

Unleashing God's Power Within the Church

As we have noted earlier, the Church is the Holy Spirit's baby, having given birth to it on that flamboyant day of Pentecost. That same Church born in a far off wilderness has become global in its reach and benevolence, and alas, its malevolence as well. It has grown exponentially in size and power.

We are part of a culture that has been influenced greatly by the Church. Most of our lives have been shaped in part by the Church either directly or indirectly. Its hand has made a huge positive difference in the world.

However, within the last 70 years there has been a slow but dramatic turnaround in the visible Church's reach and influence. The Church, as we have known it, is currently in serious trouble relative to its very existence.

The statistics are alarming. Approximately 40% of ELCA churches have an average worship attendance of fewer than 50 people. In the last decade worship attendance has dropped nearly 30% and overall membership has dropped 15%. We are not alone. Other mainline churches are experiencing the same fate, both Protestant and Catholic. The single most striking exception to this shrinkage is the Pentecostal church, especially in Central and South America and Far East.

Unlike most other churches the Pentecostal Church has not taken on a life of its own, developing systems of belief, rules, and regulations, but has continued to live under the direction of the Holy Spirit. In so doing it has become the second largest Church in the world, second only to the Roman Catholic Church. The Roman Catholic Church has been around for a long time, while the Pentecostal Church began in a home in Los Angeles in 1906, slightly more than 100 years ago, by a black preacher who was moved to let the Holy Spirit speak. There is something to be learned here.

The major reason behind this downward trend within the mainline churches has emerged from much careful analysis, and it turns out to be the absence of spiritual energy and passion. The Church is losing its spiritual integrity. Many people are saying the Church has not helped them grow spiritually. It has not made any significant difference in their lives, so why bother?

This is a striking indictment and one to be taken seriously. If the Church is to remain sustainable, it must recast its form and renew its original passion for spiritual engagement. The Holy Spirit must be unleashed and not just casually mentioned as an afterthought.

The central part of renewing the Church is renewing our own personal spiritual life first, then can come mission, says one Lutheran pastor who is turning around this tidal ebb. Renewing our own spiritual lives and doing so with passion is a primary concern, and we should be doing nothing else until that is front and center and well underway.

We are familiar with the directions given us when flying. If there is a loss of oxygen, we are to put on our own oxygen masks first before helping anyone else. The same sequence must occur in our spiritual lives. Attend to our own spiritual well-being first, then help others.

A former senior consultant with the Alban Institute, a not-for-profit organization that assists congregations and church leaders, recently said: “We speak of ‘conversion’ and that is not something Lutherans talk about comfortably”. Yet it is conversion, a radical change of direction in life, a transformation of who we are as Christians, that must take place as we grow spiritually.

The who we are as well as what we do must come under the transforming power of the Holy Spirit. Radical and continuing change, however slowly it might be, is absolutely mandatory. God’s Spirit must be allowed to hold sway in our personal lives as well as in the Church. Our entire reason for being must come into alignment with God’s Holy Will.

Every day should be entered as a sanctuary with the prayer: “Thy Will be done by me today in everything I think, say or do.” This should be prayed with fervor, honesty, conviction, and passion. No day should ever be begun without that prayerful intent. All day every day should be enclosed in a parenthesis of prayer. Prayer should be the bookends that hold up the script of our lives and the life of the Church.

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Granted, this is a radical and challenging task, but only that can correct the otherwise compromised and cavalier attitude we have harbored about Life, God, and Church. This calls for a specific and major attitudinal shift on our part.

The presiding Bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the Rev. Elizabeth Eaton, challenges us to “live as Church”, which she describes as a community of spiritual discernment. What a powerful description! A community of spiritual discernment. What a goal! Everything we do as Church, we must do with consummate spiritual discernment. Our prayers should be that God’s Holy Spirit will make us into an even more dynamic community of spiritual discernment.

So now this challenge is in our face! What are we to do about it? What tools are already in place for us to use, and how can we best use them?

The Holy Spirit did not create the Church on Pentecost then leave it to wander in the wilderness but gave many spiritual gifts to nourish and direct it. What are some of these gifts?

The Sacraments are among the most significant. The very definition of Sacrament tells us much. A Sacrament is the use of an earthly element—commonly available—to bestow a spiritual gift.

In the case of Baptism, the earthly element is water. When intentionally connected to God's word of promise, it creates a new spiritual life as if grafting it onto an existing natural life. Again, a spiritual life is not taught but caught one by one. Baptism is one clear cut way that it begins.

In the case of Holy Communion (Eucharist), the earthly elements are bread and wine (or grape juice). As they are consumed in the presence of God's word of promise, they become nourishment for our spiritual lives. We do not have to feel something exotic for this miracle to take place, but we do need to receive it as a gift of the Spirit.

As with all nourishment, it must be consumed regularly if we are to remain spiritually healthy. Nothing should keep up from this incredible opportunity to sustain our spiritual well-being.

Scripture is another tool for nourishing our spiritual growth and development. Among the most nutritional passages are the Psalms and Parables of Jesus. The writings of Paul are full of spiritual vitamins as well.

There are, of course, several different ways to engage Scripture. A study of the origin of the texts is helpful in clarifying the intent and message. Perhaps most important for spiritual growth is simple devotional reading. This frequently strikes a note that penetrates our spirit. When doing this, go slowly, pause often, and allow the Holy Spirit to deposit thoughts into your mind and heart.

Another highly significant gift the Spirit has given the Church is liturgical worship. The very nature of worship is spiritual or should be. If it is not, it becomes as sounding brass and tinkling cymbals to use Paul's terms.

Liturgies are weighted heavily with spiritual nuances. Any part of any liturgy that directs our attention to God's connection to us is a spiritual gesture. Remember, being intimately connected to God is what spirituality is about. Anything that enhances that relationship is spiritual food.

During liturgical worship look and listen for those connecting points and spend some time letting the ideas spread into your heart, mind and spirit, even to the point of letting the liturgy proceed without your attention. Stop and gather those precious nuggets.

They are there. Some are obvious, some hidden or more subtle, but they are there to enhance your spiritual experience. Look and listen for them. Use them. Let them transform you and make you into a radically different person. You will like the new you.

Then there is prayer. Nothing moves us closer to God than passionate prayer. We are to know and believe with all our hearts that prayer is our very lifeline from God. Prayer changes things! God listens with intent whether or not our reason allows us to accept it. Trust prayer as an indispensable form of plugging into God as the source of all power, love and grace.

There are many different types of prayer that we could name. The most important information regarding prayer is that as we commit to it as an essential means of communicating with God, we will discover for ourselves how best we can carry out this engagement. Personal prayer is quite individualistic. The Spirit will teach us how to pray as long as we relentlessly commit to the process.

Of no less importance is learning to listen to God who speaks to us through the Spirit. That is why we have quiet moments in worship. There should be more of these moments with directed thought to open us to hear God's response to our prayers.

The practice of having worshipers write prayers to be prayed by the entire congregation in the general prayer is a marvelous spiritual practice. We should pray these prayers along with these people with conviction that God hears and answers them. A few moments of quiet time following these prayers would allow God time to put thoughts into our minds relative to the prayers just prayed. That is one-way God speaks to us. Parenthetically, another way God speaks to you is through this presentation.

All of the above presentation hopefully falls under the topic of Unleashing God's Power within the Church. The Church can be sustainable, but only the Holy Spirit who created it on Pentecost can make it so. Our role in all of this is to use every gift at our disposal to make us into a community of spiritual discernment.