

Welcome Sunday June 30 2024

You know once upon a time I was a “fly in fly out” pastor.

Ilona was done with Alice Springs – she wanted to go south and be with her “family”.

I wanted to stay up in the bush with my family – the Arranda people, the Finker River Mission, and the Northern Territory.

Every 3 weeks I would fly down south.

It was always a “thing” where we would go to church.

We avoided the Hills because we know everybody and we were always treated as “special visitors” because I am pastor I suppose.

We were welcomed but we never fitted in.

We tried congregations in the city where we weren’t so well known.

And we were treated with suspicion. Only the bravest “members’ would come and speak to us – and as you would know they would try and pump us for information.

What brings you to this place?

Where are you from?

Both leading questions trying to find out who we knew and who we were connected to.

If we knew someone that they knew it seemed like the conversation was over – they had worked out where we fitted and were satisfied.

We were looking for the toilet, the coffee, and some talk about the service or sermon – they were looking to see whether we fitted in or not.

Do you know how hard it is to come “cold” to a community of loving Christians, when you’re not connected, when you don’t have a Lutheran name, when you don’t know anyone?

Do you know what it’s like to be interrogated - only to discover that you don’t belong.

You do know what it’s like to worship in another congregation? You place you self in a safe spot so you can watch how they do Holy Communion.

You don’t want to be one who doesn’t know whether to go left or right.

You see our Lutheran congregations are like a family – our synods are like a big family.

It’s great if you’re a member of the family – but what if you’re not?

I could write a very fat book about people who have been excluded from the Lutheran family and a very thin book about people who have been accepted by the Lutheran family.

You know how bad it was back in the day when we had 2 synods – one church split in two.

My old trucking mate Syd. A good Lutheran young man, with a good

Lutheran name meets a good Lutheran girl, with a good Lutheran name. They fell in love and want to get married.

Syd was told in no uncertain way, by the pastor, by the elders, by the parents, that he was never to marry this girl because she was from “the other side” – the wrong church family. Syd married the girl but never went to church again. A few years ago I buried Syd as a Christian – but that’s another story.

Last week. An old man, a dying man, a faithful man, a supporter of the Lutheran church all his life had never had Holy Communion. He doesn’t have a Lutheran name. He was told very clearly that because he wasn’t **baptised** a Lutheran, he could not have Holy Communion. In other words, he was told he was not “family”.

I invited him to receive Holy Communion for the first time in 90 years – I said This is Jesus body and blood given **for you** – not for Lutherans or Methodists – this is given for you – for the forgiveness of your sins – but more so in his context, for his body and soul.

I could see his body receive the body and blood of Christ with thanks and love.

My Daughter Sarah surprised me yesterday. She has been working on a cattle and sheep station in NSW. And now she wants to move on – she knows this is the life she wants.

So we’ve been looking for jobs on line.

There’s a great job at Idracowra Station on the Finke River, near Kulgera, in the Northern Territory.

I know the people there because I go to Horseshoe Bend on their property – this is the sad place where pastor Strehlow from the Finke Rive Mission died a 100 years ago.(1922).

Horseshoe Bend is an amazing place...

Every time I go there, they bring grandma and all the kids to the Bend – it’s a real family affair.

I said to Sarah you should think about Idracowra it’s a good station – the people are good, it’s only 4 hours from Alice Springs.

It’s good river country, and you have the Finke Desert race right at your front door.

She was silent.

She said I don’t want to go to a family station.

What?

She had just been on a family Station – she said they talk about things you don’t know about, they expect you to do things you don’t know about, they have a life and you are always on the outside trying to fit in,

always trying to read the unwritten rules and hear the unspoken expectations.

I was taken aback – because I know the family she was with – and they're a good family.

But she made me hear her point - her point was that **they are family and she was not.**

Most of you business people out there – have family businesses. Hear the voice of a young person – “you are family and she is not” – how do you run your business?

She wants to go to one of the great big cooperate stations, a Gina Reinhardt station, where you are one of **a collective of strangers** with one thing in common – a love for the bush.

Wow – we are asking you new people to join this family.

Is this good?

How long before we're going to let you in on our secrets.

How long before we treat you as equals?

In the Northern Territory you get invited to the NT Ball and are made a Territorian after 20 years.

- **I don't want you to join this family.**
- **I don't want your comfort to be determined by how we accept you – because I know it will be varied.**

Can we be a place where we welcome the stranger?

Can we be the place where you are welcomed having the name Jones?

The writer to the Hebrews says, *'Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it'* (13:1,2).

I dread going to a new church – you new people here today are brave you have taken that step – you have walked into our midst “cold”.

Was your reception cold?

Ask Pastor Paul about his experience as he came here, cold, as a visitor before he was installed.

How can we be a community that welcomes all people?

If we think of ourselves as “one big happy family”, and I think we do, then by nature, please know, we are going to be selective as to who we welcome and who we ignore.

Is that how we want to be?

Families are about intimacy and privacy.

Joining a family is difficult.

Even if you marry into a family, it is no guarantee of being accepted.

Like Sarah's experience, families have “in Jokes”, they have their own

stories which make no sense to anyone else, they have their unwritten, and unspoken rules – it takes years and years to be accepted.

Let's be honest there are some people we will never allow into our family. Sarah wants to work for Gina Reinhardt – she wants to be in a company of strangers with one thing in common.

Let's be real.

Let's be honest. We are part of this congregation because we all have something in common.

And that 'something' is not that we particularly like each other – although that would be nice, it's not that we all support Port Power, or all vote Liberal.

It's not that we're all on the same social scale.

Let's be honest in many cases we would not choose to be friends, let alone family members, with each other.

You know what they say – “you can choose your friends but you can't chose your relatives”.

We are a company of strangers who have all been baptised into the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

That's what we have in common.

That's what unites us.

A healthy congregation is a company of strangers who depend on **God's hospitality** – not family ties.

We need to be a company of strangers – open to strangers.

You are welcomed today because you came cold – how brave. Somehow you are connected – somehow you can make a claim to this family.

I'm proud of you.

I know most of us have not come to this place through the work and love of the congregation.

I'm not proud of that.

Our former LCA SA/NT mission director (That's “in” talk) Steen Olsen says that “even healthy families make lousy congregations”.

Healthy families have clear boundaries. Unless you are related, we are just not a part of it.

Steen says a congregation, needs to be “fuzzy-edged”.

A congregation should have both wheat and weeds, as Jesus teaches.

A congregation should be a place where a stranger can come and be invited to join in as an equal”.

Families' are private affairs.

A congregation needs to be a public place.

A place where you're welcome even if you haven't been before or don't come very often.

The one thing we have in common is Jesus.

We have to be a company of strangers – then we will look outwards – strangers will be our friends.

If we want to be one happy family then be prepared for next year where we will welcome another brave little group of souls - well connected, with proper Lutheran names.

If we want to be “one happy family” then these people will be welcomed ever slow slowly as they **earn their right to belong.**

Is that what we want?

You know, I regret, resent, those painful years trying to find a congregation where I would fit in.

I regret, resent, that I felt I had to fit in.

I regret, resent, that I fitted in pretty well because I have the right name and I’m well connected.

After reading Steen Olsen and having a coffee with Sarah – how I wish I would have come across a company of strangers having Jesus in common.

A congregation who knows what it’s like to be a stranger and therefore welcomes the stranger.

Hebrews 11 talks about all the people of faith from Noah, Abraham, Jacob, Sarah, Moses, Joseph, even Rahab the prostitute.

As you read that chapter it’s so easy to think of the one big happy family of faith.

What does it say?

Verse 13: They were all foreigners and strangers on this earth.

What does Peter say (I Peter 2:11) to the gathering of faithful people? You are a happy family?? No!.

“You are strangers and foreigners on this earth, ... live good lives among the unbelievers so that they come to know God”.

In other words, **Be a stranger, and live your faith among strangers.**

Let me tell you for sure no one will ever come to know Jesus because you are a Schultz, or a Schubert, or a Pfiefer.

Jesus says to us today:

“A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”

The promise is that the most remote stranger will get to know Jesus – if you love one another and show hospitality to strangers like you and me.

Lord teach us to be a community of strangers, who know what it is like to be on the outside – and is welcoming to all people. Amen.