

Thrive Community Church: A Mission of the LCMS

John D. Roth

Abstract: As the planning and work of a mission planter began in Southwest Florida among a campus community and a growing suburb, reflections on God's Trinitarian nature became foundational for a reworking of the mission approach. The importance of community, relationships, and discipleship took a central role in shaping the beginnings of this ministry prior to the public worship launch in August 2014. Rather than an attractional model, this missional model finds its heartbeat in Luther's theology of the cross and is structured through discipleship groups and gatherings, community events, mission events, and in worship.

Douglas John Hall wrote in *Lighten our Darkness* that Martin Luther "wanted a gospel that drove people into the world, not away from it; that opened their eyes what was there, rather than assisting them to look past what was there."¹ As I reflected upon the call to become a church planter in the Florida-Georgia District to a unique setting in Estero, Florida, the home of Florida Gulf Coast University, I realized that I wanted to see things "the way they are," as Luther's theology of the cross emphasizes. This desire resulted in a reframing of the mission from the beginning.

The Florida-Georgia District for three years prior to my call had worked with a group of laity and pastors in Southwest Florida concerning a mission in Estero near Florida Gulf Coast University, intent on making it both a campus ministry and a community church. This "design team," as they became known as, had worked out some basic strategies and parameters for this mission. They wanted a church that would partner with other Christians to reach the community of Estero, bringing about Gospel saturation. They wanted the doctrine of the Lutheran church to be brought into a context to reach the current Millennial generation along with older generations and postmodern culture. They wanted a big vision. They wanted more of a movement than a church, affecting the lives of many people, who in turn would have an impact on others with the Gospel.

John D. Roth is a church planter in Estero, FL and at Florida Gulf Coast University for the Florida-Georgia District of the LCMS. Ordained in 1987, he has served churches and campus ministries in Louisiana, Florida, Alabama, and California. He's been married to his wife, Lisa, since 1996. They have two children, Justin and Emma. John received his DMin from Asbury Theological Seminary in Wilmore, Kentucky in 2012.

When I arrived in Estero in February 2013, I began working through the vision and mission for the mission start. I realized that we would be doing things differently from the ground up. First of all, I had convinced the design team and district that this mission needed to start with a team rather than an individual. Just as Paul in the book of Acts went nearly everywhere with a partner or team, so we needed to add a second full-time missionary as my partner as soon as possible, especially with the dual emphasis on campus ministry and community. Yet, this decision for a team at the core is even more fundamental.

Our ecclesiology in the Lutheran Confessions is expressed as the assembly of believers gathered around Word and Sacrament. It's not the assembly of a believer, singular. It's always a community.

This understanding of community corresponds to a God who is Trinity. The Trinity is not a vestigial doctrine from the Middle Ages with no relevance today. From my reading on this subject over the past two years, I have discovered that it is a vital doctrine that has great connections with and implications for post-Christian desires for community, relationships, and purpose.

Eberhard Jüngel, in his work, *God as Mystery of the World*, states that the Trinity is about God's self-giving love. "Christian theology, however, is not primarily concerned with a God who has love but with a God who is love."² Though most Americans still believe in God, their conception of God is more aligned with Greek philosophy and comes across as generic monotheism. God is power. God gets what God wants. God is removed from this world. The God perceived by the Millennial generation (and others) in the Christian rights involvement with politics, in the institutional church's focusing on its survival and self-interest, in the seemingly regressive way Christians respond to modern culture—this God is being rejected, and I dare say, rightly so. The philosopher's God is not the God revealed in the narrative of Scripture and especially in the life and work of Jesus Christ.

The Trinitarian God is not that apathetic God of Aristotle, but the God of passion and involvement, of incarnation, of cross and resurrection. Love is Trinitarian. The Father begets the Son from eternity. God loves the world and sends the Son to display that love through His whole life, the exact image of God. With Jesus you see who God is and what a human being is fully. Jesus lives out this relationship with His Father throughout the Gospels. He finds His identity, purpose, and direction outside of Himself in the Father. Thus, we discover through Christ that even before God said, "Let there be light," there was love between Father, Son, and Spirit. God is love.

God created human beings (Gen 1) in His image, male and female, he created *them*. The image of God is seen in the relationships of love, trust, and service. The image of God is not something a person "images" singularly, but is shown in how one relates to others. God's three-in-oneness is to become evident in this world

through us. Tim Suttle writes, “A big part of what it means to be a human being in the world is that we are born of and into a community. It means that we are designed by the Triune God to live together in community, in a particular way. We are to relate to one another and to all of creation in such a way that when people look at us, they can see that the three-ness in one-ness stands behind all of it, sustaining it by sheer force of will.”³

We are discovering at Thrive that Millennials are extremely attracted to a community living out God’s love (God’s image) in relationships. They are desperately seeking community as they struggle in their relationships. Most of the relationships they have experienced are transactional in nature. Even within the family, their relationships include conditions. It is almost as if each family member says, “So long as I’m getting something out of this family that’s to my benefit, I’m involved. When it’s no longer to my advantage, I’m out.” As children of divorce, children of neglect, they have grown up expecting only deals. When they encounter community in which people are building covenantal relationships, they are both fascinated and puzzled. Upon seeing such relationships and hearing about a God of promise, a God who is three-in-one, and seeing church as organic rather than as organization, community rather than institutional hierarchy, they respond positively.

This understanding of God and of what church is has implications for pastoral ministry. When I received this call to plant a church and campus ministry, I knew that I needed community myself. Solo ministry is on the verge of being oxymoronic. We are not self-contained individuals. Rather, we are interdependent and relational. I needed a Barnabas or a Silas, a Priscilla and Aquilla, a John-Mark or a Timothy. We are now developing a style of leadership based upon implications of mutuality and giftedness from Ephesians 4 and 1 Corinthians 12.

This conviction even resulted in the tag line for Thrive—*Where Relationships Are Everything*.

When one distills what church is, one discovers it’s not programs, structure, polity, buildings, music, or budgets. As the Confessions state, it’s about relationships—a person’s relationship with God (through Word and Sacrament) and with others. It’s the assembly of believers around Word and Sacrament.

Evangelical Christianity in America, trying to reach new people, embraced in recent decades an attractional church model that involved the worship service as the center of gathering people in. Eddie Gibbs sees that, though by outward appearances this trend in Christianity in America seemed to be working, underneath the exterior triumph there lies a potential failure at Christendom’s core. The new growth shown among mega-churches is not new growth in Christianity; rather, it is a consolidation into big box warehouses of the same churchgoing population from the smaller operations, similar to the movement in retail business. Indeed, these mega-churches

“have not made an impact” in reversing the downward trend in overall Christian church membership.⁴

Christianity has shown outward vitality through some of these operations, but having a crowd does not mean one has disciples:

This consumer-focused approach to ministry successfully attracted crowds, but it has failed for the most part to transform lives or construct significant personal relationships that provide encouragement, spiritual growth, accountability and avenues of Christian ministry. The old adage “easy come, easy go” has proven very true in terms of many churchgoers, especially the boomer returnees.⁵

American evangelicalism has traded large numbers of worship attenders for authentic Christ followers.

My frustration is not limited to the attractional model found in mega-churches. There is a creeping consumerist mentality exhibited by members of all stripes of churches in America. Even those who don’t think they are “church shopping” often actually evaluate their church by how it benefits “my family” and by “what music style (traditional or contemporary) and hymn choice that I like.”

For example, we’ve been asked by numerous church people, “When are you going to start worship?” It’s a noble question, since the Divine Service—Word and Sacrament—is a vital aspect of a Christian’s life. However, for many church people, it is the total sum of their church involvement. They really only want an hour per week, Christianity delivered in a tidy package so that church becomes the purveyor of spiritual goods and services for the Christian consumer.

For me, this expectation raised the question: Is the typical attractional church paradigm of church planting making disciples of Jesus Christ? Has faith become no more than a list of propositions to be recited or weekly worship dates to be kept?

One may rightly ask, “Does worship need to lead to this behavior?” I would answer, no, but I’ve observed it happening frequently. Our theology aspires for the Divine Service to be the fullest expression of God’s grace and God’s people, but I’ve observed worship functioning at a different level. Many members now use worship as a minimum obligation. For them being Christian means knowing information about the formula for salvation. Worship just reinforces what they already know.

Thus, we are striving at Thrive to imbed a discipleship model based on Luther’s theology of the cross.

That model focuses on the Gospel’s accounts of Jesus’ call to His disciples. Jesus said, “Follow me.” As Dietrich Bonhoeffer stated at the beginning of *The Cost of Discipleship*, “When Jesus calls a man, he bids him to come and die.”⁶ Luther’s theology of the cross was his discovery that the cross is “necessary and typical of God. The cross... reveals God and his characteristic way of dealing with believers.”⁷

In other words, the justification of the sinner before God involves the death and resurrection of the sinner, not simply a word about Jesus death and resurrection.

My experience in the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod has been that most preaching in the post-World War II era became simply a word *about* the cross. Sermon after sermon in Lutheran churches teach what happened to Jesus Christ upon the cross, explaining atonement in formulaic ways, usually with these points in the message: (1) All are sinners in need of God's grace; (2) specific types of sins are spelled out that the hearers are prone to do, showing their sinful condition; (3) God sent His Son to die for the sins of the world upon a cross; (4) believing Jesus is their Savior, the hearers are forgiven so that they can live a life in praise of God; (5) thus, hearers are encouraged not to worry about sinning but simply to believe the message of the Gospel and to keep living the same way they have always lived.

No death of the sinner takes place in this preaching. The cross has only a place in history as a formula for salvation. Human beings are not confronted with the word of the cross that puts their self-centered ways to death, including their quest for self-justification for all they do.⁸

The word *of* the cross will never separate the cross of Christ from the cross of the Christian.⁹ It will proclaim the death of sinful humanity and any attempt human beings initiate to justify and perfect themselves, all attempts to excuse and control, so that Paul's assertions are true. Each Christian proclaims, "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me" (Gal 2:20). Everyone who is in Christ is a new creation. The old has passed away and the new has come (2 Cor 5:17). The preaching of the word of the cross will keep the death and resurrection of Christ connected to the death and resurrection of the hearer.

As a result of these trends, we have begun with a discipleship process based in homes, gatherings in various places, and one-on-one relationships rather than with a worship service that serves as the way to attract nonmembers. Our goal is to create disciples who will worship rather than worship attenders who may never get around to following Jesus. We are trying to take what Charles Cousar said seriously: "The church whose theology is shaped by the message of the cross must itself take on a cruciformed life if its theology is to carry credibility."¹⁰

That cruciformed life is seen in how we are trying to serve the community and how we relate to one another. Public worship then comes in line with this discipleship understanding. The service will be a time of death and resurrection for each of us as we hear the Word and receive the Lord in the Sacrament.

One year has passed since I received the call to plant this mission. We are now beginning worship, though it will be months before we publicize our worship heavily. Currently our Sunday services are for a core of members, with an emphasis on how we are creating a different culture that will be open to skeptics and questioners, sojourners and followers. The expectation from the beginning is that

those who are a part of Thrive will be involved in discipleship community, missional community, and the worship community.

A discipleship community is a place for leaders to receive support, training, mentoring, and accountability. We are striving for a discipleship community to be reproducible. We want to see more leaders begin to disciple more people. This gathering creates invitation and challenge. This group doesn't sit and talk; it takes the gospel into action. Finally, it generates high accountability. This group commits to each other to grow in relationships with one another.

Our missional community is an assembly of Christians in mission with God, empowered by the Holy Spirit to embody the Gospel of Jesus Christ to a specific pocket of people. A missional community is usually composed of a group of 20 to 50 people who exist, in Christian community, to reach either a particular neighborhood or network of relationships. It has an expressed intention of seeing those who are in relationship with Jesus live through this more flexible and locally incarnated expression of the church.

We explain worship as much more than "going to church." When we gather, Jesus is personally present to transform our hearts and empowering us to live Gospel lives. In worship, Jesus Christ is personally present in our midst. Worship is for imperfect and broken people who are in need of a Savior. We sing, we celebrate, we rejoice in the resurrection. We learn of God's great news for us in the Word.

We receive Jesus personally in the mystery of the sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion.

All three aspects of this mission are in process. My prayer is that, as in Jesus' parable of the mustard seed, we will see the kingdom of God expand in miraculous ways, not because of the strategy or dynamism of the mission planting team, but because of the Spirit, by the grace of God, through His Gospel Word.

Endnotes

¹ Douglas John Hall, *Lighten Our Darkness: Towards an Indigenous Theology of the Cross* (Lima, OH: Academic Renewal, 2001), 116.

² Eberhard Jüngel, *God as the Mystery of the World: On the Foundation of the Theology of the Crucified One in the Dispute Between Theism and Atheism*, trans. J.C.B. Mohr (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1983), 316.

³ Tim Suttle, *Public Jesus: Exposing the Nature of God in Your Community* (Kansas City, MO: The House Studio, 2012), Kindle edition.

⁴ Eddie Gibbs, *Leadership Next* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2005), 11.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁶ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*. 1937. Trans. R. H. Fuller (New York: Macmillan, 1963), 4.

⁷ Graham Tomlin, *The Power of the Cross: Theology and the Death of Christ in Paul, Luther and Pascal* (Waynesboro: Paternoster, 1999), 178.

⁸ Ernst Käsemann, *Perspectives on Paul*. The New Testament Library. Trans. Margaret Kohl (London: SCM, 1971), 16.

⁹ Regin Prenter, *Luther's Theology of the Cross* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971), 7.

¹⁰ Charles B. Cousar, *A Theology of the Cross: The Death of Jesus in the Pauline Letters* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), 186.