

The Definition of Madness

By Rev. Dan Gilbert, Northern Illinois District President
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I've quoted this before, but here it is again: "Not all change results in improvement, but all improvement requires change." Changing things won't necessarily make things better, but nothing's going to get better without something changing.

You've probably heard the statistics about Christian churches in the U.S. With very few exceptions, all congregations in all Christian church bodies are declining in numbers, and the rate of decline is accelerating.

One exception is the Roman Catholic Church which is growing due to new immigrants. For many decades the LCMS grew the same way, but let's just say there aren't a lot of boats coming over from Germany any more.

Churches in Decline

In all likelihood, your congregation is declining numerically --- members, offerings, baptisms, confirmations, attendance, etc. The number of congregations closing is increasing each year.

Our Northern Illinois District is averaging three congregations a year disbanding or no longer holding public services, and the number of those at risk is growing.

One of our pastors has done a lot of research on this, and he projects that at the current rate (that's another way of saying, "if nothing changes") the LCMS will go from its current 6,000 congregations to 1,000 in -- are you ready for this? -- 30 years.

If it actually goes that way that means 5,000 LCMS congregations nationwide will be gone in 30 years. And the congregations won't all wait to close in 30 years; they're closing now, more and more each year.

Running Out of Members

Much of the time a congregation closes not because they've run out of money or possible mission opportunities. What they run out of is people, members.

The average age of LCMS members is hard to determine; we don't have the data. But all the research I've seen puts it well above 60.

Our members are falling asleep in Jesus (thanks be to God for the gift of salvation), and there are few if any young people to step up in some of our congregations. When a significant number of members die or become less active, the congregation dies. And it's happening now.

Solution? I absolutely cannot promise that if a congregation changes they will reverse their current downward trend. I cannot.

However, I can guarantee that if a congregation makes no changes they will see no improvement in the results they're seeing now. (What results is your congregation seeing?)

So we need to change. And as I've written before, I'm not talking about changing music or instruments in worship or putting up a projector and screen.

And I'm definitely not talking about changing our doctrine or biblical practices.

But most congregations need to change from strictly taking care of "our own" to doing both that and taking care of strangers, our nearest neighbors. (By the way, it's great to travel 8,000 miles to help our neighbors in India or wherever, but what about your neighbors down the street?)

Help for Change

All of us together who make up the NID have been providing a lot of help for congregations to implement biblically sound changes to serve both near and distant neighbors in the name of Jesus.

We call this New Starts...New Believers. And we're seeing some great changes; we're seeing the Holy Spirit making new believers through Word and Sacrament in some of our congregations.

Personally, I think what our district mission facilitators offer would be helpful for any NID congregation. However, I realize that some congregations just won't make use of them. So district leadership is very intentionally promoting alternatives.

Does your congregation know about the resources for outreach provided by Lutheran Hour Ministries? If not, check out their website (lhm.org). All kinds of good stuff can be found there.

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New from Synod

Our Synod's Office of National Mission also is developing new outreach resources for congregations. (Search "Sharing Your Faith" at lcms.org.)

The Synod leaders have made it clear that this is not to replace what districts are doing. Rather, districts should continue to offer resources that are working while at the same time encouraging use of new resources from the national office.

If your congregation doesn't find New Starts...New Believers helpful, please contact the national Synod. A good place to start might be an email or phone call to Rev. Mark Wood, Synod's new director of Witness and Outreach. Our own mission facilitators would also be happy to help you connect with someone in the Synod.

NID leaders have scheduled a workshop led by Rev. Todd Kollbaum, Synod's director of Rural and Small Town Ministry, for Saturday, May 30, at Immanuel, Belvidere. I plan to be there; I hope many from our rural and small town congregations will be there also. Again, this is a Synod event, not an NID event. And we plan to offer additional Synod resources like this in the future.

Bottom Line

Well, second-from-bottom line first: Keep doing what you're doing and you'll keep getting the same results. (The definition of madness is to keep doing the same thing and expecting *different* results.)

Is your congregation declining? Follow that to its inevitable conclusion.

Make good biblical changes, and things might not turn around, but make no such changes and, well, you know the rest.

Multiple resources are available. Please make use of them. And it's not to keep your church open. Do this for...

...the bottom line: God sent his Son Jesus to rescue lost and broken humanity. Jesus sacrificed himself for us on the cross and defeated death for us by his resurrection. We have forgiveness and new and eternal life because of him and the free gift he gives all believers in him. So many of our neighbors don't know him, and it's the Lord's will that we go to them and serve them in his name.

The possibility, even likelihood of your congregation closing is dreadful. The possibility of thousands of LCMS pastors with no flock, no call, no income is staggering.

But the thought of congregations not carrying out their God-given mission to their neighbors is the worst.

May the Lord lead us to good change, and may he use us to lead many to the cross.

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