

# ***Lutheran Mission Matters***



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# A Blockbuster Story

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**Abstract:** People have likened the COVID-19 pandemic to a “God-ordained wake-up call” for our nation. Awakenings require seeing the past with greater clarity. Winston Churchill once said, “Those who fail to learn from history, are doomed to repeat it.”<sup>1</sup> While the Church of our day finds itself in unprecedented times due to the COVID-19 pandemic, we can still learn from our past and be careful not to repeat our mistakes. We can also learn through the mistakes of others like Blockbuster Video, and with God’s guidance find new ways to bring the eternal gospel to a changing world.

In our congregation we ask God to lead us to people in our community who are not comfortable in church, that is to say, have not found the peace and joy that Christians have found in faith in Jesus—and then to show us how to pour God’s grace into their lives as we walk with them. While we hope that they will eventually start attending worship services, become a part of the community of believers, and receiving the Sacraments, our goal is not that they become churchgoers who help pay our bills. No, our hope is that they come to faith and begin to seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness.

When we think about reaching out to people who have no faith in Jesus, we usually spend much time and effort thinking about the changes that outsiders will need to make, and this is an important consideration. Equally important, however, Christians need to think about the changes we need to make, both in our personal lives and in our congregational life in order to play our important role in the Holy Spirit’s work of calling people to faith in Jesus through the gospel.

I recently came across a great story—a blockbuster of a story—that is also instructive. And it wasn’t about who won the Super Bowl this year . . . or about the COVID-19 pandemic, though these are worthy of consideration. I’m thinking here of the blockbuster story of Blockbuster Video.



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Some readers will remember going to video rental stores like Blockbuster on Friday evenings and loading up on great movies to watch over the weekend. Beginning in 1985 with one VHS rental store, Blockbuster eventually grew into a multibillion-dollar, worldwide corporation that peaked in 2004 with over 9,000 stores in the United States and more than 84,000 employees worldwide.<sup>2</sup> Blockbuster began with amazing foresight into where society and technology were heading, and they capitalized on it. They were a phenomenal success.

But past success never guarantees future success. Society and technology are continually changing. Ongoing foresight is critical, which means constantly (and sometimes quickly) adapting the way in which mission and purpose are achieved.

This is a challenge for any organization. The more drastic the changes, the harder it is to quickly adapt. The more unfamiliar the territory, the murkier foresight becomes. Think only of the many changes required in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. My favorite phrase has been, “We’re just making this up as we go.”

As society and circumstances change, organizations must adapt the ways in which they achieve their mission and purpose, but that requires clarity on mission and purpose—we will come back to that thought later.

There is an interesting twist in the Blockbuster story. As technology changed, DVDs replaced VHS tapes. In 2000, a fledgling company approached Blockbuster. They were struggling financially and asked Blockbuster to buy their startup business for \$50 million.<sup>3</sup> This new company wanted to offer a unique service to the massive Blockbuster customer base: mailing DVDs to their customers, saving them a trip to the video rental store. The customers could keep the DVDs as long as they liked—with no late fees—but knowing they could not rent another video until they returned the first one.

Laughing at the startup company executives, Blockbuster refused the offer. Why? There were three major reasons. First, they lacked their usual foresight. Jim Porterfield, who ran one of Blockbuster’s many franchises, described the corporate attitude this way: “So you’re telling me that a through-the-mail system—the U.S. Postal Service—is going to eclipse my business? That’s really hard to stomach.”<sup>4</sup>

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This startup company had a hunch (we could even call it foresight) that people would prefer browsing movie rental choices online in the privacy of their homes instead of making a trip to the store. This method also eliminated the disappointment of finding an empty spot on the Blockbuster shelf. This new company also suspected that people wanted the convenience of getting those DVDs delivered right to their homes—without ever having to pay a late fee.

Blockbuster, however, was convinced that their customers would faithfully come to their video rental stores—stores conveniently located in high-traffic retail areas, with a friendly atmosphere and a movie-loving staff ready with recommendations,<sup>5</sup> Blockbuster assumed their stores would continue to be the “go-to” source for movie rentals. However, their inability to see that changes in technology had made their service less convenient reveals that they had lost sight of how society was changing.

The second major error was that Blockbuster had lost sight of its mission and purpose. They thought they were in the brick-and-mortar movie rental business—they weren’t. They were, in fact, in the much broader home entertainment business. At the time, Blockbuster was too busy adding more stores across the country to think about the bigger picture.<sup>6</sup> But this startup company saw where home entertainment was headed and offered a service to meet that need.

The third main reason why Blockbuster refused to buy this startup company was that their organizational health prevented them. Blockbuster’s business model depended on the late fees, which brought in as much as \$800 million a year.<sup>7</sup>

Actually, Blockbuster had never been in great financial shape, ending most years in the red.<sup>8</sup> Some of those losses were due to changes beyond their control (e.g. when the movie industry changed its pricing structure, making it only slightly more expensive to purchase a DVD from Walmart or Target than to rent it from Blockbuster).<sup>9</sup> But fixing the blame does not fix the problem. When the opportunity came to purchase the startup company, Blockbuster did not have the financial resources. Their lack of organizational health prevented them from adapting to a changing world.

The decision to pass up this deal proved to be one of their many fatal mistakes. Ten years later, in 2010, Blockbuster filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy. And the financially strapped startup company? Well, they somehow survived. In fact, they posted over \$20 billion in revenue this past year.<sup>10</sup> Perhaps you have heard of them? This little startup is called Netflix.

It’s interesting to note that after the decision to decline Netflix’s proposal, Blockbuster realized their mistake and consequently initiated a number of sweeping improvements that included discontinuing late fees and creating an online platform. Franchises, however, resisted the changes and investors balked at the financial costs.<sup>11</sup>

Massive transformation of a mammoth corporation is a monumental task,<sup>12</sup> and it was too late.

So, why am I telling you all this? Blockbuster’s story parallels our own as the Christian Church in the United States.

Our numbers swelled in the 1940s and 1950s as we responded to the needs of wartime and peacetime society. But, just like Blockbuster, our past success does not guarantee future success. The Christian Church as an organizational structure is declining across our nation, leading many local churches to close their doors.

I suggest that this decline is taking place for the same three reasons that Blockbuster’s did.

First, we lack foresight. I am not just talking about the new territory in which we find ourselves now with stay-at-home mandates and social distancing guidelines. I am referring to a problem that started generations ago—back in the 1950s when churches were at their peak. People back then never imagined how society would change in the 1960s and how rapidly it would decline morally and spiritually. They never envisioned courts removing the Ten Commandments and school-led prayers from public schools, or legalizing abortion and homosexual marriage. Gender confusion was simply not in their realm of societal possibility. Churches lacked foresight.

Blockbuster’s story parallels our own as the Christian Church in the United States. . . . First, we lack foresight. . . . Second, churches . . . became more focused on meeting the felt needs of their existing members.

Second, churches in the 1950s lost a clear vision of their mission and purpose; they became more focused on meeting the felt needs of their existing members. Congregations wanted to be successful, which they thought meant building bigger facilities, establishing parochial schools, and increasing the number and variety of programs. While that seemed to be right at the time, they ended up making the Blockbuster mistake of getting distracted by a brick-and-mortar mindset that focuses on the means and not the mission and purpose.

Our purpose is to be salt in this world. Jesus said, “You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people’s feet” (Mt 5:13).

The taste of salt is distinct from the food it flavors; so we Christians are called to be noticeably different from the world around us. As society continues its moral decline, the gap between Christians and the surrounding culture should be widening. Christians should be known for their unwillingness to follow practices reflecting ungodly values in the culture that surrounds them. The increasing moral gap should be

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unsettling, as the apostle Peter describes the situation: “they are surprised when you do not join them in the same flood of debauchery, and they malign you” (1 Pt 4:4).

But that clear moral contrast between Christians and non-Christians is lacking today. Despite over 70% of people in this nation self-identifying as “Christian,”<sup>13</sup> the first article in the February 2020 edition of the *Lutheran Witness* points out that “American Christians have the same rate of single parenthood as the religiously unaffiliated. The U.S. is also among the world leaders in other marks of family breakdown.”<sup>14</sup> This is but one example where there is little distinction between Christians and non-Christians; I will share more when I address the organizational health of Christian churches in our nation. Churches have lost their saltiness. We’ve lost sight of our purpose.

Our mission is to do good works that stand out amidst the darkness of the world as Jesus commanded us: “You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven” (Mt 5:14–16).

Jesus clearly states that our good deeds are to be shining forth in our world, drawing attention not to ourselves but to our Father in heaven. We are struggling to follow that command. Whenever we care for our own by having fundraisers for congregation members with health expenses, or caring for elderly members by cleaning up their yards or running errands, this is part of what we are called to do as the Body of Christ.

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But the challenge is that many Lutheran congregations have become detached from the unchurched community around them and are not even aware of the needs of those outside their fellowship, let alone involved in action to serve them. Those who take our Lord’s instruction seriously, struggle to answer these questions and others: What, for example, is our church doing to care for the poor and underprivileged in our community? Do we even know their names?

Jesus reminds us that our purpose and mission is to use our lives, shaped by God’s Word, to flood our world with good deeds which draw praise to our Father in heaven. Luther echoes this purpose in his explanation of the Second Petition of the Lord’s Prayer. “God’s kingdom comes when our heavenly Father gives us His Holy Spirit, so that by His grace *we believe His Holy Word and lead godly lives here in time and there in eternity*” (emphasis mine).<sup>15</sup>

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As the Holy Spirit strengthens our faith in the work of Jesus Christ in our place, the natural result is greater obedience, as it says in the Book of Concord: “It is also taught among us that such faith should produce good fruits and good works and that we must do all such good works as God has commanded, but we should do them for God’s sake and not place our trust in them as if thereby to merit favor before God.”<sup>16</sup>

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The third way the church’s story has often paralleled Blockbuster’s concerns the relationship with our “customers.” Blockbuster was using an unhealthy business model that assumed that customer loyalty would remain strong and which expected them to make mistakes and profited from those mistakes (i.e. the late fees) of those same customers. Greg Satell said Blockbuster’s “Achilles’ heel” was profitability dependent on “penalizing its patrons.”<sup>17</sup> In the same way, churches have become organizationally sick.

All over the country it is clear that congregations made assumptions about their futures that now are unlikely. Success was measured by the ability to build bigger facilities and still pay our bills, all the while assuming organizational loyalty would keep our doors open. It was assumed that the next generation would remain loyal to the Church. It was assumed that the Word and sacramental ministry of the church was understood and valued so deeply. Of course, parents would want to baptize their children and bring them to Sunday School! Of course, they would keep coming every Sunday and contributing money into the offering plate! But they didn’t, which undermined congregational longevity and vitality.

Second, churches built their success, like Blockbuster, on the mistakes of their customers. Five hundred years ago, Luther taught in the Small Catechism: “the head of the family should teach it [the Catechism] in a simple way to his household.”<sup>18</sup> For this to work, the church would have to equip parents for their task of raising Christian children. But since parents were struggling with that task, the church thought it could help our “customers” by offering to do the teaching for them in Sunday School, confirmation, and Bible classes. Unfortunately, the Christian faith is not usually adopted as deeply and effectively when it is taught and learned in isolation outside the family circle.

Churches presumed that more members and more programs would make our congregations more successful. But Jesus defined success quite differently. Recall when Jesus said this: “Whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and

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teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven” (Mt 5:19).

Did you catch that? Jesus just told us that success as the Church—what makes us great—is practicing and teaching the commands of Jesus. A healthy church is made up of healthy individuals who practice and teach God’s Word. When people call themselves Christians and yet starve themselves with a minimal diet of Scripture—they become sick. Disease and dysfunction will follow.

How else can we explain the fact that some Christians are not bothered by profanity or living together before marriage? By disregarding the authority of the commands of Jesus, we lose sight of the fear of the Lord and find plenty of other things to do on Sunday mornings. We get lured into spending our money on the material goods and entertainment which this world offers. As a whole, Christian churches in our nation are organizationally unhealthy because many individual members are spiritually unhealthy.

So, are we doomed like Blockbuster? Thankfully, no. The true Church is built by Jesus Christ Himself. He promises that His Church will advance and that “the gates of hell shall not prevail against it” (Mt 16:18). And perhaps Jesus is using, in a way that only He can do, the drastic changes brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic to build His Church.

Since Jesus still uses people to build His Church, let us give careful consideration to what the true Church looks like. Jesus told us that the Church (“the kingdom of heaven”) belongs to those who are “poor in spirit”—those who humbly recognize that they are weak, ignorant, and easily led astray, who have nothing to offer God. These are the ones who “hunger and thirst for righteousness” who “shall be satisfied” as Jesus promised (see Mt 5:3, 6).

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Jesus also told us in Matthew 5:17 that He came to earth to fulfill God’s Law—perfectly. Those who hunger for—and trust in—the perfect righteousness of Jesus receive His righteousness as a gift: a “righteousness [that] exceeds that of the Scribes and Pharisees,” which allows them to “enter the kingdom of heaven” (see Mt 5:20). This is the true Church.

The Augsburg Confession tells us that the True Church is that which gathers around Word and Sacrament—where the gospel “is taught purely and the Sacraments are administered rightly.”<sup>19</sup> But what does that look like? And how do we do that during a pandemic like COVID-19 with social distancing guidelines and restrictions



on how large a group gathering can be? Our fundamental question is: “Where do we go from here?”

Part of the answer lies in growing healthier as an organization—which in turn means becoming spiritually healthier as individuals. Trusting that the righteousness of Jesus has fulfilled the Law, we first gladly gather around the Sacraments and the pure Word. We seek to become great in the kingdom of heaven by following the instruction of our Lord: learning, practicing, and teaching the commands of God.

With social distancing guidelines and group size restrictions, my two congregations have taken on the challenge of how to continue Word and Sacrament ministry. Online streaming began immediately, with almost weekly updates to our technology in order to produce a higher-quality worship experience for people watching online. The leaders also came up with a way to do “drive-by” Communion in a safe, hygienic manner. It has been very well-received by congregational members.

While these changes are positive and necessary given our current set of circumstances, they do nothing to correct the problems I identified above. Our “customers” must reclaim their calling to learn the Word of God. Every Christian needs to study the Bible—on their own, as a family (with parents teaching their children), as well as in church (whether that takes the form of in-person gatherings or online weekly Sunday School and Bible classes). No exceptions. With these stay-at-home restrictions, I encourage parents and grandparents to step into the role of being the primary faith-teacher for their children and grandchildren.

Furthermore, we aggressively reassert the authority of Scripture over every area of life. The very reason we have become spiritually unhealthy is that we capitulated to society’s “demands” to relax the clear moral teachings of Scripture. Mary Eberstadt said it this way: “The churches that did the most to loosen up the traditional moral code of Christianity are the same churches that have ended up suffering the most for that effort—demographically, financially, morality-wise, and otherwise.”<sup>20</sup>

And so, those in the Church who are called to preach or teach must become more application oriented. We should not simply give a law–gospel exposition of a text but explore ways to apply it to daily life and challenge people to bring this before God in prayerful consideration. Given the morally lax mindset in which some of our hearers are approaching Scripture, we must carefully “walk the line” of avoiding a “Bible-thumping” demeanor while at the same time maintaining the unyielding authority of God and His Word over our lives.

This leads us to our second responsibility: diligently praying that God would deepen the work of life transformation through His Word and Spirit—the “good work” which He already began in us when He gave us the gift of faith (see Phil 1:6).

This transformation comes through the renewing of our mind as we intentionally and daily place ourselves on the altar as living sacrifices (see Rom 12:1–2). It requires

us to “make every effort to supplement [our] faith with virtue” so that we do not become “ineffective or unfruitful” in our knowledge of God (see 2 Pt 1:5, 8). We work diligently, not because we are hoping to qualify for heaven; rather, trusting that we are covered by the perfect righteousness of Jesus, we “work out [our] own salvation with fear and trembling” as God works in us (see Phil 2:12–13).

In this way, our fruitful choices become saltier and more distinct from the moral choices of the surrounding culture. This will affect every aspect of life: the language we use, our attitudes toward possessions and money, our views of living together before marriage, our involvement in sports, and our entertainment choices. We will become noticeably different people. All this is driven and empowered by the Holy Spirit as the Word of Christ dwells richly in us (see Col 3:16).

This, in turn, drives us to a third duty: begging God to show us how to use good deeds to shine our light into the unchurched world. Since March of this year, we have found ourselves in very unfamiliar territory. Now, more than ever, we seek God’s wisdom and guidance about the best way to flood our world with the light of Christ through good deeds. We continually pray for improved foresight, which leads us to continually adapt the means by which we achieve our mission and purpose.

Both congregations I serve are seeking to let the light of Christ shine brighter in our community. One congregation had planned to offer a free monthly community dinner in our town at the local VFW. Area churches, and civic and community organizations would be invited to join in serving and providing meals, but representatives from our congregation would be there each time with the purpose of meeting people in the community and building relationships with them. Those plans are on hold as we anticipate the lifting of restrictions. If the restrictions are not soon lifted, we will prayerfully seek other means such as offering free “drive-by” meals.

The other congregation I serve had planned to organize a free community sweet corn and brat feed at the local city park later in the summer. A fall weekend campout at a local state park was also in the works—to enjoy fellowship together as a church, but also to invite unchurched friends to come along—building relationships as we enjoy together the beauty of God’s creation. We will continue to seek God’s direction.

Transformation takes time. To become organizationally healthy, we need to become spiritually healthy as individual parishioners. Changing the culture of congregations is like steering a large ship with a small rudder. Altering the trajectory of the churches in our nation will take time, because massive transformation of mammoth organizations is a monumental task.

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Our Lord Jesus will build His Church. As His people strive to practice and teach the Word of God, focusing on the right mission and purpose and adapting their ways, the gates of hell will not prevail. May God grant this to us all.

## Endnotes

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- <sup>10</sup> “Market Watch,” accessed February 18, 2020, <https://www.marketwatch.com/investing/stock/nflx/financials>.
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- <sup>15</sup> *Luther’s Small Catechism with Explanation* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2017), 20.
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