

# LAMB OF GOD CHURCH

A LUTHERAN-EPISCOPAL CONGREGATION

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December 18, 2008

## SHIFTING INTO THE FUTURE

**HOW CHANGES IN THE CHURCH ARE CHANGING WHAT I WILL BE DOING AT LAMB OF GOD**

*This is a long letter.*

*At the end of it, I tell you about some changes to my ministry that will happen soon.*

*If you like, you can skip to the last page and find out what those are.*

*I hope, however, that eventually you will take the time to read all this and find out why, with the support of Walter and the Board of Trustees, I'm making these changes.*

Dear People of Lamb of God:

More than one person around Lamb of God has been heard to say something like, "if the pastors keep talking about the emerging church, I'm outta here."

The good news: there is no such thing as the "emerging church."

The bad news: well, let me put this in terms of one of the funniest t-shirts I have ever seen. We were on a hiking trail somewhere in Yellowstone National Park. Making his way down as we went up was a young, bookish fellow sporting this slogan across his front: *Stop Plate Tectonics*. I was in hysterics! There is absolutely nothing humanity can do to affect the movements of the massive continents. This guy was poking fun at those of us (yes, including me) who get all excited about change, whether we are trying to make things different or keep them the same. The fact is, some things shift whether we want them to or not. And the bad news is that when things shift, something new eventually emerges.



Many people believe that humanity itself is now in the midst of a shift of geophysical proportions. Some believe that it is the greatest change in 500 years (since the Reformation) or 1,600 years (since Constantine) or 2000 years (since the time of Christ) or 5,000 years (since humans began to become urbanized) or even 10,000 years (since we began settling in agricultural communities). There are also many reasons postulated for the shift happening just now, including the rise of nuclear and quantum physics, the globalization of technology, and the worldwide networking of human relationships. The consequences and implications of this shift are being discussed in nearly every discipline you can think of, including not only the hard and social sciences but business management theory, philosophy (especially in epistemology - the study of how we know what we know), and, of course, religion. The buzzword common in all of these diverse areas is that something new is "emerging." As of yet, no one can say exactly what it is. All of these people are convinced, however, things are shifting and emerging, whether we want them to or not.

The shift itself is just now beginning. Some say it started about 150 years ago, others 50-25 years back, and still others only about seven. On the scale of hundreds to thousands of years, though, these variations are not that important. What is important is that millions of people around the world have already begun to shift into

whatever era is coming next. This is not a function of their age, but of their perspective. For these millions, a top-down structure of authority is stifling; claims to absolute, objective truth are incomprehensible; and using the ways of the past to determine the ways of the future is restrictive. They are yearning for change – a lot of it. Those of us who function well in the traditional ways of the world are not being asked or expected to change; that's not the point. The point is, does the Church have anything to say to the people who are *already* shifting? Obviously, any organization, religious or otherwise, that relies solely on conventional modes of exercising authority, discerning truth, and visioning the future will be unable to communicate with those who have a non-conventional perspective.

This has profound implications not just for theology, but also for the life, mission, organization and worship of the Church. Christians need to pay attention to what is happening *now*. We cannot afford to live only in the past or in denial. If we believe that the Gospel of Jesus Christ is meaningful for the people of the future as well as the present, then we need to learn all we can about what is happening, why, and what the disciples of Jesus should be doing to prepare and live in whatever emerges from this shifting world.



In an effort to do just that, in early December Gus and I went to Memphis, Tennessee, to a conference called “The Great Emergence.” This gathering attracted hundreds of people from all over the U.S. and overseas: old, young, middle-aged, clergy, lay, male, female, evangelical, progressive, conservative, liturgical, activist, Baptist, Quaker, Methodist, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Episcopalian, Wesleyan, North American, European, Australian, gay, straight, black, white, Latino, and a dozen other labels. The one thing we all had in common was a yearning to live an authentic life of faith, with Jesus of Nazareth at the center and the priorities of the reign of God as our dream.

The bad news: no one knows for sure how to live this way in the shifting future.

The good news: that doesn't matter.

The thing is, Christianity has a distinct advantage over all of the other disciplines (for example, physics or business management) as we live into this shift: we have a fairly clear idea of what the future *should* look like. Not the future after we die, but the future of creation that begins each day the sun comes up. What happens after we die is up to God and, like plate tectonics, there's not much we can do about that. While we are alive, however, we are called by Jesus to make the reign of God near: that is, to embody the abundant, eternal life of God's future right here and right now, just as Jesus embodied the reign of God during his life. Indeed, Jesus' very incarnation began to make the reign of God present. In Luke 4, just at the beginning of his ministry, he said that he was, *that day*, fulfilling God's promise “to bring good news to the poor . . . to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.” In Matthew 25, the disciples of Jesus are held responsible for the same mission, for we make God's kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven when we feed the hungry, give water to the thirsty, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, care for the sick, and visit the captives. God has been promising and working towards this future since the beginning, proclaiming it by the ancient prophets and making it eternally compelling by the Resurrection.

Theoretically, this has been the Church's mission since the beginning, since the first Pentecost Sunday. There are many Christians in conventional congregations today who live into this mission very effectively. There is no reason these groups must cease to exist or even change. For example, the Roman Catholic and Eastern churches remained intact after the Protestant Reformation. So, it's not so much the *what* of Christianity that's being affected by the shift; mostly, it's the *why* and the *how* – especially the “how.” How will the congregations be formed? How will Christian community function?

After reflecting on the experiences I have had in congregations over the years, the reading I have done recently, my impressions of the conference in Memphis, and my personal convictions, I believe church communities that *do* make a shift will embrace most of the following values:

***Jesus is Lord.*** This emphatic declaration is the solid ground on which the Church – ancient, modern and emerging – will continue to rest. However, a messy and unhealthy intermingling of church and government has tangled up the faith community’s loyalties. When the church tries to get the government to do its work, and vice versa, it can be confusing to figure out who, really, is our Lord. A Christian’s loyalty belongs solely to Jesus, God incarnate. This does not mean that Christians are not involved in the affairs of their country; it does mean that all their decisions are made using the values of the reign of God, whether in the grocery store or in the voting booth. Needless to say, Christians will not agree on what these decisions should be. That’s fine. But the days of the divine right of kings – even elected ones – are over. There is only one divine king, and it is to him and his kingdom alone that we owe our allegiance.

***Scripture is authoritative but not restrictive.*** There will continue to be a wide range of beliefs and opinions about the Bible. By necessity, it will continue to be the primary means by which people access the life and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth. Generally, however, the Gospel values of the reign of God will be used to assess the continuing validity of scriptural provisions. To illustrate: in the fullness of the reign of God, no one will be discriminated against. As such, the verses in Scripture advocating or even simply permitting the subjugation of slaves, captives, women and children will be gently retired from use as guides to current behavior.

***Evangelism is done by engaging in mission, not persuasion.*** As Christians do the hard work of making the reign of God real for the whole world, folks will indubitably ask them why they are doing it. Upon this invitation, a person’s story of converting faith in Jesus Christ may be shared. This is how the Church grew (exponentially) in the first two centuries – without making threats, or imposing guilt, or claiming superiority – and this ancient practice will once again be the primary mode of sharing the Good News. Again, however, the main expression of faith in Christ is to do the work of making the reign of God real for the whole world, and disciples will seek to live their faith with great intentionality every moment of their days.

***Relationships are more important than doctrine.*** The splintering of the Body of Christ over doctrine will be healed as each person is invited to share his or her story and journey in a context of interest, honor and respect. Personal convictions are still important, but are never to be used as either weapons or scales. Belonging to a community is a matter of sacred commitment, not shared beliefs. Relationships are built in dialog, not on agreement. A related implication is that primary communities will be relatively small in size. Extended communities, however, will be global – wherever technology can reach. These internet friendships may not be physical, but they will be real, intense, and will transcend politics, nationality and religion.

***Leadership is shared.*** From worship to pastoral care to planning, decisions will be made communally and inclusively. In fact, no one person will be “in charge” of everyone else. The ordained people will not be the locus and focus of everything that happens in a community. The role of the clergy will be less that of “pastor” and more that of “midwife;” less that of “CEO” and more that of “servant.” Clergy leadership of a community will mean helping the group find its particular identity and face its difficulties and conflicts constructively. Clergy leadership of individuals will mean educating and equipping disciples to embrace their priesthood and accompanying seekers on their spiritual journeys.

***Ministry is based on authentic gifts, not on a given title.*** This idea has been around since the days of Luther and has been actively taught in Protestant churches for decades, but in the future the “priesthood of *all* believers” will be taken even more seriously. The first question each person in a community will need to answer is “what are my spiritual gifts?” Then the mission, activities and worship of the group will be built on the gifts of the people who choose to be part of it. This means everything, from budgeting, music and

teaching to preaching, prophecy and pastoral care, will be done by those with the gifts to accomplish it, who will not necessarily be the clergy.

***Worship is diverse but liturgically orthodox.*** Because worship planning is shared by everyone in the community, it will be creative and unpredictable. Because the worship relies on the priesthood of all believers, services will be radically participatory and inclusive. Some groups will use a lot of technology; others will use almost none. However, most gatherings will be patterned after the ancient, first-century rites and will be intensely prayerful, eucharistically centered, scripturally serious, and musically communal.

***Creativity, beauty and the senses are celebrated.*** An integral aspect of worship is to create a time and place of beauty in which to share our enjoyment of God. Music, fabrics, paintings, dance, glasswork, cooking, and drama: these and other creative talents are gifts from a creative God. Incense, light, movement, food and singing involve all our senses in worship. Our bodies enfold God's Holy Spirit, and what we create with them glorifies our God. The expressions of worship will differ among groups as they convey their unique tastes and talents.

***"Church architecture" will become a lost art.*** Classic church buildings can be stunning, but they are not versatile. To preserve the environment and reduce expenditures that instead could be applied to ministry, people will use existing buildings that can serve a myriad of functions and purposes seven days a week. This does not mean that gorgeous church facilities will be torn down; their beauty indeed glorifies God and should be appreciated for generations to come. It does mean, however, that new communities of faith will be looking more for places like vacant warehouses where they help create urban renewal, rather than for vacant land where they help create urban sprawl.

So, where do we all go from here? Personally, I am deeply intrigued about what is happening in this tectonic shift in culture, and convinced that the church has a fabulous opportunity not only to be part of whatever emerges, but also to help shape it. One conference and a dozen books do not make me an expert, however, so I need time and space to learn more and dream more. My current plans and hopes:

(1) I will be going to three-quarters time beginning January 1. I concede that reducing my hours started out as a cost-saving measure due to the congregation's finances, but it quickly turned into an opportunity for me to have the freedom and time to take action in this new area. This means that an entire workday each week will be dedicated to researching and exploring this unfolding phenomenon. As I trim back my hours to an average of thirty per week, you will undoubtedly notice changes in my availability or preaching schedule. However, I hope you will also rejoice that this action helps both Lamb of God and me.

(2) Episcopal priests are expected to go on a sabbatical every seven years to pursue their interests and reflect on their sense of call to ministry. I will be taking my sabbatical in 2009, my seventh year with you. During this time, I plan to visit groups across the U.S., and perhaps abroad, that have embraced the values I described above and that are experimenting with various ways of expressing their faith.

(3) After gleaning from these experiences, I would like to work with the people of Lamb of God, the Diocese of Southwest Florida and the Florida-Bahamas Synod to sponsor a "daughter" community. The location and other details are both unknown and unknowable at this point, but I assume it will begin in early 2010 in an urban area of Fort Myers that is in need of our care and service in the name of Christ.

I am excited about this venture, and some of you may be also. Others will think that if I have a nice dinner and a good night's sleep, I'll come to my senses in the morning. Whatever your reaction, I welcome your questions, appreciate your concerns, value your thoughts, and need your prayers.

Peace,

