

Dying Well - The Experience of the Miriam Committee of Christ Lutheran Church, Agincourt, ON

The Church has two functions.

The first is to help individuals and communities to live well.

In Ephesians, Paul describes the purpose of the church as “equip[ping] the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ.” This is why the Church has ministries of teaching, worship, evangelism and outreach, advocacy for justice, local and international development, hospitality, and compassionate spiritual care.

This is where the vast majority of our energy, time and resources are spent. It is why we pay pastors, youth workers, missionaries and evangelists; build and administer structures and facilities; create committees and task forces; and commission works of art and music. Whether we use language like “proclaiming Christ,” or “faithful discipleship,” or “growing in the Spirit,” the Church exists to help us live full and abundant lives.

This is the work that gets all the glory. It’s what most of us had in mind when we applied to seminary.

The second purpose of the Church is much less glorious, but no less important. That purpose is to help individuals and communities die well (probably not what many of us had in mind when we applied to seminary).

Jesus said, “unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.” It could be argued that this is the very heart of Christianity and thus dying well is actually the primary purpose of the Church. Why? Because an important part of living well means not being afraid. “For I am convinced,” says Paul to the Romans, “that neither life nor death... nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” Living truly well only begins when we stop being afraid... even afraid of death.

Dying well can mean many things. The first image that comes to mind is palliative care for those whose bodies are dying. In the past, this has been important work for many pastors. Even today, when a call is received that a parishioner is at death’s door, absolutely everything else is put on hold and the pastor arrives at the bedside as soon as possible. But, with the increasing institutionalization of all things pertaining to physical and mental health, the pastoral role in palliative care has decreased significantly. It is more common now that the Church gets involved in the death of someone only after they have actually died, and then the Church plays its institutional role in planning and carrying out the funeral with the family. The

Church could, and should, play a much more significant role in helping at least its own people die well through effective palliative care.

But dying well means much more than overseeing the death of the physical body. Dying well means ending relationships well. Dying well means letting go of that which binds us – unhealthy traditions and customs, unattainable expectations and obligations, injustice and oppression, or, to use a Church word, sin. Dying well means managing transformational change well. “Very truly, I tell you,” said Jesus, “no one can see the kingdom of God without being born anew.”

A wise elder of one of my previous congregations once asked me, “Do you know why the moon is dead?” I tried to answer with scientific definitions of life and death, but he shook me off. “The moon is dead,” he said, “because it never changes.”

Dying well means changing well. Again, the Church words for this include: transformation, conversion, repentance, and reconciliation.

Unfortunately, very little of the energy, time or resources of the Church go into helping individuals and communities die well, which is such a shame because dying well may be the one thing that Jesus really hopes for us – after all, we are Resurrection People, aren't we? Perhaps dying well is exactly what it means to “come to... the measure of the full stature of Christ.”

Many Christian communities in Canada are in trouble both spiritually and financially. Congregations of the Eastern Synod of the ELCIC are no exception. The way many of our communities are currently structured is unsustainable. Worship attendance is decreasing. The volunteer pool is shrinking. Financial resources are dropping. Commitment and participation levels are tumbling.

Our immediate response to this crisis is to cry out that we are not doing what we need to do in order for individuals and communities of our Church to live well. Maybe what we need to ask ourselves is this: Are we doing what we need to do in order for our people and our communities to *die well*?

This does not necessarily mean encouraging and helping congregations to close, although, in some cases, it might. It does mean using our faith, our theology, our time and our energy to help congregations manage well the change that is upon us all.

The Miriam Committee

In June of 2003, Christ Lutheran Church in Scarborough began an 18-month process of dying well. Ostensibly, it began when I wrote a newsletter article naming the “elephant in the room” – declining attendance, finances and volunteer support. But that was only the catalyst for the real change that needed to happen: the open acknowledgement by the lay leadership that the status quo would not be sustainable

for much longer. It was only when that happened that we were able to begin rolling up our sleeves and exploring the possibilities.

A “Future Directions” task force was struck with a mandate to:

1. Identify and name the current state of the congregation
2. Imagine one or more desired futures (options)
3. Communicate this mandate to the congregation and quell rumors

The task force renamed themselves “The Miriam Committee” after Moses’ sister. According to Exodus, chapter 2, it was Miriam’s task to see that Baby Moses, floating down the Nile in his basket, was going to be all right. It seemed to us that we were being charged with a similar task under similarly hopeless circumstances.

From the very beginning, great care was taken to be respectful of the membership of the congregation during this uncertain time. From the minutes of the first meeting: “All options need to be looked at – [it is] possible that some people may feel excluded from the process, and this requires care and honesty.”

Early in the process, the Committee established a process that would guide its work:

- a. Acknowledge that the congregation is not without resources
- b. Define and make explicit core values that will help us discern God’s call for the congregation and thus make the best use of those resources [Kelly Fryer, *Reclaiming the ‘L’ Word*]
- c. Identify specific activities that will need to be engaged to implement and embody those core values
- d. Ask members, “What will you commit to in support of these activities?”
- e. Develop sustainable future options for the congregation based on the level of commitment received.

Visiting teams were established to go into member’s homes to:

- a. Explain the purpose of the Miriam Committee
- b. Explain the process developed
- c. Discuss core values identified
- d. Explain the survey and encourage members to complete it

One hundred surveys were distributed. Over the next three weeks, sixty-five were returned. (Seventy-five had been hoped for.) Based on responses, the Committee came up with six possible options, citing pros and cons for each.

1. Congregation disbands handing assets over to the Synod

2. Congregation merges/amalgamates with an existing Lutheran Church
3. Part-time Pastor
4. Site is given/sold to another congregation or service organization with the understanding that Christ Lutheran be given worship/office space at no charge
5. Congregation sells site and rents space for ministry at new location funded by the sale of the site
6. Chaplaincy
 - site sold to another congregation with proviso that Christ Lutheran have use of facilities for Sunday afternoon worship
 - ½ proceeds from sale used to sustain chaplaincy ministry for x number of years
 - ½ proceeds support one or more chosen ministries
 - Chaplain is freed from any expectation for growth, focusing instead on the long-term palliative care of the congregation
7. Re-development on current site based on evangelism drive

A great deal of time and energy was spent exploring various possible partnerships that would reflect option #4 above. This proved to be a dead end.

By March of 2004, a new vision had arisen built on option #7 above. A five-year plan was submitted to Canadian Missions for consideration. This plan, as well as subsequent amendments, was rejected.

Finally, in the October of 2004, a plan was submitted to the congregation wherein the congregation would close in the new year and the building and land would be given to a local Chinese Lutheran Church to grow their ministry. Tearfully, this is the plan that was ultimately accepted by the congregation.

Conclusion

The Miriam Committee didn't set out to help the congregation die well, but that's what it did. Even if one of the other options had been chosen, it would still have effectively needed to die into order to grow into what it might have become.

The strength of the Miriam Committee was its process: beginning with the acknowledgement that God had gifted us with resources, moving to the desire to use those resources well by identifying core values, wanting to embody those values with concrete action, and determining what level of commitment the congregation was willing to make towards those actions.

I believe two key realities made this process possible:

1. We began the process *before* finances dictated the process. In other words, we had time.
2. We were *unafraid* to enter the process.

The Miriam Committee of Christ Lutheran Church, Agincourt is not a perfect model to be followed by every struggling congregation. Mostly, we stumbled along all the while hoping against hope that we would find our way back to living well and not have to face death. But, in the end, we did die well; a holy death that I ultimately attribute to our faith in resurrection.

Peace,
Pastor Brian Wilker-Frey