

*State of the Church*  
February 13, 2011  
1 Corinthians 3:1-9  
Pastor Vern Christopherson

In my first congregation I was blessed with four organists. We didn't go looking for these organists, mind you. They found us. One by one they joined the congregation. And, as you might imagine, they all wanted to play for worship. Fortunately our regular organist was gracious enough to make room for them. Let's just say, it led to some interesting variety. One of the organists played as fast as a racehorse. Another played as slow as a turtle. One played as loud as a 747. Another played as soft as a summer rain.

The variety wasn't the problem. The congregation got used to it and even liked it. The problem was that these four organists couldn't agree about anything. Somebody would make plans for Christmas; somebody else would change them. Someone would line up a soloist; someone else would line up the choir. Needless to say, it led to hurt feelings, and lots and lots of snipping behind each other's back.

Finally I got fed up with it. I called the organists into my office. I had a little speech prepared: "The four of you are a blessing to our church," I said. "You each bring wonderful gifts and I'm glad you're willing to share them. But you have to stop this incessant snipping at each other. And more than, you have to start working together. We can't make music that is pleasing to God if we're not going in the same direction."

Well, I'm happy to report, things did get better after our little talk. They weren't perfect, but they were better. As I see it, if four squabbling organists can set aside their differences and learn to work together, anybody can.

When Paul writes his first letter to the church in Corinth, the snipping is at a fever pitch. What are they snipping about? Among other things, whether Paul or Apollos is a better preacher. I'm sure these two had different styles of preaching, different things to emphasize. And it led to factions in the church, and jealousy, and quarreling.

Paul doesn't pull any punches. "You are acting like a bunch of spoiled babies," he says. "I should be feeding you with solid food, but you're so immature that all I can give you is milk. People, grow up. This ministry isn't about getting your way. It isn't about saying that one pastor is better than another. It's about Jesus."

Paul goes on: “Who’s Apollos anyway? Who’s Paul? We’re plain, ordinary servants. I planted some seeds. Apollos came after me and watered them. But here’s the deal: the only way our efforts are going to amount to a hill of beans is if God gives the growth.”

Paul then makes a crucial point: “What’s important,” he says, “what’s really important is that the one who plants and the one who waters work together with *the same purpose*. You can’t be a church any other way.” Whether you’re trying to get four organists on the same page, or four pastors, or the church council, or the Sunday School teachers, you need a common purpose.

There’s a contemporary way of talking about this common purpose—it’s called *alignment*. Alignment happens when we as a church are going in the same direction and working toward the same goal. That doesn’t mean we’ll always see eye to eye. It doesn’t mean we won’t have some honest disagreements. What it does mean is that we need to commit our hearts and minds to working together.

Last November, in an effort to work toward alignment here at Zumbro, three groups got together for a retreat—the Church Council, the Visioning Team, and the program staff. Our goal was to discern five goals for five years. The retreat went late into the evening. If you’d have asked me an hour before we were done whether all this was going to come together, I’d have had some serious doubts.

Then we took a much-needed break. I grabbed a cup of coffee. On my way back to front I whispered a prayer, “God, you’re going to have to make this come together, because I can’t.” Guess what? During the last hour of the retreat, things did come together, and in a remarkable way. It was a God-moment. We had so much agreement, in fact, that we settled on three goals instead of five.

Again, we were working on alignment, a common purpose. The first goal we discerned for Zumbro was this: *to create a culture of welcome and belonging, not only for ourselves but for those who are not yet here*. This goal has become our focus for 2011: “Creating a place for all to belong.” People, I have to say, it’s been great to see your enthusiasm: signing up to be greeters, inviting people to the Islam class, trying the two minute connection. There’s been so much chatter on Sunday mornings, in fact, that we might have to start kicking people out the door so we can lock up and go home.

Let's be honest, though. As shy Lutherans we're not always sure what to say when we meet someone we don't know. For example, Ann Leland of Zumbro recently met someone she didn't know and she promptly stuck her foot in her mouth. From what I've been told, Ann is pretty good at that. And so, in a spirit of "less-than-perfect hospitality," Ann and Pastor Jason are going to share a top ten list: the "Top Ten Things **Not** to Say to Someone You Don't Know." Ann and Jason:

10. Are you new here?
9. I've never seen you before; do you go to the other service?
8. Hey, do you remember my name?
7. How long have you been a member here?
6. So, did you go to Luther, Concordia, or St. Olaf?
5. Do you come here often?
4. Are you a Lutheran?
3. Are you pregnant?
2. Did you walk over from the old church?
1. Are you one of those Christmas and Easter people?

If you're wondering what to say instead, how about this: *Hi. I don't think I know your name. My name is Vern.* And let the conversation take off from there. As we do this, we have to get over our hang-up over names. We're going to forget names and make mistakes. I called Arne Nelson "Bob" one Sunday at the communion table. I asked McKenzie McCormack if she was busy getting ready for her wedding. McKenzie's eyes got very wide. She's a junior in high school. It's her older brother that's getting married.

Ann Leland, move on over. We're all going to stick our foot in our mouths. That's okay. It's part of creating a place for all to belong.

The second goal we discerned at the retreat: *to explore worship possibilities for a variety of preferences and target audiences.* This goal, I think, stems from a number of things. For instance, 1) the Wednesday G2G service ended a couple years ago and nothing has come along to replace it; 2) In the worship survey last May, twenty percent of respondents said they enjoy singing contemporary songs; 3) On the same survey, a sizeable number of folks indicated that they're not all that enamored with traditional liturgy. I don't know what all these things mean. But I think we at least need to talk about them.

One of the biggest challenges that mainline churches like Zumbro are facing is that almost none of us are growing. In reality, most of us are shrinking. On top of that, many of our children and grandchildren don't go to church anymore. Or, if they do go, they go to places like Autumn Ridge. That should at least give us pause. Again, we need to talk about it.

Please hear me: I'm happy with the worship we're doing at Zumbro. I don't have some sort of master plan for figuring this out. But, in an effort to reach people for Jesus, I'm convinced we'll need to try some "experiments" along the way.

An example of this was Wednesday worship during Advent. We reconfigured the pews in the sanctuary so it had a feeling of being "in-the-round." We lit dozens and dozens of blue candles. We sang simple liturgical songs. We had shorter, more personal sermons...out of the pulpit and down among the people. We invited worshippers to light candles in prayer. There was nothing earth shattering about what we did, but people found it very engaging, including the confirmation students.

Our third goal for Zumbro: *to grow as disciples of Jesus who will be actively engaged in living out our callings in the world.* The early Christians gathered in homes. They broke bread together, prayed and worshipped together, and then scattered into the world. That's the rhythm of the Christian life: gathering and scattering. In other words, worship is not the destination. It's the sending out point to live our callings in the world.

Jacque Peterson has been sent. Jacque is the principal at Harriet Bishop Elementary School. She's been living out her calling in a particular way through the Backpack Program. I've asked Jacque to come forward and share a little bit about it. :

My job is more than instruction, more than managing a staff, maintaining a safe building and monitoring achievement data. Working with 480 kids everyday means making a commitment to the academic, social and emotional development of each one. It is a calling. I'm often asked how I know which kids to select for Food For Friends. The truth is, I don't think it's possible to work closely with students and families and not know. In terms of physical needs, often I am aware of families who need extra support because they feel comfortable enough to tell me. Other times, the needs present themselves in subtle ways. Like the mother joining her four children for lunch in the cafeteria. At first glance, this is a family enjoying a special Subway sandwich meal together. Look closer, and it is mom, splitting one sandwich 4 ways because they're out of money in their lunch account and there's nothing left in

the cupboard to pack in a cold lunch. This is a college educated, employed, single mom, struggling to meet the needs of her family of five.

Visitors to Bishop might say my students don't appear to be needy. Looks can be deceiving. One of the most responsible 8 year olds at my school appears neat and well dressed. He looks like he has it all together, but the truth is, his mother suffers from mental illness and they are about to lose their housing. It is because his neighbor (who has major health and financial challenges of her own) washes his clothes and provides him with a meal each night that he appears to not have needs.

There are many needs at my school. Every school has them, some more than others. Until our partnership with Autumn Ridge, it felt impossible to address everyone. Twenty-five of my families receive food for the weekend through this program.

Almost a year ago now I was getting my families signed up for the program. In order to generate interest and attention among the parents, I work through the children. I recall visiting with a 3<sup>rd</sup> grader one day, explaining the program – that he would take a backpack full of easy to prepare food home each Friday. He accepted the permission form and then he looked at me and said, “Mrs. Peterson, do you think there will be chicken noodle soup in the backpack”. Amazing, he didn't wonder if there would be candy bars, chips or cookies, but something as simple as a can of soup; something I so easily put in my grocery cart each week.

I am excited to hear of Zumbro's plan to support Lincoln Elementary. It will be great to see what God can do through you.

There you have it: three goals for three years: 1) creating a culture of welcome and belonging; 2) exploring worship for a variety of people; and 3) living out our callings in the world. I'm excited about these goals. *Way to go, God!*

Remember, this is about alignment. It's about laying aside our differences and working together with a common purpose. Most of all, it's about God working through us to give the growth. Amen.