

Lutheran Mission Matters



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Humility in Mission Outreach

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Abstract: Missionaries commonly set out quite opinionated and self-confident. They learn humility through facing the realities of the work. In our mission training, we can give our students a heads-up on the fact of humility as central to the life and work of the missionary. We can help them start out with respect for their partners in the work and for the complexities of the task.

The most important characteristic for a person involved in mission is humility. This would seem to be contradictory, since an evangelist must have confidence in the crucial importance of his/her message. However, the best way for the Spirit to work faith in other people is when their heart is receptive. We do not want to make people defensive to our message and service. When they see us as open-hearted, they are more likely to be open-hearted and receptive (1 Thes 1:7–8; 1 Pt 3:15).

If so, then the question is how to help future mission workers to be humble. It would seem to be a prior work of the Holy Spirit in their hearts, a fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:22–23) seen in them before they enter mission training. However, mission training is a ministry of the Word, which is powerful and changes people’s hearts (Heb 4:12–13; Is 55:19–11). We arrange the training curriculum so that such transformation is our goal. We arrange teachers who exemplify this transformation. Here are some reflections on how such a curriculum might be organized.

1. Train to Be Trainers

A leader in mission outreach must be a trainer. A leader cannot and should not do it alone, but must humbly multiply himself. And the leader must inspire, using the motto used in training business leaders: “There’s no limit to what you can accomplish in life if you do not mind who gets the credit.”

If it is seminary training, the focus must be on training students to be trainers of



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lay leaders. The goal is to start a movement, led by the Holy Spirit. The mission-minded pastor works to inspire a mission-minded congregation where the work is not dependent on him. He is a ready resource and gentle supervisor. His work is to equip the saints and build up the congregation as a mission agency (Eph 4:12).

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2. Importance of Women

Very often, the most effective mission workers are women. People are less defensive when approached by women, more trusting and open. We all know of women who have accomplished great things because the men around them just couldn't say "no." In addition, in many cultures it is the women who are spiritually minded and religiously active. The religious life of the family is their purview.

The mission trainer will look to mobilize and authorize women for outreach and will advocate their leadership, especially in a male-dominated society. Very often women have the innate soft-heartedness and gentle spirit that lend to an open ear. In societies where women are traditionally in their own closed-off world, only other women can reach them. Men will be trained to acknowledge the women's leadership and humbly support and respect them.

3. Importance of Youth

When it comes to zeal and energy and creativity in mission there is no greater resource than the youth. Just as with the recognition of women, so with the recognition of youth. Adult male leaders of the organization accept that they are not the leaders in mission. The mission trainer respects the youth and challenges them to take the lead and is their humble cheerleader.

When I was Area Director for South Asia on behalf of the LCMS Board for Missions, I had a conversation with an India Evangelical Lutheran Church pastor that opened my eyes. He lamented that fresh seminary graduates often spent years waiting and maneuvering to get some place in the church. They entered the seminary with great zeal and left fully ready and equipped for ministry and mission, but then had to sit on the sidelines, dispirited and frustrated. We were wasting all their youthful zeal and energy, sinfully quenching the Spirit in their hearts (1 Thes 5:19).

I discussed this with the seminary and church leaders, and we developed a program of internship focused on church planting. Through generous and steady support from the Jesus Is Lord mission society, these interns spent three years under the supervision of local pastors, assigned to planting new churches in their area. A few of them had the blessing of establishing a fully self-standing congregation; they all

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gained the enthusiasm and skills for mission work and church planting, which they brought into their future congregational positions.

My experience in India was that evangelistic growth and congregational vitality hinged on church leaders mobilizing the youth. The one-year training course at Concordia Theological Seminary in Nagercoil produced a great resource of enthusiastic youth who became active in the church's evangelistic and social work outreach. Likewise, when I was training in Northeast India, the church there was thriving because of youth leadership in all facets of the church life, including public worship. We train leaders to humbly back off and let youth lead, and their youthful vitality is unleashed in God's service.

4. Importance of Social Service

Social service has always been a central element in mission outreach, from our Lord's healing ministry to the life of the Early Church and onward. Even opponents of mission work readily acknowledge and appreciate the social service carried out in the name and spirit of Christ. Such humble service gains credibility for the gospel and its promised transformative effect on human hearts. Very often such service is carried out among the most needy and neglected of the society. They are highly grateful and have open hearts to the ministry of the Word as well.

Once again, we are called to give high respect and status to those involved in such difficult ministries. We train church leaders to recognize and encourage those special spiritual gifts among their people. We humbly authorize such spiritually gifted workers to head up such ministries, as the apostles themselves did. And as Luke records, the effect of their ministry was that "the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith" (Acts 6:7).

Recognizing the importance of social service in the mission work of the church, it is crucial that future mission trainers be equipped with understanding in this area. We recognize that theology does not provide the expertise and analysis for understanding all social issues. It humbly and respectfully gives way to sociology and anthropology as the curriculum that provides the tools for effective service that the gospel inspires.

5. Importance of Spiritual Warfare

Many societies in Africa and Asia are pervaded by struggles with evil spirits. Their religious life is focused on controlling and evading these supernatural powers. Mission workers who enter a new territory often report the battle that takes place and the need for exorcisms. People know the power of these spirits, and they are unwilling to put faith in this Jesus until they know for sure that He is Lord of all. Such victorious battles

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were central to the credibility of our Lord's ministry and the mission work of the Early Church, as recorded in the Book of Acts (cf. 13:7–12; 16:16–18; 19:11–20; 28:1–6).

This is an area where we humbly realize our limitations. Not everyone is spiritually gifted to be an exorcist. We all recognize that there are powers that are supernatural and beyond our power to resist and control on our own. We need the prayers and gifts of God's people, and even more the One who is Lord over "all rule and authority and power and dominion" (Eph 1:20–22; Rom 8:38–39). Our intellectual training and academic degrees will not equip us for this battle, but only "prayer and fasting" (Mt 17:21).

6. Importance of Appreciating Other Religions

There is a reason people are persuaded of the truth and worth of their own religious beliefs. People are not stupid. Many have studied the history and accomplishments of their religion. Some have also studied the Christian faith and found it unconvincing and wanting. In the field of multi-faith conversation, we have worthy advocates of their positions. We will disagree with many of their convictions, but we need to humbly hear their reasons so that they will also hear us.

We humbly appreciate the truths that are in other religions and the exemplary lives that they have inspired. In our understanding of the Two Kingdoms, we heartily recognize that God is at work also in the kingdom of the left for the good of society through other religions. Only when we respectfully and honestly listen can we expect that others will listen to us. In our studies, we can know certain doctrines and activities of other religions, but only those who live in that religion can know its power and attraction.

In our mission training, we humbly accept that the history of the church and its mission outreach have not always reflected the spirit of Christ. We have reason to repent, accept our failings, and ask forgiveness. Thus, we witness to Jesus, not to the church. Even in our polemics, we carry this spirit of "gentleness and respect" as we witness to the hope that is in us (1 Pt 3:15), humbly knowing that only the Holy Spirit can work faith in anyone's heart.

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7. Importance of Community

As I shared in a previous *Missio Apostolica* article,¹ most people stay in a religion because that is where they find their community. Their allegiance is not a matter of

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intellectual conviction and study. Rather, this is where their family and friendships are. This is where they have support and resources for life in all its ups and downs. This is where they find spiritual satisfaction and strength. Why would they want to leave that?

If they leave all that, will they find comparable community in the church? Will they be fully accepted and respected and trusted? A crucial part of our mission training is enabling pastors and lay leaders to integrate converts into the community. We humbly acknowledge that our congregations have often failed badly in becoming family to those who leave house and home in response to the call of the gospel. They come with full joy in the Lord and full expectation of love from His people and often are sorely disappointed. People are friendly, but not friends. We are often church people, but not Christ people.

Clearly, the preparation of a welcoming community must precede our mission outreach. As recorded in Acts 2:43–47, when people experienced their “glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day” (also Acts 4:32–34). We must cultivate God’s people to be a community that others can trust and long to be a part of.

8. Importance of Personal Experience

Very often, our theological training is intellectual, and students come to think of mission outreach also as an intellectual argument. However, in reality many conversions occur because of real-life spiritual experience. We humbly must recognize that our intellectual arguments are largely fruitless and pointless. We must come to accept that conversion is an act of God. We totally depend on Him to act in ways that are totally out of our control (cf. Jn 3:5; 6:29; Acts 2:38; 10:44–48; 1 Cor 12:3).

Most mission outreach takes place in home prayer fellowships. The mission worker goes to a home inquiring about their lives and offering to pray for their needs. When those prayers in Jesus’ name are answered, by God’s grace and power, the gospel message has credibility. People come to accept Jesus as the new Lord of their lives. Faith is an act of new trust based on the experience of answered prayer. Similarly, with converts from major religions such as Hinduism and Islam and Buddhism, very commonly conversions take place because of visions or dreams or miracles. They experience a personal call from the Lord, as the Holy Spirit works faith in their hearts, and they faithfully and courageously respond.

9. Importance of Ecumenical Respect

We have a lot to learn from other approaches to Christianity, particularly in mission outreach. We will disagree on certain doctrines, but we will recognize our common commitment to mission outreach, and we will commit to work together respectfully. Our shared goal is to reach the lost and serve effectively. We humbly

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acknowledge that God’s Kingdom is greater than our denomination. We rejoice when converts join other churches also. We rejoice when other organizations also bring glory to God through their lives of service (Mt 5:16).

God has done great things through others:

- the monastic orders of the Roman Catholic Church
- the powerful healing ministries and evangelistic efforts of the Pentecostal churches
- the specialized ministries of parachurch organizations
- the historical stability of the Anglican and Orthodox Church traditions
- the moral training of the Methodist tradition
- the transformed lives among born-again believers
- the specialists in urban ministry
- the lay-training resources of ecumenical organizations
- the funding and expertise of ecumenical agencies in social work

The list can go on and on. The point is that our mission training should be clear but humble and respectful. We train people to work respectfully and eagerly with other believers and organizations. They are not our rivals but our partners, not in Word and Sacrament but in mission and service. They have strengths and expertise that we do not. We need and value them in the Kingdom work and respectfully receive what they have to offer.

10. Importance of House Churches

“For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them” (Mt 18:20). Our congregations are not the Church, the sole member of the Body of Christ. We humbly recognize that not everyone will want to gather in our buildings and fellowships. In fact, the most effective and productive outreach around the world often is through house churches. Even in countries like the United States that have many large denominations and many congregations, much of the new outreach is through house churches. People who don’t feel comfortable in regular churches gather with and invite other like-minded people into this Christian fellowship.

Can we train our church leaders to encourage house churches, developments that are largely out of our control? Can we train churches to be mission agencies that spin off and plant house churches, perhaps as satellite fellowships? We do not add to our organizational numbers, but we do add to the Body of Christ. It’s a much more humble role than we are accustomed to. With St. Paul, we become weak so that we “might by all means

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save some” (1 Cor 9:22).

It is not easy to be humble, either personally or organizationally. Yet, the attitude of humble service and witness is key to following Christ’s call. In His great mission effort, our Lord Himself “humbled himself and became obedient to *the point of death*” (Phil 2:8) so that He could reach us in our need. He came “gentle and lowly in heart” (Mt 11:29) to save and serve. Now He fills our heart with His Spirit and sends us out to serve in His name. And when we have done all that He has commanded, we humbly accept that “we are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty” (Lk 17:10).

Endnotes

¹ “Community vs. Belief,” *Missio Apostolica* 18, no. 1 (May 2010): 30–35.