The tone and content of the second annual *Church and Change* conference held in Brookfield this past November was completely different. About 50 pastors, teachers, and lay people showed up — some of those same creative and innovative types I panned last year. They spent two days talking seriously about their responsibility to share ideas, support and encourage one another, and promote appropriate and meaningful change in the church. The individuals who attended came from various ministries that have bucked the trends and are growing, often in spite of demographic shifts occurring around them or the skepticism of brothers in the ministry. What a gratifying change from a year ago!

I am pleased to announce a partnership between CHARIS and *Church and Change*. Recognizing that the best ideas are those which stand the test of time and application, we are hosting a website for *Church and Change* which will post some of the ideas and strategies that have been used successfully in congregations. The site will also promote submission of additional ideas, provide links to various other sites, and eventually host a listserv for those who would like a more immediate dialog with others.

The URL for the *Church and Change* web site is: http://www.charis.wlc/cac. It is a modest first step in trying to create an active forum for the exchange of ideas. I hope that the quantity and quality of material will be expanded as readers contribute.

Yes, it would appear that Lutherans can change — light bulbs as well as congregations — to meet the spiritual needs of a changing world.

**Where is the Castle Church Door?**

Lately, I’ve found myself contemplating the life and work of Martin Luther. In particular, I’ve wondered about the academic climate in which Martin Luther worked while a professor at the University of Wittenberg from 1512 to 1518. It was there that his Christocentric theology of justification by grace through faith was developed. As so often is the case, the teacher is the student while preparing for classes. His preparation for lectures on the books of Genesis, Psalms, Romans, Galatians, and Hebrews certainly contributed to his evolution from a scholastic theologian to a biblical humanist. Historians tell us that so persuasive was he in arguing his theology, by 1517 the entire faculty of the university had endorsed his point of view.
When ideas diverge from the mainstream, however, conflict is inevitable. This new theology was destined to clash with the Roman Church. Luther’s first point of engagement with traditional scholasticism came over the practice of selling indulgences. When Luther learned of this practice he forced the issue into the public arena by publishing 95 theses. Whether he actually posted them on the school bulletin board – the north door of the Castle Church – or not, as some historians question, he invited discussion among colleagues and church leaders in the hope that debate would clarify the subject.

What Lutheran hasn’t seen the romanticized pictures of Luther, hammer in hand, tacking those 95 theses to the door? The power of this symbol has inspired Lutherans for centuries. Childhood stories and images of this man of faith with his hammer and nails created a hero for generations of young Lutherans.

But more recently I’ve wondered about the significance of that event - then and now. The propositions for debate were in Latin so presumably the debate was to take place within the academy. They were written for scholars, not the general public. But they also weren’t posted on some obscure bulletin board on the third floor of a faculty office building. They were public in the sense that anyone of good education could read them and attend the discussion.

Having taught the history and philosophy of education for most of my teaching career at WLC, I knew full well that within the great universities of the Medieval and Renaissance periods there existed considerable academic freedom to debate theology. Apparently, in Northern Europe, scholars could also debate the doctrine and practices of the Church with a certain amount of freedom. What got Huss and Savonarola burned at the stake was their public heresy, not their academic disputation.

Does the cautious academic freedom Martin Luther seems to have enjoyed at Wittenberg exist in the church today? Is there a castle church door in conservative confessional Lutheranism upon which articles can be posted for debate? Is it even possible to debate doctrine, let alone praxis? Whether it is within the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS) or other branches of conservative Protestantism, there is a natural tendency to preserve the Church by discouraging debate in the interest of maintaining purity of doctrine. But there is a danger inherent in such a position. The church can easily lose its vitality and replace earnest scholarship with orthodoxy preserved by traditionalism.

Conversations behind closed doors about fellowship practices among Christians, the appropriate roles for men and women in the Church, renewed interest in historical liturgy and worship practices, and the doctrine of Church and ministry are guarded for fear that those engaged in such discussions might be found out and “burned at the stake.” As one respected theologian told me, “There is at present only one way for our church to deal with those who raise such questions, and that is to declare them out of fellowship and to kick them out.”

Is there room for debate? Can it be conducted with academic integrity without fear of reprisal? Are such discussions the exclusive domain of theologians and seminary professors, or is there room in the agora for Lutheran scholars as well as educated lay Christians? In the spirit of Martin Luther, we need a church door – a place where theology can be discussed, where application of biblical principles can be debated, where men of scholarly integrity can be free to explore such issues, seek clarification, discuss applications, and ultimately to seek truth.

The Healthy and Vibrant Church

The number of Lutherans in America is on the decline. This is of concern not only to the various synods of the Lutheran church, but to fraternal organizations such as Aid Association for Lutherans and Lutheran Brotherhood. After all, declining Lutheran membership translates into fewer potential customers and a smaller bottom line.

AAL has fretted over this problem for several years and recently engaged the Alban Institute to conduct a comprehensive study aimed at identifying the attributes of the “healthy and vibrant church.” I was asked to participate in one of their focus groups along with an interesting collection of pastors and a small number of teachers and lay leaders from the three major synods. These were not randomly selected individuals, but those who had been identified as having experience working in or with successful congregations. I suspect my invitation came as a result of my role as executive director of CHARIS.

After about an hour of brainstorming the attributes of the prototypic “healthy and vibrant church” (e.g., active lay involvement, strong community outreach, specialized ministries to various subgroups, contemporary worship, etc.), I felt compelled to share the observation that, having had the opportunity to visit many different churches in my lifetime, I had yet to visit a congregation that I would term “healthy and vibrant” in which the preaching was poor, worship was
uninspiring, and adult education was weak. It was quite surprising to me that after an hour of brainstorming, not one participant had talked about the vital role of the pastor in these three areas which we agreed were prerequisites of any healthy and vibrant congregation. As the consultant paraphrased my concern, “It’s hard to imagine a lay person feeling very excited about inviting someone to church when they are embarrassed about their ineffectual pastor.”

Twenty years ago at a mission seminar at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, now sainted Pastor Norman Berg, then the Executive Secretary of the Board for Home Missions of the WELS, discussed his twenty years of experience in starting home missions. While he validated the three rules of real estate (i.e., location, location, location), he also boldly told the students that while those rules certainly needed to be considered, there were three more important rules that had far greater impact on the success of new missions than any other. The three rules for home mission success were “the pastor, the pastor, and the pastor.”

Why is everyone afraid to talk about the role of the pastor in a congregation’s success? No one is arguing that it is anything but the work of the Holy Spirit that changes the hearts of sinful people and turns them to God in faith. No one is elevating the pastor to anything other than a servant of God who preaches and teaches the Word in its truth. But we intuitively also know that human attributes can provide either barriers or avenues for people. Some personalities are approachable, warm, emotive, and people centered. Others are analytical, logical, and task oriented.

Instead of talking about the programmatic or physical attributes of a healthy church, I would posit that we need to examine those attributes of a successful pastor and work hard to identify and cultivate those qualities in the men we send out to lead our congregations. Would anyone argue that a pastor shouldn’t have leadership skills? Bruce Eberle forcefully argues the case in this issue’s lead article. Should we say that it’s okay for a pastor to be lacking in social and interpersonal skills? What pastor would we want who couldn’t put together an interesting, biblical, and relevant sermon? Who would say that it’s acceptable for their pastor not to relate to them personally in their times of need, to be approachable and caring, or to give evidence of joy in ministry?

Membership in Lutheran churches is eroding. It would seem that the Alban Institute and AAL would be doing a service to the Church by focusing its research on the critical role of the pastor. Operationalizing and studying those variables that comprise the “healthy and vibrant” congregation is a worthy goal that might be of great benefit but only if they include elements dealing with the effectiveness of the pastor and his leadership. In the preliminary report of their findings, the Alban Institute has chosen to remain focused on more global qualities. Excluding examination of the role of the pastor in contributing to those attributes is short sighted and misses the mark.

### The Ecumenical Christian

I had seen several references to a treatise by John Philipp Koehler dealing with legalism and decided to take the better part of an entire morning to read Gesetzlich Wesen Unter Uns: Our Own Arts and Practices as an Outgrowth of the Law. Published in the Quartalschrift between October 1914 to July 1915, this paper (fortunately translated into English) was prompted by the concern that legalistic tendencies were contributing to stasis and decline in all fields of church life.

About half-way into the paper, Koehler is moved to lament the lack of “ecumenical spirit.” This caught my attention because, as a Lutheran baby boomer who grew up in the middle of the scouting issue, the dissolution of the Synodical Conference, and a stint in the CLC, the term “ecumenism” was definitely considered a pejorative word right up there with “unionism” and “syncretism.”

Consider the following excerpt:

> “Under ecumenicity of the evangelical proclamation I understand this that one nourishes the appreciation for the one true invisible Church, the communion of those who trust in the Lord Jesus, as against the political machinations of the different concrete church groups of this world that claim they are the one true visible church. True ecumenical spirit is something within one, peculiar to the individual through the Holy Ghost.”

> “It consists in my rejoicing that another, whether from Jerusalem or Samaria, on the road to Damascus or at Athens, has come to faith in the Lord Jesus.”

> “If I at any time meet up with someone that believes on the Lord Jesus, then the very fact of his faith and that, through his faith, he has become a child of God, a member of the body of Christ, becomes the main thing and warms the very heart. To this I will give expression by emphasizing those things that unite us in faith, and not open up with reproach and criticism on those things that still divide us. Intellectualism and the lack of the
ecumenical sense, each conditioning the other, on the other hand express themselves predominantly in judgment and condemnation, thus showing the character of the works of the Law.”

Contrast the tone of the foregoing with more recent expositions on why we shouldn’t permit non-WELS students to sing in our high school or college choirs or why we should discourage having non-WELS speakers address our students on any subject, let alone on religious matters. I wonder what Koehler would say if he were around today. I’m sure he’d admire the refinements we’ve made to church doctrine in the interest of clarity and truth. But I really wonder if he’d approve of the tone in which we communicate with those Christians who aren’t card carrying members of our party. I suspect he’d have occasion to point us back to the Gospel and remind us that the true ecumenical spirit is more concerned with finding ways to celebrate our common membership in the one true invisible church than it is with looking for reasons not to interact with other Christians because we don’t belong to the same visible church.

Sadly, this tension has become more manifest at WLC. Much of our recent enrollment growth consists of Christian men and women from other church backgrounds. Still, the large majority of students belong to the WELS and most graduated from Lutheran high schools. The spirit of legalism rears its head among our students when questions such as “You’re Methodist? What in the world are you doing here?” or “I’m not sure if I can be your roommate because you’re Missouri Synod.” We claim to be a Lutheran liberal arts college for Christian men and women, but instead – whether intentionally or unintentionally – we tolerate an environment which is hostile to at least some fellow Christians. A recent student forum confirmed many of my concerns: our own faculty and students don’t always know how to interact with other Christians because we don’t belong to the same visible church.

The End of An Era

Not counting the part-time service of Rev. Robert Krause during the first two years of Wisconsin Lutheran College’s existence, Gary Greenfield is the only president WLC has known. This past April he announced his intention to retire in June of 2003 after 28 years of visionary leadership.

Most will remember Gary for his outstanding ability as a fund raiser and for the phenomenal growth of the WLC campus. Others will remember him for his obsession with quality (“The difference between first and second place is only one one-hundredths of a second.”). Certainly we were all influenced by his high expectations. On his desk was a small statue of Captain Ahab who pursued his goal with “fire in his belly and fire in his eye.” He expected the same passion of us. Simple axioms with large implications!

However, having served with Gary for 21 years, I will remember him most for his devotion to the Church and his desire to see WLC provide leadership for the Church through its students and the service of its faculty and staff. I will remember his earnest prayers in Monday morning Cabinet meetings in which he sought God’s guidance and blessing for us and the faculty, staff, and students. His love and concern for the Church spawned the idea for this institute more than 12 years ago. His messages to students and faculty frequently included encouragements to boldly proclaim the Gospel, become involved in leading the Church, and to work closely with pastors and teachers to bring others to Christ.

Gary also had little tolerance for mediocrity. Occasionally he would irritate people who mistook his impatience for cynicism, or his aggressive pursuit of excellence as arrogance. But underneath it all, he was driven toward a vision of what this college and the Church could and should be under God’s grace. I honestly believe he felt a divine calling to gather and utilize whatever human and financial resources were available in the cause of this vision. His professional life was clearly one of restless service and ministry.

In a way, the purpose of CHARIS is to perpetuate that same kind of restlessness for the Church. It is never my aim to be critical for the sake of criticism. Nor do I believe that hubris is the inevitable result of life in the ivory tower. The vision for CHARIS is to support the Church, to help it understand itself better, to marshal human and financial resources to address some of the challenges facing the Church in ways that the organized Church can’t, to serve the Lord of the Church.

Gary will probably be angry with me for calling attention to him in this manner. But his retirement is indeed the end of an era. The next president will face his own challenges and opportunities. And whoever God calls to that position will need the prayers of us all. But at this juncture in the College’s history, it is appropriate to pause and reflect on Gary’s era of service. Certainly, we are all indebted to him for his visionary leadership. Truly, we profited much from his unyielding expectations. But, in the last analysis, we should remember him more as a devout man of God who wanted this College above all to serve Jesus and His Church.