

There's something about light that draws a crowd. Lit storefronts attract shoppers. The Rotary Lights website boasts 160,000 guests every year to Rotary Lights. Thousands packed Times Square last week to ring in the new year, and part of the attraction were the light of the city and the splendor of the New Year's Eve Ball.

Our Old Testament Text from Isaiah says the same thing. **“Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you. For behold, darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the LORD will arise upon you, and his glory will be seen upon you. And nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising.”**

The Light of the Lord draws the nations to Zion. The Glory of the Lord draws people young and old to the Church. Then 1. (oops!) Why aren't we drawing the nations here?

It's easy to wonder this. Where are all the young people? We used to have a full Sunday school and college students would fill pews! Where's the ethnic diversity? Isn't the Church made up of all languages and nations? Why are the pews more empty than in previous years? We used to need two services for want of space.

Our district provides as a service to its pastors demographic studies that help us get a feel for the neighborhoods which we serve. I understand that not all of you are from the 54601 zip code, but studying that zip code specifically, in the past ten years our area has seen a significant drop off from Roman Catholicism and Lutheranism and a significant growth in the no religious preference category. The only Christian religious preference that grew was nondenominational which grew only moderately compared to no religious preference.

We can see there's a problem. Some may wonder: 2. (ugh!) Maybe we need to change our light bulbs. If our light is to gather the nations at our church, maybe we need to change from incandescent to i.e.d. or from flame to neon. The non-denominational churches were growing in that study, so maybe we need to be more like them. Ditch the organ and get a rock band. Stop taking our design cues from the 16th century and see if we can get with the times. That'll get the kids in, right?

Maybe we need to sand off our rough edges. Of the people surveyed back in 2017 from our zip code, only 28% of them think same-sex marriage should be illegal. 29% of them think traditional marriage is still relevant. Only 37% think that religious communities don't need to embrace the LGBTQ lifestyle. Only 28% think abortion should become illegal. Maybe we need to quiet down on some of these social issues so we don't offend people. Couldn't we compromise just a *little* bit?

We see this fantastic picture in Isaiah 60. The light of the Lord attracts the nations. **“Lift up your eyes all around, and see; they all gather together, they**

come to you; your sons shall come from afar, and your daughters shall be carried on the hip. Then you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and exult, because the abundance of the sea shall be turned to you, the wealth of the nations shall come to you. A multitude of camels shall cover you, the young camels of Midian and Ephah; all those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall bring good news, the praises of the LORD.” Where are the sons and daughters from afar? Where’s the wealth of the nations? Where’s my camel? We must be doing something wrong!

It is difficult. It’s difficult to look back at the past and see a church that was more full. It’s a godly desire to want this congregation to grow that more people have their lives changed by the Gospel. We all want the same things. I think there is a tension here in this text because we know that Jesus was born and saved the world through His birth, life, death, and resurrection. Why isn’t the light of the Gospel gathering our neighborhood and community at our doors?

However, our starting point as Christians is to remember who is the bringer of light. Who is the church electrician, so to speak, giving us light? It is the Lord God who brings the light. **“the glory of the LORD has risen upon you... the LORD will arise upon you, and his glory will be seen upon you.”** 3. (aha!) The Lord brings the light.

Demographic studies can be helpful to get to know the lay of the land. However, if we forget that the Lord brings the light and that it’s God’s Word and not ours, then we can fall prey to all sorts of misunderstandings. We can’t change the message to appease the world around us. The Bible’s teachings on marriage and abortion are the truth and changing the truth is only dimming the light, not brightening it.

Instead, **THE LORD GATHERS THE NATIONS TO THE LIGHT OF HIS SON THROUGH THE HOLY SPIRIT.** 4. (whee!) We rejoice over the nations the Holy Spirit draws to His Church. Over the next three weeks our assigned Green Sheet Catechism section is the third article of the creed which confesses the Holy Spirit. We read “I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him; but the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith. In the same way He calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian Church on earth, and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith.” God through the Holy Spirit gathers His Church on Earth.

This doesn’t happen because of a charismatic pastor or a huge ministry staff. It doesn’t happen because of a hip praise band or a world class organ. It doesn’t happen because of a certain governing structure or constitution. Growth happens as the Holy Spirit uses the Word and Sacrament to enact Isaiah 60 in our modern world. His light draws us to Himself.

And we see the Holy Spirit has been doing this for ages. As we gather to celebrate Epiphany, we see the wise men come from the east because of the star. Yet it was the Word of God which directed them to find the Savior in Bethlehem. We see the nations come to the Church as people of all sorts of nations and languages were drawn to Jesus Christ at Pentecost. We see the nations gather at the Church as missionaries have gone to every part of the world and every country boasts Christians, even if they are a small percent of the population.

The Church is not just Faith Lutheran Church in La Crosse, Wisconsin. Last month President Harrison talked about the Latin School in Wittenberg that our sister church body in Germany owns. They have been taking in refugees from Ukraine, housing them and teaching them the faith. Likewise, Christianity in the global south has been expanding, especially in Africa.

Where are the nations? Where are the young people? It may be true that things weren't the same as they were in the 80s, but a lot of things in life are different than the 80s. The Holy Spirit is gathering people of all walks of life to this place. We have parishioners of all ages. Let us be thankful for each one of us here who is redeemed. Each and every one of you is a miracle. It is a miracle that the Holy Spirit has gathered you out of darkness into His marvelous light. Faith itself is a gift!

5. (yeah!) We seek out the Light of the World to draw others to Himself. The message of the Gospel has changed so many. The history of the God-man Jesus Christ coming down to earth to live a perfect life for me and for you, who died to forgive our sins, and rose again to prove that death has no victory over us. This message is something our dying world needs to hear. This is a message that applies to everyone.

Yes, this prophecy of the nations streaming to the Church will not be fully realized until Christ comes again in glory and we gather as every language, nation, and tongue before the throne of the Lamb, but in the meantime, we can shine our light to invite others into the peace and hope we have in Jesus alone.

This happens not by watering down the message of the Gospel by compromising Biblical truth, but by showing others how the good news of Jesus applies to them. It is better to light a candle than curse the darkness because light draws.

For our area, warm and friendly encounters was by far the most important factor for someone to consider a church. We may not have all the answers and not all of us are Biblical encyclopedias, but we don't have to be. But as we show kindness to others, it gives us a platform for the Holy Spirit to then let us share the Word with others. As the light of Christ shines through us, we can rejoice and invite others to the light of the Church. We do this through God alone who gathers all nations to Himself.