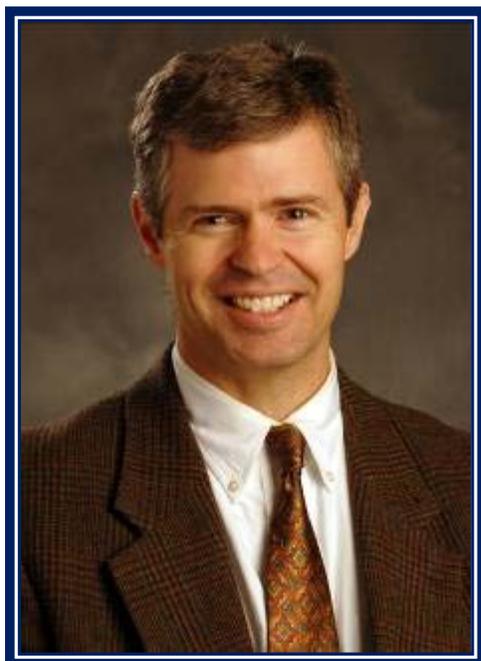


WHAT MAKES A VIBRANT CONGREGATION? A SEMINARY REDISCOVERS CONGREGATIONAL LIFE

by

John M. Mulder

During the 1960s—and somewhat before and after—Protestant seminaries were marked by an ethos that was either apathetic or hostile to the life of congregations. It was symbolized, if not fueled, by such books as Gibson Winter's The Suburban Captivity of the Churches (1962) and Pierre Berton's The Comfortable Pew (1965). The church existed to promote social change, the argument went, and congregations were part of the problem, not the solution. Ironically, this critique of congregations occurred just as many Protestant congregations began a steady decline in members and as seminaries faced the task of raising their funds increasingly from congregations and individual members.



David J. Lose

A sea-change has swept through Protestant seminaries in the past half-century. Many now recognize anew that their students both come from congregations and serve congregations when they leave. Many now recognize their role in supporting congregational life and spurring congregational vitality.

Luther Theological Seminary in St. Paul, MN, stands at the vanguard of this movement. It has received a Lilly grant for its “Vibrant Congregations Project,” which intends to reshape not only congregational life but seminary life as well.

“Vibrant congregations are the heart of North American Christianity,” says David J. Lose, director of the Vibrant Congregations Project and Associate Professor of Biblical Preaching at Luther Seminary. Lose also directs the

Center for Biblical Preaching. He argues, “[Congregations] are overwhelmingly the most frequent arena in which Christians gather for worship, support, education, and outreach. The health of North American Christianity can be measured most simply by surveying the health of its congregations.”

“Some of the key indicators of mainline congregational life and health continue to be ominous,” Lose declares, but “more recently there are also numerous signs that genuine renewal has begun.” Some involve reclaiming “longstanding traditions and practices,” and “others feel more like disruptions of the familiar in favor of emerging though as yet undefined patterns.”

Lose flatly concludes, “A decade into the twenty-first century, it looks like vibrant, life-giving communities of faith in the mainline tradition are making a comeback.”

Now in its second of three years of the Lilly grant, the Vibrant Congregations Project at Luther essentially aims at studying thriving congregations to help struggling congregations, though Lose and Luther Seminary Dean Roland D. Martinson concede that the division between the two has been blurred. In both cases, they insist, they are trying to learn from the two sets of congregations to help them in critical areas of ministry and to reorient and renew seminary teaching to prepare graduates for effective ministry.

At the heart of the program is a fundamental rethinking of “vibrant faith and vibrant congregational life,” Lose says. That used to be understood in “Enlightenment-defined cognitive terms,” he explains. But “we are now recognizing and reclaiming a more primary, even visceral understanding of faith.” As an example, he cites a study of church members on the issue of vocation. The term “vocation” came in dead last as a significant category. Instead, “meaning and work” resonated with church members.

“Dynamic, life-giving faith is believing that God is active in the world and desiring to join that activity,” Lose states. He adds, “It is the practiced ability to see God in the world (often hidden where one would not expect God to be) and to discern where and how one might partner with God in God’s ongoing work to love, bless, and save the world.”

The Vibrant Congregations project was built on two shifts over the past twenty years. The first involved a curriculum change at Luther Seminary that placed congregational life and contextual learning “at the heart of the curriculum,” Lose says. The second was an attempt to seek out the advice and counsel of congregations in shaping the strategic plan for Luther in 1998-2000. The strategic plan identified four emphases for the Luther Seminary curriculum: 1) biblical preaching and worship, 2) the vocation of all God’s people, 3) congregational mission and leadership, and 4) children youth and family ministry.

Consultations with congregations added two more emphases: 5) biblical fluency and 6) stewardship.

In words that would have scarcely been uttered a half century ago, the Luther Seminary proposal asks about congregations: “Who better to tell us whether we are achieving our mission than those who receive our graduates and who have helped us articulate our goals in the first place? Even more who better to teach us how to achieve our goals and accomplish our mission than those congregations that are already thriving, vibrant places of faith, community, and purpose?”

The idea, says Lose, is not simply studying congregations but to study with congregations and develop a more significant partnership with congregations than most seminaries have previously envisioned. “We intend,” he writes, “to walk along side our partner congregations, accompany them on their various journeys to vibrancy, and thereby learn both from them and with them how they have grown, why at times they have fallen short, how other congregations may learn from their successes and failures, and what we should know about preparing leaders for vibrant congregations.”

Implementing the Vibrant Congregations Project is fairly straightforward, but with an emphasis on partnership and collaboration. First, Luther Seminary is identifying a range of diverse congregations—both thriving and aspiring, and both Evangelical Lutheran Church congregations and those from other traditions—that fit one or more of the six areas of congregational life. With these congregations, Luther aims at “exploratory experimentation” with those congregations and then analyzes and reports the findings via print and digital media.

Second, web-based resources constitute a major piece of the Vibrant Congregations Project, based on Luther Seminary’s extraordinary success in this area. www.workingpreacher.org, which focuses on preaching and worship, was launched by Luther Seminary two years ago and now has 300,000 hits from more than 100 countries each month. Another site, www.enterthebible.org, has been launched, and it focuses on biblical fluency by providing reference and study tools to individuals or groups. Other sites—dealing with congregational mission, stewardship, and vocation—are being developed. These will complement another Seminary website dealing with youth ministry. It will combine www.exemplarym.org, which deals with research under the Lilly youth ministry grant, with one that deals with an annual conference on youth ministry, www.firstthird.org.

“We have found creative, thoughtful, and professionally executed websites to be an incredibly effective means to share with congregations and their leaders,”

Lose says. He adds that they want to build on that experience by not only providing resources but using the web for “dynamic forums for discussion and learning.” As a result, part of the Vibrant Congregations project involves more websites covering the other areas of “vibrant congregational life.”

Lose says the web sites also help minimize the feelings of disappointment from congregations who are not accepted into the Vibrant Congregations Project. These congregations can interact with the material being generated and shape the Project in direct and substantial ways. Lose estimates that even though 8-10 congregations are involved in each of the six areas of study, as many as 100 congregations might participate in each focus area via the Internet.

Third, through a series of small and large meetings, the participants in the Vibrant Congregations Project will present their findings to each other and to other interested lay and professional church leaders. Conversations and consultations among Luther’s faculty about the implication of the findings and process are also an intentional part of the Project.

Lose acknowledges that there are two commitments that are essential to this work between seminaries and congregations.

First, he says, “meaningful change will only occur in congregational and seminary life if we can establish and maintain a dynamic interaction between research and practice.” He explains, “We’re not proving anything. We’re testing hypotheses. For example, our original distinction between thriving and striving congregations proved inaccurate. We had closed the door to being surprised. Now we’re trying to identify interesting congregations instead. Most of our goals are process goals, not outcomes.”

Martinson adds, “We’re part of a discovery—a curiosity that seeks to know. We are engaged in a process. And we’re convinced that congregations are a reservoir of wisdom and resources. We’ve got one foot deeply planted in the academic world and one in the richness of congregational life.”

Second, Lose says, “no single institution can accomplish the transformation we envision.” Beyond the scope of the grant project is the daunting task of creating the networks of institutions, agencies, and individuals that can sustain the Project’s process and insights into vibrant congregational life.

Lose readily admits the Vibrant Congregations Project will not accomplish some things. First, the six signs of vibrancy will be studied by teams independently and only later will the connections between the six signs be analyzed. Second, he is optimistic that this will further reshape Luther Seminary’s curriculum, but “this will be only the beginning, not the end, of moving toward full-fledge

curriculum assessment and revision in light of our engagement with congregations.”

Lose, a former Dean at Luther Seminary, is encouraged so far by the reaction of the Luther faculty. “We have three groups of faculty,” he says. “One third is strongly supportive and deeply engaged. Another third has expressed interest and gradually entered into direct participation.” He adds, somewhat drily, “A small group is lightly interested.”

Current Dean Martinson agrees. “Some of the most involved faculty come from Bible and systematic theology and at least one church historian,” he notes. Most of the participating faculty come from the practical disciplines. Martinson says the Vibrant Congregations Project learned from the curriculum reform of the 1990s in which Luther did consultations with congregations in 14 areas of the country. “We were told that we were educating people for a church that no longer exists,” he says. He also notes that 3/5ths of the Luther Seminary faculty are new, and “now there’s a new possibility.”

Have they encountered resistance or resentment from congregations? “Almost the opposite,” says Lose. “They are working so hard and are so beleaguered. Despite all their hard work, the congregations still decline. So there’s a sense of gratitude when we open the conversation. There’s no tinge of grudges from the past or resentments.” Each of the six areas of vibrant ministry has had 90-160 applicants, both self-nominated and nominated by others. Lose says, “Even asking the question is a source of renewal” for congregations.

In addition, Lose says that by engaging congregations directly, they aren’t trying an end run around denominational structures. “So far no one’s raised a question,” he says. “There’s a huge shift going on in how resources are available—web-based vs. denominational channels, and we are using the web.” Martinson adds, “It’s more and more the case that judicatories are stressed and strapped and trying to develop more networks. Individuals recognize seminaries as more flexible and innovative. What we’re witnessing is a tension between structures versus fluid networks.”

What is vibrant? Lose answers, “That’s what we’re learning. We’re constantly shifting to testing what we suppose might be true, instead of seeking data to confirm our ideas.” As an example, he cited the distinction between “thrivers” and “strivers” that they have abandoned. “What we discovered was that it was not nearly as easy as we imagined to distinguish between the thrivers and the strivers. We also realized that our original design presumed we already knew what the marks of a thriving congregations were. That assumption unintentionally limited what we might learn from our conversations with our partner congregations.”

What have they learned so far?

For one thing, Lose says, “our conviction that the best way to share the results of our work may not end up being through traditional print media.” The success of Luther Seminary’s websites is one marker in this transition. But leaders of the study are also exploring whether videos might be a more effective means of transferring the findings of the study to congregations, judicatories, and seminaries.

Lose says, “We’re being rewarded by investing in the process, not the outcome. We thought people would resonate to the idea of vocation, but that came in dead last. We also learned that Bible study is dead last as a way of cultivating a relationship with God. I’ve been struck by how deep the cultural shifts actually are. Our youth ministry grant [from Lilly] prepared the way, but had scratched only the surface.

“This culture is so different than the one we grew up in,” Lose continues. “That includes the whole process of constructing meaning, values, and identity. This is a huge change. It’s a shift from being receivers of information to participants in forming information. Today’s worship services are the one area of your life where you can imagine being in the 1950s and 1960s, where everything is done for you and to you. The better the preacher, the deeper the crisis. And that’s only one example. We’ve paid attention to the culture, but not nearly enough.”

Martinson adds, “These changes have left even the most talented pastors shocked. But I think now they have the sense that someone cares about what is happening to them and their congregations. I think we’re seeing the power, the pent up power, that exists in congregations and their leaders.”

Lose admits that the Vibrant Congregations has affected him deeply. “It’s been a fruitful, vocational crisis,” he says. “I was approached by Augsburg-Fortress to write a textbook on preaching. I can’t write it now because I’m re-thinking what I know. I fear I’ll end up writing a textbook I didn’t want to buy.”

Martinson says, “I confess to a certain gloating and joy in what we are finding.” He says he was part of the important studies of congregations and ministry by Merton Strommen and others, published as Ministry in America (1980). “Now it’s been a hoot for me to see the openness and freedom to talk to and about congregations. It warms the cockles of my heart.”

Lose concludes, “We are at a turning point in North American congregational life. While signs of continued decline [exist], there are also signs of renewal and transformation....It is an ambitious project, but...we are confident that we can

**“What Makes a Vibrant Congregation?:
A Seminary Rediscovered Congregational Life”**
from the website
Resources for American Christianity
<http://www.resourcingchristianity.org/>

succeed in greatly strengthening the renewal and growing vibrancy of congregational life in North America. We both suspect and anticipate through this process of partnership and exploration, it will not only be congregations that change, but our seminary, and perhaps through what we learn and can share, seminary education as a whole.”

If the Vibrant Congregations Project at Luther Seminary is a sign of change—and indeed it is—then the future of both seminaries and congregations is brighter. They are discovering and rediscovering that they have much to learn from each other, and in fact, they cannot survive or prosper without one another. They’re all charged with the task of ministry in an increasingly complex culture.

Lose expresses “profound appreciation to Lilly and the congregations we’re working with.” He says, “Lilly not only supports ingenuity and creativity. It not only provides resources but makes sure the findings are shared. They push back, they challenge, and they encourage. They are wonderful partners.”