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Released for Mission at Home— The Texas District of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod

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Abstract: God uses critical stages in life to call workers to ministry. The author left the Eritrean Liberation Front for Sudan at the age of twenty-two, where an Eritrean pastor became the voice of God that changed the trajectory of his life.

The article makes three major points: the mission of God is always Trinitarian; God gives His Church the gifts and resources necessary to do the missionary work; the office of the evangelist is critical in the expansion of the mission of God. The discovery, intentional development, and release of the gifts for the mission of God is, therefore, the role of church leadership.

Introduction

Released for Mission, as a topic for this publication, is so fitting for where I am now in my ministry. It has been eight years since I left LCMS World Mission. As they say in politics, elections do matter. The 2010 elections of the synodical convention of my denomination changed everything for me. I thought I would never go back again to the mission field as a full-time worker. I was offered positions after I left LCMS World Mission to be in full-time ministry, but I turned down all of them. Instead, I enrolled in the MBA program of Ball State University in Muncie,



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Indiana, in the winter of 2014, almost four years after I left St. Louis, Missouri. However, this paper is not about election results and their impact on the future of an organization; it is about how God leads and releases His people into His mission field.

Exactly a year into my MBA program at Ball State, a telephone call came from the Texas District asking me to put my name on the list for a call to the Mission and Ministry Facilitator position of Area B, which is the Northeastern corner of the state of Texas. This call came at a time when I was becoming restless and questioning the idea of working for and retiring from The Lutheran Foundation, a great organization that does much good for churches and nonprofit organizations in northeast Indiana. Having a comfortable life working for an organization flush with money and giving it away generously was not how I wanted to end my ministry.

“Why, then, did you enroll in the MBA program?” may be a question that the reader is asking. The answer to this is not so simple. I must go back to my refugee camp days in the early 1980s. It was the fall of 1981. I was in my early twenties when my friend and I left the Eritrean Liberation Front for Sudan. We entered the city of Kassala late at night; we asked a family in the outskirts of the city to let us stay with them for the night, and they did. The next day, we went downtown to search for people we knew. A few days later, I met my parents’ pastor, who had recently immigrated to the Sudan. Knowing my background, he first requested me to consider serving in the refugee camps as an evangelist. I was just on the door to going back to church but did not expect to be called for higher responsibility. However, I could not say no. I began my journey in ministry instantly. I led small groups, children’s ministry in one of the refugee camps and shared my faith with many joyfully for almost three years before coming to the USA.

I am sure the reader may think that my role as an evangelist in the Sudan might have been a full-time paid position. I worked as a security guard and interpreter to make a living. I was a bi-vocational evangelist, and this opened many doors for me to serve my Lord in a closed Muslim country.

Likewise, when I came to the USA in 1983, I thought I would be a bi-vocational pastor to serve Eritrean refugees. Of course, that never happened; I served in the Church full time as a parish pastor, missionary at large, and as staff in mission leadership of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod from 1991–2010. Now that I am out of full-time called ministry and well rested from the grind of a demanding work as a denominational executive, I thought it was time to explore bi-vocational ministry again—thus, the reason for the MBA.

However, as it happened to me when I began my pastoral ministry in the US in 1991, I was never to be a bi-vocational worker. A call was coming my way, and I could not say no to it. The call is to one of the leading districts in the mission movement of the LCMS in North America. I know the leaders well; I know their

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heart for mission, and I know the congregations that have been so faithful to reach all kinds of people for Christ. I answered the call to come to Texas, and I am exactly where the Lord wants me to be. The years in Indiana and the training at Ball State were just a preparation for the next chapter of my ministry. (Since I am just getting started in Texas, I will have more to say in a few years, after I have more work done and my vision for my ministry has come to some level of fruition.)

In all this, I hope that the reader will realize that we may plan when, where, and how to do the mission, but it is God who determines, guides, and fulfills the missionary task through the people He releases to be part of His mission to reconcile the world to Himself.

In the following pages, I will discuss the mission of God in the Old and New Testaments, the Church as a released body to collaborate in the mission of God, the church-planting ministry and the vision for an evangelistic mission movement of the Texas District.

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The Mission of God

Timothy Tennent starts his discussion of the *missio Dei* by saying, “The word mission refers to God’s redemptive, historical initiative on behalf of his creation.”¹ God is the initiator of mission; while humankind runs away from God because of sin, God continues to pursue those whom He created in His image so that there might be true reconciliation.

The *missio Dei* is also Trinitarian. It is not difficult for me, as an African, to understand that the Triune God is always in a mission to pursue humankind, and this pursuit is a Trinitarian pursuit. The Old and New Testaments are filled with directives that remind us that the goal of the mission of God is to reconcile creation to Himself, and we see the three persons of the Trinity in play in this missional pursuit.

Moreover, the *missio Dei* is universal. Peters describes the universal nature of God’s mission saying, “Universality is a biblical principle expressing the purpose and provision of God. The actualization of this principle and purpose is a matter of methodology and of time. In regards of methodology, the Scriptures prescribe a twofold way—the centrifugal and the centripetal.” Of course, centrifugal is the New

Testament way while centripetal is the Old Testament way of carrying out the *missio Dei*.²

The discussion about the universal nature of the *missio Dei* and the twofold way or methodology is important in missiological conversations, especially as we approach the North American mission field that has increasingly become so ethnically and culturally diverse. Recent practitioners, such as Billy Hornsby, former executive director of Association of Related Churches (ARC), have written on the nature of *The Attractional Church*.³ Neil Cole in *Organic Church*⁴ and Alan Hirsch in *The Forgotten Ways*⁵ have also very eloquently made a case for the missional or incarnational nature of the mission of the Church, while missiologists such as Ed Stetzer would say that all churches should have missional/incarnational and attractional aspects to their work and life. In other words, all Christians should be missional and all congregations attractional.⁶

In the backdrop of the conversation about the heart of God and the work of the Church, we now will look at the *missio Dei* in the Old and New Testament. I will also include my experience and vision for the mission and ministry I am now engaged in in the attempt to let the reader hear from a struggling practitioner.

The Old Testament *missio Dei*

Victor P. Hamilton, in his commentary to Genesis chapters 1–17, discusses the theology of Genesis and reminds his readers that theologians miss the point when the discussion is focused on the “Yahwist or of the Elohist” theories. For the missiologist, and Hamilton would also agree, the main point is the “divine promise.”⁷

God the Father proclaimed this divine promise in Genesis 3:15 immediately after the fall into sin. Luther, in his sermon on Genesis 3:15, also writes that the Devil was eager to devour the Christ as a fish desires to devour a worm on a fishing line. “The fish found the worm a tasty morsel, but the hook remained sticking in his throat; so it is with Christ—he is victorious and through this, God fulfilled his promise.” Luther implies that the Devil discovers God’s plan of salvation too late; he went for the worm, but he got the hook instead.⁸

It was in the mid-1980s at Concordia College, Bronxville, that I was part of an honors discussion group. I remember distinctly one of the topics for our discussion, which was the state of the Church in the twentieth century. My idealist college classmates, smarter than I, were convinced that the Church’s death in North America was drawing near. They thought that the Church would go out of existence in North America within a generation.

Fresh out of Africa, that statement/idea did not ring true to me. I declared that all those who were making the statement would die before the Church dies. The older I

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got, the firmer my commitment that the Church would be triumphant and would march on its militant mission until Christ comes again.

How was it possible for the Church in the Old Testament to remain faithful to the end? Or was it always faithful? The answer to these questions comes by looking into the promise of God to save His people, all people groups, and His promise of His Spirit to sustain His redeemed (Ps 51:11–12). Tennent, when discussing the Abrahamic commission and promise, makes three points: God is the source of mission, God is a sending God, God has a heart for all nations. With the idea of sending also comes the authority and guiding presence that accompanies it, which demands both personal and corporate call for obedience.⁹ This sending is truly Trinitarian missiology, in which the Triune God is releasing the Church to be in mission to proclaim healing and reconciliation to all creation.

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The New Testament *missio Dei*

Luther's bait and fishing hook analogy are appropriate as an opening to this discussion.¹⁰ What was promised in Genesis 3:15 has now come true in the incarnation of Jesus Christ. God enters our human context to be conceived and born of a woman.¹¹ Neither Mary nor Joseph have absolutely anything to do with the announcement and the process of incarnation. The Gospel accounts tell us that Mary was pondering this in her heart; Joseph obeyed the call of the angel to take Mary as his wife. The devil, in Luther's words, was caught by surprise, and all his attempts to foil the incarnation and ministry of the Second Person of the Trinity failed (Mt 16:23; Mk 8:33; Lk 4:8). Of course, the greatest of all in the devil's attempts to foil the mission of the Son is the temptations (Lk 4:13).

Jesus also speaks of the Holy Spirit (Jn 14:26) as the one sent by the Father and the Son. His sole purpose is to guide, empower (Acts 1:8), teach and bring into remembrance the teaching of Jesus.¹²

The Trinity was at the beginning of the creation and is throughout the Scriptures in the work of restoring all creation to Himself. The promise for a Savior, as is stated in the "Proto Evangel" in Genesis 3:15, came to fulfillment in the incarnation, in the suffering, death, and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ, and in the coming of the Holy Spirit and the sending of the Church.

Moreover, as Schulz has eloquently stated, “justification forms the centerpiece of Lutheran missiology, and around it clusters a series of principles that are influenced and normed by it.”¹³ The doctrine of justification will be the organizing principle in our discussion of the sending of the Church into the world to be the light and salt of the world as she proclaims the justifying life and work of her Lord, Jesus.

The Sent Church—Released for Mission in the Book of Acts

Quoting the theological statement on mission of the Commission on Theology and Church Relations (CTCR) of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, Schulz says, “Mission is rooted in the mystery of the triune God, whose entire being is a communication and a giving of Himself to the world. The triune God is the subject of mission and, as the church pursues her mission, everything she does emanates from God and reflects His being.”¹⁴

However, before we get into the sending of the Church in the Acts of the Apostles, a brief discussion on the Great Commission as discussed in the Gospel accounts is helpful to the conversation on the mandate and role of the sent church. The Great Commission of Matthew 28:16–20 is the one that is discussed the most among these commissions by Jesus to practitioners. Peters discusses the Great Commission, not just as an isolated text, but as an integrated message found in all four Gospels and the book of Acts: Matthew 28:18–20; Mark 16:15–16; Luke 24:44–47; John 20:21–23. In this conversation, he makes the point that the commission is an imperative by the Lord to reconcile the world to Himself by the Gospel and through human instrumentality.¹⁵

Jesus commissions His disciples before His ascension once more to go and preach the Gospel, beginning in Jerusalem going to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). F. F. Bruce says, “The whole verse, including the promise of the Spirit, the gift of power, and the geographical instructions, forms a summary of the narrative of Acts.”¹⁶ Repeatedly, we see the same concept displayed in the Acts narrative. The Church is persecuted (Acts 7–8) and then scattered; and as it goes into hiding and dispersion, the Gospel proclamation goes on, and the process is repeated over and over again. Tennent says,

The persecution, suffering, and eventually death of Christ are portrayed as fulfilling God’s plan.

In the same way, although the suffering and persecution of the church take place through the agency of a sinful world, it too is part of the larger, unfolding plan of God’s sovereign purpose for His church. In the face of persecution, the disciples are told not to fear “those who kill the body and after that can do no more” Luke 12:4.¹⁷

A persecuted church of the Acts of the Apostles was able to stand firm and proclaim the Gospel to a known world then, and the Church of all ages will continue to do so. The gates of hell will not prevail against it. The doomsday prophets may use statistics and other factors to begin writing the obituary of the Church anywhere in the world; the fact remains that the Church may be persecuted and her members wavering at times, but the Lord is faithful to His promise, the promise He gave to our father, Abraham.

The Offices in the Church: Their Role in the *missio Dei*—Eph 4:11–13

Johannes Verkuyl, in his book, *Contemporary Missiology: An introduction* discusses the motives for mission. The pure motives are the motives of obedience, love, mercy and pity, doxology, eschatology, haste and personal. The impure motives are imperialist, cultural, commercial, and ecclesiastical colonialism.¹⁸ Especially his explanation of ecclesiastical colonialism is important in our conversation about the sending of the Church. Verkuyl says, “Ecclesiastical colonialism is the urge of missionaries to impose the model of the mother church on the native churches among whom they are working rather than giving the people the freedom to shape their own churches in response to the gospel.”¹⁹

Why is the issue of missionary motives important in the discussion of passages like Ephesians 4:11–13? The idea of sending implies that the sent ones are entering new communities and even new cultures as they are going to proclaim the Gospel. They go into new communities who have a cultural perspective that may not necessarily differ from that of the Gospel message. Understanding what is cultural and what is central to the Gospel message is critically important, especially in an urban culture where global cultures collide daily. Thus, the concern for uniformity and diversity in forms is certain to continue.

What is important, however, is that the offices in the Church are specifically given for equipping the members of the congregation to be the missionary agents in a world that lives in darkness. Peters discusses the offices fully as the “instruments of missions” in his book, and they are apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastors-teachers.²⁰ Suffice it to say that the Church, as the body of believers in Christ, is a sent church.²¹ Peters says,

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As we turn to the disciples, we discover similar experiences. They, too, were sent ones—messengers, ambassadors, apostles. On several occasions, Christ sent them forth into ministries. He chose them that they might be called apostles, or ‘sent ones,’ Luke 6:13.²²

Scudieri also agrees with Peters. Scudieri states that “if the phrase apostolic church had been used . . . , it would have meant missionary church, the church of the ‘sent ones.’”²³ The offices are given then to equip the sent ones, who are all disciples of Jesus Christ, to do the ministry that they are charged to do. In all this, there is only one pure motive, which is “freeing consciences and strengthening faith.”²⁴ All else, especially cultural things, are systems that will need to be adjusted as the context demands.

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The Texas District and Church Planting Vision—The Ablaze Movement

One of the issues that became very controversial in The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod in the last decade was the Ablaze Movement. The vision of the movement announced shortly after the 2001 Synodical convention, was to have Gospel contacts with one hundred million people globally. The vision to plant two thousand congregations by the five hundredth anniversary of the Lutheran Reformation was announced at the 2004 convention.

Texas District was one of the few districts that committed to planting 200 congregations as part of the Ablaze vision. The district has planted more than 140 congregations and ministries as part of the vision, which is far more than any other district of the LCMS has been able to do.

Looking Forward—The Role of the Evangelist for Reaching Texas for Christ

The Texas District is committed to planting congregations. In Area B, the area where I serve as the Mission and Ministry Facilitator, which is the northeastern corner of the district, we have the vision to raise seven apostolic church planters to plant multiple congregations in the next ten years. The plan includes the raising up of Timothies and Tituses to take over the new plants as the apostolic church planter moves on to the next target community to repeat the planting process.

So far, we have four apostolic church planters identified: two from the Hispanic and two from the Anglo communities. We want to plant congregations in the

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sprawling suburban communities. We have identified four hot spots where The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod does not have a strong presence. These are areas that are recently developed or are in the process of development.

We also want to enter into the urban communities, where millions are living in very concentrated areas in apartment complexes. We have an apartment ministry in four communities in the Dallas area of the Metroplex and plan to expand to Tarrant County soon.

The rural communities are also underserved. These communities can be and often are as closed as the gated communities in the cities and suburbs. The plan is to embed evangelists in these communities by raising five hundred evangelists by 2031, the year when the district will celebrate its 125th anniversary. Persons of peace, who live within those communities, will have better access than a missionary coming from outside would have in proclaiming the Gospel and bearing fruit.

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Conclusion

As a freedom fighter trained to kill the enemy and die for the freedom of his nation, I never thought church work was in my future. I have been in some battlefields spared from death with a non-life-threatening wound, finally to find myself in a refugee camp called to serve differently. The call to ministry was not in my plans. I have also tried to plan my future in ministry. I want to be in control of my life. However, things never went the way I planned them most of the time, especially when my plans were out of step with God's plan for my life and vocation. In all this, I have learned a few things that have proven effective in my ministry:

1. God has already given us the gifts necessary for our Christian vocation. The gift of an evangelist is, therefore, one of the gifts (offices) that the Lord gives to His Church, and those who have it are to be obedient and use their office in the mission of God.

2. God will supply for his mission field. This awareness has freed me to serve boldly without fear of what may happen with paid positions. I am always ready to make a living as a security guard, janitor, interpreter, or clerk, as I faithfully do the work of an evangelist.

3. God uses the words of believers to call His workers to recognize the spiritual gifts that He has given them to bring His kingdom to the communities around us and us. Because of this awareness, I always see an evangelist/missionary in every believer who comes my way until proven otherwise.

4. It is God's will that every community should have access to the Gospel. The Church's role is, as the Lord has sent her, to send her members to all people groups, communities, and places to be the heralds of the Gospel. Access to the Gospel must not be dependent on economics.

5. Where there is a ministry that is making an eternal difference in the lives of people who live in darkness, there is the devil working overtime to discourage, destroy, and deceive. This perspective has given me a better appreciation for the persecuted Church, the Church that boldly and faithfully has proclaimed the Gospel throughout the ages and in all places.

I am not giving up on the Church. The Church of Christ is and will always be victorious. Her head, the Lord Jesus Christ, has conquered death and the powers of the devil. In the ebb and flow of life, the Church may look like a flickering light, but it eventually glows with radiance, because the Triune God continues to create, redeem, sanctify, and guide His Church. It is with this hope that we will continue to march forward until the Lord calls us home or comes back again to restore all things to Himself.

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To God be the glory!

Endnotes

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