

We are disciples of Jesus

By the Rev. Wm Chris Boerger, bishop



It's very clear that the church has to move from a membership model to a discipleship model. The Scriptures never speak of creating members. It's always about disciples. The term disciple has two dimensions.

First, a disciple is a student of a teacher. That is the right place to begin. We, the members of the church, are first and foremost in a relationship with Jesus that will transform us. We expect to be taught from Scripture and in the community of faith. It is through prayer and study that a disciple is formed.

Second, a disciple shares the tasks or ministry of the teacher. The description of the church as the body of Christ is appropriate. The work and message of Jesus was that the reign of God had begun. We are called from our self-centered approaches to life. God is using us to bring hope to the hurting and life to the dying. Disciples will regularly be stretched to act in the name of God beyond their comfort zones.

In this age of overactivity, this call to discipleship may sound like another pitch to get people to volunteer. Volunteers are part of the membership model. Disciples are called to see that everything they do is claimed by God and a part of their baptismal life. Sharing the hope of Jesus in our daily life is how we live our discipleship. It's not an add-on to an otherwise overscheduled life.

It was easier to fall into the membership model of institutions. We count members and try to hang on to sufficient members to justify our existence. But that is not the church. The church is the people of God gathered around word and sacrament. It is where we are taught, fed and forgiven. From that gathering the disciples move out into the world as the body of Christ. We are part of each other and we have a mission in the world.

Talking about discipleship is critical to our life together. We are disciples of Jesus first and foremost. We may be members of a local congregation and the Northwest Washington Synod. That fact is merely identifying the arena for our discipleship. The first disciples were commanded to make disciples of all nations. The same command comes to us. □

Small congregations prepare to grow

By the Rev. Jan Nesse

When Jesus spoke the words recorded in Matthew 28:19-20—"Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you"—he was speaking to his disciples. Granted, they were the disciples in the first century, but none of us whose "faith and norm" are the Bible would excuse ourselves from being included in that group.

It is our call to make disciples. If we are making disciples our congregations will be growing; our congregations will be equipping people for ministry; and our members will be strengthening their faith, multiplying their numbers, and witnessing to the presence of Christ in their own lives and in the world. If we are making disciples, not only will our congregations change and grow but the communities in which we live will change as well.

The problem is that most of our congregations in the Northwest Washington Synod haven't experienced growth for a long time. Many have declined, some to critical levels. While this is a situation not unique to our synod nor to our denomination, approximately 21 of our congregations have 75 or fewer in attendance on Sunday mornings. Eleven of these congregations are addressing this condition in a process called "Prepare to Grow." This

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project is directed to the “making of disciples” rather than the “building of the church.”

The process has five areas to address: prayer, Bible study, servant project, spiritual disciplines, and the practice of generosity. Each is infused with evangelism, invitation and hospitality. For a simple outline that congregations may use to develop a plan for their settings, see www.smallcongregations.org. And because “everything rises and falls on leadership” (John Maxwell, *Developing Leaders Around You*), the pastors and, in some cases, lay leaders meet every two months to share their resources, ideas, wisdom and prayers.

If this approach to ministry would help you focus the direction of your congregation, you are welcome to join this group of congregations committed to changing the direction of congregational decline. □

Nesse is an assistant to the bishop.



Renton Lutheran Church was torn down in October 2009 to make way for a project involving The Compass Center and a new ministry called Luther's Table (see page C). This ministry in South King County was made possible through the generosity of the congregation of Renton Lutheran in 2006.



Renton Lutheran continues to give

By Lindsey Lund

Renton Lutheran was a congregation tucked into the heart of downtown Renton, a rapidly revitalizing city just south of Seattle. In many ways, the church was ahead of its time in scope and mission.

Founded in 1941, the church included housing units on its site from the very beginning. “A Church – Close to the Heart of the City” was the congregation’s motto in the late

1950s. Their purpose was “to be an effective witness for our Lord Jesus Christ at the very throbbing, bustling hub of this ever-growing and rapidly changing community.”

Six decades later, the congregation began to craft a vision to leave a gift to the community before closing in 2006. That gift is the Compass Veterans Program—Renton, an effort developed by The Compass Center, a Seattle social service and housing agency.

Renton Lutheran Church was torn down in October 2009 to make way for this new complex that will contain apartments for homeless veterans. When the building opens in fall 2010, it will provide 58 units of supportive housing for single adults and families. It will include studio, two- and three-bedroom apartments, community gathering spaces, offices for program staff and work spaces for social service providers.

The need for veterans housing is great. Both male and female veterans are more likely to be homeless than their non-veteran counterparts. A large number of displaced and at-risk veterans live with the lingering effects of post-traumatic stress disorder and substance abuse, compounded by a lack of family and social support networks. According

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An architect's drawing of what the building for this new ministry will look like.

to the National Coalition for Homeless Veterans, there are approximately 6,800 homeless veterans in the state of Washington annually, 2,500 of whom are in the Puget Sound area.

The need only increases as soldiers return home from Iraq and Afghanistan. Rick Friedhoff, director of The Compass Center, said: "This is a huge burden for these young men and women. We're asking a lot of them, and it will affect them for the rest of their lives. We owe them much more than this, but providing a safe housing option is a start."

Thanks to the vision, partnership and faith of Renton Lutheran Church, a gift of property will be transformed into a life-giving space for the men and women who have served this country. □

A vision for Luther's Table

By the Rev. Gretchen Mertes

Luther's Table is a new ministry in South King County, and it looks like nothing you've ever seen before: a coffee shop/bakery by day and a music venue/pub by night. You won't find any pews here. And that's a big part of the idea—creating community among those for whom church is a challenge, an offense or just not up their alley.

We're experimenting with grace to see how far it can really go.

One of the core tenets of the Christian church is to share Christ's meal together, to eat and drink together. Luther's Table is built around the idea that community, trust, conversation and faith are found around the dinner table. We're trying to bring Christ's meal outside of the walls of the church and serve it up with generosity where the people already are: downtown, at the local watering hole.

Luther's Table will feed your body, your mind and your soul. With good food, good music and good people, it's the ultimate third place. Grab a bite before or after a show, enjoy a speaker, meet up with your mom's group in the morning for coffee, enjoy a book, listen to a band or sing a song at an open mike.

It's the place you've been waiting to go to for as long as you can remember.

Legend has it that Martin Luther developed the pastime of inviting his students to his home after class to discuss theology and share a pint of his wife Katie's home-brewed ale.

At Luther's Table, we are going

to continue that tradition of fostering faith and developing theological depth through conversation and fellowship in downtown Renton. We even have pastors from the area who have volunteered to bartend, believe it or not. Everyone who works here from the host to the custodian will be trained to serve generously and to care for the people they serve.

We are attempting to reclaim the secular as sacred space. We are going to be modeling moderation and teaching through example that yes, we are sinners, but by the grace of God we are also saints. We are following Christ's example of eating and drinking with the people, and walking alongside them in their lives and on their journey of faith. We are widening the walls of the church, and practicing being sent out into the world.

Who we are

Luther's Table is a joint effort of the ELCA Lutheran congregations of south King County, headed up by St. Matthew Lutheran of Renton. We are also partners with The Compass Center and a vast network of volunteers.

Luther's Table is projected to open in fall 2010.

If you are interested in being part of Luther's Table as a volunteer or through financial support, please contact us at lutherstable@gmail.com or by calling 425-226-2420. □

Mertes is a pastor of St. Matthew Lutheran Church, Renton.