



Time to “Change Hearts in the Heartland”

By Bishop Rodger Prois

I recently listened to a pastor who told of issues he was having with the congregation's council. He had attempted to help a refugee and used the church's address on a document, which landed him in a good amount of hot water. The council president was worried that his action could drag the church into a legal situation. None of the lay leaders could speak the immigrant's language or knew this person's background. The stranger may even be a criminal, even though she was caring for her small child. The pastor was afraid that the lay leadership was going to ask for his resignation.

I'm writing this while visiting in Chile. This story is from our companions in the south, and the pastor in question is on the roster of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Chile, but it could easily be one from our setting here in Iowa. The commonalities abound. Unfamiliarity with a different culture created suspicion, which led to fear that, if left untended, might even turn to hate.

I find it interesting that Jesus made a Samaritan the hero of the story when asked, “Who is my neighbor?” The good Samaritan was not a Jew, came from a distant land, spoke a different language, ate strange food and probably even smelled bad to those Jesus was trying to change. Yet Jesus contrasted the deeds of the church leaders, who had left the beaten man on the side of the road, with this foreigner. Is it possible that Jesus wanted, and wants still, to push the hearers of the story to consider that the person from a different culture is also a child of God, capable of compassion and worthy to include in the community?

In this *Living Lutheran* insert (page B), Cindy Wells, a member of the Mission Center Team, shares her sense of how “isms” get in the way of creating and nurturing relationships with others who are different from us. She speaks to those positions we take on gender, race, religion, age, and other wall-building attitudes. I'm convinced that if we allow “isms” to influence our interactions and appreciation of

others, we will remain isolated and could find ourselves alone in large old buildings, wondering why people aren't coming to us anymore. I feel we have forgotten the Acts comments where Jesus says, “You will be my witness in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, to the ends of the earth”



Bishop Rodger Prois

God has given us the opportunity to explore the “isms” we carry through an instrument called the Intercultural Development Inventory. The short survey can provide insight into our personal acceptance of other cultures. My hope is that we, as a synod, will take the time to learn how our attitudes prevent us from engaging our neighbor, and then use that knowledge to develop a learning plan to help “Change Hearts in the Heartland” and address those things that keep us separate.

Contact Wells (cindy.wells@wisynod.org) to learn how you can participate in the survey. Then attend the Leadership Academy, Feb. 10, to help plan our next steps. Details for registration and such can be found on page D, and more information on the inventory is at idiinventory.com.

I have used the 1 Corinthians 12 text many times to encourage individual congregation members that their church is one body, to help congregation councils see that they are part of the Western Iowa Synod, and during the assembly to remind voting members that they are church together. Now we can start looking beyond the Lutheran family and realize that others are part of the body as well. It might give us the opportunity to share what is unique about the Lutheran Christian witness and fulfill the urging of Jesus recorded just before the ascension in Acts. **L**

From “othering” to “transformation” to “beloved community”

By Cindy Wells



Cindy Wells

It is my belief that we all “other” a group to some degree—meaning, we have difficulty, challenge, lesser awareness of, lesser acceptance of another or more groups that hinder the building of beloved community among us.

Such groups might involve people of another political affiliation, socio-economic status, sexual identity, gender, age, race, religion, denomination, cultural/ethnic diversity, the incarcerated, the immigrant, the refugee, the powerful oppressor and, sadly, perhaps more. I have recently come to learn that in naming and acknowledging the reality of the ignorance, unacceptance and sin we harbor in our hearts, we can begin the journey toward transformation.

The journey toward transformation entails an intentional openness and seeking to relate to and grow to know the other. It entails the mutual unveiling and sharing of our personal stories of pain caused by unjust systems, and how they have negatively hurt and impacted us personally and communally, impeding the building of beloved community. It entails understanding how the cultural shaming and conspiracy of silence, as well as the hate and fear that divide us, allow such injustices to perpetuate. It entails embracing each other’s pain and joining forces to combat collectively and righteously the unjust powers that be as

we mutually strive for the justice God beckons us all to bring forth.

I found myself in a very diverse group of social justice advocates where we were invited and encouraged to name those whom we “other.” I looked deep inside and named “non-heterosexuals.” Interestingly, the young transgender woman in the group claimed her “othering” of white, heterosexual women in the institution of marriage—*me* no less! Also interestingly, I came to learn that my assigned roommate was a young, African-American, bisexual woman married to a man—a lovely soul striving to make change and an impact at the federal level of government.

As the week progressed and we came to know one another much more deeply—growing to know one another’s passions, coming together in the throes of social justice, with authentic hearts and love for God—our “othering” broke down considerably as our respect and love for one another grew. Ultimately, this enabled us all to embrace one another in the fight for justice and the mutual building of beloved community.



I feel so blessed to have had this experience toward transformation, and I pray that oh so many more in the Western Iowa Synod find themselves on similar journeys now and in the days ahead as we strive to “Change Hearts in the Heartland.” May God guide and bless all who strive to build beloved community. Ƙ

Cindy Wells is the Western Iowa Synod’s director of global mission.

Becoming a more vital congregation through changing hearts

By the Rev. Jeff Unga

From 2012 to 2016, Emanuel Lutheran Church in Council Bluffs has seen worship attendance increase from 82 to 122. That is a 49 percent increase in average worship attendance. In that same time, Emanuel has experienced an increase in church offerings of 20 percent, and an increase in mission support giving of 51 percent. There has not been a large boom in the census or economy of Council Bluffs in that time. So what has contributed to Emanuel's recent growth?



Emanuel has taken many adaptive measures that have contributed to this growth, but the short answer to the question is “radical hospitality” and “changed hearts” within the congregation.

In 2013, Emanuel entered into partnership with the Western Iowa Synod and the ELCA by calling a pastor with redeveloping skills. The Rev. Lowell Hennigs began asking many questions about historical and current practices. A timeline was made and placed in the fellowship hall that noted church, community and global events to demonstrate how God has been active throughout Emanuel's history. Members were invited to include their memories of significant events of the past. Through many conversations the congregation recognized that Emanuel at one time was a church connected to, and perhaps even viewed as, the center of the nearby community.

Members began to look at the entrance point to their church and realized the bridge that connects North Broadway to their building—the only way to get to Emanuel—was a symbol of their disconnectedness from the community. In some ways, members viewed it as a drawbridge that had been taken up, except for Sunday worship. The

church was not as connected as it once was to the community.

A change of hearts soon began to transform the congregation as they rediscovered their passion and found joy in God's mission for Emanuel in the North Broadway community. But change doesn't come easy or by accident. Change is an intentional process that requires a lot of work. It includes changing hearts from viewing the church as an organization and a building to being a living organism: The body of Christ.

The initial team that did the work of looking back and looking into the future evolved into what is now known as the FAITH (Future Actions, Innovation, Trust and Hope) team. The FAITH team studied Stephen Bouman's book, *The Mission Table, Renewing Congregation and Community*. They attended an ELCA missional leadership conference in Denver, Colo., where they began to see the church with new eyes. They also began the process of moving from a welcoming church to an inviting church.

Recently, Hennigs gave a sermon using the ELCA mission and vision statement regarding inclusivity

Continued on page D



Emanuel choir singing during community worship in the park.

When the FAITH team said they believed Emanuel is a welcoming and radically inclusive congregation, the synod’s director for evangelical mission asked them if everyone is really fully welcome. After thoughtful debate, the FAITH team decided to make table tents for fellowship time with the ELCA statement on inclusion and diversity, along with the statement: “All are welcome, or are all welcome? Your FAITH team wants to know.” They invited members to listen to God and to one another respectfully as they engaged in conversation.

and diversity. That statement says: “Inclusion and diversity—as Christ’s church, we value the richness of God’s creation and offer a radical welcome to all people, appreciating our common humanity and our differences. We are a church that does not view diversity as a barrier to unity. We recognize and will challenge dynamics of power and privilege that create barriers to participation and equity in this church and society—for women, people of color, minority ethnic groups, people with disabilities, people who are marginalized or living in poverty, and the LGBTQ community.”

Emanuel has “set the drawbridge down for good” to connect with the entire community and continue to seek ways they can express the radical hospitality of Jesus Christ in word and in deed. New outreach ministries to the community include participation in the food bank, care packages for members to give to the homeless, cookies for soldiers and many others. Within the congregation, members are asking, “Who is not present at the table because they have been excluded?”

Outreach and radical hospitality at Emanuel have given members and visitors a glimpse of the foretaste of the feast to come. This change has come with much hard work and intentionality. Congregations who want to grow in their vitality and ability to be truly welcoming and want to make disciples of Jesus must be intentional about having respectful conversations. Our hearts are changed as we listen to God and to one another with the love of Jesus. 4



Leading Change
in
the
Heartland

WIS 2018 Leadership Academy

“Leading Change in the Heartland”

This year’s Leadership Academy will focus on Interculturality. A narrative that points to God in Christ’s story of reconciliation and restoration of relationships, a lens that sees the “other” in the image of God, a methodology that addresses the asymmetries of power in relationships to move us to interdependence and mutuality.

When: Saturday, February 10th, 2018; Snowdate, February 17th
Time: Registration @ 9:00; programming @ 9:30; closing @ 3:00 pm
Where: St John Lutheran Church, Carroll, IA; 901 E 18th St.
Cost: \$20/person if registered by Jan. 25th; \$30/person thereafter

All leaders* in the Western Iowa Synod are encouraged to join in this day of Interculturality; rostered and lay leaders.
**a leader - anyone who affects another person’s life*

This event will be lead by Rev. Sunitha Mortha, Director for Mission Formation in the Global Mission Unit of the ELCA, accompanied by Glocal Musicians

Please register on-line at www.wisynod.org/synod-events

Jeff Unga is the Western Iowa Synod’s director for evangelical mission.