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Reflections on Ministry in 1968

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The 1960s

The 1960s were tough years for the United States. University students, angered at the Vietnam War and its draft, began protesting on campuses in various ways, including sit-ins at offices of presidents and deans. Allies for the students appeared in increasing numbers, and calls for an end to the Vietnam War multiplied. Civil rights protests and marches became larger in scope. Theological professors from Luther and other seminaries, as well as pastors and laity from all over the country, traveled to join Martin Luther King Jr. in what became a violent Selma march. King led larger and larger civil rights demonstrations, which clogged the streets and buildings in US cities and universities. King's soaring sermonic speeches filled the airwaves. His "I Have A Dream" speech from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial was heard by millions and was inspirational for many.

A new "hippie" youth culture appeared. Often, heated divisions between younger and older generations added confusion in churches and communities. Issues of gender equality and anti-institutionalism further complicated US public life. Government officials were increasingly distrusted. Confidence in a "United" States was at low ebb.

The author was a prominent Lutheran pastor and community leader in Minneapolis during the 1960s and well positioned to observe the events of that turbulent period. His reflections on that time, and our present time, observe both progress and work yet to be done.

The congregations and pastors, as well as everyone else, had to make their way through the difficult 1960s. The editor of *Word and World* has invited me "to write a personal remembrance of the year 1968, and how it was in the church during that turbulent time." I served as pastor of the University Lutheran of Hope ("Hope Church") in Southeast Minneapolis, Minnesota, during the years 1958–73. Both Hope Church and I as its pastor became involved in wider public ministries as well as in traditional congregational ministry. The first broadening of public ministry for myself and Hope Church grew out of very local concerns.

The decaying character of residential life in Southeast Minneapolis during the l950s and 1960s led Hope Church to become a founding member of a Southeast Minneapolis community organization that included churches, neighborhood-improvement groups, business owners, the University of Minnesota, the Minneapolis City Planning Commission, and other groups with a stake in Southeast Minneapolis. The chief goal of the community organization was to maintain a healthy residential community in the area that surrounded the University of Minnesota. Participation in this community organization helped Hope Church and its pastor to understand that congregations and pastors had a wider public ministry than previously thought. We were soon into zoning ordinances, the future of elementary public schools, university expansion, housing restrictions, traffic patterns, parking requirements, and many other matters typically dealt with by public offices without any input from churches or other nongovernmental units. However, urban decay was spreading, and the churches and other neighborhood groups had to decide to either stand by and let Southeast Minneapolis decay or try to be helpful. The Southeast churches and other groups organized for action.

It quickly became apparent that the congregation and pastor had even wider public ministries than previously thought. There was a growing awareness that both congregation and pastor were also called to "do justice." A theological moment of high importance was taking place. Martin Luther King Jr. was a prime user of the call to congregations, pastors and laity, and society at large to "do justice." Racism and its results were unjust, and MLK Jr. was calling all American people to be God's people in doing justice. I was much taken by the call for Christian people, collectively and individually, to "do justice." So were a great many others. For many of us it was a summons from God.

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The churches at all levels, congregations, districts, national church bodies, and ecumenical councils of churches tried to find ways to do justice. The churches' charitable ministries, such as medical care, social-service agencies, and refugee

sponsorships, had long been outstanding. However, getting at the root causes, often necessary to "do justice," was looked upon as getting into politics. Staying out of politics, especially if contentious, was taken for granted by churches as well as the larger society. By the 1960s, it had become impossible for many in the churches to stay silent and on the sidelines.

Nationally, the Lutheran churches issued materials regarding military service. Statements on conscientious objection, pacifism, and just wars were designed to help young people facing the military draft to think through their obligations and options. Staff persons from national program units sought ways to be helpful by introducing new initiatives aimed at bringing justice to inner cities, families in poverty, and the rural poor. There was a growing awareness that churches had to be more involved in public life.

The experience gained from Southeast community action soon led Hope Church to even broader public involvements. Southeast community personnel became a Minneapolis alderman, members of the city park board and city planning commission, and I was appointed to the Minneapolis School Board in 1965. The Hope Church Council and I concluded that service on the school board would be a useful expansion of Hope Church's public ministry. One of the early results of school-board service was an invitation to join Martin Luther King and about fifty other church leaders to form a US Council on Religion and Race. The intent of the council was to give churches a united center to declare their support for racial justice.

By 1968, the Minneapolis School Board was under court order to desegregate the Minneapolis schools. Desegregation, with attendant busing, was extremely divisive and quickly became a part of demonstrations at schools and in the streets. The simultaneous demonstrations against the Vietnam War, racism, and school desegregation created a witches' brew of anger, division, and threat that engulfed Minneapolis. Protests moved into the streets, and there was fighting and fires, with police and protesters in general melees. Protest movements moved quickly into the public high schools and even grade schools.

Harry Davis, a legendary African American leader in Minneapolis, and I had run a joint campaign for the school board in 1966. After a landslide win in the election, we sat next to each other at meetings. There were many scary scenes as desegregation hearings were held. I heard Harry Davis called every possible obscene name. The most frightening occasion occurred at a high-school gymnasium where the mayor, a rabid opponent of desegregation and school busing, stirred a crowd of desegregation opponents with a frenzied speech. The crowd surged toward the school board. I thought physical violence was about to occur and that Harry and I would be its first victims. Fortunately, the board was seated on an elevated stage, and none of the protesters made the key jump to the stage. The mayor stayed in the background, and the meeting was adjourned while the protesters milled around the mayor.

While the desegregation hearings were threatening enough, the street demonstrations were much more dangerous, both in Minneapolis and throughout

the nation. The antiwar parades, demonstrations, and sit-ins always threatened to become violent. Universities suspended classes, curricula were changed, and school and city leaders were in constant dialogue with demonstrators. In Minneapolis and many other cities, the demonstrations against racial injustice boiled over. Fights and fires broke out. The threat of continuing and growing street violence was palpable. City administrators and police were not able to bring an end to violent protest. Minority activists had a long history of antagonism against city officials and especially the police. Fortunately, a new element came on the scene in Minneapolis.

A decisive response by CEOs of major metropolitan businesses created a new opportunity. The CEOs from such well-known corporations as Pillsbury, General Mills, and US Bank publicly committed themselves and their companies to addressing the demonstrators' concerns. In short order, the CEOs created an urban coalition of about twenty-five people. The CEOs promised to personally serve on the coalition together with a like number of demonstration leaders. An additional dozen coalition members came from a variety of community sources. It took only a day or two before the first coalition meeting was held. As the then chair of the school board and pastor of a congregation that had been very active in community affairs, I was asked to be a member of the coalition. Hope Church became one of the coalition meeting places.

The immediate personal response of the business leaders was what the demonstration leaders most desired—access to community power centers. The ability and willingness of the business leaders to personally serve with demonstration leaders at decision-making meetings was the key element in bringing peace to the Minneapolis streets. A wide variety of new proposals received attention. New job-training opportunities, new jobs, and new workplace rules led to an early working peace between protestors, the urban coalition, and the city-elected leadership. The Minneapolis scene improved enough to enable the community to make a new start.

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In retrospect, it is possible to designate 1968 as a major turning point in US public life. The Vietnam War was the key point. The question was no longer "how does the US win the war?" but "how does the US get out of the war?" After more than a decade of military involvement in Vietnam, the majority of Americans no longer believed the United States should be fighting in Vietnam.

Military commanders were giving false body counts of enemies, and political leaders were echoing them. Trust in both political and military leadership regarding the Vietnam War was at a new low. The My Lai Massacre by American troops was a shock to the American conscience. A massive 1968 Tet Offensive by the Vietcong made clear that US political and military leaders were all wrong about the United States "winning" the war. A massive riot at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago brought US anger and dysfunction to the fore. The militant antiwar and anti-draft protests throughout the 1960s had influenced the American public. Americans wanted no more long American casualty lists. They no longer believed the war to be necessary. It became public knowledge that Congress would no longer provide personnel or finances to expand the war. It became widely known that President Johnson was looking for a way out of the war without being labeled the first American president to lose a war. 1968 was the year the American people decided the US military should get out of Vietnam. The need for street fights and draft battles served no further purpose.

At the same time, the US civil rights movement had become increasingly strong in its demand for justice for all. The shocking 1968 assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. brought a growing realization that only the end of racial injustice would bring lasting peace and health to American society. Hope Church, like many congregations, held a special memorial service to commemorate King's life and work and to give people a chance to mourn his loss. Services were held only a few hours after King's assassination, and there was only word of mouth to announce the service, yet the church was packed. The following day, Minneapolis school superintendent John Davis and I flew to Memphis to join in the Sanitation Worker's March that King had come to Memphis to lead. The march was totally silent and totally without incident, yet its effect was profound. The American people knew the sanitation workers were saying that peace and justice would come to America, but only when liberty and justice were for all Americans. 1968 was the year in which the American majority became convinced that the Vietnam War must end and complete racial justice must be an uncontested American goal.

There was another monumental change in the life of the churches in the fifty-year period that bring us to today. The ordination of women started in Lutheran churches in 1970, something that had been high on the churches' agendas throughout the 1960s. The rapidity of gender change in clergy service has been amazing. In 2018, approximately half of the newest class of pastors will be women. Women are serving as pastors in all of the ministry areas that were previously served only by men. Women are serving as bishops, and the current presiding bishop of the ELCA is Elizabeth Eaton. A remarkable change has occurred in the life of Lutheran churches while both church and state have been moving through several other significant changes.

It is instructive for the churches to look back and attempt to assess how 1968 continues to affect US churches in 2018. There are significant identifiable changes, some good and some bad. On the good side is the renewed sense that "doing justice" is a central element in the lives of churches and clergy. Clear distinctions still

need to be made between separation of church and state issues and the churches' responsibility to "do justice" in their everyday ministries. There is now a widespread awareness that parish ministry must reach beyond congregational membership. The boundaries of a more public ministry will always need to be established anew as society becomes increasingly complex and vulnerable.

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Churches are always thrown for a loop when faced with wars. Sorting out what is just and unjust is usually difficult and almost always ends in uncertainty. Yet, the churches have to keep struggling with the questions posed by war. That the United States finally said "no" to the Vietnam War must be studied and restudied in an effort to see whether wars as a means of settling disputes can be stopped. 1968 found the churches working on individual conscientious objection as a valid stance, but the larger questions about war still defy answers. A few voices are raised in support of pacifism, but such support has never become widespread. Meantime, 2018 is as bedeviled by "small" wars as 1968.

1968 signaled real advance in race relations. Employment and pay scales for minority peoples decisively improved. First-class educational opportunity continues to be difficult, but there are gains. Continued residential segregation presents a huge roadblock, but even here there has been improvement in residential mobility. 1968 marked progress in civil rights, and while the goal of full equality remains elusive, 2018 presents hope. If Hope Church was at all typical, the gains in congregational and individual commitment to racial diversity was noteworthy. Overt racism was gone. Readiness to participate in civil rights support was present. A distinct change for the better has occurred.

A church negative from 1968 was a precipitous drop in university student participation at university churches' worship services. At Hope Church, what had been hundreds of worshipping students became dozens in a very short time. It quickly became evident that the drop in student church attendance was a church-wide phenomenon. Now, fifty years later, the drop-out rate for students and recent graduates continues to be severe. Cited earlier in this article is a reference to the new hippie youth culture. I doubt that a large proportion of youth from our churches dropped out and joined a hippie lifestyle. I expect there is a greater correlation between church drop-out and the "none" answer to questions about religious preference. I do not understand either the "drop-out" or the "none" and am greatly grieved over the churches' apparent loss of many of her youth.

Another negative effect from 1968 to 2018 is the willingness of political parties to run against the US government. Prior to the 1960s, most Americans were

proud of their government. The Vietnam War made it possible to denounce the US government as a cause of the country's troubles. In 1980, President Reagan made political hay by his declaration that the US government was the problem that needed fixing. In 2016 it happened again with Trump vowing to "clean up the Washington swamp." Confidence in the government is basic to the health of a nation and to all the constituent parts thereof. Denunciation of the government was appropriate in 1968. The misuse of such denunciation for political purposes is an unfortunate residue.

The effective role of public demonstrations and protests was decisively demonstrated in 1968. I rather suspect the effectiveness of large public demonstrations has been accepted throughout American history. Certainly, the recent demonstrations against police brutality have picked up on illustrations from the 1960s. The ability of Martin Luther King Jr. to insist that they be nonviolent has been helpful, but in any large protest there is the potential for violence. The repeated readiness of 1960s demonstrators to take to the streets has been inspirational for contemporary civil rights advocates.

The Hope Church Council and I were very conscious of the need for the congregation to continue and strengthen its traditional word-and-sacrament ministry while embracing a broader public ministry. We were adamant that a broadened public ministry of Hope Church would in no way diminish, but would enhance, Hope Church's gospel ministry. Declaring the good news of God's redemptive love through Christ would be the chief work of the church in good days and bad. Throughout my years of ministry at and on behalf of Hope Church, I never heard a complaint from a member that Hope Church was failing to maintain the centrality of gospel ministry.

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It would be encouraging if we could look at the US churches in 1968 and then 2018 and see a steady progression from strength to strength in the life of the congregations and clergy as well as in the life of the American public. That has not been the story, however. The United States remains knee deep in wars. While civil rights have improved, there continue to be battles in the streets over police brutality with respect to minority peoples. Equal-education opportunity remains a distant goal. A sheaf of new needs makes claims on all people of good will. Global warming, income inequities, environmental pollution, impoverished migrant communities, personal and public health concerns, and many other problems continue to knock on American doors. Should we be optimists or pessimists with regard to the human future? More congregations show decline than growth.

While there are many stirring illustrations of congregational and clergy service to neighborhoods and communities, the overall American picture is one of uncertainty. Hope Church can believe its public ministries have made real contributions to Minneapolis neighborhoods and to the University of Minnesota.

Still, problems seem to accrue as fast as communities can rise to meet them. Churches, clergy, and all the strengths the churches can muster will be needed to meet the challenges of today and tomorrow. A thorough and thoughtful look at 1968 will help the churches and clergy to be ready. ⊕

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