

I-90 Ministries

Discerning the mission to come

Goals

- Paint a picture of the religious landscape in the United States
- Describe religious trends that shape how people think
- Show you where the ELCA fits in
- Name the unprecedented situation of the church today
- Dream about what's next

Cultural landscape of Christianity in the United States

- Christians = 70.6% of US population
 - 25.4% = Evangelical Protestants
 - 20.8% = Catholic
 - 14.7% = Mainline Protestant
 - 22.8% = Unaffiliated/"Religious nones"
 - 15.8% = Nothing in particular
- Not as bad as the news makes it seem, right?

Cultural landscape of Christianity in the United States

- 2007 – 2014
 - Number of people who identified as Christians decreased 7.8%
 - Number of unaffiliated increased 6.7%
- If Mainline Protestants continue on the same path we only have 21 more Easters left to celebrate (https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2017/04/28/if-it-doesnt-stem-its-decline-mainline-protestantism-has-just-23-easters-left/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.638052522f81)

How are individual Christians responding to changing landscape?

- Christians are becoming younger and more diverse
 - Between 2007 and 2014 only one age group increased in size
 - 30-39 year old group grew 33% to 39% of total Christian population
 - POC also grew, while % of Caucasians shrunk 71% to 66%
- Importance of religion in a person's life is increasing, BUT weekly worship attendance is decreasing
 - How the faith is practiced is changing
 - 1.8/month average attendance

▶ Cultural trends

- Articulate a truth raw numbers simply cannot capture
- 3 key thinkers reveal important cultural trends happening today
 - Ted Peters (Science)
 - Jean-Francois Lyotard (Meaning)
 - Leslie Newbigin (Mission)

▶ Ted Peters

- “In the twenty-first century, the island of safety has been sorely eroded. The tides of modern life are everywhere sweeping away traditional verities.” TFP
- With the changing cultural tide, it becomes difficult to explain the distance between where Christianity currently sits and where it will be next.

TFP Hermeneutical Question

- “How can the Christian faith, first experienced and symbolically articulated in an ancient culture now long out-of-date, speak meaningfully to human existence today as we experience it amid a worldview dominated by natural science, secular self-understanding, and the worldwide cry for freedom.” TFP
- Peters’ hermeneutical question is important. As congregations in the ELCA seek to be transformed to best join in God’s mission, this hermeneutical question points out an important cultural obstacle that congregations will face. The culture’s dominant worldview is governed by natural science, a secular self-understanding, and the worldwide cry for freedom.

▶ The situation of a Christian

- “The modern mind poses a challenge to Christian theology because it makes assumptions that are essentially hostile to the symbols of the Christian faith. The most devastating is that Christian symbols are old-fashioned and out-of-date.” TFP

▸ Jean-Francois Lyotard

- Postmodernity = "...incredulity towards metanarratives." JFL
- In other words, if one could define modernity as trust in a metanarrative and a search for the ultimate metanarrative in science, medicine, philosophy, democracy or theology, postmodernity has lost its faith that such a narrative exists

What's at stake for JFL

- "...the status of knowledge is altered as societies enter what is known as the postindustrial age and cultures enter what is known as the postmodern age." JFL
- At stake is how knowledge is legitimized. If there is no metanarrative, then Lyotard raises the question of how a person can come to know something. Pitting narrative knowledge against scientific, Lyotard shows how language games are used to legitimize each type of knowledge. This eventually leads him to the conclusion that there is a plurality of narratives through which people legitimize their knowledge instead of an overarching metanarrative.

Implications

- Many see Jesus and the story contained in Scripture as an ultimate metanarrative which gives meaning and purpose to those who are disciples of Jesus. However, if, as Lyotard has pointed out, our culture no longer believes in metanarratives, then the question is how the church will legitimize the story of Jesus as a source of knowledge. Lyotard does not suggest that metanarratives are bad, he merely explains that our culture today does not receive them as an adequate means to legitimize knowledge

Lesslie Newbigin

- Post-Christendom
- "No doubt there are large parts of Christendom where the present tense would still be applicable. However, most thoughtful Christians are in the old, established Western churches can no longer use this kind of language. They recognize that, with the radical secularization of Western culture, the churches are in a missionary situation in what was once Christendom" LN

Implications

- "The task of ministry is to lead the congregation as a whole in a mission to the community as a whole, to claim its whole public life, as well as the personal lives of all its people, for God's rule. It means equipping all the members of the congregation to understand and fulfill their several roles in this mission through their faithfulness in their daily work. It means training and equipping them to be active followers of Jesus in his assault on the principalities and powers which he has disarmed on his cross. And it means sustaining them in bearing the cost of that warfare." LN
- Mission field not "Out there"
- Mission field = here

Summary

- In summarizing the implications of the works of these three authors for the future of the ELCA, three insights are particularly important. First, Peters' work shows that the ELCA needs to learn new ways to communicate ancient truths in a world being shaped by natural science, secularism, and a new understanding of freedom. Second, in learning from Lyotard, the church must learn how to speak to a culture that is no longer dominated by a metanarrative but rather by a plurality of narratives. Third and finally, from Newbigin, it must learn that the church of tomorrow needs to understand the mission field not as a far away location, but rather as the reality of its surrounding local communities.

▶ The ethos of the ELCA

- Unity
 - Discussion regarding unifying Lutheran denominations in the 60-70 started the discussion regarding mergers
 - Lots of ink spilled in early days regarding what unity looked like
 - What does doctrinal agreement (AC, Article VII) look like in practice?
 - AELC pushed discussion along as Seminex grads needed options

▶ The ethos of the ELCA

- Ecumenism
 - Report & Recommendations of the Commission for a New Lutheran Church defined membership on one's baptism
 - Departure from confession

The ethos of the ELCA

- Inclusivity
 - RRCNLC went to great length to make sure there was accurate representation of people and church bodies
 - 5.01b that “This church, in faithfulness to the Gospel, is committed to be an inclusive church in the midst of division in society. Therefore, in their organization and outreach, the congregations, synods, and churchwide units of this Church shall seek to exhibit the inclusive unity that is God’s will for the church.
 - Put into place a quota system

■ An unprecedented situation

- The major cultural trends that seems to dominate society are at odds with the values the ELCA formed around. While people understand the world as having a plurality of narratives, the ELCA wants to overcome these narratives in favor of unity. While people are beginning to understand the need for evangelism at home, the ELCA wants to pursue ecumenism. One focuses on those outside the church while the other focuses on those inside the church. Finally, while people in the world have questions about how their faith and modern ideas relate or if they even do, the ELCA is focused on inclusivity.

Solutions?

- For the ELCA, this challenge is an unprecedented situation. Perhaps at no other point in its short existence has it been so out of touch from the world around it. The
- ELCA is in frightful need of transformation, but the issue is how it can best prioritize transformation to join in the *missio dei*. The ELCA structure needs to equip existing and future congregations to have transformation built into their DNA. Finally, it needs to show congregational leaders how to start bringing about this kind of transformation

Dreams...