



Human Traffickers Tell ELCA How to Be Vibrant and Not Shrink

By Alvin Erickson
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This is written by Pastor Al Erickson, Director of Adults Saving Kids, an ELCA pastor, who was a pastor at Trinity Lutheran, Mott, North Dakota for seven years in late 70's and early 80's. The ministry adultssavingkids.org started in 1990 and now has a second website parentsarise.org. The social message "Commercial Sexual Exploitation" can be found on www.elca.org under Resources. This came about by four synods memorializing the ELCA to write it because of work they had done with Adults Saving Kids then called A-STOP.

Human traffickers have found the ELCA to be "Easy Pickings". They have discovered our weaknesses. They know perfectly well how to exploit our vulnerabilities. They love to target members of churches that are not prepared for dealing with the sophisticated schemes by which they groom people. So, they just move in and in many cases take over a number of our members. (A sex trafficker can be a procurer, a pimping operator, an Internet pornographer, a strip club manager, a brothel manager, an escort service owner, plus those who pre-condition youth to be trafficked: a sextortionist, a sexual predator, a revenge porn sharer, a child molester. So we are talking about those who use other people's sexuality purposefully for their own benefit without regard for the future wellbeing of the person being used.

Now how do I know they are successful? Three reasons: First, one of my daughters was a victim of a human trafficker so I had to learn the hard way what it is like to be a shocked and then grieving parent—and now what it takes to not be a victim again or to not be a vulnerable congregation. Secondly, I have worked with three ex-traffickers and I know their mindset and their methods. I discovered too late that they know what they are doing and are professional schemers. Neither I nor the congregation I was a part of had any idea what we were up against. Thirdly, the way we did church would basically cause traffickers to salivate.

There are five ways we can express the problem we have in many of our ELCA congregations. The first is that we are not listening to Scripture. (I am not referring to the homosexual discussion here but much more basic things.) The second is we are not listening to key matters Martin Luther emphasized. The third is are we basically lazy, laid-back churches that have had it too easy for too long and we have therefore little appetite for arming ourselves for the battle waging in front of us? Fourthly, we have fallen in many cases into a pattern of doing church that does not prepare our young people for the treachery they are and will be facing. Fifthly, even though we celebrate him, have we not for the most part stepped aside from Bonhoeffer's rigor and detoured around the cost of discipleship?

So now I pick up a report about how our ELCA is shrinking. This report comes from two professors of Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota. It outlines what the projected future of the ELCA is going to look like. It states that in 2017 the ELCA had 3,458,539 baptized members. By 2033 this number will be reduced to 1,816,735 members. Then

by 2050 the membership will be down to 66,540. It also shares what worship attendance does and will look like. In the year 2000 there were about 1,500,000 worshippers. By 2017 that number had dropped to 899,000. By 2025 the decline will be down to 604,601. From there a precipitous drop will occur to the point that only 15,811 ELCA members will be attending worship in 2041. They are talking about weekly worship attendance. The conclusion to this study is that the ELCA will for all intents and purposes be going out of existence in the next generation. This sounds like we are in deep trouble. Of course, most of us love our church and we surely don't want this to happen. So, what can be done?

First and unfortunately, this forecast of the ELCA's future does not catch me by surprise. Over the years I have been in contact with well over 100 ELCA congregations. Only in a few have I heard church members being thought of as ministers in their own right. I have met a lot of exhausted pastors. I have sat in the pew almost every Sunday for 39 years. Most churches have expected little of me. They give me hints they want me to attend church, receive holy communion, be a steward of my finances, maybe come to a Bible Study but even that has been stated in quite easy to avoid terms. They have wanted my children to be in Sunday School, confirmation, Vacation Bible School, youth group—all at the church building. So they have given me the unspoken idea that Christian education which happens in the church building and through others is sufficient for what my child needs. Maybe that is not what they intended but it is what came across. Very few times have I walked away from church uncomfortable that maybe I have some calling and responsibilities I am not about. When I preached in North Dakota, I suspect that is how people left after hearing me. I grew up with that kind of approach to church life and continued it myself.

So, some of the above is good obviously, but then we have to ask the question: What is still missing which if it were put in would have a congregation be more vibrant, relevant, compelling and vital? Here is what I have come to see and I must say it has taken me a long time to see it for I am rooted and swimming in a church culture that has been a mainstay in my life for decades—way back to when I was growing up. I am old so I am talking back in the 1940's and 1950's. Now I must say I loved my pastors then and I still love my pastors and my church. This is not about picking at what is wrong but honestly discovering what is missing. Ironically, human traffickers can help us do that. If we are willing to look at them as those competing for our children and our other members, they provide for us a mirror so we can take a more focused view of ourselves. It is like a football team that doesn't know how good it really is until it is faced with an outstanding opponent. And human traffickers are that good at what they do. I am referring here to the professionals, not the wannabees.

First of all, are our young people being prayed for all through their pre-frontal cortex of their brain development years—males up to 25 years old, females up to 23 years old? Are their parents and grandparents being prayed for? Are other members of our congregations being prayed for and daily? One challenge we have is Internet pornographers are on the prowl as are child molesters, the traffickers and the drug dealers plus many others like bullies, domestic violators. At the congregation I served we had a prayer chain made up of a few women taking calls from people facing serious issues: sickness, accidents, loss of jobs, etc. We left it at that! We had no structure for others to be prayed for. The average member was not asked to pray and many probably didn't. We heard **Ephesians 6:18** more like a suggestion than a mandate. We held no trainings to help people learn to pray. So, we relied on the Lord's Prayer and some worship prayers once a week. In other words, the average member felt no responsibility to be praying. Prayer was delegated to only certain people. Is this what the Scriptures, the Psalms, the New Testament propose?

Mary Jane Haemig, retired professor at Luther Seminary and a Reformation scholar has written articles on Martin Luther, his prayer life and how he taught people to pray. She mentions how our modern day ELCA has lost track of this emphasis of Luther in many of our congregations. Who is more vulnerable to the shrewd tactics of human traffickers than those who are not prayed for? I did not grow up with prayer in my home and I never became much of a pray-er. No one at my seminary trained us in having a personal prayer life. It was assumed and encouraged but left at that. Check this out for yourself. From starting with a man, Martin Luther, who prayed much, taught prayer, concentrates on the Lord's Prayer in the Catechism, how did we end up being a church where prayer is as minimal as it is?

The reality is prayer provides us with a great adventure with God. Walter Wangerin has helped us see prayer as a two-way street—talking to God but also listening for God. God wants to be intimate with our lives, empowering us in love to live out our new identity in Christ. Prayer helps us see God active in our lives. That helps us realize God really is working behind the scenes on our behalf and on behalf of others. In turn we come face to face with God in confession of sin and discovering reasons to thank and praise him. Walter Wink said history belongs to the intercessors. Are we in the ELCA ready to come more alive and make more history?

There are churches which have discovered the power of prayer as a great priority in congregational life. I would love to discover more of these churches. One ELCA congregation I have found has its own 15-member prayer team. It is Ezekiel Lutheran in River Falls, Wisconsin. This prayer team has divided up the membership of the congregation such that every member is prayed for every day by one of its prayer team members.

Memorial Drive Presbyterian Church in Houston, Texas started praying back in the 1960's when they realized they were not a praying church. Their pastor, Charlie Shedd wrote a little book "How to Develop a Praying Church". They got people to pray for members. Now in 2022 they have about 600 people who have committed themselves to pray daily for certain other members. So their approximately 3,500 members are prayed for daily. How is it that they have persisted for about 58 years? Prayer transforms life. Let's find ELCA congregations that can give us some leadership in this. What if a congregation that prays all out has more fun? Are we having fun yet?

A teenage boy at Salem Lutheran (ELCA) in Longville, Minnesota discovered he had gotten too old and was no longer going to be prayed for in their system. Someone found him out in the hall crying. They couldn't understand why he was shedding tears. When asked, he said, "Now no one is going to be praying for me." What if as E. M. Bounds said, "The poorest person in the world is the one who has no one to pray for them"? Can we expect a denomination which has reduced prayer to a few people expect to grow or be transformed? Let's face it: How can we be a "God is alive here church" if we are only letting him in the back door? Or are we content with having a formula instead of God—Father, Son and Holy Spirit?

As soon as we say the above, there will be those who say, "Are you saying prayer solves the challenge we face with the traffickers?" No, that is not what is being said here. Prayer is surely one gift, one tool God has given us to have many things happen but it is only one of the tools we have. We must press on. Here is something I learned way too late. I and many of my comrades in pastoral ministry have not really taken seriously the important role home ministries have in their congregations. I came to realize it is only the parents and the grandparents who are really in the position to convey the Gospel and the wisdom children need to outfox the foxes.

It seems it took a while for the early church to realize the importance of the ministry of lay people. Initially the early apostles had to evaluate potential leaders and get them

trained—pastors, elders, teachers. Once that happened there came an awareness as we see in **Ephesians 4:11-16** that every follower of Christ among them was important and had ministries which would build up the body of Christ. No one was to be left to be like a child, manipulated by false teachers and connivers. (Vs. 14) This verse can well be pointing to those we are discussing: traffickers, molesters, Internet pornographers, bullies, drug dealers, defrauders, domestic abusers. So, in **Ephesians 5:22-33** how a married couple was living out their lives in the Lord in their relationship to each other was a vital part of what was happening in a congregation. This was to be the ministry of a couple interacting with each other. Their stability was part of the bedrock design of a congregation.

Likewise in **Ephesians 6:1-4** the way children were obeying and honoring their parents as children in Christ was stressed in what we could call the ministry of children. Then parents were to be bringing up their children, not by emotional reactions but by how they would live the Christian life of discipline and learning what the Word of God is. This was to be the ministry of children to parents and parents to children. Again, every one of these family members has a ministry. Adults Saving Kids is coming out with a Bible Study on the letters to the Ephesians designed for parents and grandparents to equip them for their vital ministries.

Finally, each person in the workplace has a ministry. Slave (employee) and master (employer) are to serve Christ and do that in the way they relate to each other and the work that is before them. **Ephesians 6:5-9**. So, when any member of an ELCA church prays the Lord's Prayer and says "Your will be done", do they recognize that they are talking about their marriage ministry, their ministry as child or parent, their ministry as employee or employer? For any of us, if we are going to serve the Lord with energy and focus, it must be clear to us what it is God is holding us responsible for.

Is this being preached in our churches and are we allowing the straight forward mandates of Ephesians to direct the lives of our people? I must say that as a preacher in Mott, North Dakota for seven years I never woke up to and talked specifically about these callings of the lay people. Is it any wonder that many of them had little grasp of what God was expecting of them and therefore little appetite for growing up in how they would conduct their own ministries? Clarity brings on energy. If I as a parent am not absolutely clear as to what my calling and responsibilities are, I will probably wander off towards other priorities.

In 1998 we developed a six weeks course called "Wise As Serpents". It was to be taught in confirmation and maybe high school classes. About 400 churches used it. The idea was a pastor or lay teacher would teach this so the kids could become more street smart. Later others told me this was not going to be as effective as we wanted because "Youth are not going to become street smart out of six short lessons." Yes, it helped but not enough to have our youth be really ready to meet treacherous people and messages. I came to realize it is the parents and the grandparents in some cases who are in a position to live with their offspring, observe, connect, share, teach, pray, find teachable moments, confess their own inconsistencies and their faith that will have a child grow in faith and wisdom so as to be ready for connivers and evil set-ups. From the DVD of Wise as Serpents, we worked with both the Oprah Winfrey show, coaching them and had ABC/20, 20 come and create a session with us.

Only family leaders are right there to protect their kids, especially their young ones. And only family leaders with their close relationship can equip their youth at appropriate ages to defend themselves. In reality children are going to find themselves in situations where their parents are not around. They must be prepared to deal with those times on their own. Martin Luther believed parents are a key part of a congregation when he said: "Most certainly father and mother are apostles, bishops and priests to their children, if

they make them acquainted with the gospel. In short, there is no greater or nobler authority on earth than that of parents over their children, for this authority is both spiritual and temporal.” We dare not overlook what part parents play to protect, equip (not overprotect) and model for their kids on how to stay faithful, wise or shrewd and safe. Undergirding all of that is the parent’s role in sharing the Scriptures with their children and continually to affirm who they are, their identity “in Christ.”

What I have come to see if I look at the times one of my children got into a fix or into trouble, if I trace back there was something that wasn’t said, wasn’t given, wasn’t practiced. If this had been said, given, practiced beforehand like going over it again and again, it might well have given my child the wherewithal needed to deal with the risky circumstance and treacherous people they faced in a safer way. It could possibly have given them some options, saving them from hurt and misery. So young people need to be equipped with tools, wise insights, weapons, proverbs, Scriptural promises and warnings, daily support and this can mainly come from committed parents and older family leaders. (See **Proverbs 1-7** and the challenge of **Matthew 10:16** when applied in families).

If that is going to happen, we must clearly articulate what is the calling and mandate God gives to every parent, every grandparent—not to just a few faithful ones in our congregations. And if we delve into what is happening in our families, will we not find that trauma is there? There is hurt, there is brokenness, there is anguish and is not much of it being overlooked or not shared by the way we go about our congregational ministry? Are not most families dealing with some pretty heavy matters or soon will be? Of course, we are not talking about a public sharing but the kind of sharing where a person in pain has people who will listen and receive the sharing with empathy, empowering them to find their way. There are topics like death and grief which get our attention. But there are those often avoided issues like molestation, Internet pornography use, domestic violence, defrauding, chemical abuse, exploitation that can too easily be slid under the rug so individuals and families are left to deal with these secretly by themselves.

Now by the grace of God our ELCA has been richly blessed with parachurch ministries that have seen the need for good Christian parenting. I am familiar with Vibrant Faith, Faith Inkubators, Milestone Ministries, faithwellmt.org, marilynsharpeministries.org and our ministry adultssavingkids.org and parentsarise.org. There are others and some work is being done at our seminaries. So, God has not left us without the gifts that would have us be able to change course and revive our congregations.

But there is still one more issue that has to be faced if we are going to be a vibrant church. We must confront what is for lack of a better term the sophisticated subtle evil that permeates our lives today. If we are older, we probably have some perspective on these statistics. Former professor of church history, Walter Sundberg of Luther Seminary wrote these words in a review of our two Parents Arise books:

“In the first of these two indispensable volumes on safeguarding children today Pastor Al Erickson (along with Patricia Malloy) notes that in 1960 the four most important influences on children were family, school, friends and peers, and church. Having entered the world of the teenager in the early sixties, I can personally attest to this list; although in my case, my close friends and peers were in my congregation which magnified the influence of the church on my formative years. By 1980 the situation had changed. The four greatest influences in order were friends and peers, family, media and school. Church was out of the top four, family and school demotes, peer pressure

increased, and media on the rise. It was about this time that Hollywood realized that its meal ticket depended on the tastes of teenagers and so put enormous amounts of energy and money to create the summer adventure blockbuster (think “Star Wars” and “Raiders of the Lost Ark”). By 2000 media took top spot, friends and peers second, family and school at the rear. But media was no longer simply TV, popular music, and movies; it now included the computer with the internet; a wild-west world of anything goes in which children could often navigate better than their parents. With bedroom door closed, boys and girls could enter forbidden worlds: pornography, chat rooms, and the like where predators, who have always lurked in the shadows, acquired new weapons to tempt and ensnare vulnerable youth to drugs, sexual slavery, and other horrors. To make things worse divorce and out-of-wedlock births have increased many fold across the decades since the watershed 1960?” Who will safeguard our children if not the family?”

What these words of Walter Sundberg point out is this: Not only are our denominational numbers going down but something is happening in our culture that transforms the priorities we once held into other priorities that are much controlled by people whose main job is to make money or gain advantage, not to nurture or empower our youth to healthy lives or Christian living. Unfortunately, many of these influential people are not just shifting our youth away from the faith to secondary matters but also our adults are being redirected also. We all can see how distractions control much of our lives and keep us from prayer, the Scriptures, Christian fellowship because there is so much else out there vying for our attention. Surely our own Christian callings are affected. When we say we don’t have time for something, we also know, if we think about it, that seductive distractions have played a real part in that.

As a church, have we come to terms with the reality that many of our young people are spending 50 hours a week in front of a screen? Compare this with possibly 45 minutes in a Sunday School class. Who is influencing whom? Writer David Walsh tells us three things jolt the brain to attention: humor, violence and sex. He says TV is putting on material that will attract eyeballs to advertisers. So, who is calling the shots? Is it not those who know that the way to get an audience is to stick with those three jolts and then the advertisers get the attention they are paying for? So, what are viewers seeing and how is that controlling what is important to them? One thing is for sure—prayer is not going to be encouraged and good parenting is not going to be intentionally urged. What about subtle sophisticated evil? I wrote that some advertisers were connivers, working simply to get their own advantage over viewers. A man who worked with advertisers for 20 years told me to change that word “some” to “all”.

Even though Martin Luther talks much about the wiles of Satan, what has happened to that reality? Have we become so sophisticated we know longer believe Luther? Here is a quote of his. Read it and then ask how many times you have heard similar words in your church. This is in the Preface to the Large Catechism: *“If this were not enough to admonish us to read the Catechism daily, there is God’s command. That alone should be incentive enough. **Deuteronomy 6:7,8** solemnly enjoins that we should always meditate upon his precepts whether sitting, walking, standing, lying down, or rising, and keep them before our eyes and in our hands as a constant token and sign. Certainly, God did not require and command this so solemnly without reason. He knows our danger and need. He knows the constant and furious attacks and assaults of the devil. So, he wishes to warn, equip, and protect us against them with good “armor” against their “flaming darts,” and with a good antidote against their evil infection and poison. O what mad, senseless fools we are! We must ever live and dwell in the midst of such*

mighty enemies as the devils, and yet we despise our weapons and armor, too lazy to give them a thought!"

If we are not following Luther's beliefs, whose are we following? To check ourselves out we can turn to **Ephesians 6:10-20**. Are we talking about putting on the armor of God and the different protective armor and offensive weapons listed there, now not later? Are we teaching our kids how not to be simple-minded and foolish as in **Proverbs 1-7**? I know as a pastor in North Dakota I did not recognize how sophisticated the evil assaults of this culture have become. If I had, would I have had the same experience Luther writes about when he says the people are "too lazy to give them a thought" even though they are desperately needed? An oversimplified Gospel does not prepare our people for the battle being waged against them, does it?

As a Lutheran church, we have been given much. Jesus said, "From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required; and from the one to whom much has been entrusted, even more will be demanded." **Luke 12:48b**. Are we willing to make the changes that will give us a future? Are we willing to stand with Paul who tells us we are "More than conquerors"? Right now, the human traffickers like termites behind our walls are winning. They and others are basically dismantling our ELCA from within. Do we have the love, the grit, the courage to have our people be strong in the Lord, secure in the Lord, shrewd in the Lord?

If you have read up to this point, you might be agreeing or disagreeing. If you are like I have often been in the past, I figure I learned something and then go off and do nothing. That is the "classroom syndrome" meaning just moving on to what's next. Obviously, that is not going to turn anything around regarding this freefall the ELCA is in.

So where do we go from here? I would assert every congregation has some substantial action it can take. But will it? Is prayer for everyone missing? Contact us and we can support you in taking some decisive action, tell you of resources. Maybe work with you. We have no paid staff. This is not about money. You need to become part of a movement that will recharge the ELCA. The same goes for parent and grandparent training, really equipping people to be the family leaders they are called to be. Don't sit on this if you want to do something. Contact us. We can direct you to resources, help you find your way. Family ministry must be lifted high and fortified if we are going to have a church. Maybe you have little idea how traffickers, connivers, manipulators work. You want to know more. You want to see it in the Scriptures. You want to know how to address it. You might need us. The church needs you. Take some initiative, a first step. Wake yourself up. Make Luther proud of you.

The word BOLD has been floating around the ELCA. On the other hand there is the opposite ACQUIESCE to the status quo. Whatever you do with this will end up being one of these two. It really is all about leadership as it was for Joshua, "Be strong and courageous". Be free in Christ. Launch out and discover what God is prompting you to be about. It is time to discover anew the Cost of Discipleship and what fruit it bears.

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