

Lutheran Mission Matters



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The Mission Opportunity of the New Immigrants to America

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Abstract: The 67th national convention of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod adopted several resolutions. One was remarkable for the mission of the church in North America. In a resolution on “National Witness,” Committee One gave thanks for “new and existing multi-ethnic populations”; asked congregations of the LCMS to reach out and welcome these new Americans; asked districts of the LCMS to make church planting among the new ethnic groups a priority; committed the Office of National Missions (ONM) to provide resources to districts to form church workers to help churches reach these new populations; and affirmed the work of ministries that provide distance education to workers from these immigrant groups. In his article the leader of the ONM effort, Rev. Robert Zagore, shares a strong witness to the need for such an effort. A national leader with a mission heart, Zagore details his department’s plan to bring the gospel to the world (Mt 28:16–20) as the world comes to America. - Dr. Robert Scudieri, President of Mission Nation Publishing

The LCMS is an evangelizing church body. It is impossible to be a faithful church if that is not true. Over the years, the Lord has helped us to welcome many new people into our congregations. Thirty-five percent of our adult membership did not grow up Lutheran. That is among the highest rates of all Christian denominations.¹

However, most of the new adult members of the LCMS look like the old members of the LCMS. While we rejoice with the company of heaven when any sinner comes to salvation (Lk 15:7), we have more nations among us to baptize and teach (Mt 28:19–20).

According to a Pew research study, the LCMS is the third least diverse denomination in the US. It may be a Lutheran problem; the ELCA is the second least



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diverse.² Some of that statistical stigma stems from the LCMS's practice of forming partner churches in other countries. Their membership does not count toward our measures of diversity. On an average Sunday morning, our pews look very homogeneous.

Our members have widely acknowledged this and are calling for action. The 2019 LCMS convention adopted six different resolutions (1-02, 1-05A, 4-03A, 4-09, 11-04A, 11-07A) that called on Synodical congregations, ministries, and the Office of National Mission (ONM) to fund and to provide more guidance and resources for outreach and ministry to immigrant groups.

- 1-02, Encourages the planting of churches and asks ONM to create resources to help.
- 1-05A, Asks Synod to strengthen multi-ethnic outreach through the development of resources and making intentional efforts to engage ethnic and multi-ethnic communities.
- 4-03A, Commends the Synod's Mission Priorities and lays out the framework of *Making Disciples for Life* as the Synod's triennial emphasis. Unlike former emphases this resolution comes with a programmatic framework to ensure that resources are placed into the hands of those engaged in mission.
- 4-09, Encourages the celebration of our theological heritage and encourages that this be the jumping off point for an initiative to fund mission activities around the world.
- 11-04A, Affirms the Common Humanity of All People and Ethnicities, confesses that all need a Savior and the Synod's divine mandate to bring the Gospel to all nations.
- 11-07A, Remembers the persecuted church throughout the world and encourages our prayers and activities on behalf of those who are subjected to persecution for Christ's sake.

These form a valuable outline of how the LCMS will carry out our mission particularly to the ethnic and multi-ethnic communities in our midst. The following paragraphs will outline some of what the domestic mission landscape looks like and how one-year removed from the convention the ONM is responding to Synod's call for action.

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The Holy Spirit is the one who brings people to the church and to faith. Nothing I will write should be taken to say that conversion is possible apart from His work through the means of grace. Only the Holy Spirit can create faith, call, gather,

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enlighten, and sanctify His church. He both sends the church and prepares the fields that are white for harvest (Jn 4:35). Because He is a God of order (1 Cor 14:33), when we go to all nations, we do not run aimlessly (1 Cor 9:26). Nor, do we go simply to make “evangelism conquests” (Mt 23:15). Our love for our neighbor and the stranger in our midst must be genuine (Rom 12:9), growing out of the Father’s desire that all people be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth (1 Tim 2:4).

In that desire, the Lord has brought the nations streaming through our gates (Is 60:10–11). The US has 44.4 million immigrants, a larger number than any country on earth. At this moment, 13.6% of the US population is immigrant.³ That is the highest percentage since 1890 (record 14.8% share) when German immigrants by the millions were among the huddled masses coming to our shore.⁴

While much is (rightly) made of Hispanic immigration, the actual countries of origin of US immigrants may surprise us. Since 2010, more Asians have come to the US than any other group. Asians account for 27% of all immigrants living in the United States. By 2055, demographers project that Asians will be the largest minority group in North America.⁵ According to the US Department of Homeland Security, Office of Immigration Statistics, between 2015 and 2018, over 293,000 immigrants have come from China alone.⁶

Major cities like New York, Los Angeles, Houston, Miami, Chicago, Seattle, Detroit, and Baltimore are the most frequent destinations for new Americans. It should not escape notice that several of these are places in which the LCMS has experienced declines in congregations, membership, and attendance over the years. Our lack of success in reaching new urban populations appears directly correlated to that decline. It is not a unique problem. No mainline Christian denomination in the US has experienced both overall numerical growth and even a 5% growth in congregational diversity. But it is a problem Christ’s mission demands we address—especially when we realize that many who are coming to our shores are Christians looking for a place to worship.

Religious and social persecution has risen dramatically around the world. A study published in July 2019, “A Closer Look at How Religious Restrictions Have Risen Around the World,” highlights an alarming increase in the amount and intensity of religious persecution.⁷ The persecution index score that explains the level and intensity of persecution in an area has nearly doubled in Europe in the last ten years. China leads the way in increased persecution. Pew notes that the number of countries that persecute Christians rose from 95 to 143 between 2008 and 2017.⁸

The US government’s response to this provides a unique opportunity for the LCMS, because of our strength in rural areas and small towns. It is tough to qualify for asylum based on religious persecution. Many who come to the country because of persecution do not enter the US under a formal resettlement program. Those who are not in formal programs tend to settle in cities near relatives and friends. But the US

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government settles those who qualify for asylum in low population density areas. Over 160,000 entered the US under the Refugee and Asylum program between 2015 and 2018 (the latest reported data). On a per-capita basis, Washington, Idaho, North Dakota, South Dakota, Nebraska, Iowa, and Vermont have received the biggest share, and these have been mainly resettled in low population counties.⁹ Even rural congregations in the LCMS are likely to have a mission field in their backyard.

Once people come to the US, how they and their descendants move within the country looks remarkably like historical patterns. First generations (1i) tend to live in major cities near family or friends and quite often near the place where they first entered the country. Within ten years, generally motivated by economic factors, people move to areas of greater opportunity. Not surprisingly, they often relocate to places that have given a welcome to family members or countrymen. 1i immigrants are frequently aware of their countrymen, and family members settled in different cities. Immigrant migration studies within the US show a general movement from areas of higher population density to lower density. That, too, means it is likely that an immigrant family will move into a suburb or farmhouse near an LCMS congregation.

Furthermore, successive generations are likely to move away from immigrant parents to establish families, seek schooling, etc. A lot of the children that could be in LCMS confirmation classes and schools are part of this population. In 2009, 23% of all children born in the US were from immigrant families, and about thirty-three million people in the US were second-generation (2i) immigrants.¹⁰ The opportunities for congregations to welcome these new families are great.

Overall, the 2i generation is much more assimilated into US society. They are more educated (59.2% have attended college compared to 44.5% of their parents).¹¹ They are likely to have higher earnings. Likewise, they are likely to have greatly improved financial circumstances.

Studies and experience demonstrate that by the third generation (3i), people are culturally assimilated. Most 3i families no longer speak the language of their ancestors. While they may still identify culturally with their ancestry, they are statistically likely to reflect the lifestyle of their new homeland. That makes sense. A 2013 US Department of Commerce report determined that the group with at least one grandparent who was a first-generation immigrant numbered about 235 million people.¹² They look like the population because they comprise three-quarters of the population.

The last forty to fifty years of immigrant churchgoers in the US yields an important insight. In the 1970s and 1980s, the US saw the rise of large immigrant congregations of various denominations. However, the acculturation and geographical movement of the descendants of first-generation immigrants has resulted in dramatic declines in the size of these same congregations. Across denominations, the 3i generation largely do not attend ethnic congregations. They reflect the religious

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landscape of their community. Although it happened more slowly, much the same phenomenon happened in the LCMS.

What does all of this mean for LCMS congregations and the resources they need to reach out to immigrant communities? Since the convention called for the Office of National Mission to help, what resources are available or in development?

First, it means that *over time*, strictly cultural outreach will be unsuccessful. The descendants of the immigrants who made up much of the LCMS's congregations are acculturated and no longer identify with their grandparents' church based on their German (or other) culture alone. What binds these descendants to the church? In a social media study those whose grandparents were LCMS members cited biblical theology, infant Baptism, catechism classes, and Lutheran schools as the reasons they remained in the church body. In the same study, those who are no longer members of LCMS congregations said they still believed themselves to be LCMS theologically—but they could not find a congregation like the one in which they learned the faith. A strongly catechetical and theological emphasis must be a part of our mission because it endures. Heritage-based congregations tend to decline sharply in just a couple of generations.

While the means of grace set in the context of the Divine Service and the study of God's Word will be relevant as they have been for thousands of years, the setting and language of those means are a moving target. There is a rightful and needed push to develop Spanish-language resources for the church, but we have an even larger Asian influx. These are languages and cultures that (as a national church) we do not know well. ONM is working with LCMS International Missions, overseas partners, and indigenous domestic pastors to try to meet this expected challenge. It is vital in the coming years that our professional church workers be given the option of training within the cultural context of the communities they serve.

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LCMS Offices of National and International Mission have been openly working to “blur the lines” between units and create opportunities for training, mission, and resource development for the mission fields internationally and domestically. For example, the Latin America and Caribbean region of the Office of International Mission has created the VDMA project. VDMA is an expanding, large, digital library of Spanish Bibles, Bible studies, theological books, journals, etc. Our missionaries are involved in creating, translating, and distributing a great number of Spanish-language resources. A Spanish language school that helps train missionaries and a Spanish-

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language seminary in the Dominican Republic are also resources available to LCMS districts and congregations who wish language training. These all can help inform and equip our outreach throughout the US. The interaction between international and national mission units makes further sense because our missionaries are often reaching out to the friends and family members of those to whom our domestic congregations are reaching out.

A series of multicultural outreach grants are available through the *Making Disciples for Life* initiative that is being spearheaded by the ONM. Districts and congregations alike may apply for grants to enhance or begin multicultural outreach programs. The National Youth Gathering offers special scholarships to youth groups with an international component or multicultural emphasis.

The LCMS has a long history of planting churches and the need to plant them is great. But 2010 statistics show that 1,266 of 3,075 counties in the US (40%) have no LCMS presence.¹³ The ONM is engaged in a study of forty years of church planting by the LCMS. ONM's Church Planting Program Ministry is also deeply involved with scholars across denominational lines regarding what seems to work and what does not. While the LCMS was highly successful in planting congregations during the times of massive German immigration, more recent efforts have not met with the same success. We have experienced very little lasting success with efforts that result from centrally managed district or Synodical planting.

It seems clear across denominational lines and is demonstrable within the LCMS that the best church planting outcomes have resulted from a mother congregation planting a daughter congregation *and* providing members for the effort. Aubrey Malphurs of Dallas Theological Seminary has studied the various church planting models. Interestingly, the study showed that even if the church plant failed, the planting church grew by an average of 23.7%. This appears to be because these congregations emphasize mission over survival.¹⁴

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Our outreach to immigrant groups and others cannot be because we need new members to sustain an institution. Outreach must be motivated by a desire to save the lost and love one's neighbor. When this is done in connection with the riches of Lutheran theology, we are calling people to a place where the means of grace can sustain them and their descendants for generations.

ONM has prepared and continues to prepare a huge treasury of resources that teach the theology and the nuts and bolts of this outreach. The tremendously popular ONM outreach program, *Everyone His Witness*, is now available in Spanish, as is the

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valuable *Church Planting Handbook*. Many other domestic resources are now in production. ONM's programmatic ministries: outreach initiatives, podcasts, webinars, and partnerships with LCMS recognized service organizations are being rolled out several times per month. We will be doing even more. Through the *Making Disciples for Life* initiative, regional conferences, new multicultural resource testing, grants, and an internet resource center will all be available to help with resource sharing and training. Work done together among mission offices, the Pastoral Education Office (e.g., PALS), and the districts will yield fresh, tested, and theologically-solid LCMS outreach tools and ideas.

But, among the most substantial takeaways from the analysis of our current situation is that if our outreach efforts are to be sustained, they must be robust and generationally minded. That means that in reaching out to immigrant populations we must see beyond the first generation. Congregational outreach must be theologically informed if gains are to be sustained over time.

We must actively seek to connect people to congregations that see themselves in mission to their entire community—whatever its composition. This is especially the case, since every twenty years or so the first-generation immigrants bring forth a second and third generation of descendants who do not see themselves as international immigrants, but as Americans. They all are our neighbors, and the most important, blood-bought children of God.

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The twenty-two programmatic ministries of the ONM will continue to provide expert advice; high-quality, theologically solid resources; incentives; funding; training, etc. The real work of outreach is done when neighbors love neighbors because the Lord has brought them together, when forgiven sinners share the grace they have received with those who need absolution. Churches that become institutions that seek to survive for the sake of the institution will die. But, the gates of hell will not prevail against Christ's church (Mt 16:18). All of the resources of the LCMS could rightly be summarized in this way: we need to bring the means of grace, the medicine of immortality, into the lives of those who will die eternally without them.

Endnotes

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