

# Identifying the idols

## *Achtemeier speaks of God's cleansing of idols to bring about transformation*

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In today's church it is common to fret about the decline in membership, the shortage of funds and the loss of traditional structure.

Maybe the church shouldn't fret so much. Maybe the church is in a time when God is cleansing the idols.

Mark Achtemeier told attendees at the Synod of Lakes and Prairies' COM/CPM training event at Christ the King Retreat Center in Buffalo, Minn., last week that "God seems to be taking away the dream of large, profitable, successful churches." And he later added, "I'm trying to tell you this is not a story of failure."



Achtemeier, who has served the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) since 1984 as a pastor, writer and theologian, and taught theology and ethics for 15 years at the University of Dubuque Theological Seminary, addressed three plenary sessions at the annual training session for members of presbyteries' Committee on Ministry and Committee on Preparation for Ministry.

His presentations, addressing the event's theme, "Live into Hope," noted how God is at work in the contemporary church, weaning it from idolatrous hopes for a church that is measured by secular criteria and grounded in human effort.

Achtemeier identified three particular idols that God has chosen to "bring down" — the idolatry of numbers, money and organization.

When Jesus said, in the Gospel of John 6:56, "Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in them," many of his disciples found the message difficult and turned away from him. His disciples, Achtemeier said, were "winnowed down to a smaller flock that follows Jesus."

The same may be happening today. The size of today's church is smaller than in the past, but perhaps God has winnowed the church to its smaller size. Achtemeier rhetorically asked, "Which is the better church?"

To identify the second idol, Achtemeier turned to two Bible verses. The Gospel of Matthew, 6:24, states, "No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be loyal to the one and have contempt for the other. You cannot serve God and wealth." The Gospel of Mark, 10:21, is the story of Jesus and the wealthy young man. It states, "Jesus looked at him carefully and loved him. He said, 'You are lacking one thing. Go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor. Then you will have treasure in heaven. And come, follow me.'"

Achtemeier said church leaders have said, "Think of all the wonderful things we could do if we had X amount of dollars. ... You fill in the amount."

It's possible, he added, "God is raising up a poorer church," and he said, "I don't think it was a coincidence the golden calf was made of gold."

To speak to the idolatry of church organization and structure, Achtemeier called on the visit of Jesus and his disciples to Jerusalem's temple. The story in the Gospel of Mark, 14:58, states, "We heard him saying, 'I will destroy this temple, constructed by humans, and within three days I will build another, one not made by humans.'"

The problem, Achtemeier said, occurs when the "majority of energy" in the church is devoted to "keeping the organization turning." When that happens, the church organization itself becomes the idol.

During the '50s and '60s, the church existed in a culture-of-joining that has disappeared. The demise of that aspect of the culture, along with other cultural changes, has had a "very bad influence on churches," Achtemeier said.

But the cleansing of these idols from the church can lead to a "changing and transforming relationship with God in Christ."