

THE EVANGELISM-RESISTANT CHURCH

by Mike Ruhl

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In his monumental book, *Good to Great--Why Some Companies Make the Leap ... and Others Don't*, author Jim Collins writes about "confronting the brutal facts." He observes that a "breakout characteristic" of a "good" company becoming a "great company" is this watershed capacity to confront the brutal facts that current conditions are not healthy.

Is it possible a goodly number of American congregations need to "confront the brutal facts" about evangelism? Is it true that far too many Lutherans are perfectly content to go to heaven alone, and that reaching lost people with the good news of Jesus Christ is simply not a priority?

Frederick Baltz (from the ELCA) wrote an engaging article in the March 2004 issue of *The Lutheran* called "The Evangelism-Resistant Church." He identifies twelve factors which "hold back" congregations in evangelism.

1. **The Great Omission**--The Reformers do not address evangelism in the confessional documents which formed the church. A society with hundreds of millions of unbaptized people may have been incomprehensible.
2. **How We Got To Be Us**--Baptists and Methodists moved West (beyond the Appalachian Mountains) to win souls. But Lutherans were more concerned about nurturing souls who already believed. Evangelism became something that "others" did.
3. **Lex orandi, lex credendi**--This phrase essentially means that our worship shapes our belief. And when talk of evangelism is rare in the worship context, worshipers may quietly assume that it isn't important.
4. **Presence of Vagueness**--Many people are unclear about the meaning of evangelism. Evangelism is sharing the gospel of Christ to bring people to baptism and a life of discipleship. Evangelism is not a "membership drive" or something to do when it is difficult to pay our bills. Evangelism is winning souls.
5. **Failure to Teach Evangelism**--Lutheran pastors receive little training in evangelism. The list of our theologians who have written in this field is short.
6. **Shortage of Evangelists**--Lutheran offices (national and district) once had *evangelists* available to congregations. We have gifted people who are familiar with evangelism programs, but we need more evangelists.
7. **Suspicion**--Evangelist (and evangelistic) concern with numbers can *seem* unspiritual. But until evangelism is an honored ministry among us, resistance will continue.
8. **Competing Priorities**--Evangelism is the church's primary mission. But that is often NOT where everyone's heart is in the evangelism-resistant church.
9. **Cold Shoulder to Church Growth**--The basic premise is that God wills the growth (spiritual and numerical) of His church. While those who start new missions benefit from some insights, others in the church have been neutral to cold.

10. **Myth of the Silent Witness**--Many churched Christians believe that they witness silently each day by the way they live. But unless that witness is specific (and Word-based), many will not have a clue what they are saying with their lives.

11. **Alternative Solutions**--Aware of declining interest, mainline churches have tried appreciating liturgy more, making language more inclusive, balancing traditional and contemporary worship styles, being more multicultural, showing more hospitality and offering the secrets of deeper spirituality ... all so that people will come. They haven't.

12. **Spirit Quenching**--The Spirit calls the church to evangelize and moves believers to answer that call. But many churches are "unexcitable" about evangelism, making choices not to be enthusiastic about evangelism.

The ***Ablaze!*** vision and call for reaching 100,000,000 people globally with a Gospel witness, 50,000,000 of them here in the United States, will be best served by saints and congregations that are not *evangelism-resistant*. ■

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