

**2010 Sabbatical Report
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Sabbatical Proposal

Objective:

To provide an extended period of study and rest in order to continue my leadership at Christ Lutheran Church.

Dates:

Monday, June 7 – August 15, (10 weeks)

Primary Study Plan:

The bulk of this time (approximately 8 weeks) will be driving from Florida to California with my 18-year old son, Christopher, visiting notable churches along the way. Based loosely on the idea from the book, *Jim and Casper Go To Church*, we will be studying churches along the way who are doing effective 20-something ministries (i.e., music, message, architecture, etc.). Both he and I will keep detailed notes on what we experience with the desire to bring our thoughts together for the purpose of offering creative ideas on how Christ Lutheran Church can do a better job in outreach to 20-somethings. In addition he and I would be catching as many major league baseball games as possible, and finding the best golf course in our price range to play.

Secondary Study Plan:

In addition to the above mentioned plan, my desire is to catch up on a long list of books that have been waiting my attention.

2010 Sabbatical Overview

Days away from home.....59

Days “on the road”.....52

Miles traveled.....6,650

Total cost of gas.....\$682.64

Total number of gallons of gas purchased.....260

Number of moving violations received.....0

Number of hotels stayed at.....18

Number of nights stayed in hotels.....34

Number of nights stayed with relatives and friends.....17

Number of visits to McDonalds.....5(!)

Churches visited.....11

Minutes of sermons heard.....353 (approximately)

Baseball games attended.....8

Number of grand slams witnessed.....2

Number of foul balls caught.....0

Number of hot dogs/bratwursts eaten.....too many

Number golf courses played.....9

Number of holes played (combined).....324

Number of holes-in-one.....0

Number of birdies (combined).....10

Number of pars (combined).....107

Number of bogeys.....113

Number of books read.....9

Findings and Reflections

We live in amazing place at an amazing time.

Our drive across the United States (mainly the southern route) showed us how beautiful our nation is. From the everglades of Florida, to the Blue Ridge Mountains of North Carolina, to the cornfields of the Midwest, to skyscrapers of Chicago, to the prairies of the heartland, to the canyons of the southwest, we are so fortunate to live in such a diverse and picturesque land.

As amazing as the sites were, so also the people. We had the joy of spending time with family, of reconnecting with friends from years past, and of making new friends along the way. We were graciously received wherever we went. We visited some churches where we were made to feel very special, and we visited churches that didn't know we were there, but nonetheless filled our spirits.

The time we live in is no less amazing. If Rex Miller in his book *Millennium Matrix* is correct (and I have every reason to believe he is), we are currently undergoing a paradigm shift in how people think, process information, and communicate. While the implications for this will change the way business is done, education is passed along, and people live together, the Church will equally be affected. This new time is making room for a younger generation who have been greatly impacted by the digital world (thus, this paradigm Miller calls "the digital culture"). At the same time, the "print culture" (those who rely on reason and structure) and the "broadcast culture" (those who are attracted to multiple sensory experiences) are ever present.

Those that make up the "digital culture" were generally born after 1985 (give or take). They have been raised on the computer with all its blessings and curses. They are profoundly affected by interactive, immediate, and non-conforming social connections. They are active and activist, and they have different values and goals than their parents (and certainly grandparents). And they are not likely to show up to church on a Sunday.

What will this new paradigm look like for the Church? In short, we don't know for sure. We are still early in its unfolding. But we do know things will be different. And we do know (based on our earlier shift from a print culture to broadcast culture) that it will be challenging. People do not like to change, especially when it means needing to give up something (i.e., familiar ways) in order to get something (i.e., a new crowd of younger people in the church).

I consider this to be an amazing time because the Church will be challenged to be the Church. That is, we will find ourselves venturing into unfamiliar territories as we seek to be faithful with only our faith in God to hold us up. We will need to rediscover a missional attitude that will propel us to do things out of the ordinary. We will encounter people who think and act differently from "us" and we will work hard at seeing Christ in them. We will be challenged to die to ourselves and be raised with Christ, as was promised us when we were baptized.

The challenge ahead could be the most difficult one we have ever faced. I will outline some of the challenges as I see them. But I also believe we have a unique opportunity at Christ Lutheran Church to connect with and adapt to the digital culture. I have a hope and belief that we will commit to the necessary work so that we will experience Jesus and live like Jesus so that those desiring greater meaning will enjoy and abundant life in Christ.

Issue #1 – Leadership will change

About five years ago I remember Bill Hybels, senior pastor of Willow Creek Community Church in Illinois saying, “we are not racially representative of the community around us.” As I looked in on Willow Creek through web portals I began noticing more and more people of color in up front leadership roles (largely in music). When we were at Willow Creek this summer Bill Hybels noted that nearly 20% of their church was now made up of people of color, closer to the demographics of their community.

The axiom, “speed of the leader, speed of the team,” comes into play here. If we want to attract 20-somethings we need to have people in leadership who are representative of this age. Leadership, in this broad definition, are those in front of the congregation and behind the scenes who are steering the direction of CLC. We need talented, gifted, and mature 20-somethings who sit in on planning sessions. We need talented, gifted, and mature 20-somethings in front of the congregation on Sundays who are leading worship, musically and non-musically.

The issue of younger leadership is not just perception (though that is important). The issue is also thought process. 20-somethings will challenge the way “we have always done it,” and they will help us see ministry from a different perspective (different social engagements, different activities, different outcomes of certain ministries, etc.).

Issue #2 – Worship/Music will change.

Christ Lutheran Church has navigated the shift from “print culture” (think LBW, liturgy, eternal candles, etc.) to “broadcast culture” (think video screen, worship band, robeless worship leaders, etc.). We did so somewhat effectively, and we also made mistakes along the way. The point is, we are not unfamiliar with changing worship according to the cultural paradigms.

We will be challenged to do this again.

I used to think that the only way to create a viable worship experience for 20-somethings was away from our current campus, in a coffee-house setting, with hip worship leaders. I don’t think this any more. While some churches we visited definitely have this style in mind (notably Mars Hill Church in Albuquerque), it doesn’t have to be this way. 20-somethings don’t necessarily want to be cut off from older generations. And 20-somethings definitely don’t want hip. 20-somethings want genuine community with authentic people.

As we once discovered, the secret for worship/music change is not to take away anything but to add something. It seems to me the best course of action will be to keep our traditional service and our celebration service and add (for lack of a better term) a 20-something service. This service would follow the same theme as the previous settings, some of the same leaders, but also have 20-something worship leaders (musical and non-musical) and more contemporary music. It would probably be louder than our current ChristSong worship services.

Issue 3 – Communication and interaction will change.

We currently have multiple ways to communicate in the congregation. We will create more, mostly through digital means. We will become more creative in the way we get information out, as well as receive information. We will also look to digital means to create a sense of community within the congregation. One challenge will be that those

ways which seem as inefficient communication to those in the print culture will most likely be the most effective to those in the digital culture (i.e., What is the reason we have to wait two to three years for a church directory? Isn't this something that can be available electronically and updated in a minute by the user?).

Issue #4 – Architecture will change.

The recently finished Community Connection Center was built for those in the print culture (note large offices where people can get some “work” done, and a conference room where the “board” can meet) and the broadcast culture (note the pull down screen in the conference room and the sound and video capabilities in the large room). The digital culture is not interested in corporate setting nor large scale entertainment gathering. We might be challenged in the future to create “liquid” office space and give permission to redesign meeting rooms.

Our greatest challenge will be to consider and create new worship space that goes beyond the print culture (which is how CLC was originally built) and our attempt to move it into the broadcast culture (which is what we have struggled to do these past 15 years). What this new sanctuary would look like, I don't know. I think it is too early to tell how architecture can facilitate the print and broadcast culture while allowing the digital culture to find a home.

In my opinion, now that we have completed the Community Connections Center we are in a perfect position to begin exploring what this new sanctuary might look and be like.

Issue #5 – The presentation of who we are will change.

It has been a long time since we have re-thought our branding as a congregation (roughly 13 years). Currently we have a branding team that is thinking about such things as logo, tag line, print color scheme, and the like. I anticipate this will continue. I also anticipate that this work will also cause us to rethink the way we present ourselves in the church web page.

Many people do not think the church ought to be in the practice of marketing itself. They fail to realize that the church has “marketed” itself from the very beginning. When Paul spoke about being a Jew to the Jews and a Gentile to the Gentiles (1 Cor. 9:20) he was implying that depending on who his audience is he would focus the message so as to be heard by that audience.

I believe one of our challenges will be to rethink our presentation away from print culture trappings. Like it or not, “Lutheran” in our name is a print culture thing. 20-somethings do not know what a Lutheran is nor do they really care. While print culture churches are denominationally identified, broadcast culture churches generally have the word “community” in it. They are also likely to be a mega-church model. Digital culture churches are often named such things as Revolution, Radiant, The Well – rather vague and nonspecific things. We are wondering if our rebranding will allow us to be known and accepted as “CLC” as opposed to Christ Lutheran Church? Maybe this little change will be enough to help us enter into the cultural mainstream.

Beyond a renaming, we also will need to carefully rethink our digital image, largely through the web page. Print culture churches (i.e., Lutherans) use lots of words to explain who they are. Broadcast churches use lots of pictures to show who they are. Digital churches (seem to) use lots of ways for people to get connected with them

digitally. The web might be our most important tool for telling the story of who we are to others as well as to create a community of faith. Think about that for awhile.

Issue #6 – Theology will expand and established ethics will be challenged.

The truth of the matter is, with the coming of a new generation of followers of Christ, there will be more complex ways to understand life and faith.

First of all, while the church has focused heavily upon substitutionary atonement to describe what Jesus did on the cross (he paid the price of your sins so you might have salvation), 20-somethings are asking for more with regard to the presence of God and the work of Christ. They are asking what does this mean now, not when they die. They are active and activists. They want to see the value of the kingdom of God in how they live, and want the world to be. Therefore, 20-somethings are challenging the church to see itself in a crusade to be environmental, to be advocates for the poor, and to be doing things rather than believing things.

20-somethings are also challenging the church to rethink what salvation means. They want us to go beyond the narrow scope of repeating a prayer or believing 4 spiritual laws in order to be saved. They see salvation as more than a “simple” conversion, and more like a lifestyle. They abhor phoniness and duplicity. They seek genuine community and authentic relationships. They embrace saint and sinner living more than previous generations (to see a good picture of a 20-something perspective, read Anne Lamont; though she is older than I am, she is deeply in touch with this altered way of living the faith).

But with the expanding theology will come a challenge to traditionally accepted ethics. Be prepared for tattoos. Get ready for non-conforming dress. Piercings and earrings are a style all of their own.

Apart from externals, however, there will be some significant challenges to the way the church understands relationships. Non-marriage, life-together relationships are dominant (the majority of 20-somethings grew up in homes where traditional marriage existed but fell a part in divorce). Also, 20-somethings have a much more accepting opinion of same-sex relationships.

Statement – Our identity at CLC will remain the same.

The core values of CLC are rooted into who we are. These core values are as relevant to those in the digital culture as they have been to those in the print and broadcast culture. We are blessed with a theology which is not rigid, which accepts people different from the norm. We are blessed with people who are willing to pay the high price of personal sacrifice as they give up their comfort for the sake of others in need. We are blessed with a congregation that has never been happy sitting back, but desires to be active (though maybe not activist). We believe that God wants to develop each person and that the only way to discover true faith is by becoming the person God wants us to be, serving in capacities of His choosing, and making a real difference in the world around us.

There is no question in my mind, that while we might be up against our greatest challenge as a congregation as we seek to be welcoming of the digital culture, we will remain vibrant and effective.

I believe the journey ahead may be the best days of CLC.

Churches We Visited

(My comments are the main text, Christopher's comments are italicized in blue)

Hendricks Avenue Baptist Church, Jacksonville, FL – 6/20, 8:45

This service was promoted on the web site as their contemporary service (the traditional service was at 11:00). We arrived 10 minutes early. Not many in the parking lot. As we walked to the sanctuary, no one greeted us. *No one assigned at the door for greeting.* We walked into the sanctuary. A very beautiful sanctuary with arched beamed ceiling, all out of wood. A very nice setting. The service started about 5-10 minutes late. *I liked the fact that the service didn't start on time. It gave a little more relaxed of a feel rather than having everything having to be precise.* Not many people there (the previous week's total was 93).

Style of the service was "classic rock." The pianist was, in fact, the pianist we watched perform in an outdoor concert at an open air concert on Friday night. The music was very good. Two singers; female was very good.

The pastor delivered a good sermon. Very polished. No notes. Neither were there take away points. No overhead projection for the sermon (though there was for the songs). Very good work with the text. I liked his finishing point, which I believe was his whole point. But it remained very vague in terms of application. *The pastor was very engaging. He was able to hold my attention, even though he was speaking to a crowd much older than I. He wasn't behind a pulpit and moved around quite a bit which I think helped.*

There was no mention of service work of the church. They did mention they had a missions group traveling, though I forget where. Not much was mentioned.

Today was Father's Day. Little was said regarding this.

After the service a couple people greeted us. *We were greeted by the pastor himself, as well as a few sitting near us.* We were able to sneak out easily.

Interesting: they had "Alternative Fuel Parking," but no "Visitor Parking."

This seemed to be the case where the web site oversold the service. But I would attend again. *I would most likely attend again if there were more people there my age.*

Celebration Church, Jacksonville, FL – 6/20, 11:30

A classic "Concert Service." Very slick; very performance driven. *The "rock concert" feeling really seemed to have a pull on those my age. Its more their style of music, and the fact that there were so many people there, its hard to be singled out.*

We were guided to our parking spot by way of parking lot ushers. There were many. We traveled a long way. They even had the local police directing traffic.

There was a large stage with speaker towers and many banks of lights. Also visible were the cameras which were going to beam the message to multiple sites (one being right next door which was a worship café setting).

A countdown on the screen brought the band onto the stage. Very loud music. Lots of bass. The lights went low. People continued to file in. Ushers helped direct people to their seats with flashlights. Soon the whole sanctuary seemed full (500? 600? 700?). The band was very tight (five or six singers, one who led, a couple guitars, bass, drums, electric piano, drums, and sax). We did not know any of the songs they played,

though, many in the church seemed. *The music was good, although I didn't know any of the songs. They were still great to listen to.*

Use of video throughout. At one point they showed a great self-made video on the need for “volunteers.” Most of the announcements were video prepared.

They made a big deal out of Father's Day. They had all dads stands. They spoke about the importance of dads in setting good examples for their children. It was not a heavy. It was affirming. They even did a “give away” to a dad (ticket under the seat).

The message was delivered by the student pastor. He was a very good speaker; very vulnerable, and very animated. The message was on Judges 6 (Gideon). It was all about putting God's purpose in you above your fears. He mixed humor with good points. All points were projected. He was easy to follow. *The pastor who gave the sermon was a younger guy, which made it easier for teens and those in their twenties to identify with him. The fact that he included comedy into his sermon helped hold the audiences attention, as well as lots of acting while he was talking. My only criticism is that his sermon was far too long and my attention started to drift.* It was a “typical” personal development sermon that ended with an altar call. The altar call was not only for those giving their lives to Christ for the first time, but for anyone needing prayer. Many went forward. One large black man standing near me went forward. He came back with tears in his eyes. Clearly something was going on in his life that today was important for.

The preacher had a bad habit of saying, “Can I tell you...” He said this no less than 35 times.

When the offering was taken there was a brief mention of service beyond themselves. The main point of the church seemed to be having people encounter a personal God. They are big into church growth. Multiple sites with the announcement of a new church starting soon in Greece!

Everyone on stage was no more than 35 years old. Many in their 20's. I was clearly one of the older people present. Though there was a greeting time in the service, not many greeted. After the service, everyone seemed to make their way to their cars without talking with anyone and drove away. *We were not greeted by a single person at this church. No one introduced themselves or tried to speak to us in any way.* Police made sure everyone could get to the street easily.

North Point Church, Alpharetta (Atlanta), GA – 6/24, 7:30 PM

Driving up to this church I was not prepared to see all the cars in the vast parking lot; hundreds (maybe thousands). A mid-week service! It was promoted on the web site as a service of worship, prayer, and communion. The sanctuary was full. My estimation is that there were in excess of 2,500 people there, all ages, a variety of ethnicities (though anglo predominant).

Once again, a concert-style of worship. Very professional. Maybe the best musicians I have ever heard in worship. A variety of lead worshippers. The music and words on the screen matched perfectly. The ages of the musicians was a variety of ages, most younger (30-ish). *Familiar songs were played at this service, and they were played well. The singers were all in sync, and the band seemed like they had a lot of practice time together. This made for an awesome rock church service.*

Lots of singing. The congregation was into it. Then Andy Stanley spoke about the prayer time. He asked people to connect with others for prayer (prayers were asked

for their youth mission trip, those effected by the economy, and things happening in the world). A little awkward. But people all around me did it. *This prayer time WAS awkward. They asked everyone, members and visitors alike to pray with those around them. While this might have been normal for the regulars, for us as first time visitors, I found that I wasn't comfortable with doing so.* Music under the prayer time. About 15 minutes of prayer. Then more music, then an introduction by Andy for communion. A very compelling presentation of communion as a demonstration of God's love for us (rather solid theology).

After communion (which everyone seemed to go up for (multiple stations), then another 4 or 5 songs; a lot more emotional driven. After an hour and a half (!), then we were out. *While most of this service was music, the fact that it was an hour and a half made it not as much fun as it could be.*

Apart from Andy's introduction to communion, and very emotional service (actually even his introduction was a bit emotional). *Sorry to say this dad but after reading that book you gave me, I have to say that the fact that there was so much emotion in that part of the service was a sham. From what I read in that book, using that emotion is common and is often used to help bring in more money for an offering or such. Please, please, please don't ever try to get emotional in church for the extra buck.* Lights go low (probably the most extensive and expensive light show I have seen outside of a rock concert), and then come up. Very well orchestrated service. Almost slick.

Again, so many people on a Thursday night. Amazing!

Biltmore Baptist Church (Vertical), Asheville, NC – 6/25, 6:00 PM

Arriving for the evening service they called "Vertical," we encountered a huge Baptist Church with quite a few cars coming into. Though we were told (by sings) to put on our flashers if we were first time visitors, I didn't do that. Evidently we would have been directed to the best parking spaces (there were parking lot attendants on duty). *My dad was constantly put off by churches asking him to identify himself as a visitor. In some churches they would ask visitors to stand or in this case to put on their flashers and take the best parking spots. My dad refused to do any of it. But at this particular church I got a free shirt because I was a visitor.*

Upon entering the front door we were greeted by many young volunteers. One introduced herself and told us a little about what we would experience in worship. We waited in the foyer a few minutes (before they opened the doors). While there a few other greeters (older) welcomed us. *I liked the fact that we were greeted so warmly. And it wasn't just the fact that we were greeted. People seemed genuinely interested in us and kept up conversations.* When they asked what church we attended I said, "Lutheran." They responded, "Well, this will be different for you."

We entered the sanctuary. It was dark. The sanctuary was a cross between a "concert-setting" and a more formal sanctuary. It made me wonder if the sanctuary was changed over from morning to evening.

The band was not as musically deep as Celebration Church and North Point. All musicians were quite young (in their 20s). The music was good, a cross between a few old hymns and contemporary songs I have never heard before. *I thought the music was quite good. Not too many people in the band, just three singers.*

The sanctuary was quite full. There were people of all ages, though Christopher said that he saw a lot of people his age (leading him to suggest this was a church he could get used to).

Christopher noted that there was a lot of smokiness in the air. We couldn't tell if it was coming from a construction project going on inside the sanctuary (ish!), or if it was caused by a smoke machine (weird).

During the song set there were baptisms (by immersion). *I thought this was pretty cool to see, it also made me wonder how often they do this sort of thing in one of their services.* The music was played over the baptisms so I couldn't hear anything said to the baptized. About 7 people were baptized. A couple of them were in their 20s, a couple in the teens, and the rest quite young (one I guessed to be about 6 years old...a rather young "age of reason!").

The message was preceded by a video that set the stage well; on the theodicy of God. The message essentially was on Job, given without notes, and with a non-stop narrative. The preacher (senior pastor) was quite intense; no jokes, no levity, and the self-insight was about his step-father's death, and his presence in the room of a woman who had suicided.

Apart from some of his theology on the devil, he did a fairly good job on the message. He stayed Biblical, and came to a point (actually two points). *This pastor wasn't all that memorable. He was slightly older, which probably didn't help my attention, but the fact that he was completely serious throughout the whole thing kind of threw me off. He didn't even crack a smile, which really detracted from the whole thing for me.* His conclusion was weak, sorting morphing into his altar call. Prayer leaders (all men?) were up front to pray for people who needed prayer or who wanted to commit their lives to Christ.

Interesting – earlier in the day we traveled to worship on “Billy Graham Highway.” Tonight, Billy Graham was the only quoted church leader in the sermon. Clearly I know where we are!

Willow Creek Community Church, South Barrington (Chicago), IL – 7/4, 11:15

We arrived at Evangelical Mecca! A long awaited visit. What a beautiful campus! Not too many churches can boast of their own lake. The buildings and grounds (and parking lot) were well laid out. An incredible place.

Once inside I/we were astonished. It was huge! *The size of this church was almost a minus for me. With such a large church and large member base, how is it possible for a church to be a personal church. The chances of you meeting everyone is slim, and the chances of you ever getting to meet with the pastor one on one is pretty much none.* How many church have escalators? And a full size cafeteria (where we ate lunch and it was fantastic). A book store upstairs to rival most Christian bookstores (we bought books there). Also a café in the lobby, making every kind of coffee drink you can think of. Everything was so clean and so well laid out.

Then we entered the sanctuary. Wow! Clearly the largest sanctuary I have ever been in. By my estimation over 5,000 seats, three levels. There were no crosses in sight, or other Christian symbols (in keeping with big box/concert worship). But there were well-placed windows that lightened things up and didn't make us feel so enclosed. *I feel*

that the windows were a big plus. It really helped out the atmosphere and think it might be something for us to look into.

The band started with strong music. One guitar, bass, drums, and piano, where the principle worship leader was. All musicians were excellent, and younger than me (mid-20s). *Having young band members was a good thing for this church, I thought. They played good music and seemed very well practice, no hitches in the music.* Then three vocalists came on stage, again in their 20s to 30s; they were all African-American. Interesting as I know Willow has worked to be more multi-racial (mentioned by Bill Hybels later in the service, going from 4% black to 20%, though I did not see that number of people of color present).

The music was interesting. It started with a hymn, amped up the melody, but kept the King James Version language (these and thous, and using “man” rather than human). The other songs were great and easy to sing.

As this was the 4th of July, there was a concerted effort to focus on freedom. We sang a couple of songs on freedom, then the band shared their thoughts about what they were free for, and what was keeping them from fuller freedom. Then the congregation was invited to pray/think about this.

Bill Hybels then came forward (I didn’t expect him there). Bill was Bill (elegant, yet homey). *I’ve heard things and read things about Bill Hybels before, but I wasn’t all that awestruck by him. He seemed just like a normal pastor, and I can’t see why he has been praised so much. His rockstar status really didn’t have that big of an effect on me.* I was very impressed with the conversation about immigration. Clearly Bill (and he tells us his leadership team of elders and staff) is/are concerned about this. So much so that he showed us a C-SPAN clip of him speaking to lawmakers in Washington D.C. He talked about the Spanish-speaking church and people at Willow, many who aren’t documented, and who live in daily fear of deportation (and family being split up). He spoke about the need to find a non-partisan approach to immigration which would be tough, but fair. He then introduced President Obama (and that is where the clip ended!).

The sermon (“teaching”) was done by the pastor of Willow’s north campus (supposedly the fastest growing campus of Willow). The text was Matthew 25, the parable of the talents. He hit hard the notion of laziness/procrastination. There was no altar call. I didn’t think it was long, but Christopher did. The message was good, but had very little humor (though a great story of his second child’s birth).

After the message, then Bill came up, prayed, and we were done. One hour and fifteen minutes.

We then went to lunch (in the cafeteria) and the book store. What an experience.

Lutheran Church of Hope, West Des Moines, IA – 7/11, 9:15

Lutheran Church of Hope is one of the ten largest Lutheran church in the United States. The sanctuary holds many thousands. They have one service on Saturday night, three Sunday morning, and one Sunday night. They also have two additional sites around Des Moines.

Truthfully the email site didn’t impress me; the worship theme was based on “The Old Testament Times: Wise King Ponders Purpose of Life;” not real exciting sounding. Had it not been for this being the Forbus’ church, I may have passed on it.

Further, I know this to be a church/pastor that has been a voice in the Lutheran CORE movement. I cannot say I agree with their/his theological perspective in regard to sexuality.

The parking lot is large. The foyer was huge; great gathering space. They have a cafeteria for breakfast (we were told it was very good food). They also have an easy access nursery and a nice book store. The sanctuary is one of the nicest I have ever been in. Lots of light. A huge waterfall on a side wall up front. Comfortable seats (with coffee cup holders). Two screens on the sides, and one huge screen in the center.

The sanctuary filled up. An usher worked the crowd very well, filling in open seats (and being a little disruptive to me sitting on an aisle. The main floor was nearly full; the back risers had a few open seats.

The band was good, though they didn't appear to be really into the music. They stood at a distance from one another and they didn't interact with each other. The lead musician, a guitarist, was younger than me. *This lead singer/guitarist seemed way off to me. It felt like he was more into pleasing the crowd than actually playing the music. He smiled in a way that was kind of off-putting, and it all seemed very fake to me.* There were three other vocalists (2 female and 1 male). A couple of the musicians appeared older than me. The music was soft, somewhat familiar and easy to sing, and upbeat.

The announcements were a little odd. The pastor who gave them didn't appear real comfortable in that role.

The message was delivered by the senior pastor. He used video in a couple of situations. One situation was put together by their production team and was extremely good. The other was two movie clips, the last was at the conclusion of the message. It worked, I guess. *The use of video by this church was amazing. They obviously have a highly trained team working on videos during the week. Maybe something we might look into.*

The message was not read, but memorized. It was unclear if there were particular points; it just sort of went on and on. The message lasted nearly 55 minutes. *In my opinion this wasn't a very good message at all. The pastor ad no ability to hold my attention and his points really made no sense to me. He just kind of kept going on and on and not really saying anything.* At times he appeared to be quite animated, sometimes had humor (the first really in our travels), and sometimes got quite loud. He also hit upon the sexuality issue when he said that Solomon's many wives was not what God wanted (I don't exactly know his justification for this).

Immediately after the message, the service was over. The video screen played The Byrds' song, "Turn, Turn, Turn." People filed out quickly.

There were a variety of ages present. A lot of young families. There didn't appear to be a lot of racial differences. We were greeted only by assigned greeters, and then a few people we were told to shake hands with in worship.

Walnut Creek Community Church, Des Moines, IA – 7/11, 11:30

Whereas Lutheran Church of Hope didn't overwhelm us with friendliness, Walnut Creek was incredibly warm and welcoming. I was engaged by three people who didn't just greet me, but really engaged me, asking questions about me, and sharing (appropriately) about themselves. *I feel that this is the single best church we went to. It was a medium sized church, with some satellite churches. The people there were the most friendly of any place we*

went. To be perfectly honest, if I had to choose one church to go to that we visited, it would have to be this one, just because of the people.

The inside of the church was a little disappointing. The sanctuary was essentially a basement with no windows, basketball backboards up, and a rather small stage. There were no symbols or art. There also wasn't any flowing air, which made the sanctuary rather uncomfortable.

The music started 7 minutes late. *I kind of liked the fact that the service started late. It gave it all a more relaxed feeling.* Few people were seated; most wandered in. We were nearly the oldest people present. Most were in their twenties. From the information in the bulletin they have a large church staff (5 pastors), and a huge ministry team for college students (they have an on campus ministry at Drake University). This was truly a 20-something service (I have no idea if the other service was equally represented, nor if the other three sites were also focused on 20-somethings). One site, the Downtown Church, we were told, is rather edgy in 20-something ministry, and the young lady who told me said she isn't "cool enough" to worship there.

The music was strong and upbeat. I knew none of the songs, though most were not hard to follow (the refrains were often repeated). All the of the musicians were very good, and very young. There were two vocals; the lead was a male and also a guitarist, the female only song. The female was very good. *This was a case of a four person band, and they were amazing. No extra people to try to fill sound, just the basics, and it was good.*

The message, delivered by a pastor in a tie, was one of the worst I have ever heard. It lasted over 45 minutes. The outline in the bulletin covered his 31 points...31! There was no flow, and no easy take-aways. The delivery was poor. The illustrations were weak. Amazingly, the congregation/youth paid attention. I didn't see any falling asleep (which I almost did). I don't think this is a pastor who is one of their best. I just don't understand why these 20-somethings were there. *I don't remember a single thing about this pastor or his message. The fact that he spoke for so long zoned me out entirely. A shorter message is a better message in my opinion.*

Revolution, Kansas City, MO – 7/18, 11:00

The web site drew me in. Very edgy. Not a lot of details, but definitely appealing to a younger crowd.

We found the church after driving around a little. It is a downtown church, in a former (or maybe they are presently) Methodist church, just down the block from a Catholic church. There were what appeared to be homeless people wandering around.

We entered the sanctuary. It is an old sanctuary with oak pews. We were handed two pieces of information. One was requesting information about us. The other was an envelope and financial information ("Our financial processes, from budgeting to money-counting, are transparent and available to all members, and we pride ourselves on doing a ton of ministry with an ounce of money").

We were greeted by a woman (who I later figured out was one of two pastors) who told us that the air conditioning had just gone out that morning. I have hunch this isn't the first time that has happened. It wasn't too warm, so no problems.

The band began playing. Most appeared younger than me. The guitarist was the lead. There was a young black bass player, and an older black drummer. There was also

an old white guy who was definitely a throwback from the 60's who played harmonica (and who probably wasn't too good because they gave him a microphone that didn't seem to work). The music was good. The first song was an old hymn, the next two very contemporary (I had never heard them before). Many sang, some didn't. *I thought that the music was good. The thing that I haven't mentioned about these bands is that I like when there is a young band because the players are not afraid to rock out. It makes me a little more comfortable.*

There were about 80 people present. Although all ages were present, it was definitely leaning toward the 20-something age. There was a kid's corner in the sanctuary where lots of kids and parents gathered. It was a little noisy. At one point the kids (and many parents) were dismissed to Sunday School.

The worship leader, who I take was also a pastor, introduced the service as a continuation of a theme on creation. To the point, we are creations of the Creator, and are given the opportunity to be creators ourselves. Then three people came forward to share their creations. One was a young man who told a humorous story about swallowing a quarter as a child and having it forcibly removed by his grandmother ("the moral of the story: don't be money hungry"). The second was a young man who played a steel guitar and sang a great song about being broken in order to be whole. The third was a young lady who read a short story about compost, and how her (and our) lives have rotting things in it that need time to be turned into fertilizer for growing things. *I thought this was a great way to involve others in the church service. There were also pictures and other forms of art out in the foyer that church members and done.*

The worship leader/pastor (whose name we never heard) then gave the sermon. It was about a 40-minute sermon. His delivery was mix between reading a text, and freely expanding. At one point he showed a clip from "South Park." I had not thought there was anything redeeming about "South Park," but the clip was funny and poignant, and Christopher really liked it (as did most of the other 20-somethings, I suspect). *I liked this clip for several reasons. First is that it was from SOUTH PARK! How many churches have the stones to use South Park in their church service? Plus it was a funny clip. But the other reason why I liked this clip was that it was fully relevant to the service and the message. I thought it was awesome that this church had actually found a South Park clip that worked for this.*

At the end of the service, immediately following a few announcements after the sermon, we held hands and said a benediction. The young lady I held hands with asked if we were visitors and then asked a little about us.

I left this worship with more joy than I have left any service yet. There was life, authenticity, joy, and (true to the web site) an edginess that gave me energy. *This was a great church. A lot of young people, which helped make me feel a little more comfortable. Definitely one I would go back to.*

St. Paul Lutheran Church, Albuquerque, NM – 7/25, 9:15

Something in me wanted to go worship at an ELCA congregation. It may not have been my best intuition.

In truth, what we experienced is a reason why the ELCA is not going to be effective in reaching 20-somethings. St. Paul is an architecturally attractive church. The campus is actually quite large.

As we arrived we noticed that there were many elderly people arriving, and that many (most?) of them were dressed up. We had our shorts on. We were greeted (a little awkwardly by two greeters who seemed more interested in talking with friends). Nobody welcomed us in the foyer. We entered the sanctuary, which was designed in a triangular layout. The altar furniture was very attractive. There was no video projection.

The worship was liturgical, led by an organ. A very slow organ. We did sing “Gather Us In,” and it was less than inspiring. Most of the opening liturgy was removed (no kyrie, hymn of praise, etc.). We did a lot of standing and sitting. The pastor (a female) had just returned from a week at Bible camp. I know that because her children’s message was all about it. The pastor did make use of high school kids to collect canned goods from the congregation; there were about 5 who helped. The sermon completely read, and I cannot remember any of the content.

The service lasted an hour and fifteen minutes. It was made largely up of elderly people. As a “Reconciled in Christ” congregation there were one or two male couples. As we departed the only one who greeted us was the pastor.

What works here is a genuine effort to bring healing and spirituality to the community. We were told that immediately after our worship service there was a time for prayer and meditation. I have no idea how many participated, but it seemed like this was a major emphasis. Also, during communion, people were invited to come and light a candle as a part of a prayer meditation (on behalf of others, I presume). Many did, including teenagers.

Also central to this church’s identity was the care and feeding of its aging members. They installed a new staff person who was congregational care director. This person was to oversee the prayer ministry, the healing ministry, the care ministry, the Stephen’s Ministry, and other things (by the way, they had two Stephen’s Ministers on staff). These folks were well into care for one another, physically, emotionally, and spiritually. *I have nothing to interject into the middle of this but I do want to say that the music was terrible, but not necessarily because it was from an organ. Let’s just say I was worried that the organist might have a heart attack while playing.*

Mars Hill, Albuquerque, NM – 7/25, 11:15

This is a “satellite” church of the Mars Hill Church in Seattle, pastured by Mark Driscoll. This church is located about a block away from New Mexico State University. It is a very trendy area. The church meets in an old, refurbished movie theater.

As we entered we were handed a tri-fold 3X5 folder with a picture of something we could not identify. It looks sort of like an alley. *I believe that this art was the church’s attempt at an abstract feeling, and it kind of worked for this church, but I wouldn’t suggest this for our church.* The foyer had multiple pieces of art on it. There was also a book rack of books for sale; most were authored by Mark Driscoll. There was also coffee, which was very good.

Nobody greeted us in the foyer. We went into the “sanctuary.” It was very dark. We were early and had our pick of a seat. As people came in we noticed there were a lot of young couples with very young kids. Many of the kids ended up in the child care area (off the foyer).

The service began with a prayer by the music leader (playing a guitar), and then we sang three songs. All musicians were young. The novel feature was that they had a

female violin player. The music was not well mixed, and the vocals were often flat. Also many of the lyrics were very repetitive.

After the songs there were announcements. This was a “bilingual” service, so there was a Spanish-speaking counterpart. Even without the Spanish, the announcements were very lengthy. There were no slides to help.

The huge surprise was in the message. It was a video taped sermon who was standing in for Mark Driscoll. I don’t know if the local pastor actually ever speaks (though I assume he does), but evidently most weeks the message is brought by Mark Driscoll.

The message was actually introduced by Mark Driscoll, speaking from Caesarea Philippi. It was very weird; it had nothing to do with the message. The message was given by another pastor at Mars Hill, Seattle. It was actually very good, but seemed long. As I mentioned, it was dark in the sanctuary, and I actually fell asleep for a few moments. I don’t think I have ever done that before! The one problem I had with the message was the preacher’s incorrect theological understanding of “messiah.” *The fact that the message was delivered through a video really pulled away from the whole thing. I didn’t fall asleep like my dad, but I was pretty dang close.*

After the message the offering was taken, then an lengthy introduction to communion (bilingually). At this point parents went to collect their kids so they could come forward for communion. After that, a couple more songs and we were done. Nobody spoke with us as we left.

The service was about an our and a half long.

The one thing this church had going for it was the emphasis on small groups. When we were invited to welcome one another, we were told to seek out members of our small groups. If we were not in a small group, basically the message was, good luck! The tri-fold bulletin offered strong encouragement to be a part of a small group, and during the announcements this was reiterated. Clearly these folks spend as much energy on their connectivity outside of worship as they do on worship.

Community Lutheran Church, Las Vegas, NV – 8/1, 9:30

Because of Christopher’s flight out at 12:45, we needed to attend the 9:30 service which is promoted as a “blended contemporary worship.” This church has a Saturday evening service, an 8:00 traditional service, and an 11:00 more contemporary service. We wanted to attend the 11:00 because it appeared the most appealing to 20-somethings. Oh well.

We were greeted by the “professional” greeters when we arrived, and once again, friends had dominated one greeter, which prevented us from shaking hands.

The service was a blend between organ and piano. It actually worked (drums were added, softly). Interesting, this is the only ELCA church I know that uses a song leader. It was distracting. I could only really hear him sing, not the congregation. *This was very distracting. They had a choir as well but this guy was singing as loud as he could into the microphone. Definitely something not to do.*

This was the intern pastor’s last Sunday, and so she preached. It was basically a reflection on the past year, with lots of pictures. There was no Scripture reading within the service itself, and the Scripture passages she referred to I do not remember. In fact I

do not remember the basic theme of her message, she often spoke about “radical grace” (which is a part of their tag line – “Real People, Inclusive Community, Radical Grace”). She was a very good speaker, and clearly had a great year on her internship. During the message the sanctuary lights were dimmed quite a bit.

The choir sat up front. There was one person of color, everyone else was older and whiter than me.

They had had VBS that week, and a handful of kids came forward and sang a song. It was hard for me to tell if some of the older “kids” up front were teenage helpers, or what. The song was actually from a taped sound track, and you could not hear the actual kids much at all. All the kids seemed to be into the song.

This is the only service we attended that had both a confession of sins and confession of faith (The Apostles Creed).

The sanctuary was quite full. Most people were middle age to older, and most white. They offer a Saturday night service, an 8:00 Sunday traditional service, this 9:30, an 11:00 more contemporary, and a Sunday evening Cowboy Gospel service.

It was hard for me to come away with anything significant.

Annotated Bibliography

M. Rex Miller, *Millennium Matrix*

The essential point of the book is to introduce you to a historical understanding that as our method of communication has changed (oral to print to media to digital), the way we understand the world changes, and the way we create culture changes. I believe this is going to be a significant book to read as the generations to come will be entirely “digital” in perspective. This means that the Buster generation (to some extent), and the Mosaic generation, and those that follow them, will experience the world, God, community, authority, and most everything else quite differently from their parents (and ergo, grandparents). The implications are significant for the future of being the church and doing ministry.

The first era is the oral era. In the oral era stories are told, people relate face to face, and a person’s word was their bond. The oral era is full of symbols and mystery. In the oral era the message is the messenger. This era was the longest. It went from the most primitive time to about 1500.

The next era was the print era. The world changed when Guttenberg invented movable type. All of a sudden people began to mass communicate. The printed word enabled people to be very specific about what they meant. Doctrine and theology exploded in this era (has anyone heard of Martin Luther?).

The next era began to take shape somewhere around 1950. It is called the broadcast era. The television became the prime means for people to communicate. Images and ideas became reduced (why read a book when you can watch a 2-hour movie?).

The fourth era is dawning right now. It is the digital era. Digital communication is immediate and interactive. Whereas in the broadcast era people are used to sitting back and being entertained, in the digital era people want to respond. Kids, for instance, want to play a digital game rather than watch a movie.

The Church has certainly been active in each era. In the oral era the Church was the mediator of God’s mysteries. As such the sacraments were very central. In the print era orthodox theology was essential. As such the Bible became central, and the exposition of the Bible in the sermon was the critical moment in worship. In the broadcast era the event is everything. As such worship became a production with lots of flash, excitement, and relevancy. Although we are early in the digital era, there are a few things we can already sense. The Church of the digital era is highly relational, very authentic, and committed to helping people in need.

Interesting, all four eras are still present among us in the Church. There are churches (and Christians) who are still in the oral era (think Roman Catholic, eastern Orthodox, etc.). Then there are churches (and Christians) who are still in the print era (think mainline Protestant churches, like Lutherans). Then there are churches (and Christians) who are well into the broadcast era (think non-denominational community churches). And there are a couple churches (and Christians) who are developing the digital era (think Mars Hill that I mentioned above). Can all of these eras co-exist? I am waiting to find out.

Andy Stanley, *Choosing to Cheat*

This is an awesome book that is an easy read, but full of great insight (as an aside, I received more than one interesting look as I read this book out by the pool in Kansas City as dozens of bikini-clad women walked by) Stanley's basic point in the book is there is not enough time in the day to do everything and to do it completely. There is always more work to do at work, and there are always more things that need attention at home. So, Stanley says, we all cheat somewhere, which is to say, we call out the corners in order to simply make it through the day. So, rather than constantly cheat everywhere, why not choose to cheat in the places that you need to in order to give highest attention and priority in the one place needed most. That one place, according to Stanley (and backed up by Biblical reflection), is the home. Stanley makes an excellent case that, when all else is said and done, the people in your home are the ones you owe your greatest attention, time, effort, love, commitment, and energy to. Starting from that perspective, and then working back, everything else comes second. This means that work, school, hobbies, even church, do not replace one's family, but are intended to support one's relationship in their families.

I needed to read this book and take in Stanley's thoughts. This was especially challenging in light of the time I have been away from my wife and oldest son this summer. I intend to make changes in my schedule when I return for their benefit.

William Willimon, *Who Will Be Saved?*

Willimon, one of my favorite authors, is a bishop in the Methodist Church. He doesn't write as a bishop; he writes as a deep theological thinker with a great read on current culture (would that more bishops had this gift!). Willimon dissects the Biblical idea of salvation, and broadens one's understanding in a significant and challenging way.

How often have you heard people say (or said yourself), "Who is going to heaven?" Or, "How can I be sure who is saved?" Or, "Is a person once saved always saved?" Or, "How can I/we be sure?" To these (and so many other questions/issues) Willimon reminds us that salvation is a gift from God. With that in mind he uses Biblical passages throughout the Scriptures to reveal the graceful (and judging) nature of God in ways that bring comfort and conflict.

I am loving this book! It may not be for everyone to read, but it ought to be required reading for all pastors, and anyone who tries to understand the work of God.

Ann Lamont, *Plan B: Further Thoughts on Faith*

I mentioned in a sermon before I left that I heard Lamont speak at a commencement service but had not read anything by her. One of our members gave me two books, this being one. Lamont writes great insights into living a faithful life in the midst of everyday complexities. The best way I can describe her (and her style) is a perfect mix between saintliness and sinner – a perfect perspective for a Lutheran like myself. She is brutally honest about life,

vulnerable about her fallibility, and wonderfully in love with Jesus Christ and His Church. Some might be put off by her honesty; I loved it.

Ann Lamont, *Grace (Eventually): Thoughts on Faith*

Lamont is a terrific writer, capturing the struggle and grace in living real life. Much of her reflections center around being a single parent to a teenage son. You can imagine the both the struggle but also the moments of grace that comes from parenting a teenage son.

Lamont is someone who has had a lot of setbacks. She is a recovering alcoholic and a former hippie. She admits that the things that have happened to her have happened because of her. She says that she is a mess. But she is also a Christian, someone who clings to the grace of God. One of her best lines in the book is: “Sometimes I think that Jesus watches my neurotic struggles, and shakes his head, and grips his forehead and starts tossing back mojitos.”

I think that too sometimes.

Leonard Sweet, editor, *The Church in Emerging Culture*

The editor of the book is Len Sweet, a brilliant church thinker. Five other church thinkers offered their reflections. They are Andy Crouch, Michael Horton, Frederica Mathewes-Green, Brian McLaren, and Erwin McManus.

One of our members asked me one day why the church constantly reacts to the issues that culture raises. That is a great question, and in fact, is the premise of this book. What is the relationship of the church and culture. The thinkers who wrote chapters for this book provide essentially four different perspectives: don't change the message and don't change the methods, don't change the message but change the methods, don't change the methods but change the message, and change both the message and the methods.

The reality is that we are living in a challenging time. How can the church be the transforming presence of God in the midst of these challenging times. Each writer offered insightful reflections, and at times, contradicted each other in their conclusions. The bottom line is that there are not any easy answers, but the challenge of us all (especially those in church leadership) is to struggle at being the church in the world.

Jim Henderson and Matt Casper, *Jim & Casper Go To Church*

This is the seminal work that got me thinking about this sabbatical. Jim is a burned out pastor who wants to rediscover the way the church can reach out to non-believers. Matt Casper, an agnostic, becomes his traveling partner as they visit eleven churches, many large churches. Each write their synopsis of what they experienced. It is enlightening to read what Jim experiences and then compare that to Casper. This is something every pastor needs to do. We get so institutionally focused that we fail to see ourselves as “outsiders” would see us.

This construct proved to be extremely valuable in visiting churches with Christopher. How is it that my son sees things differently than me? Because he isn't me, and I have to listen to him to find out what his world is like.

John Ortberg, *The Me I Want to Be*

It sounds like a self-help book. At times it comes off that way, too; Ortberg provides a lot of tools to help better your life in a more healthy way. Ortberg's general premise is that we are all growing spiritually; the question is, is our spirit being developed by Christ to be more like Christ, or is it being developed by any of the multiple "gods" of our world. His contention is that out by having Christ develop our spirit are we are to flourish in life, but when we are developed by influences other than Christ, we languish. I think this is an important book for everyone at CLC to read.

Dave Kinnaman, *Unchristian*

Kinnaman is a senior researcher for the Barna Group, a company that surveys religious trends across the United States. First my frustration with the book (and with Barna): Kinnaman operates from a rather conservative (and in my opinion, narrow) description of faith. He (and Barna as a whole) have a rather rigid definition of "evangelical," and it is clear that he/they promote a faith that is best lived out from this perspective.

The positive of this book is that they interview thousands of people and center their research on "Mosaics (those born between 1984 and 2002)," and "Busters (those born between 1965 and 1983)." Largely they interview those outside the church. What they learn is that "outsiders (as they call them)" have the opinion that the Church is:

1. Hypocritical
2. Too focused on getting people "saved"
3. Anti-homosexual
4. Sheltered
5. Too political
6. Judgmental

I think their research needs to be carefully reflected on. Kinnaman makes many important discoveries. The reality is that the Mosaics and Busters have turned away from the church. They are interested in spirituality (whatever that may mean to them), but they are not interested in the way the Church has behaved (real or perceived). These impressions are important for the Church to grapple with. In many cases (and I believe this critique is more true for the religious right/conservative/evangelical churches), the clarion call is, "change or die." There is a lot of encouraging thoughts as well. As one person interviewed says, "We like Jesus, just not those who follow Jesus." One of the important take-aways from the book is that Mosaics and Busters are yearning for authenticity, both in their relationship with God, and with their relationships with others. If there is one important thing to hear it is this: it is deeply important to build relationships with others that respect them, loves them, and when needed, helps them develop a relationship with God.

I cannot say this is a "must read" for everyone, but for those who are leading the church it is helpful and insightful. And especially for CLC that desires to reach out more intentionally, this book is a helpful resource.

Postscript

I am indebted to the leadership of Christ Lutheran Church for giving me the opportunity to step away from day-to-day ministry in order to see things and experience life differently. This 10-week gift was truly that, a gift. In truth I did not know how entwined my life had become with the responsibilities at CLC. It took me a week to stop waking up each day worrying about what was happening “back home.” I also did not have a sense at how my spirit was getting weighed down. This time away was like a fresh drink of cool water for my soul. I cannot thank you enough.

I also am indebted to an incredible staff who jumped in to pick up the pieces and carry the load in my absence. They made sure I would be “protected” from the things happening around the church (phone calls home were very vague and non-specific). The preaching task, worship leadership responsibilities, and pastoral duties were covered in such a professional way that I have been inundated with comments from members upon my return about how great things went. I am not surprised; we have an incredible team at CLC.

And I am thankful to my wife and my eldest son who stayed behind and fulfilled the duties of the house. Timothy stepped up and kept things steady. Leanne is not only my love, but she is my inspiration. I cannot say for certain that given the reverse situation that I would have handled her absence with such grace. As well as she maintained at home, I have assured her that never again will I leave her behind so long.