

# ***Lutheran Mission Matters***



Volume XXVIII, No. 1 (Issue 56) May 2020

# Mission Nation Publishing

Dan Gilbert

**Abstract:** Most North American Lutherans know the situation: congregations are declining; young people aren't joining; membership rolls and weekend worship services usually show only one ethnic group, and it's usually people of northwest European descent. A new mission agency called Mission Nation Publishing has some easy and engaging ideas for working to change that scenario. This article tells the story of Mission Nation Publishing, beginning with a missionary memory from the author.

When I was in about fifth grade in 1962, a missionary came to our Lutheran grade school. He showed lots of slides and told lots of stories about his work in Africa. As he was concluding, he said, "Boys and girls, when you're grown up, missionaries from Africa will be coming to America to serve us." We weren't even polite; we all laughed out loud. Ridiculous, we thought.

Fast forward to 2018. My wife and I semi-retired and moved St. Louis to be near family, and we joined Messiah Lutheran Church. Our pastor: Rev. Mike Okine, a US citizen immigrant who came to this country from Ghana. He's been at Messiah for nearly fifteen years, and he's by no means the only African immigrant pastor in this country. I can almost hear that old missionary say, "I told you so."

Since its very beginning, the United States of America has been and continues to be a nation made up primarily of immigrants. Yet our church body remains almost entirely of northern European ethnicity in general, German in particular. That's not what the Lord's eternal New Creation is going to look like. It will be an amazing and beautiful bouquet of men and women from every tribe and language and people and nation. Wouldn't it be great if the bride of Christ on earth looked like that? If *your* congregation looked like that? Or, at a minimum, if we served at least one more ethnic group along with our current members?



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This is not just a “Wouldn’t it be nice?” This is, in fact, something the Lord wills as we read in Genesis 12:3 (all families); Exodus 22:21; 23:9; Deuteronomy 1:16; Jeremiah 22:3; and the “light to the nations” theme, as in Isaiah 60:1–3. Repeatedly the Lord charges His church to go with the saving Good News of Jesus to “all nations,” literally to “all ethnic communities” (Mt 28:18; Lk 24:47), to “all the world . . . the whole creation” (Mk 16:15), and “to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). More importantly, the Lord reminds us that we were all strangers and aliens, “having no hope and without God in the world” (Eph 2:12). We read in that same chapter, “But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility” (Eph 2:13–16).

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And this is all in the context of the powerfully profound bringing together of Jews and Gentiles, quite a remarkable synthesis of cross-cultural issues, and not into homogeneous groupings of “Jewish Christians” and “Gentile Christians,” each with their worship styles and “like-mindedness.”

We have been brought near to God by the blood of Jesus—such a cost, so freely given for us. And that payment has been made not only for our sins, “but also for the sins of the whole world” (1 Jn 2:2).

That’s the biblical foundation for immigrant ministry. However, before getting to the role of Mission Nation Publishing itself, here’s another story:

Did you know that for its first 100+ years The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod was a leader in immigrant ministry? Although there were brief lulls during the two world wars, the LCMS actively sought and served immigrants to the US. These were almost exclusively German immigrants, and there were hundreds of thousands of them. For decades after the Synod’s founding, congregations in port cities would check for the arrivals of passenger ships from Germany. They would then go to the dock when such ships arrived with large signs written in German saying things like, “Follow me for a free German breakfast.” Often a group would gather and off they’d go, not to a restaurant but to the church. And in addition to a good meal, the new arrivals also got lots of information about where to shop, from whom they could safely rent, employment opportunities, and, of course, the message of sin and of grace in Jesus with an invitation to the church for worship

and also to the congregation's German-speaking school for the kids. In later years the LCMS worked with refugee agencies, especially after the wars, offering similar services. Although it was for only one ethnic group, the LCMS excelled in welcoming the stranger. I remember in grade school we were taught to say, "*Gute Morgen, Herr Töbe*" to our church and school janitor who had escaped Communism in East Germany after World War II.

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The boats aren't coming from Germany anymore, and neither are many German immigrants. However, we all know that millions of girls and boys and men and women around the world want to come to this country which still abounds in freedom and opportunity.

Out of this scene in the US, an idea, a dream (not literally) came to Rev. Dr. Bob Scudieri—a deep longing to help congregations reach out to our new neighbors from other countries, other cultures, other languages. While that idea had long been in Bob's heart, it started taking shape as a movement when he wrote a biography of an immigrant pastor friend. He got to thinking that reading a story like this could help others to see wider possibilities in mission and ministry, and he began to seek other stories and other biography writers. He found plenty of both.

Thus began the idea of Mission Nation Publishing (MNP) which now has five biographies and other accompanying books published with four more in production. These books are available both in print and on Kindle.

Bob and others actively seek out stories of immigrant missionaries. As soon as one gets Bob's attention, he contacts the person, tells him or her his goal and begins to work with them. Several phone interviews lasting four to five hours are conducted and recorded. A writer listens to the interviews and together with Bob determines what the core message of the book is to be. The book is then laid out in chapters, and a draft is written and sent to Bob for editing. Finally, another editor polishes the book for publication.

The idea is not simply that people read these books, but rather that congregations promote both the books and the concept behind them, namely, the importance of welcoming immigrants in general and immigrant pastors specifically into our congregations, welcoming members and calling immigrant pastors.

While this is "the right thing to do," there's an additional factor to consider. As you know, fewer and fewer young adults attend Christian churches in the US these days. Of those who do, many will not even consider attending a church that

is made up of only one ethnic group and they actively seek churches that are multiethnic. While that's not the main motivation, it is a factor to consider.

Here are some facts:

- The church in the US is under stress and decline.
- Lutherans are among the most ethnically non-diverse denomination in the US.<sup>1</sup>
- White English-speaking churches in the US are also among those declining most rapidly.<sup>2</sup>

Mission Nation Publishing is proposing one way to work toward changing all that.

- Congregations buy MNP books at cost and sell them with a small markup to members and others.
- An economical display case is purchased from MNP and placed in the church's entry area.
- A key person, preferably a layperson, takes on the leadership role for the project.
- At key times, volunteers are at the display to engage in conversation with members and guests.

Here are benefits for a congregation doing this:

- It sends a powerful welcoming message to any immigrants or non-majority visitors.
- It lights up members' awareness of and zeal for mission right in their own community.
- It provides small funding for new mission projects.

Mission Nation Publishing exists to help congregations to welcome and to witness to all our neighbors and to welcome and to call immigrant pastors.

One last anecdote: In the 1980s I was serving a congregation that was about one hundred years old in a very mono-ethnic community. One day an active member and friend, about my age, was driving by and stopped in to see me just for conversation and prayer. Somehow, we got into a conversation about the many immigrants coming to nearby communities from Latin America. "Well, it's OK that they're coming here," my friend said, and then emphatically added, "but they need to learn English!" I replied, "You know, Mike (not his real name), the other day I was out in our church cemetery and I noticed the gravestone of your great-grandparents. You know what language is on their stone?" Sheepishly he just kind of nodded. (Let's just say it wasn't English.) And I said, "They'd been in the US for a lot of years before they died, hadn't they?" "Point taken, Pastor," he said.

We all do well to take that point. Except for “100% American Indians,” i.e., Native Americans, all US citizens are descendants of immigrants if not immigrants themselves. The Lord is bringing the nations to us—we don’t even have to go overseas to participate in the Great Commission, literally. Mission Nation Publishing is here to help congregations participate in a new way.

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*For information on the books, on how to distribute them in your congregation and for videos of immigrant missionaries, please go to [www.missionnationpublishing.com](http://www.missionnationpublishing.com).*

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Michael Lipka, “The most and least racially diverse U.S. religious groups,” Fact Tank, Pew Research Center, July 27, 2015, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/07/27/the-most-and-least-racially-diverse-u-s-religious-groups/>.

<sup>2</sup> Pew Research Center, “Chapter 3: Demographic Profiles of Religious Groups,” America’s Changing Religious Landscape, May 12, 2015, <https://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/chapter-3-demographic-profiles-of-religious-groups/>.