

It Might Not Work

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Originally printed in *The Northern Light*, March/April 2016



Read the title of this article again. The fact is, there's a real good chance that it won't work.

For years now I've been encouraging all of us to pray about, look for and then do one new thing to reach the people in our own community with the love of Jesus.

Our district mission facilitators have met with scores of congregations, pastors and other church leaders prayerfully to brainstorm about possible ways to do that and then put together a plan of action. And scores of congregations have actually carried out their plans.

Thanks be to God, we see the Holy Spirit bringing people to saving faith in Jesus through the Word and Sacrament ministry of our congregations. New Starts...New Believers. It's happening by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Great news, right? Right.

Here's further news—not so great: a lot of congregations have done the things described above and not one person has come to faith as a result. Why in the world is that? Why do so many do so much and see such poor results?

Specifically, I can't say. In general, I confess this: "To obtain such faith," that is, saving faith in God's grace in his Son Jesus, "God instituted the office of preaching, giving the Gospel and the sacraments. Through these, as through means, he gives the Holy Spirit who produces faith where and when he wills, in those who hear the Gospel," Augsburg Confession V.1-3.

Notice the words "where and when he wills." I wish that everyone who hears the Gospel would confess faith in Jesus. I also know that's not how it is. And I don't know why. God wants all to be saved, and many are called but few are chosen. My brain can't wrap around that—because I'm not God.

I've come to realize that some of our leaders, pastors especially, are hesitant, even afraid to do something new to take the Good News to their local neighbors because they're afraid "it won't work." They're afraid they'll look like a failure if they try things and those things "don't work." They're afraid that members or other pastors will criticize them for not making it happen. That fear is understandable.

But here's the thing: making it "work" is not up to us. The parable of the Sower and the Seed is such a great comfort. The sower doesn't make the seed grow, but the sower does get out there and sow. Maybe there will be a great harvest, maybe not. It's not up to the sower to make that happen. But it IS up to the sower to sow.

This article is for all believers in Jesus in our 220 NID congregations, missions and multi-site locations. But it's especially to my brother pastors, and even more so it's to those brother pastors who are afraid to try something new for fear that "it won't work" and they'll look bad.

The pastors of the Northern Illinois District have heard me say this multiple times: "I will never criticize any pastor in a shrinking congregation or any congregation that's shrinking so long as the pastor and the people are doing the work of honestly trying to connect with their neighbors with the Gospel."

Has your congregation really tried things that didn't work? You're not alone. The Church has always experienced that. The Apostles did. Even Jesus did. So why be surprised? And why does it "work" at the neighboring church but not yours? See above.

If you prayerfully and thoughtfully put together a plan to connect with your neighbors, serve them in Jesus' name and tell them the Good News and many come to faith, praise God! He made it happen.

If you do all that and just one person comes to faith, praise God! Angels rejoice over that.

If you do all that and no one comes to faith through your efforts, praise God! You have been faithful—not just faithful in your doctrine, important as that is, but also faithful in being who and what you are: witnesses of Jesus who died for all, who rose again, and in whom we have forgiveness, life and salvation.

It might not work. There's a real good chance that it won't. You might be criticized if you put a lot of effort and resources into it and have no visible results. But you're not responsible for the results.

That's a lousy business plan, I know. In business, you want a pretty good assurance of high return on investment. But read the Bible, look at Church history and you'll see: there is no assurance that every congregation will grow and thrive.

Do you know what command the Lord speaks most often in the Bible? It's "Don't be afraid." We can live that way because our Lord Jesus has defeated sin, death and the devil for us. That same victory is ours in all our endeavors.

"Don't be afraid." Yes, it's a command, but it's backed up by the Good News of the cross and the empty tomb. In the mission, in all things, in Jesus we can carry out the command to proclaim repentance and forgiveness in his name to all, beginning at home. And we can do it without worrying about the results because the results are up to him.

