

# ***Lutheran Mission Matters***

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# Keeping the Main Thing the Main Thing

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**The Stimulus (Abstract):** The LMM survey on demographic projections of potential LCMS membership losses and the future of mission in the LCMS prompted this writer to offer some observations on one congregation’s approach to mission and outreach in a time of declining numbers.

## The Wallpaper of Our Culture

In our Western milieu, incessant marketing and entertainment serve as the very wallpaper of our culture. It surrounds us, and we ignore the effects and implications to our peril. People are confronted by constant change and promotion of new things, epitomized by electronic gadgetry, much of which is focused on perpetual entertainment. The advent of the iPhone and its clones—new manifestations appearing almost annually—is paradigmatic. The newest is the best, and before one learns to use it, something better—with more bells and whistles—comes along.

In this context, succumbing to the Zeitgeist is all but inevitable. The assumption is easily made that surely the Divine Service—“worship practice”—can’t help but benefit from “enhancements” and “diversity”—nouns that, like the adjectives “new” and “contemporary,” even “relevant,” often suggest an agenda rather than convey a definite meaning. What is just as easily overlooked is that “as we pray (or worship), so do we believe” and that nothing must blur the focus on God’s gifts to us—His Word and

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Sacrament—by, for example, shining the spotlight on our actions or substituting another purpose for the Divine Service.

### **Release the Word to Do Its Work**

The good news is that there is no need to “enhance” or make “more relevant” the liturgical life of Lutheran congregations. The *Lutheran Service Book* provides five Divine Services and five Daily Offices. Based as they are in the Word of God and a long history in His Church, they have much to offer to people, both inside and outside the Church.

In support of the “good news,” this writer has at least his own experience to offer: life in a vibrant, thoroughly twenty-first-century Lutheran congregation. His observations are, to be sure, anecdotal and based on a narrow sample. That said, he has never been in a congregation as active and alive as his present one, at least since his childhood in the mid-twentieth-century heyday of the Missouri Synod—an era when one knew what to expect at a Sunday service, when pews were filled, when many members lived within walking distance of their church, when *The Lutheran Hour* was heard by millions, when “This is the Life” had a strong following on television, and, of critical importance, when an elementary school was a common structure next to the church building.

First, it should be said that the writer’s present congregation is located in a wealthy suburban area and at one time had a reputation of exclusivity, that is, a country club church, something it still struggles with today. Oldsters even tell the story of intent to limit the membership. It was nearly taken out of the Synod by its pastor and some leaders during the time of the “great trouble” in the 1970s. More recently, a different pastor ran into difficulties while standing firm for scriptural conduct against cultural pressures. Although more than a few members left, a significant remnant “kept the faith” and remained. Yet, for a time, it was considered a “troubled” congregation. Several years later, the faithful pastor resigned for health reasons, and the congregation again had opportunity prayerfully to examine its strengths, weaknesses, and needs.

The congregation called a young pastor, who is scripturally and liturgically oriented, personable, a strong family man, and a very effective teacher, in fact a prime example of the importance of the biblical languages in pastoral education. During his ministry over the past decade, the congregation has nearly doubled in size, including many young families with children so that, for a duffer like the writer, too many children to count populate

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the pews and their parents' arms at Sunday services. Infant Baptisms are frequent, and baptized membership has more than doubled in the decade.

About half of the service attendees also attend Sunday morning Bible classes, a phenomenon outside of the writer's past experience. Overcrowding has recently resulted in adding a second class and purchasing an additional seventy chairs. More Bible classes are held on Tuesday, Thursday, and Friday, along with a Wednesday "family night" that serves also as a time for confirmation instruction and leads nicely into Wednesday evening services during Advent and Lent. To assist in the growing number of activities, after several years of hosting deaconess interns, the congregation has engaged its last intern on a full-time basis. In response to the growth and activity, a planning committee has proposed several choices: add services, add physical space, begin a mission plant, help to "re-seed" a struggling congregation.

The laity are very involved in the life of the congregation. Offices and boards are consistently filled. Activities include events as mundane as periodic work days when a large number of parishioners come to work on the grounds—trimming, weeding, spreading mulch, repairing and setting up the Christmas crèche. Some members volunteer for the whole growing season. Passersby have noticed this kind of activity and remarked on it. Services are enriched by adult and children's vocal choirs and adult and children's bell choirs, partially staffed by a volunteer.

## **Outreach**

Outreach and community involvement are an important and intentional part of the picture. The pastor and an elder are major players in a local nonprofit organization that moves homeless people (often single mothers and children) to permanent domiciles. The organization frequently holds its meetings at the church. The congregation fields an active campus ministry spearheaded by the deaconess, such that there is a score of local university students at services and Bible class every Sunday. One member has long taken it upon herself to transport international students to church services.

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Recipients of monetary and personal support from the congregation of about three hundred communicant members include at present

- two missionary families and a Lutheran Bible Translator family.
- the local Lutheran high school association
- students who attend Lutheran schools

- the LCMS joint seminary fund
- Lutherans for Life
- a Lutheran international student ministry
- an inner-city community school at a Lutheran congregation
- District/LCMS
- KFUO

In spite of the outflow of funds—nay, because of it—the congregation has recently been blessed with modest budgetary surpluses.

Does the congregation connect strongly with its immediate community? That’s not easy given the local populace, which is marked by a presence of great material wealth and, clearly, many other priorities. In fact, most members could not afford to live in the immediate community and instead drive some distance to attend services and engage in other activities.

Nevertheless, the congregation is anything but invisible in the community. A preschool, summer VBS, and a week-long “summer camp” are regular outreach endeavors through which the Holy Spirit works.

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For the past several years, the congregation has sponsored an apologetics lecture event featuring authoritative, well-known speakers that brings in many people from outside the congregation. Signage at the parking lot entrance from the busy thoroughfare adjacent to the church property informs passersby of services, events, and activities. The nearby fire and police first responders enjoy sharing in the food, drink, and fellowship at the annual picnic.

The congregation also provides space for an early morning Bible class attended by students from an adjacent private school. Some members have found “friendship” evangelism effective. Recently, several Sunday Bible class hours were devoted to the Synod’s evangelism program: Everyone His Witness (the LASSIE approach—Listen-Ask-Seek-Share-Invite-Encourage).

For many years, during a three-month period, the congregation’s late service has been broadcasted on KFUO and reaches many more through the Internet. A disabled friend of the writer in southern California listens regularly and commented, “I have been listening to the services from [your church], and they have brought great comfort to me. I find it uplifting to hear a service that uses the liturgy and the traditional lectionary.” Year-round, members who are unable to attend services can participate via a telephone connection. The congregation maintains a website that provides sound recordings of its services and video recordings of the apologetics

events, as well as the usual information: service times, activities, Bible classes, staff contacts, etc.

## **The Keys**

What lies at the center of all this? What do/should people expect and observe at this congregation? First, a faith foundation in scripturally based sermons and both the age-old and newer liturgies and hymns of the *Lutheran Service Book*. With all the latter's built-in "diversity," little else is required. The members know that the Divine Services in the LSB comprise in large part words from Scripture; that is, they hear God's Words and speak and sing them back to Him. It is no secret (just ask the members) that the consistent practice of liturgical services, every-Sunday Lord's Supper, and the fore-mentioned effective, sound teaching in Bible classes, are the major—nay, key—factors in the internal health and external outreach of the congregation.

When non-Lutherans are present for a Divine Service, or for a wedding or a funeral, some may find the "rites and ceremonies" strange, even discomfiting (what's this "poor, miserable sinner" stuff?), but they also experience a congregation that is engaged in the service, that sings the hymns and liturgy enthusiastically, that listens to a Bible-based sermon, that approaches the altar with reverence, and that is really happy to see them and lets them know it. No bait and switch are involved.

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As the pastor puts it, the Holy Spirit works through His means—Word and Sacraments—as He has promised to do. In worldly terms, that's keeping the main thing the main thing.