
THE CHRYSALIS CHURCH

by Pastor Helga Jansons (Director for Evangelical Mission)

The image of a chrysalis is often used at Easter because it is one of nature's miracles; that a caterpillar can turn into a butterfly. It helps to explain the resurrection of Jesus, and how his resurrected body was so different. Even more, at his ascension he virtually flew into the sky, like a beautiful butterfly, never to die again. Jesus is always present in an even more radical form as he comes to us through the Holy Spirit.

This metaphor gives us hope that new life can come out of death or the pain that is in our lives. Usually it is used for children's sermons where just a mention is made of the baffling chrysalis stage when what is in the pupa is more like a soup. But something radical is changing in there. Some cells are told to die, others digest themselves, while still others turn into eyes, antennae and wings. Hormones and day length regulate this process and the old ingredients are not wasted; they are used for metamorphosis.

Recently this metaphor was used in relation to churches. Bishop Wells and I were part of a three day consultation with Emmaus Lutheran Community in Idaho Falls. Mission Investment Fund and the ELCA fund 21st Century Strategies to work with New Wine Ministries which are those people that chose to stay with the ELCA after their congregations voted to leave the ELCA. Our synod has only one like that where enough people chose to stay with the ELCA and are committed to giving birth to a new congregation.

Bill surveyed the people of Emmaus and the community for several months and compared the results with 1,000 churches and demographics around the nation. He interviewed members of Emmaus and offered training sessions and gave recommendations. Only 20% of all churches that attempt a transformation initiative toward sustainable growth succeed. In the ELCA it is 10%, and if they their first initiative fails, they have even less chance to re-engage a second attempt. Congregations don't know how to go about it and are unwilling to do whatever it takes. It seems they are unwilling to "stay in the soup".

"In that chrysalis there is no caterpillar that is growing wings. It is goo. For this metamorphosis you need to let go of everything you are in order to be all that you can become. Churches that are faithful, effective and sustainable do things differently than other churches. It is not a theological, denominational or geographic issue. It is a focus issue and a behavioral issue" said Bill.

Some of the essential ingredients of this chrysalis church sound like things we know. We can know the hormones involved in the transformation of the caterpillar. Many churches have done some work in discerning their mission and guiding principles. However most are still doing many things in the same way which may attract former Lutherans or other people much the same as themselves. A radical transformation is a lot more gooey.

For example he repeatedly said "Sunday School is dead" – as we know it. Not just in the struggling ELCA churches. People do not want to spend 2 hours on a Sunday. However his recommendation for what is working is very different and exciting. The old ingredients are used, but are multiplied in ways that can grow the ministry of the whole congregation almost effortlessly. I can imagine my 12 year old son responding to all of it.

Being part of this consultation taught me so much I can't wait to share it with others. I have permission to use anything that will help the kingdom of God. Please call me in to work with your church or leaders. It can be on a Sunday or during the week helga.jansons@elca.org phone (509) 380 7122

