

I one time heard a comedian speaking about Canada, but his words apply equally to North Dakota: North Dakota is kind of like your attic. You forget it's up there, but every once in a while you stick your head in, look around and say, "Hey, there's some really cool stuff up here."

The Great Commission of Matthew 28 is crucial for our context. However, rather than North Dakota going to the nations to make disciples, the nations have come to us.

We begin with the First Nations of the land. There we have six congregations on four reservations serving the Arikara, Dakota/Lakota and Ojibwe peoples.

Then, in the late 1800's immigrant populations from Russia, Germany and Scandanavia, especially from Norway, descended upon us and are still with us today.

We built churches in anticipation of their arrival, especially for the Lutherans who we expected would become Episcopalians, but to our dismay brought their pastors with them. (As a result we have contributed a number of quaint stone churches for service as county museums throughout the state.)

And in almost every small town in North Dakota are one Roman Catholic church and several brands of Lutherans. (I have toyed with the idea of a church growth campaign with the motto: "When Lutherans marry Roman Catholics they are really Episcopalians," but ecumenical sensitivity inhibits me.)

More recently, tribes from the Sudan have joined us. One of our largest churches is a Sudanese congregation which has three services on Sunday: one in English, one in Dinka, and one in Arabic.

Demographically, North Dakota is a very white state with over 90% of the population comprised of European Americans. In contrast, however, the Episcopal Diocese of North Dakota is much more racially diverse, as evidenced by the fact the over one-quarter of our clergy are people of color, including Native, African and Sudanese Americans. This provides us with inroads into those communities that other denominations simply do not have. (We also enjoy an almost even 50/50 split between male and female clergy.)

We are being called, I believe, to grow in our own sense of discipleship as we reach out to these nations-in-our-midst with the invitation to join us as disciples of our Lord Jesus Christ following the Anglican Way.

The 8<sup>th</sup> chapter of the Acts of the Apostles recounts the beginning of the severe persecution of the church, resulting in the scattering of the disciples throughout Judea and Samaria. I'm sure that's **not** what the apostles had in mind when Jesus told them earlier that they would be his "witnesses in Judea, Samaria and even to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1). But there you have it. The Christian Gospel was spread through traumatic circumstances.

On my better days, I am able to view the financial crisis we are all facing and the very difficult decisions we are forced to make in a similar fashion. Just maybe God is using these circumstances to push us to a place we might not have been able to go on our own strength of will and motivation.

We are very much aware of the cultural shift occurring in our time as reminded, for example, by Phyllis Tickle in her book, *The Great Emergence*. We have been inspired by the Fresh Expressions movement in England and are beginning to realize that people will not automatically come to us, but that we will have to go to them.

This reality requires more from our people than we've ever asked before. This requires that our people be willing to be transformed from mere church members to actual disciples of Jesus Christ.

I think God is willing to do the transforming, but are we willing to be changed becomes the question. In the Gospel of Luke (chapter 10), Jesus himself notes that while "the harvest is plenty, laborers are few."

Finally, in the first chapter of Acts, Jesus tells his followers that they will "receive power" when the Holy Spirit comes upon them. In the words of our Pentecostal brothers and sisters, we in North Dakota need a "Holy Ghost anointing."

In my opinion, only by the Holy Spirit's power and our willingness to be used by that same Spirit, will we be able to join in God's mission of reconciliation -- a mission that causes us to serve the poor, to work for peace and justice, and to introduce wandering people to a life-giving, life-saving relationship with God in Jesus Christ, not only in North Dakota but to the very ends of the earth.