

“Here We Stand; Here We Go!”: An Interview with Pat Ferry

Abstract

In answering questions raised by his Commencement Address (published as the previous essay), Patrick Ferry unpacks some of the specific issues he touched upon, especially regarding pastoral formation for mission leadership in today’s world. In short, though grounded in the past, the mission is before us, and today’s context is not that of previous generations. Key areas of focus are evangelism and mission, education, and encouragement. Pastoral leaders need to understand the next generation, to be able to bridge to other cultures, to build relationships, and to present Christianity positively in a culture where we are no longer the “home team.”

LMM: The theme of your address could be summarized as “Ready, Set, GO!” So where are we going? You were addressing a graduating class of seminarians and graduate students. Obviously, most are “going” forth into pastoral ministry. But you seem to imply more than just “going out and getting to do what you are now ready to do.” Did you intend a greater sense of “going”?

First, I should say that I have used this metaphor of running a race previously, and yes, beyond the “go” of graduation and behind my encouragement to them was the “Go” of Christ’s Great Commission. So, yes, go—and make disciples of all nations. Go into the world of God’s mission field. Whenever I talk to pre-sem and pastoral students, I like to emphasize that this is a challenging time—a great time—to be about this mission, but we need to go, and to go *forward*. God’s mission is before us, and we need to look outward.

LMM: So, yes, go forward. But where? Is there more direction there? And, as an historian, isn’t there much good in looking back? Your example of running backward seems to address this point negatively, but the runner is also moving forward. Isn’t that also a positive metaphor for how to move forward with our eyes anchored on who we are and what has formed us?

Our default mode seems always to be looking back, and that is important. We do look back, first of all to Jesus! He is the founder and perfecter of our faith (Heb 12:2). And we stand on the shoulders of giants in the church’s history, in our own tradition. But the goals are before us. My own father’s world was a different world from mine, from ours. It’s not mine, and it’s not our children’s and grandchildren’s. I remember my father’s house. It was special. But after he was gone, we knew it needed some updating and remodeling, and we did that. And now, once again, it is a wonderful house. It is still the house of my father, but it is now ready for today’s world.

Back to the race, and to the starting line—yes, we do look back. Before one even gets to the starting line of a race, there is a lot of work, almost as much, if not more, than running the race itself. You can't show up without good training, solid preparation. Experience and awareness, yes, "history." That's all very important background, and it gives us the strength and confidence to run the race. But the race is before us. The goals are before us. Again, we anchor our eyes on Jesus. He is behind us but also before us. The past can't become an anchor that drags us down or holds us back.

LMM: So let me go back to the question of where: where are we going? You note that we often find ourselves fighting old battles from previous centuries and ask if there are better ways to use our energy. What are some better ways?

First, I think we need to renew our sense of mission and evangelism as part of our culture. This is not something new to us, but we've somewhat lost our way, our focus. We need to keep our eyes on the goal as part of our culture—who we are and what we do not only as Confessional Lutherans but also as part of Christ's mission to all nations. I think we need to reimagine the importance of mission. It should be part of our culture, and we simply don't think or talk about it enough.

Let me raise three areas of focus. First, evangelism, which is bigger than any one program we "do," or that some folks in our congregations take on. It's not just a "part" of what we do, like a special subset of our congregational life. Nor should it become some kind of "burden" either, as though our failure to witness whenever we can or should then leaves us with guilt. No, evangelism should be the reason God's people exist: to be the people of God to carry out His mission into all the world.

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It's easy, sometimes, simply to acquiesce to the narrative that there is not much we can do, or that our moment has passed, like that rain cloud. True, we don't want to be pushy, and sometimes that can do more harm than good. But that does not change the fact that my neighbor is not a believer. We don't want to push our beliefs on others—yet we seem willing enough to push other things, like morals or sometimes our political views on others!

I like to note that C.S. Lewis wrote *Mere Christianity* because (as he wrote elsewhere) there are no "mere mortals." Every person we encounter every day is an immortal and eternal being, and we have an opportunity to invite others to the eternal life offered to us in Christ. We need to look at others that way, that no one is "mere" or merely mortal, but everyone is someone for whom Christ died.

Second, we have a treasured history of education, at every level, and that's been the niche of my service to the church. This is about the next generation—folks tell me that they want to have an LCMS for their children, but sometimes they wonder, Will this church, this wonderful expression of God's truth, anchored in the Gospel, be there for another generation? We don't do church on the basis of statistics or numbers, but

we don't need to ignore them either, and the numbers, our demographics, are not good. At the same time, the mission field is exploding all around us.

We have great experience in education at all levels, from pre-school to higher ed, including graduate and professional programs, in church work and, more recently, in a vast spectrum of vocations. How might we address the needs of the next generation and do so within the challenges of the world in which they will live and work—and be part of Christ's mission?

Another area I like to emphasize is encouragement. We do a lot of intramural squabbling, sometimes fighting old battles over and over again and putting each other into various historical categories. We often approach one another with a certain suspicion, as though we must size everyone up, get behind them to whatever agenda or "side" they are on. What if we put that same energy first to listening better, to understanding our real concerns? Can we find ways to work together toward addressing what are likely common concerns and then support each other with a certain amount of respect and trust? Can we get to the middle ground, common ground, and restore that "concordia" among us? We've done that before, and we should be able to do that now, in this critical time.

LMM: You note that, in moving forward, "sometimes something has to go." That might make some people nervous. We don't like to let things go. Isn't there a legitimate concern for losing our heritage, who we are, our "identity"?

First, there are some things that we never let go: justification by grace through faith. That is—and will always be—the article on which the church stands or falls. There are so many issues on which we will not compromise. We have our commitments to our texts, to Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions. Those things don't change, the "text" doesn't change, but the context in which we live does change. That's also the contemporary context in which we apply those texts, in which we proclaim those texts, in which the mission of Christ is carried forward.

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And here again, we need trust. I need to trust that you know your own context better than I. That's especially true in missions, where we cross into other worlds, other cultures, other neighborhoods, other lives. I have to trust that you know your context and will apply our shared truths appropriately. We often start by assuming that the other is not so competent as I am, and I need to show you how to apply those texts to your world.

God's truth is constant, but there are all kinds of different people, and they will express their faith in different ways. It's not quite as simple as assuming everything can just be translated. It's been said that there all kinds of churches for all kinds of people, and that can be true even within the same fellowship of a common faith grounded on a shared confession. But that can sometimes mean letting go of some

things that may seem dear to me if they might get in the way of what is important to another.

In terms of international mission, my own first-hand experience here is limited, though I have had some very engaging opportunities. I have talked with some veteran mission folks, and we certainly need to do some listening. They bring years of experience and great wisdom, and they provide both great insight along with some criticism of how our attitudes and approaches as a “synod” have changed in recent years. That is especially true in international settings, where we work with and need to trust our partner churches, many of whom we helped form. They have grown by the Spirit’s power and now need to be taking their own leadership within their cultural setting. And we need to trust them to know their context better than we. My point is that we need to listen to those who bring experience, including those on the other side of cultural issues.

LMM: This issue of LMM is especially about pastoral formation for mission leadership. Your leadership has been at the university level, but share some thoughts about pastoral formation, especially in light of the mission challenges of today’s world.

One thing I did as a university president was to write a letter commending pre-sem students on to seminary. I took that seriously, but I did my best to make that a conversation more than some kind of interview toward a recommendation. We would discuss one’s assessment of personal strengths and weaknesses, and a variety of usual things would come up. But then I’d try to expand toward some more collective or corporate sense of our church’s strengths and weaknesses, and almost universally the number one strength of our church body would be identified as “we’re good at theology.” That could mean various things, but there was a sense that we know our theology, our Bible. Our Lutheran theology and doctrine are sound and biblical. But the number one weakness—and it was also almost universally so identified—was a lack of reaching out to others, of not connecting with the community, with those who were not already part of our church. That was not only for the sake of mission but also simply in showing awareness and understanding, especially regarding a host of contemporary issues, where we can seem uninterested in understanding another’s perspective or viewpoint. The concern is that such an attitude, even if only a perception by others, not only does not allow us to reach out with the truth of God, to speak the truth in love, but it actually drives people away.

That seems to be true and even acknowledged across our church. As I have said it in the address and elsewhere, “forward is not our forte.” Looking forward is part of mission and evangelism, but it’s bigger than that. It has to do with those around us, with a sense of looking outward, not inward, in building relationships. John Nunes had a line in a recent Lutheran Hour sermon which used the language of witness as “with-ness,” and that says it very well. It’s almost always about relationships, building a safe space for those faith conversations.

LMM: Do you have any specific thoughts about how a church body and its seminaries might do better in meeting these mission challenges?

First, we need to connect to the next generation. That was obvious in a university setting. Their general view of our church is that we Lutherans, and specifically those in our church, are judgmental, anti-science, irrelevant. It's clear that others know what we are against, but I'd rather be known for what we are for. We often lose many of the brightest and best of our next generation as church workers—or even just church attendees—because they really don't want to be part of this way of doing church. That comes back to listening. We want to teach, but first we need to listen and then learn from one another. The world of my children and grandchildren is so much different. I want the next generation to know not only what we are for, but also who is *for them*. That is the message of the love and grace of God in Jesus.

We know how to teach; that is part of our strength in education. But the next generation can teach us something about how to relate. Look at the Youth Gathering and all the energy, the interaction, the exuberant joy shared with one another. It was interesting when that happened in the same summer as our synodical convention, and one might even compare the atmosphere of the former to the debates and wrangling and tension in the air, and to the huddling up in closed groups that characterize that latter aspect of our church's life.

We may be confident in what we know and want to teach; we are very able to catechize those who are listening. But we are not the home team anymore, not once we leave the building. We need to think about how we relate to one another—and then to others who are not part of our fellowship of faith and life.

Thinking about seminary formation, I'd certainly support some fresh ways in thinking things through, getting a variety of people and perspectives around the table. I'm the product of a world class seminary education—and I made a point of reminding our pre-sem students of that. We may have the Cadillac, but maybe there is a Tesla out there that can also be first-class but reflects some new approaches that can be engaged.

Our schools face tremendous challenges, but this is also a time of great opportunities. Some of our ways of working together, including our governance structures, are not necessarily working as they were intended, and some of the structures themselves may need some fresh conversations. I've had helpful experiences, both positive and negative, but no one person or viewpoint has all the answers. The great need is to bring people together, find common ground, keep our eye on the goal, go forward.