

A Church being ReBorn - Stir it Up

Going Forward as a Synod of Experimentation & Discovery



*“And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall name him Jesus”
Luke 1:31*

*“For we know that the whole creation has been groaning in the pains of childbirth until
now.” Romans 8:22*

*“By God’s great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the
resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead,” 1 Peter 1:3*

Introduction

The story of Jesus doesn’t end with Jesus. It continues in the community of the men, women and children who repent, believe and follow. God’s salvation, which became articulate, visible and particular in Jesus, continues in the people who have been raised to new life, the community of the resurrection.

The conception and birth of Jesus, as well as the community that would bear his name are dominant in the early chapters of Luke and Acts. The Holy Spirit is alive and well in these parallel beginnings: both Jesus Christ and the community of Jesus similarly conceived by the Holy Spirit.

Conception, birth, re-birth and even labor pains are significant images throughout scripture. Sara, Moses, Psalms, Elizabeth, Mary.

Is the church in a continual flux of conception and birth, with the accompanying labor pains?

The book of Acts is the second in a two-part book written by the same person who wrote Luke. It is known for citing of historical context (though today we see those historical references in a more nuanced way and less literal) as well as attention to geographical markers. Perhaps more importantly, this two-volume description of the birth of a new

Jewish sect, which became known as Christianity, is written for a new generation of followers. Luke-Acts is addressing the question of a “what now?” Written sometime at the end of the first century, some 30 to 50 years following the events it records, the early church is wondering “where to next?” In other words, now that James and Peter and Paul are all gone, and the kingdom did not arrive as anticipated, what are the followers of Jesus to do? The questions that came to the minds of the second or third generation of Jesus people have significance for us today. Could it be that we are asking similar questions in this turn of the page in history?

During the first three centuries of the church, the followers of Christ constituted a minority in a world that viewed them with suspicion. These were people trying to work out the meaning of their existence in a time when the imperial power was demanding their allegiance. They were asking questions: What happened? Where does our identity rest? What’s gone wrong? What is God up to in the world? What then does it mean to be the church in this new time/space?

In many ways, we as primarily white, middle class Lutherans in the old mainline traditions of post World War II North America are asking similar questions. We recall the days of full Sunday school classes, sanctuaries and offering plates. We remember a Lutheran identity rooted in Scandinavian or German culture. We wonder: What happened? Did we do something wrong? Where does our identity rest now? What is God up to in the world?

This paper is an attempt to start a conversation about the future of Lutheran Christianity in New England. You are currently reading version 12, see the date and version above to make sure. This document has many contributors, but I got the ball rolling. Eventually, I hope it’s going to be read and edited by thousands of people in the New England Synod.

The purpose is to engage in a judicious conversation about where we are and where we are guessing the Holy Spirit is leading us.

Thanks for reading.
Thanks for praying.
Thanks for investing.

James Hazelwood
Bishop

***“You can’t think your way out of a problem, you need a spirit of adventure.”
Edwin Friedman***



Initial Comments here at Version 12

As this paper has been digested by a wide variety of people, I received suggestions for improvements. This version attempts to incorporate some of those ideas. The major change in this version is the addition of more concrete examples of what's happening in our region. You'll find Incarnational Examples to help give you some connections, and I've included links to websites and resources as you may wish to explore further.

There have been other comments but this has been the most consistent request. But there is one comment I have heard that I wish to address here. Candidly, it is a comment that ticks me off. That is the comment that 'the church is dying.'

I reject this idea. The church of Jesus Christ is not and will not die. It is eternal. The current dominant model of congregation based Christianity as a whole is not dying, but it is undergoing a dramatic shift. Are there congregations that will no longer exist? Of course. As I write this in the spring of 2018, I have two appointments scheduled to meet with church councils that have voted to close their congregations. I expect that to continue. That does not mean that all congregations will close. Yet, it does mean that all congregations need to change.

In the future, there will be multiple models of church, and I give some examples in this version. I also include at the end of this paper a document prepared by Pastor Tim Stein where he gives multiple examples of different kinds of congregations.

In an effort to provide concrete examples, I've added several throughout this paper. Each example has links to websites, podcasts and resources. If you are reading a paper version, you may want to access the online version of this paper to benefit from the resources. Download your copy at <http://bishop.nesynod.org/goingforward.pdf>

The typical model of congregational church life as practiced for about 100 years in this country has been: A church building, and a paid professional ordained minister supported primarily through voluntary efforts and financial offerings of a local congregation of people. That model is not going to be the only model going forward. I suspect it will be one of many models, most likely a rare one.

Our challenge is to turn to the Spirit to guide us into new forms of Christian expression. What are the new forms of church? What are the ways God might be calling forth a new

birth? In past revivals, old forms have disappeared and new ones emerged, are we in a new revival?

Finally. Some have hoped this paper would provide answers, and are frustrated that it includes more questions. This is intentional. The era of easy answers is over. The age of the quick fix may be our desire, but that desire is not what is needed. We need a spirit of adventure, and questions lead us in that direction.

A Church in Labor

When I first began exploring this idea of birth and rebirth in the church, I left out a very important detail. The kind of detail that only a man could omit. I had forgotten that all birth includes labor pains. Mea Culpa. But, also thanks to the women who called this important detail to our attention.

We are in an era of tumultuous upheaval. Every aspect of the modern world is undergoing tremendous changes: newspapers, photography, banking, technology, transportation, education, communication, and of course, the church.

This is destabilizing for many people in our communities and in our congregations. The pull and power of nostalgia is significant in these times, because we see it as a way to stabilize the tumult. One quote captures this best: "I don't come to church to be challenged, I come for peace and stability." Like it or not, many of our people are in that place. No wonder an election built around nostalgia succeeded in capturing just enough imaginations. The irony is that while there may have been a desire to achieve stability by going backwards, what it has yielded is angst.

Much of our current model for operating as a church was formed in a post World War II structure of expanding suburbanization. The church floated on the relatively calm waters of economic expansion, a dominant white culture and the last vestiges of Christendom, which reinforced church participation. All that is gone. We are not going to see 3-5% annual GDP growth, society is increasingly diverse and institutional forms of religious expression are waning. The post-modern world has a diversity of voices and our culture is far too fluid to reinforce a one-religion expectation.

There is not a single pastor, deacon or bishop in the ELCA who was prepared for what needs to happen now. We were taught through a combination of role models, upbringing, seminaries and internships to provide spiritual leadership in a world that no longer exists. This involves numerous areas including: how people learn, how behavioral change happens, how organizational change is led, how church buildings can become resources for the community, and how we finance the mission of the gospel. While there are a few leaders who are figuring it out as they go along, we need to find ways for us to learn from one another.

Four Pain Points

I wish to highlight four major pain points of our times that impact the ministry of Jesus Christ in our midst. Then we will look to some hints of possible ways forward.

First, let's remember that we are a people of pain. Yes, as human beings, but I mean specifically as Christians. We worship a God who knows the heart of pain and suffering on a cross. That tells us many things about God, among them it means that it is in pain that God meets us, knows us and embraces us. Therefore, as we look at these four pain points for life and church in the early 21st century, perhaps an important question to ask would be: How is God meeting us in these pain points?

Spiritual Vitality – I almost hesitate to say this but I'm going to anyway. The truth is that some of our congregations are spiritually dead. I could cite statistics from the CAT (Congregational Assessment Tool), observations from my visits, conversations with pastors and deacons as well as church members. Why are some places lacking spiritual life while others are vibrant and blooming? That's way too complicated to answer here, but I simply want to point it out. You know it's true. I see it when I go to a congregation for a meeting and there is no prayer at the beginning or the end. We know it because of the lack of participation in any kind of bible study. I see it in the CAT results, where even in our healthiest congregations vast majorities of people answer yes to the question, "While spirituality is important to me, I just don't have time for it right now." We have congregations that are more focused on coffee hour or carpeting than welcoming the neighbor/visitor. For all the struggles we face, this one is probably most critical.

A spiritually dead congregation is not in labor pains, it is in the early stages of hospice. Turning this around is a central task for leaders in our congregations, be they lay leaders, clergy or deacons. One thinks of Sarah and her assumed barren womb. Is it possible that God will bring forth life, laughter and joy? In many ways, this is the heart of our struggle.

Congregational Finances - The financial struggles in this time of change are what many people discuss. Even our strongest New England Synod congregations are depending on older generations of donors to keep the doors open. In some cases, it's only a few people in a congregation. I have had more than one pastor tell me that their congregation's entire budget is supported 80 to 2. In other words, 80% of the budget is coming from 2 households. In every case, those households are people in their 70's or 80's looking to move south to a warmer climate or to the nearby nursing home.

Several years ago, I presented a picture to the June Assembly of this synod. I explained that we were a synod of 40-100-40: Forty congregations in near crisis, forty healthy and one hundred in between trying to figure out which way they were going. Three years later, I'd venture a guess that this assessment is no longer accurate. In the last three years, we've had churches close, others merge, others partner with Episcopal congregations, and others go from full time clergy to part time. In 2018, I think we are now 20 functionally or officially closed, 60 in crisis, 60 in the middle and 30 that are

healthy. These are challenging times. Labor pains? If so, what sort of new life will this labor birth? How might God be meeting us in this cross like experience? Is death for some inevitable?

Changing Demographics - The demographics in our synod are also indicators of the road ahead. A recent article in the Atlantic magazine focused on the trials and tribulations in the state of Connecticut. A combination of population decrease, an economic trend that includes fewer high wage jobs, expensive property values and struggling urban centers makes for a perfect storm. (*What on Earth is Wrong with Connecticut?* Link - <https://tinyurl.com/y964wsqm> by Derek Thompson, The Atlantic, and July 5, 2017) A similar assessment could be made of Rhode Island and Massachusetts, with the exception of the Boston area, which is seeing an increase in jobs in certain sectors. However other challenging trends hold for the city especially in the area of housing and transportation. The northern three states have a different challenge. Vermont, New Hampshire & Maine, along with our two New York counties are in the midst of a long-term population decline as well as an aging demographic. There is little economic activity that offers an invitation to those areas. Obviously there are exceptions in some pockets, largely dominated by tourism, universities and health care.

Additionally, there are the oft-cited statistics that New England is now the least church-attending region in the country. Various statistical analyses by the Pew Research Center, Barna Group and others have pointed to our region as having the lowest levels of participation in church life. Maine and Vermont are often wrestling for first (last?) place, but the other states are not far behind. The reasons for this are many and beyond the scope of this paper, but include Yankee independence, rapid growth of secular attitudes, economic fragmentation, increasing suspicion of institutions, Roman Catholic sex scandals, and demographic trends in population decline, among others.

However, it's also fair to ask: If many people are not going to church, does that mean there is also a tremendous opportunity to serve, connect and reach?

Turbulent Social Times - Society is in a turbulent time. This includes the realm of politics. The election of Donald Trump is an example of this turbulence. This surprising event has and will continue to be analyzed and debated. It is being resisted and embraced by people in our congregations. New England may be a predominantly blue state region (trending democratic) but it has a strong libertarian and independent streak. In the old days, it was Rockefeller Republicans who were considered socially liberal and fiscally conservative.

Regardless of where one stands on the political spectrum, it cannot be ignored that Mr. Trump's election is a destabilizing event. Our pastors have experienced strong push back on what some listeners in the pew perceive as "political" sermons, when all the pastor did was read the appointed scripture for the day from the common lectionary. One pastor was challenged over the content of his sermon. When he met with his critics, he had them read the Sermon on the Mount, to which they responded, "Oh, I guess it's not you I disagree with, it's Jesus."

In my view, the current political turbulence at a minimum, demonstrates a challenge to basic Christian virtues. I am thinking of the fruit of the spirit in Galatians 5 22-23: *By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.* (If you want a more complete picture, read all of [Galatians Chapter 5 – link here - https://tinyurl.com/ybpc3r2j](https://tinyurl.com/ybpc3r2j)) Let me be clear in my words here. I am not suggesting other politicians, past or present, have been full embodiments of graciousness and humility. What I am suggesting is that now we have a President who most clearly demonstrates a lack of common courtesy. In the words of my 94 year-old life long Republican voting father-in-law, “He is just so rude.” This shift in public discourse is causing dramatic shifts in the tone and the substance of our common life. Permission has been granted for people, from all perspectives, to shout their opinions in ways that reinforce hostility, violence and intolerance. Our congregations are experiencing these attitudes, as some people are no longer interested in discussing topics, but simply shouting their conclusions.

If this is a particularly painful aspect of modern life for you, what might you be wondering about God’s presence in this moment of pain?

Now that we’ve touched on four pain points in our life together, let’s look at options and hope.



Three Hopeful Options

Let's turn now to look at three dynamics that may provide some help as we move forward.

Hope Option # 1 -Experimentation Discovery - In the words of a podcast I listen to "Inspiration is great, but Inspiration with Action is better." I have advocated for most of five plus years now that we embrace our declaration that we are a synod of holy experimentation. My reason is simple.

The definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again, while expecting different results.

I think it's pretty clear to most of us, that trying harder at the same thing isn't going to cut it. What do I mean?

Incarnational Example: *You've been seeing fewer and fewer young people attend confirmation class that meets on Wednesday afternoons at 4:00 p.m. You think the answer might be a different curriculum, so you order new books this year. Nothing changes, the trend continues. Maybe you need to try something very different. See what Pastor Niki Harvell did with a creative use of technology, game theory, a genuine love of kids and purple hair. [Watch this video - https://youtu.be/ssvCjPmlsM0](#) and come to her workshop at the 2018 Synod Assembly. That's an experiment.*

In addition to experimenting, we need to be about a more intentional process of discovery. What are we learning from our experiments? How are these experiments changing us? What adaptations are we making? Our emphasis on experimentation has been good, but I now believe we need to be bolder. However, I recognize that the kind of change and dramatic upheaval that may be required of our congregations requires a learning community.

The [Forward Leadership Community](#) - <https://tinyurl.com/yc5fsngw> has been our first attempt to help congregations embrace flexibility, risk-taking and attempting something new. Perhaps what is needed is a broad based synod wide emphasis that focuses on all of us learning together and from one another.

Perhaps a series of questions for all our congregations to explore:

- Where does it seem God has abandoned you, your congregation, or our world?
- What are you most afraid of in your congregation, home, life?
- What no longer works for you in your congregation?
- Where do you see life and hope in the ministries of your congregation?
- What faith understanding do you wonder about? (Aka what are your doubts?)
- What gives you hope?

Incarnational Example

[Zion Lutheran Church](#) in Pittsfield, MA is our oldest congregation. For 30 years they struggled and debated about their next steps. Should they stay in the city in their aging asbestos and lead contaminated building or move to a new facility in a nearby town. In 2011, Pastor Tim Weismann arrived and through a long and sometime painful process they chose to stay in the city, renovate their facility, let go of some old ideas of church and engage in clearly focused ministries. Now they have a multi use space that can be Sunday worship, Friday concert hall, Tuesday farmer's market, Wednesday municipal meeting space, Monday night children's ballet. Zion sees the sacred and the secular as both/and. They are finding a role for the church in local governance conversations, establishing themselves as a center for the arts and balancing the revenue in takes to sustain the ministry. You can learn more about this project by listening to this [podcast interview https://tinyurl.com/y88vla9c](https://tinyurl.com/y88vla9c) and by viewing photos on their website.

Hope Option # 2 - Centers of Justice and Spiritual Strengthening

When I first arrived in this office five short years ago, I asked many people the following question: What do we do well? The most frequent answer was 'social justice'. After five year, I've learned that we don't do social justice, but we talk about social justice.

The one exception to this talk but no action would be in the area of human sexuality, beginning with the leadership of Bishop Margaret Payne, who led the ELCA Task force on Human Sexuality, and the first ordinations of openly LGBTQ persons, and continuing with my tenure. It is clear that this action, which I think of as simply doing church well, has been the most influential social justice activity in which we've been involved as a synod.

As New Englanders we have a preference for action in how we express our faith. Congregations continue to talk proudly about their ministries of concrete action that make a difference in their neighborhoods and around the world. The gospel frees us and sends us to be agents of hope. Another example of justice in action that has been widely embraced would be the generosity of the ELCA World Hunger Appeal. Among ELCA synods, New England ranks as one of the highest in both gifts to the WHA, as well as grant recipients. The New England Synod truly embraces this area of justice ministry. What does this tell us about ourselves?

Can our congregations become centers of spiritual and justice strengthening? Should linking discipleship, compassion and justice be one of the marks of the church that is being born? What kinds of experiments in this area are already happening? How do we rediscover an authentic Lutheran spirituality?

Incarnational Example: *For most of its history as a congregation, St. Andrew Lutheran Church had a commitment to improving the lives of people living in*

their town. Because the congregation had numerous skilled carpenters, plumbers and a motivated volunteer base it engaged in annual Faith in Action Sundays. "Don't go to church, Be the church" was the motto. After many years, the church decided to form a separate non-profit organization called [Neighbors Helping Neighbors](https://www.facebook.com/NHNRI). <https://www.facebook.com/NHNRI> Their goal is to help people stay in their homes.

Incarnational Example II: *If the above example is one of hands on service, we need another that shows attempts to change unjust systems. The [Naugatuck Valley Project](http://www.naugatuckvalleyproject.org) <http://www.naugatuckvalleyproject.org> is a prime example. It's a coalition of congregations, small businesses and labor to impact an economically deprived area. Increasingly, it's obvious that churches that want to impact change need to join with other agencies and organize to improve conditions in our communities. We can't do it on our own. This spring all of our Conference Deans will participate in a two-day training in the foundations of community organizing. How can we make use of these tools to become centers of justice?*

I wonder if our Lutheran strength of clarity in matters of theology, confessional identity and intellectual rigor is also a weakness. I have thought for many years that the 16th century existential angst, which our reformation theology addressed, is less relevant in the 21st century. Simply making that statement puts me at odds with several of our churches leading theologians. But, I'll venture out anyway with a series of questions:

- Is the hunger in our day more focused on encounter with God, rather than understanding of God?
- Why are Yoga studios so popular today?
- Is mystery a more powerful force among younger generations?
- Do we think ourselves into new ways of living, or do we live ourselves into new ways of thinking.
- Is the absence of Lutheran spirituality connected to our intellectual emphasis, or a lack of emphasis on discipleship training?
- Are these either/or questions frustrating you as much as they are me? It's true I put some of these questions in a binary format. That's unfair. So what's a third way through this topic?

Several years ago, I finally fell into a series of spiritual exercises that worked for me. Yes, I will admit to having an inadequate personal prayer and devotional life for years in my earlier ministry. What I had was a lot of "should" projects. I should read the bible, I should pray more often, I should have a journal, I should... As I made my way through the early stages of the mid-life transition, I fell into several disciplines that now feed my soul and expand my awareness and compassion. Those include a mix of practices that include Eugene Peterson's Message translation of [the Psalms](#), a meditation app on my iPhone called 'Headspace,' rigorous physical exercise, healthier eating, a movement toward a simpler lifestyle that includes less consumer spending, therapy with an analyst and the

writings of [Richard Rohr](#), [Brene Brown](#) and [James Hollis](#). Through it all is a Grace, that gives me permission to strive to do these well, but no shame in not achieving perfection.

Hear me clearly. I am not saying, we should abandon our Lutheran roots. Rather, I am suggesting that we openly seek and ask questions about what 21st century North American people need. My personal view is that people today are not seeking more information, they are seeking an experience of Jesus Christ, the embodiment of the divine.

Is there a connection between spiritual aliveness and social justice? I think so. And I am increasingly of the opinion that the way we get at this is through stories. Every time I preach, it's always the stories that people remember. We are a story people. The Bible is really a library of stories. Perhaps one of the most significant ways we can help our congregations rediscover a Spiritual Vitality and a passion for justice is through story telling.

***Incarnational Example:** What began as a spiritual autobiography group at a local synagogue morphed into a faith and life storytelling group at [St. Paul Lutheran Church](#) <https://stpaulcapeann.org> in Gloucester, MA. Together, each week, well, most weeks not all, a group of people meet and talk about life and faith and struggles and joys. They call the group Holy Voices, Holy Time. Over time, as in years, this group has honestly embraced an Ancient/Future practice of Midrash or faith/life story telling.*

Hope Option # 3 - Ecclesiastical Entrepreneurs – In the last six months. I've been listening to various podcasts on this subject. [Side Hustle School](#) <https://sidehustleschool.com> and [How I Built This](#) <https://tinyurl.com/y7s6lnpp> are the names of two of those podcasts. I'm fascinated by the way in which some people are choosing to engage in projects that bring value to their lives as well as additional revenue.

I've chosen to embrace the term entrepreneur as opposed to all the church words we have used. It's clear that this has disrupted a few readers of early versions, as I've received a number of comments on this section. Stir it Up! Let me try to clarify, while still disrupting your thinking.

Ecclesiastical Entrepreneurs are leaders or organizations, mostly congregations, who do the good and hard work of looking at the holes around them, and under the Spirit's guidance act on connecting resources to address those holes. The phrase "side hustle" was once viewed as a derogatory term, but is now being embraced in some parts of the culture. However, the church has an older history with this concept, as we have called it tent-making. This is a reference to St. Paul's ministry, and economic support model. While it is true that the numbers of younger people actually making a living in solely self-start ventures don't equal the hype, I think it's fair to say, "a societal shift is happening in the way we work." I want to connect this with the reality we are facing and will continue to face. Namely, more and more of our churches may not be able to pay for a full time professional religious leader, whether deacon or pastor, along with the other accompanying structures of the post World War II model of congregational life.

Some churches have begun forming separate 501c3 non-profits as a way to focus on a particular community need. Others are beginning to seek partnerships with Ascentria, Mosaic or others. Are these some possible solutions? Could any of the following be helpful?

- Congregational calls to pastors and deacons may need to be part-time, this will mean part-time leader responsibilities
- Pastors and Deacons may have to have Side Hustles or Tent-making ministries
- Congregations will need to start other revenue streams
- Some congregations will close, merge, sell buildings, partner with other denominations, become multi-point parishes.
- Non-ministry non-profits will need to be formed
- Licensed Lay Leaders need to be cultivated, and bi-vocational (dual-career) ministries need to be encouraged.
- Should the bishop and staff return to being in a parish, as it was pre-1957?
- What other ventures should we now be pursuing?

Congregations need to think in terms of collaboration with their entrepreneurial pastor. We can be creative in our use of financial tools such as continuing education money, sabbaticals and paying off church-mortgages that have the potential to increase financial stability of congregations, pastors and deacons by investing in structures and skills that cultivate a new model of church.

All of these factors raise both a crisis and an opportunity for the church. These are among the larger scale labor pains we are experiencing in New England. But labor pains are signs of a coming new birth.

Incarnational Examples:

Jim Hazelwood. *(Yup, that's me) While serving as a parish pastor, it became evident that the only way to send my son through college was for more funds to be available. That could happen by taking out student loans, seeking financial assistance, a job for my son while in school, a significant increase in my salary or income generation. The significant increase in my salary didn't seem like an option. I started a Side Hustle using my photography skills. I had the opportunity to photograph people for magazines, business, weddings, family portraits. In time, I led workshops for aspiring photographers. While a few people in the congregation opposed my attention to this project, the vast majority understood and even asked me to photograph their families.*

Mark and Sarah Huber *began a series of Side Hustles when they started the ministry at Sanctuary in Marshfield, MA. Building and maintaining websites for both church and corporate clients was a way to earn some additional*

funds, but Mark also points out, “It was a great way to connect with people and make friends.” This is important to note, because a true side hustle is about passion and purpose, as well as income. In addition, Sarah teaches music through private tutoring and small classes. As their ministry has expanded, as well as their family, they’ve reduced their website work. What can we learn from Mark & Sarah?

***Victor Cabrera** is currently developing a ministry in Providence, Rhode Island, La Iglesia Luterana. They meet in an Episcopal Church building. Victor was trained as a civil engineer in his native country. When he first began this ministry, because US culture doesn’t value his overseas education he worked a so-called unskilled job 40 hours per week. That has now changed and he is employed full time using his engineering degree. He also leads his congregation, helps raise a family with his wife and takes classes on-line through United Lutheran Seminary. What can we learn from Victor and his congregation?*

***Karen Safstrom** worked for many years as a pharmacist before her recent full time call. She readily admits this posed challenges as well as opportunities. This is a model that is more of Bi-Vocational approach, rather than a Side Hustle, but one that provides a hint for the present/future. Perhaps seminaries should offer a dual degree program. MDiv/MBA, MDiv/MSW, etc.*

Congregational Examples:

***Zion Lutheran Church in Southington, CT** is well known for its Apple Fritters at the Town Fair. This small quaint table of fritters grew over the years to generate significant revenue for the congregation’s ministry as well as several entities & missions. Has there been a problematic impact on giving and stewardship? That’s an important discussion in this topic.*

***Faith Lutheran Church in Cambridge, MA** initiated a project with a nearby Synagogue to launch a Meal Site for the community. As they developed the project, they realized the benefit of forming a separate non-profit organization to secure grants and donations. You can hear this described in this podcast interview with former, now retired Pastor Tim Stein. [Click https://tinyurl.com/ybxnvxld](https://tinyurl.com/ybxnvxld).*

***Bethesda Lutheran in New Haven, CT** has been attempting to understand its options with a large facility. They have a history of relating to Yale Divinity School and even have modest housing on site for some of those students. Is this a Side Hustle? Is this wise use of building space? They are wrestling with what other options they might engage. There is a great article on building use in a recent issue of Christian Century. You can view it [here](https://tinyurl.com/yc4mma6n). <https://tinyurl.com/yc4mma6n>*

What resources does your congregation have? Unused rooms? People with skills? Could you convert an unused space to a wifi-office We Work type set up?

We've covered three areas of Hope in these times of Labor. Experimentation, Centers for justice & Spirituality and Entrepreneurial Endeavors. As you have read these examples, what strikes you most? Church is changing, right. Change is challenging. What energizes you? What frightens you? Where do you see God in these times?



Seventh Inning Stretch - Labor in the age of the quick fix?

Let's take a pause at this moment. In fact, if you are reading this as a group, I'd stop here. Go for a walk, stretch your body. We've covered a lot of material here. It can be overwhelming. When you come back, we'll dive in to some more clues.

Ah, the age of the quick fix, the easy solution, and the magic answer. When visiting one of our congregations last year, a very concerned woman asked me, "What's one easy thing we can do to get people to come to our church?" I told her, "That's like asking what's the one easy thing to raise a teenager? Lose weight? Grow a business? The one easy thing doesn't exist. It's a thousand little things."

Another example: One of our pastors recently said to me, "If I only had a picture of what the next church looks like, I could start pointing us in that direction." He leads a congregation that has a sufficient number of people and resources to engage in ministry right now. Yet, he knows that over half his congregation will be gone in five years, along with at least that much in funding. I wanted to be able to tell him what that picture of the next church looks like, but I couldn't.

What I can do is suggest some markers, but that comes in the next section.

Let me pause here to say as clearly as possible what I'm seeing as I visit and talk with church leaders in New England. The local church with its current self-supporting model of a modest size building, a full time ordained pastor, and maybe some part time staff is experiencing stress. In some cases, the stress is significant. The model of the stand alone congregation is the way we have practiced Christian ministry for about a hundred years in this country. This model supported everything else we know as Lutherans because these congregations provided funding and people for everything we have done. Whether it's campus ministry, global missions, seminary education, world hunger, etc. - it has all been supported by the congregational model. This model may be on its last legs. It is already teetering, and in five to ten years it will barely be able to stand. What do we do?

I am not saying that all local congregational ministries will be gone in the years ahead. But, I am saying that the current model as the dominant form of ELCA Lutheranism is undergoing a dramatic downsizing because it is no longer sustainable.



Marks of a Church in Labor

What Do We Do?

I have consistently maintained in my conversations with people that any and all predications of the next church should be met with extreme suspicion. Society is changing at such a rapid pace that no one knows what the future holds. However, I do believe we can look to some characteristics, or as Luther called them: marks of the church. In 1539, Luther's writing, [On the Councils and Church](#), refers to "Seven Marks of the Church." (For a study guide to this topic see Mary Hinkle's [Signs of Belonging](#)) Now 500 years later, in this season of Reformation commemoration, during a vastly different context, I would like to suggest Five Marks of a Church in Labor – a church that is being reborn:

Centered in the Unconditional Love of God in Christ we are

- **A Community of Adventure – People risking everything, willing to try and fail in order to discover how God might be reshaping us.**
- **A Community of Confession – People known by the Cross, embracing the reality of brokenness in our own lives and the life of the world, and guided by biblical themes of honesty, reconciliation and forgiveness.**
- **A Community of Collaboration – People who intentionally connect with other congregations, non-profits, businesses and government.**
- **A Community of Spiritual Vitality – People centered and rooted in spiritual disciplines of prayer, meditation, generosity, Bible study, thanksgiving and Word & Sacrament.**
- **A Community of Holy Action – People intent on making a concrete difference in our neighborhood, nation and world.**

I am intentionally trying to modify traditional church language here, while still embracing some religious terminology. Why? My primary concern with a list that includes Justification, Trinity, Sanctification, etc. is that I have found in many quarters we have lost the depth of what these words mean or we assume we all know what the other is saying. These five marks are rooted in a variety of sources that some of you have brought to my attention from scripture, Luther, more contemporary thinkers, as well as your own thoughts.

Some have suggested that these Marks are more 'doing' than 'being.' That's a fair critique, and it suggests this area needs more work. Some questions to ponder: Is the church that is emerging in need of a rebalancing? Are we too focused on doing? On being? Is the gospel message of unconditional love a starting point or launching point for doing ministry? Or is it an ending point?



Summary - Two truths

Truth # 1 - This is hard. We are in the midst of dramatic cultural, technological and spiritual shifts. Everything is moving under our feet. We have to be patient and good to each other, because the kind of work we are talking about doing is not easy. That needs to be said, again and again. This is hard.

Truth # 2 - The church isn't dying, it's being reborn. I believe that. But although the church as the whole body of Christ is not dying, the other truth is that some local churches are dying. We don't need to be afraid of that, because some of those deaths may be a part of the resurrection of the church, the rebirth of the church.

I've tried to establish our situation as New England Lutherans living in the midst of the labor pains of something new being born. Unlike modern birth in our health care system, we cannot perform an ultrasound, in order to get a glimpse into this new life. We cannot predict its future. Nor can we pretend to know the designs God may have on this next iteration of the church. But, we might suggest some clues, and have thus proposed "Five marks of a Church in Labor"

This short paper is designed to raise questions, encourage conversation, and be rewritten multiple times. The era of easy answers ended a long time ago. I'm interested in good questions that lead us into a new place, and ultimately actions that we can take.

- What questions in this paper made you wonder?
- Look over the proposed marks of the church, what excites or frightens you?
- What's worth investing time and energy and limited resources?
- What should we abandon, what should we no longer do?

- What do we really need/not need, to be Jesus-people, in the way that he wished?
- What kind of learning community do we need?
- What are you most afraid of in these times?
- What gives you hope?

Addendum – Winter 2018

Recently, this paper became a topic of discussion at one of our congregations. This is a church smack dab in the middle of labor. They have sold their building, and the people have begun worshipping in a nearby Episcopal church. The 14 folks in the room impressed me with their honesty. They spoke of the joys and sorrows, the laments and the hopes. They told how they missed their old building, but were glad not to have to constantly work to repair it. They were getting to know the ‘new’ people in this ‘strange’ place. At one point I was asked, what the church of the future will look like. Here was my answer:

“First off, I don’t know. If anyone tells you they know, they are lying. But I will say that I believe that in a time in the distant future – a future I will not see. 50 years from now, 100 years from now, I believe there will be three expressions of the Christian faith here in New England. One will be Roman Catholic, another will be Pentecostal and the third will be liturgical progressive Christianity. (I’m not sold on the adjectives of this last one, I’m looking for something else, but these are a start) This third one will be made up of what we today call the mainline denominations of Lutheran, Episcopal, Congregational, Methodist, etc.

“Now I don’t think we are going to have a formal merger of those bodies to be something like the New England Christian Church, because I think that societal and cultural forces are pushing away from denomination institutionalization. But I do think there are signs today that these mainline traditions are coalescing and something new is happening. I wonder if we are now at a time shedding some of the old, in order to get ready for the new. I wonder if God is in this in a pruning sort of way.

“But, I think what you are doing here is the beginning of some new church that is being born. You are part of the labor. That’s hard. This is hard work, but I believe it’s leading somewhere.”

The mood in the room shifted, as someone said, “We’re cutting edge.” Laughter began to breakout, nervously at first. But, it seemed there was a sense of being a part of something larger, more expansive.

I return to the beginning of this paper and the quote by Edwin Friedman

“You can’t think your way out of a problem, you need a spirit of adventure.”

The only way I know how to have a spirit of adventure is to stir it up, get some energy going around experimentation and let God move us along this journey.

The next section includes examples of church ministries, prepared by Pastor Tim Stein

A Variety of Churches

There are lots of different ways of being a church. Though Lutheran churches in the US (and New England) are often traditional, increasingly many are not. As you think about possible futures for Grace, use the examples here to inspire your imaginations. The point is not to judge these churches favorably or unfavorably, but to stimulate discussion about what Grace might be and do.

Each example contains an image, a short comment concerning what makes the church unusual, and a quote from the church's website.

Our Saviours East Boston

A church with low attendance but with an active mission that reaches hundreds of people every week. It is a site for Spanish-speaking mission which is being integrated with an old Norwegian congregation.



We adopted an "open door" approach to the community, and in doing so learned the gifts and blessings of hospitality which can emerge in a poor city neighborhood. In the 1980's and 90's, Our Saviour's, together with a community organization housed in the basement of the church, became the center of work with thousands of refugees and immigrants in East Boston - the largest community-based program in Boston.



Sanctuary Marshfield

A Lutheran mission church that moved into a Methodist church building and re-organized the worship space, removed the pews, put the altar on a side wall, and emphasized all kinds of music. Now starting a second congregation.



We get it. Sometimes you go to a church for the first time and realize it's a lot like fine dining. Quiet. Refined. Sanctuary is a bit more like a family picnic. We have kids, they act like kids, and that's expected and embraced. In fact, Sunday mornings are intentionally geared to be engaging for all ages, and during all our worship services we have coloring tables and room to move so kids can feel comfortable and parents are able to relax.

Faith Cambridge

Once worshipping with only a handful of people, eventually attracted a new demographic. Has welcomed four other congregations to be part of its ministry, including a German congregation that is increasingly integrated with the English-language one. One of its missions is a meal program.



We are called as Christians and as neighbors to help relieve suffering and to care for our sisters and brothers.

An ongoing program of the church (in partnership with Temple Beth Shalom) is Faith Kitchen, which has been cooking, serving, and sharing great meals for nearly twelve years. Sometimes local restaurants help.



Cathedral in the Night

An outdoor-only church that started as an experiment by two nearby pastors (one Lutheran).



Cathedral in the Night is an outdoor Christian community in downtown Northampton, MA, which seeks to create a safe place for all people: the homeless, the housed, the churchless, the churched, the student and the resident to explore, question and live out their spiritual beliefs; to gather for a meal and to empower one another to engage in issues of social justice by working to fight the causes of inequality and homelessness

Zion Pittsfield

A Pittsfield Lutheran church that was ready to close, but instead fixed up their building, which became a big community center and a small congregation. In the first six months, the church was used 130 days out of 180, only 40 of them for worship.



As a result of [a large renovation project], a new ministry was born. We call it Common Room to reflect our vision of shared space, as well as to recall our proximity to the Pittsfield Common, the adjacent city park. We give thanks that we have begun to forge new relationships with our neighbors, and we have already hosted theatre rehearsals, musical concerts, nonprofit meetings, dinners, and movie nights, in addition to our congregation's worship and fellowship.



Salt and Light Church and the Leaven Community

A young Lutheran pastor presides at a church that is just one part of Leaven, a larger non-profit, community-based organization. Leaven was formed after a traditional congregation decided to close and to start over as a new kind of church.



Melissa's job was to envision a new way of being in the neighborhood on behalf of the gospel. By a community organizing process, the congregation, in Melissa's words, decided "to become vulnerable for the sake of the community."

Churches Joined Together

Lutheran Church of Framingham

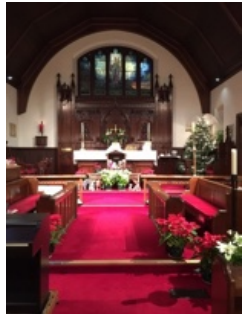


A Lutheran congregation moved from its own building and became a separate worshipping body within a nearby Episcopal church.

The church voted to "Partner with St. Andrew's Episcopal Church in sharing ministry activities - service projects, Christian education, staff (both Episcopal and Lutheran), building - while remaining as a Lutheran congregation teaching from both the Lutheran and Anglican heritages at the current Episcopal location."



Christ Trinity Church Sheffield



A "conjunction" of a Lutheran and Episcopal church into a vital single congregation. Its motto is "Our Church is ALIVE!"

Our church grew from the conjoining of two congregations in 2007. Now, blending a rich heritage of Episcopal and Lutheran traditions, we share worship, governance, budget and mission outreach. ... "Conjoined" means Lutheran and Episcopalian churches join to become one. In cases of conjoined churches, services and rites have evolved to a combination of both Episcopalian and Lutheran liturgies.

Good Shepherd Rutland



A Lutheran church joined by a Methodist one, a relationship that started with a joint ministry project called Faith on Foot.

RUMC held a special congregational meeting in September to deconsecrate and leave their current building. Operations will be moved into a leased space in our city's downtown neighborhood and into the campus of Good Shepherd. ... Faith on Foot has evolved from a single ministry project (the weekly Street Reach) into an umbrella of Cooperative Mission between the two churches and a commitment to strengthening the discipleship of everyone involved.

Bethel Auburn and Zion Worcester



Two Lutheran churches separated geographically but "yoked," sharing pastoral leadership.

In a landmark move by the Spirit, Bethel Lutheran-Auburn & Zion Lutheran-Worcester sign a Yoking Agreement on 4/12/16. This is a first for the NES, two ELCA parishes covenanting to share pastoral/rostered leadership.

