

What If...

By Chon Pugh

Matthew 28 - Great Commission

Today's Gospel is the great commission text from Matthew 28, "Go therefore making disciples of all people..." Making disciples of all people – teaching all people about Jesus – this is really exciting to me!

This year the ELCA is twenty years old and Good Shepherd is twenty five. You both are twenty somethings. I am familiar of twenty somethings; I have four of my own – 23, 24, 27 and 29. And what I tell all of my twenty somethings is, "It is time to get out of the house!" So to the ELCA and Good Shepherd, "It is time to get out of the house."

I recently attended a conference called "Churches Growing Churches" hosted by Desert Cross Lutheran in Tempe, AZ and the ELCA. The ELCA brought together churches from all over the country that had asked themselves the question, "What If...we shared The Story outside of our house."

The ELCA has 10,000 churches. 1000 of these churches have grown by at least 1 member over the past ten years. Yes, that means 9000 ELCA churches have either maintained membership or lost membership over the past ten years. Out of the 1000 churches that have grown by one person or more, 500 of these churches are really growing. What is the common thread of the churches that are really growing? The leadership, both lay and rostered, is willing to ask and answer the question, "What if..." They are willing to think outside the box and draw outside the lines.

A forty-five year old church in a downtown area in its prime would worship over 1000 people a weekend. It has a beautiful campus, sanctuary, and a two story Christian Ed facility any church would covet. It is set up for rotational Sunday school and has a prop and costume room that can dress all 12 disciples in four different sizes and clothe enough animals for a nativity scene that if real you would be shoveling poop for two days. If you visited this church today you would find 8 people in Sunday School.

This church and leadership asked the question, "What If..." They realized they had become a donut church – meaning they weren't teaching, reaching or worshipping those people in their community any more – they were serving those that lived away from the church leaving the community around the church empty from hearing the teachings of Jesus. So in interviewing the people that now lived around the church they realized most of them spoke Spanish.

So, this church decided to grow a Spanish/English speaking congregation, not as a mission or stand alone congregation but as a joint congregation. Same budget, same council, same staff, same facility. They called a Latino pastor and began worship services in English, one in Spanish and one in ELCA Spanglish.

What the congregation found when they asked the people in their surrounding community what they needed and wanted was a need for a worship service that allowed first generation immigrants speaking only Spanish to be able to worship with their second generation children who spoke English. So the Spanglish worship service “United de Christo” was developed with half the worship in Spanish and half in English. During communion the bread would be consecrated in English and the wine in Spanish. The only problem I had in worshipping in the community was in singing the songs. The verses alternated between Spanish and English. I found myself trying to remember if I was singing Jesus (English) or Jesus (Spanish).

Another church that asked, “What if...” is in Colorado. There the mountain passes aren’t conducive to people traveling over them during the winter. So a church in Greeley decided that as soon as they reached 250 in worship they would begin another church in the next town. Both churches would be housed in strip malls, share the same staff, budget, name and communication avenues. The pastors then would be the only ones traveling the mountain passes.

One conference in the Grand Canyon Synod the churches got together and asked, “What If...” What they came up with was two of the churches would together by a piece of land for a new congregation to be placed. A third church then supported the salary of a pastor for a year, gave the new church \$50,000 and 100 members. This new congregation is currently meeting in a school, has called a second pastor and has begun building their first permanent structure on the donated land.

The most creative, “What if...” mission idea is a church down in Tucson. This is the church the farthest east and south of Tucson and the church closest to the Mexico border. Knowing that there were no churches in the miles between Tucson and Mexico this church decided to use today’s technology. They located five places over the miles to set up pod casts. These were places the people already frequented and assembled in the community. Three were in cafes, one in the only movie theatre and the fifth was at a bowling ally. On Sunday morning these five venues received the Gospel via pod casting from the church in Tucson. In their own community they received the Gospel, the sermon and the music. During the week the pastors would then visit each pod cast site to make home visits, teach bible study and administer communion.

God was the first mission developer. God took nothing, darkness, an empty void and asking, “What If...” made light and darkness, sky and water, land and vegetation, the sun, moon and stars, fish and birds, animals and at last humanity. And it was good! The Garden of Eden was the first faith community.

A basic of faith formation is the belief and understanding of God. The bible, although never referring to the Trinity as the Trinity refers to God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Always asking the question “What If...” early church leaders tried to define the Trinity. In 325AD in two different councils meeting in Nicea, under the Emperor Constantine, the wording of the Nicene Creed was agreed upon as a basis of our faith belief system.

Later in 1410 in Russian an Iconographer named Andrei Rulev tried to further explain the Trinity by asking, “What If...” and answering through his art work. Looking at the icon “Trinity” one sees a table with three beings around it. On the right hand side is a being with a firm yet gentle face, a halo and dressed in a blue shirt for the divine and a green robe for new life. Behind him in a picture inside the picture is a mountain, such as the one the disciples met near in Galilee in today’s Gospel reading. This being represents a visual understanding of the Holy Spirit.

Behind the table in the center is another being with the same face and halo as the first. Also in a blue shirt for divinity, with a gold band around the sleeve for royalty and a robe of brown signifying his earthliness, this being is Jesus. The picture in the picture above his head is of a tree. The tree stands for being rooted in the earth and is symbolic for the tree/cross he was crucified on.

The third figure around the table is on the left side. Having the same face, halo and blue clothing as the other two figures, the robe this being is wearing is iridescent and shimmering other worldly and magnificent. The picture in the picture is of a mansion. The mansion God is preparing a place for all of us in when we die.

With three sides of the table surrounded by the three figures of the Trinity, the front of the table is left open. Front and center of the table is a lone chalice with wine in it, a symbol of the Eucharist – Christ’s blood. The front of the table is an open invitation for all of us to join God in three persons in community, the community of the Eucharist.

Have you ever thought about God a being a community as Trinity? (This concept was introduced by Sue Mary Dreier of Luther Seminary.) We are asked to join in community with the Trinity. We do this as we begin our faith journey through baptism, our entrance in Sunday School, receiving our first bible and first communion, when we are confirmed, married, consecrated, ordained and yes in our death. In our entire faith journey we called to journey in community.

It was in community Mary Magdalene and the other Mary traveled to the tomb in the Gospel verses in Matthew prior to today’s Gospel reading. Once there, the Mary’s experiences an earthquake causing the rock to no longer block the tomb. An angel appears telling the women to come and see that Jesus is no longer there. They are then told to go and tell the disciples that Jesus is alive. These women also encounter Jesus who tells them to go and tell the disciples to go to Galilee. Did you ever stop to think, “What If...” the Mary’s didn’t tell the disciples? Would we be still be sitting here today? Or, “What if...” the disciples decided to stay and watch a ball game instead of going to Galilee? Did you ever wonder?

Well, the disciples did go. Verse 17 in our Gospel today says, some of the disciples doubted but they went. In the Greek the word “some” does not exist. It is only present in the English translation. Mark Allen Powell, Trinity Seminary, asked a bible translator why “some” appears only in English. The translator said because it was added to make

sense stating you can't doubt and believe. Mark Allen Powell invited him to attend the Lutheran church because there we doubt and believe all the time.

As Lutheran's "What If..." we don't know all the answers to faith questions? Doubt is okay. It means we see there are many possible answers to the question. When Peter saw Jesus walking on the water he jumped out of the boat and he too walked on the water. As he began to doubt the fact he was walking on the water, he began to sink into the water – yet another possibility. We can doubt, not know all the answers yet we are called to be disciples to all nations and we can do it with what we all ready know.

Not having all the answers lets us dream big. Recently I heard of about a space elevator. The concept of the elevator is to enter it, go up out of the earth's atmosphere and wait 12 hours until the earth rotates and come back down on the other side of the world. Since today it can take a couple of days and plane changes to go to the other side of the world, this would be fuel and time efficient. You could be literally have pie in the sky while you are waiting! There are three companies currently working on this possibility. I am sure if they can design this concept small things such as longitude and latitude will be taken care of.

Dreamers have to be willing to scrap their knees. They have to be willing to think outside the box and color outside the lines. One out of four ideas will succeed! Good Shepherd as a twenty something, "What If..." you get out of the house? What would that look like?

Think about it... to whom is God sending you?

What are your favorite bible stories? Creation, Noah, Jericho, The Nativity – any cows or sheep out there? Share these stories.

What about your favorite songs? Peter, James and John in a sail boat, Arky, Arky, Arky, Jesus Loves Me. Share them!

Picture who the next generation of Jesus followers are going to be.

Infant

Full tummy, clean diaper, cooing  
Drop of milk on the side of his mouth

Neglected. No longer crying  
knowing no one will care or pick  
him up. Born addicted to crack.

Young Child

Curly hair, freckles  
Jack-o-lantern smile  
Tooth loose, moving it with tongue

Bloated tummy from malnutrition  
glazed eyes with flies flying around  
staring blankly into space

Teenager

Diploma, idealistic, full of promise  
Will make the world better than her parents

Angry, violent  
Incarcerated for life

What If... you tell the story of Jesus to all of them? They are the future. God's future!!!!

Creation, Trinity, Baptism, Community

It is not about Us!!!!!!

It is all about GOD!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

Where is God leading you to tell the story?

If **you** don't tell the story, what **is** God's future?

I don't want to even consider the "What If" if **we don't** tell the story.

Do You?

Dream; Imagine "What If" we do tell the story? What will the world will look like and be like in 50 years?

And all God's people say, AMEN!