



Texts in Context

The Book of Acts in Congregational Renewal

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THE CONTEXT: CONGREGATIONAL RENEWAL—A GOD-SIZED PROJECT

A couple of years ago, I helped lead a conference held at an ELCA congregation located near a major metropolitan area on the West Coast in a vibrant, diverse, and growing community. The Lutheran church we were visiting was none of these things. In fact, the conference was being held there because the church had begun renting its relatively new space to outside groups as a way of generating income in order to be able to maintain their beautiful and spacious facility. Once upon a time—and it looks not so long ago—the five-hundred-seat sanctuary was filled to capacity during weekend worship services. Today, an average of thirty-five people attend Sunday morning worship. They are mostly gray-haired and tired. It was a depressing sight. And although I was aware that there are congregations all across North America with a similar story, I had not then personally witnessed this phenomenon—a handful of old, faithful members at worship in buildings originally meant to hold hundreds (at least, not since I toured Europe two decades ago). Across the Continent, even in traditionally “Lutheran” nations like Denmark, magnificent old churches stand nearly empty on Sunday mornings. And I couldn’t help wondering, as I stood in the back of an empty sanctuary in one of our congregations in the sunny Southwest, whether we weren’t headed for the same future.

There is a crisis brewing among mainline Protestant churches in the United

The problem in our congregations is not one of right techniques or adequate financing. Our problem is spiritual. Our task is to join ourselves to the surprising mission of God, and we can be helped by a fresh encounter with the book of Acts.

States. In some circles, in fact, there is a growing consensus that mainline Protestantism—if not the whole of denominational Christianity—is in danger of extinction if current trends continue:

Christendom has been sick unto death for well over 100 years. We began to recognize this clearly during the past 50 years. Yet the actual death of congregations is happening suddenly, quickly, and with an odd sense of surprise on the part of church leadership....[The utter collapse of Christendom] will happen, over the next decades. Although the timeline will vary in different regions of North America, we will see...congregations close, entire presbyteries and dioceses disintegrate into chaos, and whole denominations declare bankruptcy and merge with other declining churches, only to die in the end.¹

This is, perhaps, an extreme view. At least I hope so. But it is hard to avoid the conclusion that we are living in a time of dwindling membership, aging congregations, and depressed leaders. And, although some in the church argue that what we are experiencing is nothing more than a “downturn” in the cycle of American religious life, the European experience waves before us like a frantic red flag. If mainline Protestantism has a future in North America, it seems to many in the church today that something must be done. The question we are all asking, of course, is: *What do we do?*

The painful reality is that, for the most part, our efforts in the ELCA to revitalize struggling congregations in recent decades have largely failed. During the 1990s, for example, the ELCA declared a churchwide “emphasis in evangelism,” dedicating significant money and effort to the development of resources to help congregations recover a measure of evangelical fervor that would, presumably, lead to vitality and growth. Additionally, our denomination planted up to forty new congregations each year. These efforts were initiated and carried out by some of the most gifted and faithful leaders in our denomination. Nevertheless, during the 1990s, the total number of ELCA congregations actually decreased by nearly 3%, and this denomination declined (in worship attendance and membership) by over 100,000 people. Most disturbing, perhaps, is that after a decade of emphasis on evangelism, ELCA members are less willing to share their faith with others today than they were before. And our own research has shown that, if a congregation was intentional about using our evangelism programs, it most likely finished the decade smaller than it was at the beginning of the decade. In fact, it was in worse shape than a congregation that had done nothing at all! Clearly, the answer to this crisis does not lie in some new program or technique.²

Furthermore, there is much evidence that the answer to this crisis is not a fi-

¹Thomas G. Bandy, *Moving Off the Map: A Field Guide to Changing the Congregation* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1998) 18–19. Bandy and his partner Bill Easum are highly esteemed consultants on American church life.

²Much of the data in this article comes from two important articles produced by the ELCA: “An Evaluation of the 1991 Evangelism Strategy” and “Worship Attendance in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America: Faith Communities Today,” by Kenneth W. Inskeep and Jeff Drake, Department for Research and Evaluation of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 3 October 2000. (For more information or for the complete report, contact the Department for Research and Evaluation through the ELCA website at <http://www.elca.org>.) Also, a table of membership figures since 1987, when the ELCA was formed, is located at <http://www.elca.org/co/news/table.html>.

nancial one. In 1994, for example, over one hundred and fifty congregations received outreach grants from the ELCA. These congregations were struggling, to be sure, but they made a good argument that their plans for revitalization should be funded. Overall that year we invested over two million dollars in these projects. Five years later, sixteen of these congregations had actually closed and, altogether, there were almost two thousand fewer people attending worship.³ Clearly, we will not buy our way out of this mess, either.

Congregational renewal is nothing less than a God-sized project. In fact, convinced that what we have on our hands today is not a problem of right technique or adequate financing, more and more church leaders believe that we are dealing, rather, with a spiritual problem in our congregations. In other words, we are dealing with the same problem today that Søren Kierkegaard observed in his church in Denmark two centuries ago.

Kierkegaard believed then that a moment of judgment over the church had arrived. The church, having perverted the Reformation doctrine on justification by grace through faith, had effectively severed the gift of justification from the call to works of love. It had turned the message of salvation into “a pillow” instead of “a life-belt.”⁴ It had, thereby, completely forgotten “that to be a Christian means essentially to be a missionary.”⁵ This problem, Kierkegaard believed, was connected to this even more serious situation: “I have in my possession,” he shrieked, “a book that probably is almost unknown here in our country, and therefore I will give the precise title: *The New Testament of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ*.”⁶ Kierkegaard’s passion, clarity, and courage to stand against the church *for* the church went unappreciated in his day. His own brother, a pastor, used his funeral sermon to mock him, suggesting that Søren was a drunk, a man out of his mind, who should have been “forcibly taken away by his friends until he recovered.”⁷ It was the church’s loss, back in the nineteenth century, to close their ears to Kierkegaard’s challenge. We dare not repeat their mistake.⁸

³These are facts I have been hearing repeated for the past couple of years by David Daubert, Executive for Renewal of Congregations for the ELCA. One of Daubert’s projects has been debunking the idea, favored by too many congregational leaders and pastors, that congregational turnarounds are possible only if they are funded by the denomination.

⁴Denzil G. M. Patrick, *Pascal and Kierkegaard: A Study in the Strategy of Evangelism* (London: Lutterworth, 1947) 297.

⁵Søren Kierkegaard’s *Journals and Papers*, ed. Howard and Edna Hong, vol. 3 (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1975) 204.

⁶Søren Kierkegaard, “The Moment, No.1,” in *The Moment and Later Writings*, ed. Howard and Edna Hong, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998) 101.

⁷Alastair Hannay and Gordon Marino, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) 37.

⁸Kierkegaard’s challenge—and his contributions—are highlighted in Kelly Fryer, “The Gift Is a Call,” in *The Evangelizing Church: A Lutheran Contribution*, ed. Richard Bliese and Craig Van Gelder (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2005) 11–31.

THE TEXT: THE BOOK OF ACTS IN ACTION

The Transformational Ministry Team of the ELCA (a mostly volunteer group, consisting of clergy and lay leaders, working within the Division for Outreach) has been working with congregations in need of renewal for over six years. For the first year or so, the methodology this team used was primarily technique-driven. Congregational leaders were taught “how to” make their ministry more relevant, effective, and “user-friendly.” This approach was quickly scuttled in response to a growing sense that the real issue facing congregations in trouble is a spiritual one. Today, this team facilitates a four-day process for congregational leaders that prepares them to facilitate a similar process for folks back home. The methodology consists principally of worship, prayer, Bible study, and mutual conversation. Through this process, participants are invited to discern God’s call to their congregation and upon their own lives, within the context of God’s mission in the world. Along the way, they are introduced to the ideas of articulating a mission statement, developing guiding principles, reading a context, acting strategically, managing conflict, working as a team, using an asset-based approach to ministry, and empowering others to use their gifts. The primary text for these transformational ministry events is the book of Acts.

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Participants, both clergy and lay, are asked to read the book of Acts in its entirety prior to attending a transformational ministry event. This book provides the key sermon texts at the eight or so worship services that are held throughout the event. And each work session includes a time of deep listening for the voice of a living God in the stories of that earliest church and the words of this book. This listening time includes time spent reading the text itself, conversation with fellow teammates, and, often, interactive projects. For example, in an early work session on the mission of the church, participants are each given a Styrofoam cup and a pencil. Each congregational leadership team is then asked to “build a church” using the church in Acts as a model. The room quickly turns into a learning lab/playground as teams engage each other in the task but also in conversation about what it means to “be” the church. The fun—and learning—continues as each team shares their “church” and their explanation with other teams. Some themes are always consistent across the teams: the church is not a building, the church is people; the Holy Spirit is at the center of the action; there is movement across barriers and out toward the world; the good news cannot be contained; the church must expect to be constantly surprised and challenged.

In another work session, participants are invited to reflect on God’s call upon

their own lives. They will, after all, be going home to face the various expectations, hopes, fears, and suspicions of their fellow members. They have been called to lead. And that is risky business. In *lectio divina* fashion, Acts 9:1–19 is read aloud. Three or four questions, then, are asked in turn. These questions vary, depending on the facilitator, but they are usually something like this: (1) When have you been on the wrong “road” and heard Jesus calling you onto a new one? (2) Who has been an “Ananias” to you? (3) What do you hear Jesus calling you to do (or to stop doing) right now? (4) What will it cost you to answer that call? Pencils, crayons, and markers are provided and participants are invited to *draw* their responses to each question, in silence. (Sometimes, they are given clay and other materials and have the option of creating a sculpture in response.) Once everyone is finished, participants share their creations and their stories with one another. There is always much joy in the room during this sharing and often many tears. Jesus seems real. God is alive. And nothing could be more important for a group of leaders who know they are facing a perilous and unknown journey.

This, above all else, is the key to using the book of Acts (and the Bible, generally) in congregational revitalization: The unshakable conviction that God is real! Congregational leadership teams are encouraged to make deep listening—to God and to each other—a regular part of their life together. A variation of a Bible study method common in many thriving Christian communities in the Southern Hemisphere is recommended for regular use. Using the method that I recommend, a congregational group chooses a passage from the Bible to read together. Usually, this is a fairly long passage. It is read aloud. Then, the group has conversation together around three questions: (1) What is God doing in this text? (2) What do you hear God saying to *you* in this text? (3) What do you hear God saying to *us*, together, in this text?⁹ Sometimes the text is read three times, once before each question is asked. It is critical that there be no hierarchy in the room; laity must be encouraged to bring as much to this conversation as their pastors. The exercise is not dependent upon any special knowledge or training. New Christians sit beside experienced Christians, each humbly listening to God speak to them through the other. Using these three questions and this egalitarian process, people are opened up to the possibility that God is still speaking and, more to the point, has something important to say to us today (individually and as a community). This method helps the word come alive for people and gives them practice in the spiritual discipline of listening for God’s voice. It helps them learn how to discern God’s direction together.

Some biblical scholars, among others, may question the wisdom of encourag-

⁹These three questions are at the heart of a newly published adult small-group Bible study series titled *No Experience Necessary: Bible Study*, by Kelly A. Fryer (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2005). This Bible study series is developed on several key principles: God is speaking; no experience is necessary; everyone has something to offer; engagement with God’s word leads to transformation. Furthermore, this Bible study is designed to be led by laity. It uses a primarily narrative approach to scripture, is grounded in the Lutheran theological tradition, and approaches the biblical text with a missiological lens. Unit 2, cowritten by Rolf Jacobson, became available in August 2005.

ing what seems to be an “anything goes” approach to reading and interpreting the Bible. They may also be concerned that this approach does not take the text itself, or best scholarship about the text, seriously enough. Likewise, theologians may worry that this approach leads to a sort of “theology of glory” and the mistaken idea that we can always know exactly what God is doing. Fair enough, on all counts. In response to these concerns, I would first argue that this kind of Bible study is not meant to be the only faith practice in which congregations participate. In a true learning community, people will be engaging the most current biblical scholarship and the best theological thinking of their generation. They will be studying their confessions and learning from their history. They will be wrestling with profound theological questions and asking, for example, what to make of a God who sometimes appears to be saying nothing at all. Furthermore, I would argue that no one will care about any of these things unless they are first convinced that God—and all the stuff of the Christian faith—really matters. In other words, they have to believe that God is real for them, for their congregations, and for the world. And, finally, I would contend that God, in fact, *is* up to something in this world and that God is calling us—as the church—to be a part of it.

“The mission of God is the one and only starting point for our life together as church. As the church, we don’t have a mission of our own. We are an instrument in God’s mission.”

The Bible describes God’s mission in many different ways: God is blessing all nations (Gen 12:1–3). God is reconciling the world to God’s own self (2 Cor 5:18–21). God is inaugurating a new kingdom (Matt 4:17). God is setting the captives free, giving sight to the blind, and bringing good news to the poor (Luke 4:14–21). God is rescuing all creation from brokenness and death (Rom 8:19–22). God is saving the world (John 3:16). The mission of God, however finally articulated, is the one and only starting point for our life together as church. As the church, we don’t have a mission of our own. We are an instrument in God’s mission. Again, there are many ways the Bible describes this: We are sent into the world, even as Jesus has been sent by the Father (John 17:18). We are called, as followers of Jesus, to be fishers of people (Matt 4:19); a fragrance that spreads the good news (2 Cor 2:15); and ambassadors of Christ, reconciling people to God (2 Cor 5:18–21). We are the light of the world and the salt of the earth (Matt 5:13–16). There are countless images to describe what our purpose is, as the church. Finally, the church is nothing less and nothing more than an agent of God’s mission. We have no identity, no purpose, apart from this. This is, first and finally, *God’s* mission. Thus, anything that we do together must begin with deep listening for God’s voice and the humble attempt to discern God’s direction for us.

Finally, the method that is put into action is unimportant. What matters in congregational revitalization, as we confront our God-sized *problem*, is that people

are invited to experience God as real, to realize that God has an important word to speak today, and to hear a call to participate in a God-sized *project*.

KEY THEMES IN THE BOOK OF ACTS

Should a congregational group choose to read and reflect together on the stories in the book of Acts, it would encounter a couple of themes that are critical in the revitalization process. A preacher or preaching team, working within the context of a congregation in need of revitalization, might well use these themes as the basis for a sermon series.

This is God's gig

Consider this: What if the “birthday” of the church is not Pentecost (Acts 2), as has traditionally been taught? What if the church was really “born” in Acts 8? This is where, chased out of Jerusalem after the martyrdom of Stephen, those early Christians finally do what Jesus told them to do in Acts 1:8: “You will be my witnesses,” Jesus tells them, “in Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” Remember how the story goes: Jesus gives them these instructions and then tells them to go to Jerusalem to wait for the Spirit. They do that. And, just as Jesus promised, there is a dramatic outpouring of the Holy Spirit. This amazing gift provides them with everything they need to be the church. But, instead of following Jesus’ instructions, they continue to hunker down in Jerusalem! The truth is, they would likely have stayed there forever if it had been up to them. And this, frankly, is very much in character for those apostles and other early Christians.

Throughout the story, the followers of Jesus get it wrong time and again. Ananias argues with the Lord about going to Saul because he is afraid of him; Saul, of course, turns out to be God’s instrument to take the good news to the Gentiles (Acts 9:1–22). The church leaders in Jerusalem criticize Peter for eating with Cornelius and his family, but this experience becomes a turning point in the mission of that young church (Acts 11:1–18). Peter miraculously escapes from prison, only to be locked out by his friends who cannot believe in God’s power to save (Acts 12:6–17).

For this reason, some scholars suggest that the book of Acts ought not be thought of as the Acts of the Apostles. It is, rather, the Acts of the Holy Spirit.¹⁰ The story of the early church, in other words, is actually the story of the Spirit at work in and through the church. It is hard to miss the activity of the Spirit in Luke’s writing—both the Gospel and the book of Acts. To start, it is the Spirit at work in and through the ministry of Jesus. The Spirit is there at Jesus’ conception (Luke 1:35), his baptism (Luke 3:22), his wilderness experience (Luke 4:1), and as Jesus makes his first public appearance when he opens the scroll of the prophet Isaiah and reads these words, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me” (Luke 4:18). And, without ques-

¹⁰Justo González has a thought-provoking commentary on the book of Acts called *Acts: The Gospel of the Spirit* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2001).

tion, it is the Holy Spirit at work in and through that earliest church. A quick count shows the Spirit showing up at least sixty times in the first twenty or so chapters of the book of Acts.

In a day and age when congregations are so often embattled, confused, depressed, and desperate, the book of Acts reminds us that new life will not come as a result of our own efforts. All of our fancy techniques and newfangled programs will have little lasting effect. It isn't that we couldn't learn a few new things, but, finally, the vitality and health of our congregations will be a result of the work of the Holy Spirit in and through us.

This is God's gig.

God chooses and uses unlikely people

As if to prove the point that the church thrived and grew as a result of God's work, Acts makes a point of highlighting the unusual choices God made when it came to leadership in the church. Right at the outset, Peter and John are arrested after healing a man born lame. They are hauled before the strangely intimidated council of religious rulers and elders, who listen to the men explain themselves. The members of the council are, Luke tells us, amazed. They recognize that Peter and John are but "uneducated and ordinary" men (Acts 4:13). They have no special training. They have no credentials. They haven't been to seminary. They haven't been ordained. They don't have any fancy letters behind their names. They have, simply, this: their own stories about their experience of Jesus, the call Jesus gave them, and his promise to be with them always. And that is all they need.

As the story continues, there is this strange pattern of unlikely people being called into leadership. Most unlikely of all, of course, is Saul. This zealot for his faith turns out to have been terribly wrong all along. "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" Jesus asks him on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:4). Then he puts him on another road, a missionary road, and Saul—now Paul—becomes the greatest church planter in history. Less well known, but just as odd in many ways, is Lydia. Paul encounters Lydia, a wealthy merchant with no husband in the picture (a strange sort of woman, in those days, to be sure), on the sabbath day. She hears the gospel and is moved to accept the message of Jesus; she and her household are baptized that day. Lydia invites Paul to come stay in her home, which he does, and the church in Philippi is born (Acts 16:11–15).

The health and vitality of our congregations do not, thankfully, depend on our skills or abilities. It is not necessary for us to boast the best preacher in town or the most well-informed church council. It will not be our education or our extraordinary giftedness, our ability to balance budgets or to write strategic plans or to produce impressive worship services that will make the difference. This is not an excuse to be sloppy or lazy or intentionally ignorant. But it is a challenge to us not to make credentials the prerequisite for meaningful ministry. Everyone has something to offer on this journey, which is just another way of saying that we belong to a priesthood of all believers. And it is, furthermore, a reminder that God is able to

do amazing things even (and, perhaps, especially) through those people we would be most likely to overlook. In fact, one concrete step toward vitality might be to seek out those on the margins and invite them into the process. We might begin by giving voice to those who have been silenced within our congregations and listening to those outside our congregations who have for too long been unheard.

Expect surprises

The book of Acts is finally, in many ways, the story of a church that never ends up where it thought it was going. The Holy Spirit, again and again, pushes them out of their comfort zones and into the company of strangers. For example, Philip is on his way back to Jerusalem (home at last!) with Peter and John when he is picked up (well, not so fast) and whisked away to a wilderness road where he encounters a man as different from himself as he could be (Acts 8:26). Likewise, Peter is pulled from his nap in the warm afternoon sun and the promise of a good meal to visit the home of a family that he, according to every standard he had been raised with, shouldn't have even been talking to. Here, in the home of these Gentiles, Peter sees the Holy Spirit in action and comes to understand the gospel in a whole new way (Acts 10). Paul and Silas, freed from their prison chains, are led into the home of the one who was their jailer. There, he and his family receive the good news and are baptized (Acts 16).

This is the story of a church that is never allowed to stay hunkered down in Jerusalem but is, rather, led into the world. The story ends, of course, in the capital city, Rome. Along the way, the world is changed by this unlikely cast of characters and the Holy Spirit at work in and through them. But, along the way, the church itself is also transformed. Their prejudices are shattered. Their traditions are challenged. Even their understanding of scripture is changed as it is read in a new context, in a new situation, in a new day (Acts 2:16–21; 2:25–36).

The good news for congregations in the midst of revitalization is that this work has always been messy. There is no blueprint for change or health or growth. There is, in fact, no way at all to predict how things will end up. We can expect to be surprised. In fact, we might even learn to embrace the unexpected people and unforeseen circumstances we encounter. God has been known to show up in just such moments. We may even learn to give thanks for the crises—even the God-sized ones—that occur along the way. God has a way of using those, too, to accomplish unpredictably wonderful things. ⊕

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