

# ***Lutheran Mission Matters***

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# The Little Church That Could: Watching God at Work as We Walk in Faith

**Dale Hedstrom**

**Abstract:** Sometimes when we can't imagine how a new ministry opportunity could come together, we close the door. Or if we consider the risk and cost of failure to be unacceptable, we stop trying. This is often because we don't factor a supernatural God into our equations. But Scripture is full of examples of God asking His people to believe impossible things—and then start walking in faith that God will what only He can accomplish. Here is a story of a little congregation that decided to take some steps of faith—and what God did in response.

“Don't close the door before giving God a chance.” That pretty well sums up what went through my mind the day one of my parishioners said to me, “Pastor, I have an idea.”

Here's the background to the story. Holy Trinity Lutheran Church is a small country church in rural Lakefield, MN. The congregation has been in existence for 122 years. Congregation members told me that when they celebrated their centennial in 1996 they wondered how much longer the congregation would be able to keep its doors open. A few years later, they formed a dual parish with another rural congregation. Sunday attendance currently averages just over seventy people.

Like most rural congregations, we have aging facilities. For example, the handicapped ramp is an external structure that is beginning to get rickety. Congregation members brainstormed ideas and options, finally settling on plans for a remodel and addition that would give us two enclosed ramps—to the main floor and the basement—plus a handicapped-accessible bathroom on the main floor.

We created a building fund with a goal of raising half the funds in 2017. Halfway through that year Denny approached after the service one Sunday and said he wanted to run an idea by me before bringing it to the building committee. He told me that he was lying in bed asking God for fundraising ideas when the thought came



*Rev. Dale Hedstrom (MDiv, Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, 2007) is the pastor of two rural churches in southwestern Minnesota. He and his wife Mary served as lay missionaries to Thailand in the late 1990s with LCMS World Mission. They have seven children, four of whom are still living at home.*  
[dalehedstrom@gmail.com](mailto:dalehedstrom@gmail.com)

to him: “Why not host a major Christian outdoor concert in the Iowa Great Lakes area?” By “major” he meant that we would approach one of the most well-known names in contemporary Christian music, Michael W. Smith, with our story and ask him to come.

Hmmm. Just looking at the surface of things, it would have been logical to respond, “No way. Couldn’t happen. We’re just a bunch of farmers and blue-collar workers. We don’t know anything about organizing concerts.”

But I’ve read about God giving “impossible” visions to people (think Abraham becoming the father of a nation, or Moses asking Pharaoh to let God’s people go). Andy Stanley describes it this way in his *Visioneering* book: “God-ordained visions are always too big for us to handle. We shouldn’t be surprised. Consider the source.”<sup>1</sup> I certainly did not want to be the one to close the door before giving God a chance to do what only He could do. I looked at Denny and said, “Well, let’s start walking down the path and see if God opens the doors.”

That was in July of 2017. Turns out Denny had organized concerts when he was a member of the Jaycees. With the blessing of the building committee, we started exploring possible venues and gathering cost estimates. We expected it to cost about \$30,000 to book Michael W. Smith, plus about \$5,000 for sound and lighting, plus an estimated \$5,000 for advertising, catering, insurance, and other expenses.

Asking a small country church to be on the line for approximately \$40,000—when they are trying to raise money for a building project—sounds a little crazy, doesn’t it? We agreed to charge \$25.00 per ticket, and hoped to get corporate sponsors to cover most of the expenses. We were also told by the venue to expect four to five thousand people. Profit projections looked good!

But still, we knew that the congregation had to make the final decision. A letter was sent to members informing them of the estimated costs and the importance of their input for this decision. After much discussion, ballots were distributed and then tallied. The results—24 to 6—far from unanimous, but a clear enough majority to proceed.

That was January 28. And what a step of faith it was! We knew that once the contract was signed we had only two weeks to come up with \$15,000 (half of the fee to book Michael W. Smith). The venue offered to have their concert agent do the negotiations for us. We agreed, wanting to get going on finding corporate donors yet knowing that we couldn’t begin until we had locked in the contract.

Meanwhile, we tried to get organized—forming a concert committee and then forming sub-committees to work on various aspects like advertising, ticket sales, corporate sponsors, and a fence and stage crew. It was amazing to see the excitement and enthusiasm of the concert committee members—none of whom had ever done anything like this before. God the Holy Spirit was at work in their hearts!

Finally, we heard back from the venue. Turns out they not only did the negotiations, but also signed the contract and paid the \$15,000 down payment,

trusting that we would eventually pay them back. God was clearly opening doors for us!

Month after month went by with very little ticket sales and few corporate donations. We eventually reached \$15,000 and were able to repay the venue for the down payment. But things weren't coming together as quickly as we hoped.

Yet God was still at work. In early June, He brought alongside us a couple who were very excited about this concert. As part owners of a major publishing company, they offered to design more eye-catching promotional material and a press release—not only giving us over four hundred large posters, but putting it in most of their publications free of charge.

A month later God brought another person who organizes a two-day Christian music festival every year. He, too, was very excited about this project and wanted to help us out. God also provided a radio announcer who created a professional 30-second ad for this concert without charging us anything.

Still, the profit projection was not looking a rosy as we originally thought. Faith was being stretched! Concert committee members were putting in lots of time visiting corporate sponsors, trying to sell tickets and spreading the word.

Yet God would continue to provide words of encouragement through people who heard about the concert. In July, a man and his wife approached two of our concert committee members who were selling tickets at an amusement park. As the conversation unfolded, she told them that God had given her a dream that she and her husband were supposed to bring Michael W. Smith to the Iowa Lakes area. A minute later this same couple pulled out their checkbook and donated \$1,000 to the concert fund. The next day we learned that an anonymous donor had given \$10,000 to the concert. God was at work!

About three weeks before the concert, we finally reached the break-even point. Anticipation was growing; ticket sales were increasing. But the weather forecasts were getting worse. Then God astounded everyone (including a professing atheist!) on the day of the concert by shielding our venue from the storms. Radar images throughout the day showed storm cells, one after another, approaching the venue site and then either changing course or disintegrating all together. It was truly a modern-day miracle!

Over 1,700 tickets were sold, despite the weather forecasts. Still, donations kept coming in throughout, and even after, the concert. We even received one donation from a local church plant that had organized a free barbeque outside the fence at the venue site and then walked around collecting donations from people who didn't want to buy a ticket—all without telling us.

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To this day people all over the area are still talking about the concert. God was up to something much bigger than simply raising funds for a building project. And we got to be part of it!

As a pastor I learned some lessons from this event. The biggest is this: listen to the laity—and stay out of the way when they want to lead. God had already provided within the congregation everything needed to pull off this event: a former concert promoter, a computer whiz who loves to organize, professional food service workers and caterers to host the band and stage crew members, hard-working farmers and construction workers who constructed an inexpensive fence around the concert venue, an emcee who was a former radio announcer, two public health nurses and a PA to run the First-Aid station, and, to top it off, a former boxer and two black belts to be part of the security team.

Almost every person in the congregation came on the day of the concert to help out. Others, who were not members, also volunteered. God blessed everyone with enthusiasm (doing their job with joy) *and*, more importantly, the faith to step out and let God to something that only He could accomplish.

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In the end, we added about \$30,000 to the building fund. But many church members believe this was no longer about the finances. God was doing something much bigger in our hearts—and in the hearts of people throughout the region. Many people have been inspired with the thought that if a little country church could do something that big . . . why can't we? Don't close the door before giving God a chance! His plans may be way bigger than yours.

## **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> Andy Stanley, *Visioneering* (Colorado Springs, CO: Multnomah Books, 1999), 42.