hears and answers prayer.

In addition to hearing a message of hope, people who come to our churches need to experience the message of hope lived out by us. Our attitudes, conversations and actions in the parking lots, narthexes, basements and courtyards of our churches need to reflect

the hope that is in us. To be credible, it is important that our churches create genuine upbeat and hope filled atmospheres in the communities where God has placed them and that churches communicate that hope in meaningful ways.

Home

So continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved.

Acts 2:46-47 (NKJV)

“There’s no place like home. There’s no place like home. There’s no place like home.”
Dorothy in “The Wizard of Oz”

A longing for meaningful social contact in a safe context brings many people to our churches. Like Dorothy in “The Wizard of Oz,” many people are trying to find home. They hope to find a place that is genuinely warm, loving and caring. They want to experience a friendly smile and a warm greeting. They long to know that they are valued and accepted by others. They want and need to experience being loved. They are looking for a church home.

It is important that our churches create atmospheres that are welcoming and that encourage the building of relationships. Leadership in the church, beginning with the pastor, must love the people whom God loves in ways that are evident and genuine.

Congregations that help people find home understand that people who experience love are people who love other people. The saying “home is where the heart is” is true. Home is a place where love is shared. It is where people invest themselves. Churches that are effective in reaching and retaining guests almost always have mastered the ability to make people feel loved. In these churches people experience being loved and see the evidence of love throughout the congregation. They see it in the leaders and members who love those whom God loves.

It does not matter if the first time guest is a long time believer, a new believer or a seeker. He or she still hopes to find help, hope and home in our churches. The churches that are effective in reaching people with the gospel understand this fact and ensure that guests of their ministries experience help, hope and home. The experience is practical, relational and relevant. It is evidenced in the church’s life, its preaching and its teaching. Effective churches understand that people may come to a house of worship but they are looking for a church home where they will find help and hope. ■

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