



An Easter People

By Bishop Greg
April/May 2019

Decline. Empty pews. Loss. Shrinking numbers. These words and phrases are used a lot in church conversations. One of the problems we face is that if we focus solely on mere numbers, then we likely will conclude that we have been absolute “failures” as a church.

But herein is a caution we must heed. What took place in the 1950s and 60s is regarded by many of us as being normative. It is what we experienced. It is what we grew up with. Psychologically, we judge everything against our own lived experience. What is “normal” for us becomes our expectation. We measure such things as church attendance, Sunday School class sizes, youth group attendance, and weekly volunteer hours against these norms. The result is that we end up reaching the conclusion that we have somehow failed.

Dr. Wade Clark Roof, professor of Religion and Society, once told our class that the church generation of the 1950s and 60s was — take note of the word he used — an “aberrant” generation. In other words, the large number of attendees and participants was an “aberration.” It was unusual. It was not a predicted outcome. But since many of us over 60 years of age experienced those times, they have become our norm. The temptation, therefore, is to regard today as a failure; we feel that we do not measure up and that perhaps we have been unfaithful.

As I visit with congregations, I hear this longing for what once was. I hear the anxiety and the deep concerns about whether they will be able to hang on for a few more years. These concerns are real. These fears are real. People care deeply about their faith and about their congregations.

But there is another story, another narrative, that I find life-giving in the midst of these statistics of decline. Rather than leaving us with feelings of guilt, it is a story that provides hope — hope in an unknown future.

We must not live in fear. We must not live with a foreboding sense of failure and guilt. After all, we are an Easter people. We know the story well. Death and defeat do not have the final word. God has the final word, and that word is one of life, renewal, hope and promise.

Oh, sure, some of our congregations may close. And while there is sadness and hurt when such things occur, we are called to lift up our eyes unto the hills and see that God journeys with us through all things — even death.

We are an Easter people. We have our faith, trust and hope in the one in whom we live and move and have our being. This is the one who journeys with us in the midst of struggle and challenges and, yes, in the joyous and happy occasions of life, too.

We live as an Easter people. We therefore are defined and determined by future hope. We live “as if,” that is, we live in the hope and promises of God. We have been claimed by God, named and chosen. We have been saved by grace. Therefore, we live all of life today in the hope and

expectation of what is to be. As that common phrase states: We are not called to be successful, but faithful.

A prayer that continues to guide us in the BC Synod with respect to our missional way of thinking and being is found in several places in our Evangelical Lutheran Worship. “O God, you have called your servants to ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths as yet untrodden, through perils unknown. Give us faith to go out with good courage, not knowing where we go, but only that your hand is leading us and your love supporting us; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.”

We need to set aside the paralyzing sense of failure and instead live and serve for what is now and for what is to come. If Dr. Wade Clark Roof is correct that the “glory days” of the church are a statistical and phenomenological aberration, then we must set aside that mental framework as the orientation by which we live.