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How Lutherans Have Done Mission: A Historical Survey¹

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Abstract: “Mission is the one Church of God in motion,” wrote Wilhelm Löhe in his *Three Books on the Church* of 1848. Lutherans have recognized that on the basis of their theology they have an obligation to address the unbelieving world. Their mission efforts have always begun with prayer for missions and missionaries and in the field have included clear catechetical instruction, frequent use of Bible translation into vernacular languages, and an emphasis on holistic mission. The nearly five hundred years of Lutheran mission history demonstrate well how forces and ideas outside the church inevitably shape how mission is organized and done (or not), and how Lutheran people with mission vision, guided and led by the Spirit of God, have found a variety of ways to make a Lutheran contribution to the evangelization of the world.

The mission task is different. When two people or groups of people share the same language and culture, it is likely that they will ask the same kinds of questions and expect similar answers. The questions are easily asked and relatively easily answered. When people come from different cultures, then those who want to communicate the Good News of Jesus must make special efforts to be sure that the message is clearly communicated.

A clear example is the fact that Jesus never once used a description of Roman soldier’s armor to make a point about the way in which God equips His people for service. Paul freely speaks about “standing firm” in Christian life, using the various parts of Roman military dress (Eph 6:14ff.). Paul wants his Gentile hearers to clearly understand how God has equipped His people for service, and so he starts with a picture that they all knew and in many cases had experienced themselves. The point that Paul was making—that God equips His people for service—was not new, but the metaphor that he used to express that point was.

Mission is always like that. Mission is essentially an interaction between two parties—the one who passes on the message and the one who receives it. And, in the course of this event, both are changed. The missionary must think about and find the

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appropriate way of expressing what he knows to be the truth in this new situation, and the one who listens must be prepared to accept the challenge of making sense of a new—and in many cases a totally new and even unimaginable—message of hope, forgiveness, and life.

Mission adapts itself not only to different languages. Mission recognizes the incredible variety of ways of life and particular spiritual situations that human beings have created in various places and times, and mission history tries to put those peoples and situations before us so that we can understand the successes and failures of previous times and places even as we consider what we should do here and now. It emphasizes to us that in spite of many formidable challenges, the Spirit of God has led His people to say exactly what needs to be said (Lk 12:11–12).

Since the perspective of the observer inevitably shapes the historical narrative, I want to be clear that my perspective is German. The Christianization of the Teutons in the German lands began way back in the first half of the history of Christian mission (fourth to ninth centuries), well before the beginning of the Reformation at the beginning of the sixteenth century with its subsequent emphasis on mission. My view is therefore oriented to the sending church and the work of the missionary rather than on the view of those who received missionaries. Moreover, it is focused on the German birthplace of the Reformation. Within these boundaries, I will highlight the most important points for understanding the Lutheran contribution to mission. Readers in a different context will have their own experiences with which they will make their contribution to the history of Lutheran mission.

I. A Theological Basis for Mission

Luther's theology demonstrates from its start an incredible potential for a theology of mission. He emphasizes that the effectiveness of the Gospel is not dependent upon a person's ability to actualize it, but rather awaits God's initiative. Through the preaching of His Word, the Holy Spirit creates saving faith in those who listen to it. Through Baptism and faith, the faithful become members in the one Church under the Lordship of Christ, which extends over all times and places. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, all Christians are equipped and prepared to carry the message of the Gospel further in their own time and surroundings. Luther points to 1 Peter 2:9 as the biblical basis of mission, "You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you

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out of darkness into his wonderful light.”

Surprisingly, Lutheran missionary activity and the expansion of Lutheranism is rather small when looked at in worldwide perspective. It is true that the Lutheran church in Africa is rapidly growing and very likely the Ethiopian Evangelical Church, Mekane Yesus (the Lutheran church in Ethiopia), and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania will become the two largest Lutheran churches in the world very shortly. Nevertheless, about half of all nominal Lutherans today live in Europe and North America, and most of them are members of historic Lutheran denominations that can trace their roots back to the time of the Reformation.

There are many reasons why Lutheranism has not completely stepped over its original borders. The geographical situation of the Lutheran lands—for the most part away from the coasts and the sea lanes of the Atlantic Ocean—did not allow much contact with the newly discovered lands of the Western Hemisphere nor with the exploration of the coast of Africa.

In addition, the Lutheran churches found themselves in a struggle for survival against the threats of the Roman Catholic Counter Reformation and the Thirty Years’ War (1618–1648, involving nearly all of Europe at one point or another), and the Lutheran churches had to employ almost all of their energy simply to maintain their existence.

Furthermore, Lutheran churches (and all other churches) lived under the authority and protection of their territorial governments. The oversight of the church assumed by the secular princes limited the efforts of each church to the territory in which the church was located. Only after the step-by-step dissolution of this union between church and state had been accomplished was a missionary engagement with the larger world possible.

For these social-political reasons, Lutherans developed little missionary initiative at the beginning. However, there are also reasons which are rooted in Lutheran theology itself.

A. The Universal Call (*vocatio universalis*)

The assumption that the Christian church has its origin already in the beginning of human history, in that Adam and Eve believed in the “promised seed of the woman” (Christ) in Genesis 3:15, was united with a certainty that God’s Word could not remain inactive. From this premise, the mistaken conclusion was drawn that for all times there has been and continues to be a Christian church, although at times perhaps only a small one. There was no urgent need to send missionaries into the world because the Word of God had been present in the world since the time of Adam and Eve and had already called people to faith throughout the world (*vocatio universalis*). This meant to those who were influenced by this kind of thinking that

the resources of the Lutheran church should be limited to the task of spreading the faith in the lands in which the Lutheran church was already in existence.

This kind of thinking has much in common with the universalism commonly expressed in the modern and postmodern world, but with an important difference. In early Lutheranism, some held that God has already sent His Word into the world and called people to faith. They are saved; there is no need to send missionaries to them. In the idea of universalism, all are saved because all paths lead to the same God, and God would not condemn anyone. As far as the mission of God's people is concerned, in both cases, mission is not required since all are saved.

The idea of a universal call could be developed in a different, more fruitful way, however. In this way of thinking, the starting point was the existence of many individual Christian cells scattered throughout the world, brought into existence through the universal call of God's Word. These cells would naturally grow and could extend outward into their immediate surroundings. To assist their expansion, these cells might need some level of support as a kind of diaspora mission. A missionary person would not need to be sent, because Christians were already present and committed to sharing the Good News of Jesus; but the cell might need some material assistance to carry out the task.

An early example is the Uracher Circle of Primus Truber (1508–1586) and Hans Ill Ungnad von Weissenwolf (1493–1564). Starting in 1561, the Uracher Circle made the effort to support the Lutherans under persecution by the government in Slovenia (Ljubljana), not by sending a missionary, but by translating and publishing books and pamphlets in Wuerttemberg, a Lutheran territory in South Germany. The distribution of these books supported the spreading of the Reformation by local people as far as Croatia and in spreading Christianity as far as Turkey.

In his significant work, *De Regno Christi* (1597), the Lutheran theologian Philipp Nicolai (1556–1608) made God's words spoken to Christ, "Rule in the midst of your enemies" (Ps 110:2), the basis of his missionary program. God's Word increasingly strengthens and anchors the newly planted faith and thereby preserves the church. At the same time, it presses outward across the borders of the existing church and expands the church. Inner (directed toward lands where there are already Christians) and outer mission (directed toward the non-Christian world) complement each other.

Mission is the expanding life of the church, and the church lives from the Gospel, which steps over every established border.

In more recent mission history, God has used immigrant congregations or entire immigration movements (Australia, North America, South Africa, New Zealand, and

Latin America) for mission work. Mission is the expanding life of the church, and the church lives from the Gospel, which steps over every established border.

B. Universal Office of the Apostle vs. Locally Limited Office in the Church

In the course of the controversies of the Reformation era, Lutheran dogmaticians were compelled to answer Roman Catholic claims that the Pope was the successor of the Apostle Peter and had authority over the church throughout the world. The Lutherans answered that the office of Apostle was given once and for all to the men whom Jesus had called personally into service. This office was given one time, could not be inherited, and could not be a basis for universal authority in the church. Authority in the church now was focused on the office of pastor of a congregation, who served the needs of local people.

This understanding gave rise in Lutheran congregations to the tendency to focus exclusively on the life of the local congregation and to restrict to the pastor and only a few congregation members the commission to proclaim the Gospel. It did not take seriously that mission is God's mission to the whole world and involves the whole people of God.

Admittedly, at this point, there were mission opportunities that could have been grasped, especially by Lutherans working together. Lutherans could have taken up many different tasks, e.g., proclaiming the Gospel face-to-face with Jews, Lapps, Inuit, and Moslems, and they could have been involved in producing theological literature. From this perspective, the importance of the laity in mission work could have been recognized and the laity deployed to testify to Christ through word and deed in their daily lives, but this would have to wait until a later period.

C. Church Confession and Personal Confession

With the strong emphasis on the church's confession as it is set forth in the confessional writings of the Reformation, the richness of the Lutheran faith for life could be reduced to an orthodoxy that existed on a purely intellectual level, i.e., assent to a number of correct statements about the Christian faith. The theologians of Lutheran Orthodoxy had already recognized this tendency and warned against it, e.g., Balthasar Meisner (1587–1626), Johann Gerhard (1582–1637).

Personal confession, which is the basic element of all mission, always communicates a personal faith and piety that is transmitted from one heart to another, not just from one head to another. Therefore, it was not by chance that the Lutheran church experienced a missionary explosion first under the influence of Pietism and then later during the period of the Awakening.

II. Lutherans in Action in Mission

A. Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries

At the beginning of Lutheran territorial church life when Lutheran churches were officially recognized by the German states as official state churches, repeated attempts were made to begin mission to the Jews, e.g., Elias Schadaeus (ca. 1540–1593) in Strasburg and Esdras Edzard (1629–1708) in Hamburg. Other initiatives occurred in places where non-Christians lived in the same land as Lutherans (such as Turkish prisoners of war or the Lapps in northern Scandinavia), or as in the Swedish colony in America (Johann Campanius, 1643), and in small trading posts on other continents (in Gambia, 1654; Ghana, 1662–1670). Of particular significance is the work of the Lutheran pastor Hans Egede (1686–1758) and his son Paul (1709–1789) in Greenland among the Inuit.

B. Eighteenth Century

In the age of Pietism, the first initiatives for establishing special missionary institutions emerged (such as what would become known as the Danish-Halle Mission in Denmark or the mission institutes at the University of Halle, Germany). The call in the mid-seventeenth century for such institutions by Justinian von Welz (1621–1668), the Lutheran missionary martyr who died in Suriname, remained largely ineffective.

Mission as organized and led by institutions led to the first great mission undertakings. Those included the Danish-Halle Mission in Tranquebar/South India, 1705–1825, which sent out about sixty missionaries, including Bartholomew Ziegenbalg (1682–1719), and a most notable missionary, Christian Friedrich Schwartz (1726–1798). The Judaica Institute in Halle, 1728–1792, was organized by Johann Heinrich Callenberg (1694–1760) and developed by missionary Stephan Schultz (1714–1776). Karl Rhenius (1790–1838) was sent by the Church Missionary Society (CMS) in London in 1814 to take over the work of the Danish-Halle Mission in India after Danish rationalism had ended Danish mission leadership in India. After Rhenius separated from the CMS in 1837, he became the first missionary to be supported by a Lutheran denomination in America (General Synod), even though this was only for a very short period.

C. Nineteenth Century

During the Awakening Movement, the first missionary efforts made by Lutherans came from confessional Lutherans in Germany in the middle of the nineteenth century, who organized themselves into mission societies. The results of these efforts are still evident today:

- 1836, Dresden Mission under Johann Georg Wermelskirch (1803–1872), relocated in 1848 to Leipzig under Karl Graul (1814–1864), with mission fields in India, Australia, and later east Africa;
- 1841, Neuendettelsau Mission under Wilhelm Löhe (1808–1872), mission to Native Americans and in 1886 in Australia and New Guinea;
- 1849, Hermansburg Mission under Ludwig Harms (1808–1865) and his brother Theodore (1819–1885) in South Africa and later Ethiopia;
- 1871, Leipzig, under the Evangelical Lutheran Central Society for Mission among Israelis (Franz Delitzsch 1813–1890);
- 1876, Breklum Mission in India.

In other Lutheran lands, particularly in Scandinavia, confessional mission efforts were achieved somewhat later: Sweden 1856; Finland 1859; Denmark 1868; and Norway 1891. The missionary movement during this time was possible for two reasons: the emancipation of citizens from state control made it possible to form private societies, on the one hand; on the other, the church was becoming more and more independent from the state.

As soon as churches achieved such independence, they acknowledged mission as a responsibility of the church as such, not simply the responsibility of a smaller mission society or mission committee within the congregation. Church bodies that organized themselves according to this pattern included:

- 1841, Old Lutheran Church, today part of the Independent Evangelical Lutheran Church (SELK) in Germany;
- 1847/1893, the forerunner of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod;
- 1892, Hanoverian Evangelical Lutheran Free Church, today part of the SELK.

In areas where mission movements developed within the German state churches, they became increasingly confessional in the course of the nineteenth century in that they wanted to be committed to a pure biblical theology unaffected by confessional differences. The emphasis on pure biblical theology quickly led to a commitment to the Lutheran Confessions and a clear proclamation of the Lutheran faith. For these nineteenth-century Lutherans, it was assumed that a non-denominational Christianity would be Lutheran, since the Lutheran faith was based on the clear teachings of the Scriptures. This was a very different perspective from the commonly held belief in the United States that non-denominational Christianity would be some variety of Reformed Christianity.

D. Twentieth Century

The two world wars cut off many mission areas from their home bases with their personnel and financial support. In the field, missionaries from the “wrong side” at

work in the colonies were also often hindered in their work by repatriation to their homelands and even internment.

These historical circumstances led to a strengthening of international cooperation through ecumenical associations in order to assist the orphaned missions: International Mission Council (1921) and the World Council of Churches (1948), as well as confessional federations such as the Lutheran Foreign Missions Conference of North America (1919); Lutheran World Federation (1947)—with its international mission radio program, the “Radio Voice of the Gospel” in Addis Abba 1963–1977). The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod also intensified its cooperation with its partner churches in the ILC (International Lutheran Conference, now the International Lutheran Council).

At the same time, the vast geopolitical developments in the twentieth century led to increasing decolonization. In Asia and Africa, newly independent countries emerged, demanding new relationships between church and state and church and mission.

The Lutheran perspective was largely shaped by the theology of the separation of the two kingdoms: the church, God’s kingdom of the right hand, and the state, the kingdom of God’s left hand. For this reason, most Lutheran missions kept their distance from the imperial governments that ruled the colonies. Their watchword was that the Gospel demonstrates its power not through political might, but rather through the power of the Word of God.

Nevertheless, the Lutheran churches in these areas had to redefine their roles amid the changes within these societies. The role of church and state had to be redefined in many emerging nations as the churches lost the support of colonial governments and needed to work out relationships with new political systems and leaders.

Perhaps the most significant change was the greater independence of the young mission churches from the mission societies or home churches through whose work they had come into being. A new type of cooperation developed with the “mother churches” in Europe and North America, a cooperation that recognized that the “young churches” would make their own decisions in their own ways, and these decisions needed to be respected. The “young churches” were no longer regarded as children but were regarded as “sister churches” on both sides.

In a serious misreading of the signs of the time, the decline of churches in the “Christian West” was not seen as a missionary challenge, but was described as a special and inevitable “post-Christian” development affected by secularization, the ideologies of Communism and National Socialism, and many other socio-political changes.

Christian people became unsure of how to live in relation to these new socio-political phenomena. Many of them, even though they had been baptized as children, distanced themselves from the church or rejected it outright. Under both social and political pressure, the churches struggled more with survival than with mission.

The positive side of these developments was and is that increasing numbers of Lutheran Christians have recognized the close connection between mission and evangelism. Mission is not only something that is done across the sea by a handful of professional missionaries, but the Western churches must be at work at every level in sharing the Good News of Jesus with the masses of unbelieving people around them.

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E. At the Beginning of the Twenty-First Century

As a result of the great migration movements caused by wars, the expansion of modern civilization and industrialization, the globalization of business and trade, as well as far-reaching ecological changes, many Christians have found themselves in ecumenically-mixed and even multi-religious populations. Working in the midst of these changes, the challenges for mission are brought closer to home as Christians must find new ways to express the truth of the Christian faith and the gift of confidence and joy it brings. It will be increasingly important for Christians that they do not give in to faithless fear of all things foreign but rather overcome this fear with the confidence that God gives to Christians whose faith is set ablaze for mission.

The God of the Bible is a God of migrants. He called Abraham out of his homeland on a journey of faith. God led His people Israel out of Egypt through the wilderness into the Promised Land. Jesus did not present Himself to His disciples as a stationary point but said, “I am the way” by which one comes to the Father (Jn 14:6). Christ sent His apostles out into all the world (Mt 28:18–20; Mk 16:15). The Epistle to the Hebrews describes Christians as a wandering people of God on their way to the promised, eternal rest. Before this goal is reached, Christians live as foreigners in a strange land. In this setting, the Great Commission is continually contemporary.

Lutheran churches still have the opportunity to prove themselves in the mission field. From a historical perspective, the missionary situation will decide whether or

not the Lutheran churches can communicate faithfully the pure teaching they have received in new situations. If not, they will shrivel up into an increasingly insignificant minority. Christ establishes His claim on all nations in the Gospel. “The Gospel must be preached throughout the whole world” (Luther, 1539, cf. Mk 13:10). It will certainly happen—with or without Lutherans.

III. Methodology in Practical Work

A. Prayer

Prayer has always been viewed as the most important practical activity in the service of God’s mission. In Luther’s explanation of the Lord’s Prayer in the Large Catechism, the only explanation that includes a prayer is the Second Petition, “Thy kingdom come,” which is the mission petition.² In doing this, Luther demonstrated the spiritual significance of mission prayer.

In 1582, Duke Ludwig of Wuerttemberg introduced an obligatory mission petition within the prayer of the church on Sunday mornings—a practice which should be obvious for Lutheran liturgies. Mission can only succeed as God’s matter. “A true believer bears the missionary and the entire mission endeavor in his praying heart” (C.F.W. Walther, 1878).

B. Teaching the Faith

Instruction in the Catechism is the traditional manner in which the mission work of the Lutheran church is begun. Mission and schools have always been closely connected with each other. A clear example is the work of the Danish Lutheran missionary, Ziegenbalg, who founded the first school for girls in India within one year of his arrival in 1707.

Instruction for membership was held in the vernacular language whenever possible. The Catechism was often the first book translated and published, and this often paved the way for the creation of a full vernacular literature. The use of traditional local languages was connected with a strong sensitivity to traditional culture and social orders.

At the same time, innovation was always a part of the missionary program. Medical, agricultural, and technical knowledge was shared, and missionaries were committed to improving the lives of the people with whom they worked. Evangelism and development went hand in hand just as faith and life belong inseparably together (cf. Luther’s explanation to the First and Second Petitions of the Lord’s Prayer).

C. Biblical Piety

Luther's program for Bible translation expanded into the mission field as well. Instruction in Luther's Small Catechism was understood to be the introduction to the Bible, and Bible translation was regarded as urgent. To cite only one example: After Ziegenbalg arrived in southern India in 1706, by 1714 he had already translated the New Testament and the Old Testament up to Ruth into the Tamil language, the vernacular of the local people. Having the Bible in their own language promoted the self-confidence of new Christians. They could read God's Word for themselves. In many lands, this new skill led to an independent and autonomous faith. New believers were not dependent solely on the missionary but could learn from the Scriptures themselves.

Accordingly, high priority was placed on the education of local people for service as clergy. Again, a short three years after his arrival in India, Ziegenbalg was ready to deal with questions regarding the ordination of Indian believers.

D. Holistic Mission

The set goal of having a "Volkskirche im Vollwuchs," a people's church in fullest form, a phrase coined by Gustav Warneck (1834–1910), was characteristic of Lutheran mission in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This was a church-centered piety. Individual Christians were brought into a congregation through the means of grace and became members of the Body of Christ (Article 3 of the Apostles' Creed).

This conception of God's saving work was combined with a view of mankind rooted in Luther's Small Catechism (Explanation of the First Article), according to which people live with one another in a society based on a created order. Christian faith was experienced as a power that altered the old society and gave people a place in the new order as a people set apart for life in God's kingdom. (See, for example, the work of Bruno Gutmann [1876–1967] in East Africa and Christian Keysser [1877–1961] in Papua New Guinea.) Many large and powerful ethnic churches were established in mission lands through Lutheran mission work: among the Kohls in north India, the Batak on Sumatra, among the Oromo in Ethiopia, the Chagga in east Africa, the Ovambo in Namibia, the Tswana and Venda in South Africa, and the indigenous populations of Papua New Guinea.

Unfortunately, an emphasis on indigenous churches could lead to strong efforts to preserve old structures of society, even when social circumstances had vastly changed and were in need of development and reform. Missionaries and young churches faced the temptation to reject or even demonize urbanization and industrialization as a kind of foreign infiltration under European/North American influence. Even in the Western homelands of Europe and North America, modern civilization was seen as the basis for the decline of the old faith. For this reason,

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pious young Americans and Europeans who had no chance for a future in agriculture in their homelands were happy to be sent into foreign mission fields, and their desire to work in rural areas encouraged a move away from industrial centers in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. As a result, many missionary opportunities in the cities remained overlooked as modern civilization spread unhindered around the world.

In addition, their high regard for their mother tongue and traditional culture meant that Lutheran immigrants often held fast to their language and culture in their new homeland and thereby remained cultural islands in their new surroundings. This attachment to one's own culture and culture-bound church often hindered a missionary openness to other population groups and for far too long kept Lutheran churches from serving additional ethnic groups. This high regard for the inherited culture sometimes also enabled a questionable union with nationalistic as well as racist ways of thinking, e.g., not maintaining adequate distance from the ideology of Apartheid in South Africa.

E. "Mission is the one Church of God in Motion"

This beautiful definition, which was formulated by Wilhelm Löhe in his *Three Books on the Church* (1845), is a wonderful vision which has led the Lutheran church through the centuries and should also lead us today. The Lutheran churches have for the most part taken a solitary route in mission because they are bound to an unaltered confession. "Because we in the Lutheran Church have the Word of God in pure unadulterated doctrine and administer Baptism and the Lord's Supper purely according to the institution of our Lord Jesus, we want to urge Lutheran mission" (Ludwig Harms, 1857). But it is exactly for this reason that the Lutheran place in the greater framework of the whole Christian Church cannot be overlooked.

God is one, and Christ is the one Lord of the one Church. All missionary work breathes in its true moving power only from the one Holy Spirit, which unites all Christians with one another in the one single fellowship of service (1 Corinthians 12). Mission is not about the self-promotion of a Lutheran church that wants to hold up its particular form of church life, but rather about the confession of Christ, to whom the Father has given all power in heaven and on earth (Mt 28:18–20) and to whom every knee shall bow (Phil 2:9–11). The Lutheran church serves the one Lord Christ and His one church in proclaiming the pure Gospel according to the Scriptures and the Confessions. This ecumenical commitment forms the working

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structures that Lutherans need to transcend their own social group in Christian love and missionary openness to increase and strengthen the community in Christ.

How Lutherans have done mission over the past five hundred years has been a journey—not without its bumps and curves. Beginning with the basic theological understanding that doing mission is obeying God’s call to share the Good News of Jesus throughout the world, Lutherans of various times and places have struggled to carry out the task. Mission is all about serving people in the world around us, but that world is constantly changing. In their effort to deliver the true and eternal word of God and to be faithful to the Confessions, Lutherans must be attentive to challenges of the ideologies and worldviews of each new generation and pray for the wisdom to face such challenges in God-pleasing ways. Especially in the present day, Lutherans must see that mission is not only something that is done across the sea by a handful of professional missionaries, but rather something done by all at every opportunity, sharing the Good News of Jesus with the masses of unbelieving people around them.

Endnotes

¹ A previous version of this article appeared in *Missio Apostolica* 13, no. 2 (2005).

² Martin Luther, *The Large Catechism* in Kolb and Wengert (eds.), *The Book of Concord* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 447. “Dear Father, we ask you first to give us your Word, so that the gospel may be properly preached throughout the world and then that it may also be received in faith and may work and dwell in us....”