**2020 is the New 1517: The Coronavirus will Change the Church**

*A Crisis on this Scale can reorder a society and its religious institutions.*

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*[This is an open-source document. It needs you. It needs a whole lotta voices editing, changing, adding, flushing it out. Because this new reformation is not about a single person’s perspective. It’s about a community of people learning together to discover something new that God is doing]*

In between Zoom video meetings and an increase in chocolate chip cookies I’ve begun to wonder about the future of our work together in these days and the days ahead.

Even before the Coronavirus, along with the accompanying Anxiety Virus, dismantled our not so orderly daily living and church activities, the ELCA was already entering into a time of restructure. This is not unique to our tribe. It’s been true of most every religious institution in America for decades. Mainline Protestants, Southern Baptists, Jewish and Muslim Communities have all been in a tailspin.

But now the crisis of Corona19 is forcing us all to face a dramatic and harsh rearranging of life as we know it. The most vulnerable are hardest hit, while the rest of us struggle to adjust to new rhythms. The only ones least impacted seem to be teenage boys who continue with a 24/7 video gaming habit, interrupted by brief departures for soda, chips and a bathroom. They’ll be fine as long as the internet holds up, and indoor plumbing remains an option. The first being more essential. But I digress.

What follows are some ideas. They are not based on research or empirical evidence. It’s simple conjecture. If I’m right on any front, I’ll claim the title of majestic guru. If I’m wrong, well, it won’t be the first time.

**But first, before we go to what will Change, let’s ask what won’t**

Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos, is frequently asked “What will change in the next 10 years?” He responds with something akin to, “Let’s also ask What will not change?” That’s a good question to ask in these times. What won’t change?

I think of these vital human centered qualities

* Humans will always be storytellers
* Humans still need connectedness and compassion
* Humans are meaning seeking creatures
* Humans will make bad decisions
* Humans are problem solvers

Then I think of these sacred centered qualities

* God’s Grace remains a constant
* The Holy remains a prevailing gift to all humanity
* The Incarnation of God in Christ is defining

How we understand and engage these unchanging aspects of life may be our most significant work, which is why I believe #5 below is most intriguing. Let’s keep these unchanging truths close at hand while we ruminate on the future of what might change

**Here are Five Changes**

1. **Technology will become more widely embraced, while the tech divide will leave some behind**.

There are pros and cons here. On the plus side, I’m seeing a swift move by previously reluctant parishioners toward Zoom Bible Studies, Church Council meetings and even worship. This could facilitate opportunities to increase involvement in numerous activities. There are opportunities for outreach that have been waiting for application. Covid19 forces many people to adapt. I do think there is the open question of how community and interactivity needs are addressed. Figuring this piece out will be key going forward.

On the downside, one wonders if people will become lazy in their application and participation. Could in-person attendance decline in preference for staying home in our jammies? How will all the plethora of online streamed worship services impact church shopping, attendance and giving? Will we be entertained or offended by bloopers?

As a general rule simpler, shorter and succinct proves to be the key in online communications. Our attention spans are dramatically reduced. This means worship, study groups and meetings will follow suit. Your 75-minute-long liturgy may start with 100 viewers, but you’ll dwindle down to a precious few by the end. This could force all of us to hone our messages and ‘get to the point’ in meetings. On the flip side, coffee or cocktail hours might enjoy a renewed extension.

1. **The Role and Purpose of the Pastor will change or diminish**

For most of the 20th century, we built the church around the professional minister. He or she was trained with a college or seminary degree thus credentialing them as the intellectual specialist. The blessing of this was the value of the educated clergy. The downside included a level of intellectual superiority. But chiefly we trained the church to center around the Pastor, and all we asked of the laity was regular attendance and consistent financial support.

The Coronavirus ends this model, which has been in decline for some time. The new model, which is actually a reclaiming of the old model, sees the ministry leader (do they need to be ordained?) as a mid-wife for ministry.

In the early weeks of the CV19, Boston area Pastor John Polk, divided his congregation into small groups of three to four households. Each group is headed by a shepherd who checks in with people on a weekly basis. Pastor Stephanie Pope did something similar and reported the delight of a father over-hearing his high school age daughter, a group leader, making phone calls checking in on people. The experienced warmed his heart to witness the Christian compassion expressed by this 18-year-old. Pastor Lauren Holm guided a member of her congregation on the details of how to give a blessing to other family members. Each of these Pastors have quickly made the shift from provider of services to mid-wife. They are now assisting others in providing ministry.

This shift has been needed for some time. We would be well served as a church to run with this new direction rather than resist it. But it calls into question some assumptions about the ordained. We will need to train them to be mid-wives. In other words, their role is to help others give birth to new ways of being church. The spotlight shifts from Pastor to lay leader.

Implicit in this shift may call into question our financial model. Most of the congregations in our synod have significant budget preferences toward the paid professionals.

1. **Many Congregations Will Close, some don’t have to**

Any person looking at the landscape of US American Christianity for the past decade has witnessed the coming wave of church closings. This virus and the accompanying economic tsunami will make the slow pattern of decline a cascading waterfall. Hey, it’s a mixed metaphor but at least it’s still water.

In the month since CV19 became more than a news story in China, I’ve already heard from congregations who used to say, “we’ve got 2-4 years” now saying, “I think we’ve got six months left.” More of our fragile churches will close more rapidly.

The rolling impact of church closings, rising unemployment, stock market declines will impact healthier churches as well. This leads to declines in the funding model that supports denominational systems. Both middle judicatories like synods as well as national systems will experience dramatic reductions in funding. This will force a needed refocusing of priorities. I know for us in the New England Synod, while our budget consists of little fat, we will have to make tough choices about what work we will and will not be able to do. I suspect this will be true on a national level as well.

But does this have to be all bad. Congregations/Synods/Denominations that are willing to adapt to these fluid times could continue, especially if they adopt new leadership structures. Pastors may have to shift from full time to part time, and one wonders, if this might be true for bishops as well. If this happens, lay leaders will need to pick up more of the ministry and operational functions of their congregations. We all may have to decide that the church does X, but not Y. Discovering your WHY becomes more important than ever. Discovering the ability to say NO, a crushing challenge for church folk, will no longer be an option – it must be done.

1. **An Opportunity to Reorient the Focus of Ministry**

What is our WHY? Our purpose, the one thing we offer to our local community that is unique and no one else can do it?

In the new post-CV19 church there will not be an option for being all things to all people. For nearly two decades I’ve been preaching this message. Those congregations that acted on this early are stronger now. A previous iteration of this message was: “If your church closed this week, would anyone in your community notice?” I’m not talking about mission or vision statements; I’m talking what people say about your church.

* That’s the church that builds wheelchair ramps.
* That’s the church that has an elderly care network.
* That’s the church centered on spiritual practices.
* That’s the church with a recovery ministry.

Whatever it is PICK ONE. Yes, one. Do it better than anyone else in your community. You’ll have a future and a clarity of purpose. You’ll also be able to say ‘No’ to all of the distractions, suggestions, worthwhile ideas that you just can’t do if you are doing your ONE THING well.

Ministries that spend their time, energy and resources on being all things or nothing to people will be gone, likely in 2 years, some less. There’s a future for focused purpose

1. **Now is the time to imagine a new Ancient/Future Spirituality**

This Plague has dethroned us from our Egypt Pharaoh Ego arrogance that we are in charge. I’m not saying God sent this Plague to do us harm or punish us for some moral faux pas. Rather, I’m suggesting that this modern Plague, a product of biology, has scattered the illusion that human beings are in control and masters of our own destiny. Our illusion of primacy, control and independence has been shattered. This includes our theology/spirituality/belief systems.

Will we be ready for a new theology, a new spirituality that fully embraces all of nature? It is clear to me that any religious thinking about life on planet earth now needs to pay attention to the natural world. This creation is speaking to us through both this virus as well as the climate crisis. They are related, even integrated.

I believe every church and every church leader now needs to wrestle with the threefold crisis of our time. The crisis of the climate, the crisis of the pandemic and the crisis of meaning. These three interrelated crises need an engagement that brings together our best thinking and living. I’m rereading and rethinking my views on two books in the Bible – Job and Revelation. They are somehow related both deal with questions of ultimate meaning on both an individual and collective level. I’m reading them through a Creation Care Depth Psychology Lens. Honestly, I don’t know that that means at this point in time, but on an intuitive level I’m suspecting something that relates to a transformation of life.

The calendar may say 2020, but it’s 1517 again. What I mean by that is the events of 500 years ago were both reformation and a renaissance of culture and worldview. We are in a similar time. We can’t just think our way into the future, we must be willing to live into an adventure. That requires risk, which is another word for faith.

**Other articles worth reading**

**How Church Leaders Need to Function**

<https://journal.praxislabs.org/leading-beyond-the-blizzard-why-every-organization-is-now-a-startup-b7f32fb278ff>

**Domestic Implications with 34 different Perspectives.**

<https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2020/03/19/coronavirus-effect-economy-life-society-analysis-covid-135579>

**International and Foreign Policy Perspectives**

<https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/03/20/world-order-after-coroanvirus-pandemic/>

**Another Perspective on implications for the Church**

<https://convergenceus.org/2020/04/02/ten-ways-the-church-will-be-changed-by-covid-19/?inf_contact_key=4ec20b0f3f206b8f4f9762d8c24d8f84f651f238aa2edbb9c8b7cff03e0b16a0>

**What Reopening might look like in US. The Executive Summary is worth a read.**

**American Enterprise Institute**

<https://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/National-Coronavirus-Response-a-Road-Map-to-Recovering-2.pdf>