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Articles

An Examination of Strategic Mission Plans Before and After 2010

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Abstract: Given that it has been five and a half years since the restructuring of the LCMS it is appropriate to ask: How goes God's mission in the LCMS? Rather than gathering opinions for a variety of interested participants and observers, this article has chosen to narrow its focus to the comparison of two strategic mission plans. The first is the Balanced Focus Plan of the Board for Mission Services dated 2007. The second is the first strategic plan for the new Board for International Mission dated 2014, Consolidate, Focus, Renew and Establish Partnerships. There are a number of significant differences in the two strategic plans: governance models, questions about who does the mission (Is it all baptized Christians or just pastors?), and worship practice in the mission field. A primary concern, however, is the state of relationships between the LCMS and partner churches across the globe. In a word, there is much work to be done before relationships deteriorate even more.

2010 was a watershed year for LCMS mission and governance. First, the 2010 Convention adopted a new structure for the national office. Instead of one Board for Mission Services (BFMS) for worldwide and national mission, two separate boards



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were brought into existence. The Board for International Mission (BIM) also incorporated the worldwide component of the former Board for Human Care. A new Board for National Mission (BNM) created one place for various North American mission components, including Human Care and what used to be termed Congregational Services. The second matter of significance was the election of the Rev. Matthew Harrison to the presidency of the Synod and the normal changes in the staffing of the President's office that occur in the midst of the staffing changes for the newly adopted mission structure.

The purpose of this article is to examine how the new BIM/BNM structure is working when compared with the previous BFMS activities. Two documents will be foundational for this examination: *2007–2010 Balanced Focus Plan* of the BFMS and the *Consolidate, Focus, Renew and Establish Partnership: Strategic Plan for the Office of International Mission*, dated May 15, 2014. It is recognized that these two documents are not “apples to apples” comparisons since the United States was previously considered as one part of the world mission field.

There are different assumptions and strategies evident when the two strategic plans are compared. The *2007–2010 Balanced Focus Plan* centers on Ablaze, the collaborative effort of LCMS congregations and worldwide partner churches to intensify personal witnessing in preparation for the five hundredth anniversary of the Reformation of 1517. This was the second stage of a three- or four- stage strategy to connect with 100 million unchurched or unconnected people across the world.

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Consolidate, Focus, Renew and Establish Partnership is the plan of May 2014. It might be described as a starting-from-scratch plan, especially as a whole new administrative staff was being gathered in St. Louis, together with many new missionaries in the field replacing long serving staff. The lack of continuity of the old with the new has complicated the normal difficulties of continuing to grow relationships with partner churches.

Balanced Focus Plan 2007–2010

The plan begins with a Theological Preface, adopted by the BFMS in October 2000.¹ The Preface begins with two paragraphs setting forth the premises that God loves the world, His will is that all should be saved, and mission belongs to God. The next two paragraphs set forth the principles that, in the broadest sense, all Christians are missionaries and that, in the narrower sense, the Spirit, using the church as the means for identifying and sending people, sends specific people to accomplish specific tasks in missionary service. This sending includes men as missionary

pastors; men and women, including teachers, to share the Gospel through words and deeds of loving service; and support staff, for example, to fulfill record-keeping or accounting standards of the United States or foreign governments.

Referencing the Augsburg Confession, Article V, the Preface speaks of the office of ministry that is given to all pastors to provide the Gospel and Sacraments. It further defines “missionaries” as those who are called to carry the Gospel to people who would not hear it unless someone crosses a barrier of language and/or culture to reach them. In view of its US responsibilities, the Preface states that a missionary is not necessarily called into foreign service; for mission work is done wherever boundaries must be crossed to proclaim the Gospel. It may require learning another language but especially learning how to communicate clearly in unfamiliar cultural forms.

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In a Preface subheading, “Baptism, the Church and the Lord’s Supper,” the Augsburg Confession’s Article VII is referenced to define the church as “the assembly of all believers among who the Gospel is preached in its purity and the holy sacraments are administered according to the Gospel.” The Preface further observes “in this sense it can be said that Lutheran mission work leads to Lutheran Churches.”

In the section on “Worship,” the Theological Preface again references Augsburg Confession Article VII: “It is not necessary for the true unity of the Christian church that ceremonies, instituted by men, should be uniformly observed in all places.” This is further explained with the statement: “The Lutheran church does not maintain that there is one form of worship that must be used throughout the world, but it has always been concerned that its total worship life confesses the faith of the creeds in accord with the universal church, that that the worship-liturgical life of the church is done decently and in order.” The Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, Article X: 5,9 is also referenced: “We further believe, teach and confess that the community of God in every place and at every time has the right, authority, and power to change, to reduce, or to increase ceremonies according to its circumstances, as long as it does so without frivolity and offense but in an orderly and appropriate way.”

“Church and Ministry” is the final subheading of the Theological Preface. Two matters are to be noted. First is the statement: “Scripture makes clear that all believers are priests before God (1 Peter 2:9).” This is explained as follows: “All Christians have the joyful privilege and responsibility of showing their thankfulness to God for his salvation by sharing the Gospel with those around them.” It is further noted: “One of the missionary’s primary responsibilities as a pastor [is] to prepare all the members of the congregation for their works of service, each according to the

calling God has given (Ephesians 4:11–13), and to prepare some men, selected by the church, for entrance into the public ministry.”

After the Preface, the *2007–2010 Balanced Focus Plan* identifies six areas of focus (mission, mission responders, partnership, people, leadership and board). Each of the six areas has a listing of goals, strategies, and measures. Basically, the *Balanced Focus Plan* describes the BHAG (big, hairy, audacious goal) of sharing the Good News of Jesus with 100 million unchurched or uncommitted people by the five hundredth anniversary of the Reformation in 2017. This sharing has also been known as Ablaze!, the organizing mission principle for 2007–2010. Measures for the Mission Focus for June 30 were established as three thousand congregations and their districts engaged in Ablaze! initiatives, together with one thousand congregations participating in international and national mission events. Measures also had a board focus. Every board member of the BFMS was expected to have traveled on a board-designated trip, to have been involved in at least one short-term mission experience. Board members were also expected to be active financial contributors to LCMS World Mission and to have made at least two development visits with a principal gift officer, usually within his/her district.

One asterisk (*) in the plan gives clarity to the definition of new missions. “A ‘new mission’ in the United States is a group that meets regularly around the Word and intends to become a separate congregation at some point. Internationally, a new mission may be defined as a new community of believers gathered around the Word that may become part of a Word and Sacrament community.” Seven hundred fifty new missions were to be started in the United States by LCMS World Mission and its partners. Internationally, with five partners in each region, one thousand new Lutheran communities would be initiated. Both were to be accomplished by June 30, 2010.

It is important to remember that Ablaze! was officially adopted at the Synod’s 2004 convention and reaffirmed in 2007 and 2010. The 2004 convention agreed to “the urgency of the national goal to reach 50 million unchurched and/or uncommitted people with the Gospel.” The convention further encouraged each congregational member “to share the Good News of Jesus when the Spirit provides opportunity.” The 2007 Convention further resolved “that the LCMS through its districts, congregations, Lutheran Hour Ministries, LWML, and LCMS World Mission through its national team support the mission revitalization efforts as a major component of Ablaze!”² Several Conventions commended “the Board for Mission Services for its loving efforts to lead the church in God’s mission and the Ablaze! movement.”³ By 2013, mention of Ablaze! had shrunk to a parenthesis in a “Whereas” “(including the goals and priorities of Ablaze!)” with reference to the new Office for National Mission’s being encouraged to continue church revitalization efforts.⁴

It is true that when a new mission field is entered by any church body a long process begins that eventually results in a new church body—a church body that becomes a partner church. A former German missionary to Papua New Guinea, Georg F. Vicedom, later became an eminent professor of missions in Germany. Concordia Publishing House has translated and published two of his books, *The Mission of God* (1965) and *A Prayer for the World* (1967). The second work examines mission from the perspective on the Lord's Prayer. Vicedom addresses partnership in mission in the final chapter.

In mission everything appears as God's act. Conversion, faith and life are worked by God alone. . . . God works among men the same way He worked on the apostles. . . . They all stand under the same effective action and under assignment of the one Word since all have received the same gift from God. Solidarity under the Word and in reception of salvation incorporates believers into one unity.⁵

It should be the same way with the relationship between mission leadership and the young church, missionary, and congregation, the missionizing church at home and the Christians abroad. There are no opposites, no superior and inferior, no givers and receivers. Both are a unity before God even if they have different tasks and obligations. . . . How many tensions between the mission and the young churches would have been eliminated if this common basis had been the point of departure!⁶

Fast-forward to four Regional Directors for LCMS World Mission meeting together with the Associate Executive Director for International Mission on August 29, 2006. The issue discussed was the different results gained from partnership and paternalism approaches. A speech on this topic by then Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice, inspired the conversation. At the end of two days, the five international mission leaders put into writing their understanding of transformational mission in a thoughtful and thought-provoking paraphrase of Secretary Rice.

We would define the objective of transformational mission work in this way: To work with our many Lutheran friends around the world in a posture of partnership, in order to build and sustain missional, well-developed, and well-managed national churches, (including our own LCMS, for the conversation goes both ways), that will respond to the needs of people (spiritual and physical), while being held accountable for efforts in the international Lutheran mission movement. . . . Transformational mission work is rooted in partnership, not paternalism, in doing things with other people, not for them, often being directed rather than directing.⁷

Partnerships, no superiors or inferiors, unity in Christ, working with and accountable to one another. These are rich words for partnership in the Mission of

God, for sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ across the world. What a wonderful common basis for working together.

Consolidate, Focus, Renew and Establish Partnerships

Strategic Plan for the Office of International Mission v.1.1a (May 15, 2014)⁸

The 2014 strategic plan for the Office of International Mission is a document of some fifty-six pages compared to twenty pages for the previously reviewed Balanced Focus Plan. Following an Executive Summary the plan is presented in nine sections: (1) Historical Background; (2) Lutheran Mission at the beginning of the 20th and 21st Centuries; (3) Structure: Board/Staff; (4) Organizational Tenets; (5) SWOT analysis for 2014; (6) Regional Plans; (7) Appendix A—Toward a Responsible Lutheran Church; (8) Appendix B—LCMS Partner Churches Responsible Lutheran Metric; and (9) Appendix C—Regional Organizational Charts. To compare the two mission plans, it is important to add to this strategic plan the twelve-page “Theological Statement for Mission” authored by President Harrison that serves both the Board for International Missions and the Board for National Missions. The Theological Statement has twenty-three sections.

God is the subject of the first section. One readily identifies what has become the signature phrase of President Harrison’s administration: WITNESS, MERCY, LIFE TOGETHER.

God. Where the Holy Trinity is present via the Gospel and received in faith, there cannot but be WITNESS (*martyria*), MERCY (*diakonia*), and Life Together (*koinonia*).

His holy will for all in Jesus Christ—namely that all come to believe in and bear witness to Christ, reflect divine compassion, and live together in forgiveness, love, and joy in the Church.⁹

The signature phrase is lifted up throughout the “Theological Statement for Mission.” It even summarizes the statement in the final sentence: “The theology of the cross will forever be a litmus test of the genuineness of our WITNESS (*martyria*), MERCY (*diakonia*), and LIFE TOGETHER, (*koinonia*) in our midst.” Generally the English and the New Testament Greek equivalents are printed together. There is a problem with connecting MERCY with *διακονα*. The entry for *diakonia* from the Third Edition of the Greek English Lexicon of the New Testament in 2000 makes a significant change from the second edition published in 1979.¹⁰ In

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the third edition, the first meaning is “to function as an intermediary, act as a go-between/agent.” The fifth use is identified as the “special problem” of Acts 6:2 “looking after tables.” The second edition placed “to wait someone at table” in first position. “Care for, take care” of were in third position. Make no mistake, the concept of mercy, care, compassion for those in need is a critical aspect of the Church’s Gospel. Luke 4 and Matthew 25, among many possible citations, make that very clear. However it cannot be based on the understanding of “mercy” as the normal translation of the New Testament word *diakonia*.

“The theology of the cross will forever be a litmus test.”

It is evident that the work of Friedrich Wilhelm Hopf (1910–1982) has had a significant influence on President Harrison. He referenced Hopf’s signature phrase “the Lutheran Church can only do Lutheran missions” in an earlier essay written in 1993 published in a 1998 issue of *Logia*.¹¹ President Harrison was also involved in the translation of Hopf’s 1967 essay for a Special Issue (April 2015) of the *Journal of Lutheran Mission* published by the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. One section of that essay is noted here under the heading of Confessional Subscription.

The Confessional status of a congregation—the catechism in the instruction of the youth, the Order of the Divine service, of the liturgy and of the worship of the church according to the Agenda, the hymnal, the ordination vow and the promise of the pastor at his installation—all that receives its Spiritual power through God’s efficacious Word of salvation at work in it.¹²

What is included? The BFMS recognized a variety of worship ceremonies and practice. Divine Service, Agenda, and Hymnal appear to have a more limiting perspective. Is Hopf requiring that the same Divine Service, hymnal, Agenda, etc., be translated in every mission/language setting? Missing is any reference to choir music.

Hopf’s work may have application for understanding the Policies for the Board for International Mission, dated January 16, 2011. Under the category of Witness Outcomes, paragraph 1.3.1.3 states “Lutheran Missions will include thorough catechesis of Lutheran doctrine, hymnody and worship to all.” Policy 1.3.1.6 reads

The Church will also seek to establish Lutheran congregations that imitate the early believers who “devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of the bread (i.e. regular and faithful use of the Lord’s Supper) and the prayers (historic liturgical forms of worship)” Acts 2:42.

1.3.1.7 states: Lutheran “missions will be done by Lutheran clergy who will preach, teach, and administer the sacraments.” No reference was identified for other church workers in other sections regarding Mercy Outcomes and Life Together Outcomes.

Now for a look at the Strategic plan itself.

The Executive Summary notes, “changes due to restructuring made it impossible to continue to use the Balanced Focus Plan of the previous BFMS.” A new plan was needed and the current document is described as “a work in progress that represents the focusing of strategic ideas.” The “work in progress” includes no sign of Ablaze! in the entire document.

Section 4, Organizational Tenets, is an exceptionally useful one-page description of the work intended! It would make an excellent color tri-fold handout to be distributed throughout the church. The Synod Mission Statement flows smoothly into the Office of International Mission’s mission statement with the appropriate sending and supporting language. Note how the Vision Statement casts an important direction for the work of the Synod across the world.

The LCMS is the premier catalyst of a seamlessly connected global network of confessional Lutheran partners united in mission to Witness to the Gospel, manifest Mercy, and enhance Life Together.

Of special interest is the listing of five values. One could only wish to learn more about each of them. The listing of “sustainability” and the continual references to stewardship in both the Theological Statement and Appendix A of the 2014 strategic plan call for more attention to this subject later in the this article.

1. Fidelity—Be Lutheran
2. Quality—The pursuit of excellence
3. Credibility—Inspires belief in project
4. Sustainability—Financial capacity to last
5. Stability—Strength to stand and endure.

The last categories are a listing of six Mission Priorities.

1. Plant, sustain, revitalize Lutheran churches
2. Support and expand theological education
3. Perform Human Care in close proximity to Word and Sacrament ministries
4. Collaborate with the Synod’s members and partners to enhance mission effectiveness
5. Nurture pastors, missionaries, and professional workers to promote spiritual, emotional and physical well-being
6. Enhance elementary and secondary education and youth ministry.

Section 5 is a two-page analysis of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. From the experience of this writer in working with congregations in strategic

planning over the last twenty years, strengths or assets are an especially critical foundation of any way forward in mission. Eight items are listed as strengths. As might be expected, the declining membership of the Synod is anticipated to have a negative impact on the capacity of the church to engage in mission at home and abroad. It is a bit of a surprise to see the recognition of the effect of the departure of many missionaries in recent years included in the “weakness” category. The needed learning curve of the completely new and inexperienced mission team was also acknowledged. The opportunities for providing theological education with our mission partners most certainly prompted the second of the six Mission Priorities. The need for better coordination of mission societies, districts, congregations, and Recognized Service Organizations with the Board for International Missions was noted in both the Weaknesses and Threats categories.

Regional mission plans for Africa, Asia, Eurasia, and Latin America take up pages 12–27 in the plan. Latin America has the most developed plans in the document. The rest are sketchy, still in process.¹³

Appendix A—Toward a Responsible Lutheran Church is dated September 2013 and makes an assessment of partner churches, giving a metric or percentage grade for how fields are performing in six categories: Proclamation, Theologizing, Theological Education, Leadership, Operational Ability, and Stewardship. The assessment material without the percentage grading scores was also published in Synod’s electronic *Journal of Lutheran Mission*, Vol. 1, No. 1 in 2014 under the title: “Ecclesiology, Mission and Partner Relations: What it Means that Lutheran Mission Plants Lutheran Churches.” (p. 20–27)¹⁴

It needs to be clearly stated that very important matters are being addressed with the concept of responsibility. Please note, page numbers from Appendix A are included to provide accurate reference. “How to measure the success of the church” (29). There is a continual need for “evaluation of partner churches” (29). A question in the evaluation of a particular partner church is: “Is it responsible for stewardship to support its workers, operation, and mission work?” (29).

Please note that the following quotations are all from Appendix A, with page numbers also noted:

Work is done to help each church grow in the six areas. . . . The relationship and partnership is dynamic and based on mutual respect and love for the other as the Body of Christ. (32)

The assessment evaluates a particular church as a responsible Lutheran church as observed by the partner church and informed by the particular local church (usually identified in the form of a request for assistance). (32)

The Responsible Lutheran church metric provides a snapshot of the current state of the mission partner/partner church. It shows in broad categories

where the Missouri Synod can partner with the [specific partner church]. Over time, the nature of the work done by the Missouri Synod will change. The snapshot also helps planning by demonstrating what type of worker might need to be recruited to help in a given area (33).

For the purposes of this article, the focus on metrics will be narrowed to the area of stewardship. The listing of questions for evaluation of this part of the life of the church is as follows:

Does the church teach stewardship?

How much of the church's budget is funded externally?

Are the core and essential operations self-funded?

Would vital components of the church's life diminish if external funding was no longer provided?

Stewardship would further be subdivided into the capacity to work outside the geographical borders of the church [i.e. help other partner churches]. (31–32)

Earlier in this article, reference was made to the five values under the heading of Organizational Tenets. The fourth value listed was Sustainability, defined as the "Financial capacity to last." What appears to be happening is that "sustainability" is being equated with "stewardship." While the two may be connected, they are definitely not describing the same thing. In fact, the strategic plan has fallen into the common fallacy of equating offerings with stewardship. Often does one hear congregational leaders state that "if the church budget is fully funded we congratulate ourselves because we are good stewards." This is formulated in the 2014 strategic plan with the assumption that the more the partner church becomes self-funding for its core and central functions the more the partner church is demonstrating good stewardship.

In 1998 the LCMS Convention adopted eight biblical stewardship principles to clarify some common perceptions that stewardship was all about money. The first two of those principles are:

God's stewards are stewards by virtue of their creation and their recreation in Holy Baptism; therefore, they belong to the Lord.

God's stewards have been entrusted with life and life's resources and given the joyful responsibility of managing them for him.¹⁵

It would be wise to bring these principles back into the discussion of sustainability and stewardship.

The matter of financial support with each partner in mission requires prayerful, mutual conversation. In district mission grants, allocations usually find their place in a mutually agreed schedule for self-support that is regularly revisited and adapted to

need. Issues of entitlement or even greed are ever lurking in the shadows of such conversations. This requires a mutual, transparent, not top-down, process.

A significant danger in a metric process is turning the Gospel into Law—we are saved by what we do as stewards. Romans 12 describes the steward as a person who presents the entire or whole self as a response to God’s call. The child of God is always a 100 percent steward. Any other metric undermines Holy Baptism. A partner church may be providing 50 percent of the resources to fund its core functions, but it is never a 50 percent steward. Anything less than a 100 percent steward is divisive for relationships with partner churches. For the record, every mission field/partner church is assigned a measurement for the six Mission Priorities mentioned above. There is no measurement or self-assessment for the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, let alone an evaluation of the LCMS by partner churches.

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Concluding Observations and a Look Ahead

	2007–2010 Balanced Focus Plan	2014 Consolidate Focus, Renew, and Establish Partnerships
SIGNATURE PHRASE	Ablaze!	Witness, Mercy, Life Together
VISION	First place the church looks for quality mission involvement	Premier catalyst of a seamlessly connected global network of confessional Lutheran partners.
MISSIONARIES	In the broadest sense, all Christians are missionaries	Lutheran missions will be done by Lutheran clergy
RELATIONSHIP MODEL	“with” reciprocal—give and receive	“above” one directional
GOVERNANCE MODEL	testing policy-based governance checks and balances	fully policy-based accountability to Synod President

	2007–2010 Balanced Focus Plan	2014 Consolidate Focus, Renew, and Establish Partnerships
WORSHIP	<p>Total worship life confesses the faith of the Creeds . . . and that the worship-liturgical life of the church is done decently and in order (Augsburg Confession VII)</p> <p>The community of God in every place and in every time has the right, authority, and power to change, to reduce, or to increase ceremonies according to its circumstances (Formula of Concord, Article X)</p>	<p>Establish Lutheran congregations that imitate the early believers, who devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship.</p>
FUNDING BASE	<p>shrinking cutbacks as needed when funding declines</p>	<p>shrinking even more Sustainability plan</p>
NEW FUNDING MODEL	<p>Pilot test of five positions for network-supported missionary model</p>	<p>All missionaries in Network Supported self-funding model. Must raise 70% before leaving for mission field. National staff team to assist</p>
STAFFING	<p>Experienced team with minimal/normal changes in both administrative and field staff</p>	<p>All new key staff in administrative positions. 45 field positions changes from September 2010 to December 2014</p>

1. Comparison and Contrast

The chart above has attempted to summarize some of the key elements of the two strategic plans. Vision, Missionaries, Worship, and Relationship Models are the locations of the most significant differences. Those differences should be a cause for some concern. In the 2014 vision, the picture designed to draw one into the preferred future is not one of reaching people who do not know Christ so that the Spirit will work faith in the promises of God. The “all nations” of Matthew 28 and the “large crowd from every, nation, tribe, people and language” of Revelation 7 represent a vision for mission. “Bringing together confessional Lutheran partners” refers to people already reached in God’s mission. At best it is about Life Together but certainly not about Witness to the Savior of us all. It is a reversal of Gospel priorities.

The significance of the diminished vision of 2014 is evidenced in a letter of August 13, 2013 sent to all LCMS military chaplains serving with the Office of National Mission. This letter was in response to the US Supreme Court’s reversal of Don’t Ask Don’t Tell legislation that had the effect of legitimatizing same sex marriages. At issue is the role of LCMS chaplains in conducting marriage retreats.

Our LCMS chaplains cannot lead marriage retreats where SSDPs [Same Sex Domestic Partners] have signed up. To do so would give the appearance of “normalizing” a behavior that is not in conformance with the Christian, Biblical and Lutheran definition of marriage.

The mission concern is the requirement that a chaplain recuse himself from a situation where a Gospel-motivated witness is needed. The example of Jesus’ interaction with the woman at the well in Samaria comes to mind. While even walking through Samaria was risky behavior for a God-fearing Jew in that time, speaking with an individual whose moral behavior did not meet biblical standards was a risk our Lord was willing to take—for the sake of her relationship with God’s Messiah. Determining that our chaplains should not associate with SSDP individuals in marriage retreats is to cut off the opportunity for faithful witness whatever the “appearance” may be to others.

2. Restructuring

The restructuring of the LCMS adopted in 2010 appears to have deep roots in a policy-based governance model for the Offices of International and National Mission. Both are now directly accountable to the Office of the President of the church body. Previously the Board for Mission Services established its own plans and called workers into the mission field. The BFMS was linked to the President’s office through the Board of Directors’ budgeting process. This made for a system of checks and balances. In the restructuring, the President has personally authored a Theological Statement for Mission that is thorough and comprehensive. While this

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article has had some quibbles with the signature phrase, WITNESS, MERCY, LIFE TOGETHER, the rest seems to work. The focus on “Lutheran churches plant Lutheran churches” appears in the Balanced Focus Plan of 2007–2010, and so it is nothing new. The phrase’s prominence is. Twenty-five years of personal experience facilitating church plants in the Ohio District assumed nothing else was appropriate. The unanswered question is: Why the fuss now?

3. Ablaze!

The transformation of Ablaze! from a worldwide effort giving direction to the efforts of LCMS mission stations (congregations), districts, and international partners in a Gospel, grace-based effort to share the Good News of Jesus Christ in anticipation of the five hundredth anniversary of the Reformation to a parenthesis in a 2013 convention “Whereas” is troubling. To read in the 2014 Strategic Plan that “restructuring made it impossible to continue the Balanced Focus Plan” is confusing. Yes, International and National Mission are two separate entities. But continuing a convention resolution from 2004, of which the *2007–2010 Balanced Focus Plan* was one installment of a seventeen-year emphasis, is impossible? In the light of the 2010 convention’s commending of the work of Ablaze!, a new plan now cancels it. Creative minds are able to find ways to do things. “Impossible” does not seem to be the right word; “choose not to” seems closer to the mark. Choosing not to carry out commended convention-adopted emphases sets a precedent of great concern.

The SWOT analysis of the 2014 Strategic Plan includes the following: “The Synod-wide restructuring of 2010 . . . also resulted in a feeling of constant change, confusion, and lack of vision and plan for the future in the area of mission.” What else might be expected? Long established missionaries relating to partner churches are no longer on the scene for whatever reason. Leaders of partner churches had attended both the 2004 and 2007 conventions in a demonstration of support for Ablaze! In 2005, five international case studies of progress in Ablaze!-related efforts were published in a small book, *Reaching 100 Million, International Lutheran Leaders Speak Out*.¹⁶ The copyright is listed as the Lutheran Society of Missiology via Concordia Publishing House. Is it possible that the abandonment of Ablaze! has played a role in the perception of partner churches of constant change and confusion mentioned in the 2014 SWOT analysis above? Faithful efforts are now deemed “impossible” to continue?

4. Who Does Mission?

One subject that continually surfaced in the research for this article might be characterized as: To whom does the mission belong? Was it given just to pastors? Matthew 28 and Mark 16 are sometimes adduced as giving the mission to the apostles, now interpreted as pastors. Or is mission given to the whole church?

Ephesians 4 and 1 Peter 2 are cited. In 2007, the Convention adopted Resolution 1-03, “To Prepare New Study and Increase Emphasis on the Priesthood of All Believers” and assigned the task to the Commission on Theology and Church Relations. This article cannot quickly solve the issue, but it can point to a sermon that might make a good place to initiate conversations.

To whom does the mission belong? Was it given just to pastors?

First, a word about sermons in general. While doctrine may be evident in preaching, the primary focus is to proclaim Jesus as Savior in the face of the sinfulness of humankind. It is a call for the baptized to live out the faith granted by their God. A sermon is always set into a particular time and place. We might even say it is “customized” for a particular group of worshipers by a faithful pastor.

This sermon of C. F. W. Walther is for the 12th Sunday after Trinity in 1842. The text, Mark 7:31–37, depicts Jesus in His ministry passing through the area of the Decapolis, ten small communities near the Sea of Galilee settled by Roman immigrants. Friends brought to Jesus an individual who was deaf and unable to speak clearly. After touching the man’s ears and his tongue, Jesus said: *ephphatha*, translated “be opened.”¹⁷ The man was healed. The event concludes with Jesus’ ordering the man and his friends not to tell anyone what happened. But the more Jesus discouraged them, the more they told the story. It is this act of bringing a friend to Jesus and the subsequent sharing of the Good News of Jesus that is the “hook” for Walther’s sermon.

The opening paragraph sets forth a “perfect equality” for all the baptized.

The church which Christ has established on earth ought to be marked by perfect equality. It should never be set up as an earthly government. In the church, no one should be on top, no one the superior, no one first, no one lord and master. This is one of the fundamental doctrines of all Christendom: whoever is a real member of the true church is equal to all the others. Each has the same baptism, the same faith, the same Christ, the same righteousness, the same hope of eternal life, the same eternal blessing of salvation in Christ Jesus.¹⁸

In the next paragraph, Walther points out the practice of the world to make much of what he calls external differences: rich, poor, high status, simple, clever, etc. But he insists that it must be different in the church.

But in the kingdom of God, these things make no difference. Although gifts, office, and accomplishments may differ, yet all members remain the same before God; all have the same power; no one is subjugated to another.

He concludes the introduction with a reminder of his duty as their pastor.

It is therefore my duty, dear friends, to teach the right and duty of the spiritual priesthood diligently and often. Allow me to speak now of one aspect in particular—the duty of all Christians to lead other souls to Christ.

The following are some paragraphs that describe the gift of faith that kindles a holy desire to share the news of the Gospel with others, Walther speaks of sharing the Good News as a “sacred duty.”

Dear friends, through faith a Christian receives not only the holy desire to bring souls to Christ, he receives this task as a sacred duty. No one should say, “I am not a pastor, a teacher, or a preacher; let them teach, instruct, comfort, and lead souls to Christ. I wish to remain in my own vocation.” No Christian, you are baptized, and through holy baptism you have already been called and anointed to be a priest of God.

Through holy baptism, every Christian has been consecrated, ordained, and installed into the ministry to teach, admonish, and comfort his neighbor. Through holy baptism each Christian has obtained not only the authority, power, and right, but also the high, holy obligation—under the pain of losing the divine grace—of rousing himself to care and to help so that others may be brought to Christ.¹⁹

By now a listener in 1842 and the reader of this article will be asking about the relationship of the Office of Public Ministry and this sacred duty priesthood of the baptized. Walther puts it in terms of a both/and. The work of the church needed to be accomplished by both pastors and the people of the congregation.

It is certainly true that not everyone is a pastor or bishop in the Christian congregation. God is a God of order. For order’s sake, the congregation calls only one (or a few) to administer publicly—in the name of all—the rites of the spiritual priesthood. But just as in the construction of a church building many workers are needed, not only the foreman who organizes and supervises the whole job, so also in the construction of the invisible church, not only the called ministers of Christ do the work, but rather all Christians must lend a hand.

The Christian church is a great mission-house. Each Christian in it is a missionary, sent out by God into his own circle to convert others to Christ, invite them to the heavenly wedding, call them into the kingdom of God, and enlist soldiers everywhere to the eternal treasure and the army of Christ. God does not give his spiritual gifts only to pastors and teachers. Lay people who do not stand in the public office often have very glorious gifts. . . . Does God give these gifts to the church for nothing? Does not our God clearly show by these gifts that every Christian is a fellow laborer in the vineyard?²⁰

In this sermon we are able to discern the high honor Walther gave to the faithful in the congregation. Every church is a mission house and each Christian is a missionary. Clearly Walther knew pastors as entrusted with the mysteries of God, but he also saw each of the baptized as agents of God bringing Good News “in their place of life, in their vocation.” The question, “Who does Mission?,” requires similar clarity in these days in the life of the LCMS.

Every church
is a mission house
and each Christian
is a missionary.

Yes, pastors are called to the Office of Public Ministry to lead mission. But Walther indicates that there is a role for members of congregations who are called by Baptism to do mission. It is not an either/or but a both/and. We are all, together, called into God’s mission.

Isn’t it time for thorough conversations about this matter to begin in earnest?

The Initiating Question

The question initiating this review was: How well is the new LCMS mission structure working? After five years, it appears that there has been limited progress, perhaps even a step back. Much work is still to be accomplished. Be assured that the initiating question does not assume there was no need for continuous improvement in the old BFMS structure. However, three specific items in the new structure do call for attention.

The first is best described with the mantra of a few years back: Make the main thing the main thing! Is the main thing the reaching out with the Good News of Jesus Christ, or is it building a worldwide Lutheran confessional movement? The first part of that question is not exclusive of the second part. But an exclusive focus on a confessional movement has the effect of working on a secondary, not the main, thing.

Second, relationships matter. Worldwide cross-cultural relationships can be a quagmire. One wrong step can set back working relationships for a generation. The report of the 2014 strategic plan states that some of the mission fields are considering leaving the fold. That has to be a major concern! It is not a sign of healthy cross-cultural relationships.

Finally, one never starts from scratch. The complete overhaul of mission staff (forty-five position changes in four years) is a significant loss of corporate memory and impairs critical relationships across the world. Out with the old, in with the new may appear to be a worthy idea. But the church may have lost more than it gained over the past five years.

Afterword

If a reader has gotten this far with analysis of God’s mission in the LCMS, the questions of “so what?” and “now what?” are hopefully close to the surface. It has long been a core conviction of this writer that each and every congregation is an outpost of God’s mission, with the corollary that each of the baptized is called into that mission.

Since the 1980s, a citation, long lost in the details, has captured this conviction: “*The church is the only organization in the world that exists for the sake of the non-member.*” This thought made it into a sermon at the dedication of a congregation’s new educational wing, congratulating the mission outpost for preparing such wonderful space for the children of the community. The “deer in the headlights” response revealed that the members thought the addition was just for the children of the congregation. It is significant that one recent Bible version translates the word “repentance” with the phrase “a new way to think and act.” So it must be with God’s mission.

As I read the new strategy for international work, I would hope that the Synod would make every effort to emphasize that the Synod, its districts, congregations, and every man, woman, and child in the LCMS exists not only to take care of themselves, but to carry the love of Jesus to all, in and outside the United States. It is not only ordained clergy who can “speak the good news.” The church in Antioch grew without the knowledge of the Apostles in Jerusalem.

The LCMS exists not only to take care of themselves, but to carry the love of Jesus to all, in and outside the United States.

Furthermore, seven times in the book of Revelation some working into the text of the four words—tribe, language, people, and nation—call the church and the baptized into the vision of the mission of God. That this combination of words is repeated seven times must have been significant for John’s first readers and therefore for each of us as we are called to God’s mission in the twenty-first century. To perhaps overstate a point, this is not LCMS mission or even Lutheran mission. It is God’s mission entrusted to His Church.

On the one hand, we understand our mission as bringing the Lord’s Gospel to people outside of the United States. But the mission leadership of the LCMS should be constantly reminding us that the United States is a “mission field.” The large numbers of immigrants and refugees in our culture could be seen as a gift from God. One of our leaders has repeatedly said that, “The only way for the LCMS to increase in membership is for LCMS women to have more babies.” Yes, white English-speaking people in our country are not replacing those who have gone to be with the Lord. At the same time, for Hispanic, Asian, and African immigrants, births are

exceeding deaths. What is the Lord trying to tell us? As someone said, “Heaven is not going to be a room filled with only white English speaking people.”

In one of the weeks following Easter this year, pictures taken over fifty years ago were shown to our congregation of a Baptism service in Papua New Guinea. Over five hundred people in white robes processed to the place for Baptisms. The line of people to be baptized walking four abreast, stretching back beyond camera range. Tribe, language, people, nations—it was amazing. It was energizing. Then sadness overwhelmed me as I remembered how many LCMS mission outposts do not report one adult Baptism or adult confirmation in a year; the number was upward of twenty percent in the Ohio District during my years of service.

Yes, this article is about world or international mission. But it also must be about God’s mission in every Christian congregation. God’s mission cannot be reduced to institutional structures. God’s mission must be fueled by Spirit-directed study of the Word of God. God’s mission will be filled with prayer for reciprocal, collegial relationships with people near and far with the view that we will be joining others across the world in praise and thanksgiving to the Lamb that was slain, whose life and death has brought us hope.

Endnotes

¹ The full text of the preface is available at Daniel Mattson, “A Preface to Lutheran Missiology,” *Missio Apostolica* 15, no.1 (May 2007), 45–52.

² Documentation is found in the published Proceedings of the conventions: 2004 p. 120; 2007 p., 57, 111; 2010 p.103; 2013 p. 120.

³ 2010 Resolution 1-02 first resolved. Adopted first in 2004 1-05A

⁴ Proceedings 2013 Convention Resolution 3-08A, p.120.

⁵ Georg F. Vicedom, *A Prayer for the World* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1967), 147.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 148.

⁷ Paul Mueller, “International Partnerships: A Reflective Assessment,” in this issue of *Lutheran Mission Matters*, no. 2 (May 2016), 182–183.

⁸ Although this document has not been made available to the public, it has been referenced and sections have been distributed at LCMS meetings. Specific reference to the 2014 plan is given in the February 13–14, 2015 meeting of the Board of Directors. Unofficially the document has been distributed on the web.

⁹ Matthew Harrison, “A Theological Statement for Mission in the 21st Century—Draft,” September 2013.

¹⁰ *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament, Third Edition*, revised and edited by Frederick W. Danker (Chicago, IL, University of Chicago Press, 2000), 229–231.

¹¹ Matthew Harrison, “Lutheran Missions Must Lead to Lutheran Churches,” *Logia*, (1998): 29–33.

¹² Friedrich William Hopf, trans. Rachel Mumme with Matthew C. Harrison, “The Lutheran Church Plants Lutheran Missions,” *Journal of Lutheran Mission*, (Special Issue April 2015): 6–38.

¹³ It was surprising to find Puerto Rico in the list of countries where the LCMS works in mission efforts. Puerto Rico is a US territory with approximately three million US citizens.

¹⁴ Albert B. Collver is the author of the *Journal of Lutheran Mission* article without reference that it is a portion of Appendix A of the 2014 strategic plan. From this I believe that Dr. Collver is the author of Appendix A, if not the whole strategic plan.

¹⁵ These principles were embedded in the Handbook of the LCMS as Bylaw 9.01. They do not appear in the 2013 edition of the Handbook, having been overlooked in the reworking of structural matters resulting in separate boards for international and national mission.

¹⁶ Allan R. Buckman, ed., Eugene W. Bunkowske, Series Editor, *Reaching 100 Million* (St. Louis: The Lutheran Society for Missiology & Concordia Publishing House, 2005).

¹⁷ It is worth noting that the annual conference of LCMS churches in ministry with the deaf is called the Ephphatha Conference.

¹⁸ C. F. W. Walther, “Bringing Souls to Christ: Every Christian’s Desire and Duty,” trans. Bruce Cameron, *Missio Apostolica* 6, no.1 (May 1998) 6–15.

¹⁹ C. F. W. Walther’s Sermon for the 12th Sunday after Trinity, 1842 in C. F. W. Walther, *Year of Grace*, Donald E. Heck, trans. (La Valle, WI: Donald H. Heck, 1964), 267–274.

²⁰ *Ibid.*