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Word Alive! Connections and Conversations

President Matthew Harrison recently reported to the Concordia Seminary Board of Regents that The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod has lost 18 percent of its membership in the last forty years. To be sure, we're not the only mainline American denomination in serious decline, and cultural and demographic reasons can be cited, but that's little comfort to a church which has taken the Great Commission seriously since its founding. I'm not setting out on a guilt trip here. There may well be valid reasons why some congregations are not growing, like the decline of 160-acre family farms in rural America. Growth is not the only measure of congregational health, as Peter Steinke writes knowledgeably in *A Door Set Open*.¹ That said, decline in any congregation and in the general synod saddens us and challenges us to strategic thinking for the future, especially in our seminaries as we prepare the pastors who will take our places. When groups talk about our decline, the amazing growth of Christianity in other places, especially Africa, is usually brought up, but in my experience these discussions usually end in resignation and the meeting proceeds. The 800-pound gorilla of decline lumbers off to sit silently in the back of the room and watches us vainly put our energies into lubricating the machinery of an institutional church we love but is in serious decline.

I certainly don't have a silver-bullet answer, no one does, but we can gain insight by comparing today's culture to the culture of the early and growing church, which is one reason why our healthy, confessional seminaries are especially important in this time of decline. Professors who are scholars in cultures and historical times different than our own can help us understand the practical problems facing the church today. "Most of what we do in serious Bible study has to do with overcoming the gaps that separate us from the original audience of the scriptural documents."² Learning the differences between the cultures of the first and the twenty-first century can sharpen pastoral presentation of God's gospel to all the baptized in sermons, Bible classes, and conversation. And the more insightful and incisive we are in our preaching, teaching, and visitation, the more our laity will be enabled to give persuasive reasons for the hope that is in them as they pursue their vocations in the world (1 Pt 3:15). Growth cannot be guaranteed, but we can sing with conviction, "Save us from weak resignation to the evils we deplore."³

One key difference between then and now: the first century was an oral culture; ours is largely literate. It is estimated that only about 10 percent of the population of the Roman Empire could read, and the percentage of literate Christians may have been even less.⁴ That has profound implications for our understanding of how the gospel of Jesus Christ got into the hearts of people in the first century and, pending our thoughtful reflection and strategic pastoral and parish action, how we can witness more effectively in the twenty-first century. Begin your thoughtful reflection with this: Ask your parishioners to locate the "word of God" and they'll most likely point to the "Bible," which means the "book" or "scroll" containing God's bound words. On Sunday the lessons are printed in the bulletin, projected on a screen or found on page whatever "in

your pew Bibles” and many readers follow the print while the lector reads. The sermon explicates and tries to drive home the printed word, which is fine, but the result can be less than a direct interaction between the preacher and the hearer because the “living and active” word has been reduced to a printed point of reference (Heb 4:12). Bible classes gather around the printed word that literate people can read and discuss. Think about it, the very term “Bible class” is symptomatic of our Western-literate culture. There’s nothing wrong in all this, but it doesn’t replicate the dynamism of the first-century church. Largely illiterate, they focused on hearing the spoken gospel, the *viva vox evangelii*. Jews, probably more literate than Gentiles because of their devotion to the Torah, heard texts read and expounded in their synagogue worship by someone who could read.⁵ Jesus did just that in Luke 4:16–19 and notice the sequel, verses 20–21: “He rolled up the scroll and gave it back to the attendant and sat down. And the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. And he began to say to them, ‘Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.’” After Jesus’s ascension, the “People of the Way” continued in the synagogue but also gathered on “the Lord’s Day” (Rv 1:10) to hear from the eyewitnesses and their companions (see Acts 1:21–22).⁶ Sometimes the witness would come in the *person* of the apostle or evangelist but because of the multiplicity of worship sites the authoritative witness to Jesus’s life and words came more often through the *writings* of the apostles and evangelists.⁷ Those writings, especially the works of the canonical New Testament, were read by someone to the largely illiterate congregation. When Mark 13:14 says, “let the reader understand,” it strikes us as strange (“Well, I’m obviously reading this and I am paying attention!”) but it could well be a cue from St. Mark to the person doing the public reading to the worshipers in that first-century Christian synagogue or house church. Similarly, 1 Timothy 4:13, “Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture” isn’t a bland encouragement to keep reading the Bible in worship but is an earnest plea to intentional oral reading of the Old and now the New Testament Scriptures because, absent reading, that’s the only way the Spirit will take the authoritative gospel into the lives of the illiterate. This gives urgency to the plea that the Hebrews not neglect “to meet together, as is the habit of some” (Heb 10:25). “Whoever is of God hears the words of God” (Jn 8:47). “Faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ” (Rom 10:17). The dynamism of the first-century church was, among other things, the orality of the gospel, “the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes” (Rom 1:16). The word wasn’t bound and shelved, a source of religious information, it was a powerful agent of transformation, living and active, upon all who heard and believed.

Consider 1 Peter. Christianity had come to the Roman provinces of Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia through oral reports carried by religious pilgrims returning from Jerusalem.⁸ I doubt they brought home slick evangelism brochures! What these pilgrims did bring home to their fellow synagogue members was what they heard with their ears in Jerusalem, the announcement that Old Testament texts are fulfilled in Jesus. Wherever these Jews and the God-fearers fell on the scale of literacy/illiteracy, they did know Old Testament texts from worship. Illiteracy does not preclude familiarity with texts.⁹ That being the start of these Christian “churches,”

actually synagogues filled with People of the Way, Peter is concerned that they remain God's "peculiar people" in the face of powerful peer pressures against the gospel.¹⁰ He sends what we call "The First Letter of Peter," but calling it a "letter" already slants our understanding, suggesting that the members of those congregations actually read it, as we might read the bulletin before worship or the church newsletter at home. A more accurate picture of how the "letter" was received is one you may remember from your youth, before the internet instantly connected us, when communication was carried on by writing letters. Maybe Aunt Louise wrote to your mother. She gathered the family around to hear her read the letter out loud. Silas/Silvanus may well have been the person who read the letter to the congregations and no doubt shaped the form and many expressions of Peter's content as he delivered Peter's witness and encouragement over and over again (1 Pt 5:12). His reading would have conveyed Peter's heart and his own, not like the lifeless readings we sometimes hear these days in church. The nature of manuscripts and scrolls, especially the lack of space between words and units, required the reader to be intimately familiar with the contents, making for a direct communication to the congregation.¹¹ In fact, the reader would have been so familiar that a short work like 1 Peter, 105 verses, would have been largely or completely memorized.

Peter never speaks about reading but his content and outline reflect the oral communication and rhetorical conventions that were so popular in the first century. After the salutation, Peter, through the reader, begins the body of the letter with a sweeping vision of the inheritance laid up for the hearers, climaxing "in the things that have now been announced to you through those who preached the good news to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven, things into which angels long to look" (1:12). "Therefore" in verse 13 alerts the hearer to a shift of thought (oral communication signals such moves) as Peter next presents motivations for holy living (hope in Christ's return, future; the Father's present judgment, present; and Christ's saving work, past).¹² Verses 13 to 25 climax with an authoritative quotation from Isaiah (the hearers knew the passage well) and the reader drives home Peter's point: "And this is the good news that was preached to you." Sit in your study twenty centuries later, read the entire epistle in this light, as an oral communication, and you'll find rhetorical devices throughout.¹³

What does this mean for our gospel ministries twenty centuries later? Nancy Ammerman of Boston University has written about theological education in our changed times. "Those who are on the margins of religious life . . . are more likely alienated because a congregation has failed in its relational work than [that] they have ceased to believe. Connections and conversations are the building blocks of the new kinds of religious communities our best students will learn to lead."¹⁴ In the first century the church grew because the word was alive through personal connections and conversations. Carrying that to our twenty-first century, pastoral and congregational ministries can be more effective through connections and conversations that use oral style more than literary style. From the most literate through the functionally literate to the illiterate, people respond better to imagery and narrative than to linear propositional presentations. And younger people who are native to new communication technologies are literate in a different way than older generations. Many of them won't abide long

lectures about the faith but they will give a hearing to someone they trust, connection, who speaks the *viva vox evangelii* with the transparency and eye-to-eye contact that marks oral style, conversation. That means we preachers, being thoroughly literate, will in our preparations make a special effort to “lift” the printed word off the biblical page and speak it into the hearer’s heart so that the word “living and active” surgically enters the hearer’s heart (Heb 4:12). Rote reference to printed passages is less effective than the voice of God speaking faithfully through us to our audience and then through our parishioners to the people in their lives.¹⁵ By the way, this invites us to the discipline of memory, to memorize biblical texts, the Small Catechism and also the incisive words, phrases, and sentences of devotional writers and theological thinkers. As important as our libraries are, the arsenal for witness must be in our heads and hearts that we take into connections and conversations.

When I first started at The Lutheran Hour, I was asked to attend sessions at, I think this is the name, the Broadcast Center. It was staffed by radio professionals and their purpose was to teach me the peculiarities of speaking on radio. One of the helpful things they taught me was not to use long quotations because long quotations lose the interest of the hearer. That’s true for radio but it’s also true for preaching and teaching and general pastoral communication. The problem with long quotations is that they introduce a third entity, an obstacle to the immediate interaction between speaker and listener. Think about it; reading a long quotation from the pulpit requires you to take your eyes away from direct engagement with the audience. It disrupts the connection and impairs the conversation. No matter how great the quotation is, even from the Bible, it can get in the way of direct interaction. A former CNN executive, a committed Christian, once spoke about the “Gutenberg captivity of the word of God.” We are blessed to read the word in print and our theological tomes and treatises have their place, in our studies, but the living and active word goes into its mission through connections and conversations. “The woman left her water jar and went away into town and said to the people, ‘Come, see a man who told me all that I ever did. Can this be the Christ?’ They went out of the town and were coming to him” (Jn 4:28–30).

“Almighty God, grant to Your Church Your Holy Spirit and the wisdom that comes down from above, that Your Word may not be bound but have free course and be preached to the joy and edifying of Christ’s holy people, that in steadfast faith we may serve You and, in the confession of Your name, abide unto the end; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.”¹⁶

Dale A. Meyer
President

Endnotes

¹ “Many churches . . . will not grow. Some are hospice cases. But, not one of them is outside the realm of mission. I want to underscore that growth, as significant as it is for mission, does not alone define what mission is. To assign ‘mission’ as a title exclusively to numerically growing churches is a mistaken understanding of mission.” Peter Steinke, *A Door Set Open* (Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute, 2010), 61.

² Thomas M. Winger, “The Spoken Word: What’s Up with Orality?” *Concordia Journal* 29 (2003): 136.

³ “God of Grace and God of Glory,” *Lutheran Service Book*, 850, 4.

⁴ William Harris in Harry Y. Gamble, *Books and Readers in the Early Church: A History of Early Christian Texts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 4, 7.

⁵ “Instruction in reading Hebrew was more widely given among Jews than instruction in Greek or Latin was among Gentiles.” Gamble, 7.

⁶ “People of the Way” seems to have been the first designation for followers of Jesus, Acts 9:2. See also Acts 19:9, 23; 24:14; 24:22. “Christian” was first used in Antioch, Acts 11:26.

⁷ “Elders” (plural) of the church in Ephesus suggests more than one worship location (Acts 20:17). The same may be suggested for Corinth, since the Lord’s Supper was celebrated in the triclinium and atrium of a believer’s home, which limited the attendance (see 1 Cor 11:17–22).

⁸ Acts 2:5–11

⁹ Cf. Acts 4:13

¹⁰ For example, 1 Peter 2:4–10.

¹¹ See F. R. Cowell, *Life in Ancient Rome* (New York: Penguin, 1961), 165.

¹² On the motivations, see Dale A. Meyer, “More Lively Participation,” *Concordia Journal* 41, 2015: 94–98.

¹³ See for example Kenneth J. Thomas and Margaret Orr Thomas, *Structure and Orality in 1 Peter: A Guide for Translators* (New York: United Bible Society Monograph Series, 2006).

¹⁴ Nancy T. Ammerman, “America’s Changing Religious and Cultural Landscape and its Implications for Theological Education,” *Theological Education* 49, no. 1 (2014): 33.

¹⁵ See Dale A. Meyer, “PDAs and the Spirit’s Sword,” *Concordia Journal* 29 (2003): 166–176.

¹⁶ Collect for the Church, *Lutheran Service Book*, 305.