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Missio Trinitatis: Averting the Trifurcation of Witness, Service, and Life Together

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Abstract: The Trinitarian God calls the church to be in mission through redeemed relationships (*koinonia*) in which witnesses to the Gospel of Jesus Christ (*martyria*) enact works of service (*diakonia*). While professionalization and progress contribute many benefits to the Christian West, a negative consequence is the tendency toward operational separation of ministry functions.

The growth and strength of Lutheran churches in the global south provide an inspiring opportunity for Lutherans in the pluralistic North America context to reimagine their mission informed by the more comprehensive approach of communities like the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus (EECMY). One EECMY leader, Gudina Tumsa, born in 1929 and martyred for the cause of Christ in 1979, advocated for Christian mission not to be “divided or departmentalised.”

The fuller sense of relationality implicit in a *missio Trinitatis* approach will help cultivate greater unity as the church lives leaningly into witness, service and life together.

*“Help us to see ourselves as your mission to people in their every need, to society in all its tensions, to the church in all its tribulation and to the whole world in all its futile struggles to find its peace without you. Give us, who are your sent ones, your compassion for your lost ones.”*¹

Mission Affirmations 1965

This epigraphic prayer shines conspicuously in its affirmation of various ministries supporting evangelistic witness in a constellation of interrelated action. It is a petition speaking directly to the unique, salvific, wholeness found only in Jesus Christ. It exudes a wide-eyed sensitivity to the various contexts of mission. It avows its intent to be in solidarity with human struggle against sin and suffering. Overall, these words reflect the life and ministry of Jesus in whom there was no dissection between fervor for the lost and compassion for the “least of these.” Multiple times

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we hear variations of how He accomplished His mission: “Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people” (Mt 4:23).

While many positive changes since 1965 have strengthened the practices of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod’s faith-based development work *and* mission activities, the escalation of a professionalized approach raises potential concern; namely, techniques imported uncritically from disciplines external to the church have, in part, led to a disconnection of the various componential functions. This, coupled with the tendency of Westerners to prefer tidy silos in life, i.e., sacred and secular—which perhaps is intensified among Lutherans who hold to a binary interpretation of the doctrine of two kingdoms—has not resulted in the best outcome with respect to mission.

Standards have risen, arguably, and foci become clearer, but the result has also been an either/or dilemma: either human care ministries (*diakonia*) or evangelism (*martyria*). Further, the proximity between proclamation (*kerygma*) and expressions of ecclesia (*koinonia*) with diaconal activity has lessened. This essay will propose a theological approach for the de-departmentalization of these marks of the church recoupled with a recovery of what the epigraphic prayer asks God for—the gift of eyes to see the church’s mission comprehensively, especially as Western Lutherans learn from their sisters and brothers in the developing world.

The term *missio Trinitatis*² is proposed as a framework in nuanced contrast with the *missio Dei*. The image of God, inherent in all humans, cannot be either understood or realized by Christians apart from personal relationships of mutual recognition, along with respect for the personhood of the other.

Correspondingly, the God of Christians cannot be understood apart from the personal, trinitarian, interrelationship of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. People bearing the image of the relational God will be in relationship with one another, *analogia relationis*. They bear in relationship the image of the relational God. Further, these missional marks of the Christian Church—namely, its service (*diakonia*), its life together (*koinonia*), and its witness (*martyria*)—cannot be understood fully apart from relationships, as deriving and occurring within relationships.

For example, *service* apart from *life together* tends toward patronizing acts of charity that create dependency, that do not honor an individual’s or community’s

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capacity, and that do not lead to sustainable development. Or, conversely, *life together* apart from the sense of responsible *service* tends toward a crisis of stewardship, blind to the opportunity to aggregate intentionally goods and services so that they might be extended toward those in need. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer noted in a volume ironically called *Life Together*, “We are inclined to reply too quickly that the one real service to our neighbor is to serve them with the Word of God. It is true that there is no service that can equal this one. . . . (Y)et a Christian community does not consist solely of preachers of the Word.”³

An Historic Opportunity

The five hundredth anniversary of the start of the Reformation, as the historian Jaroslav Pelikan once axiomatically observed, represents a “tragic necessity”⁴ for all who confess Jesus Christ as Lord and are baptized into His death and resurrection. By *tragic*, Pelikan was pointing to the ever-spiraling rupture of the church prompted by that first major breach—a problem some Protestants are quick to abet and slow to acknowledge (Jn 17:11); and by *necessity*, he meant the historical moment’s imperative to reassert in 1517, amid princes, powers, popes, and perversions of the Gospel, God’s saving gift of justification by grace—an urgency some Roman Catholics do not immediately concede and some Eastern Orthodox consider irrelevant.

From a global, twenty-first-century perspective, however, this five hundredth anniversary commemorates not merely a *tragic necessity*, but it provides for Western Christians within Reformation traditions an historic opportunity; for Lutherans, in particular, the shifting demography of their membership suggests a momentous circumstance from which to reinvigorate their ecclesial and missional movement with Gospel resources emanating from Lutheran traditions outside of Europe and North America. Anniversaries are not only for looking *backward*, of course, but also provide occasions for looking *forward*. Moreover, for those who prioritize the church in mission, this five hundredth anniversary can become an invitation to look *within* in order that we might look *outward* in a learning and listening posture toward the expanding global church.

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WMLT or WMST (*Diakonia* as “Mercy” or “Service”)

The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, since 2010, has promoted a three-fold focus to thematize strategically its ministry. Derived from Scripture—the sole rule and norm for teaching in the LCMS—these dynamic foci are Witness (*martyria*), Mercy (*diakonia*) and Life Together (*koinonia*) and commonly abbreviated a WMLT. These ancient marks of the church reinforce a confessional *fusion* of the LCMS, even as they catalyze a welcome missional *fission*. A church stabilized and united in confessional subscription (fusion) will walk together with clarity, confidence, and charity amid the inevitable disruptive messiness of being energetically in mission (fission).

WMLT provides, furthermore, a focused opportunity for theological conversation concerning the interpretation and implementation of these emphases. In that spirit, this article commends LCMS leaders for introducing WMLT even as it proposes that our current Reformation commemoration offers a momentous moment: As the LCMS embraces the opportunity to reimagine how WMLT can be more fully refined and defined by global expressions of its evangelical confession beyond North America and Europe, it could be anticipated that there might be a corresponding shift in the linguistic translation and theological conceptualization of *diakonia*: towards *service* rather than *mercy*.

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First, *service* lends itself to fewer misunderstandings than *mercy* about the sort of compassionate interaction being undertaken, providing fewer semiotic misperceptions leading to condescension or paternalism—either among the beneficiaries (who internalize inferiority) or by the doers of *diakonia*.

The term *mercy* in the Christian understanding is never without divine dimensions reflected in one of the faith’s oldest and purest prayers, *Kyrie eleison*. Mercy’s effusive source is always God (Psalm 136). Human beings, at best, serve as instruments providing others with gifts originating in God. Only in view of God’s steadfast love (Rom 12:2) do Christ-bearers offer themselves humbly in service toward others. The word “mercy” can carry a linguistic insistence of charitable action conveying a relationship of power to powerlessness, of capacity to incapacity, of knowledge to lack of knowledge.

Ministries of compassion, relief, and support that are most effective, however, recognize the power, the capacity, and the knowledge resident within even the most debilitated communities. All people inherently possess agency (for working, for

achieving potentially everything except salvation) since all people are created in God's image.

Finally, "mercy," as it is used in the English-speaking world, seems tinged with a tone of someone's benevolent disposition of forbearance toward another who is guilty of some moral transgression. Such discretionary withholding of punishment is akin in its usage to Jesus' biblical illustration of the Pharisee's smug petition as contrasted with the tax collector's urgent plea, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" (Lk 18:13).

The parable of the father's lavish love, also known as The Prodigal Son, highlights the implication that those in need of mercy are experiencing their plight because of bad or sinful choices; as Art Just suggests rightly, the primary point is the "proclamation of the mercy of a loving father made manifest to the repentant sinner, no matter how gross the sinful conduct has been."⁵ Service does not carry as readily that baggage or that judgment of the other.

Thus, *diakonia* is most appositely translated as service, striving to live out Luther's axiom that "There is no greater service of God than Christian love which helps and serves people living in poverty and need."⁶

When *service* is coupled missionally with *life together* and *witness*, it invites the sending community to see itself primarily engaged with prepositions of horizontality or companionship. So, we are not in service *at* them or *for* them or *to* them, but we see ourselves related to them through the preposition *with*. Such *with-ness*, especially with partner churches, implies mutual mission, partners joined by Christ, 1 Corinthians 12:12–27, "members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel" (Eph 5:23).

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Further, when witness, service, and life together are held together in creative tension, the level of sensitivity to contextual nuance will rise, as will the respect for everyday patterns, everyday speech, local customs, and language—not imposed from above, but as Martin Luther suggested:

We do not have to ask about the literal Latin or how we are to speak German. Rather we must ask the mother in the home, the children on the street, the common person in the market about this. We must be guided by their tongue, the manner of their speech, and do our translating accordingly. Then they will understand it and recognize that we are speaking German to them. . . . The literal Latin is a great barrier to speaking proper German.⁷

Learning from Ethiopia

The conference was called “Diakonia.” It was held in Adidas Ababa, Ethiopia in 2010. I attended it as President and CEO of Lutheran World Relief; and so, during a break in the sessions, I was privileged to sit with the then-president of the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus (EECMY), Iteffa Gobena. This church body has grown from 65,000 members at its founding in 1959 to more than five million members in 2010. As of 2015, it hovers at the seven-million mark in membership. In light of the struggle for Baptisms and confirmations in the LCMS, I took the opportunity to hear and learn about the Holy Spirit’s work in that community. Pastor Iteffa identified four reasons for the growth.

1. “We emphasize equipping the saints and the ministry of the laity.” All baptized believers are called into action for the work of ministry, the exercise of spiritual gifts belongs to the whole church, not just the ordained clergy; in fact, the EECMY has a dire shortage of clergy, but this has not impacted negatively its growth because of its equipping of the saints.
2. “We’ve been in revival since we were founded.” I worshiped with them; the character of their liturgy is ebullient with joy and evangelistic energy. The buildings are simple and spare; but despite the barren, spare, simple outdoor churches, multiple times there were Baptisms. But more than spiritual fervor, revival refers to repentance and baptismal renewal.
3. “We are in mission to the whole person.” Again, there is nothing particularly innovative about this emphasis. The church operates organically a vast network of social service, health care, and outreach ministries within the nation of Ethiopia and beyond—especially among some of the most marginalized people groups. In their strong commitments to ministries of service, this church is teaching us all that witness and life together become disingenuous without care for the livelihoods of others, especially those with whom one shares fellowship.
4. “We are prepared to die for our faith.” And some in their church body rendered the ultimate sacrifice. In the 1970s, Gudina Tumsa served as the General Secretary of the EECMY. Refusing to bow down to the draconian political demands of the revolutionary Marxist military government seeking to silence the church, he was arrested. Refusing to submit or recant, he was tortured. Refusing to flee from Ethiopia while he had a chance (like Dietrich Bonhoeffer in Nazi Germany) he was re-arrested and viciously murdered.

Each refusal was predicated on his doctrinal conviction: that God’s justice in the world and God’s justifying act in Christ are inextricably linked. He wrote:

The Gospel of Jesus Christ is God’s power to save everyone who believes it. It is the power that saves from eternal damnation, from economic

exploitation, and from political oppression. . . . It is the only voice telling about a loving Father who gave his Son as a ransom for many. It tells about the forgiveness of sins and the resurrection of the body. It is the Good News to sinful humanity. . . . It is too powerful to be compromised by any social or political system.⁸

The life of Gudina was resonant with another early African church leader, Tertullian, who affirmed that “the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church” (*Apologeticus*, Chapter 50).⁹ He should be remembered among us, *Augsburg Confession XXI* and his death day, July 28, should be commemorated.

Life Together and Diversity

The church’s *life together* requires constant scrutiny against any one particular cultural expression’s becoming an exclusive unifier, filtering out of the fellowship those who are different, rather than *life together* being unified in Christ, with a common confession of faith, as agents of Christ through *witness* and *service*.¹⁰

The sole source of life (*bios*) and meaningful existence is God’s creative, redeeming, and enlightening Word to the world. The following inhere:

- life replete with dignity (*Würde*¹¹) and purpose (*zoe*, Jn 10:10),
- life rich with integrity, of life redolent with living traditions robust enough to both anchor community and prompt spiritual growth,
- life rooted in fellowships of Christ’s forgiveness.

“If human dignity, as built in the image of God, ceases to be based in God’s address to human beings, which extends without exception to all humans and awards them a principal authorization to live, other criteria will gain prevalence.”¹² These “other criteria” might include culture or sociological phenomena. When an individual or a group’s fundamental identity become incurred (*incurvatio inseipsum*) rather than oriented toward Christ and neighbor, people are prone, according to Luther, to make false gods even of otherwise virtuous goods: “great learning, wisdom, power, prestige, family and honor.”¹³

These pursuits—apart from God, apart from the deliverance of Jesus Christ, apart from the Holy Spirit’s enlightenment—become idols. These prizes and gifts, apart from their subsuming to the worship (*leitourgia*) of God’s Son, become idolized. This happens quite apart from any inkling of deliberate, conscious intention since such desiring “sticks and clings to our nature all the way to the grave” according to Luther.¹⁴

Not only do these priorities in themselves not sustain and nurture the sort of life in which God intends us to live, but “great learning, wisdom, power, prestige, family and honor” by the very vigor of their virtue become invisible fences which exclude those lacking “great learning, wisdom, power, prestige, family and honor” and

prevent *koinonia*. Without the tempering effect of a spirituality of stewardship, the ego will create a God from the good. Without the incursion of the outsiders, strangers, new neighbors, redemptive truth often is not received.

Remarkably, Jesus is recognized in Mark's Gospel by the "way he breathed his last." This recognition did not come from a sacred insider, nor a tribe-member, nor a disciple, but from a secular outsider, an agent of state, an imperial mercenary. At Jesus' maximal point of godforsaken suffering, it takes an *other* to tell the truth on the *same*.¹⁵

But the mere position of being an outsider does not ensure truth. Lack of proximity and familiarity can lead to exoticizing and fetishizing the other. For example, during the development of the African American worship supplement in the 1990s, another well-intended impulse—that of fascination with the other—led to a sort of liturgical dilettantism evidenced in the introduction of rarefied practices that, albeit pondered in academic theology and mused about at conferences, were and are not recognized in the worship customs of the vast majority of everyday African Americans.

One such practice proposed by more liberal Lutherans included libation rituals, a traditional heritage ritual among some West Africans, which were debated for hours though they are virtually unknown among black Lutherans or committee members from "real" congregations who were suspicious of the wisdom of their introduction. Furthermore, very few Lutheran Christians who are Africans from the continent followed these practices.

Conclusion

Gudina Tumsa highlighted in his Nairobi address (1974)¹⁶ "the contrast between the traditional African concept of life and the Western concept." To heal, then, is not simply a question of medical care, but "has to do with the restoration of man to liberty and wholeness": "In the ministry of Jesus we note that forgiveness of sins and healing of the body, feeding the hungry and spiritual nurture, opposing dehumanising structures and identifying himself with the weak were never at any time divided or departmentalised. He saw man as a whole and was always ready to give help where the need was most obvious." The theology and practice of this comprehensive approach leads us, for example, to an amplification of the notion that Jesus saves. From what? From sin, from malaria, and from oppression.

Typical dichotomizing is not only unhelpful, but untrue: either service or verbal witness, either social justice or moral righteousness, either prophetic zeal or charismatic spiritual zeal are false and unnecessary options. The contention remains that, in their engagement with the rest of the Christian world, Christians in the West bear a unique challenge to be confessionally critical and self-critical, and to be reflectively creative in mutual mission. The relationality implicit in a *missio*

Trinitatis approach will help cultivate greater unity as the church lives leaningly into witness, service and life together.

Endnotes

¹ Original wording: “Help us to see ourselves as Thy mission to men in their every need, to society in all its tensions, to the church in all its tribulation and to the whole world in all its futile struggles to find its peace without Thee. Give us, who are Thy sent ones, Thy compassion for Thy lost ones.”

² I initially became familiar with the notion of *missio Trinitatis* in a 5 a.m. conversation with Mike Breen in Palm Springs, California, in September 2015 during our shared ride to the airport. Breen uses this term in contrast to describe families in missional activity, in contrast to *missio Dei*, which he considers individualistic.

This term is used by Peter Bellini, Assistant Professor in the Practice of Global Christianity and Intercultural Studies in the Vera Blinn Chair at United Theological Seminary, “The Processio-Missio Connection: A Starting Point in Missio Trinitatis or Overcoming the Immanent-Economic Divide in a Missio Trinitatis” in *Wesleyan Theological Journal* (October 2014).

³ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together: Prayerbook of the Bible*, ed. Geoffrey B. Kelly, trans. Daniel W. Boesch and James H. Burtness, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works 5* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 98.

⁴ Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Riddle of Roman Catholicism: Its History, Its Beliefs, Its Future* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1960).

⁵ Arthur A. Just, *Luke 9:51–24:53 in Concordia Commentary* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1997), 608.

⁶ Quoted in Lindberg, Carter. *Beyond Charity: Reformation Initiatives for the Poor* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 164.

⁷ Martin Luther, *An Open Letter on Translating*, September 15, 1530.

⁸ Gudina Tumsa, “The Role of a Christian in a Given Society” in Oeyvind Eide, *Revolution & Religion in Ethiopia: The Growth & Persecution of the Mekane Yesus Church, 1974–85* (Oxford: J. Currey, 2000), 200–204. See also Tumsa’s “Memorandum to Ato Emmanuel Abraham, President, ECMY; from Gudina Tumsa, General Secretary, ECMY Re: Some Issues Requiring Discussions and Decisions,” 271–279 in the same volume.

⁹ For easy access to the work of Tertullian, see Tertullian and Robert D. Sider, *Christian and Pagan in the Roman Empire: The Witness of Tertullian* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2001).

¹⁰ While it is no sin to move in homogenous circles, it is a sin, however, not to recognize one’s neighbor. It is the essence of sin to live a radically inward-turned life. It is a sin to, under the guise of natural self-limitation, to ignore or exclude or oppress others who are trying to gain entrance to opportunity or membership or contracts through a rigid affiliation to one’s networks of friendly association. (See Luther’s explanation to the Ninth and Tenth Commandments.) The church is not a social club, it is a society of the redeemed, joined to Jesus Christ by Baptism, first and foremost, not by a group’s cultural identity. Lutherans have been guilty, in my estimation, of equating their Lutheran-ness with an inward-focused Garrison Keillor-esque identity. This exclusivizing tendency in Lutheranism, where expressions of Nordic and Germanic identity—music, being literate, art, style, even humor—

are almost tantamount with the Gospel, has largely contributed to our overwhelming whiteness and English-speaking character. The Mormons, who until the 1970s had laws against minorities having full membership, are three times(!) as diverse as we. It irks me that we say we are knitted together primarily by our Confession of Doctrine when that does not seem to be the case.

¹¹ Michael Rosen notes that, rightly or wrongly, Immanuel Kant's thought about dignity occupies a critical philosophical centerpiece of any discussion of dignity. "The German word for dignity . . . closely related etymologically to *Wert*, the term for 'worth or value.'" *Dignity: Its History and Meaning* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 19.

¹² Johannes Schwanke, "Luther's Theology of Creation." *The Oxford Handbook of Martin Luther's Theology*, Robert Kolb, Irene Dingel and Lubomir Batka, eds., (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 205.

¹³ Martin Luther, "Large Catechism," *The Book of Concord*. ed., Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 387.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ John D. Caputo, *What Would Jesus Deconstruct?: The Good News of Postmodernism for the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 29.

¹⁶ Gudina Tumsa, "Serving the Whole Man; A Responsible Church Ministry and Flexible International Aid Relationship" in *Proclamation and Human Development. LWF Documentation for a Lutheran World Federation Consultation in Nairobi, Kenya, October 21–25, 1974* (Rome: IDOC International, 1974).