

# ***Lutheran Mission Matters***



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# Articles

## Mission Control

John L. Mehl

**Abstract:** The Gallup headline from March of 2021 reads: “U.S. Church Membership Falls Below Majority for First Time.” The article goes on to state that in 2020, only 47 percent of Americans state they belong to a church, synagogue, or mosque.<sup>1</sup> How will God’s Church react to these stark statistics? The church could play it safe and only focus on worship experiences and programs for those who already know Jesus. But our Lord also loves those who don’t yet know Him, and He is sending us into the awkward places where we are not in control, to point people to Jesus.

Being out of control is not something that most people embrace—apart from enjoying a few rides at the carnival. As we look at how God’s Church is engaged in His mission (His sending) we see that our desire to control is often a prominent feature of the activities that comprise church life. We want to be engaged in God’s mission, but on our terms.

When we hear the term “mission control,” we may think of NASA or some other agency. Mission control is the team that ensures that a task is completed *precisely as planned*. For all of our language about the Church’s mission belonging to God, we want our activities to go as *we* have planned . . . we want mission control.

At a mid-1990s meeting of mission leaders working in Russia, a parachurch organization was complimented for its extensive work in the former Soviet Union. The organization’s team leader responded by saying, “We make the plan, and the Holy Spirit runs with it.” While we reel at this blatant assumption of God’s role in His mission and would never be caught saying something like this aloud, a close reflection on our ministries often reveals an effort to maintain the comfort of control.



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Control usually takes the form of the church turning inward. We look to programs that can be accomplished on the property. Worship services are carefully scripted and often with strict limits to ensure a timely beginning of the next event. Alan Roxburgh makes a point that churches can be mechanistic and rely on Newton’s Third Law: For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction. “The church, a community, and a series of programs are all treated as a set of working parts that, when arranged in the right order with the right functions, bring about success in the form of numerical growth.”<sup>2</sup> We like to see a return on investment (ROI) and pulling control levers that produce an outcome we can point to. This is done best on one’s home turf and for those who already know Jesus.

### **The World Is in Need of Jesus**

The church is about helping people have right relationships with God. This certainly happens *in* a church building, but it also needs to happen *outside* the walls. Church attendance cannot be the only goal.

Already in Genesis 3:9 we see God’s desire to rebuild the broken relationship with humanity. He comes looking for Adam and Eve who were hiding because of their sin. He calls out to them, “Where are you?” Matthew 15 points to God’s mission to reclaim the hearts of mankind for a right relationship with Him. Jesus quotes Isaiah, saying, “This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me” (Mt 15:8).

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God’s mission is the salvation of all.<sup>3</sup> His story of salvation includes the sending of Jesus, the Holy Spirit, and now us. Jesus says, “As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you” (Jn 20:21). In all of this, we see the rebuilding of a relationship between God and mankind. If salvation is for all, it is likely that we will need to go out to the highways and byways to find people (Lk 14:23).

Apart from Jonah, the Old Testament paradigm was centripetal—a drawing in to Israel.<sup>4</sup> In the New Testament we see the church being sent out.<sup>5</sup> This centrifugal movement is on display in the work of Paul. Paul’s going was not easy. He was stoned and run out of town on more than one instance. He even found himself out of control in cultures where he did not understand clearly what was going on,<sup>6</sup> but on he went into a world hostile to Christ.

Jesus told Pilate, “My kingdom is not of this world.” He had already told his disciples that we will be hated by the world (Mt 10:22–24). Former Wheaton College president, Duane Litfin, observed that “The Christian church is no longer playing for the home team. Society is no longer rooting for the church to win.”<sup>7</sup> In that case, do

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we even want to cross our church property lines where we don't control the scenarios? Yes! We do so to point people to a relationship with Christ.

This reality of the world's reaction to Christianity should *not* make us yearn for the "good old days" nor to circle the wagons around our churches. This is a time for the church to get off campus and engage as never before. The world needs a Christian people that serve it. It needs the love of God in all its forms. We live in an America where only 45 percent of the population attends church monthly or more<sup>8</sup> and 40 percent of millennials have ticked the "none" box. When Jesus "saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd" (Mt 9:36). We pray for the Spirit to move us with the same compassion.

### **Engagement with the World Is Difficult**

It has been observed that in foreign, cross-cultural ministries, Christians are forced to let go of control. This isn't simply because one goes to a foreign country and cannot figure out how to get the normal morning latte or how to make the internet work. The feeling of not being able to manage situations is often the result of not knowing the rules and underlying values of the host culture.

One does not need to cross an ocean to find different value systems. They can be found in a household between different generations. Different cultures can be found all around us, based on ethnicity, age, interests, or religion, to name a few.

Filmmaker Eli Steele described the rush of clergy in Ferguson, Missouri, to Canfield Drive after the shooting of Michael Brown. These church leaders were horrified when they realized that they knew few of the young people protesting. He writes, "In the years past, their churches had turned away teen moms, drug addicts, criminals and other sinners. That's why the clergy had little to no connection with the descendants of the unwanted in the streets."<sup>9</sup>

Bob Newton has spoken often about the mission field being the place where Christ, rather than the church, is in charge.<sup>10</sup> Learning to engage where we are not in control requires us to go where only Christ is in control.

### **There Will Be Objections**

It feels like a risk to engage the world in this way. In other words, it is going to cost us and not simply in terms of money.

The world's relationships are transactional. And even in the church there will be discussions about being good stewards of God's gifts. Donors will want reports to know if their support has been used wisely. There will be efforts to have events at the church or for things to be branded so that the church gets credit.

By contrast, service to the harassed and helpless without carefully defined expectations suggests that there may be no ROI for a congregation, even if people may

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come to know Jesus. It is difficult for the old Adam living in us to give without expecting something in return. But, enlightened by the Spirit, we live free from the bonds of *quid pro quo*.

This stepping out into a culture we do not understand involves making embarrassing mistakes. We do not like that, but it is necessary. Dwight Gradin, of Mission Training International, has repeatedly made the statement that one needs to make a million mistakes before becoming fluent in a new language.<sup>11</sup> Can the same lesson be applied to our engagement with non-church culture? This engagement is not going to go according to plan, and we could well be humiliated by something wrong we say or do. But this is how we learn how to serve those who need Jesus.

Another challenge is the suffering that accompanies being the Church. In the 1950s, Georg Vicedom wrote, “Today we have a Christianity that shies away from suffering, which still goes on dreaming of a Christianized world, appeals to the rights of man and the freedom of conscience and wants to put them into operation; all this in order to escape suffering and to make that suffering impossible instead of recognizing her call to suffer.”<sup>12</sup> The world will hate the love we show as we serve in God’s mission, but this suffering can be confirmation that we are serving well.

Finally, there are also questions about what it means to be faithful to those who already have a relationship with our Lord, who need the faithful proclamation of the Word and administration of the sacraments (AC VII). Should churches neglect these responsibilities for the sake of the lost? Of course not. Seminary professor Elmer Matthias taught a mission class which included a theme of two-track evangelism. He emphasized that the work of evangelism is done both internally and externally to point people to right relationships with Jesus.<sup>13</sup>

## **We Have Done It Before**

The history of the LCMS shows we have allowed ourselves to be out of control and followed God’s lead when we are outside our own culture. LCMS records describe overseas mission engagement with German speakers, (known as “home mission abroad”)<sup>14</sup> and with the “foreign tongued”<sup>15</sup> before 1900. Foreign work increased heavily between the end of WWII and 1960. In those years, the Missouri Synod began work in Guatemala and Philippines in 1947, Papua New Guinea and Japan in 1948, Lebanon and Hong Kong in 1950, Taiwan and Venezuela in 1951, Portugal in 1956, South Korea in 1958, Chile, Uruguay, and Ghana in 1960.<sup>16</sup> Featured prominently in this foreign work of the LCMS was service work.

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Service is one area of work in which the church does not have complete control. A usual definition of *service* is “contribution to the welfare of others.”<sup>17</sup> It assumes a relationship that is NOT transactional because nothing is expected in return. We commonly use the word *diakonia* to describe the godly service done by Christian people. It reflects God’s concern for the well-being of the whole person. Physical health is part of our Lord’s First Article creative action.

Jesus tells us, “Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful” (Lk 6:36). God sends us out to be His hands of mercy. Jesus says He will tell those who inherit eternal life, “For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me” (Mt 25:35–36).

Medical and education ministries have always been a part of LCMS engagement with those who do not yet know Jesus in the foreign mission field. Lulu Ellermann, RN, is considered by many to be the first medical missionary sent by the LCMS in 1913. She served in Bargur, India, and her work was foundational in the establishment of Bethesda Hospital in Ambur. The Evangelical Lutheran Hospital at Eket, Nigeria, was established in 1952 and served by LCMS missionary doctors Lofgren, Reule, and Maier. Wheatridge helped build and equip the Children’s Hospital in Ajiro, Japan, and Haven of Hope Sanatorium in Hong Kong.<sup>18</sup> LCMS missionary doctors served at Immanuel Lutheran Hospital in Mambisanda, Papua New Guinea, from its establishment until 2010.<sup>19</sup>

Luther was a strong proponent of education,<sup>20</sup> and education has been a major part of missionary service. Lutheran missionary work in India resulted in over seventy Lutheran schools and seven schools for the handicapped.<sup>21</sup> Rooftop schools started in Hong Kong for refugees resulted in thirty-plus schools run today by The Lutheran Church Hong Kong Synod. Concordia Middle School in Chiayi, Taiwan, was established by LCMS missionaries in 1967 and today educates 2,300 students.<sup>22</sup>

The unique thing about these Lutheran schools is that they are not just for Lutherans. They reflect the religious makeup of the society that they serve. Taiwan is 3.9 percent Christian<sup>23</sup> and it is assumed that the incoming students will reflect this. The result is an opportunity for service and engagement that is rarely found in Lutheran schools in the US.

These medical and educational ministries were not transactional, forcing people to become “members” to receive services. Otto Hintze once made the point that while the LCMS started nineteen schools in Papua New Guinea during the first several years of work it was not until the mission team had served nine years that they would celebrate their first baptisms.<sup>24</sup> The result of those early days of patient service is that today the Gutnius Lutheran Church in Papua New Guinea counts 125,000 baptized members.<sup>25</sup>

In North America, we see that Lutherans have a good history of engaging where we are out of control. The 1930 Statistical Year-Book records “foreign tongued” work being done in America with English, Polish, Latvian, Lithuanian, Assyrian, Chinese, Italian, and Spanish speakers.<sup>26</sup> Lutheran hospitals in St. Louis, Ft. Wayne, Des Moines, Park Ridge (Illinois), and elsewhere are part of the service of the church, past and present.

These examples in both the foreign and domestic fields are institutional, but they set the tone for how God’s people serve. LCMS congregations and members can be equipped and encouraged to engage the community with Christ’s love in even the smallest way. Speaking at a mission conference, campus pastor Bill Steinbauer said, “Just be a virus. You only need to touch one life at a time.”<sup>27</sup> It is okay to think small. Jesus often healed people one at a time.

We are not Paul on Mars Hill. We are Dan and Ruth in our own communities. What would happen if our LCMS churches and members would shift their thinking from the Old Testament model of attracting people into the church to a New Testament model of going out to meet the “harassed and helpless”?

Lutheran doctrine of the two kinds of righteousness<sup>28</sup> helps us understand our role in God’s mission. Before our God, we stand alone, but on this earth, we are always in relationship with Christians and unbelievers. When called to faith, we are, by virtue of our baptisms, also prepared and sent into the world to give witness to God’s love for all.<sup>29</sup> We do this through words and deeds. There is no list of how we serve. God sends His Spirit to teach us love that discovers how to help our neighbor in earthly and spiritual things, and He gives us the strength and courage to love selflessly. God sends us to do this not because He needs help, and not for our own benefit, but for the good of our neighbor.

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## **It Is Time for Action**

In *Hondo*, a 1953 movie, Hondo Lane throws Johnny Lowe into a pond to teach him to swim. Johnny’s mother, Angie, is upset at what is done to her son. She turns and runs away when Hondo takes a step toward her after she reveals that she also cannot swim.

Getting thrown in is difficult because we are out of control, but it does bring results. As we think about how our congregations and members can engage where only Christ is in control, a few suggestions may help remove some of the fear before jumping in.

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- Pray and meditate on God’s Word. Be fed on Word and Sacrament at worship. We cannot neglect our spiritual well-being—our vertical relationship with God—if we are going to be godly instruments in our horizontal relationships.
- Pray to the Lord of the Harvest that He will use you in His mission. Pray “Thy kingdom come,” remembering that it is not about *our* kingdom(s). Expect no ROI for our kingdom(s). Jesus gave His all, and died for all, knowing that not all would believe. We can be extravagantly generous because His Spirit works in our lives.
- Do not throw out planning. We need to be moving forward if we are going to be surprised when God opens doors we did not plan for. We still want to be good stewards. The point is not to hold so dearly to our plans that we fail to see God’s.
- Think about how, when, and where congregations and their members can be out of control in relationships. DCE Kendra McNatt describes herself as “bracing for awkward” when she engages people in cross-cultural spiritual conversations.<sup>30</sup> The encounters often are not awkward at all, but the potential is there. Look for places with this kind of potential.
- Do not judge unbelievers because of how they live.<sup>31</sup> Sanctification comes with faith, not before. Be curious and learn their stories. Paul tells the Corinthians, “For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge? God judges those outside” (1 Cor 5:12–13a).
- Forget about trying to convert anyone. This is only the work of the Holy Spirit. Check Luther’s explanation to the Third Article on this.<sup>32</sup> We can tell what we know but cannot convince anyone.
- Have an answer to the “why” question. If you are serving, this question will come. If you are being kind and not expecting anything in return, this question will come. If you are honestly curious about someone’s life, they are going to ask you, “Why are you this way? How can you give expecting nothing in return?” Peter writes, “In your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect” (1 Pt 3:15).
- Trust in God and His Word to be efficacious. “For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it” (Is 55:10–11).

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John sent his disciples to ask Jesus if He was the Christ and Jesus answered, “Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them” (Mt 11:4–5). God sends us to be part of His mission to make the same impact and He empowers us to serve in a way that bears witness to who our Jesus is.

If we want to make tight plans and pull control levers to fulfill tasks as planned, this is done best at home for those who already know Jesus. But God’s mission is more. He sends us into the awkward as we step over the church property line and engage the world on its terms. In the world we find God working His mission in amazing ways and we have the privilege of being His instruments to accomplish it.

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Luther says, “For whatever remains of your life, live as those sent by Christ. It is the office of everyone to instruct his neighbor, etc. And this power is given not to the clergy alone (though [here it is] spoken to the apostles) but to all believers. When you have performed this highest work, seek to become Christ’s apostle, to serve all people, so that they may come unto God as you have.”<sup>33</sup>

So, serve we shall . . . giving up control to be a part of God’s mission.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Jeffrey M. Jones, “U.S. Church Membership Falls Below Majority for First Time,” Gallup, March 29, 2021, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/341963/church-membership-falls-below-majority-first-time.aspx>.

<sup>2</sup> Alan J. Roxburgh, *Missional Map-Making: Skills for leading in times of transition* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2010), 62.

<sup>3</sup> Rom 5:18–19; 1 Tm 2:4; 2 Pt 3:9; Gal 3:28; Rv 7:9

<sup>4</sup> Mi 4:1–2; Ez 17:22–24; 1 Kgs 8:41–43

<sup>5</sup> Mt 9:35–38; 24:14; 28:16–20; Mk 16:15–18; Lk 24:45–48; Jn 17:18; 20:21; Acts 1:8.

<sup>6</sup> In Acts 14 as Paul and Barnabas enter Lystra, it appears that they did not understand Lycaonian.

<sup>7</sup> Duane Litfin, April 23, 2016, at the CUS Council of Members Meeting at Concordia University, Nebraska.

<sup>8</sup> Pew Research Center, “In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace,” October 17, 2019, accessed February 26, 2021, <https://www.pewforum.org/2019/10/17/in-u-s-decline-of-christianity-continues-at-rapid-pace/>.

<sup>9</sup> Eli Steele, “Reporter’s Notebook: Chicago pastor turns gangsters’ lives around with stunning compassion,” *Fox News*, February 25, 2021, <https://www.foxnews.com/us/chicago-pastor-gangsters-compassion>.

- <sup>10</sup> Rev. Dr. Robert Newton at the Concordia Mission Institute, July 2018.
- <sup>11</sup> Dwight Gradin, Program in Language Acquisition Techniques, July 1993.
- <sup>12</sup> Georg F. Vicedom, *The Mission of God: An Introduction to a Theology of Mission* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1965), 139.
- <sup>13</sup> Concordia Seminary, St. Louis class, P-139 *Equipping People for Christian Witness*, Winter Quarter 1982–83. Dr. Matthias recognized that internal evangelism was not just equipping the saints to witness, but also to be witnessed to.
- <sup>14</sup> *Statistisches Jahrbuch der Deutschen Evangelisch-Lutherischen Synode von Missouri, Ohio und andern Staaten für das Jahr 1900* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1901), 114. Mission to German speakers in Brazil, Argentina, Australia, New Zealand, London, and even in Germany.
- <sup>15</sup> D. Christudas, *Tranquebar to Travancore* (Delhi: ISPCK, 2008), 33.
- <sup>16</sup> “LCMS World Mission Report,” *Convention Workbook: Reports and Overtures* (St. Louis: The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 2001), 18–19. Some include El Salvador (1958) and Honduras (1961), but the report to convention does not.
- <sup>17</sup> <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/service>, accessed February 26, 2021.
- <sup>18</sup> *Mission Digest*, The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, Department of Stewardship, Mission Education, and Promotion (St. Louis: The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 1959), 56–57.
- <sup>19</sup> The last LCMS missionary doctor to serve at Mambisanda was Dr. Stephen Lutz who left Papua New Guinea in the spring of 2010 and died of brain cancer in June of that year. His obituary was posted in the *Reporter* in June 2010 found here: <https://reporter.lcms.org/2010/longtime-missionary-dr-stephen-lutz-dies>.
- <sup>20</sup> Luther wrote open letters in support of education with *To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation Concerning the Reform of the Christian Estate* (1520) and *To the Councilmen of All Cities in Germany That They Establish and Maintain Christian Schools* (1524).
- <sup>21</sup> <https://www.lcms.org/page.aspx?pid=1340>, accessed February 26, 2021.
- <sup>22</sup> <https://www.lcms.org/worldwide-regions/asia/taiwan>, accessed February 26, 2021.
- <sup>23</sup> <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/taiwan/#people-and-society>, accessed February 25, 2021.
- <sup>24</sup> Otto Hintze in a presentation at the PNG Mission Society Bung, Timothy Lutheran Church, St. Louis, July 29, 2011.
- <sup>25</sup> <https://ilc-online.org/members/asia/papua-new-guinea/>, accessed February 26, 2021.
- <sup>26</sup> *Statistical Year-Book of the Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Missouri, Ohio, and Other States for the Year 1930* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1931), 201–2.
- <sup>27</sup> Rev. Bill Steinbauer, Beautiful Feet Mission Conference, Concordia University, Nebraska, November 15, 2015.
- <sup>28</sup> Luther wrote: “This is our theology, by which we teach a precise distinction between these two kinds of righteousness, the active and the passive, so that morality and faith, works and grace, secular society and religion may not be confused” (LW 26:7).
- <sup>29</sup> “But after we have become Christians through this Priest and His priestly office, incorporated in Him by Baptism through faith, then each one, according to his calling and position, obtains the right and the power of teaching and confessing before others this Word which we have obtained from Him. Even though not everybody has the public office and calling, every Christian has the right and the duty to teach, instruct, admonish, comfort, and rebuke his neighbor with the Word of God at every opportunity and whenever necessary” (LW 13:333).

<sup>30</sup> Kendra McNatt described “bracing for awkward” as a guest presenter in GMC 270—Mission of God class at Concordia University, Nebraska in October of 2016.

<sup>31</sup> Michael Newman includes a great story of not judging in his book, *Gospel DNA: Five Markers of a Flourishing Church* (San Antonio: Ursa, 2016), 124ff.

<sup>32</sup> Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert, eds., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 2000), *The Small Catechism*, 355.

<sup>33</sup> LW 69:336f.