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Inside This Issue: Released for Mission

The current issue of Lutheran Mission Matters explores the theme “Released for Mission,” patterned truly after the Acts 1:8 model. A homily Professor Jeff Oschwald preached on “Philip the What?” on the day in the liturgical year when the Church commemorates Philip the Evangelist. The surveys, articles, and mission encounters cohere as they urge the readers to become Gospel witnesses, sharply contrasting with the unfounded pessimism that lingers in some corners that the missionary labors of our time are futile and in vain.

The cover story is a composition of the data the authors of the article received from a variety of church members, pastors, mission executives, and synodical leaders who spoke from their heart how we can be more missional, reflecting on our Synod’s past experience.

Professor Oschwald has contributed the lead article on our theme, “released for mission,” based on his detailed study of the Book of Acts. Yohannes Mengsteab, of Eritrean descent, shows how—in his work as a pastor, church planter, and mission executive—God uses his ministry to reach out to Americans outside of church walls. While Larry Merino avows that local congregations are the hope of the world, Richard Gahl affirms that our pulpits are the avenue for preaching God’s mission. John Juedes affirms that deacons were missionaries, based on a closer reading of the biblical narrative in Acts 6.

In the last century, our church body pioneered reaching the world with the voice of the Gospel through radio, and Kirk Farney’s essay focuses on the life and ministry of Walter A. Maier, the epitome of that ministry. Armand Boehme shows America is the new mission field and that Lutherans have the opportunity and the means to seek out to the new generation with the promise of the Gospel.

Mike Rodewald takes an outside look at the missio Dei in 2 Kings 5 and shows how God works through unusual means to reach out to those “who may not be like us” with God’s love in Jesus Christ. From his personal experience as a Lutheran theologian in South Africa, Karl Böhmer asks where mission agencies are going with the mission of God.

In the section on encountering mission, Carlos Winterle shows how local lay leadership empowers the Church and congregations to spread the Good News across cultures.

In a context close to home, David Berger demonstrates that in upscale suburban neighborhoods, historic Lutheran Word and Sacrament liturgical services work well as missionary means for reaching out to friends and neighbors in a winsome way.
Pastor Dale Hedstrom shows that God’s love reaches out to all people and invites them to gather as communities in Christ, regardless of where a congregation might be located. Hedstrom shows that God is doing His work in mission and ministry through His people, using local congregations as missionary outposts. Whether rural or suburban, servants of the Gospel need to be sensitive to working outside the traditional ways of outreach. Miriam Carter shows Christians are released for mission because Scripture commissions them for God’s mission.

There is hope. This hope is rooted in Scripture and well founded in our own confession. We go forward with the mission of God.

Victor Raj,
Editor

_Lutheran Mission Matters_
Editorial

New Doors Open for the Good News

Victor Raj

Lutherans engage the Church’s ministry and mission today with some virtual discomfort if not excessive fear and trepidation, for fear that the contemporary missional church may not be keeping in step fully with the traditions the faithful from early on have embraced. Correspondingly, certain constituents of the institutional church assume that our generation already is post-missional, and all we need to do is preserve our respective traditions and conserve the values our fathers passed on to us. For the Church and for the Christian, mission and ministry are not two separate entities. In fact, mission is ministry and vice versa. The one without the other is unthinkable.

Ever-emerging spiritualities and constantly changing worldviews are overwhelming and in some ways intimidating to those who customarily hold onto the status quo of the institutional church. Traditional ways of expressing the faith, worship styles, and the ways in which Christians interpret the world cannot remain stationary in a fast-changing world. The Church and the faithful people of God need to identify innovative ways and means to adapt to the situations in people’s lives, and bring a word of comfort and hope to an otherwise fractured and hopeless world. No culture forever remains monolithic, and neither can the Church.

Institutional churches are already experiencing a bewildering loss in terms of membership and a disheartening decline in weekly worship service attendance. Regular attenders notice that their Sunday experience does not necessarily resonate with the daily life they lead outside the church walls, in the workplace, and the marketplace. Apparently, certain traditions hold them captive to a culture that claims its moorings in sacred history, conventions, and customs, while causing them to disengage the secular world in which they live and work daily. A sheltered environment in the Church impels them to disregard the world they are in, where God has called them to interact regularly with family, friends, and neighbors who may not necessarily share a common faith or worldview. Furthermore, these Christians feel unprepared and unequipped to share as missionaries the love God has in Christ for all people across cultures and ethnicities for their salvation from sin, Satan, and death.

This issue of Lutheran Mission Matters shows with examples that the Church’s concern and apprehension over newer approaches to outreach and mission is literally out of place. The Church’s mission actually is God’s mission. God has delegated to His Church His mission for all people to believe, teach, and confess that Jesus is
their Savior and Lord. The people of God are released through Baptism for God’s mission in the world that He first created and on which He lavished His love in Christ.

The churches in the postmodern West grow primarily because they are making use of methods that have been effective and fruitful for bringing the Gospel of God to the traditionally non-Christian cultures in the majority world. Wherever Christianity has been a minority religion, ongoing mission encounters occur as God’s people make house calls, meet others in the marketplace, hold small group meetings, and launch house churches, allowing people to know Jesus without plucking them away from their natural, cultural origins and environments. In the United States, today’s congregations multiply as Christians reach out to the de-churched and unchurched, involving in large measure immigrants in the country for whom the Christian Gospel is brand new. People and communities that are new to the faith feel welcomed and accepted to the extent they are given opportunities to build interpersonal relationships with Christians. Whether at home or far away from home, the mission of God operates well initially when presented on a personal level, in small groups and in house church settings patterned after the services of the first-century evangelists and missionaries.

A missionary church is an outgoing church that invites into the household of God men, women, and children from all walks of life and keeps the faith active in love with an outward focus that reaches out to friends and neighbors for the sake of Christ.

Martin Luther proposed three worship styles for the local congregation for relating the Gospel to various people groups at their level. For traditional members and regular attenders who might be the elite and sophisticated, Luther recommended the Latin Formula Missae. For the ordinary unlearned lay folk of Germany, though, Luther recommended the German Mass in the vernacular.

Conversely, for those who may be new to the faith Luther proposed a third order of worship that he called the evangelical model, for beginners echoing perhaps what today’s missiologists and church planters identify as the first-century model. Luther suggested that worship should be designed for “those who want to be Christians in earnest and who profess the Gospel with hand and mouth should . . . meet alone in a house or somewhere to pray, to read, to baptize, to receive the sacrament and to do other Christian works.”1 Introducing the Luther texts, Stolle wrote that “every Divine Service is endowed with a missionary dimension.”2 Evangelists, church planters, and missional theologians of all time have Martin Luther’s approval in all they do to reach out to the lost with the Gospel of God.

Inside this issue readers will find a cadre of essays and reflections relative to how God’s mission extends throughout the world, at home and abroad across cultures. Solid Gospel witnessing, rooted in Scripture and the Confessions, is

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1 Introducing the Luther texts, Stolle wrote that “every Divine Service is endowed with a missionary dimension.”
2 Evangelists, church planters, and missional theologians of all time have Martin Luther’s approval in all they do to reach out to the lost with the Gospel of God.
practical and relevant for all people in these postmodern times. Surveys, articles, and reflective essays here presented are by Lutherans serving as theological educators, leaders, and missionaries in various parts of the world. They do not in any way compromise their Lutheran identity and are forever cognizant of the changes and transitions that are occurring in their own neighborhoods that have local and worldwide implications. Lutherans are always bold and ready to confess Christ as a testimony for all people. New doors open for the Gospel to enter human hearts as never before. God’s people live today in exciting times.

Endnotes

Dear Friends in Christ,

If you don’t already know, you should, that it is Dean Burreson and his staff who diligently and faithfully produce the worship bulletins that guide our worship together here day after day, season after season, year in year out. That is one normal parish duty that we chapel preachers don’t have to worry about. And that’s a good thing, too, because, if today’s bulletin had all been up to me, I would probably still be in my office right now, frantically trying to decide what to call our commemoration today. Even my sermon has across the top of Page 1 the title “Philip the What?” Let me illustrate for you my quandary by considering briefly the texts that could have been the basis for our message this morning.

Once we realize that we are not commemorating Philip-one-of-the-Twelve, but Philip-one-of-the-Seven, our thoughts probably go immediately to Acts 6. Here we read the account of a complaint, a matter of neglect, a need that had been identified among the Christians of Jerusalem. And that need was met by the appointment of seven men, “well spoken of and full of the Spirit and wisdom” (Acts 6:3), among whom was our Philip. So far so good, but there’s barely a word of Acts 6:1–7 whose meaning has gone unchallenged and is not currently the center of debate in the study of Acts. The pulpit hardly seems the place from which to charge into such a fray, though countless preachers have disagreed with me on that point. What is important for us this morning is that Philip is nowhere here called a deacon. In fact, not one of
the Seven is called a deacon. In fact, Luke does not ever refer to anyone as “a deacon.” But whatever service it was that these seven men were being appointed to carry out, Philip was judged by all to be qualified for it, and he proves himself to be willing to carry it out. Through the service of the apostles and the service of these seven men, “the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem” (Acts 6:7). So, even though Acts 6 provides important information about Philip, it almost raises more questions than it answers for us, and so seems a poor choice for the one text to use to commemorate him.

If we jump ahead to some twenty years later in the story of Acts, we find our Philip again making a brief appearance, although so much has happened in the meantime that I fear we readers are more plagued by narrative amnesia at this point than we are by difficult and unanswered questions. We read in Acts 21:8, “On the next day we [that is Luke, Paul, and their fellow travelers] departed and came to Caesarea, and we entered the house of Philip the evangelist, who was one of the seven, and stayed with him.”

How do you imagine this scene? Is this the highlight of Philip’s career when Saint Paul deigns to stay with him and his family? The waiter on tables welcoming the apostle to the nations? Do you imagine Philip’s hands trembling as he now serves at the table of the man from Tarsus? If so, then you’ve forgotten. You’ve forgotten the first impact these men had on each other’s lives, and you’ve forgotten everything that Luke has told you about them since.

Why is it that Philip is hosting Paul in Caesarea and not in Jerusalem? What forced Philip to abandon his much-needed care of the widows there? Why is it that Philip took to the road and began proclaiming Christ in Samaria? Because Paul, this Paul, sitting in Philip’s living room with his tired feet on Philip’s coffee table, was trying to kill him—Philip and every other person from Jerusalem to Damascus who professed his or her faith in Jesus Christ. If anyone’s hand trembled at that first handshake, if anyone looked at the floor because it was hard to look the other in the eye, if anyone felt that he was the younger brother being embraced by the older, I’m guessing it was Paul. But such feelings, if they were there at all, would have immediately been disarmed by the warm hospitality of Philip, a hospitality animated by the One who would one day say to Philip, “You have done it unto Me.” And it may well be the case that Paul and Philip were already old friends by the time this visit took place. Paul, you will recall was no stranger to Caesarea.

And yet, it is not Philip the Hospitable that we commemorate this morning. And I don’t think he would have been happy with the epithet anyway. I suspect the epithet Philip would have preferred is the one that Luke actually gives him here in chapter 21, the one that seems to best represent what Philip’s life was really devoted to: Philip the evangelist. Philip is, in fact, the only person that Luke calls an evangelist. He is the only person in the entire New Testament called an evangelist.
We know there were others, for Paul tells us that God has given His Church evangelists (Eph 4:11), and Paul even tells Timothy to do the work of an evangelist; but it is Philip alone who is referred to as ὁ εὐαγγελιστής, “the evangelist.” And to see Philip the evangelist at work, we have only to turn back to Acts chapter 8, to the text that finally seemed to be the best choice upon which to base our commemoration.

Acts 8 chronicles two important moments in Philip’s career, but it is in the second where we get to hear a little more clearly the evangelist’s voice. Luke summarizes Philip’s message in Samaria for us with just these few words: “he proclaimed to them the Christ.” Philip preached, Philip did wonders, and there was much joy in that city. But it is along that desert road that stretched from Jerusalem to Ethiopia that we get a little clearer picture of Philip’s evangel—and of Philip himself.

That it was the Spirit of Christ that Philip was full of is shown in a rich variety of ways throughout this passage. Philip’s willing obedience, glad obedience, to go and do whatever was needed is almost dizzying as Philip first heads north, then heads south, then runs to catch the chariot. And don’t forget, at the end of the episode Philip gets “snatched” by the Spirit and dropped in Azô’tus. And he simply carries on from there.

Philip begins his conversation with the eunuch by asking a question that sounds very much like his Lord, who was always asking, “Have you not read?” and “How do you read?” And Philip’s response to the eunuch’s question, “About whom does the prophet say this?” is much more Christ-like than we might first think. We hear the words that the eunuch was reading:

Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter
and like a lamb before its shearer is silent,
so he opens not his mouth.
In his humiliation justice was denied him.
Who can describe his generation?
For his life is taken away from the earth.

—and we immediately say, “That’s Jesus, of course.” In fact, we probably would not have let the eunuch get past “he was led to the slaughter.” But, F. F. Bruce reminds us:

There is no evidence that anyone before the time of Jesus had identified the Isaiaonic Servant with the Davidic Messiah, but [Jesus] seems to have identified them in his own person and by his own act. When he insisted that it was written concerning the Son of Man that he should “suffer many things and be treated with contempt” (Mark 9:12), it is difficult to think of a more suitable scripture as the basis of such words than Isa. 52:13–53:12.
And the same is true when Jesus insisted, “Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?” And you know what came next: “Beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, [Jesus] interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself” (Lk 24:26–27). Philip, it seems, gave the eunuch the 12½-minute version of the same sermon. When and where and how Philip had come to be so filled with the Spirit of the Christ who opens minds to understand the Scriptures is not told us, but that Philip was an evangelist in the truest sense of the word cannot be doubted. And by the conclusion of this episode, Philip has brought us geographically, ethnically, and dramatically in mission to the door of Cornelius.

Martin Luther regarded Philip as one of the “little preachers” through whom God works “great things.” Speaking of Stephen and Philip together, Luther wrote: “Certainly they were not asked or called by anyone, but they did it on their own initiative and by reason of a common law, since the door was open to them, and they saw the need of a people who were ignorant and deprived of the Word.”

Who was Philip? What was Philip? The difficulty we have in answering these questions only serves to enhance the beauty of Luke’s account of Philip’s career of service and to magnify the importance the memory of him holds for us today. Philip must certainly be the patron saint so desperately needed by a church that strains out the gnat of a title or position description and swallows the camel of a lost opportunity. While we complain about how difficult things are getting in Jerusalem, Philip, unbidden, has converted Samaria. And yet, when someone needs a cup of cold water in the Lord’s name—or a fount of living water in the desert, a bed for the night or a hot meal for the journey, a kind word or the Good Word—and what difference does it make if it’s a widow or an apostle or a confused magician or an excluded foreigner from another continent who is needs it?—Philip is there. He is willing. He is ready. He loves. He serves. And what he offers is nothing but what he has received. And in and through and with it all, what he offers is always the good news of Jesus Christ. He is Philip the Evangelist.

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Endnotes
Articles

A More Hopeful Future for the LCMS

Robert Scudieri, Daniel L. Mattson, Jon Diefenthaler, Andrew H. Bartelt

Synopsis: The Synod’s projection that the LCMS will lose 500,000 more souls has caused pain and despair. As missional leaders in their denomination, the authors looked for a more hopeful direction. They sent out a question about the future of the LCMS to over five hundred influencers in the Synod. The responses received were both heartening and chastening, and they shared both frustration and hope. In large measure, they demonstrated a multitude of instances where congregations and individuals have taken initiatives to bring the good news of God’s great love to the growing number of Americans who do not know the Gospel. God’s people have seen the challenge and have acted in hope. The purpose of this article is to share that hope.

“For you should know that God’s word and grace,” Martin Luther wrote in 1524, “are like a passing shower of rain that does not return to where it has once been.” Over the past several years, members of the current administration in the

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Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS) have frequently used Luther and this same “passing shower of rain” analogy in order to explain, if not justify, its alarming membership decline.

**Declining to 1.5 Million Members: Demographics and the LCMS**

More recently, demographic studies have provided further support for this same view of the Synod and its future. These have in fact suggested that the Missouri Synod is likely to lose another five hundred thousand members in the next decade. At the outset of 2018, President Matthew Harrison released a “white paper,” the essence of which subsequently became the chief theme of his President’s Report to district conventions, and one that reaﬃrms our “joy” in being “fully Lutheran” in the face of such demographic evidence. Nevertheless, the future projected for the LCMS is one that is clearly bleak and depressing.

Surprisingly, the implications of the George Hawley demographic study, contracted by the Synod and published in the Synod’s *Journal of Lutheran Mission (JLM)*, is not seen as an urgent call to action but as an incontrovertible sign that Lutherans must simply wait while an additional quarter of its already greatly reduced membership is lost over the next fifteen years or so. After that distressing period, the LCMS will again reach equilibrium, and . . . And what?

In his published dissertation, Hawley notes that from a demographer’s point of view the cause of the dramatic losses in the Lutheran Church can be summarized as

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the difference between the number of babies born to Lutheran parents and baptized into the Lutheran church and the number of Lutheran members who pass away. At the present time, losses in the LCMS are cushioned by “demographic momentum.” As Hawley puts it,

Most of those Lutherans born in the 1950s and 1960s are still alive. Because of the small numbers of infant baptisms in the LCMS today, once the older cohort begins to die in large numbers, we can expect the denomination to significantly contract. In fact, we are rapidly approaching the stage when more adult members of the LCMS are dying every year than are being born.4

To wait while the Missouri Synod hemorrhages members until its birth rate finally equals its death rate does not offer much hope of a future healthy, vibrant LCMS.

Nor is the road to that future likely to be easy. If the LCMS loses another 25% of its membership, the LCMS will be a very different church body. If the losses were evenly distributed, and every congregation lost 25% of its membership, this would be tragic enough in itself. Of course, this is not the way in which the losses will be experienced.

Hawley’s analysis in JLM of the demographic data led him to the conclusion that “LCMS adherents are disproportionately found in counties experiencing population loss. The regions where the LCMS is strongest—the Great Plains and the Western Corn Belt—are also among the regions suffering the greatest population loss.” LCMS congregations are also located where the median age is above the national average.5 In addition, the latest statistics (2015) reported by the LCMS indicate that 60% of LCMS congregations have 199 or fewer confirmed members, including the 35% of congregations that have fewer than 99. A decline in membership in these contexts threatens the continued life of these congregations. This decline in turn sets other system challenges in motion. The number of clergy required to serve a membership of 2.7 million is quite different than the number required to serve 1.5. The two LCMS seminaries will face new challenges, as will the Concordia University System, and the list goes on and on.

Since its beginning, the LCMS has had a compelling zeal to share the Good News of Jesus with the world. There is no question that the present challenges are very great; but it is the conviction of the authors of this essay that there is a much more hopeful future for the LCMS and that under God’s grace, wisdom, and power, there are additional things that we can consider doing in order to help facilitate it.
1944: When the LCMS Last Totaled 1.5 Million

The need for closer reading and study began when we found that Luther’s “passing shower” analogy was part of his address “To the Councilmen of All Cities in Germany That They Establish and Maintain Christian Schools.” There he argued that the time had come to overhaul their entire system of public education (there was no separation of church and state in Germany in 1524) for the common good of their communities and for the recovery of the Gospel in churches where they worshiped. He believed that the crisis was, in fact, an opportunity that was not to be missed, and his words in fact amounted to a “call to action.” As Luther, himself, stated in the same immediate context of his “passing shower” analogy, “And you Germans need not think that you have [this opportunity] forever. . . . Therefore, seize it and hold it fast; for lazy hands are bound to have a lean year.”

In addition, we examined attitudes toward the future exhibited by the LCMS the last time its membership stood at the 1.5 million mark that is forecast for our Synod in the coming years. For a quick description of the Missouri Synod’s zeal for God’s mission in ever-changing contexts, we recommend Michael Newman’s video presentation, “The Real LCMS Strands of DNA from the Movement Called ‘Missouri’” on the LSFM website (https://lsfm.global).

We found that 1944 was the year the LCMS numbered 1,501,315 baptized members and 1,033,875 communicant members. It was likewise a time of crisis and change in America. The nation was at war both in Europe and the Pacific. Rationing of all resources and restrictions on travel affected nearly everyone. An estimated 115,000 men and women from Missouri Synod congregations were in military service, some 77,000 of whom were overseas on the front lines of battle. Nevertheless, the Synod, with considerable energy, was hard at work preparing for a brighter future. Plans for celebrating the centennial of our founding in 1847 were moving ahead with dispatch, and the groundwork was being laid for carrying the Gospel forward at home and abroad. In the Concordia Seminary report to the 1944 Synod Convention, the seminary noted that the students had organized a “voluntary Foreign Mission Society” to “stimulate interest in Foreign Missions” and to “study the lands, peoples, customs, and languages of China, India, Africa, South America, Russia, and Japan.” In addition, the seminary announced that it had taken initial steps to establish a “Mission Department.”

Already in 1935, the Cleveland Synod Convention established a “Candidate Fund” to support the approximately three hundred seminary graduates who did not receive calls during the Great Depression. They were sent on a temporary basis into...
larger congregations and by mission boards to survey territories ripe for harvest and to engage in door-to-door canvassing of neighborhoods. By 1944, all of these same graduates still available for calls had not only received them, but in many cases, they went on to become the respected parish pastors of the 1950s and 60s who stood out because of their strong commitment to outreach and evangelism.

With the Synod’s endorsement of the Lutheran Women’s Missionary League in 1942, it also had an organization determined “to develop and maintain a greater mission consciousness among the women of Synod.” Sponsored by the nearly all-male Lutheran Laymen’s League, Walter A. Maier’s Lutheran Hour was being broadcast on 682 radio stations, and the number of letters from listeners being received at its headquarters was exceeding five hundred thousand. Congregations nation-wide proudly identified themselves as “The Church of the Lutheran Hour.”

In 1944, moreover, the Synod’s Board of Directors was bold enough to authorize a Five Million Dollar Peace Thank Offering (equivalent to 70.85 million 2018 dollars), and by the close of World War II during the following year, the total in gifts and pledges had surpassed this ambitious goal.8

While it all seems so simple in retrospect, nearly every decision seemed to the leaders of the time to be full of uncertainty and risk. Yet, one is struck again and again by how the leadership of the church felt itself challenged by a changing America and was equally determined to use its resources to bear clear witness to the Gospel with the expectation that God would bless their efforts.

In 1944, in spite of all the restrictions the war effort imposed, the Synod gathered all its Circuit Visitors throughout the United States and Canada to discuss the task of the church in the post-war era.

In his opening sermon, John W. Behnken, then-president of the Missouri Synod, spoke of the task of the leaders of the secular world not only to win the war but also the peace, giving “thorough thought and study to possible solutions of both present-day and future problems.” He immediately noted, “As God-appointed church leaders everyone [sic] of us is vitally interested in these things. We know that the church will face enormous problems, and with God’s help we must find the correct solution.”9

In his welcoming address at the same meeting, O. P. Kretzmann, then-president of Valparaiso University, noted,

I am certain that many of you, fathers and brethren, have been concerned over the occasional manifestations of defeatism and quietism in the Church militant. There has been a certain shrugging acceptance of things as they are. We, too, may be tempted to retire from the stage of history. It would be so much easier to remain in our corners of life and limit our vision to the seen. If we do that, however, we shall not be in the great Christian and Lutheran tradition. The working of the Spirit of God is always to the future.
There is no room in Christian life and thought for a Golden Age in the past. There can be no such thing as a spiritual primitivism. The story of the Church between Pentecost and the last Advent is a story of a tremendous pilgrimage toward the future because God alone is in the future, and the Church militant moves toward him.\textsuperscript{10}

The conference then turned its attention to the issues confronting the church. The papers have titles that would take us too far afield like “The Returning Service Men and Women,” “The Office of the Visitor,” “The Christian in the Community,” “The Postwar Battledline [sic]—The Family,” etc.

H. A. Mayer’s article, “‘Do the Work of an Evangelist’ (A Discussion of Mission Methods),\textsuperscript{11}” is characteristic of the presentations and is devoted to the task of sharing the Gospel. Recognizing that “the pastor must be mission-minded,” he recognizes that the pastor has “special mission opportunities” in preaching and other ministerial contacts; he has a position of respect within the community (“It is a good rule for a pastor to endeavor to make at least one mission call a day,” 72); he trains his members to be missionaries (“The large classes of adults are, in a very large degree, the fruit of lay mission activity,” 74); he works to see that visitors are welcomed, that there is an active mission society in the congregation; and he makes use of special activities like neighborhood surveys (“at least every two or three years,” 75); etc. All of these instructions are presented not as rules to be followed, but as examples of activities that had been shown to make a difference.

Of course, that was then and this is now. Much of what is suggested—especially the specific activities—seems quaint and impossible to implement in the twenty-first century. American life and culture have changed in ways that were largely inconceivable in 1944. That way of being the church is unlikely to return ever. However, the need for the church to take seriously the challenges it faces and creatively and collectively seek solutions is the example to be taken.

\textbf{Toward a Hopeful Future: Responses from the Church-at-Large}

We recognize that seeking a similarly hopeful future for the LCMS is not about numbers, but about people. It is about the Word of the Lord going forth, and it is about the Holy Spirit working through means, through Word and sacrament, among and through His people. It is also about “all nations.”

\textbf{The need for the church to take seriously the challenges it faces and creatively and collectively seek solutions is the example to be taken.}
The means of grace are “means,” and so are pure doctrine, solid catechesis, theologically-informed practice, as well as goal setting and counting. These are never ends in themselves, but the means that facilitate the mission of God in Christ through the Holy Spirit. In God’s incarnational design, this same mission has been entrusted to us—His people, feeble and faltering, weak and waffling, and easily distracted into focusing exclusively on the means and not the end. We are reminded that a carpenter whose only concern is keeping his tools in good shape but never venturing to build something is destined to be a poor carpenter.

Furthermore, we are hopeful enough to believe that our profound, biblical theology—expressed and confessed as Lutherans do so well—is not just for those already predisposed to our Lutheran ways. If we believe this theology is bibically correct, then it needs to be shared with everyone, regardless of culture, ethnicity, or human “like-mindedness.” This is God’s work, God’s mission. God could have done it all by Himself, but God has chosen us to be His hands, His feet, and His mouths.

Convinced that there is a more hopeful future for the LCMS than the recent demographic studies of our membership trends seem to indicate, we decided to construct a brief survey of persons across the Synod. We cobbled together various email lists of Synod and District officials, the general readership of Lutheran Mission Matters (LMM), and others in various networks, with the encouragement to respond to and to distribute to other interested parties, the following question:

Demographic projections shared at recent district conventions and elsewhere indicate that despite current efforts at evangelism, church planting, and revitalization, the LCMS may lose as many as 500,000 additional members in the next decade. Do you think there is a more hopeful future in mission toward which the LCMS, empowered by God the Holy Spirit, might seek to work? If so, please describe the steps in mission and outreach that our Synod, and congregation pastors and lay leaders, with the aid of God the Holy Spirit, need to consider taking.

We got responses!! We sent the question to 533 email addresses and received 104 responses, a remarkable response rate of 19.5%. Some were short and to the point. Others wrote essays worthy of future publication. Most were pleased to be asked. We gained and gleaned insights and ideas that can fuel ongoing discussions, and we hope to continue this conversation very publicly via this journal. And many more, who for whatever reasons did not receive the survey question, are sincerely asked to contribute their thoughts as we move forward.
Some of those who did respond expressed frustration at the Synod’s general inability to turn from the past to the present and the future, from “who we were” to “who we need to be” in order to address the twenty-first century, North-American context. Many more expressed hope, confidence, even excitement over engaging the challenges in today’s mission fields, so ripe for harvest, but with some refinements in the methods we have employed. We are very grateful to all those who took the time and effort to reply and hereby publicly express our sincere appreciation for their helpful and creative responses.

Overall, the responses were encouraging, even hopeful. Mission energy abounds in the LCMS, and there are many ideas and places through which and where God the Holy Spirit seems to be working mightily. There is also some frustration amidst the “joy” of being “fully Lutheran,” especially when it comes to defining “fully.” Yes, we must know who we are as Lutheran Christians, and we must uphold our solid understanding of biblical theology; but these, too, are “means” and not the “end” of what we are about.

There is also some concern about the lack of mission energy, vision, and encouragement in dealing with the challenge of declining congregations that have reached a point of simply striving to survive. At the same time, we clearly heard much that is positive, hopeful, local, and “glocal,” frequently anchored in the efforts of specific contexts rather than corporate pronouncements and programs.

What follows is an attempt to summarize the hopeful themes of the responses we received. Space does not permit much detail here, and we got plenty of detail. We also promised that responses would remain anonymous, which pushes us toward more generalities. A side effect of this project is the prospect of following up in various ways, as our survey generated considerable grist for the mill of future conversations and articles for *LMM* and other mission-focused platforms.

**Summary of Survey Responses**

1. **The Use of Sociology and Demographic Studies**

   Many who responded to our survey affirmed that Jesus is Lord of His Church and the gates of hell will not prevail, regardless of demographic studies. We are not driven by sociological studies, but by the Word and the Spirit of God. Others added that Jesus entrusted His mission to His disciples and His Church to be witnesses and to engage the world with...
means that lead to God’s ends. Yes, we are faithful—to His Word, to sound doctrine and practice. This is our faith and life, so that we may give witness to our identity as the people of God.

Several drew honest conclusions, asserting that the demographic studies are accurate and potentially helpful. They pointed out that we are a very dedicated and committed church body, but one that is still heavily invested in an institutional definition of “church.” But we now find ourselves in the midst of a society that is largely uncommitted to “church” as such.

In addition, we are part of a predominantly Anglo church in the midst of an increasingly non-Anglo context, even though there are many unchurched folks “like us” right outside the doors of many of our congregations. In short, sociology can function as a mirror and a window. It can show us who we are and what impact we are making, or not making. More importantly, it can provide a view of the world into which Christ has sent us, and it can open our eyes to ways we might become more effective agents and messengers of God’s truth and life.

In fact, many who responded to the survey cited the extraordinary mission opportunities that the demographic statistics present, and they stressed that, given our commitment to the Word of God, we are extremely well-positioned to be a powerful force within the mission of Christ. We have hope!

2. Engaging Cultures No Longer “Like Us”

This awareness leads to the single, most common and hopeful theme in the responses we received: We must address the changing culture “out there,” not simply with critique of the loss of values, and not simply with the hope that if we are a bit more welcoming (though many of our churches could stand to be a bit more welcoming), then more people will come and want to become like us.

The key question is, how do we move from thinking primarily about “us” to putting “others” foremost in our thoughts? Was not St. Paul’s mission strategy one of seeking to be “all things to all people” so that “by all means he might save some”? He did not seek to create pockets of “fully” messianic Jews, nor did he propose homogeneous groupings of Jewish and Gentile believers; he sought a new and radical unity in Christ that both recognized and transcended issues of cultural identity. Wrestling with these issues is exciting, and it may well lead to insights not only about other cultures but also about who we are as Lutheran Christians in the twenty-first century.
Answers must begin with attention to the non-Anglo, non-Northern European cultures all around us. The syllogism seems obvious: If we are 95% Anglo as a church body, and the Anglo population is declining, we will, of course, continue to decline in membership. Yes, we might give greater attention to the Anglo population around us that is unchurched or de-churched, especially where our own cultural accoutrements are less likely to get in the way of our witness. But if the demographics demonstrate that we will not and cannot “birth” our way into growth, then becoming a bit more of “all things to all people” might be a mission strategy worthy of our serious, urgent, committed, and intentional attention. Becoming all things to all people does not mean that “anything goes.” St. Paul surely did not mean that. But he did seek to take multi-cultural contexts seriously.

It also does not mean that we simply do more “ethnic ministry,” although this theme was often sounded in the responses we received. More importantly, it means intentionally reaching out to those who may be culturally “other,” and doing so as sisters and brothers in Christ, with all of us bringing our own cultural background to the one body of our one Lord and Savior.

This approach, it was suggested, was one of the unsung successes of the “Ablaze” movement in the first decade of this century. The goal that it set for LCMS churches was to pray and to work to begin one thousand new ministries among ethnic groups different from white, English-speaking people, and the goal was exceeded. In the process, the LCMS also ventured into some unfamiliar territory, listened, learned, and struggled with issues of language and culture.

We gleaned a long list of specific ideas from respondents that gives great hope and energy, and it illustrates what many LCMS churches and their members are already doing. It starts with looking outward, getting outside the building and “getting our hands dirty” in the community.

It continues with the need to understand urban sociology, build relationships, break down barriers, pay attention to the next generation (not as a target about which we wring our hands in grief, but as full partners in the mission of Christ), invest in leadership whose cultural background does not reflect the synod majority (age and gender, as well as ethnicity and culture), attend to “bridge building” that reaches “out” and not just “in,” and listen, listen, listen! Several responses from non-Anglos expressed sincere appreciation, along with a little surprise, even to be asked and taken seriously.
3. Our Great Strengths

Many responses focused on the great strengths we have in the LCMS, starting with our theology, including doctrine, commitment to Scripture and the Confessions, rich liturgical worship, and the Lutheran distinctives that can serve us well in today’s context. Others noted the Synod’s history of strength in education, from preschool to higher education and theological education.

We also have reason to rejoice in a history of innovative technology, remembering the early use of radio and television to reach the masses, and how even now Lutheran Hour Ministries (LHM) is plowing new ground in the use of the internet and other media in order to bring the love of Jesus to the attention of people in North America and around the world.

We can stand in awe of the vision and the faith of the LWMLL with respect to the resources this organization is developing for the sake of mission advancement, as well as their commitment to bringing more women from ethnic minority groups into their midst. The use of current technologies has also proved to be useful in the formation of pastors at our seminaries and opened doors to more women and men serving Christ in a public way.

Another recurrent theme was the Synod’s view of the partnership between those called to public ministry and the priesthood of the baptized. Most emphasized the underutilization and lack of real commitment to a serious role for the laity in a church that seems to be growing more “clergy-dominant,” and that—somewhat ironically—is in a time of decline in seminary enrollments.

Many noted the need to “translate” LCMS theology and practice into other sociological and cultural contexts. If the people of the LCMS reflect a truly biblical theology and possess the pure Gospel and seek to follow theologically-informed practices, they surely have the capacity to imagine a church that is truly “for all,” regardless of anyone’s background and ethnicity or the demographic trends of the day. In any case, the church must present God’s truth, anchored in the means of grace, but always with an awareness of the context and the culture in which it is working.

4. Mission Service Agencies

Responses to our survey noted the good work of the LWML and LHM, not to mention many congregations and ministries that are vibrant, faithful, and effective. Lutheran Hour Ministries was cited as an example of an organization that has done its “demographic homework” and, as a result, developed a plan to reach the unchurched. Many took issue with reports and publications of the Synod that do not seem to take seriously or call attention to local congregations where significant growth is taking place.
Often overlooked, as well, are younger ministries that have grown up to support the mission of congregations and districts. These include the Center for U.S. Missions, the Transforming Churches Network, LINC (Lutheran Inner-City Network Coalition) in its various local iterations, the Acts 5:2 Network, Mission Nation Publishing, and other mission networks and support societies. These ministries are likewise sources of hope for the future of the LCMS, and we certainly hope that the Lutheran Society for Missiology and this (LMM) journal continue to be a source of encouragement and a “safe space” for discussion.

5. Challenges of “Walking” (and Working!) Together

More negatively, another theme that emerged described the systemic problems that are present within the Synod as an organization. Many highlighted the division into those who are committed to missions as a true priority (the “missionals”) and those who are not (many of whom consider “missional” an inappropriate-for-Lutherans term). Others noted the dysfunctional governance, attempts at “top-down” control, on the one hand, and independent congregational attitudes on the other, all of which work against any unified spirit, not to mention strategic thinking or planning. The Synod has those who focus more on seeking the “lost,” even seeing it as the goal of church and its mission. Others focus on gathering the “found.”

The responses demonstrate a deep desire to discuss these things in an atmosphere of transparency, forgiveness, and hope. There is a felt need for conversations about what it means to be a faithful Lutheran-Christian, or, more radically, a reorientation to what it means to be the Body of Christ in the world. Are we a single cultural group with the goal of preserving one type of music, language, and dress? Rather than talking with one another, will we remain divided into our own subgroups of “like-minded” people who don’t listen to the others and are often energized by criticizing them? The responses show the will of many to discuss these issues so that the mission can proceed joyfully through us.

Similarly, some respondents noted the fact that conventions of the Synod do not represent the majority of the Synod, not to mention minority demographic groups, since conventions are often organized in a way and at a time that makes them difficult to attend.

The need for more pastors and other church workers was highlighted, along with the need for attention and for significant changes in the way the church raises them up and prepares them.

There is a felt need for conversations about what it means to be a faithful Lutheran-Christian. . . .

Direct criticism of Synod’s leadership was cautiously approached.
Direct criticism of Synod’s leadership was cautiously approached, though there were calls for greater accountability and better listening within a spirit of unity rather than divisive pushes for control or preoccupation with identity as Lutherans rather than the mission of furthering God’s kingdom. One theme, prompted no doubt by the question that was posed, was a perceived sense of resignation on the part of our current leadership to demographic realities rather than using them for creative and generative thinking linked to a much more hopeful future. Many are convinced that we need new leadership with fresh ideas, greater energy, and the capacity for inspiring all members of our church body who desire a more hopeful future.

6. Strengths of Pastoral and Lay Leadership

Many respondents to our survey affirmed the importance and the blessing of pastoral leadership when it comes to holding up our Lord’s mission as primary. Also affirmed was the high regard the Synod has had for pastoral formation and solid theological education. At the same time, there is a desire for greater flexibility, more attention to local contexts, and the need to instill an “apostolic” zeal for reaching the “lost” rather than caring only for the “found.”

An even stronger motif was encouragement for equipping and releasing the laity for mission. Not only does the pastor need to be in the community, the laity must be made more aware of the unchurched with whom they rub shoulders every day. Key verbs mentioned were “equip,” “encourage,” “empower,” “engage,” and “release.” We are blessed with a host of educated, talented, resource-filled laity who, in many cases, want to be in mission. Praise be to God for this gift! Why not put it to work?

As Lutherans, we are joyfully intentional in our mission efforts, and we enjoy a sense of freedom under the Gospel. We avoid turning evangelism and witness into legalistic exercises or guilt trips. We thank God there has been joyful intentionality in mission over the years, just as we have been intentional and joyful about our doctrine, practice, and worship.

7. More Signs of Hope

The hopeful responses to our survey were, as expected, focused more on local issues. Congregations with strong pastoral and lay leadership, focused on Word and sacrament ministry, are growing, some with traditional, liturgical worship forms and others with a variety of “contemporary” or non-traditional forms. We received countless stories of community engagement, congregations

A major theme was ethnic, i.e., non-Anglo, mission, not simply as an area of outreach, but as a source of “best practices” in evangelism.
involved in activities “outside the building,” and a general “external” rather than “internal” orientation.

A major theme was ethnic, i.e., non-Anglo, mission, not simply as an area of outreach, but as a source of “best practices” in evangelism. The aggressive mission planning, and even goal setting, of our African brothers and sisters stands in stark contrast to a passive acceptance that the LCMS may lose another five hundred thousand members in the next decade. They serve to remind us that the global picture of Christianity is far more positive and hopeful than what statistics reveal about North America and Europe. We also were prompted to remember that during the first thousand years of Christianity’s history, one-third of all believers lived in Asia, and as many as 10% lived in Africa. All of this was, in fact, taking place long before there was any of the “Western” Christian heritage that many of us tend to see as normative.

Congregations that warmly welcome visitors and communicate a culture of openness and hospitality are, not surprisingly, actually receiving new people. Human care and mercy ministries make a difference with their commitment to finding ways to meet people’s needs and to build bridges for taking mission out to the world rather than simply waiting for the world to come to us.

What we found most encouraging is the confidence that our God is also the Lord of the Church, which is the body of Christ empowered by the Holy Spirit. Jesus Christ has redeemed us, humble sinners made holy by the blood of the Lamb. In that spirit, many responses called for repentance—from the highest levels of leadership to each and every one of us, for specific sins of ignoring and neglecting the urgent mission of Christ as the very basis for our lives as humble, forgiven sinners living in the grace and mercy of God toward us and for all members of the human family.

So What Have We Learned?

1. Praise God! There Is Lots of Mission Activity Going On!

We found this in the significant number of responses and the words of encouragement that many provided. Those who responded as such were glad to be asked. We learned that there are even greater mission opportunities for working together if we just listen to one another.

2. There Are Obstacles That Can Be Overcome!

Some obstacles to growth clearly lie with our own synodical culture, which can be used either to encourage and “release” congregations for mission or to control and
restrain mission. Checks and balances are good, and we need to listen both to the 
words of encouragement and to the critical concerns that are expressed. But there is 
an obvious need to identify more ways that serve to unite us, rather than pitting 
ourselves against each other by taking the “both/and” of Lutheran theology and 
turning it into an “either/or.” We learned that there is a strong desire to celebrate 
more of what we share in common in the LCMS. The vast majority of the Synod is 
anxious to move forward with both sound doctrine and Lutheran practice in the 
service of the mission of Christ’s kingdom. Actually working together side-by-side is 
more likely to lead to joyfully Lutheran outreach than continuing to focus on 
factional battles.

3. Word and Sacrament, Theology and Practice Are Fundamental, but Always 
Contextualized!

Strong Word and Sacrament theology and practice are indeed foundational to all 
mission endeavors, but they must also be culturally incarnated, expressed, and 
mediated. Questions of “theology and culture” are essential and key to understanding 
mission in twenty-first-century North America. The good news is that we have the 
necessary theological tools, and in the next generation of church workers there are 
native speakers ready to address the cultures around us. We learned that, in this 
regard, there is energy, awareness, and hope!

4. Within the LCMS We Have a Rich Mission Heritage to Reclaim!

We learned that the Synod still cares about the mission of Christ in our world. 
But at this point in time, we are clearly not of the same mind as yet on how best to be 
God’s mission agents. At the same time, we have reason to thank God that we can 
move into the future with the sure knowledge that His Spirit is able to guide us to 
accomplish everything He needs for the sake of His mission.

5. An “Outward” Perspective Is Essential!

We learned that with the right leadership, congregations (and the whole Synod) 
can be encouraged to look “outward” rather than “inward.” This focus includes a 
better understanding of the context and community in which God has placed them 
and seeing themselves as a “mission outpost” in the world of today.

6. There Is a Need for New Ways to Reach Our Cities!

The LCMS is predominantly a rural and a suburban church body, and our 
demographics tend to match these environments. But the greater mission fields are 
where we are currently not well-positioned in twenty-first-century North America. 
We learned that new mission experiments and commitments to our nation’s urban
centers are an important key to the more hopeful future we envision for our church body.

7. We Must Engage Those Who Are Not “Like Us”!

The LCMS has a history of being a growing church body through outreach to new immigrants. We knew how to welcome Northern Europeans fleeing political and religious persecution, as well as seeking a better standard of living. The more hopeful future we project for our Anglo-dominant denomination in a non-Anglo-dominant world involves a vision of the people of God as bigger than any single cultural or ethnic grouping. We learned that in many places this is already beginning to happen!

8. The Next Generation Is a Source of Hope

The rising generation is already imbedded in the mission context of our contemporary culture in North America. They have no memory of the “good old days” of a “churched” culture, when church-going was the thing to do. We learned that many of them have a good sense of what needs to be done to reach people for Christ in our time. So why not learn from them and even release them for mission?

9. All Mission Is Local!

We learned that there is no “one-size-fits-all” approach. Mission is contextual, and we must be able to discuss the proper ways and means of contextualization instead of just arguing about it. Today, there are many examples of new Lutheran mission starts that have found creative ways to contextualize the saving Gospel of Jesus Christ. Centralized programs are limited in what they might achieve. Centralized control can be an obstacle. But we rejoice that much is happening locally in LCMS congregations, based on their members’ love for the Lord and His Church and on their concern for the unbelieving population around them.

10. We Need Each Other

The energy and resources of the Synod are bigger than one or the other side of the synodical convention aisle. One of the campaign planks of the current administration was to overcome the disunity in the Synod. Eight years later, the gap between the so-called “missional” and the so-called “Confessional” factions is as wide as ever, with many mission endeavors simply ignored or even dismissed by the Synod’s administration. We cannot find unity simply in preaching to our own

There is no “one-size-fits-all” approach.
political choirs. The checks and balances in our Synod are important, but we actually need to listen to one another, take the strengths and insights of each side seriously, and work together to keep our balance and awaken the sleeping giant that others see in us. A strong commitment to the distinctive strengths of Lutheran theology, together with energy and commitment to the mission of our Lord, can combine to make us a powerhouse of the Holy Spirit into all the world.

Conclusion

First of all, we believe that a more hopeful future for the LCMS is not about numbers, but about people, souls, the rule and reign of God, whose mission is the world’s redemption. The use of sociological studies can be helpful, and we would do well to learn even more from what they can tell us, about what is working and what is not, while subjecting everything to theological evaluation. Numbers are not sinful either. We count attendance at worship and the Sacrament. We count pastoral acts and visitations. We reckon with sanctification and stewardship, and we account for budgets.

All the criticisms associated with “Ablaze!” mission goals in the first decade of this century notwithstanding, there was an increase in the number of church plants, especially in immigrant and non-Anglo communities. “Ablaze!” also involved the first church-wide offering that attempted to free up more of the Synod’s members for mission, returning $3.4 million to participating congregations to support their own mission projects, $7.6 million to participating Synod Districts, and $12.6 million for the Synod’s national and international efforts.

Secondly, we are convinced that a more hopeful future for the LCMS involves a willingness to adapt our ministries to the changing context in which we are living. In 1944, it was with great care for maintaining our confessional integrity, and despite charges of “unionism” from other members of the Synodical Conference, that our Army and Navy Commission developed a strong corps of military chaplains, 236 of whom were on active duty during that year. We also followed the same road taken by the army of 23 million people who left home to work at defense installations and war-production plants, establishing “trailer missions” within the temporary housing parks; and we were taking into account the African-Americans within this transient population, who were migrating by the droves from the South to urban centers in the North. A more hopeful future for the LCMS, in our estimation, demands leaders who openly recognize the post-churched age that
has fully dawned in twenty-first-century North America and who are equally willing to adapt our mission efforts to this new terrain and environment.

Thirdly, we believe that a more hopeful future for the LCMS means renewed efforts on the part of our congregations and their leaders to see and to seize the opportunities that the changing and challenging climate of the twenty-first century is presenting to us. In the wake of World War II and the advent of the Cold War, the Synod’s official centennial historian, Walter A. Baepler, much like Luther before him, concluded his work on *A Century of Grace* with an eschatologically-grounded “call to action.” “The centennial of Synod must stimulate its members to reconsecrate themselves to the work of the Lord,” he wrote. “If the Missouri Synod, bountifully equipped with spiritual and material resources, refuses to discharge its obligations as a missionary agency, the Lord can and will call forth a Church to do His bidding, for ‘this Gospel of the Kingdom’ shall be preached in all the world for a witness unto all nations; and then the end shall come.”

Fourthly, in the spirit of the theme of this issue of *LMM*, we believe that the necessary course of action is a resounding call for everyday participation in the mission of Christ on the part all the baptized in the LCMS, lay men and women as much as clergy, one that is not only faithful to our doctrine and practice, but clearly and authentically addresses the challenges raised by contemporary culture. This is what our forebears did in 1944; and during the following two decades, our Synod’s membership nearly doubled. Our survey revealed that many long for new leadership with fresh ideas, greater energy, and the capacity for inspiring those in our church body who desire a more hopeful future. Our intent in sharing this is not to tear down any elected or appointed leaders, but only to note there is a strong desire for change, one that is built upon the confidence that our Lord will lead His people to better ways of serving Him in our efforts to reach out to other members of the human family.

Finally, and above all else, we already know the One who has sent us on this incredible mission of hope and healing. What’s more, He goes with us. We are empowered and released for mission. The prophet Isaiah put it this way in the midst of some of the darkest and declining days of the kingdom: “I took you from the ends of the earth, from the farthest corners I called you. I said, ‘you are my servant’; I have chosen you and have not rejected you. So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand” (Is 41:9–10).
Endnotes

1 View the responses on the Lutheran Society for Missiology’s website: 
4 Hawley, Decline, 99.
5 Hawley, JLM, 24.
7 Reports and Memorials for the Twenty-Fourth Delegate Synod (Thirty-Ninth Regular Convention) Assembled at Saginaw, Michigan, June 21–30, 1944, 2.
9 Addresses Delivered at Visitors Seminar held at Valparaiso, IN, November 14–17, 1944. St. Louis: Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Missouri, Ohio, and Other States, A-1.
10 Visitors Seminar, A-5
11 Visitors Seminar, 70–79.
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¿Un futuro más esperanzador para la LCMS!

Robert Scudieri, Daniel L. Mattson,
Jon Diefenthaler, Andrew H. Bartelt

Sinópsis: La proyección de que la LCMS (siglas en inglés para The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, https://www.lcms.org) perderá 500.000 miembros ha causado dolor y desesperación. Como líderes misionales en su denominación, los autores buscaron una dirección más esperanzadora. Enviaron una pregunta sobre el futuro de la LCMS a más de quinientos líderes influyentes en el Sínodo (abreviación para la LCMS). Las respuestas recibidas fueron alentadoras y de duras críticas, así como expresiones de frustración y esperanza. En gran medida, demostraron una multitud de casos en los que congregaciones e individuos han tomado iniciativas para llevar las Buenas Nuevas del gran amor de Dios al creciente número de estadounidenses que no conocen el Evangelio. El pueblo de Dios ha visto el desafío y ha actuado con esperanza. El propósito de este artículo es compartir esa esperanza.

“Pero debes saber que la palabra y la gracia de Dios,” escribió Martín Lutero en el año 1524, “son como una lluvia pasajera que no regresa de donde antes ha estado.” Durante los últimos años, los miembros de la administración actual en La Iglesia...

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Luterana, Sínodo de Missouri (la traducción más común para la LCMS) ha utilizado con frecuencia a Lutero y esta misma analogía de “lluvia pasajera” para explicar, si no justificar, su alarmante disminución de miembros.

**Una membresía declinando a 1.5 millones de miembros: Demografía y la LCMS**

Más recientemente, los estudios demográficos han proporcionado más apoyo para esta misma visión del Sínodo y su futuro. De hecho, estos estudios sugieren que la LCMS perderá otros quinientos mil miembros en la próxima década. A comienzos del año 2018, el presidente Matthew Harrison publicó un documento, cuya esencia se convirtió posteriormente en el tema principal de su Informe como Presidente a las convenciones de distrito, y uno que reafirma nuestra “alegría” de ser “completamente Luteranos” a la luz de dicha evidencia demográfica. Sin embargo, el futuro proyectado para la LCMS es claramente sombrío y deprimente.

Sorprendentemente, las implicaciones del estudio demográfico por George Hawley, contratado por el Sínodo y publicado en el *Journal of Lutheran Mission*— *JLM* (publicación del Sínodo en inglés sobre temas misionológicos Luteranos), no es considerado motivo para un llamado urgente a la acción, sino más bien una señal incontrovertible de que los Luteranos deben simplemente esperar mientras la cuarta parte de su membresía ya muy reducida, se pierde en los próximos quince años.

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Después de ese período de angustia, la LCMS volverá a alcanzar su equilibrio, y... y entonces, ¿qué?

En su disertación publicada, Hawley señala que, desde el punto de vista de un demógrafo, la causa de las dramáticas pérdidas en la Iglesia Luterana puede resumirse como la diferencia entre el número de bebés nacidos de padres Luteranos y bautizados en la Iglesia Luterana, y el número de miembros Luteranos que fallecen. En la actualidad, las pérdidas en la LCMS se ven amortiguadas por un “impulso demográfico.” Como lo describe Hawley:

La mayoría de los Luteranos nacidos en los años cincuenta y sesenta siguen vivos, aunque ya de edad avanzada. Debido a la pequeña cantidad de bautismos infantiles en la LCMS de hoy, una vez que la generación de personas de edad comienza a morir en grandes cantidades, podemos esperar que la denominación se contraiga significativamente. De hecho, nos estamos acercando rápidamente a la etapa en que cada año mueren más miembros adultos de la LCMS, que los que nacen. Esperar mientras que el Sínodo “hemorragia” sus miembros, hasta que su tasa de natalidad finalmente sea igual a su tasa de mortalidad, no ofrece muchas esperanzas para una futura LCMS saludable y vibrante.

Tampoco es probable que el camino hacia ese futuro sea fácil. Si la LCMS pierde otro 25% de su membresía, la LCMS será un cuerpo eclesiástico muy diferente. Si las pérdidas se distribuyeran equitativamente y cada congregación perdiera el 25% de sus miembros, esto sería bastante trágico en sí. Por supuesto, esta no es la forma en que se experimentarán las pérdidas.

El análisis de Hawley publicado en el JLM sobre los datos demográficos, lo llevó a la conclusión de que “los adeptos de la LCMS se encuentran de manera desproporcionada en los condados que experimentan pérdida de población. Las regiones donde la LCMS es más fuerte, el “Great Plains” y “Western Corn Belt” (zonas geográficas del centro de los Estados Unidos), también se encuentran entre las regiones con mayor pérdida de población.” Las congregaciones de la LCMS también están ubicadas donde la edad promedio está por encima del promedio nacional.

Además, las estadísticas más recientes (del año 2015) reportadas por la LCMS, indican que el 60% de las congregaciones de la LCMS tienen 199 o menos miembros confirmados; inclusive, el 35% de las congregaciones ya tienen menos de 99 miembros.
miembros. Una disminución en la membresía en estos contextos amenaza la vida continua de estas congregaciones. Esta disminución, a su vez, pone en marcha otros desafíos al sistema. El número de miembros del clero requerido para servir a una membresía de 2.7 millones es bastante diferente al número requerido para servir a 1.5 millones de miembros. Los dos seminarios de la LCMS enfrentarán nuevos desafíos, al igual que el Sistema Universitario Concordia, y la lista de secuelas sigue y sigue.

Desde su inicio, la LCMS ha tenido un gran entusiasmo por compartir la Buena Nueva de Jesús con el mundo. No hay duda de que los desafíos actuales son muy grandes; pero es la convicción de los autores de este ensayo que hay un futuro mucho más esperanzador para la LCMS y que bajo la gracia, sabiduría y poder de Dios, hay cosas adicionales que podemos considerar hacer para ayudar a facilitarlo.

**1944: El año cuando la membresía de la LCMS totalizaba 1.5 millones**

La necesidad de una lectura cuidadosa y un estudio más intenso comenzó cuando descubrimos que la analogía de la “lluvia pasajera” de Lutero formaba parte de un discurso cuyo título fue: “A los concejales de todas las ciudades en Alemania que establecen y mantienen escuelas cristianas.” Allí argumentó que había llegado el momento de reacondicionar todo su sistema de educación pública (no había separación de la iglesia y el estado en Alemania en el año 1524) para el bien común de sus comunidades y para la recuperación del Evangelio en las iglesias donde ellos adoraban. Creía que la crisis era, de hecho, una oportunidad que no debía perderse, y sus palabras en realidad equivalían a un “llamado a la acción.” Como el propio Lutero declaró en el mismo contexto inmediato de su analogía de la “lluvia pasajera”; “Y ustedes, los alemanes, no deben pensar que tienen [esta oportunidad] para siempre. . . . Por lo tanto, apoderarse de ella y manténganla firme; porque las manos perezosas sin duda, tendrán un año con pocos resultados.”

Además, examinamos las actitudes hacia el futuro exhibido por la LCMS la última vez que su membresía se ubicó en la marca de 1.5 millones que se pronostica para nuestro Sínodo en los próximos años. Para obtener una descripción rápida del celo del Sínodo por la misión de Dios en contextos de constante cambio, recomendamos la presentación en video de Michael Newman, “Las hebras de ADN que son propias de la LCMS del movimiento llamado ‘Missouri’” en el sitio web ([https://lsfm.global](https://lsfm.global)) de la Sociedad Luterana para Misiología (Lutheran Society for Missiology—LSFM en inglés).

Encontramos que, en el año 1944, la LCMS contaba con 1.501.315 miembros bautizados y 1.033.875 miembros comunicantes. Igualmente fue una época de crisis y cambio en los Estados Unidos. La nación estaba en guerra, tanto en Europa como en el Pacífico. El racionamiento de todos los recursos y restricciones de viaje afectó a casi todos. Aproximadamente 115,000 hombres y mujeres de las congregaciones
del Sínodo se encontraban en el servicio militar, de los cuales 77.000 estaban en el exterior en la primera línea de batalla. Sin embargo, el Sínodo, con considerable energía, estaba trabajando arduamente preparándose para un futuro más brillante. Los planes para celebrar el centenario de nuestra formación (el año 1847) avanzaban con el entusiasmo, y se estaban sentando las bases para llevar el Evangelio en el país, así como en el extranjero. En el informe del Seminario Concordia a la Convención del Sínodo del año 1944, el seminario observó que los estudiantes habían organizado una “Sociedad de Misiones Extranjeras Voluntarias” para “estimular el interés en Misiones Extranjeras” y “estudiar las tierras, pueblos, costumbres e idiomas de China, India, África, América del Sur, Rusia y Japón.” Además, el seminario anunció que había tomado medidas iniciales para establecer un “Departamento de Misión.”

Ya en el año 1935, la Convención del Sínodo en Cleveland estableció un “Fondo de Candidatos” para apoyar a los aproximadamente trescientos graduados de seminario que no recibieron llamados durante la Gran Depresión. Fueron enviados temporalmente a congregaciones más grandes y por juntas misioneras para examinar los lugares “listos para la cosecha” y participar en el sondeo en comunidades, haciéndolo puerta-a-puerta. En el año 1944, todos estos mismos graduados que todavía estaban disponibles para recibir llamadas no solo los habían recibido, sino que en muchos casos se convirtieron en los pastores parroquiales respetados de los años 50 y 60 que se destacaron por su fuerte compromiso con el evangelismo.

Con el respaldo del Sínodo a la Liga de Mujeres Misioneras Luteranas (Lutheran Women’s Missionary League—LWML en inglés) en el año 1942, también tenía una organización decidida a “desarrollar y mantener una mayor conciencia misionera entre las mujeres del Sínodo.” Patrocinado por la Liga de Laicos Luteranos (Lutheran Laymen’s League—LLL en inglés), siendo una organización de solo hombres, Walter A. Maier y su “Hora Luterana,” se transmitía el Evangelio por 682 estaciones de radio. En respuesta a este esfuerzo, el número de cartas de los oyentes se recibía en su sede fue superior a quinientos mil. Las congregaciones en todo el país se identificaron con orgullo como “La Iglesia de la Hora Luterana.”

Además, en el año 1944, la Junta de Directores del Sínodo se atrevió a autorizar una “Ofrenda de Agradecimiento por la Paz de Cinco Millones de Dólares” (equivalente a 70.85 millones de dólares en el año 2018), y al concluir la Segunda Guerra Mundial al año siguiente, el total en donaciones y promesas, había superado este ambicioso objetivo.
Si bien todo parece tan sencillo en retrospectiva, casi todas las decisiones parecían estar llenas de incertidumbre y riesgo para los líderes de la época. Sin embargo, nos sorprende una y otra vez cómo el liderazgo de la iglesia se sintió desafiado por un cambio en los Estados Unidos y estaba igualmente decidido a usar sus recursos para dar un testimonio claro del Evangelio con la expectativa de que Dios bendeciría sus esfuerzos.

En el año 1944, a pesar de todas las restricciones impuestas por el esfuerzo de guerra, el Sínodo reunió a todos sus Visitantes de Circuito en los Estados Unidos y Canadá para discutir la tarea de la iglesia en la era de la posguerra.

En su sermón de apertura, John W. Behnken, entonces presidente del Sínodo, habló de la tarea de los líderes del mundo secular no solo para ganar la guerra sino también para la paz, y “reflexionó detenidamente y estudió las posibles soluciones de problemas actuales y futuros.” De inmediato señaló: “Como líderes de la iglesia designados por Dios, todos nosotros estamos vitalmente interesados en estas cosas. Sabemos que la iglesia enfrentará enormes problemas, y con la ayuda de Dios, debemos encontrar la solución correcta.”

En su discurso de bienvenida en la misma reunión, O. P. Kretzmann, entonces presidente de la Universidad de Valparaíso, señaló:

Estoy seguro de que muchos de ustedes, padres y hermanos, han estado preocupados por las manifestaciones ocasionales de derrotismo y silencio en la iglesia militante. Ha habido un cierto encogimiento de aceptación de las cosas como son. Nosotros también podemos sentirnos tentados a retirarnos de esta etapa de la historia. Sería mucho más fácil permanecer en nuestros rincones de la vida y limitar nuestra visión a para el futuro. Sin embargo, si hacemos eso, no estaremos en la gran tradición cristiana y Luterana. La obra del Espíritu de Dios es siempre para el futuro. No hay espacio en la vida cristiana ni en nuestro pensamiento para retirarnos a una Edad de Oro del pasado. No puede haber tal cosa como un primitivismo espiritual. La historia de la Iglesia entre Pentecostés y el último Adviento es la historia de una tremenda peregrinación hacia el futuro porque solo Dios está en el futuro, y la Iglesia militante avanza hacia ese futuro.

La conferencia luego dirigió su atención a los problemas que enfrentaba la iglesia. Los documentos tienen títulos que arropados de compromiso, tales como “Los hombres y las mujeres que regresan de la guerra,” “El oficio del visitante,” “El cristiano en la comunidad,” “La línea de batalla de la posguerra—la familia,” etc.

El artículo de H. A. Mayer, “Haz la obra de un evangelista: Una discusión de los métodos de la misión,” es característico de las presentaciones y está dedicado a la tarea de compartir el Evangelio. Reconociendo que “el pastor debe tener una mentalidad de misión,” reconoce que el pastor tiene “oportunidades especiales de
misión” en la predicación y otros contactos ministeriales; tiene una posición de respeto dentro de la comunidad (“Es una buena regla que un pastor se esfuerce por hacer al menos un llamado a la misión por día,” página 72); forma a sus miembros para que sean misioneros (“Las grandes clases de adultos son, en gran medida, el fruto de la actividad de la misión laica,” página 74); trabaja para ver que los visitantes sean bienvenidos, que haya una sociedad misionera activa en la congregación; y hace uso de actividades especiales como encuestas de los vecindarios (“al menos cada dos o tres años,” página 75); etc. Todas estas instrucciones se presentan no como reglas rígidas que deben seguirse, sino como ejemplos de actividades que demostraban que sí era posible lograr una diferencia.

Por supuesto, eso fue lo del pasado y ahora estamos en el presente. Gran parte de lo sugerido, especialmente las actividades específicas, parece extraño e imposible de implementar en el siglo XXI. La vida y la cultura de los Estados Unidos han cambiado de muchas maneras desde el año 1944; de que lo hoy existe, comparado con aquel tiempo, hubiera sido inconcebible. Es improbable que esa forma de ser regrese alguna vez a la iglesia. Sin embargo, el ejemplo que se debe tomar es la necesidad de que la iglesia tome en serio los desafíos que enfrenta y busque soluciones de forma creativa y colectiva.

Hacia un futuro esperanzador: respuestas de la Iglesia en general

Reconocemos que buscar un futuro igualmente esperanzador para la LCMS no se trata de números, sino se trata de personas. Se trata de que la Palabra del Señor salga a la luz, y se trata del Espíritu Santo que trabaja a través de los medios, a través de la Palabra y los sacramentos, entre y a través de Su pueblo. También se trata de “todas las naciones.”

Los medios de gracia son “medios,” y también lo son una doctrina pura, una catequesis sólida, una práctica arraigada en la teología, así como el establecimiento de metas y la recopilación de estadísticas. Estos nunca son fines en sí mismos, sino los medios que facilitan la misión de Dios en Cristo a través del Espíritu Santo. En el diseño de la encarnación de Dios, esta misma misión nos ha sido encomendada a nosotros Su pueblo, débil y vacilante, débil y arrogante, que se distrae fácilmente al centrarnos exclusivamente en los medios y no en el fin. Se nos recuerda que un carpintero cuya única preocupación es mantener sus herramientas en buen estado, pero nunca aventurarse a construir algo, está destinado a ser un carpintero pobre.

Además, tenemos la suficiente esperanza de creer que nuestra profunda teología bíblica, expresada y confesada como lo hacen los Luteranos, no es solo para aquellos...
que ya están predispuestos a nuestras costumbres Luteranas. Si creemos que esta teología es bíblicamente correcta, entonces debe compartirse con todos, independientemente de la cultura, el origen étnico o la “mentalidad” humana. Esta es la obra de Dios, la misión de Dios. Dios pudo haberlo hecho todo por sí mismo, pero Dios nos ha elegido para que seamos sus manos, sus pies y sus bocas.

Convencidos de que hay un futuro más esperanzador para la LCMS que lo que parecen indicar los estudios demográficos recientes sobre las tendencias de nuestros miembros, decidimos construir una breve encuesta de personas en todo el Sínodo. Reunimos varias listas de correos electrónicos de funcionarios del Sínodo y de los Distritos, generalmente los lectores de la publicación Lutheran Mission Matters—LMM (siglas en inglés que significa Misiones Luteranas son Importantes), así como de otras diversas redes, con el estímulo de responder (y, de ser posible, distribuir a otras personas interesadas) a la siguiente pregunta:

Las proyecciones demográficas compartidas en las recientes convenciones de Distritos y en otros lugares, indican que a pesar de los esfuerzos actuales de evangelización, plantación de iglesias y revitalización, la LCMS puede perder hasta 500.000 miembros adicionales en la próxima década. ¿Crees que hay un futuro más esperanzador para la misión, hacia la cual la LCMS, autorizada por Dios el Espíritu Santo, ha sido llamada a implementar? Si es así, describe qué pasos en la misión y en la promoción del Evangelio deberían tomar (e implementar) nuestro Sínodo, sus congregaciones, pastores y líderes laicos, con la ayuda de Dios el Espíritu Santo.

¡Recibimos respuestas! Enviamos la pregunta a 533 direcciones de correo electrónico y recibimos 104 respuestas, una tasa de respuesta notable de un 19,5%. Algunos eran respuestas cortas y al punto. Otros escribieron ensayos dignos de una futura publicación. La mayoría estaban encantados de recibir la pregunta. Obtuvimos y recogimos ideas y sugerencias que pueden impulsar estas discusiones, y esperamos continuar esta conversación de manera muy pública a través de esta publicación. Y, a los que por cualquier razón no recibieron la pregunta de la encuesta, desearíamos contribuyan con sus ideas y experiencias.

Algunos de los que respondieron expresaron su frustración por la incapacidad general del Sínodo para pasar del pasado al presente y al futuro, de “quienes éramos” a “quién debemos ser” para abordar el siglo XXI, en el contexto norteamericano. Muchos más expresaron esperanza, confianza e incluso entusiasmo por enfrentar los desafíos en los campos de misión de hoy, que están maduros para la cosecha, pero que van a requerir alguno refinamiento de los métodos que hemos empleado.
Estamos muy agradecidos a todos aquellos que se tomaron el tiempo y el esfuerzo de responder. Expresamos públicamente nuestro sincero agradecimiento por sus respuestas útiles y creativas.

En general, las respuestas fueron alentadoras, incluso esperanzadoras. Hay abundante energía misional en la LCMS, y hay muchas ideas y lugares a través de los cuales Dios el Espíritu Santo está trabajando poderosamente. También hay algo de frustración en medio de la “alegría” de ser “plenamente Luteranos,” especialmente cuando se trata de definir “plenamente.” Sí, debemos saber quiénes somos como cristianos Luteranos, y debemos mantener nuestra sólida comprensión de la teología bíblica; pero estos también son “medios” y no el “fin” de lo que somos.

También existe cierta preocupación acerca de la falta de energía, visión y estímulo hacia la misión al enfrentar el desafío de las congregaciones en declive que han llegado a un punto de simplemente esforzarse por sobrevivir. Al mismo tiempo, claramente escuchamos mucho de lo que es positivo, optimista y “glocal” (global y local), con frecuencia anclado en los esfuerzos de contextos específicos en lugar de solo pronunciamientos y programas corporativos.

Lo que sigue es un intento de resumir los temas esperanzadores de las respuestas que recibimos. El espacio aquí no permite muchos detalles, y tenemos muchos detalles. También prometimos que las respuestas permanecerían en el anonimato, lo que nos obliga hacia más generalidades. Un efecto secundario de este proyecto es la posibilidad de realizar un seguimiento de varias maneras, ya que nuestra encuesta generó una gran cantidad de información para futuras conversaciones y posibles artículos para LMM, así como para otras discusiones sobre la misión de la iglesia.

**Resumen de las respuestas de la encuesta**

1. El uso de la sociología y los estudios demográficos

Muchos de los que respondieron a nuestra encuesta afirmaron que Jesús es el Señor de Su Iglesia y que las puertas del infierno no prevalecerán contra ella, independientemente de los estudios demográficos. No nos guiamos por los estudios sociológicos, sino por la Palabra y el Espíritu de Dios. Otros agregaron que Jesús confió Su misión a Sus discípulos y a Su iglesia como testigos y para interactuar con el mundo con medios que conduzcan a los fines de Dios. Sí, somos fieles a Su Palabra, a la sana doctrina y práctica. Esta es nuestra fe y nuestra vida, para que podamos dar testimonio de nuestra identidad como pueblo de Dios.

No nos guiamos por los estudios sociológicos, sino por la Palabra y el Espíritu de Dios.
Varios sacaron conclusiones sinceras, afirmando que los estudios demográficos son precisos y potencialmente útiles. Señalaron que somos un cuerpo eclesiástico muy dedicado y comprometido, pero que todavía está muy aferrada con una definición institucional de “iglesia.” Pero ahora nos encontramos en medio de una sociedad que en gran medida, hace caso omiso y a la “iglesia,” como tal, sin relevancia.

Además, somos parte de una iglesia predominantemente anglosajona en medio de un contexto cada vez más diverso, aunque hay muchas personas sin iglesia “como nosotros” justo afuera de las puertas de muchas de nuestras congregaciones. En resumen, la sociología puede funcionar como un espejo y una ventana. Puede mostrarnos quiénes somos y qué impacto estamos haciendo o no haciendo. Más importante aún, puede proporcionarnos una visión del mundo al que Cristo nos ha enviado, y puede abrir nuestros ojos a formas en que podamos convertirnos en agentes y mensajeros más efectivos de la verdad y la vida de Dios.

De hecho, muchos de los que respondieron a la encuesta mencionaron las extraordinarias oportunidades de misión que presentan las estadísticas demográficas, y destacaron que, dado nuestro compromiso con la Palabra de Dios, estamos extremadamente bien posicionados para ser una fuerza poderosa dentro de la misión de Cristo. ¡Tenemos esperanza!

2. Involucrar a las culturas que ya no “como nosotros”

Este tema fue el más común y esperanzador en las respuestas que recibimos: Debemos abordar la cultura cambiante “allá afuera,” no simplemente con una crítica de la pérdida de valores, y no simplemente con la esperanza de que si somos un poco más acogedores (aunque muchas de nuestras iglesias podrían ser un poco más acogedoras), más personas vendrán y querrán ser como nosotros.

La pregunta clave es, ¿cómo pasamos de pensar principalmente en “nosotros,” a uno de poner a “otros” en primer lugar? ¿De que manera fue la estrategia de misión de San Pablo uno de ser “todo para todos” para que “por todos los medios se salven algunos”? Él no buscó crear grupos “totalmente” de judíos mesiánicos, ni propuso agrupaciones homogéneas de creyentes judíos y gentiles; buscó una unidad nueva y radical en Cristo que reconociera y trascendiera los problemas de identidad cultural. Luchar con estos temas es emocionante, y puede llevarnos a conocer no solo otras culturas sino también quiénes somos como cristianos Luteranos en el siglo XXI.

¿cómo pasamos de pensar principalmente en “nosotros,” a uno de poner a “otros” en primer lugar?
Las respuestas deben comenzar con atención a las culturas no anglosajonas, ni las del norte de Europa que nos rodean. El silogismo parece obvio: si somos 95% anglosajones como un cuerpo eclesiástico y la población anglo está disminuyendo, por supuesto, continuaremos disminuyendo en la membresía. Sí, podríamos prestar mayor atención a la población anglosajona que nos rodea y que no tiene iglesia o que abandonó la iglesia, especialmente donde nuestros propios elementos culturales tienen menos probabilidades de interponerse en el camino de nuestro testimonio. Pero si los datos demográficos demuestran que no vamos a crecer debido a más nacimientos, entonces debemos convertirnos en un poco más de “todo para todas las personas” como estrategia de misión digna de nuestra atención sería, urgente, comprometida e intencional. Convertirse en todo para todas las personas no significa que “todo vale.” Seguramente San Pablo no quiso decir eso. Pero sí buscó tomar en serio los contextos multiculturales.

Tampoco significa que simplemente hagamos más “ministerios étnicos,” aunque este tema se mencionó a menudo en las respuestas que recibimos. Y lo que es más importante, significa acercarse intencionalmente a aquellos que pueden ser “los otros,” culturalmente hablando y hacerlo como hermanas y hermanos en Cristo. Podemos aportar nuestros propios antecedentes culturales al único cuerpo de nuestro único Señor y Salvador.

Este enfoque, se sugirió, fue uno de los éxitos no reconocidos del movimiento ABLAZE (nombre del programa misional, “encendidos en el fuego del Espíritu”) en la primera década de este siglo. El objetivo que se estableció para las iglesias de la LCMS, era orar y trabajar para comenzar mil nuevos ministerios entre grupos étnicos diferentes a los blancos y personas de habla inglesa. Se superó la meta. En el proceso, la LCMS también se aventuró en un territorio desconocido, escuchó, aprendió y tuvo problemas con el idioma y la cultura.

Recolectamos una larga lista de ideas específicas de los encuestados, quienes brindaron esperanza y energía, e ilustraron lo que muchas iglesias de la LCMS y sus miembros ya están haciendo. Comienza con mirar hacia afuera, salir del edificio y “ensuciarnos las manos” en la comunidad.

Continúa con la necesidad de entender la sociología urbana, construir relaciones, romper barreras, prestar atención a la próxima generación (no como un objetivo sobre el cual nos retorcemos las manos con dolor, sino como socios plenos en la misión de Cristo), invertir en el liderazgo cuyo trasfondo cultural no refleja la mayoría del Sínodo (edad y género, así como la etnicidad y la cultura), presta atención a la “construcción de puentes” que se extiende hacia afuera y no solo hacia “adentro,” y escucha, escucha, escucha! Varias respuestas de los no anglosajones...
expresaron su sincero agradecimiento, junto con una pequeña sorpresa, porque se les pidió participar y fueron tomados en serio.

3. Nuestras grandes fortalezas

Muchas respuestas se centraron en las grandes fortalezas que tenemos en la LCMS, comenzando con nuestra teología, incluida la doctrina, el compromiso con las Escrituras y las Confesiones, el culto litúrgico rico y los distintivos Luteranos que nos pueden servir bien en el contexto de hoy. Otros señalaron la rica historia del Sínodo en cuanto a la educación, desde preescolar hasta educación superior y educación teológica.

También tenemos motivos para regocijarnos de una historia del uso de tecnología innovadora, recordando el uso temprano de la radio y la televisión para llegar a las masas, y cómo incluso ahora, Lutheran Hour Ministries—LHM (sigla en inglés; Ministerios de la Hora Luterana, también conocida como Cristo Para Todas las Naciones—CPTLN) está abriendo nuevos caminos en el uso de Internet y otros medios para comunicar que el amor de Jesús a otros. Llame la atención que sigue el deseo de llevar el Evangelio a las personas en Norteamérica y en todo el mundo.

Podemos admirar la visión y la fe de la LWML con respecto a los recursos que esta organización está desarrollando para el avance de la misión, así como su compromiso de traer más mujeres de grupos étnicos minoritarios en su seno. El uso de las tecnologías actuales también ha demostrado ser útil en la formación de pastores en nuestros seminarios y abrió las puertas a más mujeres y hombres que sirven a Cristo de manera pública.

Otro tema recurrente fue la opinión del Sínodo sobre la asociación entre los llamados al ministerio público y el sacerdocio de los bautizados. La mayoría enfatizó la subutilización y la falta de un compromiso real hacia un papel serio para los laicos en una iglesia que parece estar creciendo hacia un “dominio del clericalismo” y que, irónicamente, se encuentra en un momento, una disminución en las inscripciones en los seminarios.

Muchos señalaron la necesidad de “traducir” la teología y la práctica de la LCMS en otros contextos sociológicos y culturales. Si las personas de la LCMS reflejan una verdadera teología bíblica y poseen el Evangelio puro y buscan seguir prácticas teológicamente informadas, seguramente tienen la capacidad de imaginar una iglesia que sea verdaderamente “para todos,” independientemente de los antecedentes y el origen étnico de cualquiera según las tendencias demográficas del día. En cualquier caso, la iglesia debe presentar la verdad de Dios, anclada en los medios de gracia, pero siempre con una conciencia del contexto y la cultura en la que está trabajando.
4. Agencias de servicio misional

Las respuestas a nuestra encuesta notaron el buen trabajo de LWML y LHM, sin mencionar muchas congregaciones y ministerios que son vibrantes, fieles y efectivos. Lutheran Hour Ministries fue citado como ejemplo de una organización que ha hecho su “tarea demográfica” y, como resultado, desarrolló un plan para llegar a los que no asisten a una iglesia. Muchos se mostraron en desacuerdo con los informes y publicaciones del Sínodo que no parecen tomarse en serio o llamar la atención sobre las congregaciones locales donde se está produciendo un crecimiento significativo.

También, a menudo, se pasan por alto los ministerios más jóvenes que han crecido para apoyar la misión de las congregaciones y los distritos. Estos incluyen: Center for U. S. Missions (Centro para Misiones de los Estados Unidos), Transforming Churches Network (Red para Transformar Iglesias), LINC (Lutheran Inner-City Network Coalition—Red de Coalición Luterana en la Ciudad) en sus diversas expresiones locales, Acts 5:2 Network (Red de Hechos 5:2), Mission Nation Publishing (Publicaciones Nación en Misión) y otras redes de misiones y sociedades de apoyo. Estos ministerios son también fuentes de esperanza para el futuro de la LCMS, y ciertamente esperamos que la Sociedad Luterana para Misiología (Lutheran Society for Missiology) y esta revista (LMM) sigan siendo una fuente de aliento y un “espacio seguro” para el debate.

5. Desafíos al “caminar” (y, ¡a trabajar!) juntos

Con un poquito más negativismo, otro tema que surgió describió los problemas sistémicos que están presentes dentro del Sínodo como organización. Muchos destacaron la división entre aquellos que están comprometidos con las misiones como una verdadera prioridad (los “misionales”) y aquellos que no lo son (muchos de los cuales consideran “misional” un término inapropiado para los Luteranos). Otros notaron la gobernanza disfuncional, los intentos de control “de arriba abajo,” por un lado, y las actitudes congregacionales independientes por el otro, todo lo cual funciona en contra de cualquier espíritu unificado, sin mencionar el pensamiento o la planificación estratégica. El Sínodo tiene a aquellos que se enfocan más en buscar a los “perdidos,” incluso viéndolos como el objetivo de la iglesia y su misión. Otros se centran en reunir los “encontrados.”

Las respuestas demuestran un profundo deseo de discutir estas cosas en un ambiente de transparencia, perdón y esperanza. Hay una necesidad sentida de conversaciones acerca de lo que significa ser un fiel cristiano Luterano, hay una necesidad sentida de conversaciones acerca de lo que significa ser un fiel cristiano Luterano...
o, más radicalmente, una reorientación de lo que significa ser el Cuerpo de Cristo en el mundo. ¿Somos un solo grupo cultural con el objetivo de preservar un tipo de música, lenguaje y vestimenta? En lugar de hablar unos con otros, ¿nos mantendremos divididos en nuestros propios subgrupos de personas con ideas afines, que no escuchan a los demás, y que a menudo se sienten motivados al criticarlos? Las respuestas muestran la voluntad de muchos de discutir estos temas para que la misión pueda continuar con alegría a través de nosotros.

De manera similar, algunos de los que respondieron señalaron el hecho de que las convenciones del Sínodo no representan a la mayoría del Sínodo, sin mencionar los grupos demográficos minoritarios, ya que las convenciones a menudo se organizan de una manera y en un momento que hace que sea difícil asistir.

Se destacó la necesidad de más pastores y otros obreros de la iglesia, junto con la necesidad de atención y de cambios significativos en la forma en que la iglesia los anima y los prepara.

Las críticas directas a los directivos del Sínodo se abordaron con cautela, aunque hubo pedidos de una mayor rendición de cuentas y una mejor escucha con un espíritu de unidad en lugar de impulsos divisivos por el control o la preocupación por la identidad de los Luteranos, en lugar de la misión de promover el reino de Dios. Uno de los temas, sin duda por la pregunta que se planteó, fue la sensación de resignación por parte del actual liderazgo del Sínodo al reaccionar a las realidades demográficas, en lugar de utilizarlas para un pensamiento creativo y generativo vinculado a un futuro mucho más esperanzador. Muchos están convencidos de que necesitamos un nuevo liderazgo con nuevas ideas, mayor energía y la capacidad de inspirar a todos los miembros de nuestro cuerpo eclesiástico que desean un futuro más esperanzador.

6. Fortalezas del liderazgo pastoral y laico

Muchos de los que respondieron nuestra encuesta afirmaron la importancia y la bendición del liderazgo pastoral cuando se trata de mantener como central la misión de nuestro Señor. También se afirmó el alto respeto que el Sínodo ha tenido por la formación pastoral y la sólida educación teológica. Al mismo tiempo, hay un deseo de mayor flexibilidad, más atención a los contextos locales y mayor compromiso por la necesidad de inculcar un celo “apóstolico” por alcanzar a los “perdidos” en lugar de preocuparse solo por los “encontrados.”

Un motivo aún más fuerte fue el estímulo para equipar y liberar a los laicos para la misión de la iglesia. El pastor no solo necesita estar en la comunidad, sino que los laicos deben estar más conscientes de las personas sin iglesia, con quienes andan “hombro-a-hombro” todos los días. Los verbos clave mencionados fueron “equipar,” “alentar,” “empoderar,” “participar” y “liberar.” Somos bendecidos con una gran cantidad de laicos educados, talentosos y llenos de recursos que, en muchos casos,
quieren estar en misión. ¡Alabado sea Dios por este regalo! ¿Por qué no poner a trabajar el laicado?

Como Luteranos, nuestro gozo es intencional en nuestros esfuerzos misioneros y disfrutamos de un sentido de libertad bajo el Evangelio. Evitamos convertir el evangelismo y el testimonio de la fe en Cristo en ejercicios legalistas o motivos para culpabilizar. Agradezcamos a Dios que ha habido este gozo intencional por la misión de Cristo a lo largo de los años, al igual que hemos sido intencionales y motivados con respecto a nuestra doctrina, práctica y adoración.

7. Más signos de esperanza

Las esperanzadas respuestas a nuestra encuesta se centraron, como era de esperar, en los problemas locales. Las congregaciones con un fuerte liderazgo pastoral y laico, enfocadas en el ministerio de la Palabra y los sacramentos, están creciendo, algunas con formas tradicionales de culto litúrgico y otras con una variedad de formas “contemporáneas” o no tradicionales. Recibimos innumerables historias de participación comunitaria, congregaciones involucradas en actividades “fuera del edificio” y una orientación general hacia afuera, “externa,” en lugar de una atención limitada por sí misma, “interna.”

Un tema importante fue la misión entre las muchas expresiones étnicas, es decir, las no anglosajonas, no solo como un área de proclamación de la Palabra, sino como una fuente de “mejores prácticas” en el evangelismo. La agresiva planificación de la misión, e incluso el establecimiento de objetivos, de nuestros hermanos y hermanas africanos, por ejemplo, contrasta con la aceptación pasiva de que la LCMS puede perder otros quinientos mil miembros en la próxima década. Sirven para recordarnos que el panorama global del cristianismo es mucho más positivo y esperanzador que lo que revelan las estadísticas sobre Norteamérica y Europa. También nos animaron a recordar que durante los primeros mil años de la historia del cristianismo, un tercio de todos los creyentes vivían en Asia, y casi el 10% vivían en el continente africano. Todo esto, de hecho, tuvo lugar mucho antes de que existiera la herencia cristiana “occidental” que muchos de nosotros consideramos normativos.

Las congregaciones que dan una cálida bienvenida a los visitantes y comunican una cultura de apertura y hospitalidad, como es lógico, están recibiendo nuevas personas. Los ministerios de cuidado humano y de misericordia marcan la diferencia.
con su compromiso de encontrar formas de satisfacer las necesidades de las personas y de construir puentes para llevar la misión al mundo en lugar de simplemente esperar a que el mundo venga a nosotros.

Lo que encontramos más alentador es la confianza de todos que nuestro Dios es el Señor de la Iglesia, que es el cuerpo de Cristo, empoderado por el Espíritu Santo. Jesucristo nos ha redimido; somos humildes pecadores santificados por la sangre del Cordero. En ese espíritu, muchas respuestas exigían el arrepentimiento, desde los más altos niveles de liderazgo a todos y cada uno de nosotros, por pecados específicos de ignorar y descuidar la urgente misión de Cristo como la base misma de nuestras vidas como humildes perdonados pecadores que viven en la gracia y la misericordia de Dios hacia nosotros y para todos los miembros de la familia humana.

Así que, ¿qué hemos aprendido?

1. ¡Alabado sea Dios! ¡Hay mucha actividad misionera en marcha!

Encontramos esto en un número significativo de respuestas y en las palabras de aliento que muchos proporcionaron. Quienes respondieron como tal, se alegraron de que se les preguntara. Aprendimos que existen aún mayores oportunidades de misión, motivos para trabajar juntos si nos escuchamos unos a otros.

2. ¡Hay obstáculos que pueden ser superados!

Algunos obstáculos para el crecimiento están claramente en nuestra propia cultura sinodal. Estamos conscientes que estos obstáculos pueden convertirse en oportunidades para alentar y “liberar” a las congregaciones para la misión. Por el contrario, pueden servir para controlar y restringir la misión. Los controles y balances son buenos, y debemos escuchar, tanto las palabras de aliento, como las críticas de preocupaciones. Pero existe una necesidad obvia de identificar más formas que nos unan, en lugar de enfrentarnos unos a otros tomando posiciones en cuanto a nuestra teología Luterana y convirtiéndolo en campo de batalla. Aprendimos que hay un fuerte deseo de celebrar más de lo que compartimos en común en la LCMS. La gran mayoría del Sínodo está ansiosa por avanzar con la sana doctrina y la práctica Luterana al servicio de la misión del reino de Cristo. En realidad, trabajar juntos, de manera paralela, es más probable que conduzca a la difundir el mensaje de Cristo con alegría, en vez de concentrarnos en peleas entre facciones.
3. Palabra y Sacramento, teología y práctica son fundamentales, ¡pero siempre contextualizados!

Una teología sólida de Palabra y sacramento, y su correspondiente práctica, son de hecho fundamentales para todos los esfuerzos de la misión, pero también deben ser culturalmente encarnadas, expresadas y mediada. Las cuestiones de “teología y cultura” son esenciales y clave para comprender la misión en la Norteamérica del siglo XXI. La buena noticia es que tenemos las herramientas teológicas necesarias, y en la próxima generación de obreros de la iglesia, hay personas de diversas culturas listas para abordar las realidades que nos rodean. ¡Aprendimos que, en este sentido, hay energía, conciencia y esperanza!

4. Dentro de la LCMS, ¡tenemos un rico patrimonio misional que reclamar!

Aprendimos que al Sínodo todavía le importa la misión de Cristo en nuestro mundo. Pero en este momento, claramente aún no tenemos la misma opinión sobre la mejor manera de ser los agentes de la misión de Dios. Al mismo tiempo, tenemos razones para agradecerle a Dios que podemos avanzar hacia el futuro con el conocimiento seguro de que Su Espíritu puede guiarlos para lograr todo lo que Él necesita por el bien de Su misión.

5. ¡Una perspectiva “hacia afuera” es esencial!

Aprendimos que con el liderazgo correcto, se puede alentar a las congregaciones (y todo el Sínodo) a mirar “hacia afuera” en lugar de solo mirar “hacia adentro.” Este enfoque incluye una mejor comprensión del contexto y la comunidad en que Dios ha colocado cada congregación y de cómo ven a sí mismos como parte de “una misión en avanzada” en el mundo de hoy.

6. ¡Hay una necesidad de nuevas formas de llegar a nuestras ciudades!

La LCMS es predominantemente un cuerpo eclesial rural y suburbana, y nuestra demografía tiende a coincidir con estos entornos. Pero, no estamos bien posicionados en los campos de misión más importantes en la Norteamérica del siglo XXI. Aprendimos que los nuevos experimentos de misión y los compromisos con los centros urbanos de nuestra nación son una clave importante para el futuro más esperanzador para nuestra iglesia.

7. ¡Debemos involucrar a aquellos que no son “como nosotros”!

La LCMS tiene una historia de ser un cuerpo eclesial con crecimiento a través de la inclusión de nuevos inmigrantes. Sabíamos cómo dar la bienvenida a los pueblos del norte de Europa que huían de la persecución política y religiosa, y que
buscaban un mejor nivel de vida. El futuro más optimista que proyectamos para nuestra denominación anglo-dominante en un mundo no anglo-dominante, implica una visión del pueblo de Dios que es más grande que cualquier grupo cultural o étnico. ¡Aprendimos que en muchos lugares esto ya está comenzando a suceder!

8. La próxima generación es una fuente de esperanza

La nueva generación ya está incrustada en el contexto de la misión de nuestra cultura contemporánea en Norteamérica. No tienen memoria de aquellos buenos “viejos tiempos” de una cultura de “eclesiástica,” cuando la iglesia predominaba en la vida de muchos. Aprendimos que muchos de ellos tienen un buen sentido de lo que se necesita para alcanzar a las personas para Cristo en nuestro tiempo. Entonces, ¿por qué no aprender de ellos e incluso liberarlos para la misión?

9. ¡Toda la misión es local!

Aprendimos que no hay un enfoque de “talla única.” La misión es contextual, y debemos ser capaces de trabajar las formas y los medios adecuados de contextualización, en lugar de solo discutir sobre estos temas. Hoy en día, hay muchos ejemplos de nuevas misiones Luteranas que han encontrado formas creativas de contextualizar el Evangelio salvador de Jesucristo. El control centralizado limita lo que se puede lograr; el control centralizado puede ser un obstáculo. Pero nos alegramos mucho de lo que está sucediendo localmente en muchas congregaciones de la LCMS, en función del amor de sus miembros por el Señor y Su Iglesia, y por su preocupación por la población incrédula que los rodea.

10. Nos necesitamos unos a otros

La energía y los recursos del Sínodo son más grandes que los distintos grupos representados en nuestro Sínodo. Una de las promesas de la administración actual fue de superar la desunión en el Sínodo. Ocho años después, la brecha entre las así llamadas facciones “misionales” y las así llamadas “confesionales” es tan amplia como siempre, con muchos esfuerzos misioneros simplemente ignorados o incluso descartados por la administración del Sínodo. No podemos encontrar la unidad simplemente predicando y defendiendo a nuestros propias posiciones eclesiásticas. Los controles y equilibrios en nuestro Sínodo son importantes. Pero, en realidad necesitamos escucharnos unos a otros, tomar en serio las fortalezas y los puntos de vista de cada lado y trabajar juntos para mantener el equilibrio y despertar al “gigante eclesiástico dormido” que otros ven en nosotros. Un fuerte compromiso
hacia lo que son las fortalezas en nuestra teología Luterana, junto con la energía y el compromiso con la misión de nuestro Señor, pueden combinarse para convertirnos en otro poderoso instrumento del Espíritu Santo en todo el mundo.

**Conclusión**

En primer lugar, creemos que un futuro más esperanzador para la LCMS no se trata de números, sino de personas, almas, el gobierno y el reinado de Dios, cuya misión es la redención del mundo. El uso de estudios sociológicos puede ser útil, y haríamos bien en aprender aún más de lo que pueden decírnos, sobre lo que funciona y lo que no funciona, al tiempo que sometemos todo a la evaluación teológica. Manejar números tampoco es pecaminoso: Contamos la asistencia al culto y al sacramento; contamos actos y visitas pastorales; evaluamos la mayordomía al contar las ofrendas; y tenemos en cuenta los presupuestos.

A pesar de todas las críticas asociadas con los objetivos de la misión, ABLAZE (nombre del programa misional, “encendidos en el fuego del Espíritu”), en la primera década de este siglo, hubo un aumento en el número de iglesias, especialmente en comunidades de inmigrantes. ABLAZE también involucró la primera ofrenda en toda la iglesia que intentó liberar a más miembros del Sínodo para misión, devolviendo $3.4 millones a las congregaciones participantes para apoyar sus propios proyectos de misión, $7.6 millones a los distritos sinodales participantes y $12.6 millones para los esfuerzos nacionales e internacionales del Sínodo.

En segundo lugar, estamos convencidos de que un futuro más esperanzador para la LCMS implica la voluntad de adaptar nuestros ministerios al contexto cambiante en el que estamos viviendo. En el año 1944, con gran cuidado por mantener nuestra integridad confesional y, a pesar de las acusaciones de “unionismo” por parte de otros miembros de la Conferencia Sinodal, nuestra Comisión del Ejército y la Armada desarrolló un sólido cuerpo de capellanes militares, 236 de los cuales estaban en servicio activo durante ese año. También tuvimos la misma iniciativa cuando 23 millones de personas salieron de sus hogares para trabajar en instalaciones de defensa y plantas de producción de guerra, estableciendo “misiones de campos de tráiler (casas rodantes)” dentro de los parques industriales para ofrecer viviendas temporales. Y, estábamos tomando en cuenta a los afroamericanos dentro de esta población transitoria, que estaban migrando del sur del país a centros urbanos en el norte. Un futuro más...
esperanzador para la LCMS, en nuestra opinión, exige líderes que reconozcan abiertamente la actual era post-eclesiástica, que se ha apoderado completamente en la Norteamérica del siglo XXI, y que estén igualmente dispuestos a adaptar nuestros esfuerzos de misión a este nuevo terreno y entorno.

En tercer lugar, creemos que un futuro más esperanzador para la LCMS significa esfuerzos renovados por parte de nuestras congregaciones y sus líderes para ver y aprovechar las oportunidades que nos presenta el clima cambiante y desafiante del siglo veintiuno. A raíz de la Segunda Guerra Mundial y el advenimiento de la Guerra Fría, el historiador oficial del centenario del Sínodo, Walter A. Baepler, al igual que Lutero mucho antes de él, concluyó su trabajo en *A Century of Grace* (Un Siglo de Gracia) con un “llamado a la acción, con base escatológico.” Escribió: “El centenario del Sínodo debe estimular a sus miembros para que se consagren de nuevo a la obra del Señor. Si la LCMS, equipada tan abundantemente con recursos espirituales y materiales, se niega a cumplir sus obligaciones como agencia misionera, entonces el Señor puede y sí hará un llamado a otra iglesia para que cumpla Su mandato, ya que ‘este Evangelio del Reino’ se predicará en todo el mundo para testimonio a todas las naciones; y entonces vendrá el fin.”\(^{13}\)

En cuarto lugar, en el espíritu del tema de este número del LMM, creemos que el curso de acción necesario es un llamado contundente para la participación diaria en la misión de Cristo por parte de todos los bautizados en la LCMS, tanto hombres como mujeres. Necesitamos un clero, uno que no solo es fiel a nuestra doctrina y práctica, sino que aborda de manera clara y auténtica los desafíos que plantea la cultura contemporánea. Esto es lo que hicieron nuestros antepasados en el año 1944; y durante las siguientes dos décadas, la membresia de nuestro Sínodo casi se duplicó. Nuestra encuesta reveló que muchos anhelan un nuevo liderazgo con nuevas ideas, mayor energía y la capacidad de inspirar a aquellos en nuestro cuerpo eclesiástico que desean un futuro más esperanzador. Nuestra intención de compartir esto no es derribar a ningún líder electo o designado, sino solo señalar que existe un fuerte deseo de cambio, que se basa en la confianza de que nuestro Señor guiará a Su pueblo a mejores formas de servirlo en nuestros esfuerzos para llegar a otros miembros de la familia humana.

Finalmente, y sobre todo, ya conocemos a Aquel que nos ha enviado en esta increíble misión de esperanza y sanación. Lo que es más, Él nos guía y va con nosotros. Estamos empoderados y liberados para la misión. El profeta Isaías lo expresó de esta manera en medio de algunos de los días más oscuros y decadentes del reino: “Yo fui quien te tomó de los confines de la tierra; yo te llamé de tierras lejanas. Yo te escogí, y no te rechacé; yo te dije: Tú eres mi siervo. No tengas miedo, que yo estoy contigo; no te desanimes, que yo soy tu Dios. Yo soy quien te da fuerzas, y siempre te ayudaré; siempre te sostendré con mi justiciera mano derecha” (Isaías 41:9–10).
Notas


4 Hawley, Decline, 99.

5 Hawley, JLM, 24.


7 Reportes y propuestas en la vigésima cuarta convención (Thirty-Ninth Regular Convention) reunido en Saginaw, Michigan, June 21–30, 1944, 2.


9 Presentaciones durante el Visitor Seminar realizado en Valparaiso, IN, November 14–17, 1944. St. Louis: Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Missouri, Ohio, and Other States, A-1.

10 Visitors Seminar, A-5.

11 Visitors Seminar, 70–79.


13 Baepler, 357–358.
Released and Sent:
Verbs and Their Subjects in Acts 13

Jeffrey A. Oschwald

Abstract: The sending of Barnabas and Saul (Acts 13:1–4) is rightly regarded as a crucial text for understanding the Church’s role in God’s mission to save His world. Sometimes, however, the beautifully balanced and coordinated relationship between Spirit, Church, and missionaries described by Luke is obscured in English translations. A closer look at the use of ἀπολύω (apoluō) (v. 3) helps to restore and even sharpen our insight into the relationship between the Spirit’s leadership and the Church’s response—and to challenge us to be willing to release our resources for the fulfillment of the Spirit’s will and purpose.

Writing in 1960 for The Journal of Theological Studies, Ernest Best described an impasse that the study of Acts, in particular of Acts 13, had reached. There was general agreement that the “solemn setting apart of Saul and Barnabas” formed an important part, even an important turning point, of the story that Luke tells in Acts; but there was “considerable variation” in assessing that importance and in assigning significance to it. Suggestions ranged from seeing the incident as the point where Paul becomes the chief actor in the story, to the beginning of the Gentile mission, to the moment when the Gospel advances to and enters the Roman Empire. Best proceeds to show the weaknesses, exposed by a careful reading of Luke’s narrative, of each of these various views. He proposes his own suggestion that “the incident represents the first deliberate and professional missionary activity.” Best finds support for his proposal in the work of David Daube, who had seen close parallels between Acts 13 and the setting apart of the Levites in Numbers 8. Best presents a brief, but persuasive, case for his proposal, which can be seen reflected in a variety of ways in more recent commentaries.

One part of Acts 13:1–3 that requires some additional attention, however, is the action of the Church at Antioch that immediately follows the laying on of hands in

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v. 3. The laying on of hands itself continues to receive considerable attention in both commentaries and articles, but the final word of the verse, ἀπέλυσαν (apelusan), is often passed over with little or no consideration given it. And yet, many readers base significant claims about the passage and its implications for us on that verb—or on its translation. Our purpose here, then, will be to take a closer look at this word and its meaning and its significance for Acts and for us.

Since Acts 13:4 will also play an important role in this study, we begin with a careful look at the text of Acts 13:1–4. The text reads as follows in NA:\*²⁸:

\[\text{Ἦσαν δὲ ἐν Ἀντιοχείᾳ κατὰ τὴν οὖσαν ἐκκλησίαν προφῆται καὶ διδάσκαλοι ὁ τε Βαρναβᾶς καὶ Συμεὼν ὁ καλούμενος Νίγερ καὶ Λούκιος ὁ Κυρηναῖος, Μαναὴν τε Ἁρώδου τοῦ τετραάρχου σύντροφος καὶ Σαῦλος.} \]

\[\text{2 Λειτουργοῦντων δὲ αὐτῶν τῷ κυρίῳ καὶ νηστευόντων εἶπεν τὸ πνεῦμα τὸ ἅγιον ἀφορίσατε δὴ μοι τὸν Βαρναβᾶν καὶ Σαῦλον εἰς τὸ ἔργον ὃ προσκέκλημαι αὐτούς.} \]

\[\text{3 τότε νηστεύσαντες καὶ προσευξάμενοι καὶ ἐπιθέντες τὰς χεῖρας αὐτῶν ἀπέλυσαν.} \]

\[\text{4 Αὐτοὶ μὲν οὖν ἐκπεμφθέντες ὑπὸ τοῦ ἅγιου πνεύματος κατῆλθον εἰς Σελεύκειαν, ἐκεῖθεν τε ἀπέπλευσαν εἰς Κύπρον . . . .} \]

The ESV translates:

Now there were in the church at Antioch prophets and teachers, Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen a lifelong friend of Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. 2 While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.” 3 Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off.

4 So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit, they went down to Seleucia, and from there they sailed to Cyprus.

The question such a translation raises for the careful reader is: Who is sending Barnabas and Saul, the Church, or the Holy Spirit? Although it is not impossible that both are sending them, it is worth asking whether or not that is what Luke has written. How are we to understand ἀπέλυσαν (apelusan) at the very end of v. 3? If ἀπέλυσαν (apelusan) does not mean “they sent off” (as will be argued below), what implications does that have for our understanding of what took place in Antioch according to Luke? What picture is Luke sketching for us of the relationship between church, missionaries, and Spirit?

What picture is Luke sketching for us of the relationship between church, missionaries, and Spirit?
ἀπολύω (apoluō) has a variety of meanings, and BDAG offers these six principal meanings for the literature it covers:

1. to grant acquittal, set free, release, pardon
2. to release from a painful condition, free, pass. be freed
3. to permit or cause someone to leave a particular location let go, send away, dismiss. Pass. be dismissed, take leave, depart
4. to grant a request and so be rid of a pers., satisfy
5. to dissolve a marriage relationship, to divorce
6. mid. to make a departure from a locality, go away

Of these six meanings, the third would seem to be the most appropriate for this context. Although BDAG does not reference our verse in its article on ἀπολύω (apoluō), this would appear to be the meaning used by the ESV translators.

The problem is that, especially in this verse, there is quite a difference in force between “let go” and “send away.” Both Bolt and Schnabel, for example, claim that Luke describes the Church as sending but not as sent, and both cite our passage as the evidence for that claim. Barrett and Fitzmyer translate ἀπέλυσαν (apelusan) as “they sent them on their way” and “they sent them off,” respectively; yet, both want to emphasize that the initiative here is the Spirit’s, an emphasis both discern in Luke’s account. Barrett even feels a corrective is implied by v. 4:

Barnabas and Saul had been sent on their way (ἀπέλυσαν, 13.3) by the church at Antioch, or its representatives, but in truth they were being sent out . . . by the Holy Spirit (cf. 13.2).

Witherington, on the other hand, sees the verb as conveying the idea of releasing or letting go: “the leaders . . . let them go (‘released them’ literally).” Lenski also takes the word in the sense of “release,” adding that “Luke is careful not to say: ‘they sent or they commissioned them,’ which would have been untrue.” All of this serves to make it all the more important to give a careful answer to our question above: What is the best way to understand ἀπέλυσαν (apelusan) at the end of v. 3? A return to the dictionaries would seem to be in order.

It is worth noting at the outset that the Liddell-Scott-Jones Lexicon does not include the meaning “send” for ἀπολύω (apoluō). Of the passages listed for meaning 3 in BDAG, the great majority are glossed “let go, dismiss,” and the most common context is the dismissal of a crowd at the end of a purposeful gathering. Mark 8:3 deserves a special comment, for it is the one verse that is glossed as “send them away” by BDAG. Here, too, the context better suits the idea of dismissing or releasing a group from something they were planning or intending to do. Jesus notes that the crowd has been with Him for three days already. He has given them no signal that He has finished His teaching, and they have given no indication that they
plan to leave. The concern relates to providing the large crowd with adequate food; the presence of the crowd in and of itself is not the problem. If Jesus were to dismiss the crowd immediately, many might not make it to a place where food was available before “fainting on the way.”

Matthew 15:23–24 provides another example worth considering carefully here. The disciples ask Jesus to «ἀπόλυσον (apoluson)» the Canaanite woman, using the aorist imperative of ἀπολύω (apoluō) to express their request. What is it that they are asking Jesus to do? BDAG suggests that, in this “semantically dense” passage, the disciples are not simply asking Jesus to “send her away”; rather, the implication of their use of ἀπολύω (apoluō) is that they want Jesus to satisfy her request and so be rid of her. That is, once she has received what she came for, Jesus can dismiss her and all will be well. When Jesus responds to the request by referring to His purpose, He uses ἀποστέλλω (apostellō): “I was not sent except for the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (Mt 15:24). This response would not seem as appropriate if the disciples were telling Jesus to “send her away” plain and simple; on the contrary, it would seem to share their sentiment completely. It does make very good sense, however, if the force of the disciples’ request is: “Please (just give her what she wants and) let her be on her way!”

Louw and Nida also list uses of ἀπολύω (apoluō) that carry the meaning “send” in their lexicon based on semantic domains. The passage given as illustration is worth considering here, since it gives evidence of Luke’s usage. In Acts 15:30, we read that the delegation chosen by the assembly in Jerusalem went to Antioch, gathered together the Christian community there, and delivered to them the letter from James and the church leaders in Jerusalem. The men who do all of this are the οἱ ἀπολυθέντες (apoluthentes), “those who were sent,” according to Louw and Nida. Since we have already been informed of their destination (v. 22), this understanding renders the sentence somewhat redundant: “Those who were sent (to Antioch) went to Antioch.” Barrett, on the other hand, understands ἀπολύω (apoluō) here in its more common sense and translates: “So they, when they had been dismissed, went down to Antioch.” This translation makes very good sense in the context of the adjournment of an important conference and of the assignment of new duties to the two men, Judas Barsabbas and Silas. When these two had completed their work in Antioch, they were “released” (ἀπελύθησαν, apeluthēsan) from the community there in peace (cf. Simeon in Lk 2:29) to return to those who had sent them (πρὸς τοὺς ἀποστειλαντας αὐτούς, pros tous aposteilantas autous; Acts 15:34).

Luke is not at a loss for words when it comes to expressing the idea of “sending.” He uses forms of ἀποστέλλω (apostellō) fifty times in Luke and Acts,
most often in contexts of people being sent by others to carry out specific tasks. ἐξαποστέλλω (exapostellō) occurs ten times, generally with less emphasis on accomplishing a task and more emphasis on moving out of or away from a place. The verb πέμπω (pempō) appears twenty-one times in Luke and Acts, in a wider variety of contexts, but generally involving people sent by others for a specific purpose. ἐκπέμπω (ekpempō), which occurs in our passage (Acts 13:4), is used only twice by Luke, both times in Acts. Finally, the verb ἐκβάλλω (ekballō) is used ten times in Luke-Acts of “sending out” or “driving out” people.

We are now ready to return to Acts 13 and take a closer look at what the passage might be saying if we allow ἀπέλυσαν (apelusan) to have its more common meaning. We begin by proposing the following working translation of the passage:

Luke’s narrative provides a very clear and easy-to-follow account of the actions that transpired and of the subject responsible for each action. He has chosen his words carefully (humanly speaking) to emphasize the initiative and agency of the Holy Spirit in the selection, appointment, and sending out of these two men. The other prophets and teachers simply accept and comply with the command of the Spirit. ἀπέλυσαν (apelusan) stands out as the one finite verb of which “prophets and teachers” is the subject. It would seem strange that the dismissal at the end of the
service should receive such emphasis, especially alongside the laying on of hands. The idea of “release” may seem out of place here, but the tradition of which I am part (The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod) has throughout its history spoken of the need for a pastor to obtain the consent of or a release from his current congregation before accepting a call to a new ministry or place.¹⁴

There is no suggestion whatsoever of reluctance on the part of the Antioch ministerium to part with Barnabas and Saul at the command of the Spirit, and so this was a peaceful, no doubt even a joyful, release. That there was no un-peaceful severing of relationships, no resentment or ill will, is at least implied by the experience of the return of the two missionaries to Antioch, recorded in Acts 14:24–28. Luke’s χρόνον οὐκ ὀλίγον (chronon ouk oligon)—“no little time”—suggests that Antioch was once again “home” for Paul and Barnabas (v. 28).

There is one other feature of Luke’s description of the return to Antioch of Paul and Barnabas that we should note, since it seems to confirm the interpretation of Acts 13 presented here. In Acts 15:33, we read that, after Judas and Silas had delivered their letter and spent some time in Antioch encouraging and strengthening the community there, they were “given a peaceful release (ἀπελυθῆσαν μετ’ εἰρήνης, apeluthēsan met’ eirēnēs) from the brothers to the ones who had sent (τοὺς ἀποστείλαντας, tous aposteilantas) them.” We discussed this passage above as an example of the interplay between being released (ἀπολύω, apolūō) at the completion of a task and the original sending (ἀποστέλλω, apostellō) to carry out an assignment. Note now the different way that Luke describes the return of Paul and Barnabas to Antioch (Acts 14:26): “From there they sailed away to Antioch, from where they had been handed over to the grace of God for the work which they completed.” Luke seemingly wants to remind the reader of the special circumstances in which Paul and Barnabas had departed from Antioch, circumstances that he does not casually summarize as “from where they had been sent.”

Why is any of this important? What does all of it mean for us? As Martin Franzmann pointed out in his The Word of the Lord Grows:

The book [of Acts] does not pretend to be a history of the first church or even a history of early missions; it would be woefully incomplete as either of the two. It is the continuation of the story of the Christ, and can therefore be as selective in recording the facts of history as the Gospel itself. Of all the ways which the Gospel went, Luke selects just one, the high road to

[Luke] has chosen his words carefully (humanly speaking) to emphasize the initiative and agency of the Holy Spirit in the selection, appointment, and sending out of these two men.

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Rome. And even that segment of the total history of missions is not fully portrayed but is leanly and monumentally sketched. . . . Indeed, the whole work illustrates rather than chronicles the course of the word which proclaims and presents the Christ. Luke selects incidents and actions that illumine and bring out in clear outline the impact of that word upon men, the tensions and conflicts which ensue when the word of the Lord is heard, and the triumphant progress of that word despite tensions and conflicts.¹⁵

The same could be said regarding using Acts as a mission strategy. Luke’s purpose is to tell us how things happened, not necessarily how they should happen. He does not present a model for mission, nor does he exclude other models from consideration. As with any other part of the Bible, when it comes to the application of that Word of God to us today, we must do the careful work of determining what shared “underlying realities” join us to this the text.¹⁶

Of first importance for us is the acknowledgement that it always has been and always will be and still is today the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Jesus, who guides and controls the proclamation of the Word throughout His world. We fully acknowledge that the Spirit works through means and that He chooses now to call His workers through the Church. We fully acknowledge that He has not delivered to us, any more than He delivered to the Church of Antioch, a mission plan spoken by Him through the mouth of His prophets. Like the Church of Antioch, we, too, must devote all of the gifts we have been given to make wise and bold decisions about the proclamation of repentance for the forgiveness of sins in the name of Jesus to all nations (cf. Lk 24:47). But, Luke’s account also calls us back again and again to acknowledge humbly that it is the Christ through His Spirit who is Lord over the Church. And Luke’s account calls us to a renewed commitment to discerning the Spirit’s will in worship and service, prayer and fasting.

Secondly, the picture of the Church we see in Acts is the picture of God’s people creatively and ingeniously responding to the needs of the world around them in light of the resources available. Whether by direct command of the Holy Spirit (as here in Acts 13) or by the emergence of a need and the reasoning together toward a solution (as in Acts 6 and 15), the Church in Acts reaches decisions about what to do next that are characterized by the same boldness and freedom that characterized their proclamation. The Word was not bound, nor did it bind them. It was that very Word that propelled them out into the world, convinced them to seize every possible opportunity to proclaim the good news of Christ Jesus, and
served as the inexhaustible source of their own strength and courage and peace. The earliest mission endeavors also encountered “dead ends,” but the earliest missionaries—whether by direct revelation or by their individual and collective knowledge of God’s will for the world—saw even these as the guidance of the Spirit for the advancing and conquering Word.

A third and final point of application suggests itself from our brief study of the idea of being “released” for mission. Reference was made above to the tradition of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod in using this language of release with respect to the relocation of called workers. Whether or not the reader is a part of this tradition, there is much sound biblical wisdom in these discussions and some very pointed reminders for the Church today. C. F. W. Walther begins the discussion of the “Relocation of Preachers” with a long excerpt from Pastorale Evangelicum. The author of the latter, J. Ludwig Hartmann, warns against two potential errors that might corrupt the process of relocation. There is the problem of “excess,” i.e., of the pastor who is too eager to seek a new position for personal comfort or ambition, etc. There is, however, a second danger, and Hartmann labels it “deficiency.” It is the sin of holding that it is impermissible for a pastor to be relocated for any reason, even for the overall good of the Church. In the discussion that follows, Hartmann warns of the dangers of coveting for all parties involved: the pastor, the calling congregation, and the congregation from whom the pastor is being called. Congregations should not “arrogate to themselves an absolute dominion over the ministers of the Church”; rather, “they are obligated to give the regular, divine call of preachers a free path.” What kind of relationship is it between the called worker and the calling congregation “if Jonah, who was born and created to enlighten Nineveh, so to speak, [were restricted] to a small city of Judah?” Not a proper relationship, not a relationship that serves the greater glory of God, Hartmann concludes.

My point in including this material here is not to turn our focus to questions of ministerial casuistry; rather, it is hoped that this material will call to mind the kind of attitude seen at Antioch and encouraged—even longed for—by these Lutheran pastors of an earlier century. Allowing the call of God to have “a free path” is not only obstructed by the coveting, even the hoarding, of the ministers of the Gospel. The idea of a “peaceful release” must include all of the resources that the church in a particular place has at her disposal. It is an act of trust to “release” anything we have or have claim to—whether workers or wealth—for the service of God according to His will.

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It is an act of trust to “release” anything we have or have claim to—whether workers or wealth—for the service of God according to His will.
And it is an act of distrust not to. “Teach us the loose hold on Your present gifts lest we lose the great gifts You hold in store.”

Released and sent, releasing and sending, praying and fasting, worshiping and serving, each of us has a role in the work of being witnesses of the risen Lord Jesus. Inspired by the Spirit, Luke never loses sight of the truth that it is the Spirit who guides and directs the Church’s witness to her Lord. It is hoped that hearing and reading him carefully might help us to do the same.

Endnotes
4 *BDAG*, s.v. ἀπολύω.
10 *LSJ*, s.v. ἀπολύω.
11 *BDAG*, s.v. ἀπολύω.
Liberado y enviado:
Los verbos y sus sujetos en Hechos 13

Jeffrey A. Oschwald

Resumen: El envío de Bernabé y Saulo (Hechos 13:1–4) se considera con razón como un texto crucial para comprender el papel de la Iglesia en la misión de Dios de salvar a Su mundo. A veces, sin embargo, la relación bellamente equilibrada y coordinada entre el Espíritu, la Iglesia y los misioneros descrita por Lucas se oculta en las traducciones al inglés (y aún el español). Una mirada más cercana al uso de ἀπολύω (apoliō) (v. 3) ayuda a restaurar e incluso a puntualizar e intensificar nuestra comprensión de la relación entre el liderazgo del Espíritu y la respuesta de la Iglesia, y a desafiar a estar dispuestos a liberar nuestros recursos para el cumplimiento de la voluntad y propósito del Espíritu.

Escribiendo en el año 1960, para The Journal of Theological Studies (JTS), Ernest Best describió como un “callejón sin salida” al que había llegado el estudio de Hechos, en particular el de Hechos 13. Hubo acuerdo general en que el “solemne apartar de Saulo y Bernabé” formó una parte importante, incluso un punto de inflexión importante, de la historia que Lucas cuenta en Hechos; pero hubo una “variación considerable” en la evaluación de esa importancia y en la asignación de su significado. Las sugerencias iban desde ver el incidente como el punto donde Pablo se convierte en el actor principal de la historia, hasta el comienzo de la misión entre los gentiles, hasta el momento en que el Evangelio avanza y entra en el Imperio Romano.1 Best procede a mostrar las debilidades, expuestas con una lectura cuidadosa de la narrativa de Lucas, de cada uno de estos diversos puntos de vista. Él propone su propia sugerencia de que “el incidente representa la primera actividad

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misionera deliberada y profesional.”

Best encuentra apoyo para su propuesta en la obra de David Daube, quien había visto estrechos paralelos entre Hechos 13 y “el apartar y el separar” de los levitas en Números 8. Best presenta un caso breve, pero persuasivo, para su propuesta, que puede verse reflejado de diversas maneras en comentarios más recientes.

Sin embargo, una parte de Hechos 13:1–3 que requiere atención adicional es la acción de la iglesia en Antioquía inmediatamente después de la imposición de manos en el v. 3. La imposición de manos siguen recibiendo una atención considerable tanto en los comentarios como en los artículos, pero la palabra final del verso, ἀπέλυσαν (apelusan), a menudo se pasa por alto con poca o ninguna consideración. Y, sin embargo, muchos lectores basan afirmaciones significativas sobre el pasaje y sus implicaciones para nosotros en ese verbo, o en su traducción. Nuestro propósito aquí, entonces, será de examinar más de cerca a esta palabra y su significado y su importancia y relevancia para Hechos, y para nosotros.

Dado que Hechos 13:4 también desempeñará un papel importante en este estudio, comenzaremos con una mirada cuidadosa al texto de Hechos 13:1–4. El texto dice lo siguiente en NA28:

1 Ἔστων δὲ ἐν Ἀντιοχείᾳ κατὰ τὴν οὖσαν ἐκκλησίαν προφῆται καὶ διδάσκαλοι ὁ Βαρναβᾶς καὶ Συμεὼν ὁ καλούμενος Νίγερ καὶ Λουκίος ὁ Κυρηναῖος, Μαναήν τε Ἡρῴδου τοῦ τετραάρχου σύντροφος καὶ Σαῦλος.

2 Λειτουργοῦντος δὲ αὐτῶν τῷ κυρίῳ καὶ νηστευόντων εἶπεν τὸ πνεῦμα τὸ ἅγιον: ἀφορίσατε δὴ μοι τὸν Βαρναβᾶν καὶ τὸν Σαῦλον ἐς τὸ ἔργον ὃ προσκέκλημαι αὐτούς.

3 τότε νηστεύσαντες καὶ προσευξάμενοι καὶ ἐπιθέντες τὰς χεῖρας αὐτῶν ἀπέλυσαν. 4 Αὐτοὶ μὲν οὖν ἐκπεμφθέντες ὑπὸ τὸν ἅγιον πνεύματος κατήλθον εἰς Σελεύκειαν, ἐκεῖθεν τε ἀπέπλευσαν εἰς Κύπρον . . . .

La Reina-Valera Contemporánea (RVC-2009) lo traduce como:

1 En la iglesia de Antioquía eran profetas y maestros Bernabé y Simón, al que llamaban Niger, Lucio de Cirene, Manaén, que se había criado con el tetrarca Herodes, y Saulo. 2 Como ellos servían al Señor y ayunaban siempre, el Espíritu Santo dijo: «Apártenme a Bernabé y a Saulo, porque los he llamado para un importante trabajo.» 3 Y así, después de que todos ayunaron y oraron, les impusieron las manos y los despidieron. 4 Bernabé y Saulo fueron llevados por el Espíritu Santo a Seleucia, y de allí navegaron a Chipre.

Tal traducción plantea preguntas para el lector atento y precavido: ¿Quién envía a Bernabé y Saulo, la iglesia o el Espíritu Santo? ¿Cuál es la diferencia entre la iglesia “ enviándolos (con una bendición)” y el Espíritu “ llevándolos y guiándolos”? Aunque es posible que Lucas querrá decir aquí que la iglesia envía a los apóstoles y
luego el Espíritu los guía por el camino, vale la pena preguntar si esa es la mejor manera de entender lo que Lucas ha escrito. De especial importancia para nosotros es el significado de la palabra ἀπέλυσαν (apelusan) al final de v. 3. Si ἀπέλυσαν (apelusan) no significa “ellos los enviaron” (como se explicará más adelante), ¿qué implicaciones tiene esto para nuestra comprensión de lo que sucedió en Antioquia, según Lucas? ¿Qué quiere Lucas mostrarnos acerca de la relación entre la iglesia, los misioneros y el Espíritu?

ἀπολύω (apoluō) tiene una variedad de significados, y el BDAG ofrece estas seis interpretaciones principales para la literatura que cubre:

(1) conceder la absolución, indultar, liberar, el perdonar;
(2) liberar de una condición dolorosa, librar, pasar por alto, liberar;
(3) permitir o hacer que alguien abandone un lugar en particular, dejar ir, enviar, encomendar, despedir o despedirse, ser despedido, dar paso, partir;
(4) conceder una solicitud y así deshacerse de una persona, despachar, satisfacer;
(5) disolver una relación matrimonial, divorciarse;
(6) salir de una localidad, irse.4

De estos seis significados, el tercero parece ser el más apropiado para este contexto. Aunque BDAG no hace referencia a nuestro verso en su artículo sobre ἀπολύω (apoluō), este parece ser el significado utilizado por los traductores de la RVC (en español) o como usa el autor de este artículo, el ESV (en inglés).

El problema es que, especialmente en este versículo, hay una gran diferencia de fuerza entre “dejar ir” y “despedir.” Tanto Bolt como Schnabel, por ejemplo, afirman que Lucas describe a la iglesia como enviando pero no como enviado, y ambos citan nuestro pasaje como la evidencia de esa afirmación.5 Barrett y Fitzmyer traducen ἀπέλυσαν (apelusan) como “los enviaron en su camino” y “los enviaron,” respectivamente; sin embargo, ambos quieren enfatizar que la iniciativa aquí es del Espíritu Santo, un énfasis que ambos distinguen en el relato de Lucas.6 Barrett incluso, siente que un correctivo está implícito en v. 4:

Bernabé y Saulo habían sido enviados (para tomar su camino—ἀπέλυσαν, 13:3) por la iglesia en Antioquia, o sus representantes, pero en verdad estaban siendo enviados . . . por el Espíritu Santo (cf. 13:2).7
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Witherington, por otro lado, considera que el verbo transmite la idea de liberar o dejar ir: “los líderes . . . los dejaron ir (literalmente, ‘los liberaron’).”8 Lenski también toma la palabra en el sentido de “liberar,” agregando que “Lucas tiene cuidado de no decir: ‘los enviaron o los encargaron,’ lo que hubiera sido falso.”9 Todo esto sirve para que sea aún más importante dar una respuesta cuidadosa a nuestra pregunta anterior: ¿Cuál es la mejor? ¿Cómo entender ἀπέλυσαν (apelusan) al final de v. 3? Un retorno a los diccionarios parece estar en orden.

Vale la pena señalar de entrada que el Léxico de Liddell-Scott-Jones no incluye el significado “enviar” para ἀπολύω (apoluō).10 De las citas enumeradas para el tercer significado (3) en BDAG, la gran mayoría está glosada en “dejar ir, despachar,” y el contexto más común es como el “despedir” a una multitud al final de una reunión convocada con intencionalidad. Por eso, Marcos 8:3 merece un comentario especial, ya que es el único versículo que BDAG señala como “los despachó.” Aquí, también, el contexto se adapta mejor a la idea de despedir o liberar a un grupo de algo que estaban planeando o que intentaban hacer. Jesús nota que la multitud ha estado con Él por tres días ya. Él no les ha dado ninguna señal de que ha terminado su enseñanza, y ellos no han dado ninguna indicación de que planean irse. La preocupación se relaciona con proporcionar a la gran multitud comida adecuada; la presencia de la multitud en sí misma no es el problema. Si Jesús despidiera a la multitud de inmediato, muchos no podrían llegar a un lugar seguro donde hubiera comida disponible sin “desmayarse en el camino.”

Mateo 15:23–24 proporciona otro ejemplo que vale la pena considerar cuidadosamente. Los discípulos le piden a Jesús que «ἀπόλυσον (apoluson)» a la mujer cananea, usando el imperativo aoristo de ἀπολύω (apoluō) para expresar su petición. ¿Qué es lo que le piden a Jesús hacer? BDAG sugiere que, en este pasaje “semánticamente denso,” los discípulos no están simplemente pidiéndole a Jesús que la “despida”; más bien, la implicación de su uso de ἀπολύω (apoluō) es que quieren que Jesús satisfaga su pedido y así deshacerse de ella.11 Es decir, una vez que ha recibido razón por lo que vino, Jesús puede despedirla y todo estará bien. Cuando Jesús responde a la solicitud refiriéndose a Su propósito, usa ἀποστέλλω (apostellō): “No fui enviado excepto para las ovejas perdidas de la casa de Israel” (Mateo 15:24). Esta respuesta no parecería tan apropiada si los discípulos le dijeran a Jesús que la “despidiera” simple y llanamente; por el contrario, parecería compartir completamente su sentimiento. Sin embargo, tiene mucho sentido si la fuerza de la petición de los discípulos fuese: “¡Por favor (solo dale lo que quiere y) déjala que siga su camino!”

Louw y Nida también enumeran los usos de ἀπολύω (apoluō) que tienen el significado de “enviar” en su léxico basado en dominios semánticos.12 El pasaje dado como ilustración vale la pena considerar aquí, ya que da evidencia del uso de Lucas. En Hechos 15:30, leemos que la delegación elegida por la asamblea en

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Jerusalén fue a Antioquía, reunió a la comunidad cristiana allí y les entregó la carta de Santiago y los líderes de la iglesia en Jerusalén. Los hombres que hacen todo esto son los oí ἀπολυθέντες (apoluthentes), “los que fueron enviados,” según Louw y Nida. Como ya hemos sido informados de su destino (v. 22), este entendimiento hace que la oración sea algo redundante: “Los que fueron enviados (a Antioquía) fueron a Antioquía”. Barrett, por otro lado, entiende ἀπολύω (apoluō) aquí en su sentido más común y se traduce: “Entonces, cuando fueron despedidos, bajaron a Antioquía.”¹³ Esta traducción tiene mucho sentido en el contexto la conclusión de una importante conferencia y de la asignación de nuevos deberes a los dos hombres, Judas Barrabás y Silas. Cuando estos dos completaron su trabajo en Antioquía, fueron “liberados” (ἀπελύθησαν, apeluthēsan) en paz de la comunidad (cf. Simeón en Lucas 2:29) para regresar con aquellos que los habían enviado (πρὸς τοὺς ἀποστείλαντας αὐτοῦς, pros tous aposteilantas autous; Hechos 15:34).

A Lucas no le faltan palabras para expresar la idea de “enviar.” Utiliza formas de ἀποστέλλω (apostellō) cincuenta veces en Lucas y Hechos, la mayoría de las veces en contextos de personas enviadas por otros para realizar tareas específicas. ἐξαποστέλλω (exapostellō) ocurre diez veces, generalmente con menos énfasis en cumplir una tarea y más énfasis en salir o irse y alejarse de un lugar. El verbo πέμπω (pempō), aparece veintiún veces en Lucas y Hechos, en una variedad más amplia de contextos, pero generalmente involucra a personas enviadas por otros con un propósito específico. ἐκπέμπω (ekpempō), que aparece en nuestro pasaje (Hechos 13:4), es usado solo dos veces por Lucas, ambas veces en Hechos. Finalmente, el verbo ἐκβάλλω (ekballō) se usa diez veces en Hechos como “enviar” o “expulsar” a las personas.

Ahora estamos listos para regresar a Hechos 13 y observar más de cerca lo que podría decir el pasaje si permitimos que appeus tenga su significado más común. Comenzamos proponiendo la siguiente traducción de trabajo del pasaje:
La narrativa de Lucas proporciona una explicación muy clara y fácil de entender sobre las acciones que se produjeron y del sujeto responsable de cada acción. Ha escogido sus palabras con cuidado (humanamente hablando), para enfatizar la iniciativa y la actividad del Espíritu Santo en la selección, el nombramiento y el envío de estos dos hombres (desde luego con Su bendición).
ministerial en Antioquía de separarse de Bernabé y Saulo por orden del Espíritu, por lo que ésta fue una liberación pacífica, sin duda, incluso gozosa. El hecho de que los dos misioneros volvieron a Antioquía, según registrado en Hechos 14:24–28, implica que no hubo una ruptura de relaciones, resentimiento, ni mala voluntad. El χρόνον οὐκ ὀλίγον (chronon ouk oligon) de Lucas—“en no tan poco tiempo”—sugiere que Antioquía fue una vez más “hogar” para Pablo y Bernabé (v. 28).

Hay otra característica de la descripción de Lucas del regreso a Antioquía de Pablo y Bernabé que debemos tener en cuenta, ya que parece confirmar la interpretación de Hechos 13 que se presenta aquí. En Hechos 15:33, leemos que después de que Judas y Silas entregaron su carta y pasaron un tiempo en Antioquía alentando y fortaleciendo a la comunidad allí, se les “dio una liberación pacífica (ἀπελύθησαν μετ’ εἰρήνης, apeluthēsan met’ eirēnēs) por parte de los hermanos que los habían enviado (τοὺς ἀποστείλαντας, tous aposteilantas).” Discutimos este pasaje arriba como un ejemplo de la interacción entre ser liberado (ἀπολύω, apoluō) al completar una tarea y el envío original (ἀποστέλλω, apostellō) para llevar a cabo una tarea o una asignación. Observe ahora la manera diferente en que Lucas describe el regreso de Pablo y Bernabé a Antioquía (Hechos 14:26): “De allí zarparon a Antioquía, desde donde habían sido entregados a la gracia de Dios para la obra que completaron.” Aparentemente, Lucas quiere recordar al lector de las circunstancias especiales en las que Pablo y Bernabé se habían apartado de Antioquía, circunstancias que no resume de manera casual como “desde donde fueron enviados.”

Y esto, ¿por qué es importante? ¿Qué significa todo esto para nosotros? Como Martin Franzmann señaló en su libro, La Palabra del Señor Crece:

El libro [de los Hechos] no pretende solo ser una historia de la primera iglesia o incluso una historia de las primeras misiones; sería lamentablemente incompleto destacar cualquiera de los dos. Más bien, es la continuación de la historia de Cristo y, por lo tanto, puede ser tan selectivo en el registro de los hechos de la historia como el Evangelio mismo. De todas las formas en que se desarrolló el Evangelio, Lucas selecciona solo una, el camino a Roma. E incluso ese segmento de la historia total de las misiones no está completamente retratado, sino que está bosquejado de forma sencilla y monumental. . . . De hecho, toda la obra ilustra, en lugar de narrar, el curso de la palabra que proclama y presenta a Cristo. Lucas selecciona incidentes y acciones que iluminan y muestran claramente el impacto de esa palabra en los hombres, las tensiones y conflictos que se producen cuando se escucha la Palabra del Señor, y el progreso triunfante de esa palabra a pesar de las tensiones y los conflictos.\footnote{15}{Lo mismo podría decirse con respecto al uso de Hechos como estrategia de misión. El propósito de Lucas es decírnos cómo sucedieron las cosas, no necesariamente...}

cómo deberían suceder. No presenta un modelo para la misión, ni excluye a otros modelos a considerarse. Al igual que con cualquier otra parte de la Biblia, cuando se trata de la aplicación de esa Palabra de Dios a nosotros hoy, debemos hacer el trabajo cuidadoso de determinar qué “realidades subyacentes” compartidas se unen a este texto.16

De primera importancia para nosotros es el reconocimiento de que siempre ha sido y siempre será, y todavía lo es, el Espíritu Santo, el Espíritu de Jesús, quien guía y controla la proclamación de la Palabra en todo Su mundo. Reconocemos plenamente que el Espíritu trabaja a través de los medios y que Él elige ahora llamar a Sus obreros a través de la iglesia. Reconocemos plenamente que Él no nos ha entregado, como tampoco lo hizo a la iglesia de Antioquía, un plan de misión hablado por Él a través de la boca de Sus profetas. Al igual que la iglesia de Antioquía, nosotros también debemos dedicar todos los dones que nos han sido dados para tomar decisiones sabias y audaces sobre la proclamación de arrepentimiento para el perdón de los pecados en el nombre de Jesús a todas las naciones (cf. Lucas 24:47). Pero, el relato de Lucas también nos llama una y otra vez a reconocer humildemente que es el Cristo a través de su Espíritu quien es el Señor sobre la Iglesia. Y el relato de Lucas nos llama a un compromiso renovado para discernir la voluntad del Espíritu en la adoración y el servicio, la oración y el ayuno.

En segundo lugar, la imagen de la iglesia que vemos en Hechos es la imagen del pueblo de Dios que responde de manera creativa e ingeniosa a las necesidades del mundo que los rodea a la luz de los recursos disponibles. Ya sea por mandato directo del Espíritu Santo (como aquí en Hechos 13) o por el surgimiento de una necesidad y el razonamiento juntos hacia una solución (como en Hechos 6 y 15), la iglesia en Hechos toma decisiones sobre qué hacer caracterizadas por la misma audacia y libertad que caracterizan su proclamación. La Palabra no estaba restringida, ni los ataba. Fue esa misma Palabra la que los impulsó al mundo, los convenció de aprovechar todas las oportunidades posibles para proclamar las buenas nuevas de Cristo Jesús y sirvió como la fuente inagotable de su propia fuerza, valor y paz. Los primeros esfuerzos de la misión también encontraron “callejones sin salida,” pero los primeros misioneros, ya sea por revelación directa o por su conocimiento individual y colectivo de la voluntad de Dios para el mundo, vieron incluso estos como la guía del Espíritu para que la Palabra avanzara y conquistara.

La imagen de la iglesia que vemos en Hechos es la imagen del pueblo de Dios que responde de manera creativa e ingeniosa a las necesidades del mundo que los rodea a la luz de los recursos disponibles.
Un tercer y último punto de aplicación surge en nuestro breve estudio de la idea de ser “liberado” para la misión. Se hizo referencia anteriormente a la tradición de la Iglesia Luterana-Sinodo de Missouri en el uso de este lenguaje de liberación con respecto a la reubicación de los obreros llamados. Ya sea que el lector sea o no parte de esta tradición, hay mucha sólida sabiduría bíblica en estas discusiones y algunos recordatorios muy puntuales para la iglesia de hoy. C. F. W. Walther comienza la discusión de la “Reubicación de los Predicadores” con un largo fragmento de Pastorale Evangelicum. El autor de este último, J. Ludwig Hartmann, nos advierte sobre dos potenciales errores que podrían corromper el proceso de reubicación. Existe el problema del “exceso,” es decir, del pastor que está demasiado ansioso por buscar una nueva posición para su propia comodidad o ambición personal, etc. Sin embargo, existe un segundo peligro, y Hartmann lo califica de “deficiencia.” Es pecado cuando es inadmisible que un pastor sea reubicado por cualquier razón, incluso para el bienestar general de la iglesia. En la discusión que sigue, Hartmann advierte sobre los peligros de codiciar, por parte de todas las involucradas, tanto el pastor, como la congregación que hace el nuevo llamado así como la congregación que necesita liberar el pastor su nuevo llamado. Las congregaciones no deben “usurpar un dominio absoluto sobre los ministros de la Iglesia”; más bien, “están obligados a dar el llamado divino regular de los predicadores un camino libre.” ¿Qué tipo de relación existe entre el obrero llamado y la congregación que lo llama, “si Jonás, quien nació y fue creado para iluminar a Nínive, por así decirlo, [estaba restringido] a una pequeña ciudad de Judá”? No, concluye Hartmann no es una relación adecuada, no una relación que sirve para la gloria de Dios.

Mi punto de incluir este material aquí no es convertir nuestro enfoque en cuestiones de casuística ministerial; más bien, se espera que este material evoque el tipo de actitud vista en Antioquia y estimulada, incluso anhelada, por estos pastores luteranos de un siglo anterior. Permitir que el llamado de Dios tenga un “camino libre” sin ser obstaculizado por la codicia, incluso el acaparamiento, y que avancen los ministros del Evangelio. La idea de una “liberación pacífica” debe incluir todos los recursos que la iglesia tiene a su disposición. Es un acto de confianza “liberar” cualquier cosa que tengamos reclamemos, ya sean obreros o riquezas, para el servicio de Dios de acuerdo con Su voluntad. Y es un acto de desconfianza el no hacerlo. “Enséñanos a no aferrarnos a Tus dones actuales a fin de apreciar y disfrutar de los grandes dones que todavía nos esperan.”

Liberados y enviados, liberando y enviando, orando y ayunando, adorando y sirviendo, cada uno de nosotros tiene un papel en la obra de ser testigos del Señor.
Jesús resucitado. Inspirado por el Espíritu, Lucas nunca pierde de vista la verdad de que es el Espíritu quien guía y dirige el testimonio de la iglesia a su Señor. Se espera que el escuchar a Lucas y leerlo cuidadosamente nos ayude a hacer lo mismo.

Notas
10 LSJ, s.v. ἀπολύω.
11 BDAG, s.v. ἀπολύω.
Released for Mission at Home—
The Texas District of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod

Yohannes Mengsteab

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
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.

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.” 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...
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.

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.” 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.”

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.

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.” 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.
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. 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.”

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. Suffice it to say that the Church, as the body of believers in Christ, is a sent church. Peters says,
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.  

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.’” 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.” All else, especially cultural things, are systems that will need to be adjusted as the context demands.

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
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.

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.

To God be the glory!

Endnotes

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23 Scudieri, The Apostolic Church, 23.
24 Martin Luther, Conversations with Luther: Selections from Recently Published Sources of the Table Talk, ed. and trans. Preserved Smith and Herbert Percival Gallinger (Boston: The Pilgrim Press, 1915), 226.
Enter the conversation: “Why Lutheran Mission Matters.”

Be sure to check out the upcoming issue’s theme and Call for Papers near the end of this edition or online (https://lsfm.global) under the Publications tab.

If you’d like to write for a future edition, the Note for Contributors has helpful submission information, and it can also be found near the end of this edition.

Kirk D. Farney

Abstract: In the first half of the twentieth century, Walter A. Maier embraced the new medium of radio to spread the Gospel of Jesus Christ to millions of listeners in the United States and around the world. His tenacity in achieving and maintaining access to radio airwaves, especially over rapidly expanding networks, and his powerful preaching of biblical orthodoxy bore abundant fruit. Erudition and eloquence, combined with contextualized Christian substance, kept audiences tuning in week after week in the most turbulent of times. Maier’s remarkably successful evangelistic and pastoral efforts offer an instructive model to the twenty-first century church as it faces our complex, multi-media world.

In the mid-nineteenth century, Anglican cleric and school master Henry James Buckoll translated a number of German hymns into English. When he got to Martin Luther’s “Ein feste Burg,” Buckoll rendered the first line as: “A tower of strength our God doth stand, a shield and sure defender.” The devout wordsmith could not have known that his imagery had a remarkable, anticipatory quality to it. In the following century, it seems that the “towers of strength” most associated with the presence of the Almighty were of the radio transmission variety, and they were to become ubiquitous. While Gospel proclamation over the airwaves would eventually become a global enterprise, it got its start with the advent of commercial radio in the United States in the early 1920s. Americans embraced religious radio, and it flourished in the decades that followed, due in no small part to the energetic weekly preaching of an erudite Lutheran professor in St. Louis: the Reverend Doctor Walter A. Maier.

In his Large Catechism, Luther explained that the “Thy kingdom come” petition in the Lord’s Prayer was a request for faithfulness so that the Gospel would “gain

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recognization and followers among other people . . . so . . . that, led by the Holy Spirit, many may come into the kingdom of grace and become partakers of salvation.”

Walter Maier not only exhibited such faithfulness, but he wanted to share it with the rest of the world. From early on, he recognized radio as a vehicle by which the Word of God could be so proclaimed, and through which the Holy Spirit could produce faith in the lost and edify the found. Equally important, just as Luther had employed the emerging print medium to broadly proclaim Gospel truths to counter corruption of genuine Christian orthodoxy—especially within the church—Maier used the broadcast medium to speak against doctrinal erosion and variations of unbelief, from both ecclesiastical and secular sources, to millions of searching souls. His story and the history surrounding it is worthy of our attention as the church of the twenty-first century responds to similar, though often more pronounced, challenges, and the complex opportunities they present.

Radio and Gospel Proclamation

On November 2, 1920, Westinghouse’s newly-licensed radio station, KDKA in Pittsburgh, went on the air announcing the Harding-Cox Presidential election results. It was estimated that the listener tally was between only five hundred and a thousand, but the following morning callers to Westinghouse’s switchboard asked how to acquire radios. From that start, KDKA began regular daily programming, and commercial broadcasting was born. Reaction by new broadcasters and new radio listeners was swift. Additional broadcasting stations went on the air the following year, and more than five hundred new stations began operations in 1922. Expenditures by Americans buying radio parts and sets soared, as they embraced this new source of information and entertainment. This trajectory continued throughout the coming decades. By the beginning of the 1930s, 40 percent of households owned a radio—a number that would rise to nearly 90 percent by the close of the decade. Radio historian, Bruce Lenthall, contextualizes this statistic: “In 1940 more families had radios than had cars, telephones, electricity, or plumbing.” Average daily listening exceeded four and a half hours. In short, radio became a central component of American culture, and it did so with remarkable rapidity.

From the beginning, religious broadcasts comprised an important element of this cultural force. Within weeks of inaugurating the airwaves, KDKA broadcast the 1921 New Year service of Calvary Episcopal Church in Pittsburgh. With KDKA
engineers—one Catholic and one Jewish—near the pulpit donning choir robes, the sounds of the entire service were beamed over the winter air. The broadcast “went over splendidly,” as indicated by the positive response the station and the church received. One shut-in in Massachusetts wrote to say that “she could scarcely believe her ears when the organ music and choir sounded” and that the “voice of the pastor thrilled me as few things have in the long-suffering years.” She added, “at the end [I] felt at peace with the world, ‘the peace that passeth all understanding.’”

The idea of religious broadcasting caught on, and in December 1921 the Church of the Covenant of Washington, DC, pursued and received the first radio broadcast license issued to a religious organization. Months later, Calvary Baptist Church, one of New York City’s oldest congregations, began radio broadcasts. Expressing the hopefulness of many radio preachers who would follow, the church’s pastor, the Reverend John Roach Stratton, declared, “I shall try to continue doing my part . . . tearing down the strongholds of Satan, and I hope that our radio system will prove so efficient that when I twist the Devil’s tail in New York, his squawk will be heard across the continent.” By 1923, ten ecclesiastically-related organizations had stations up and running. According to the Federal Radio Commission, sixty Christian radio licenses had been issued by 1928, most of which were granted to evangelistically-minded churches. While many religious broadcasters would later shut down during the Great Depression, religious broadcasting had established itself as a substantive, lasting component of American airwaves.

Because few mainline Protestant churches owned and operated radio stations, the Federal Council of Churches of Christ encouraged its local ecclesiastical councils to forge cooperative radio ministries and to seek access to local stations for broadcasting opportunities. One such cooperative effort in the New York area began in 1923 and featured noted Brooklyn preacher S. Parkes Cadman. His popularity led NBC to make this a weekly network broadcast named National Radio Pulpit, when the network was formed three years later. The Pulpit became the first religious broadcast to originate from a studio rather than from a remote, church location, when NBC asked Cadman to broadcast from its network facilities in 1928. From the beginning, NBC offered religious groups sustaining, i.e., free, airtime, soon adding Catholic and Jewish offerings to its Protestant programming. When CBS formed in 1927, it initially sold airtime to preachers seeking a network audience, primarily as a means to generate much-needed revenue. The politically charged rhetoric of one such preacher, Father Charles Coughlin, caused the network’s executives to rethink this policy and cease selling airtime for religious programming in 1931. At that time, CBS adopted a similar policy to NBC and offered sustaining time to mainline preachers deemed non-sectarian. The Mutual Broadcasting System came along in 1934, and it provided only purchased time to religious broadcasters. Though it would eventually scale back religious programming, one-fourth of Mutual’s revenues came from religious broadcasts in the early 1940s. The two most visible such programs
were Walter Maier’s *The Lutheran Hour* and Charles Fuller’s *Old-Fashioned Revival Hour*. When NBC spun off its Blue Network, resulting in the formation of ABC in 1943, ABC management also adopted a policy of offering sustaining time primarily to mainline Protestant groups—a policy it maintained until the late 1940s.9

Whether over local stations or via national networks, outreach-minded clergy took their messages beyond the confines of their church sanctuaries from the earliest days of the radio medium. For those effective preachers who obtained access to network microphones, either by sustaining time or through purchased access, loyal listener bases developed and grew, stretching from coast to coast and, in several cases, lasting for decades.

**WAM!—A Lutheran on Radio**

Walter A. Maier energetically pursued radio broadcasting as a Gospel medium from the early 1920s. Less than a year after KDKA had birthed commercial radio, Maier was contemplating the establishment of a Lutheran radio station.

Maier first stepped in front of a radio microphone in mid-1922, when he addressed the annual convention of the Walther League in Louisville. As he experienced firsthand the technological reality of projecting his Gospel message beyond the walls surrounding young Lutherans in their Kentucky meeting hall to varied listeners in varied locales wearing crude headphones attached to crystal sets, Maier’s enthusiasm for the medium only grew.10 In March of the following year, Maier penned an editorial for *The Walther League Messenger*, entitled “Why Not a Lutheran Broadcasting Station?” Maier began by stating that he had been listening to broadcasts over his own receiver and was not pleased with what he heard. Scientific lectures “made our ears tingle” as they “insult[ed] . . . Biblical Christianity.” He warned of the “wishy-washy moral talks, misnamed sermons” that were regular fare. A Lutheran station to “send a one hundred per cent Gospel message from coast to coast,” and eventually “even to Europe,” could serve as a necessary countermeasure, argued Maier. With uncharacteristic understatement, he declared, “It seems that the radio sermon is destined to play a somewhat important role in American life.”
Interestingly, in a rhetorical move meant to both compliment a perceived ecclesiastical competitor and to prime the competitive juices of his fellow Lutherans, Maier noted that the Catholic Church had already recognized radio’s potential. He directly quoted from a current issue of *Catholic World* that had advocated for a Catholic “wireless transmitting station.” Its author had argued that such an ethereal venture would “reach untold millions at the very poles of the world,” would issue “a swift reply to every calumny against the church,” and plant the “seed of further conversions.” Maier’s implication was clear: if the Catholics could wield this new tool, why not those who “can bring the message of pure Lutheran Christianity?” Such would “offer a powerful and effective antidote against the many and varied forms of unbelief” that were becoming more prevalent. Maier pointed to the potential to reach souls that the Lutheran Church would not reach otherwise, and to do so in a “least expensive” manner. And, displaying a self-awareness not possessed by many American Lutherans at that time, Maier promised that radio could “assist us in removing the misunderstanding which makes people view our faith as that of a foreign church.”

In February 1923, Richard Kretzschmar, Chairman of the Board of Control of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, backed by a recent addition to the faculty, Walter Maier, proposed the launch of a radio station. The board approved the proposal, but it was a hollow victory since no funds were appropriated for actual implementation. Faculty support for a radio station was mixed. While there were indeed supporters, practical considerations such as financial constraints and the long-term viability of radio itself worried some faculty members. Additionally, many were tepid because of their own uncertainty as to the Lutherans’ place in American Christianity. During this period, many Lutherans—thologians, pastors, and laymen—wrestled with the trade-offs between neat denominational boundaries and broader evangelistic opportunities on the American field. In other words, even if practical constraints could be overcome, some questioned whether Lutherans, or the LCMS more specifically, *should* step further into the religious “marketplace” with a new medium “widely employed in the secular, commercial world,” or whether such work should be left to more domestically-oriented church bodies.

Eventually, faculty reservations were overcome, however, and “seed” funding was secured. In the summer of 1924, contracts were signed for the purchase of a 500-watt transmitter, and broadcasting towers were erected on Concordia Seminary’s campus. Makeshift studios were installed in the attic of one of the seminary
buildings. In honor of the Walther League’s foundational aid, and to affirm linkage of the station to the seminary, Maier and his colleagues requested that the Federal Radio Commission grant the new station the call letters “WLCS,” standing for “Walther League—Concordia Seminary.” However, the federal regulators had already adopted the policy that stations west of the Mississippi River would receive call letters beginning with “K.” The Commission assigned the letters “KFUO” to the Lutheran station. Recognizing the appeal of giving these letters a higher meaning than just an ethereal identifier, Maier declared that they would henceforth mean: “Keep Forward Upward Onward.”

KFUO’s entry into radio airwaves occurred on October 26, 1924, as the festivities around the cornerstone laying of Concordia Seminary’s new campus in Clayton (on the west side of St. Louis) were broadcast via an improvised hookup. The official dedication of KFUO’s studio occurred as the station went on the air at 9:15 p.m. on Sunday, December 14, of the same year.

Maier carried a number of “on air” duties for the young radio station and worked with its first full-time station manager, Herman H. Hohenstein, to solidify KFUO’s viability. Hohenstein was a young St. Louis pastor who took the newly-created position in early 1925 as a ministerial “call.” When Rev. Hohenstein accepted these new responsibilities, the progressive Christian Century magazine—no bedfellow with a denomination it considered isolated and uninfluential—could not help but take note. Under the heading, “He Leads the Way,” its editors noted that a pastoral appointment as a radio station manager “is said to be the first appointment of its kind in Protestant history.” They concluded, “Mr. Hohenstein seems to be in line for remembrance as a pioneer in a new type of Christian ministry.” Part of such pioneering included expansion of KFUO’s programming. While KFUO was unmistakably a Lutheran endeavor, as the breadth of programs and speakers expanded, Maier and his colleagues maintained a strict policy that he would effectively take with him to The Lutheran Hour in the years to come: “We do not use the radio for direct attacks on sectarian or Catholic Churches.”

While Maier was not the only person who led the efforts to launch a Lutheran radio station, he was at the center. His strong Walther League ties and the numerous, abiding connections they provided, his enthusiastic entry into the Concordia Seminary faculty and rapid establishment of key allies for the radio project, his expanding relationship with the Lutheran Laymen’s League (LLL), and his natural talent as a communicator all served as vital assets in the establishment of KFUO as an}

More importantly, within a denomination not known for nimbleness and innovation, Maier had placed Lutheranism on the forefront of Christian radio during its infancy.
effective venture. Lutheran historian, Alan Graebner, noted that no individual had dominated KFUO programming in its early day; however, “by the close of the Twenties the auditioning time was over.” By “a combination of talent and drive,” Walter Maier “emerged” to become the personification of “Lutheran radio.” More importantly, within a denomination not known for nimbleness and innovation, Maier had placed Lutheranism on the forefront of Christian radio during its infancy.

In June 1927, the Walther League Messenger celebrated the history of KFUO since its conception a few short years earlier. In hyperbole, of which Maier, as the periodical’s editor, must have at least tacitly accepted, one of the article’s authors provided a verbal tour of KFUO facilities to the reader:

Turning our eyes toward the slowly setting sun, we see . . . two higher towers . . . lifting their heads two hundred feet into the air. . . . How slender, yet how stately and inspiring! Seemingly so frail, apparently at the mercy of the elements, yet well-built of strong and lasting material, firmly anchored in a solid mass of concrete, fully able to withstand wind and weather. And withal, how significant! Fit emblems of the Church of Christ, which they serve! Just so the Church, seemingly so weak and helpless, yet is insuperably strong, grounded, on and anchored in, the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone, rearing its head high into the air to proclaim the Gospel of peace; a source of inspiration, yea, salvation, to the millions of men, drawing earth-born, sin-cursed mortals heavenward to the realms of eternal glory on high.

The “Towers of Strength” erected in St. Louis would soon be augmented by “Towers of Strength” co-opted by Maier across the country.

One additional point must be made about these early days of Lutheran radio. While Maier’s visionary role and energetic leadership in KFUO’s founding—and eventually in network broadcasting—should be recognized for what they were, he likely benefited from the fact that LCMS denominational leaders initially paid minimal attention to the evangelistic possibilities offered by a fledgling radio industry. Thus, one can speculate that Maier’s new ventures were effectively “below the radar,” perceived as a relatively small matter, allowing him to avoid getting bogged down in the synod’s often-ponderous administrative and theological bureaucracy. As

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The Lutheran Hour (TLH) eventually grew to global stature, this precedential “asset” would prove invaluable to Maier.

To the Networks

As Maier sought a larger platform for proclamation, he approached NBC about the possibility of adding Lutheran programming to their sustaining time religious menu. NBC reaffirmed that their Protestant time slot would remain under the gatekeeping of the Greater New York Council of Churches/Federal Council of Churches. Given the liberal leanings of these mainline churches, and in light of NBC’s policy against selling airtime for religious broadcasts, Maier knew he would need an alternate route to network airwaves. In fact, mainline leaders such as Harry Emerson Fosdick, one of the leading preachers on NBC’s Protestant sustaining time broadcasts, were influential in convincing NBC (and soon CBS) to reject all paid religious programming. Fosdick (and likeminded progressive Protestant leaders) feared that “belated forms of denominational organization”—his term for more conservative, doctrinally rigid church bodies—would glean an undeserved respectability for their brand of traditional Christianity should they gain a share in network microphones. The Federal Council of Churches went so far as to push contractual obligations on local radio stations to air only religious broadcasts that they controlled.

At the conclusion of Maier’s meeting at NBC, one of the network representatives struck a nerve by inadvertently highlighting the peripheral nature of American Lutheranism, thereby increasing Maier’s resolve to break out of traditional Lutheran confines. The NBC employee inquired, “Do you really think a Lutheran sermon is suited for the broad American public?” Before Maier could reply, he added, “Isn’t Lutheranism primarily for Germans?” Maier assured the NBC executives that there would be nothing so parochial about his proposed radio messages, even though the founder of Lutheranism had been a German. He must have been at least somewhat persuasive, as the NBC personnel left open the possibility of his periodic participation in their Protestant sustaining time programming; however, this only convinced Maier further that a regular program was needed to spread his Gospel messages.

In turn, Maier gained an audience with executives of the smaller, newer CBS network. Unlike NBC, CBS had accepted paid religious programming from its inception. The pioneering Presbyterian, Donald Grey Barnhouse, had become the first preacher to purchase network airtime when he entered into a contract with CBS in 1928. Yet by the time Maier met with CBS personnel, the network was in the process of adopting a policy of eliminating paid religious programming. This shift was partially in response to the aforementioned pressure from progressive Protestants, such as the Federal Council of Churches, and partially in response to the...
politically-charged radio preaching of Father Coughlin on the network. Nonetheless, until such policy was solidified, CBS executives were willing to consider selling Maier network access.

Specifically, they agreed to sell him airtime at standard commercial rates—the then-staggering sum of $4,500 per weekly, half-hour timeslot, which would exceed $200,000 over an entire year of broadcasts. (Given such realities, Maier concluded that “our Lutheran Radio Hour has now become the Lutheran Half-Hour.” Indeed, TLH was a 30-minute program from its inception, notwithstanding its name.) To place such amounts in perspective, CBS’s proposed weekly remuneration demands were roughly three times the average weekly funding required for Professor Maier’s employer, Concordia Seminary, to maintain its entire operation during the same year, 1930.

Maier immediately approached the Lutheran Laymen’s League. While the LLL had stepped up to help fund KFUO’s Gospel-broadcasting venture, its leadership was not content to offer the blessings of Lutheranism over just a single station. In its membership periodical, LLL editors touted the “greater opportunities... beckon[ing]” from “the chain systems of broadcasting”—opportunities that “national advertisers” already “realiz[ed].” In a clear reference to NBC’s Protestant sustaining time slot, they warned that “the Federal Council of Churches, which is under Modernist control,” already sponsored “speakers of great charm and profound learning” who “are engaged for the purpose of bringing the Modernist view of Christianity into hundreds of thousands of American homes.” They mentioned approvingly Presbyterian Barnhouse’s willingness to counter the “modernistic message” by purchasing network airtime. They concluded that Lutherans should fill the critical void for “a spiritually hungry multitude crying out for better food than is now being offered to them.”

So, when Walter Maier presented the opportunity to purchase network airtime, the LLL was ready to respond. LLL leadership held Maier in high regard, and its board of directors included several of his personal friends. On May 31, 1930, the national convention of the League, meeting at Chicago’s Palmer House, adopted a resolution “to sponsor a national Lutheran Radio Hour over the Columbia Broadcasting System beginning in the fall.”

As the country staggered from the 1929 stock market crash and its aftermath, Maier was convinced that the time was right for straightforward preaching of the Christian message. Out of concern that religious
broadcasts could conflict with, or serve as a substitute for, Sunday worship services, a Thursday evening time slot was selected. On October 2, 1930, in the 10 p.m. (Eastern) time slot immediately following CBS’s popular *The Shadow*, Maier took to the airwaves from CBS affiliate WHK in Cleveland, transmitted to thirty-six network stations, coast to coast. (The Cleveland location was used so as to feature the Cleveland Bach Chorus in the inaugural program’s music selections.)

CBS executives soon concluded that *TLH* was a viable program. After the initial broadcasts, listeners had sent in over fifteen thousand letters, many to CBS’s New York headquarters. In just eight weeks, more mail would be sent to *TLH* than to any other religious program, including those sponsored by the Federal Council of Churches, such as the four-year-old *National Radio Pulpit*, featuring the Protestant progressives, Fosdick, S. Parkes Cadman, and Ralph W. Sockman.33

Over eight hundred newspapers gave coverage to *TLH* during its first few weeks, with the *New York Herald Tribune*, the *New York Post*, and the *New York Times* frequently recommending the program.34 For instance, the *Times* highlighted Maier and *TLH* in their “Outstanding Events on the Air Today” listings after *TLH*’s October debut.35 Similarly, the *Herald Tribune* featured a complete “Today’s Radio Programs” page in its daily publication. Like the *Times*, its editors deemed approximately fifteen programs worthy of special note under the listing, “Bright Spots for Today.” Maier and *TLH* soon received top billing in this column as well.36

It should be noted that the large majority of programs to which these newspapers directed special attention were entertainment or informational in content rather than religious.

Even with *TLH*’s enthusiastic reception, the realities of the Great Depression could not be ignored as its first *TLH* season drew to a close. Insufficient funding forced Maier reluctantly to withdraw from national broadcasts. He wrote, “It seems to us that an effort so signally directed to the fulfillment of the Savior’s last commission to His Church, ‘Preach the Gospel to every creature,’ must continue.”37 Though he did not know when it would occur, Maier expressed confidence that *TLH* would eventually return. The wait would be 3½ years.

In the interim, Maier accepted multiple invitations to preach on local broadcasts sponsored by the Detroit Lutheran Pastoral Conference. As Maier, the LLL, and the Detroit pastors continued to explore ways to re-launch *TLH*, Maier was introduced to the Danish-born president of the Chevrolet division of General Motors—William S. Knudsen.38 As a Lutheran layman, Knudsen lamented the effect of the Great Depression on the American people. He agreed to underwrite an entire proposed, new season of *TLH*, with the following directive to Maier, “Now you teach the people to look up to God—they’ve been looking down too much nowadays.” As it turned out, enough donations were gathered, especially from individuals responding
to the radio messages, so that Knudsen did not have to make good on his financial guarantee.\textsuperscript{39}

On February 10, 1935, \textit{TLH} returned to the airwaves, over a portion of the new Mutual Broadcasting System (MBS). At that time, MBS covered 75 percent of the nation and boasted the world’s strongest station (WLW in Cincinnati) as an affiliate. \textit{TLH} was on the air via eleven stations for the remainder of that partial radio season and would return for the full following season and all subsequent seasons. Later that year, Maier reflected, “After the first program it was evident that the blessings of the Lord were to rest upon the entire project to an astonishing degree.”\textsuperscript{40} For the remainder of the 1930s, \textit{TLH} gained true coast-to-coast penetration as MBS continued to add affiliates and as \textit{TLH} served as a pioneer in the use of transcription disks for non-network stations that could not carry the program live.\textsuperscript{41} Even with the lingering hardships of the Great Depression, listener donations and LLL supporters covered the production and broadcasting costs, and they would do so for generations to come.

### The Message and Impact

Over a twenty-year period, millions of people tuned in every week to hear Walter Maier on \textit{TLH}. His program was produced with consistent formats and high quality. He honed his oratorical skills for maximum impact on his listeners. But it was \textit{what} he had to say that kept his ethereal congregants, across the country and around the world, huddled around their radio sets. Amid increasing individualism and uncertain opinions, many wanted to hear words of immutable authority. Amid rising Modernity, many wanted to hear affirmation of traditional orthodoxy. Amid national and international strife, many wanted to hear a message of providential stability and hope, even if it came with blunt admonition. Amid religious fragmentation, many wanted to hear words creating a shared Christian community. Maier delivered messages that provided just these elements.

A thorough review of Maier’s radio sermons reveals a remarkable richness of content. The Jesus Christ for whom Walter Maier labored once said to His followers, “If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed. And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free” (John 8:31, 32 NKJV). Maier was dedicated...
to spreading of Truth—Truth that was unchanging, Truth that was reliable, Truth that was sufficient and sustaining, Truth that was salvific for time and eternity.

His mission of truth, however, faced a problem as he went on the air in 1930. Enduring truth was falling out of fashion. Maier lamented, “There is a haze of doubt and uncertainty that rises from the unbelief so rampant in our day; there is the smoke-screen of modernist delusion by which the verities of our faith disappear in the black barrage of human speculation.”42 “Our modern, grasping, skeptical age,” he observed, had come to rely solely on “human reason”—the “cold, calculating” and highly flawed reason it had unwisely “enthroned.” The outrageous outcome of this reliance was that reason so ensconced “tells us that the only religious verities are those which can be tested and proved by the results of modern scientific investigation.”43 While Maier indicted the many secular contributors to the lubricious state of “Truth,” he particularly regretted that at a time when the church should have been reemphasizing the immutable nature of its truth-claims, its Modernist wing only added to the confusion. He complained that the “devices of the weather-vane pulpit are as froth that is blown away with every change of the wind: and these chameleon-like preachers, who can change their color to match every shade of popular flavor, only lead men more deeply into sloughs of despair.”44

With eloquent confidence, he unrelentingly confirmed the reliability of scriptural authority, reaffirmed the necessity for (and sufficiency of) Jesus Christ’s atoning blood, promised the universal availability of God’s grace, urgently called for sanctified personal lives and prophetically urged national repentance, established common ground across traditional Christian groups, urged patriotism while holding patriots to their ideals, and promised that God’s providential hand was guiding the affairs of the world, notwithstanding the messiness of the times. While articulating these overarching themes, he demonstrated a broad knowledge of developments in economics, politics, academia, medicine, science, literature, popular entertainment, and society as a whole, which further enhanced the relevance of Maier’s messages.

While Maier was accused occasionally of speaking above listeners’ heads, he was, in fact, most popular amongst common men and women. In fact, even though Maier was a well-educated man and an academic by profession, he went out of his way to craft messages that were accessible and moving. Though a biblical scholar who prepared his expository preaching by reading Scripture in its original Hebrew and Greek, Maier virtually never referred to the original texts in his broadcasts. On the few occasions when he did indeed speak with overly-lofty vocabulary, the effect likely only increased the authority communicated to his audience.

In addition to the doctrinally foundational content of his sermons, several ancillary topics came up frequently. Maier considered godly families to be the building blocks of society, and he reinforced this conviction frequently. He urged fathers to provide stable family leadership and mothers to care for their homes and
nurture their children. He counselled repentance and reconciliation in cases of infidelity or harmful behavior. As for children, Maier urged them to respect their parents and to shun the common urge to “sow” their “wild oats.” He urged husbands and wives to take the biblical instruction to “be fruitful and multiply” to heart. Maier railed against birth control in more vocal ways than most of his Protestant clerical peers. Birth control, in his opinion, represented a shirking of societal duties, a rejection of familial fulfillment, and a thwarting of God’s will. Abortion also came under fire, for these reasons in addition to its taking of an unborn life.

Maier also connected with his audience as he spoke of societal ills plaguing American life. He acknowledged the prevalence of alcohol abuse and urged those afflicted to turn their addictions over to God. He cautioned against the allure of gambling and extramarital sex. Maier warned of the perils of a life of crime, quoting current crime statistics while invoking the authoritative name of J. Edgar Hoover on numerous occasions. Maier also spoke of the damning sin of suicide with some regularity. His preaching revealed a keen awareness of the shortcomings of both the country and the church in matters of race. For his time, he was remarkably critical of the treatment of minorities, especially blacks, in America. Maier urged the church to recognize the equality of all men and women before God and pleaded for social reform in society, while maintaining his practice of eschewing prescription of specific public policies.

Maier was an educator who was often critical of the academy. While he made it clear that he supported academic inquiry, scientific discovery, and liberal education, he inveighed against those who used these endeavors to undermine belief in Almighty God and in Christian orthodoxy. Maier took humanistic optimists, liberal theologians and philosophers, and atheistic scientists to task, while calling attention to members of the academic community who retained their faith commitments. He was particularly vocal about the threat of Darwinian evolution to Christian teaching, voicing concern about the dismissal of the Creator, and consternation about evolutionary ideas harming morality over time.

Finally, although he had plenty to say about society and the church, Maier gave partisan politics a wide berth. By doing so, he avoided potentially alienating radio listeners and prevented distracting “noise” from interfering with his biblical messages. What his sermons lacked in partisanship they made up for with the sturdy truth-claims of Christianity. At a time when liberal Protestants like Harry Emerson Fosdick argued, “What one says on the air must be universal, catholic, inclusive, profoundly human,” Maier talked about universal love and inclusive hope but claimed that such were made possible by the exclusive work of Christ. He was indeed catholic, but with an urgent message that he presented as profoundly divine.
In addition to being an evangelist, Maier was a pastor—a pastor of the airwaves, who was invited into the homes of his “parishioners” by the turn of a radio dial. A confluence of the stressful times in which they lived, new and enhanced technology, the emergence of mass culture via network radio, the unique melding of perceived intimacy with, and authority of, radio personalities, in combination with Maier’s gripping delivery of his messages, enabled this Lutheran cleric to unlock greater potency of the centuries-old, pastoral “Office of the Keys,” across the nation and beyond.

As would be expected, the LLL, under whose sponsorship TLH operated, paid particular attention to audience penetration. Minutes of the LLL’s Lutheran Hour Operating Committee noted that during the peak of radio’s popularity in the late 1940s, an average of seventy radio sets out of one hundred would be turned on at some point during a typical Sunday in the United States. They reported that of those seventy sets, “four, sooner or later, tuned into ‘The Lutheran Hour.’”\textsuperscript{48} In other words, according to LLL research, with biases of its own, nearly 6 percent of Sunday radio listeners in America heard TLH.\textsuperscript{49} In 1947, the Christian Herald presented Maier’s audience as twenty million each Sunday, which it claimed made Maier “the ‘preaching-est preacher’ in all the world today, and doubtless of all time.” His “impassioned sermons” reached six hundred million in a radio season.\textsuperscript{50} In a lengthy feature article on Maier in June of 1948, the Saturday Evening Post declared that “Doctor Maier . . . hold[s] something big. . . . [H]is radio gospel encircles the globe” as it is “heard by 20 million persons . . . fifty-two times a year.”\textsuperscript{51}

In early 1945, Pageant noted that the broadcast employed “from 30 to 55 clerks and stenographers . . . to assort and answer his mail, which at times becomes an engulfing torrent of 25 thousand letters a week.”\textsuperscript{52} The tally for this radio season ending a few months later was 340,000.\textsuperscript{53} In March 1947, the Christian Herald explained that “four million people have written letters to Dr. Maier” since he went on the air and that “it takes 70 women to handle the mail,” which arrived at a pace of “as many as 8,000 [letters] in a single day.”\textsuperscript{54} The following year, a Saturday Evening Post profile noted that Maier’s clerical staff handling correspondence had reached one hundred persons—a number repeated a few months later in the periodical Radio and Television Life.\textsuperscript{55} In his 1948 critical examination of the Federal Council of Churches (FCC), Ernest Gordon pointed out that even though the FCC reaped the benefits of “close to a monopoly of free time” from major networks, Maier and TLH “receive[d] 30,000 letters a week—three times the mail of all FCC...
programs together.”56 By the time Maier died in January 1950, his annual incoming mail had risen to over 500,000 letters.57

Even more than the sheer volume of mail, the content of listener correspondence demonstrated the genuine pastoral role Maier filled for thousands of members of his radio flock. From the beginning of TLH broadcasts, mail both confirmed Maier’s pastoral role and sought his pastoral counsel. Many writers sent letters of affirmation and support (including financial support), and others wrote simply requesting a copy of specific sermons. Many shared redemptive, personal narratives that were an outgrowth of Maier’s sermons, including suicides halted at the last minute and extramarital rendezvous stopped short.58 Thousands more confessed temptation and wrongdoing, sought advice and prayer, and asked questions relating to Scripture, doctrine, and the church. Maier’s son recalls that “probably no category of effort commanded more of Father’s time than answering problem mail. Even with staff counseling assistance, he . . . [dictated] late into . . . evenings.”59

As previously mentioned, TLH continually invited listeners to write letters to the program, often offering inexpensive, inspirational gifts such as cross lapel pins or small pictures, in addition to copies of the week’s sermon. But Maier went further in his pastoral efforts, while also respecting the role of local parish ministers. The closing announcements of the weekly broadcasts extended an invitation: “If you have no church affiliation and are troubled by a spiritual problem, Dr. Maier will be glad to advise you.”60 The announcer assured the listeners that their letters seeking counsel “will be regarded as a personal, sacred trust.”61

Through the end of his ministry, Maier insisted on personally answering one hundred to two hundred letters per week.62 Certain letters describing particularly urgent personal problems or needs were passed on to Lutheran pastors in the geographic area of the letter writer for more personal assistance. On occasion, Maier even went so far as to prepare a sermon for a single letter writer and then telephoned that person to urge him or her to listen to his upcoming broadcast. Maier’s clerical staff handled the remaining bulk of his mail. While responses to correspondents varied in their level of personalization, over the years Maier developed standardized tracts or texts to respond to four hundred different problems, questions, and situations, thereby enabling him and his staff to respond situationally and quickly.63

A review of these prepared responses demonstrates just how seriously Maier and his staff took their pastoral responsibilities to letter-writing listeners. An internal TLH correspondence guide emphasized that the “problem-solution paragraphs” on file were “to be used only for Lutheran Hour Correspondence Work” and were “a privileged possession entrusted only to such who carry the delicate responsibility of answering problem mail.” The guide further instructed: “these paragraphs are not to be recopied for general distribution,” nor were they to “be made available to ‘some good friend.’” Topics were alphabetically catalogued and covered an amazing range,
including Anger, the Apocrypha, Baptism of the Insane, Bobbed Hair, Catholics attending Lutheran churches, Drunkards, Gambling, Insurance Policies, Judas, Interracial Marriage, Masturbation, Millerites, Predestination, Soul-sleep, Suicide, Water (Holy), and Worry (Needless). Responses were remarkably gracious in tone, easy to understand, and often supported arguments or advice with scriptural references. It was not uncommon for TLH responses to encourage personal contact with a local pastor. 

As his ministry flourished, Maier, and his loyal listeners adopted correspondence as a means to personalize mass-mediated pastoral relationships. The radio pastor offered access to the unique combination of intimacy and authority, with anonymity. Said another way, the very public proclamation of religion enabled a very personalized and private reception of religion for those who desired it. To be sure, other radio preachers generated and responded to significant correspondence of their own. But the letter-writing of Maier’s listeners, and the manner in which this minister responded, broadened his “pastorate” in the most dramatic and often life-changing ways.

Summary

In the 1920s, the harnessing of radio technology to create the broadcast medium changed American life in dramatic ways. As these developments rapidly occurred, a few visionary religious leaders saw the potential of reaching millions of souls with the Gospel of Christ. One such leader was Walter A. Maier, whose effectiveness in this endeavor was unsurpassed. His erudition, evangelical fervor, unwavering theological orthodoxy, boundless energy, eloquent delivery, and pastoral heart all came together to build and serve the “one, holy catholic and apostolic Church” in the United States and around the globe. And he did this as a seminary professor in a Lutheran denomination not associated with innovative methods of proclamation or outreach.

Maier was not drawn to radio by an innate interest in technology or novel devices, but he embraced these tools because of a burning desire to “bring Christ to the nations.” The confluence of broadcast technology, the resulting emergence of mass culture, and an anxiety-laden historical period—the Great Depression, World War II, and the early Cold War—produced an unprecedented opportunity to reach citizens and sinners with a message of hope. In an age of modernist skepticism (both
within secular and churchly quarters), naive humanist theories, hostility to traditional orthodoxy, and downright unbelief, Maier preached “Truth”—with a capital “T.” For millions each week, the Lutheran cleric’s divinely-inspired exhortations on truth, projected by “radio towers of strength” across the land, offered salvific peace, sanctifying encouragement, and indispensable pastoral care in troubled times.

Maier’s utilization of a previously unavailable medium to reach millions with a crystalline presentation of Law and Gospel took Luther’s marriage of scriptural exposition and technology to a new level. Maier’s embrace of radio airwaves to contextualize biblical truths, speak prophetically to individuals and the nation (while eschewing political commentary), and complement the role of pastors and their parishes, all in the midst of turmoil, can provide a helpful model of evangelistic/pastoral innovation and homiletic adaptation to today’s church leaders. Maier’s commitment “to use every available and suitable station on earth for the proclamation of Christ’s eternal Gospel” only requires a re-conception of “station” to apply to the multi-media environment of the twenty-first century.66 In a world even more hostile to the concept of enduring truth than in Maier’s time, in a religious environment in which church leaders increasingly downplay or dilute the exclusive truth-claims of Christian orthodoxy, and in a culture that features unbelievers and “Nones” in greater numbers than ever, perhaps the Reverend Doctor Maier’s sense of urgency, creativity, and tenacity offers profitable instruction in the divinely-appointed enterprise of “twisting the devil’s tail.”

Endnotes

1 Buckoll’s entire translation of this hymn appears in *Hymns and Prayers for Use in the Chapel of Marlborough College* (Oxford: Horace Hart, Printer to the University [privately printed], 1907), 302.


Note: Beginning in 1927, NBC operated two radio networks—NBC-Red and NBC-Blue. In 1943, it was forced to divest of NBC-Blue in response to federal anti-trust action.

Paul L. Maier, *A Man Spoke*, 69–71; Mark Ward, Sr., *Air of Salvation*, 43, 44. While Walter Maier gathered enough technical knowledge to understand the operational requirements of radio broadcasting, his son points out that Maier was not naturally drawn to new technology or gadgets. He allowed seminary students to set up their ham radio sets in his home; however, his interest was primarily in radio as a communication medium, rather than as a technological achievement. The evangelistically progressive Old Testament professor was content to appreciate what he termed “the miracle of radio,” without delving into its scientific intricacies. (Paul L. Maier interview with author, May 16, 2013.)


Alan Graebner, “KFUO’s Beginnings,” *Concordia Historical Institute Quarterly* 37, no. 3 (October 1964): 82, 83.

Alan Graebner, “KFUO’s Beginnings,” 82, 90.

Maier, with the help of Kretzschmar, John H. C. Fritz, Concordia Dean of Students, and a few others, raised significant foundational funding via appeals to Maier’s loyal Walther Leaguers and to other Lutheran laymen, including the Lutheran Layman’s League. Dean Fritz even convinced the seminarians to support the project by hitting up friends and family back home for donations and by dipping into their student organizational fund. (They contributed $2,500—not bad for financially-strapped clerics-in-training in 1923.) More importantly, this generated enthusiasm and “ownership” amongst Concordia’s student body that would prove beneficial to KFUO and, eventually, *TLH*.—See Herman H. Hohenstein, “The History of KFUO,” *Walther League Messenger* 35, June 1927, 636; Paul L. Maier, *A Man Spoke*, 72; Fred and Edith Pankow, *75 Years of Blessing and The Best is Yet to Come: The History of the"
International Lutheran Laymen’s League (St. Louis: International Lutheran Laymen’s League, 1992), 30.

16 Alan Graebner, “KFUO’s Beginnings,” 84, 85; Paul L. Maier, A Man Spoke, 72.

17 Alan Graebner, “KFUO Beginnings,” 85, 86.

18 Alan Graebner, “KFUO Beginnings,” 86. While The Christian Century may have found the creation of a “called” clerical position as a radio station manager innovative, it did not change its general opinion of the LCMS or its leading seminary. In July of the following year, the magazine referred to Concordia Seminary-St. Louis as a “kind of corporate pope” that exercised “rigid discipline” on the denomination by enforcing “conformity to a theology which may be described as an ossified seventeenth century orthodoxy.” The LCMS, the editorial asserted, “has isolated itself from other churches with an effectiveness . . . not surpassed by any other body,” thereby rendering its “social influence upon American life . . . very slight.”—See “What is Disturbing the Lutherans?” The Christian Century, VLIII (July 22, 1926), 909.

19 See “Suggestions for Speakers Over KFUO,” WAM Collection, Box 1, Folder 93, CHI.

20 Alan Graebner, “KFUO’s Beginnings,” 93, 94.


22 Fosdick’s “take no prisoners” approach to the religious broadcasting battleground was evident in a speech he made at a 1938 banquet at the Waldorf-Astoria, celebrating fifteen years of national religious broadcasting under the auspices of the Federal Council of Churches. In the presence of Radio Corporation of America’s President, David Sarnoff, and NBC President, Lenox Lohr, and likeminded NBC radio preachers, Fosdick proclaimed, “Whatever may be the future uncertainties, it is sure that we have an opportunity in religion-on-the-air to make an incalculable contribution that will outflank, overpass, undercut sectarianism in religion.” He went on to equate “sectarianism in religion” to a ten-year-old boy who “got onto the fact that there was to be an eclipse of the sun and who sold tickets for ten cents to all the boys of the neighborhood so that they could come into his back yard and see the eclipse . . . Religion is a cosmic matter, and yet we call people into our back yards so they can see it.” Fosdick declared that “you can’t talk that way over the air . . . it will not do on the air. What one says on the air must be universal, catholic, inclusive, profoundly human.” Quote taken from a “stenographic report” of the Waldorf-Astoria banquet, published to preserve “the proceedings . . . in a permanent form.” See “The Church of the Sky” (New York: Federal Council of the Churches of Christ in America, 1938), 31–35. See also Joel A. Carpenter, Revive Us Again: The Reawakening of American Fundamentalism (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 131; Robert Moats Miller, Harry Emerson Fosdick: Preacher, Pastor, Prophet (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 214, 379, 380; Ernest Gordon, Ecclesiastical Octopus: A Factual Report on the Federal Council of Churches of Christ in America (Boston: Fellowship Press, 1948), 87–89.


24 Paul L. Maier, A Man Spoke, 112.


26 Hal Erickson, Religious Radio and Television, 61, 62; Mark Ward, Sr., Air of Salvation, 42.
27 Tona J. Hangen, Redeeming the Dial, 21–24; Paul L. Maier, A Man Spoke, 110–115; Mark Ward, Sr., Air of Salvation, 41–49.
28 Paul L. Maier, A Man Spoke, 111.
29 Concordia Seminary incurred total costs, including faculty and staff salaries, of $79,448 for the year 1930. Thus, the average weekly expense for that calendar year totaled $1,528. See Statistical Yearbook of the Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Missouri, Ohio, and Other States for the Year 1930 (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1931), 178.
31 Paul L. Maier, A Man Spoke, 114.
32 Paul L. Maier, A Man Spoke, 115.
33 Mark Ward, Sr., Air of Salvation, 48, 49.
34 Paul L. Maier, A Man Spoke, 119, 120. For examples of press coverage, see “Lutheran Radio Program,” The Daily Herald (Biloxi), October 2, 1930, 6; “On The Air Tonight,” Appleton Post-Gazette, November 28, 1930, 10; “Lutherans Inaugurate Radio Hour,” Oak Parker (Oak Park, IL), October 3, 1930, 29; “Aces of the Air,” Hammond Lake County Times, October 23, 1930, 8; “Christmas Greetings,” Washington Post, December 25, 1930, 8. Several newspapers noted that TLH was the first effort by a denomination to spread its message via paid network programming.
37 Walter A. Maier, Forward to The Lutheran Hour, vi.
38 Knudsen would later become president of General Motors.
39 Paul L. Maier, A Man Spoke, 164–168; Fred and Edith Pankow, The Best is Yet to Come, 51–53.
41 Gerald Perschbacher, Archivist of TLH, interview by author, March 10, 2009. Perschbacher explained that two complete TLH broadcasts would be recorded on two transcription disks in a single production run. The two-disk sets would be sent to non-network stations, which their “disc jockeys” would play on the air during the time slot they assigned to TLH.
42 Walter A. Maier, The Lutheran Hour, 163.
43 Walter A. Maier, The Lutheran Hour, 28.
45 Maier was unrelenting in his attacks on birth control throughout his career. In addition to preaching against it in sermons, he often addressed it in The Walther League Messenger, of which he was editor from 1920 to 1945.
46 For example: “Humanity is not an accident, a chemical coincidence, but it is God’s supreme masterpiece, created after a counsel of the divine Trinity . . . . If there is nothing divine in man, if he is only a refined form of the beast, then all the ideals of clean, constructive living are shattered.” Walter A. Maier, The Lutheran Hour, 67, 68; “I am sure that . . . mental protests will assert that man’s rise from the beast is an accepted fact, removed from all possibility of question, a truism of modern science. ‘All scholarship is on our side,’ the exponents of man’s animal ancestry cry. ‘Only half-wits, mental weaklings, and religious fanatics accept the Book
of Genesis,’ they conclude. And so successfully have they plastered this godless theory with scientific endorsement that most of us have forgotten how great a company of internationally acclaimed scientists [Maier provided specific examples of such scientists] . . . have vehemently rejected the brute beginning. . . . The acknowledgment of God as the Fountain of our life must be firmly expressed. . . .” Walter A. Maier, *The Cross from Coast to Coast*, 82–84; “The men who seek to run the world without God or against Him are making a ghastly mess of it. This exile of the Almighty controls much of modern thought. It starts with eliminating God as the Creator, a gloating over the claim that man is a creature of chance on an accidental planet that has no place for God. . . . We are against this claim of man’s ape ancestry and this banishing of God, not only because it is against the sacred Scriptures, but also because it contradicts human reason.” Walter A. Maier, *The Radio for Christ*, 211, 212, 215; “The worst evil besetting our age is this, that self-willed men stubbornly refuse to heed Holy Writ. Rejecting the divine revelation, they insist: ‘No God made man. The human race is descended from brute beasts’. . . . Finally it must be clear to every one of us that dethroning God as Creator and making men accidental beasts, atheists are promoting sin, vice, immorality, and the giving free reign to lust. If there is no almighty Ruler . . . no Judge of eternity . . . why worry about truth, honesty, purity, love, faithfulness?” Walter A. Maier, *Global Broadcasts of His Grace*, 95–97.


48 Fred and Edith Pankow, *75 Years of Blessing and The Best is Yet to Come*, 88.

49 Though *TLH* had begun a Thursday evening program in 1930, its broadcasts moved to Sundays in 1935.


53 Tona Hangen, “The Man of the Hour,” 120.


57 Tona Hangen, “The Man of the Hour,” 120.


59 Paul L. Maier, *A Man Spoke*, 172. By “problem mail,” Maier was referring to mail from writers experiencing some personal struggle or problem.

60 See “Continuities” from broadcasts of *The Lutheran Hour*, Lutheran Hour Archives, St. Louis. The announcer often added the words, “as he has thousands of others,” or “at no charge,” or “freely and confidentially,” at the end of this invitation.

61 For an example of the “personal, sacred trust” reference, see the “Continuity” for November 9, 1941, in “Continuities” from broadcasts of *The Lutheran Hour*, Lutheran Hour Archives, St. Louis.

62 Judy Maguire, “The Lutheran Hour,” 34.

Examples: In the 1920s, radio preaching pioneer Paul Rader received thousands of letters a month, requiring dedicated secretarial support. See James L. Snyder, *Paul Rader: Portrait of an Evangelist (1879–1938)* (Ocala, FL: Fellowship Ministries, 2003), 151. In his memoirs, prominent Protestant minister and radio sermonizer Harry Emerson Fosdick mentioned letters “from all sorts of places and from all imaginable human situations,” generated by his *National Vespers* program on NBC. See Harry Emerson Fosdick, *The Living of These Days: An Autobiography* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1956), 223–225. Letters were a regular part of Charles E. Fuller’s *Old-Fashioned Revival Hour* program. Each week, Fuller’s wife read a sampling of their abundant radio-response correspondence, especially those letters that bore “witness to what the Lord has done.” In the mid-1950s, Grace Payton Fuller published a book of excerpts of letters received that she considered “the most interesting and edifying” of “testimonies.” See Mrs. Charles E. Fuller, *Heavenly Sunshine: Letters to the “Old-Fashioned Revival Hour”* (Westwood, NJ: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1956).

Paul Maier, Walter Maier’s son, recalls that his father was relentless in “always” restating this goal verbatim, in numerous settings, up to the time of his death. Paul L. Maier, interview with author, 23 April 2009. See also Paul L. Maier, *A Man Spoke*, 191, 271.
An Outside Look at the *Missio Dei* in 2 Kings 5

Mike Rodewald

**Editor’s Note:** This article was developed from a presentation on June 16, 2018 for GCS18 (Great Commission Summit 2018), Concordia University–Irvine under the theme, Interpreting Scripture through Non-Western Eyes.

**Abstract:** God’s Word is for all people. Western worldview and culture may cause bias as we study and interpret Scriptural narrative. Understanding how those from other language communities and cultures interpret such narratives increases our knowledge-base and our appreciation of God at work through the Word in the world.

A teenager said to his friends. “It was terrible. First, I got angina pectoris, then sclerosis. Then, I got psoriasis and tonsillitis followed by appendectomy.”

“Wow! How did you survive?” said his friends.

“I don’t know,” the teenager replied. “That was the toughest *spelling test* I ever had.”

Context matters. The words of a narrative event may remain the same, but as we apply new information, new insight is gained. This sometimes results in humor, other times in new learning.

As Lutheran Christians, we confess that God and His Word are for everyone regardless of who they are, where they are, or what language they speak. We have historically applied much effort within our own Western contexts to inform our knowledge-base of God’s Word and what it means to us. We witness this through the many commentaries written by Western theologians. This cumulative knowledge base informs us. But our understandings of the narratives and texts that are God’s Word are also limited by our own context and perspectives. Missiologist Lamin Sanneh notes, “Context is not passive but comes loaded with its own biases ready to contest whatever claims it encounters.”

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You would think we might be happy to see where our Western worldviews may provide bias and limit us as we study Scripture. That is not always the case.

The missionary journey starts with formation within our “home church” context. The missionary is then sent to serve outside the home church, perhaps abroad. As the missionary shares and studies the Word, these outsiders also get excited about what they are hearing. They ask questions. Often those questions are ones that may not have occurred to the missionary before. Neither have the answers. Tension occurs.

The missionary has one of two choices: to reject the question as illegitimate, thus in effect maintaining one’s own bias as a standard, or to enter into dialogue to determine why outsiders are asking the question and how God’s Word might address it. In such a case, new insight may be gained. The missionary may then wish to share such insight towards widening the knowledge base of his or her home church. But straddling the gap between those from a foreign culture and the home church is not always easy. The home church may even view the returning insight with suspicion. However, without such stimulation, the home church is at risk of stagnation and institutionalization. We need the observations and insights from those whom God calls who are different from ourselves to inform, discuss, accept, and reject. By so doing, our home church’s knowledge base is challenged and grows. The process may be uncomfortable, but overall we grow in our faith and understanding as the people of God.

This article looks at 2 Kings 5, the Naaman narrative, in a way that Western readers may have not observed it before; at least, this writer cannot find it presented this way in any of our Western commentaries. Yet, having lived on the African continent for the better part of thirty-three years and worked with this text with multiple African and U. S. audiences, I have come to an alternate way to look at such Old Testament narrative events. The interpretative findings are so consistent that, even though they may not be recorded in a commentary, in their unified conclusions they become just as valid and informative as those expressed by Western Bible commentators. It is a good lesson. Though those from different cultural contexts may interpret the events in Scripture in a different manner, the end result of the Word understood everywhere is both faith and a deeper appreciation of God and His mission to us, as we see Him at work throughout the world.

That said, let us look at 2 Kings 5, sometimes called the Naaman narrative. There are three main human characters in this narrative: Naaman, Elisha, the servant of God, and Gehazi, the false servant. Naaman, as will be seen from his actions, operates similarly to those who practice African traditional religions yet today. Such practitioners are termed “animists.” It is useful to understand this narrative from an animist worldview and perspective. But to interpret from that perspective, first the Western reader must understand how an animist worldview informs perspective.
Worldview works silently in the background of our thought processes. Such is how we make meaning of the world. Our worldview conditions what we observe and hear and the assumptions we make. One cannot know what one does not know. One will try to fit the meaning of what one sees or hears through the lens of what one already knows until one learns something new and thus modifies worldview.

A comprehensive definition is provided by the American Scientific Affiliation.

A worldview is a view of the world, used for living in the world. A worldview is a mental model of reality—a comprehensive framework of ideas & attitudes about the world, ourselves, and life, a system of beliefs, a system of personally customized theories about the world and how it works—with answers for a wide range of questions.2

A group of Western seminarians approached a Kenyan student studying in the U. S. and said, “Let’s go out and get something to eat.” There is an underlying worldview assumption. Who pays? The Kenyan student was aghast when he finished and found he was expected to pay for his own food. He had to borrow money. From his context with a high component of hospitality, the one who invites is expected to pay. That is not the case in a Western student community, which assumes that each person will pay for his own food. The assumptions provided by alternate worldviews may be different.

To help equip the reader to understand more fully the animist perspective, whether historical as in Naaman’s action or contemporary as in African traditional religions today, it is first prudent to anchor ourselves through the lens of our Christian worldview.

In the Christian worldview, God’s action is first. He has given us salvation through His Son not because of what we have done but as a gift of grace. He has done this in spite of us, not because of us. We respond in gratefulness to God’s action; God’s action is first, our action in response follows.

The animist’s world is diametrically opposite. Human desire motivates action and propitiation to the spiritual world. Human action is first, and, if successful, the spiritual responds.3

Within an animist spiritual world, there are many spiritual powers. While there is almost always a high god or creator god to which all power is ultimately attributed, there are many ways—tribal spirits, territorial spirits, life-force, familial spirits, ancestors—through which one can access the power. The Hindu spiritual world estimates over thirty million powers are available for supplication.
In animist thought, there is an underlying premise that the spiritual and physical are intrinsically linked. If one can manipulate either the spiritual or the physical, the other is also manipulated. There is no coincidence. If a physical problem occurs, it means the spiritual world is not happy and must be propitiated to fix the problem. If one desires the physical—money, love, power, or position—the spiritual can be manipulated to fulfill the desire. If the animist himself does not know how to get what is wanted from the spiritual world, there are multiple spiritual specialists who are available to help, for a price. The spiritual world responds to human action.

Now I must admit to the reader that I have propitiated the spiritual through animist practice. When I was in the eighth grade playing basketball, I had a pair of lucky socks. When I wore the socks, I played better than when I didn’t. I hid those socks so they wouldn’t get washed and lose their “luck.” Notice my animist practice. First my action—maintaining and putting on lucky socks—and if I did it right, I got what I wished as “luck,” which caused me to play basketball better. I never cracked the first team, so readers may come to their own conclusions as to actual efficacy.

Animism lies within our human nature and as such is present in every society. In dualistic Western societies, animist practice tends to be peripherally practiced through crystals, lucky charms, and superstition. In more holistic societies, animism serves as a foundation where the spiritual and physical are linked. Naaman operates from such a society, or at least his actions are understood so by African hearers who hold a similar holistic premise. As such, his worldview is likely to hold several key animist precepts.

- Holistic: Every physical action is tied to a spiritual cause. There is a Liberian proverb—“nothing happens for nothing.” There is no coincidence. Additionally, the assumption is that if physical and spiritual are tied together, then one can manipulate the spiritual by manipulating the physical and vice-versa.

- Many spiritual powers: There are many different names and types, but the underlying foundation is the same. All somehow derive their power from one source: a creator being who usually is quite distant and not directly accessible. However, the being’s life-force/spiritual power is present in earthly objects, ancestors, and spiritual beings and through them becomes accessible. Some have more and some less.
Ritual is the key to accessing spiritual power; correct performance of ritual binds power to your purpose. Conversely, incorrect performance invites spiritual wrath.

Power words, such as the name or associative number of a spiritual power, unlocks and harnesses spiritual power for one’s own use.

A spiritual specialist can help, usually for payment. If one cannot achieve results, there is always the hope that someone else might. Animists are functional. They keep trying until something works to give them what they desire.

One last note in preparation for entering into the text—this one on translation. The name of God in the original Hebrew text is expressed as a tetragrammaton, YHWH. Several hundred years before the birth of Christ, Hebrew readers began to use the referential term Adonai, “Lord,” wherever they encountered YHWH, the name considered too holy for direct use. Most English versions, such as the ESV used in this article, maintain such insider tradition; the tetragrammaton is translated as the LORD (all caps). The ESV then translates the more generic elohim as God (capitalized) or god depending upon the context understood by the translator.

This article does not use these traditions, but rather lets the text speak more directly to the English reader by maintaining YHWH as in the original text and translating the more generic elohim as “spiritual power.” This lets the reader eavesdrop on how these terms of reference occur within the original narrative and were perhaps “interpreted” by non-Israelites.4

2 Kings 5:1–4

In foundational animist society, position and power are a direct result of access to spiritual power. Naaman is a great man and, from the point of view of an animist who has achieved power, such position is obtainable only through spiritual help. In this case, he is technically correct, yet he does not know specifics, i.e., it is YHWH (v. 1) who is delivering Israel into the hands of Syria through him. But Naaman has a skin disease, and since the problem is not yet solved, his available spiritual resources have failed. He is so desperate that he is willing to follow the suggestion of a captured Israelite girl who, in her circumstances, cannot be seen as having much success with spiritual power. Yet, in the animist worldview, there is always hope that a solution can be found. Naaman secures a letter from his king to the king of Israel.

So he went, taking with him ten talents of silver, six thousand shekels of gold, and ten changes of clothing. (2 Kgs 5:5)

What is Naaman’s purpose? He has an estimated three to four million U. S. dollars’ worth of silver and gold in addition to the changes of clothing. Naaman is
prepared to pay whatever the cost. Great spiritual specialists require great compensation. They have access to the greatest spiritual powers and charge accordingly.

And he brought the letter to the king of Israel, which read, “When this letter reaches you, know that I have sent to you Naaman my servant that you may cure him of his leprosy.” And when the king of Israel read the letter, he tore his clothes and said, “Am I elohim [spiritual power], to kill and to make alive, that this man sends word to me to cure a man of his leprosy? Only consider, and see how he is seeking a quarrel with me.” (2 Kgs 5:6–7)

Note that the king of Syria does not identify Elisha or any other specialist in his letter. My Western worldview found this omission unexplainable until an African pastor from the Zande ethnic group in South Sudan explained to me that traditional chiefs and kings lead by being aware of and using all the spiritual resources in the land. Such awareness is necessary to both maintain their own power and protect themselves from others using spiritual powers against them. Naturally, from an animist perspective, the king of Israel is expected to know exactly the most powerful spiritual specialists to whom to refer Naaman.

But the king of Israel’s reaction is not as Naaman would have expected, and this created doubt. This journey, from Naaman’s perspective, is to a defeated king in a defeated land with defeated spiritual powers, on the suggestion of a captive servant girl with dubious access to spiritual power. But the journey continues when Elisha hears and sends a message, “Let him come now to me that he may know that there is a prophet in Israel” (v. 8). Naaman keeps trying.

So Naaman came with his horses and chariots and stood at the door of Elisha’s house. And Elisha sent a messenger to him, saying, “Go and wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored and you shall be clean.” (2 Kgs 5:9–10)

In sending a messenger with simple instructions, Elisha provides another worldview challenge for Naaman. In dealing with a mere messenger with simple instructions, Naaman will have an underlying assumption about the spiritual power behind the instructions. In an animist worldview, great spiritual power is not easily unlocked. Spiritual specialists—witchdoctors, palm readers, fortune tellers, New Age practitioners, etc.—help clients negotiate the complexities of dealing with spiritual powers. The more complexity, the more spiritual power. Helping a client means payment. Complexity and success means bigger payment. The best in Syria have already failed him. The messenger and instruction in Israel is too simple to reflect the

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Naaman is prepared to pay whatever the cost. Great spiritual specialists require great compensation.
great spiritual power needed. Naaman reacts,

But Naaman was angry and went away, saying, “Behold, I thought that he would surely come out to me and stand and call upon the name of [YHWH] his elohim [spiritual power], and wave his hand over the place and cure the leper. Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? Could I not wash in them and be clean?” So he turned and went away in a rage. (2 Kgs 5:11–12)

Naaman’s words confess animist thought. Elisha is expected to call on the name of his spiritual power, wave his hand over the place, and bind the power to purpose through ritual. The action Naaman is expecting has nothing to do with Naaman’s faith, or lack of, but is about Elisha manipulating his spiritual power through ritual to cure him.

In verse 12, Naaman mentions the Abana and Pharpar rivers. If one researches through Western commentaries, the comments are about the quality of water—the rivers of Damascus are sparkling clean. But Naaman’s confession has little to do with quality of water. Rather in an animist worldview, natural features such as rivers, mountains, caves, forests, giant trees, etc., are links to spiritual power. Naaman is not maintaining that the water of Syria has better physical quality; rather, he is touting the spiritual powers in the waters of Syria over any in the Jordan River.

It seems that Naaman has had enough. Naaman no longer has the slightest hope that he will find his cure in Israel. His servants intervene.

But his servants came near and said to him, “My father, it is a great word the prophet has spoken to you; will you not do it? Has he actually said to you, ‘Wash and be clean’?” (2 Kgs 5:13)

The underlying meaning in verse 13 is less literally expressed in the King James, “if the prophet had bid thee do some great thing, wouldest thou not have done it?” Animist ritual can be elaborate. Access to great spiritual power requires more than mere simplicity. The servants point out that if Naaman would have been asked to accomplish an elaborate ritual, he would have entered into the task. It is simple, so why not just try? Naaman returns, but note his action.

So he went down and dipped himself seven times in the Jordan, according to the word of the man of elohim [spiritual power], and his flesh was restored like the flesh of a little child, and he was clean. (2 Kgs 5:14)

Naaman goes down into the Jordan and ‘dips’ himself even though in verse 10 and 13, he was instructed to ‘wash’. The Hebrew words are different. A coincidence? Western commentaries brush right over the different expressions. But there is no coincidence in the animist worldview.
The difference in terms of reference is not viewed as insignificant. By “dipping” rather than “washing,” Naaman demonstrates contempt and intention to disrupt the ritual. The literally rendered English provides meaning which dismisses difference for Western readers. The sense of what is actually happening as reflected in the context is less literally expressed as, “He went down in the Jordan seven times according to the word of the man of elohim [spiritual power] and/but dipped.” Elisha’s instructions are not followed. There was no washing. In the doing this, Naaman is challenging any powers in the Jordan associated with the number seven.

On one of my early days serving with Lutheran Bible Translators in Liberia, a commotion occurred at the house next door. When I arrived, a man lay writhing on the floor foaming from the mouth. I was told that the man had obtained “medicine” (spiritual power in an object) to get a girlfriend, but he had broken its rules. It had turned on him.

If Naaman had any fear or respect towards a spiritual power in the Jordan River, he would not disobey and invite spiritual wrath upon himself. But the opposite of what Naaman might expect occurs. He is made clean. It is a gift of grace through the waters of the Jordan River.

Note Naaman’s new confession.

Then he [Naaman] returned to the man of elohim [spiritual power], he and all his company, and he came and stood before him. And he said, “Behold, I know that there is no elohim [spiritual power] in all the earth but in Israel; so accept now a present from your servant.” But he [Elisha] said, “As [YHWH] lives before whom I stand [serve], I will receive none.” And he urged him to take it, but he refused. (2 Kgs 5:15–17)

Naaman doesn’t confess a high god over many other powers, rather he confesses that he has found the one God in all the earth in Israel. This spiritual power is not one of many. Also notice Elisha’s role—a true servant. He could have used ritual in association with YHWH’s power. In 2 Kings 6:6, Elisha did so. But that context is of the people of God who already knew YHWH, not animist practitioners from outside. Elisha could also have accepted payment, since in an animist worldview, spiritual specialists expect payment to complete the process of “helping” their client. Elisha does not and in the refusal, he points to YHWH, not himself.

Then Naaman said, “If not, please let there be given to your servant two mule loads of earth, for from now on your servant will not offer burnt offering or sacrifice to any [spiritual power] but [YHWH]. In this matter
may [YHWH] pardon your servant; when my master goes into the house of Rimmon [name of a spiritual power associated with thunder and lightning] to worship there, leaning on my arm, and I bow myself in the house of Rimmon, when I bow myself in the house of Rimmon, [YHWH] pardon your servant in this matter.” He said to him, “Go in peace [goodbye].” (2 Kgs 5:17–19a)

Naaman’s new confession is precarious. Challenge awaits when he returns home. He asks for Israeli dirt. In an animist worldview, a part equals the whole. For example, access to a lock of hair can be used to cause harm to the physical body of someone far away. Spiritual essence remains linked. In the request, Naaman still exhibits animist thought. He wishes something physical that contains the spiritual power of Israel and makes YHWH available to him. He anticipates problems when he returns to where other territorial spirits have jurisdiction. Elisha doesn’t castigate Naaman; rather, he just says “go in peace,” which is the equivalent of an English goodbye—no agreement or castigation.

The rest of this narrative has been termed an appendix by some Western commentary writers. It is not. It is a continuation of the same spiritual battle even as the focus shifts. Whereas in the previous section the focus has been on God’s action through an Israelite captive, Elisha and the waters of the Jordan, now the focus moves to Gehazi and man’s action. The contrast is that of a false servant’s actions, while Elisha serves within God’s mission.

Gehazi, the servant of Elisha the man of [spiritual power] said, “See, my master has spared this Naaman the Syrian, in not accepting from his hand what he brought. As [YHWH] lives, I will run after him and get something from him. (2 Kgs 5:20)

We observe Gehazi further in the previous chapter, 2 Kings 4. He seems somewhat a “wannabe,” a servant of Elisha trying to emulate results through his own actions. However, what tells us most about Gehazi’s spiritual approach is his oath in 2 Kings 5:20. Contrast verse 16, as Elisha issues an oath using the name of God, “As [YHWH] lives, before whom I stand (serve).” We note that Gehazi omits the part about serving and instead uses the name to empower his own actions—“As [YHWH] lives, I will run after him,” in the animist sense of seeking to empower his own desire.

So Gehazi followed Naaman. And when Naaman saw someone running after him, he got down from the chariot to meet him and said, “Is all well?” And Gehazi said, “All is well. My master has sent me to say, ‘There have just now come to me from the hill country of Ephraim two young men of the sons of the prophets. Please give them a talent of silver and two changes of clothing.’” And Naaman said, “Be pleased to accept two talents.” (2 Kgs 5:21–23)
In an animist worldview, what is granted can be taken away. One must always make sure that the spiritual world and its specialists are satisfied. When Naaman sees Gehazi, he expresses concern. He has just received what he wanted. Is there a problem?

Negotiations and pretenses of politeness are often complicated in Africa and the Middle East. One may politely protest an offer on the surface, even as an underlying negotiation is progressing. Naaman appears to assume that such negotiation is in progress. The earlier protestations of Elisha were just the beginning of the formula. Now comes actual payment. The process seems familiar and, as such, is a direct challenge to Naaman’s new confession. Naaman responds by providing twice the payment requested. He seals the deal and disappears from the narrative.

Gehazi returns to Elisha. Here is Elisha’s response.

Elisha said to Gehazi, “Did not my heart go when the man turned from his chariot to meet you? Was it a time to accept money and garments, olive orchards and vineyards, sheep and oxen, male servants and female servants? Therefore the leprosy of Naaman shall cling to you and to your descendants forever.” So he went out from his presence a leper, like snow. (2 Kgs 5:26–27)

Western commentaries tend to focus on Gehazi’s greed as the reason for the punishment. However, when we look at Gehazi’s actions and how those actions may have affected the new faith of Naaman, the severity of the punishment makes more sense. We do not know what happened to Naaman. We can only conjecture. But we do know that Gehazi’s action pointed Naaman away from the faith that YHWH had extended to him in the waters of the Jordan River. Naaman had confessed the spiritual power he had met as unique from any other. Elisha’s actions synched with the new spiritual understanding given by Israel’s God of grace. Gehazi’s actions were just the opposite. They conformed to an animist worldview, pointing Naaman away from the YHWH he had just experienced through the waters of the Jordan.

It is this that evokes the wrath of Elisha and the punishment. In Matthew 18:6, the words of Jesus would seem to apply, “but whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea.”

In God’s mission, our task is to continually point to our God of grace and not set up barriers to what God is doing in the world. Elisha did so. Gehazi did just the opposite and pointed Naaman away from the
faith to which God had called him. The severity of punishment fit the action.

Naaman experienced a spiritual power in Israel that didn’t act as he expected. He received a gift he did not deserve, even as we have. God has given us faith and salvation through Jesus, not because of our own merit, reason, or strength, but because of His great love for us. That good news is consistent throughout Scripture and comes through in this outsider view of this Old Testament narrative.

God’s Word is for every language community and those within every culture and worldview. Our own worldviews may create bias and limit us in fuller indications of Scripture, but the end result in every culture is faith, as we meet our God of grace through the Word. To hear and experience Scripture as those in other cultures and contexts do does not negate our own knowledge base; rather, it validates the awesome nature of God’s Word going forth into the world, bringing faith to all peoples, no matter where they are or what their worldview.

Endnotes
1 Lamin Sanneh, Whose Religion is Christianity (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 2003), 5.
3 For an overview on animism, see Michael Rodewald, “Observing Sacred and Profane in Animist Worldview” (PhD diss., Concordia Theological Seminary, 2017).
5 טָבַל tabal {taw-bal’} “to dip or plunge”
6 רָחַץ rachats {raw-khats} “wash, wash off, wash away, bathe”
Deacons on a Mission—
The Pivotal Place of Acts 6

John P. Juedes

Abstract: The seven deacons of Acts 6 are commonly understood as having been appointed only to serve the poor. This superficial reading of the text misses their important and pivotal mission—to evangelize and incorporate the Hellenists, a culturally distinct people group. A closer study of the Seven reveals that the church in Antioch followed their model in launching Paul’s mission to evangelize the Gentiles, preparing Jewish believers to receive “foreigners” and incorporating Hellenists as full members of the body of Jesus Christ. They become the point men by whom the Church began to make disciples of “all ethnos.” The commissioning of the Seven is the root from which many succeeding missions, principles of ministry, practices and leaders grew.

The Extraordinary Story of the Seven

Many people believe that Stephen, Philip, and the other deacons of Acts 6 were appointed only to serve the poor and were not permitted to do the more significant spiritual ministry of apostles such as evangelizing, preaching, and baptizing. This view misses the pivotal and foundational ministry of the Seven.

We need to begin with the broad context in order to understand their importance. What does the Acts of the Apostles tell us about the twelve apostles? After chapter 1, in which Matthias is chosen, the Acts of the Apostles tells us almost nothing about eleven of the twelve apostles. Luke devotes just 14 (Greek) words to James the brother of John, “He killed James the brother of John with the sword, and when he

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saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter also” (Acts 12:2). This serves primarily to introduce Peter’s work. Luke mentions John only in passing, noting that he was with Peter in the temple when a lame man was healed, and also in Samaria. By contrast, Luke devotes three entire chapters, six, seven, and eight, to the seven deacons. This makes little sense if they had only a minor task to serve the poor.

Conflict, Not Cuisine

The story of the Seven begins with conflict in Acts 6:1–6:

A complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution. The twelve summoned the whole number of the disciples and said, “It is not right that we should give up preaching the Word of God to serve tables. Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty. But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the Word.” What they said pleased the whole gathering, and they chose Stephen. . . . These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands on them (ESV).

Many readers mentally trim the account to just a few words, namely, “neglect widows in the distribution,” reducing it to a story of uneven food service.

But the opening two words of the account highlight the center of the event, “complaining arose” (Greek, egeneto goggusmos). The thrust of the story is the conflict and prejudice festering beneath the surface. A few paragraphs before, Luke says, “They were all in one accord” (5:12). Now the Rolls Royce of unity whistling down harmony highway hammers headlong into a wall of discord. There are two sides, and everyone knows which side they’re on. The “Greeks” and “their widows” are one faction, marked by language and culture, even though most are Jews by birth.

Two Factions, Two Cultures

The Greek word, Hellenist, normally refers those who use the language, regardless of ethnicity. (This article and most translations use “Greeks,” “Hellenists,” and “Grecian Jews” in this way). Greek-speaking Jews were influenced by their Gentile neighbors, resulting in a culturally different kind of Jew and often in a more liberal observance of the Mosaic Law and the oral law (rulings of rabbis). This was similar to the difference between “Westernized, Conservative (or Reform)” Jews and “Hebrew, Orthodox” Jews today.
The Greeks felt that they were victims of the prejudice of the Hebrew-speaking Jews, who were in charge of the distribution and favored their own people. Prejudice would likely be more pronounced against Greek proselytes (such as Nicolas, Acts 6:5) who were not genealogically Hebrew.

The other faction was the Hebrews and their widows who spoke Hebrew or Aramaic. The Hebrews held the power, distributing to Greeks and Hebrews as they wished.

The Greeks felt oppressed, grumbling and complaining that their widows were neglected. The Greek word for complain, gongizo, is used in noun and verb forms eight times in the New Testament. It can be very serious, as when unbelieving Jews grumbled about Jesus’ claim that He is the bread from heaven, then rejected and killed Him (Jn 6:41, 43, 61).

While many translations use the word “because,” the better translation is probably “grumbling that their widows were overlooked.” The Greek word hoti here introduces indirect speech. Greeks grumbled that widows were overlooked, leaving open the possibility that widows were not overlooked, only that they thought so. Other examples of hoti indicating indirect speech include Acts 2:13; John 18:14; John 18:37; John 20:9; John 20:18; John 21:23.

If this was just a problem of unequal distribution, the apostles needed only to order the soup kitchen to use the same measure for everyone. But they knew that the real problem was disunity, not food. The difference in language made it all the harder to deal with conflict and build understanding and relationships.

Just before I arrived at my first pastorate, the church had had a quarrel and a block of people had left the church. One faction wanted to use Aid Association for Lutherans napkins and the other insisted on Lutheran Brotherhood napkins. Every church leader knows of conflicts over trivial issues. The apostles knew, as we do, that factions find reasons to fight, whether real or imagined, substantive or petty.

The apostles assigned the Seven a hard problem: to settle the conflict, pacify grumblers, and integrate Greeks into the Hebrew Church. This is why they needed to be full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom (Acts 6:3).

An Astonishing Answer to Cultural Conflict

But the apostles and the Church in Jerusalem went even farther. They addressed the problem in an astonishing way which, in other circumstances, might well have caused grumbling among the Hebrews. They publicly transferred power to Greeks in the center of the Hebrew Church in the most Hebrew city in the world. The Twelve let the whole gathering elect their own leaders who became junior partners to the apostles—and they chose all men with Greek names. Ten of the twelve apostles had Hebrew names, while all seven deacons had Greek names. The twelve apostles
fulfilled the covenant to the twelve tribes of Israel. There were seven deacons, the number of completion, by itself symbolic, because the Hebrew Church was completed by addition of Greek-speaking Jews. The apostles delegated the whole duty, or office (xreias) to the Greeks, giving them control. The deacons were established as ministers of the church just as Christ established the apostles. The apostles publicly sanctioned the deacons’ ministry by laying on hands, just as the eleven did the new apostle, Matthias.

The fact that the apostles appointed leaders who were elected by the people stands in stark contrast from the precedent set by Jesus Christ, who independently appointed the Twelve and the Seventy.

The apostles were emphatic about transferring ministry and authority to Greeks. But this move was needed because the apostles had a grand but difficult goal in mind: To welcome Greeks into the Hebrew Church and unify the two into one new man. They may not have realized the lengths to which the Seven would carry out this mandate, and how successful they would be, because the second-generation Church was mostly Greek.

The Seven were apparently bilingual (as were Paul and Barnabas), because Stephen was able to debate with those of the Greek-speaking synagogue and defend himself when on trial by the Hebrew Sanhedrin (Acts 6:9–7:56).

The Seven were either cross-cultural workers (culturally Hebraic but effectively serving in Hellenistic circles) or indigenous workers who were Hellenistic Jews themselves. In either case, they were likely better suited to work among the Hellenists than were the apostles, who appear to have all been Hebraic Jews (but probably competent at speaking Greek at that time or thereafter, since several of them wrote epistles in Greek and worked in Gentile lands).

The Seven Did the Unexpected

From the beginning, the story of the Seven took a surprising turn as seen from our ecclesiastical perspective. The Seven were chosen from among the Jerusalem congregation to address the problem of disunity in that congregation. Yet none of the stories of their ministry took place within that congregation, and none were about serving the poor, as the circumstances in the Jerusalem Church may lead us to expect.

If the Seven had been tasked only to serve the poor, one would expect stories like Jesus feeding the five thousand, Dorcas making blankets, Judas giving to the poor, and Paul collecting money for famine relief. Yet, in three full chapters, there is not a single story of their helping the poor, either inside or outside their church.
Why? I maintain that the Seven apparently understood their task as a mission to reach and incorporate all Hellenists. They saw themselves more as being sent out than called in. Taking initiative to go beyond the initial mandate of assimilating existing Greek disciples into one congregation, they evangelized and baptized Greeks, bringing many more into the church at large.

Stories of Stephen and Philip

Every story of Stephen and Philip focuses on reaching out beyond the Hebrews.

Stephen quickly left the soup kitchen behind to preach and debate with Greeks in the synagogue of the Freedmen. We know this was a Greek synagogue because of the Theodotus inscription (now in the Jerusalem Rockefeller Museum), written in Greek by a Greek so that its members could read it. One reason the Sanhedrin was angry at Stephen may have been that they were afraid that Jesus’ disciples would convert many in the Hellenistic synagogues, just as they had won over thousands of diaspora Jews on the day of Pentecost.

After Stephen was killed, the believers in the Jerusalem were scattered. Philip also left the food line and went out preaching and baptizing Hellenists. He baptized an Ethiopian official on the road to Gaza, then went to another Greek area to baptize Samaritans. He preached through Azotus (formerly one of the Philistine “Five Cities” along the coast; this Greek name replaced the former Semitic name, Ashdod) and settled in the most Greek of all cities in Israel, Caesarea (Acts 8:26–40).

This contrasts from Jesus Christ, who said He was sent to “the lost sheep of Israel” (Mt 15:24) in the synagogues of Galilee and who sent the Twelve to Israel rather than to Gentiles and Samaritans (Mt 10:2). While Jesus ministered to Greeks who came to Him, Philip went to areas in which Jesus and the Twelve spent little or no time.

The stories make clear that the Seven did not serve only to help the poor or even to bring reconciliation to the Jerusalem. They show that the Seven assisted the apostles in converting and integrating Hellenists into the Church.

Pattern for Cross-Cultural Accommodation

The Book of Acts established patterns, or templates, for the Church, such as baptizing in the name of Jesus and ordaining elders. Acts 6 provides a model for missions, a template for ministry, and a pattern for cross-cultural accommodation.
Luke offers the Seven as a model for how to assimilate Greeks because this problem plagued the Church for decades.

The apostles laid out basic qualifications for servants of the Word, but let the congregation choose them. This approach allowed believers of the other (Greek) culture to choose leaders from among themselves who could best serve them. If the Greek-speakers were in the majority, the apostles may have expected that the Church would elect Hellenists who would be different from the apostles in culture but not in faith.

**Cross-cultural accommodation** can be seen throughout the New Testament. In fact it would become more radical when the growing number of Gentiles showed that “to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life” (Acts 11:18 ESV). The Jerusalem council ruled that new Gentile believers did not have to be circumcised or keep the Mosaic Law (Acts 15:1–31). Paul allowed believers to eat food sacrificed to idols but urged they refrain if it disturbed the conscience and Jewish sensitivities of others (1 Cor 8:1–13). Church leaders in Jerusalem did not compel Titus to be circumcised (Gal 2:3). Paul openly criticized Peter when he refrained from eating with Gentile believers in Galatia (Gal 2:11–16).

However, this accommodation was resisted by believers “of the circumcision group” (as well as by Jews), who Paul said attacked the liberty they had in Christ (Gal 2:4–13; cf. Acts 15:1).

The problem of integrating Hellenists into the Hebrew Church was finally left behind when Gentile believers greatly outnumbered Jewish believers and the apostles were replaced by the second generation of leaders who were mostly Gentiles, like Timothy and Titus. (Another factor was the destruction of the Jerusalem temple, which removed the Hebraic place of worship which Jewish Christians still honored.)

**Model for Missions**

Those who left Jerusalem because of the persecution of Stephen went to Gentile lands and evangelized both Grecian Jews and Gentiles (Acts 8:1; 9:2; 10:24; 11:19–26). It does not appear that they left Jerusalem intending to be missionaries. But they would have seen themselves as carrying on the mission the apostles gave to the Seven, not as doing something new and unknown.

They, their Greek converts, and the Holy Spirit sent out Saul and Barnabas (Acts 13:1–4) with an explicit commission to preach the Gospel to Hellenized Jews and Gentiles in Cyprus and Asia Minor, following the model of the apostles who had sent
the Seven for this purpose. They laid hands on them, in part because they heard of this practice from those who had seen the apostles lay hands on Matthias and the Seven.

Saul always began his mission in a new place with a visit to the Greek-speaking Jews in a synagogue of the diaspora (Acts 13:5, 14:1, 17:1–2, etc.), just as Stephen preached Christ to those of the Greek-speaking synagogue in Jerusalem (Acts 6:9). This is one reason he was able to begin congregations so quickly. When Stephen and Philip preached to Hellenized Jews in Judea and Samaria, they established the model for reaching Hellenized Jews in the Diaspora.

Paul personally witnessed part of Stephen’s work (Acts 7:58) and may have been strongly influenced by the leaders in Antioch who knew the Seven and perhaps witnessed their commissioning and ministry about ten years before. Paul commissioned deacons in other places (Phil 1:1; 1 Tim 3:8–13) but had no need to explain this practice in his epistles because he was following the well-known model of the Seven. Paul stayed with Philip when he got off the boat in Caesarea harbor (Acts 21:8). He likely met Philip years before at the Jerusalem council (Acts 15), where they probably both spoke in favor of welcoming Gentiles and Hellenists into the church.

Priests and rabbis had expected Hellenized Jews of the Diaspora to come to Jerusalem for teaching. Now those who proclaimed the Messiah were going to them.

Template for Multiplying Ministers

When the apostles set apart the Seven for ministry, they showed the importance and a method of multiplying ministers who could both strengthen believers in congregations and extend the Gospel into different ethnic groups and new places. Their Master set a precedent for this when He sent out the Seventy.

They chose and sent out workers who fit spiritual and character qualifications rather than those who had skills, education, or social status. While the Church today emphasizes someone’s occupying an office, the New Testament focuses on fulfilling a mission.

They found leaders mainly among the new converts and within new congregations, from which Paul recruited most of his co-workers, such as Aristarchus and Titus. Saul, a Hellenized Jew who was raised in Tarsus but trained in rabbinic Judaism, passed the torch of leadership to Timothy, a Hellenized Jew, just as the Hebrew apostles did to the Hellenized Seven. Timothy learned Torah from his
Jewish mother (2 Tim 1:5) and yet was uncircumcised because of his Greek father (Acts 16:1–3).

Leaders were appointed by the new churches (as had the Seven) and received and on-the-job training there, and were not required to be approved, overseen, or trained by the Twelve Apostles. This decentralized approach enabled the Church to rapidly multiply and train new ministers.

The Church multiplied ministers by electing and training workers by and from among themselves. The Church brought in leadership from other areas when rapid growth of the church exceeded the ability of qualified leaders available to meet their needs. Barnabas was sent by the apostles to Antioch to teach new converts, and he brought Paul in to help.

Leaders then naturally reflected the diversity of the church they served in or for. The New Testament text implies the variety of backgrounds, highlighting their Hellenistic nature. The Seven were apparently Hellenistic Jews. Nicolas, one of the Seven, was a proselyte and so had followed a longer faith journey from Gentile religion to Judaism to Christianity. He was from Antioch and may have helped the church take root there, either by serving there himself or through his relationships with people there.

Leaders at Antioch included Joseph Barnabas. Although the church at Jerusalem sent him to Antioch as their representative, he was actually a native of Cyprus (Acts 11:22–26; 4:36), to which he returned at least twice to preach (Acts 13:4; 15:39). Lucius was from Cyrene (Acts 13:1; modern Libya), as was Simon who carried Jesus’ cross. Saul was a Roman citizen, yet was also formerly a legalistic Pharisee and persecutor, who once embodied everything that Christ said was wrong with Judaism.

Simeon, called Niger (Latin for “black”), was apparently of black African ethnicity. Manaen had high social status and education in Greco-Roman society, having been brought up with Herod the tetrarch. He may also have been one of Luke’s sources for events inside his friend’s court such as Herodias’ dance, the beheading of John the Baptist, Herod’s fear that Jesus was the Baptist risen from the dead, and the trial of Jesus.

Jesus Christ commanded His people to make disciples of all ethnos, which brings diverse people into the Church, while maintaining unity of faith—two goals which are constantly in tension. This required wisdom and effort and was hindered by their former beliefs and religious practices. When the Twelve appointed the Seven
from among the Hellenistic congregation, they emphasized the importance of both missions and building and maintaining unity, as well as methods for achieving it.

Paul’s epistles show constant attention to maintaining unity, based on the theology he describes in Ephesians 2: Jesus Christ created one new man in His body out of two, the Jew and the Gentile. While disunity is a natural result of sin, Paul’s theology especially addresses disharmony due to cultural, linguistic, and ethnic differences.

Summary

Acts 6–8 show that the Seven were commissioned to win and assimilate Greeks, a culturally distinct people group, into the Hebrew-dominated Church, not to serve the poor. The deacons assisted and expanded the ministry of the apostles by preaching, evangelizing, baptizing, leading, and maintaining unity. They provided a model for missions, a pattern for cross-cultural accommodation, and a template for multiplying ministers for the Early Church and for us today.

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Behold! Now Is the Day!

Armand J. Boehme

Abstract: Christianity appears to be fading from the Western world. There are increasing numbers of “nones” and those who claim to be spiritual but not religious. How should the Church bring the message of Christ’s love to this twenty-first century world? This essay offers suggestions as to how the Church might respond to current challenges and move boldly into the remainder of the twenty-first century. Seven suggestions for action are given which can be pursued either by professional church workers or by every baptized Christian.

Introduction

Concern has been expressed about the future of the Christian Church, and The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. Recent projections predict the possibility that the LCMS could lose another 500,000 members in the next ten years. This is not something to be taken lightly. As these things are discussed, one needs to remember that Christ has promised that “the gates of hell shall not prevail against [My Church]” (Mt 16:18). Still, these dire predictions, viewed in the light of the decline of the Church in Europe, illustrate the need for a serious Christian reflection and response.

How can or should the Church respond to such predictions? The suggestions offered in this essay encourage (1) the Church to avoid acting out of fear of the future, (2) an apologetic approach similar to that of the Early Church, (3) studying the culture, (4) a wholistic approach to witnessing, (5 & 6) clarity and competence in the Church’s teaching and preaching especially in the area of justification, and (7) the need for congregations boldly to witness internally and externally. These suggestions attempt to address current circumstances.
(1) Avoid Acting Out of Fear of the Future

Often when the news is bad people react out of fear and negativity. It is important that the Church not get caught up in negativism, wringing one’s hands in despair, and wishing for the good old days. A study of church history indicates that the Church has experienced difficult times before. However, as the hymn writer said, our God has been our help in ages past, and He is our hope for the years to come! (LSB 733). God has promised to be with us in the midst of joys and successes, as well as in times of trouble and difficulty—“Lo I am with you always!” (Mt 28:20).

When Elijah the prophet despaired and thought that he was the only believer left in Israel, God assured him that he was not alone. Seven thousand had not yet bowed the knee to Baal. God still had work for Elijah to do (1 Kgs 19:13–21). In its infancy the Christian Church was not large. After Pentecost there were slightly more than three thousand Christians in the world. The early Christians did not despair, look at their low numbers, and give up hope. Empowered by God’s Holy Spirit, they set out to do the work God called them to do. They boldly shared their faith with others, even in the face of persecution, and the Church grew (Acts 3–4; 5:17–42; 2 Cor 11:22–33). God called His baptized followers to share the Gospel with a world lost in the darkness of sin (Acts 13:1–3). God has commissioned His Church in every age to do the same (Mt 28:18–20).

The LCMS should study the Early Church’s calling and sending and its missiology to affirm what is sound in its mission practice and possibly to gain insight into ways of doing mission work in the twenty-first century. The LCMS’s mission journal, Journal of Lutheran Mission, and the Lutheran Society for Missiology’s Lutheran Mission Matters could spearhead this study.

(2) An Apologetic Approach Similar to That of the Early Church

The Church today needs to study the apologetic response of the early Christian Church which existed in a religiously pluralistic, and at times hostile, environment similar to that which exists today. The first Christians practiced the art of apologetics. On Mars Hill the Holy Spirit moved Paul to use non-Christian sources to help make his religious points (Acts 17:22–34): Plato, Euripides, Epimenides the Cretan, and Aratus.3

The early Christians did not despair, look at their low numbers, and give up hope. Empowered by God’s Holy Spirit, they set out to do the work God called them to do. They boldly shared their faith with others, even in the face of persecution, and the Church grew.
The writings of the early Christian apologists like Quadratus, Aristides, Justin Martyr, Tatian, Athenagoras, Theophilus, Origen, Minucius Felix, Tertullian, and Augustine should be studied to learn their methodologies for approaching the world with the truths of the faith. Church historians provide evidence of the influence of the apologetic nature of the Christian faith in its early history. The Church today could gain insights from apologists of the past for its task in the twenty-first century.

Christians, especially Christian pastors and teachers, should be trained by Christian universities and seminaries in apologetics, logic, philosophy, and metaphysics. Our seminaries and universities should be encouraging students to pursue graduate degrees in the above disciplines. Our Church does a good job of training pastors to be biblical theologians. We should train them to be apologists and philosophers as well.

Pastors and church workers should be familiar with the intellectual foundations for the “nones” and the “spiritual but not religious” movement in order to engage such views. Pastors and Christian teachers need to be knowledgeable about atheistic, anti-religious, or religiously faulty ideas and trends in order to counter them with a sound biblical and rational view. Christian pastors and teachers need familiarity with Christian apologetic books and sites that assist the Church in countering unsound arguments and in helping the laity to share and defend the faith.

An example of a Christian apologetic presence on the net is Jonathan Morrow’s Think Christianly site. Lutheran Hour Ministries has a website entitled THRED.org. Concordia University Wisconsin has sponsored an apologetics conference for laity and professional church workers each spring since 2014.

One apologetic book that all Christians should read is Bruce Sheiman, An Atheist Defends Religion. Another atheist, Alain de Botton, writes that religion has been “over-hastily sacrificed . . . on the altar of Reason” and that religious ideas are “useful, effective, and intelligent” and contain much that is good and helpful for non-believers. An excellent book that speaks about the loss people and culture experience when religious beliefs are set aside is The Sacred in Exile.

Sound apologetic arguments are just one part of the Christian’s witness in the world. It is the Holy Spirit who works through the Word of God to bring about conversion.
(3) Studying the Culture

The Church needs to understand that Western culture is living on the residue of its Judeo-Christian heritage, and the influence of that heritage is fading. The culture in which the Church exists is the twenty-first century, not the mid-twentieth century. Whereas in times past the Judeo-Christian faiths were seen as an overall positive, today that perspective is not as prominent, and in decline. Many see organized religion as declining. Others like Jürgen Habermas believe we are living in a “post-secular age.”

Current trends of individual spirituality and loosely defined religion were evident already in the mid-1980s. Some are writing books about religion without God. This is the culture in which the Church exists today, yet some operate as if there has been no change in the culture since the 1950s.

Thus, Christians need to diligently study the culture in order to understand where people really are. To understand the worldview and beliefs of those outside the Christian Church is to enable a better entrance into a conversation about religious/spiritual beliefs. It shows respect for those beliefs, even though they might be different than the ones held by Christians.

For example, some atheists now hold secular services on Sunday mornings, have Sunday Schools for their children, use their own secular Bibles, hymns, devotional materials, prayers, and worship services for funerals and weddings. This is the spirituality of atheism. Christians should be studying the reasons why atheists need to have worship services, prayer, sacred books, and uplifting devotional materials, as well as the reasons some see no need for any of those things, so that they can respond in meaningful ways.

Furthermore, Christians need continued awareness of the ethnic shifts that have occurred and the great need for Gospel outreach to the many new ethnic and religious groups that have come to the Western world. These shifts necessitate knowledge of the beliefs of other religions.

(4) A Wholistic Approach to Witnessing

Christ sent the Church into the world to witness and to evangelize. That witnessing is done in word and deed. The Church needs to be diligent in performing...
deeds of Christian love and mercy towards others, including those outside the Church. God’s Word tells Christians to do good to people inside and outside the Christian faith (Gal 6:10). Christ emphasized this when He stated that the evidence of salvation in believers is seen by their visiting the sick and imprisoned, feeding the hungry, and clothing the naked (Mt 25:34–36). Christ was concerned with the whole person—body and soul. The Church should continue in that practice as well.

In witnessing to others, it is necessary to understand the importance of relationships and the overall witness of one’s life. Many people were surprised at the friendship of the atheist Richard Dawkins and the Christian, Larry Taunton. The Christian apologist, Gary Habermas, noted his close friendship with the Anthony Flew, the atheist, who at the end of his life became a theist. Such relationships break down barriers of misunderstanding, animosity, and hatred of “the other.” Christians should view every human as an individual God loves and someone for whom Christ died, because He desires the salvation of all. Christians should actively pursue positive relationships with individuals not in the faith and pray daily for the conversion of those outside the faith. In so doing, they are living the command to love one’s neighbor as one loves self, (Mt 22:39) and are in accord with our Synod’s emphasis on “Mercy, Witness, and Life Together.”

(5) Clarity in the Church’s Teaching and Preaching

The Church needs to be very clear as to what she teaches about salvation. God justifies sinners by grace, which is received through faith worked by the Holy Spirit. Human good works do not save. Some of the antagonism against the Church comes from a faulty understanding of what God’s Word teaches about salvation and other doctrines. Surveys have revealed that many Christians believe incorrectly about how one is saved—combining good works with the saving work of Christ, believing Golden Rule Christianity, or some other form of works-righteousness. In its preaching and teaching, the Church must proclaim clearly the Gospel of God’s grace in Christ, which saves without any human contribution. Many people have rejected the Christian faith because they were taught or believed incorrectly about it. Cultural reasons for rejecting the faith also need to be studied.
It is also important to remember that even when the way of salvation is properly taught and believed, Christianity will not necessarily be viewed positively by those who have no faith. One can see and understand God correctly only by the work of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 12:3). Unbelievers do not have the Holy Spirit, and so it should not be surprising that many will understand God incorrectly.

Many outside the faith view God as a killjoy, a nasty rule maker whose rules cannot be kept, as someone who delights in inflicting harm on people, or as one who is powerless to stop evil. At times Christians are viewed as looking down on sinners and others not as good as them, and as people who delight in God’s destruction of the wicked. At times, even Christians exhibit these views.

In contrast to such false views, God’s Word teaches that God loves all sinners and has no joy in the destruction of the wicked (Jn 3:16; Ez 18:23, 30–32). God the Father sent His Son, Jesus Christ, into the world to save sinners from their sins—“For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved” (Jn 3:17). Every Christian should, like God, be grieved by the fate of the unbeliever and motivated to share the love of Christ with all so that they would be saved. The positive, respectful, loving relationships Christians have with those not in the faith can help them to see God more accurately.

(6) Competence in the Church’s Teaching and Preaching

The Church needs to examine how she teaches the faith. Is the Church merely teaching fluff or is the Church engaged in teaching the substance of the faith? What methods are being used? As important as it is to examine its educational methods, the Church should not simply rely on getting a right methodology (though good methodology is helpful). Rather, it should rely on the Spirit of God to plant faith in the baptized and to nurture that faith by means of the preaching and teaching of the Word of God and the proper administration of the sacraments.

(7) Congregations Need to Boldly Witness Internally and Externally

At times congregations become internally focused. Christian congregations need to focus on doing both internal (building up the faith of its members) and external evangelism (seeking the spiritual well-being of those outside the Christian faith). Christian congregations need involvement in their communities so that the members interact regularly with those not in the faith. This affords opportunities to form Christian congregations need to focus on doing both internal (building up the faith of its members) and external evangelism (seeking the spiritual well-being of those outside the Christian faith).
relationships with people other than Christians and provides opportunities to touch lives with the love and grace of Christ.\footnote{22}

**Conclusion**

It truly is time to seize the day! “Behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation” (2 Cor 6:2). That Christ’s Church is moving forward can be seen in the growth of the Church in Africa, Asia, and even in the West. Our God is at work. Souls are being saved in the global North and South. The sharing of God’s Word does not return void—it will accomplish its purpose (Is 55:10–11). As followers of Christ, we are to pray fervently for God’s blessings on the work of His Church. God has called every baptized Christian into His Kingdom to serve in carrying out that work. In answer to God’s call to serve, we are to be willing workers like Isaiah, saying by the power of the Spirit, “Here I am Lord. Send me!” (Is 6:8). This is part of the calling and vocation of every baptized Christian.

Christ commanded the Church to continue to bear witness to Him in the public square in every possible way so that the Gospel is shared and souls are saved, Christ’s name is exalted, and His Church continues to show forth the praises of Him who calls people out of the darkness of sin into the light of Christ. “Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father in heaven” (Mt 5:16).

As we labor in God’s Kingdom, we trust God for the increase and do not rely on ourselves. God has called us into His Kingdom to live out our faith and to witness to Christ. By God’s hand, souls will be saved and the Church will continue until eternity.

**Endnotes**


8 This site is tied with his book, *Think Christianly: Looking at the Intersection of Faith and Culture* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011). Morrow engages the world via a web site (www.thinkchristianly.org), Twitter, Facebook, an interactive blog, iTunes, Podcasts, YouTube, and FeedBurner.


17 Habermas’s comment was stated at an apologetics conference at Concordia University, Mequon, WI in March 2015; Anthony Flew, *There Is A God: How the World’s Most Notorious Atheist Changed His Mind* (New York: HarperOne, 2007).


21 Christopher Richmann, “Restoring Proclamation to the Center of Youth Ministry,” *Lutheran Forum* 44, no. 3 (Fall 2010): 20–25.

22 Helpful resources are Rick Russ & Eric Swanson, *The Externally Focused Church* (Loveland, CO: Group, 2004); Terry Tieman, David Born, Dwight Marable, *Hinges: Opening Your Church’s Doors to the Community* (Cordova, TN: Transforming Churches Network, 2015); Randy Frazee, *The Connecting Church 2.0: Beyond Small Groups to Authentic Community* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013); Greg Finke, *Joining Jesus on His Mission: How to Be an Everyday Missionary* (Elgin, IL/Tyler, TX: Tenth Power, 2014). The LCMS is also working on new evangelism materials suited for the 21st century—Every One His Witness (E1HW).
The Local Congregation—
The Hope of the World?

Larry Merino

Abstract: Are our mission problems “out there” or “in here”? Acts 13 records how the Antioch church approached it. Instead of focusing on the myriad of problems that were “out there,” they prayed, fasted, and trusted in the work of the Spirit in the life of the body of believers. It appears that they focused on what was going on “in here.” This focus led them to place their faith in the work of the Holy Spirit and His guidance. Today’s leaders are usually focused “out there” but need to focus more “in here.” A systemic approach, an awareness of underlying structures, and learning to live in creative tension can help local congregations avoid quick techno-fixes and grow in their reliance on the Spirit. There is a reason that Antioch succeeded, and there is a simple but hard way forward.

Introduction

Practically every missiologist that I have read or spoken to over many years agrees that the church at Antioch enjoyed no antecedent advantages over any congregation today. But that’s not to say there is total agreement. Some hold that the cultural milieu at Antioch in the first century was just as antagonistic to the Christian religion as it has been at any other time in history.1 Others argue that it was just as receptive as at any other time—perhaps even more.2 In any case, the church at Antioch is often considered a shining example—a bright star in a dark sky. “Surely,” we wonder, “there must have been something that they had that we don’t.” In Acts 13, we learn that their elders were spiritually mature enough to fast and pray. We know they had Barnabas and Saul. We know they had the courage to send their best on a mission that held no promise that their friends would ever return. Because of what they did, it’s hard to let the story go. Or perhaps it is better to say that the story will not let go of us. As missionaries and missiologists, pastors and teachers, evangelists, deacons and deaconesses, we are still asking the question: Is there

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anything we can take away from the church at Antioch that can help us with our mission purposes today? It is a good question. Another helpful question is this: Is the local congregation unknowingly hindering its purposes for God’s mission? In 2005 Jeanne Burger and I edited a book entitled, *The Local Congregation is the Hope of the World*. In that book, pastors, missionaries, and laypeople contributed essays and case studies that gave evidence to the notion that local congregations are more likely to succeed in mission than are sodalities, districts, and synods.

My thesis is this: We are facing a mission crisis in local congregations. South African missiologist Wim Dreyer has written that “the real crisis of the church is not to be found in institutional challenges, but in the inability of the church to be what it already is.” Dreyer summarizes the categories of crisis as:

- the effects of modernity and the Enlightenment leads to secularization
- loss of faith and skepticism
- declining church membership
- materialism and fraudulent ministry
- inability to witness to the world
- obsolete and irrelevant theology
- the perception that the church could be managed or organised into growth.

Mark Green, of the London Institute of Contemporary Christianity, suggested that the division of secular and sacred is the still behind the mission crisis that we face. Some missionaries and authors hold that the crisis lies more in discipleship. A particularly insightful idea is that much of the conversation about mission is just that—a conversation—and nothing more. A lot of talk but no action. David Kludt has called this phenomenon the crisis of “information saturation.”

Unfortunately, when this topic is discussed, the natural thing to do revolves around problem-solving, fixing, explaining, and taking sides with winners and losers. When I was a congregational mission consultant, I heard many stories from pastors who complained they didn’t get cooperation from the people. Then I heard the same stories from people complaining the same thing about the pastor. This scenario played out in churches from San Francisco to New York. In some ways, I was unprepared to help those churches the way I wanted to. In retrospect, I wanted to show them how to get out of their comfort zones. I assumed their churches were places of comfort. I found the opposite to be true. Those churches were providing...
anything but comfort. They felt more like anxiety zones. And one thing I learned for sure: When people are not comfortable with one another, they will not reach out to anybody else. The anxiety and guilt in those churches effectively hindered their chance of participating in God’s mission. They often looked to me to give them a techno-fix (change the worship style, change the worship times, start a youth group, etc.) The more their dreams were not realized, the more they got into groups and pointed fingers. This led to a new game: get on the winning side of the problem. But this game is just another pain-avoidance strategy. After a number of these scenarios, I realized that my work was often more like that of a seelsorger (soul-healer) than a consultant. These people needed help on the inside—not the outside. But it was through them and the work we did together that I was forced to look not only to the Word of God (Phil 4:5–7; Mt 6:25–27), but to some social science tools. These tools help us to be more aware of the pernicious effect anxiety can have on our churches and His mission. With God’s help we can use a systemic approach, look for the underlying structures (both physical and emotional) that hinder the work and be willing to live in the creative tension of God’s mission.

The Church as Adaptive System

Robert Elkington has proposed a fourfold mission model for the North American church that moves from liminality, through communitas and emergence, to mission.9 He writes that the church is a “complex, adaptive system”: complex because it has many diverse yet interconnected living elements (aka members); adaptive because there are both within the church and outside of the church many different agents acting and reacting (aka members and their friends and families and the wider community); and it is a system because it comprises many interdependent parts or members.10 The church is made up of human beings who are always changing and making new connections. The systemic approach gives you a fighting chance of getting your mind around these dynamics and then putting them to use for mission. When things go wrong, it is easy throw your hands up and lament. The Lord, however, wants you to make the most of every opportunity for mission (Eph 5:16). And opportunities often masquerade as crises. For example, let’s take the first step in the process: “liminality.” Victor Turner popularized the term, “liminality,” in his study of the rites of passage of the Ndembu tribe in Africa.11 The term has been adopted by missiologists to describe the disorientation and confusion of many North American churches. Liminality can be described as

When people are not comfortable with one another, they will not reach out to anybody else.
the conscious awareness that as a group (or individual) one’s status-, role-, and sequence-sets in a society have been radically changed to the point where the group has now become largely invisible to the larger society in terms of these previously held sets.\textsuperscript{12}

This liminal space in which today’s church now lives was alluded to in the last issue of the Lutheran Mission Matters. Robert Newton wrote that

The mission field challenges that we face in our communities where the Church is no longer in charge have thrown us off balance, accentuating the need and desire to maintain (even double down on) the protective boundaries and ecclesiastical order that flourished in the days of Christendom.\textsuperscript{13}

As people are thrown off balance, they feel disoriented, anxious, and angry. But even as all those negative feelings surface, the pastor and the people have two decisions to make: (1) will they deny the painful reality, or will they absorb it? (2) Will they quickly try to fix the situation, or will they delay taking action for the sake of coming together to help one another through a difficult and painful process? When a congregation delays taking action and the people take the necessary time to pray and to listen to one another, they participate in His mission. It is in these difficult situations that the Holy Spirit blesses and helps each part of the body do its work (Eph 4:16). Some LCMS churches and others have put their disorientation and anxiety to good use by imitating the church at Antioch and to pray and fast together (Acts 13:1).

As an example of how this fourfold process can work, some years ago I made the decision to lower church staff salaries—for all sixty of us—by ten percent. I thought for sure the staff would order my head on a platter. But the liminal space and disorientation created by that decision forced us to come together in a way that we had not done before. Morale actually improved. I believe the Lord took that situation and used it to help us get to the second step: community. After a while, leaders emerged in a natural and holistic way. Finally, those selfsame leaders became missionaries to our Gypsy mission in eastern Slovakia. Within a few years we experienced all of the fourfold process, and God’s mission grew. Obviously, I had no idea beforehand that the Lord was working in this way. But I’m glad to share the story because it shows what can happen when we allow the staff and the congregation to learn the value of a liminal “wilderness experience.”

**Underlying Structures**

The systems approach helps one see not only what is happening but also what lies underneath. While there are many underlying structures that work against us, two are the most obvious: reactivity and scapegoating.
One of our best writers on the subject is a Lutheran pastor and congregational consultant, Pete Steinke. He warns that congregations who remain reactive and anxious can’t create the stability needed to be a missional congregation. Making things worse is that reactivity in congregations is usually “automatic. No thought goes into our action. . . . Strange as it seems, some anxious congregations refuse to see their problems. . . . Still, the anxiety denied has a habit of staying around and festering.”14 As depth psychologist James Hollis has said: “There is no prison more constricting than the one of which we are unaware.”15

Another underlying structure that goes unnoticed is the dynamic of congregational “scapegoating.” When there is trouble, pastors and leaders are handy scapegoats. The temptation for the pastor is then to use techniques designed to manage the congregation—or at least that is what he thinks he is doing. One especially large church that I worked with had attacked their pastor repeatedly. His management strategy was to withdraw. By the time they called me to help, he didn’t want to have any meetings or any real communication. He thought it was the right way to handle the situation. But it made things worse. His withdrawal injected his anxiety into the congregational system. He wasn’t the only one. I met many pastors at other churches who were doing the same thing because they believed that the problem was “out there,” with the congregation. Those men believed that if only the congregation would stop attacking, things would simmer down. But this assumption never leads to a healthy system. Instead, Steinke recommends a self-management approach. In fact, the pastor or leader who falls into these situations may find that it is his reactivity—“in here” that may be at the root of the problem. No matter what, you must “s[tay] connected to others despite it all, . . . maintaining a nonreactive presence with people who are reacting to you (by verbally attacking you, avoiding your presence, minimizing your viewpoint).”16

It is normal and natural to strike back or at least to disconnect and withdraw when being attacked. But because God’s mission is at stake, we in the clergy are called upon to manage ourselves, define ourselves, and stay in touch. This way we have a fighting chance, with God’s help, to turn the congregation around to a God-pleasing course of mission.

In the early 2000s, many congregations hired consultants (I was one of them). We were called upon to teach them how the systems approach could be applied to all sorts of congregational problems. But many congregational leaders didn’t like what we found: that they were reactive, anxious, and afraid to change.

To be fair, asking people to focus on the underlying structures beneath their problems causes them a lot of discomfort. No one enjoys that. But by failing to focus on what lies beneath, congregations stay in a cycle of blame, powerlessness, and anxiety. Obviously, this situation has to be approached in the spirit of humility and
weakness. The good news is that is exactly where God’s power is made more perfect (2 Cor 12:9).

Living in Creative Tension

Do you know the difference between emotional tension and creative tension? If not, you could be hindering the work of the church. Failing to distinguish between creative and emotional tension, we might mistake one for the other. And it’s easy to do. Organizational consultant Peter Senge says that the term creative tension is widely misunderstood. The biggest difference is that “creative tension doesn’t feel any particular way. It is the force that comes into play at the moment when we acknowledge a vision that is at odds with current reality.”17 Emotional tension is the stress, anxiety, and worry we feel whenever there is a gap between what we want and what we have. For example, in The Fifth Discipline, Senge distinguishes between the two.

The gap between vision and current reality is also a source of energy. If there was no gap, there would be no need for any action to move toward the vision. Indeed, the gap is the source of energy. We call this gap creative tension.\(^\text{18}\)

This creative tension serves to energize people. Stress and anxiety, on the other hand, is properly called “emotional tension.” Even in the best situations, however, things don’t go according to plan, and it’s easy for the leaders and the people to become worried and even angry. This happens so often that most of us come to think that the creative process is all about being in a state of anxiety. When we distinguish between the two, we can help the congregation understand what is happening. Yes, discouraging feelings often come when we are trying to do something for the Lord; the devil is always at work. But by failing to distinguish the underlying structure of creative and emotional tension, you may have a strong urge to lighten the load of discouragement. “There is one immediate remedy: lower the vision!”19 This happens more than we want to admit.

Or worse, we become cynical and lose the vision altogether. After all, nothing ventured, nothing failed. If you believe your job is to keep the people from failing or feeling uncomfortable, they will never know the joy of participating in God’s mission. It takes time to grow a spiritually mature laity who can listen to a pastor when he says, “We won’t solve the problem today or next year . . . or even in five years. But with God’s help, we will go down this path together.”

The main culprit that keeps us from participating in God’s mission is our inability to live with the creative tension that is created whenever we obey the call to participate in God’s mission.20 We in the clergy must bear the responsibility for this. As leaders, our calling is to help our congregations bear up under the anxieties of
life, not to remove them. It is our calling to serve the people by demonstrating that God’s mission and vision are not causing the tension—we are. God Himself is not tense or worried about His mission. As clergy called to serve in God’s mission, we must beware because “the dynamics of relieving emotional tension are insidious . . . they can operate unnoticed.”

In Antioch they knew very little about what they might face on the journey. Their only instructions were: “Set apart for me Saul and Barnabas for the work to which I have called them” (Acts 13:2). Where? What kind of work? To whom? They didn’t have much to go on. And they made some mistakes along the way (Acts 16). But those mistakes happened within the context of a creative tension that allowed for changes in direction. They planned, but they knew God was guiding their steps (Prov 16:9).

**Why Antioch Succeeded**

Many different factors can be pointed to as reasons that Antioch succeeded. But what distinguishes the Antioch congregation from us in our context is this: It appears that they did not participate in any campaign against the culture or against anything in society. They didn’t participate in sociopolitical causes or issues. But they did participate in God’s mission. The elders worshiped and fasted; they prayed for Barnabas and Saul and sent them off as an obedient response to the God who had saved them in His Son, Jesus.

To be fair, the Christians at Antioch in the first century did not have the luxury of speaking out against the government, and that is an important point. They succeeded precisely where we fail. They weren’t allowed to jump into the sociopolitical fray; thus, they enjoyed a settled unity of purpose—to reach the lost and to care for the poor.

To say it more plainly: They didn’t care so much about the world’s sinful behavior because they were too busy trying to save the sinful people who belonged to it. They could do this because they knew they were only in the world and not of it. They were misfits in the world (Jn 17:14–16). “The world was not worthy of them” (Heb 11:38a). Their focus was eternal and soteriological.

I am hopeful the next generation will keep their eyes on Jesus and His mission to the lost and not so much on nonessential issues. These are a distraction at best.
and, at the worst, could be an evil trick of Satan to keep us from our first love. Doubling down on nonessentials will only prolong the current crisis.

The Way Forward

The best way forward is both simple and hard. Simple because you can begin with a simple prayer that takes only a few moments to pray, but hard because it takes courage—strength of the heart—for you to pray it: “Lord, what is going on ‘in here’—in our church? How is the congregation unknowingly hindering Your will? Is there anything going on inside me that is causing fear or anxiety in our church? How am I unknowingly hindering Your work? Amen.” After that prayer, you can rest assured that God will answer in the kindest way (Rom 2:4). That prayer can help you change your perspective from “out there” to “in here.”

That change in perspective has proved to be personally powerful for me and for many of our members. In fact, at Holy Cross, Fort Wayne (from which I recently retired), it was those people who wrestled with their own spiritual lives, felt the disorientation, and emerged with God’s help as leaders in our church. Now they serve as lay missionaries and co-workers with me in our work among the Gypsies in southeast Europe.

Conclusion

Mission work is much like getting older: There is no certainty about any of it. And yet the longer I live in it, the more I appreciate living in liminal space—not knowing what God will do next and trying (and failing and trying again) to love the mystery as much as I love God. Although there are many hindrances to our work, the good news is that the underlying structures are within reach of any pastor and people who want to work on them with God’s help. The local congregation can be the hope of the world. But the things that matter—prayer, fasting, growing in reliance on the Holy Spirit, and facing painful realities together—are harder to accomplish than looking for quick techno-fixes and wasting time on nonessentials. But with God’s help they can be done.

Lord God, You have called Your servants to ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths as yet untrodden, through perils unknown.
Give us faith to go out with good courage, not knowing where we go but only that your hand is guiding us and your love supporting us.\textsuperscript{24}

Endnotes

1 George Wood, “One Size Does Not Fit All,” \textit{AG Enrichment Journal} (Fall 2008), accessed October 5, 2018, \url{http://enrichmentjournal.ag.org/200804/200804_017_OneSize.cfm}. Wood believes that “Antioch was not much different from popular American culture—pagan, multicultural, sports crazy, and obsessed with sex.”

2 Glanville Downey, \textit{Ancient Antioch}, 120-121 as quoted in Douglas Rutt, “Antioch as Paradigmatic of the Urban Center of Mission,” \textit{Missio Apostolica} 11, no. 1 (May 2003), 34–42.

3 Larry Merino and Jeanne Burger, ed., \textit{The Local Congregation is the Hope of the World} (Indianapolis, IN: Precedent Press, 2005).


5 Dreyer, “The real crisis of the church.”


14 Peter Steinke, \textit{Congregational Leadership in Anxious Times} (The Alban Institute, 2006), 45.


16 Steinke, \textit{Congregational Leadership in Anxious Times}, 45. See also “The Leader’s Notebook on Self-Management,” on pp. 44–45. There is plenty here to keep a leader focused on himself—not on the congregation.


18 Senge, \textit{The Fifth Discipline}, 150.

19 Senge, \textit{The Fifth Discipline}, 151.


21 Senge, \textit{The Fifth Discipline}, 151.

23 The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, “We Are Free to Be Faithful,” accessed July 25, 2018, https://www.lcms.org/social-issues/free-to-be-faithful. This is a short list of the Featured Articles. They appear to be interesting reading, but nonessential to God’s mission.
- Synod joins court brief to protect pregnancy centers from mandated abortion advertising
- Supreme Court hears case of Colorado baker under fire for marriage view
- Synod joins amicus brief for Colorado baker under fire for marriage view
- ‘Love Saves Lives’: Lutherans march for life in Chicago and D.C.
- Commentary: ‘Life and breath and everything’

Defense Secretary Mattis: DoD/DHS panel will review president’s transgender guidance
- Judge Neely asks U. S. Supreme Court to reverse Wyoming court censure
- Synod, other advocates speak for religious liberty in secularized military
- Judge Neely will remain on bench despite censure
- Missouri Synod Lutherans join St. Louis Archdiocese in opposing Board Bill 203
- LCMS awaits response from DoD in request to protect troops’ religious freedom
- Protecting troops’ religious freedom: LCMS calls for clear DoD guidance
- Synod joins amicus brief for florist sued twice over marriage view
- Synod joins court brief for judge under fire for marriage view
- Lutheran, Anglican leaders discuss religious freedom

24 Lutheran Service Book (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2006), 311.
Preaching and the Mission of God

Richard Gahl

Abstract: Declining church membership is getting more attention these days. While it is not a new concern, proposed solutions result in modest increases in some congregations; but, in general, widespread decline continues. No one silver bullet is likely to fix what ails us. The work of changing a congregation’s culture takes time and a commitment for the long haul in days when instant fixes are expected.

This article raises one aspect of church life in the theology and practice of mission that doesn’t get much press: missional preaching. In other words, in addition to telling the story of the Good News in Jesus Christ, we propose to ask what the writers of the New Testament were calling on the emerging church to do with the Good News. What clues about the mission of the Church are embedded in the New Testament documents? How might those mission insights empower preaching in this twenty-first century AD? My thesis is that preachers need to refer more frequently to the mission of God and illustrate what it means from Scripture for the baptized people of God.

Biography as Confession and Illustration

Permit me to use embarrassing personal biography to illustrate how long it took for me to “get it”—over forty years to recognize that the mission of God is the purpose of the Church in every time and in every place. If the people of God are to be released for God’s mission, then preachers will need to be more forthright about the mission of the congregation in sermons and bible studies. It simply will not happen by osmosis.

When I was growing up, mission appeared to be in far distant places. There is a specific memory of Sunday lunch in the parsonage with a missionary from Nigeria who told the story of mission in an exotic place, huge pythons blocking the dirt road...
in the jungle. Of course, we sang “From Greenland’s Icy Mountains.” Mission was not local, but took place in far distant places.

During my vicarage, one assignment was to pull together the Epiphany mission emphasis. That year the national mission education materials focused on South America. The materials again presented a picture of mission taking place in distant lands. It was a “this is how your mission dollars are being invested” experience that had nothing to do with the local *missio Dei* of the congregation.

My seminary placement in 1965 was to two mission fields north of Ft. Wayne, Indiana. In Hunertown, a small congregation had been worshiping in a storefront for about a year before my arrival in late July. Organizational work for the Leo-Grabill field began in the fall and led to a first worship service in a Legion Hall on the first Sunday of January 1966. Looking back on that time, I now realize that my operative understanding of mission was to reorganize existing Lutherans from Ft. Wayne into two start-up congregations. After five years, a call came from a congregation in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. During that ten-plus-year ministry, the outreach focus was to identify Lutherans who had moved into the community from elsewhere and had not connected with a congregation.

The real mission light bulb began to turn on with the call to serve as Executive Director of the Ohio District in 1981. It happened at what I remember as my first participation in the regular gatherings of district mission execs. The secretary for North American Mission was giving his report when he looked right at me to say “and there are six million unchurched in Ohio.” Ouch! So I checked the Glenmary statistics he was referencing and retorted with a sarcastic: “You are wrong! There are seven million unchurched.”

Now the question became: What to do? We set up a schedule to visit every one of the fifteen district circuits to report the Glenmary data for the mission field in each county of the various circuits. For the record, this Catholic organization connects census data with congregation membership reported to denominational headquarters. Over the years, the data has expanded to include Amish, Bahia, Hindu, Muslim, Non-denominational, and Sikh worshipers. By subtracting reported religious organization membership from actual census data, one gets an “unchurched” or “unclaimed” number. I kept current with the expanding Glenmary data for the 1980, 1990, and 2000 censuses. The Glenmary Home Missioners site leads to all the previous reports, together with 2010 updates.

If the people of God are to be released for God’s mission, then preachers will need to be more forthright about the mission of the congregation in sermons and bible studies. It simply will not happen by osmosis.
For the district, we were able to point to “unconnected” mission fields of 150 to 1,200 individuals for every church, not just Lutheran or even Christian, listed in the county. No matter what the county ratio number turned out to be, there was general surprise. What had been new to me was also new to district pastors. We had never really thought of congregational mission or purpose as intentionally reaching out to unchurched people in the community around the building.

These conversations prompted a number of collaborations between local congregations and the district mission board. On one occasion, the local group got cold feet because they discovered a large number of Christian congregations in the target area. Was a new church really needed? The assignment was given to telephone all area congregations and request their Sunday attendance numbers. With the generous assumption that one-third of membership participated in worship on a given weekend, the local planning team figured out there were some twenty thousand people without a church in the targeted area—a number that gave renewed impetus to a new church start.

The working assumption was simple: All people had a church home, even though they might not attend very often. But the assumption was not based on demonstrable facts.

Eventually, the Ohio District began to talk of all congregations as outposts of God’s mission. But the message had a difficult time getting through. In response to a letter addressing congregations as “mission stations,” one pastor testily replied: We are not a mission congregation! Perhaps the understanding was that mission congregations get financial support from the district. In one sense, this was a common manner of speaking. Mission funds entrusted to the district were dispersed to new congregational starts and to support urban, deaf, and campus ministries. This sentiment—that mission in the local community is not the congregation’s responsibility—is echoed in CNH President Robert Newton’s report in the previous issue of Lutheran Mission Matters of a faithful congregation leader’s insisting that the United States is not a mission field.1 The sentiment among LCMS mission leaders, beginning with Ed Westcott in the 1980s, has been forthright: The United States is one of the largest mission fields in the world.

It is probably true that there are many causes for weak, even nonexistent, mission understandings and activities in congregations. Richard Bliese and Craig Gelder surmise that “many Lutherans simply do not have the confidence that their Gospel is good news to the unchurched, the poor, or those on the margins of our neighborhoods.”2 Perhaps! Was the sign “No admittance” on the door of the congregation in Ontario symptomatic of a purposeful non-welcoming attitude to newcomers? Possibly. Our prevailing culture is not much help. “What’s in it for me?” is a mantra that focuses on my needs and my desires. We become consumers of
religious experiences, losing track of our vocation as God’s people called to His mission.

Since retirement, I have been invited to participate with six to ten clergy in regular Bible study around the Sunday readings. We meet every three weeks, rotating responsibilities for leading presentations for the next three Sundays. In my twenty-five years of district ministry in support of congregations, I had really lost contact with the week-by-week pastoral leadership in worship and preaching on the appointed lectionary readings in the context of the particular congregation. So I had some catching up to do.

My continuing interest in mission, God’s mission—the *missio Dei*—has been one of my intentional contributions to these Bible studies. The many publications of the Gospel and Our Culture Network (GOCN) that have grown out of the mission theology of Lesslie Newbigin inform our conversations.

One post-retirement consultation was the opportunity to put some growing convictions into practice. A small, shrinking congregation approached a larger congregation (the one that hosts the pastors’ Bible study), asking for help. One action was to pull together a preaching team of six pastors that would rotate on Sundays, while conversations within the congregation would address matters of the future. My suggestion to the preaching team was to keep in mind a set of common mission concepts to turn light on the purpose of the congregation. Approximately every two months, I would review the lectionary inserts subscription, pull together ideas of mission that I saw in the readings and prayers, and share the results with the preaching team.

An immediate insight was the need to see a particular reading not just in relation to the other Propers for the day, but in the context of the particular Old or New Testament writing. So much of what I had been doing was to look at one particular reading in isolation from the rest of the book of the Bible. The three-year lectionary began to put together consecutive readings from the same book, jumping around a bit to fit the cycle of the church year. But there were significant times when one reading from the current Gospel followed the previous reading and led into the next Sunday. The need for a “wide angle,” “view from 30,000 feet” approach was more and more evident.

Getting back to a confessional mode—my purchase of Bible commentaries slacked off dramatically during the district office years. Now it was evident that I needed to get back to some of the seminary-trained methodologies. Each year I began to purchase a newer commentary for the primary Gospel in the three-year cycle.
series, work through it cover to cover, and place copious notes into a three-ring binder with the Greek and English texts side by side.

Meanwhile the GOCN people have continued to publish significant material on mission in the biblical writings. It was a delight to learn that since 2002 the GOCN folks have been meeting in conjunction with annual gatherings of the Society for Biblical Literature and the American Academy of Religion. The result has been an exhilarating cross fertilization of mission and biblical studies.

**The Bible as Mission Text**

In his introductory chapter to the superb collection of essays, *Reading the Bible Missionally*, Michael Goheen makes this statement:

> The most important legacy of Willingen [International National Missionary Council, Willingen, Germany 1952] was the new concept of God’s mission. . . . Mission has its source in the love of the Father, who sent his Son to reconcile all things to himself. The Son sent the Spirit to gather his church together and empower it to participate in his mission. The church is sent by Jesus to continue his mission and this sending defines its very nature. . . . Mission, then, is not merely a set of outreach activities: it defines the very being of God’s people.  

Later in the same volume, he makes this comment about missional preaching:

> The Bible is both a *record* and a *tool* of God’s mission in and through his people. . . . To recognize that the Bible is a tool used by God to shape his people for their missional vocation is essential to the homiletical task. (italics original)


> The purpose of this book . . . is about how to read the Bible in a way that takes seriously the missionary direction. . . . The Bible is a kind of project aimed at the Kingdom of God, towards the achievement of God’s purposes for good in the whole of God’s creation.

Michal Gorman holds the Raymond Brown Chair in Biblical Studies at St. Mary’s Seminary in Baltimore, Maryland. His 2015 publication, *Becoming the Gospel, Paul, Participation and Mission*, states:

> To put it simply: the cross of Christ reveals a missional, justified, and justice-making people. Because the cross reveals a missional God, the church saved and shaped by the cross will be a missional people. As the twentieth-century theologian Emil Brunner put it, “The Church exists by
mission just as a fire exists by burning. Where there is no mission there is no Church.” (italics original)\(^8\)

Darrel Guder of Luther Seminary has been a significant voice in the GOCN growth and development. He summarizes the Bible as Mission text with this statement:

The biblical formation of the church requires a hermeneutic that constantly asks, “How did the written testimony form and equip God’s people for their missional vocation, and how does it do so today?”\(^9\)

Mission as the very being of God’s people, the Scriptures as a tool to shape the Church for its missional vocation, keeping in mind God’s entire focus of salvation after the Fall, mission formation in New Testament times—putting this all together requires an additional step.

**So What Does This Have to Do with Preaching?**

Preaching is the major activity for proclaiming the Kingdom of God, continually forming the mission response of the people of God. Preaching does not end with a “what God has done for me” affirmation. It equips and empowers God’s people to represent Him in the everyday world as the priesthood of the baptized. Not every Christian is a travelling missionary or a public preacher, but we are all Good News to the world around us.

If God’s mission is not talked about in sermons, it’s not going to happen. To remind me to keep looking for mission texts, I have pinned to the corkboard facing my computer a photocopy of Greek and English terms for missionary activity in twelve categories. Now, if only I could program my computer to flash “Mission” whenever these words and concepts occur in my sermon preparation and/or Bible study.

For example, under heading (1) Subjects of missionary work, Eckhard Schnabel lists these Greek words with English translations: fisher, apostle, worker/laborer, evangelist, herald/proclaimer, witness, fellow worker and helper/assistant. Other headings include (2) Addressees of missionary work, (7) Goal of the proclamation, and (12) Misunderstandings.\(^10\)

Besides Schnabel’s mission word clues, Andreas Koestenberger has identified sixteen semantic clusters of mission as he works his way through the Fourth Gospel. He begins with cluster 1 in chapter 1, with the coming of Jesus into the world. He concludes with the calling of disciples to follow Jesus until He returns. In between is a rich feast for the missional explorer.\(^11\)

The one instance when congregations might encounter the mission of God on an annual basic is Ascension Day, when there is a reading of the Great Commission in
Matthew 28. But Ascension services are rare these days, and the reading of Matthew 28 is not always picked on the following Sunday. Post-Easter readings from John 20, where Jesus tells the disciples that as the Father has sent Him, He now sends His disciples on the same mission. But there are so many other mission texts that occur throughout the year for one who has eyes to see and ears to hear.

Permit me another personal story. In the late 1980s, Dave Hoover and I were commissioned to fill in a missing piece in the LCMS training process for planters of new congregations. There was nothing about stewardship in the extant materials. We were to fill the gap with a unit on stewardship preaching and teaching. We gave ourselves the assignment of individually working through the three-year lectionary to identify readings with stewardship implications. When we came together to write that section of the 47-page manual, we were surprised to find texts with stewardship almost every Sunday. I know we would have a similar result today if we worked through the lectionary on the lookout for mission.

Gorman offers Five Key Questions that preachers operating with a missional hermeneutic will want to ask of the biblical texts.

1. What do these texts say, implicitly or explicitly, about the polyvalent (complex and comprehensive) missio Dei and the mission character of God?
2. What do these texts reveal about humanity and the world?
3. What do these texts say about the nature and mission of God’s people in the world, that is, about the church understood as an agent of divine mission (rather than an institution, club, civic organization, or guardian of Christendom)?
4. How do these texts relate to the larger scriptural witness, in both Testaments, to the missio Dei and the mission of God’s people?
5. In what concrete ways, in our specific context, might we deliberately read this text as God’s call to us as His people to participate in the missio Dei to which it bears witness?

Bear with me for a long lost, but much remembered, citation on the subject of mission and vision in the world of business. When the leader of a corporation has become so sick of repeating the visionary message of where the company is going that one could not even think about repeating it one more time, then the message might have reached into the next level down from the executive offices. This insight keeps me going. Keep at it. Repetition. Again and again. Eventually folks will catch on. But it is a long-term project, not a once and done event.

A long-term project, not a once and done event

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E-mail lsfmissiology@gmail.com to purchase a print copy of a single issue.
A word of encouragement to prepare for the long haul with missional preaching comes from John Dally:

Missional preaching is a long-term proposition—the gradual introduction of images, attitudes and language that work against more than a millennium of preaching that equated the Kingdom of God with the afterlife or the organized church. In time, however, missional sermons can shape missional communities, and the practice of these communities with in turn shape the preaching offered in their midst.¹³

I would be remiss not to reference some other works from my bookshelves that get regular reference for sermon preparation.


Particular chapters are devoted to Paul’s writings, the Synoptics and Acts, the General Epistles and John’s writings including the Gospel of John. This is a collection from the American Society of Missiology with catholic roots.


This is the first commentary this writer has worked through with a major focus on the mission aspects of the Gospel. A stunning insight is his finding of parallel use of the words for “sending” and “apostle.” It ends with nine pages of notes that were shared with the pastors’ Bible study group. Lincoln is Professor of New Testament at the University of Gloucestershire in England.


This is one of those tools to review each time one picks up a new New Testament book for homiletical preparation around mission themes. This writer now includes photocopies of the chapters on the Gospels with the individual three-ring binders.


In the manner of Koestenberger and O’Brien, it is a very readable look through individual New Testament writings with mission eyes. It was originally published in 1996 in Danish.
Clues abound in the pages of the New Testament for the mission of God. Each biblical writer appears to have unique insights into what that mission is and how it is to be carried on by the baptized people of God. Now the preacher’s task is to lift up those insights for the mission formation of the Church. Need it be stated that preaching and the mission of God not be relegated to an annual emphasis or set aside because the mission point was made last year or the year before? It is truly a long-term proposition for every preacher in every congregation.

Endnotes
2 Richard Bliese and Craig Van Gelder, ed., The Evangelizing Church, A Lutheran Contribution (Augsburg Fortress, Minneapolis, MN. 2005), 36.
4 Michael W. Goheen, ed., Reading the Bible Missionally, Chapter 3, George R. Hunsberger, “Mapping the Missional Conversation” (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016), p. 47. This is a collection of essays by a who’s who of international scholars growing out of a 2013 conference at Calvin College. Goheen’s chapter “A Missional Reading of Scripture and Preaching” is an excellent place to start.
5 Goheen, Reading the Bible Missionally, 8.
6 Goheen, Reading the Bible Missionally, 242.
12 Gorman, Becoming the Gospel, 56.
13 John Addison Dally, Choosing the Kingdom, Missional Preaching for the Household of God (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2008), 124–125.
14 It has been my working assumption that readers of LMM are continually returning to two CPH publications: Georg Vicedom, The Mission of God, 2005, and Klaus Detlev Schulz, Mission From the Cross, 2009. However, I have recently put my hands on an out-of-print CPH treasure: Vicedom’s, Mission in the Lord’s Prayer, A Prayer for the World, 1967. Back in the days of parish ministry, I put together a number of series on the chief parts of the catechism. I harbor dreams of turning this little treasure into a Lenten series highlighting mission themes in the Lord’s Prayer.
**Missio Dei in Luke’s Gospel**

Richard Gahl

The *missio Dei* in Luke begins with the promise to Theophilus that one result of reading Luke’s account will be that he will “know that what he has been told is true” (1:4) and concludes with the charge of Jesus to the disciples that because of Him “people should be told to turn to God and change the way they think so that their sins would be forgiven. This should be told to people from all nations, beginning in the city of Jerusalem” (24:47, 48). Thus will the mission of God reach beyond Israel to all the nations of the world. In between the promise and the charge, subtle and not-so-subtle clues are drawn into the narrative for Theophilus to see.

Mary’s Magnificat (1:55) holds up “the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and his descendants.” It would seem that we should reference Genesis 12:3, “Through you every family on earth will be blessed,” as the source of that promise. Zechariah describes his son, John, as the way preparer of the One who will “give light to those who live in the dark and in death’s shadow” (1:79), a situation that would be true for everyone who does not see the “new day dawning from above” (1:78). This universal scope is repeated in the message of the angel to the shepherds in the fields around Bethlehem: “I have good news for you, a message that will fill everyone with joy” (2:10).

Simeon continues this universality in the Nunc Dimittis, “He is a light that will reveal salvation to the nations and bring glory to your people Israel” (2:32).

Luke calls on Isaiah to describe what John, the son of Zechariah, was doing in the region around the Jordan River. “A voice cries out in the desert: . . . All people will see the salvation that God gives” (3:4, 6). He tells us that crowds, including tax collectors and soldiers, responded positively to John’s call for a baptism of repentance. Since John is working on the boundaries of Judea, it is not too difficult to see the curious from across the Jordan among the crowds. Soldiers from the occupying forces were most certainly not Jewish.

In the temptation scene (4:1ff.), the second test involved the devil’s taking Jesus to a high place. We see Jesus offered the power and glory of all the kingdoms of the world were Jesus to worship the evil one. Notice how the objective of the *missio Dei* is expanded well beyond Israel. The appearance at the Nazareth synagogue (4:16ff.) furthers the mission beyond Israel. Jesus read from the Isaiah scroll about the anointed one’s telling Good News to the poor, announcing forgiveness to the prisoners of sin, restoring sight to the blind; all were connected to the year of Jubilee, announcing the year of the Lord’s favor. But now the Jubilee was pushed further beyond the Promised Land. The widow of Zarephath and the leper Naaman from Syria are described as recipients of the New Year. Gentiles are blessed by the...
Jubilee. And it has happened before. No wonder the assembly became enraged and attempted to throw Jesus over the cliff.

Perhaps there is even a hint of mission beyond Israel in the call of the first disciples following a fruitless all-night fishing expedition (5:1ff). After concluding a teaching session by the Sea of Galilee and borrowing Simon’s boat for an offshore podium, Jesus indicates that the fishing crew should launch the boats one more time. They caught such a large number of fish that the nets began to tear (5:6). Were the fish all of the same variety? Likely not. Follow this catch with Jesus’ commission: “From now on you will catch people instead of fish” (5:10). We might well see these words in anticipation of Luke 24:8.

Following a night of prayer in preparation for the selecting of twelve of the disciples to be apostles (6:12ff.), Luke reports that a large crowd of disciples and many other people met up with the new team. “They had come from all over Judea, Jerusalem, and the seacoast of Tyre and Sidon” (6:17). Tyre and Sidon are in Gentile lands—a sign of things to come. We meet a Roman army officer in Luke 7:1ff. A valuable slave was near death, and he desired help. The soldier enlisted Jewish leaders to ask Jesus to come and save the servant’s life. The leaders were quick to point out that the Roman officer “built our synagogue at his own expense” (7:5), in accordance with the custom of civic engagement that generous people often constructed buildings to house associations and even synagogues across the empire. After the ensuing dialogue with the Roman officer, Jesus turned to the crowd following Him to say: “I can guarantee that I haven’t found faith as great as this in Israel” (7:9). The mission circle expands.

Johannes Nissen contends that “whoever does not lose his faith in me is indeed blessed” (7:23) is another reference to an inclusive mission. With Bosch and others, he paraphrases the verse to mean

Blessed is everyone who does not take offense (σκανδαλισθη) at the fact that the era of salvation differs from what he expected, that God’s compassion on the poor and outcast has superseded divine vengeance. This is another way of saying that the new age is for all human beings. The mission of Jesus is inclusive.

The saving faith of the woman who had lived a sinful life in the city (7:36–50) is another example of the inclusive character of Jesus’ unfolding mission. People on the fringe, the outcasts of society, are also included.

The demon-possessed man in the region of the Gerasenes (8:26ff.) is another illustration of the expanding kingdom of God. The pig herding business is a definite signal that the setting for this miracle is not Jewish territory. Having restored the demon-possessed man to health, the man asked to join the entourage of disciples.
“But Jesus sent the man away and told him, ‘Go home to your family, and tell them how much God has done for you.’ So the man left. He went through the whole city and told people how much Jesus had done for him’’ (8:38, 39).

Three Samaritan stories help us to see the expanded focus of Jesus’ mission. In 9:51, Jesus’ disciples made an unsuccessful attempt to arrange lodgings for the group on the way to Jerusalem. Rather than calling down judgment, Jesus simply led them to another village. The Good Samaritan (10:25ff.) and the Samaritan leper who returned following the healing of ten are additional illustrations of the expanded mission.

Another easily overlooked mission text occurs in Luke 11 in the context of a charge against Him of working with Beelzebul (11:14ff.). Jesus states that Jonah, who was a miraculous sign to the people of Nineveh (11:29), and the queen from the south, who came from the ends of the earth to hear Solomon’s wisdom (11:31), will both stand in judgment over those who do not listen. Jesus claims that He is greater than both Solomon and Jonah.

Four texts add to this listing. “People will come from all over the world and will eat in the Kingdom of God” (13:39). “All the tax collectors and sinners came to listen to Jesus” (15:1). The confession of the tax collector in the temple courtyard (18:23), “God, be merciful to me a sinner,” is held to be exemplary. And the meal in the house of Zaccheus, director of tax collectors, prompts criticism that Jesus deflects with the statement: “Indeed the Son of Man is come to seek and to save people who are lost” (18:13).

Two statements place witness in front of occupying forces. In describing that the future will not be the proverbial bed of roses, Jesus gives encouragement to the disciples. “They will drag you in front of kings and governors because of my name. It will be your opportunity to testify to them” (21:12, 13), but they have the promise that His words and wisdom will be with them. That kind of witness was confirmed with the confession of the Roman officer in charge of the crucifixion. “When an army officer saw what had happened, he praised God and said, ‘Certainly this man was innocent’” (23:47).

In His last visit with the disciples following the Resurrection, Jesus clearly states the inclusive nature of the mission that He is passing on to them. “Scripture also says that by the authority of Jesus people would be told to turn to God and change the way they think and act so that their sins would be forgiven. This would be told to people from all nations, beginning in the city of Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things” (24:47, 48).

The mission of God is worldwide, for all peoples. It is to extend from Jerusalem to Judea to Samaria and to the ends of the earth. And that brings us to the next chapter in the saga of mission reported to Theophilus.
Endnotes

1 Here follows a summary of missional themes the author identified in Luke for Transfiguration 2013.
“Quo vadis, Mission Agency?”

Karl E. Böhmer

Abstract: This paper seeks to define what a mission agency is and to analyze the role of mission agencies in the church of today. There is a greater emphasis on lay involvement in the church today, and many question whether mission agencies should still send ordained missionaries. Various trends in the church have a tremendous impact on the perception and role of mission agencies, both denominational and parachurch, such as a decline in finances, globalization, short-term missions, the church planting movement, and individualization. Yet the mission agency is just as necessary today as before, since the mission agency in essence is one of the hands of the church in motion. The *missio Dei* continues, and in each generation the church needs to seek prayerfully to adapt its mission agency accordingly.

1. What is a “mission agency”?

While the almighty God has no need of anyone to accomplish His will, in His quest of love to reconcile the world to Himself, He has graciously deigned to bind the action of His Spirit to the means of grace, through which He works to convict sinners and call them to faith in Christ. These means God has entrusted to the church. As the church strives to reach the lost, mission agencies are formed to mobilize the church for mission and direct it on its behalf. These mission agencies have taken on various forms and affiliations over time. Strictly speaking, a mission agency is an organization that facilitates mission sending, often to foreign or overseas destinations. It includes both mission boards and mission societies with varying degrees of affiliation to particular denominations. Some, like many representatives of the so-called “missional church,” insist that local congregations are the only valid mission agency.¹ Historically, however, there have been many alternatives. Ralph Winter, for his part, famously distinguished between modalities and sodalities:

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¹ Historically, however, there have been many alternatives. Ralph Winter, for his part, famously distinguished between modalities and sodalities:
a modality is a structured fellowship in which there is no distinction of sex or age, while a sodality is a structured fellowship in which membership involves an adult second decision beyond modality membership, and is limited by either age or sex or marital status. In this use of these terms, both the denomination and the local congregation are modalities, while a mission agency or a local men’s club are sodalities.2

Ott et al., however, seem to operate with the definition of a mission agency as a specially-formed sending structure that is larger than a single congregation and can vary from voluntary, unaffiliated mission societies to strictly denominational mission boards.3 In light of the literal meaning of the term “agency,” and over against the “missional church” emphasis, I follow Ott’s definition in this paper, and distinguish between mission boards and societies where necessary.

2. The Church as the Human Agency of Mission

The Priesthood of All Believers

Regarding the role of the mission agency, perhaps the first and most basic question is: To whom has the triune God entrusted the task of mission? Mission firstly and fundamentally always remains God’s mission, in which He remains the divine author, actor, and completer. And Christ is the incarnation of God’s mission. Yet Baptism incorporates all believers into the body of Christ. Corporately, as they are united with Christ, they form the body of Christ while He is its head. They receive the Holy Spirit. They receive faith. And this faith confesses its Lord. Vicedom states that “through Baptism Christians receive the same witnessing role that was already given in primitive Christianity”—not that we are also eyewitnesses as the apostles were, but rather that we also witness “to what has been given to us in faith.”4 By Baptism every Christian is called to the priesthood of all believers (1 Pt 2:4–10) and thus empowered by God for participation in the missio Dei in his or her context in the sense that as priests or members of the royal priesthood of believers, we Christians intercede for others around us in prayer and communicate the Gospel and the name of Christ to them. It is in this sense that Luther could speak of every Christian as being a missionary when in the company of unbelievers.5
Everyone a Missionary?

It might seem then that no mission agency is needed at all, since mission can be carried out by laypeople within their own particular context. Must we then conclude that every Christian is a missionary? Many today would affirm this position. One problem is that while all Christians are called to the priesthood of all believers, all Christians are also simultaneously sinners and therefore struggle with indolence, timidity, apathy, and a host of other inhibitors. Church historian Stephen Neill famously said, “If everything is mission, nothing is mission.”6 We might paraphrase this as follows: If everyone is a missionary, no one is a missionary—at least in the sense that Christians might well assume that everything they do is mission—and, therefore, no organized mission is needed; or others will engage in mission on a programmatic basis, while nobody actually does so. This is particularly true for international mission. Experience teaches that it is far easier to speak about mission than to be engaged in it. Many never even get to speaking about it, while many who do never get beyond it.

It is important to see that even though Luther could speak of the individual Christian’s functioning as a missionary, when it came to the evangelical concept of mission, Luther did not think individualistically but rather corporately in terms of the church in toto, as Elert is quick to point out. He shows how Löhe echoed Luther’s thoughts by describing mission as “nothing other than the one church of God in its movement—the realization of a universal catholic church.”7 Thus to bandy about the term “missional church” is somewhat analogous to raving about wet water. That is to say, when the church is church, when the church is ontologically authentic, when the church moves, then it is engaged in mission; and if it is not engaged in mission, then the church is not moving, thus inviting the question whether it still is church.

In terms of the role of the mission agency, it follows that any mission agency that the church creates cannot exist for the purpose of taking care of the church’s mission in a way that exonerates the priesthood of this task or excludes it; rather, it must do so on behalf of the priesthood and in conjunction with it. We must maintain with Petri that “the church cannot do without the mission, that is, the mission activity of individuals, and the mission cannot do without the church.”8 The history of the church is replete with examples of churches and congregations increasingly looking inward and focusing on internal struggles rather than looking outward for and at the lost and remaining engaged in active mission to them. There is a need for mission agencies that call the church to be church, and for the church to call the mission to work with and for the church.
The Goal of Missio Dei and the Esse of the Church

The matter of goal raises a basic question that has fundamental significance for the function and authority of a mission agency, namely: What is the goal of mission? Different answers to this question will also invest and direct mission agencies correspondingly. Thus, Zinzendorf for instance believed that the goal of mission would be fulfilled when the heathens come to Jerusalem at the coming of Jesus; mission will therefore truly be possible only at the parousia, while in the meantime mission serves as a “preparatory work with the purpose of winning individuals who had been prepared by the Holy Ghost.” Correspondingly, this view led Zinzendorf to emphasize individual conversions. Pietistic mission in general would later share this emphasis. It follows that these mission agencies were therefore not very concerned about the formal establishment of a church in the mission field. Zinzendorf “even forbade the Moravian missionaries to formally establish churches” and instructed them to form ecclesiolae instead. This approach was also shared by many revivalist mission agencies in later centuries.

In stark contrast, the Roman Catholic Church “has long made plantatio ecclesiae (church planting) a central task of missions”—partly because of its belief that salvation is certifiably only imparted to converts when they become members of the church under the papal vicar of Christ. There have been many critics of this approach, such as Johannes Hoekendijk who “energetically opposed ‘ecclesiocentric’ goals of mission such as church planting” because he believed that such thinking “revolves around an illegitimate center.”

Schulz summarizes the Lutheran position when he states that the term plantatio ecclesiae is “theologically permissible only if the term implies the Church of ‘true believers’ and a ‘congregation of saints’ gathered around the ‘signs of the church,’ the preached and sacramental Word.” Vicedom holds that “the preaching of the Gospel erects a barrier between men because all those who have come to faith are gathered into a special way of life—the congregation,” and that “a believer is enrolled in the church and through her gains a group of fellow believers who with him serve the same Lord. This oneness of the church is given through the one faith as well as through the one Baptism, through which the church on earth visibly takes on form.” The una sancta ecclesia is constituted through Baptism and recognizably gathers where the Gospel is taught in its purity and the Sacraments are rightly administered. This Gospel, we confess, is none other than justification by grace through faith in Christ; and in order to obtain this faith, the office of the ministry was instituted to teach the Gospel and administer the Sacraments, through which the Holy Spirit then works as through means. And no one should assume this office of publicly teaching in the Church or administering the Sacraments without being rightly called.
The immediate goal of mission for the church therefore is the pure proclamation of the Word and the right administration of Baptism, along with the proclamation of the death of the returning Christ in the Lord’s Supper in order to impart faith to the lost and thus gather them into congregations belonging to the *una sancta ecclesia*.

It is for this goal then that every mission agency needs to be structured, and from which it will derive its role.

*A Theology of Mission Agency?*

It might seem at first blush that there is a need for the church to formulate a “theology of mission agencies.” However, Stephen Neill has warned of attempting to create such a theology, “because mission agencies are not a necessary part of the existence of the church. They perform a function of the church.”  

Neill is right. The theology behind mission agencies must be the theology of the Church. A proper ecclesiology enables us to distinguish between the *esse* and *bene esse* of mission agency and to identify relevant *adiaphora* in this regard. Neill’s warning also clarifies the connection between mission agencies and denominations. Schulz explains that while “no mission would ever claim to further a particular denomination,” nevertheless “the missionary also represents his own denomination.”  

This is true for every missionary. Since a missionary teaches and preaches the one Gospel of the one Christ, his doing so promotes the *una sancta ecclesia*, but his Gospel proclamation will be formed according to his own confession of it. Whether he intends to or not, if through his preaching the Holy Spirit produces faith, the new believers in whom the preaching will be produced and that young church which it forms will be shaped by the confession and practice of the missionary. For instance, even though Moravian missionaries were forbidden by Zinzendorf from establishing churches, in due course the work of Moravian missionaries inevitably resulted in the creation of Moravian churches.  

It is ultimately impossible for mission agencies to be nondenominational; the churches that arise as a result of their mediate activities will tend inevitably to assume the confession to which the missionary subscribes, or which his agency affirms. It is for this reason that Lutheran mission has held to three principles: The Lutheran church can pursue only Lutheran mission; Lutheran mission work can only be pursued by the Lutheran church; and Lutheran mission work must lead to a Lutheran church.  

Now in some contexts, it might not be feasible to establish a Lutheran church, at least *pro tem*, especially when restrictive policies on the part of the local government prohibit this (such as in mainland China). Nevertheless, such challenges do not invalidate the general principles to which Lutheran mission holds,
since they are not substantively theological in nature but rather a matter of legislation or operational policy. The prayer and goal of the mission continues to be that such challenges may be overcome.

The point is that even if a mission agency is not officially affiliated with any particular denomination, in practice it cannot be free of a particular confession, since this is inherently impossible. At the very least, the mission will operate according to the beliefs and convictions of its most prominent leaders or backers, and so it serves the truth and promotes the integrity of the agency to clarify its position from the outset and to work toward fellowship according to it, which is ultimately beneficial both to the sending as well as the receiving church.

Figure 1.

It is the church that bears the responsibility for training its missionaries and for ordaining and calling them. It is also the church that must sustain and support its missionaries. Since the mission agency performs a function of the church, the extent to which it performs that function will depend on the extent that the church empowers it do so. Since the general purpose of a mission agency is to facilitate the church’s sending, one would expect the mission agency also to encourage members of the church to make themselves available for a mission call and to mobilize and enable the congregations of the church to become active in both local and overseas mission.
The Structure of the Mission Agency

The first intentional sending of missionaries in the New Testament on the part of the church occurred when the congregation of Antioch sent Paul and Barnabas to Cyprus under the direction of the Holy Spirit (Acts 13:1–3). Thus, we have a clear Scriptural precedent for a congregation acting as a mission agency. Going one step further, Winter sees a Scriptural precedent for a sodality in Paul’s missionary band. While the latter point is certainly open to debate, it can be said that the New Testament does not mandate any particular structure for a mission agency. Following his overview of history, however, Wilhelm Maurer argues “that congregational mission was the more original and appropriate form.” God has given the mission mandate to His Church. Whatever form the mission agency takes must therefore represent, aid, and facilitate the church’s participating in the missio Dei.

Over the course of history, the mission agency of the church has taken on various forms, ranging from the papal office to monastic structures, to kings and princes, to mission societies and denominational mission boards. It would seem that since the Reformation, the call for the establishment of mission societies has predominantly arisen in times when frustration over the perceived inactivity or incompetency of a church or denomination in mission endeavors has set in among one or more individuals. Examples include Lutheran lay nobleman Justinian von Welz, who, in 1664, castigated the orthodox Lutheran church of his time for its indifference and lukewarmness and called for the establishment of a “Jesus-Loving Society” to take up mission to the heathen; and William Carey, who wrote in 1792 that “multitudes sit at ease and give themselves no concern about the far greater part of their fellow-sinners, who to this day, are lost in ignorance and idolatry” and thus called for a mission society to be founded. A more recent example is James Tino, whose frustration arising from his perception of a decreased emphasis on sending career evangelistic missionaries in the LCMS six years ago prompted his founding of “Global Lutheran Outreach.”

Unfortunately, the stereotypical notion that denominational mission stagnates and declines over time has frequently been borne out by experience. For a recent example of this trend, which can be ascribed to a number of causes, one may refer to Kim Plummer Krull’s article documenting the decline in the number of LCMS career missionary families between 1970 and 2011 from 350 to 59, a decline of over 80%. The current administration of the LCMS has gone to great lengths to reverse this...
trend, which is eminently laudable; yet there can be no question that long-term financial sustainability will always prove a challenge, and thus the possibility always exists for numbers to decline again.

Many who are frustrated by the stagnation of denominational mission eventually abandon their efforts to foment constructive change within the church’s mission agency and instead call for the creation of parachurch mission societies. While this is understandable, it must also be acknowledged that mission societies that come into being in this way frequently operate as a double-edged sword; while they can provide opportunities for creative solutions to problems and avenues to promote mission, it can also be very difficult to integrate their work with the greater church, depending on the level of official sanction. Sometimes the situation can become downright messy, such as in the case of ordained LCMS pastor and science professor, Edward Arndt, who founded his own mission society to China in 1912 after his overtures to the LCMS to send missionaries to China went unheeded, allegedly due to a lack of funding. Only after founding it was Arndt installed as missionary at New Ulm. He raised funds for the society himself by selling sermons and tracts and requesting pledges. Only after five years was the society taken over by the LCMS.27

It behooves the church to take seriously the frustration of its members who are driven by the love of God through the means of grace to make themselves available for service in the *missio Dei*, yet find no outlet or avenue to pursue such service within their church body. This is especially true for those members who, like Arndt, see no alternative but to resort to founding new mission societies in order to facilitate mission, not for doctrinal reasons or a break in fellowship, but because they perceive the church’s own mission agency to be inefficient, inept, or self-absorbed. I do not mean that the church is a democracy and that every member is free to do his or her own thing even against the wishes of the church. On the contrary, one of the church’s main tasks is to call, ordain, and send capable and suitable administrators of the means of grace into the world. This necessarily entails a vetting process according to Scriptural guidelines that will result in some being declared unfit or unsuited for a call to mission, or perhaps in a difference in discernment concerning the need for mission in a particular area.

However, church leaders and mission leaders are not infallible. They are both saints and sinners. This truism implies that the church must maintain a willingness to
examine itself, and, if appropriate, to repent of its mismanagement of funds, of its unwillingness to heed the call to mission, or of its preoccupation with itself, whichever is applicable. It is to the credit of the early twentieth-century LCMS that she recognized the validity of Arndt’s appeals and took on the work of the China Mission Society. In light of the growing divide between the startling decline of the number of career missionaries documented in Krull’s article and the increase in mission opportunities made possible by globalization and partnerships with sister churches around the world, the time is ripe for churches around the world prayerfully to evaluate their participation in the *missio Dei*, to repent when convicted by the Law, and to strive to find creative solutions to increase mission activity and particularly the sending of long-term career missionaries into a world that is no less in need of that mission today than it was in 1912.

It is evident from what has been argued that Lutherans work with a mission agency that shares the Lutheran confession, endorses its ecclesiology, and facilitates the sending of Lutheran missionaries on behalf of the Lutheran church. Any society or board that is created or adopted for this purpose would have to meet these criteria, no matter what particular shape it took; and it would need to marshal the forces and rest upon the support of all the congregations belonging to that particular church body, both doctrinal and financial/material.

**Ordained or Lay?**

The Church is found wherever the Gospel is taught in its purity and the Sacraments are rightly administered. Edmund Schlink points out that defining the Church according to these *notae ecclesiae* means that the presence of the Church is not expressly tied to the presence of the clergy in AC VII, but that the connection to the office of the ministry is given in AC V, XIV, and XXVIII, which precludes any possibility of severing this proclamation and administration from the office. Not explicitly mentioning the office in AC VII serves to emphasize God’s action by means of the Gospel and demonstrates that the office consists of service to the Gospel.28

In addition, it is instructive that both commonly cited Scriptural passages that speak *expressis verbis* of mission in the New Testament, John 20:19–23 and Matthew 28:18–20, as well as Romans 10:17, which speaks of unbelievers coming to faith in Christ as *Kyrios*, refer to activities pertaining to the office of the ministry—the sending of preachers, the public teaching of the Word, its proclamation, Baptism, and the exercising of the Office of the Keys.

Lutherans value tremendously the priesthood of all believers and the ability of the laity to witness to Christ and give a defense of their faith in their vocation. Globalization tends to mobilize lay involvement, and there have been many instances in the history of mission when laity have played a vital role in the spread of the
Gospel. But the office of the ministry holds a special place in the *missio Dei* for the Lutheran church, which it maintains even in the face of considerable pressure by postmodern Protestantism that sees all Christians as “disciplers” with equal authority. There is a continued need in our time for the right and necessary calling (and the right and necessary sending, which amounts to the same thing) of faithfulclergymen to deliver the gifts of God, since they alone under normal circumstances are vested by the church and its Lord with the authority publicly to administer the means of grace. This need exists because laity are not rightly called to proclaim the Gospel in an official capacity in the sense of holding divine services, preaching, etc. For this reason, the emphasis of any proper mission agency should primarily be the sending of ordained men on behalf of the church to administer the means of grace, since it is in the administration of the means of grace that certainty in the work of the Holy Spirit is found.

Together with them, however, such a mission agency sends willing and able laypeople to support or advance the work of the missionaries, that is, laypeople who are gifted in areas such as introducing people to the Gospel in a personal capacity or in those areas that will be ancillary to the mission, such as works of mercy, creating and maintaining missionary structures, or fostering the communal life of the church.

### 3. The Impact of Individualization

The rise of postmodernism brings with it a distrust of institutions. Along with a perception of an overly costly bureaucratic structure of church leadership that consumes a significant portion of any contributions, it is highly likely that this contributes to the significant decrease in unrestricted giving that the LCMS and other mainline denominations have been experiencing since 2001. The attendant decrease in restricted giving since 2007 is probably attributable at least in part to ongoing global economic challenges. Krull attributes the steep decline in career missionaries since 1971, amongst other factors, to the decrease in giving and the dramatic increase in costs of sending especially career missionaries overseas.

However, it is not as if the involvement of congregations in mission has necessarily decreased over the same period. Rather, the focus for mission has changed. When it comes to mission, congregations are increasingly doing their own thing. Many insist on what they call a “hands-on” approach. They want to “see where their money goes.” This approach does seem to enable many congregations to become involved in both national and international mission, which is commendable. The unfortunate byproduct, however, is an uncoordinated effort on the mission field by the church as a whole. The focus tends to shift to manageable short-term missions rather than sustained long-term work by career missionaries. For example, without going into specifics, it has happened that one well-intentioned congregation gave magnanimous financial support directly to indigent congregations in a different
country—but with no regard for the local context there or for fellowship ties with other church bodies in that country. The result was that considerable financial support was given to congregations that preached a gospel contrary to that of the unsupported and envious confessional Lutheran sister church right next door. At other times, a synod’s mission agency might have been carefully proceeding with a long-term plan in a given area, only to have individual congregations become involved in the same area with misdirected short-term aid, ultimately resulting in long-term chaos.

It is a simple truth in our globalized world that when mission efforts are not coordinated, then mission initiatives, while well-intended, can quickly result in counter-productive strategies and damage to the church worldwide. Short-term mission trips are often touted to yield more spiritual growth to the givers than to the takers. Is this necessarily Scriptural or good? “In what ways has the short-term mission movement seriously taken culture into account? The tsunami of over one and a half million Americans annually traveling internationally in the name of Christ has staggering implications.” Are individual congregations willing to think those through?

The upshot of individualization, amongst other factors, is that many a synod’s mission agency sends out fewer missionaries, and those that are sent are frequently forced by necessity to raise their own funds. This practice puts tremendous pressure on the missionaries and can hamper their work significantly. It should give us pause to think when Paul writes to Timothy, his young co-worker in mission, that “the laborer deserves his wages” (1 Tim 5:18, emphasis added). Is it not an Armutszeugnis for the church if its missionaries need to resort to leaving the mission field for months at a time every year or two in order to massage relationships with supporting congregations at home and continually find new sources of income? Is it legitimate for the church to bow to pragmatism and individualism? It is true that in light of the decrease in unrestricted giving to churches as a whole, not many alternatives present themselves other than to have the missionaries go around extending glad hands. But has the church truly considered the spiritual impact of this model? At the very least, missionaries in the field will be far more concerned with their finances than pastors at home, which might well serve as a deterrent to capable and gifted clergy who might otherwise have been willing to be sent to plant churches. In addition, missionaries inevitably compete with one another for support from donor congregations, since the pool of potential donors is limited. In order to maintain interest and support for their work, they need to become ever more creative so as to describe the need in ever more appealing terms in order to “touch the hearts”

Often the result of congregations’ wanting to do more individually is that less is achieved overall.
of the members, as many are wont to say. It remains an unspoken truth that the missionaries who will most probably be successful in this paradigm are the ones whose current projects offer the most emotional appeal or the greatest potential for tangible improvement, who possess the greatest personal charisma (which is not necessarily synonymous with representing the greatest need or being faithful to their calling) and who have the best contacts within the church, both individual (in terms of synodical hierarchy or rich donors) and corporate (rich congregations). But potential downsides may well be that more deserving missionaries or projects run out of funds, or that the church bows to the short attention spans of donors and becomes less willing to commit to long-term projects, which will have a dramatic impact on the kind of mission carried out and, consequently, on the reputation of the church involved. Consequently, often the result of congregations’ wanting to do more individually is that less is achieved overall.

Quo vadis, Mission Agency?

It would seem that the denominational mission agency of today still frequently operates with the tried and trusty paradigm of the late nineteenth century, yet without the means and support of the denominational church of the twentieth century. Perhaps the time has come for the church to reexamine and recreate the structure and the role of the mission agency. While the individual efforts of congregations are laudable, there is tremendous value in harnessing and coordinating mission efforts so that the church “keeps the main thing the main thing”—reaching the lost and shepherding those won—without continually committing the same errors and relearning the same lessons.

Conversations that I have had with individual Christians seem to indicate that, on a philanthropic level, members are most likely financially to support those organizations that are seen to work for a noble cause and whose transparent finances show that they siphon off little or nothing in order to support their own structure, such as the American Red Cross or The Salvation Army. The reason cited is that the givers feel that contributing to such causes is most effective and rewarding because the maximum amount of money arrives at the intended destination. Perhaps similar guarantees can be given by a church’s mission agency to individual congregations or donors by streamlining the agency, using dedicated funds from districts or synod to support a minimal staff, and providing detailed feedback to congregations and individual members as to what was done with their gifts, especially by making use of media such as video recordings or photos and social media clearly to communicate how the money is being put to work.

In addition, the mission agency could take on more of a facilitating role. If congregations want a hands-on approach, perhaps the mission agency could provide information on a number of mission projects or possibilities from which
congregations could prayerfully select to support fully or in partnership with other sister congregations, thus facilitating a greater sense of ownership. This approach in turn could strengthen ties between the congregations. Opportunities could be given for laypeople from the supporting congregations to travel to the mission field for hands-on involvement.

A mission agency could also take on a greater role in facilitating the fundraising on behalf of missionaries. A stellar example of this seems to be the work of Gary Thies at Mission Central. The national agency could coordinate with districts, so that districts or even circuits jointly support individual missionaries. In this way, missionaries would find their support in a geographically central location, thereby cutting travel costs and time needed for fundraising, which in turn would mean less need for missionaries to repeat their presentations.

A mission agency cannot afford to work paternalistically any longer. This is a time of strengthening ties with partner churches around the world. If a church body respects and values a sister church elsewhere in the world, then she will be willing to work not only with her, but also send missionaries to work under her supervision. Too often, partner churches work right alongside one another, and yet the laity and sometimes even the clergy of both churches have little or no knowledge about this. Increasing awareness and then raising support will prove beneficial to both church bodies. A greater cooperation is possible with partner churches and will strengthen the work of the missio Dei.

Finally, theological education is an area in which a great impact can be made over time, despite relatively few career missionaries. By sending more qualified missionaries to seminaries of sister churches, by enabling more local students to attend seminary, even if only in the form of repeated short-term intensive courses, and by a church’s directing greater support to its own seminaries and attracting students from elsewhere, it is possible to educate and influence whole generations of new pastors and career missionaries all over the world, who can then have a profound impact on their own culture and disseminate over a lifetime what they have received. Direct cooperation with seminaries and sending missionaries as educators is an area in which the mission agency of today can play a decisive role. True, theological education often has little emotional appeal because it is seen as ordinary, rather than extraordinary, and because it calls for long-term commitment without many immediately recognizable or tangible results. However, at the same time, capable communication experts can augment efforts by committed
church leaders in this regard, particularly when the long-term benefits of this approach are emphasized.

When the means of grace are employed faithfully and Law and Gospel are distinguished rightly, there is no need to plead for the church to be or become “missional.” On the contrary, when the church is church, then it is missional by virtue of the fact that the church moves, that it is not static. The kingdom of God is inherently dynamic as Christ’s reconciliation of the world to Himself in the cross is proclaimed and imparted to all who believe and are baptized. It is time, therefore, as it always is, for the church to be church, and thus move—by the grace of God.

Endnotes

3 Ott et al., Encountering Theology of Mission, 201–216.
6 Cited in Ott et al., Encountering Theology of Mission, 200.
10 Ott et al., Encountering Theology of Mission, 108.
11 Ott et al., Encountering Theology of Mission, 113.
12 Ott et al., Encountering Theology of Mission, 129.
13 Klaus Detlev Schulz, Mission from the Cross (St. Louis, MO: CPH, 2009), 205, footnote 17.
16 AC IV, V, and XIV.
18 Schulz, Mission from the Cross, 221–222.
20 Articulated by Friedrich Wilhelm Hopf, as cited in Schulz, Mission from the Cross, 222.
22 Cited in Schulz, Mission from the Cross, 219.
31 Krull, “Mission Heritage Sets Stage for Global Reach,” 8.
32 Ott et al., *Encountering Theology of Mission*, 126.
Encountering Mission

From Brazil to Africa:
A Good Personal Experience in God’s Mission

Carlos Walter Winterle

Abstract: Love what you do and love God’s people. God’s Mission is multifaceted. While some are sent to spread the Gospel and to train local people, others have to stay to do the local mission and to nurture the newly converted. These are the two sides of the same coin. The Gospel is always the same, but cultural issues need to be respected in the way we share the Gospel of Christ. I once read in a book review: “When a book begins with ‘I,’ I surely will read it. It’s not only theory, but life experience.” “On arriving there, they gathered the church together and reported all that God had done through them and how He had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles” (Acts 14:27).

I Was Sent

In 1973, São Paulo, Brazil, was a huge city of almost 8 million inhabitants with only four established Lutheran congregations. Just graduated, I was sent to plant a church in one of the townships of São Paulo.

I was a foreigner in my own land. I had grown up in the southern part of the country, and my German background was obvious: tall, thin, blue eyes, blonde hair, white skin. There I was, among a mixed people coming from all over Brazil to try for a better life in São Paulo, beginning their life in that new township in very poor conditions. They were African, Japanese, Italian, and even some of German background. It was a different culture from what I was used to, and they spoke with a different accent. It was not easy for my wife either.

There was nothing there but a small room that had been offered to hold a children’s Bible class by a friendly family. I would get off the public transportation...
and walk to the mission place, greeting the children who were playing on the dirt road and inviting them to come with me. After the class, I asked them if I could visit their parents. Immediately, their poor houses were open to me and I was warmly received by the parents. I introduced myself, offered a Bible study some evening during the week, and challenged them to invite their neighbors and friends. When I would arrive for Bible study, the small house was packed with people eager to hear what the missionary had to say to them. And the story repeated itself week after week.

I had been trained in a paternalistic way of doing mission. The “mother church” provided everything for the “daughter churches.” One of the professors even used to say: “Don’t talk about money; people will not come to the church anymore. Don’t worry. . . Missouri will provide for all.” But when I was sent out as a missionary, the reality showed a different face, and I had to find my own way to do mission.

One of the four established churches was supposed to be the “mother church,” pay my salary, and give support to the mission. After one and half years, they withdrew their financial help due to financial problems, and the Brazilian Synod’s Mission Board couldn’t pay my subsidy. The solution: The Lutheran Hour office needed an assistant pastor, and the position was offered to me. I worked eight hours per day at the office, and after this I went to the township for home visits and Bible studies. On weekends, I had all the other pastoral activities.

After some regular Bible study groups were established, I challenged the people to begin holding services at the small Bible classroom. The first service was held on an Easter Sunday. The room was too small for all the people who attended the service. Some of the local leaders, even though they were not Lutherans, immediately proposed to enlarge the room, and the owner agreed. They bought the materials and did it themselves. We worshiped in this room for three years. My children were baptized there. When I visited the congregation in 2016, what a pleasure it was to see the first child I had baptized and one of the first children from the Bible class being strong leaders of the congregation!

The first adults that confessed the Lutheran Christian faith comprised a portrait of the township and of the future of the church: a Japanese/Brazilian lady, an African/Brazilian couple, and a typical brown mixed Brazilian couple. I always had adult classes, and the church was growing steadily. When the church was officially organized, the first elected elders were the chair: a Japanese/Brazilian; secretary: an African/Brazilian; and treasurer: a German/Brazilian. As the last was illiterate, his wife took over the finances of the new congregation.

From the very beginning, the new members were taught Christian stewardship. It was something new in the Synod, and I adopted it immediately. It worked well. “Their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity” (2 Cor 8:2). As I was receiving my salary from my job, all local income was put in a bank account. After a while, it
was decided that the congregation buy a plot and build a bigger room for the church. Everything was donated and no labor was paid; they built the room with their own hands on weekends and holidays.

As I had the same working and free time as the members, they didn’t rely on the pastor alone to do visits and mission. They witnessed to their relatives, neighbors, and friends, inviting them to come to the services and taking me to visit with them. I never entered a new house alone: I was always introduced to new prospects by the children or by one of the members or members-to-be.

In short, when the congregation became self-supporting, they asked me to be a full-time pastor. With the help of Forward in Remembrance (LCMS—World Mission plan, 50% x 50%), we bought a bigger plot. Both a church with a basement and a parsonage were built. When I left the congregation after fifteen years of ministry, we had more than three hundred members, and the contributions to the Synod and to the District were outstanding.

Some mission lessons learned through this church planting experience:

- Work with children to lead them to Christ, and reach the parents through the children;
- Home Bible studies are an excellent way to reach the neighborhood;
- Involve local people in God’s mission. Don’t do it alone;
- Love what you do and love God’s people.

Transition

After this experience, I spent ten years as a parish pastor in a mission-minded congregation with a strong children’s, youth, and music ministry, followed by eight years as President of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Brazil, with lots of international connections. These experiences gave me more maturity and a broader vision of mission. When LCMS–World Mission was looking for a pastor/missionary for Kenya, and I was approached as a candidate, my wife and I accepted the call without any hesitations. The Brazilian Lutheran Church sent me to Kenya in a partnership with LCMS Alliance Missionary program.

African Christians in Mission

“In the church of Antioch there were prophets and teachers . . . Simon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene” (Acts 13:1).

The Ethiopian Church understands that Simon was a black man because of his nickname, “Niger,” which means “a black one.” Lucius was from North Africa.
Maybe both were Jews from the Diaspora, settled in Antioch. Or maybe both were Africans. Even so, the reference to the mixed people gathered at the mission-minded church in Antioch is meaningful!

Africa, which was once the “dark Continent” and the destination of missionaries eager to share Christ with the pagans, is now home to the biggest Lutheran Church bodies: Ethiopia, Tanzania, Madagascar have millions of Lutherans, plus Christians from other denominations, just to mention some countries. Eighty-five percent of the population of Kenya identifies itself as Christian. Is there still place for mission in Africa? Of course, there is, as in any other place! Other millions of people don’t believe in Jesus, and many, living far in the bush and forests, have never had the opportunity to hear about Jesus.

Barnabas and Saul were chosen by the Holy Spirit to be sent to other countries to preach the Gospel. But Simon and Lucius stayed in Antioch to continue the mission, preaching and teaching there in their congregation. The two missions are necessary and important: to go and to stay. Someone has to do the home work!

This is the reality we are experiencing in Mozambique. While some of the pastors are traveling far to share the Gospel in remote villages and towns, most of the pastors-to-be are doing God’s mission in their own village, among their own people.

I Was Sent to Mozambique

While in Kenya, I heard about a new Lutheran church in Mozambique that began thanks to the efforts of a former refugee who was sent back to his home village by two congregations of the Lutheran Church Canada. I did contact him, and he asked me to help train some local leaders, as Mozambique and Brazil—which are both former Portuguese colonies—speak the same language.

Being aware that the Seminário Concórdia (Brazil) has a Theological Education by Extension (TEE) program, I contacted the church leadership about it, and the Brazilian Church sent me to Mozambique to begin a Theological Education Program, using and adapting the TEE material. Eight candidates began the classes in 2010. Some other pastors and professors came from Brazil to help. I didn’t move to Mozambique, but I visit them from time to time for Intensive Training Sessions.
The first eight pastors graduated and were ordained in August of 2015. One thousand people attended this special service—almost all Lutheran members of the ten established congregations. The newly ordained pastors were sent to the villages and towns around their churches, and even farther. After one and a half years, they had more than seventy churches and almost eight thousand baptized members. Even some Muslims were converted by the grace of God! It was like a new Pentecost! Most of the churches gather under trees or in straw or mud buildings. Sixty candidates are being trained since 2015, and we hope to graduate some of them in 2020. The church received her official registration from the government in May of 2018. No foreign missionary lives in Mozambique.

As soon as a new mission station is founded, the local people elect a small board and choose one or two people to be their spiritual leaders. Sometimes they are young adults, because they can read and write. (The older generation didn’t have the opportunity to go to school.) These candidates receive some orientation from the ordained pastors, along with a Chisena Bible (local tribal language), the Lutheran liturgy, the Bible reading schedule for each Sunday, and the Small Catechism in their own language. Also, they are enrolled in the Theological Education Program (TEP). From that moment on, they are recognized and respected as the future pastor of that village. The candidate leads the services, he teaches the children, youth, and adults, and he practices what he learns at the TEP. The practical goes hand in hand with the studies. The candidates don’t have a specific internship period, but it happens during all the time they are studying, under supervision of the ordained pastor in charge of that area. And they are supported in their work by other local leaders who are not being trained to be pastors. The Royal Priesthood of All Believers is something natural among them. Everyone witnesses, everyone wants to offer a prayer during the service, everyone leads the songs. They don’t wait for the pastor to come to celebrate a service. They have services every Sunday and other activities with the pastor and without the pastor.

Jesus was not accepted when He came back to His hometown of Nazareth, and He stated that “no prophet is accepted in his hometown” (Lk 4:24). But, amazingly, this is not what is happening in Mozambique. In my point of view, this is a new concept of mission because it doesn’t cost any money to send and to maintain a missionary in that place. The candidate has his own house, he has his own little farm (machamba) that provides food for himself and for his family, and all he needs is to attend the training sessions from time to time until he is ordained and is able to offer also the Sacraments. And he will stay in his place as pastor, without need of subsidy or salary. What the congregation collects is used for special expenses of needy people (health issues) and for some travel expenses. During this time of study and preparation, the ordained pastor in charge of that region comes once every month to offer the Sacraments and to preach.
The candidates are chosen among those who fulfill the criteria of 1 Timothy 3. They need to have a good witness of the local community, be husband of but one wife (polygamy is still very common in Mozambique), and above reproach. Not all of them will graduate and be ordained. That depends on their skills and if they pass the exams. But the fact that not all will be ordained does not discourage them to witness Christ. “The mouth speaks what the heart is full of” (Mt 12:34).

This experience also gives another dimension to the mission of God. In a biblical sense, there is nothing new under heaven. Paul advised Timothy and Titus to choose faithful people to be elders among the leaders of the communities that they were leading (Ti 1:5). While Paul, Barnabas, and others were traveling from place to place, sharing the Good News, planting churches, and visiting some places again to strengthen the Christian community, others were overseers among their own people, like Simon called Niger and Lucius of Cyrene.

What We Can Learn From This Experience

We have lost that dimension of mission, and the churches are still spending a lot of money sending missionaries from America and other developed countries to the so-called Third World. Of course, some need to go to begin the mission and to train the local people. But just think about how many missionaries are well settled in good houses, while the people are living in extreme poverty and there is no real connection between the missionary and the people he wants or tries to reach. One mission sponsor told me that, when he had the opportunity to visit the missionary he was sponsoring in Africa, he was shocked to see that the missionary was living in better conditions than he himself.

Also, how many Mission Teams are sent every year to do work that the local people are able to do, like building, painting, cleaning, etc.? The benefit and the experience are more for the Mission Team than for the local people, as I already read in some mission books and heard from volunteers. Why not just send a coach to train the local people and help them to do what they are able? And to accept their way of living and of worshiping, without imposing our Western culture?

Some of these questions don’t have answers now. These are just some reflections about the current situation. The model doesn’t always work the same in all places.
Theological Education cannot be a program by itself. It is a Mission Project, as every candidate is a herald to proclaim Christ to all. Even if the candidate doesn’t conclude the training or is not ordained for other reasons, he shares what he knows and believes: Christ! We are called not just to maintain what is there, but to expand the kingdom of God among us and around the world.

Obstacles/Weaknesses

The model that we are proposing to Mozambique is not a fixed one, and it needs to be confirmed. Unfortunately, the beginning of the mission sponsored by some Lutheran churches in Canada was paternalistic. The first eight candidates received a stipend, and they became used to it. When the mission was handed over to the Brazilian Lutheran Church—IELB, an agreement was made with the graduated and just ordained pastors: They would receive a small monthly stipend and some help for travel expenses until a new class graduates. This is now ongoing, and every year the subsidy is reduced until 2020, when new candidates will graduate and be ordained. Let’s see how it will work.

Also, most of the churches are in rural areas, existing in very primitive conditions, without electricity or running water. The people live in straw huts. The church gathers under trees or in straw or mud chapels built by the local people. These buildings usually collapse during the strong summer rainy season. Some places have brick churches, built in partnership: The local people make the bricks and help with the labor. To buy cement, timber, etc., they receive a grant of $5,000 from the IELB or from a special fund that the mission has at the LCMS Office of International Mission, thanks to some faithful donors. Having a brick church gives credibility to the congregation, and the local community trusts that this church has come to stay.

The Theological Education Program meets twice every year at the Lutheran Training Center in Sena on the shore of the Zambezi River, bought by the FELSISA—Free Evangelical Lutheran Synod in South Africa. It was a former game camp. The students sleep on mats, the classes are held under trees, and the tutors have a brick hut with a bed to sleep. Food is prepared on ground fires. There is a generator for electricity that sometimes doesn’t work, and the water comes from the river, which is infested by crocodiles, making it really dangerous to pick up water from the river. Also, hippopotamuses infest the river. Several communities are asking for water wells, because people have been eaten by crocodiles while picking up water from the river. Twenty-five people were eaten in a year just in one congregation. We got a sponsorship to drill a water well for them. Others are still waiting.
Malaria is another big problem for the local people and especially for the guest professors. Three of my Brazilian colleagues got malaria while teaching there. I was spared so far, thanks be to God.

Our Strength

“Our competence comes from God.” I’m sure of this, and I have experienced it during all my ministry. This was the motto of my graduation and is the motto of my ministry. “Such confidence as this is ours through Christ before God. Not that we are competent in ourselves to claim anything for ourselves, but our competence comes from God. He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant” (2 Cor 3:4–6; emphasis added).

Training pastors in Mozambique and now also at the Lutheran Theological Seminary in Tshwane, Pretoria, South Africa, is an opportunity that God gives me to share Christ and my mission experiences. In Him I trust, and to Him all the glory.
Keeping the Main Thing the Main Thing

David O. Berger

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

“Enhancements” and “diversity” . . . like the adjectives “new” and “contemporary,” even “relevant,” often suggest an agenda rather than convey a definite meaning.

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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.

About half of the service attendees also attend Sunday morning Bible classes, a phenomenon outside of the writer’s past experience.
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.

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

Outreach and community involvement are an important and intentional part of the picture.
- 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.

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.

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.
The Little Church That Could: Watching God at Work as We Walk in Faith

Dale Hedstrom

Abstract: Sometimes when we can’t imagine how a new ministry opportunity could come together, we close the door. Or if we consider the risk and cost of failure to be unacceptable, we stop trying. This is often because we don’t factor a supernatural God into our equations. But Scripture is full of examples of God asking His people to believe impossible things—and then start walking in faith that God will what only He can accomplish. Here is a story of a little congregation that decided to take some steps of faith—and what God did in response.

“Don’t close the door before giving God a chance.” That pretty well sums up what went through my mind the day one of my parishioners said to me, “Pastor, I have an idea.”

Here’s the background to the story. Holy Trinity Lutheran Church is a small country church in rural Lakefield, MN. The congregation has been in existence for 122 years. Congregation members told me that when they celebrated their centennial in 1996 they wondered how much longer the congregation would be able to keep its doors open. A few years later, they formed a dual parish with another rural congregation. Sunday attendance currently averages just over seventy people.

Like most rural congregations, we have aging facilities. For example, the handicapped ramp is an external structure that is beginning to get rickety. Congregation members brainstormed ideas and options, finally settling on plans for a remodel and addition that would give us two enclosed ramps—to the main floor and the basement—plus a handicapped-accessible bathroom on the main floor.

We created a building fund with a goal of raising half the funds in 2017. Halfway through that year Denny approached after the service one Sunday and said he wanted to run an idea by me before bringing it to the building committee. He told me that he was lying in bed asking God for fundraising ideas when the thought came...
to him: “Why not host a major Christian outdoor concert in the Iowa Great Lakes area?” By “major” he meant that we would approach one of the most well-known names in contemporary Christian music, Michael W. Smith, with our story and ask him to come.

Hmmm. Just looking at the surface of things, it would have been logical to respond, “No way. Couldn’t happen. We’re just a bunch of farmers and blue-collar workers. We don’t know anything about organizing concerts.”

But I’ve read about God giving “impossible” visions to people (think Abraham becoming the father of a nation, or Moses asking Pharaoh to let God’s people go). Andy Stanley describes it this way in his Visioneering book: “God-ordained visions are always too big for us to handle. We shouldn’t be surprised. Consider the source.”1 I certainly did not want to be the one to close the door before giving God a chance to do what only He could do. I looked at Denny and said, “Well, let’s start walking down the path and see if God opens the doors.”

That was in July of 2017. Turns out Denny had organized concerts when he was a member of the Jaycees. With the blessing of the building committee, we started exploring possible venues and gathering cost estimates. We expected it to cost about $30,000 to book Michael W. Smith, plus about $5,000 for sound and lighting, plus an estimated $5,000 for advertising, catering, insurance, and other expenses.

Asking a small country church to be on the line for approximately $40,000—when they are trying to raise money for a building project—sounds a little crazy, doesn’t it? We agreed to charge $25.00 per ticket, and hoped to get corporate sponsors to cover most of the expenses. We were also told by the venue to expect four to five thousand people. Profit projections looked good!

But still, we knew that the congregation had to make the final decision. A letter was sent to members informing them of the estimated costs and the importance of their input for this decision. After much discussion, ballots were distributed and then tallied. The results—24 to 6—from unanimous, but a clear enough majority to proceed.

That was January 28. And what a step of faith it was! We knew that once the contract was signed we had only two weeks to come up with $15,000 (half of the fee to book Michael W. Smith). The venue offered to have their concert agent do the negotiations for us. We agreed, wanting to get going on finding corporate donors yet knowing that we couldn’t begin until we had locked in the contract.

Meanwhile, we tried to get organized—forming a concert committee and then forming sub-committees to work on various aspects like advertising, ticket sales, corporate sponsors, and a fence and stage crew. It was amazing to see the excitement and enthusiasm of the concert committee members—none of whom had ever done anything like this before. God the Holy Spirit was at work in their hearts!

Finally, we heard back from the venue. Turns out they not only did the negotiations, but also signed the contract and paid the $15,000 down payment,
trusting that we would eventually pay them back. God was clearly opening doors for us!

Month after month went by with very little ticket sales and few corporate donations. We eventually reached $15,000 and were able to repay the venue for the down payment. But things weren’t coming together as quickly as we hoped.

Yet God was still at work. In early June, He brought alongside us a couple who were very excited about this concert. As part owners of a major publishing company, they offered to design more eye-catching promotional material and a press release—not only giving us over four hundred large posters, but putting it in most of their publications free of charge.

A month later God brought another person who organizes a two-day Christian music festival every year. He, too, was very excited about this project and wanted to help us out. God also provided a radio announcer who created a professional 30-second ad for this concert without charging us anything.

Still, the profit projection was not looking a rosy as we originally thought. Faith was being stretched! Concert committee members were putting in lots of time visiting corporate sponsors, trying to sell tickets and spreading the word.

Yet God would continue to provide words of encouragement through people who heard about the concert. In July, a man and his wife approached two of our concert committee members who were selling tickets at an amusement park. As the conversation unfolded, she told them that God had given her a dream that she and her husband were supposed to bring Michael W. Smith to the Iowa Lakes area. A minute later this same couple pulled out their checkbook and donated $1,000 to the concert fund. The next day we learned that an anonymous donor had given $10,000 to the concert. God was at work!

About three weeks before the concert, we finally reached the break-even point. Anticipation was growing; ticket sales were increasing. But the weather forecasts were getting worse. Then God astounded everyone (including a professing atheist!) on the day of the concert by shielding our venue from the storms. Radar images throughout the day showed storm cells, one after another, approaching the venue site and then either changing course or disintegrating all together. It was truly a modern-day miracle!

Over 1,700 tickets were sold, despite the weather forecasts. Still, donations kept coming in throughout, and even after, the concert. We even received one donation from a local church plant that had organized a free barbeque outside the fence at the venue site and then walked around collecting donations from people who didn’t want to buy a ticket—all without telling us.

God was up to something much bigger than simply raising funds for a building project. And we got to be part of it!
To this day people all over the area are still talking about the concert. God was up to something much bigger than simply raising funds for a building project. And we got to be part of it!

As a pastor I learned some lessons from this event. The biggest is this: listen to the laity—and stay out of the way when they want to lead. God had already provided within the congregation everything needed to pull off this event: a former concert promoter, a computer whiz who loves to organize, professional food service workers and caterers to host the band and stage crew members, hard-working farmers and construction workers who constructed an inexpensive fence around the concert venue, an emcee who was a former radio announcer, two public health nurses and a PA to run the First-Aid station, and, to top it off, a former boxer and two black belts to be part of the security team.

Almost every person in the congregation came on the day of the concert to help out. Others, who were not members, also volunteered. God blessed everyone with enthusiasm (doing their job with joy) and, more importantly, the faith to step out and let God do something that only He could accomplish.

In the end, we added about $30,000 to the building fund. But many church members believe this was no longer about the finances. God was doing something much bigger in our hearts—and in the hearts of people throughout the region. Many people have been inspired with the thought that if a little country church could do something that big . . . why can’t we? Don’t close the door before giving God a chance! His plans may be way bigger than yours.

**Endnotes**

Gospel Power Overcomes Barriers

Miriam Carter

Abstract: This reflection paper is an attempt to share my struggle in figuring out how God is working in my life and how I can relinquish my efforts to control my life. This is a real struggle because there are so many things, like worries, work challenges, family problems, and even successes, that draw attention to me and my wanting to be in control. I have looked at the whole package of Barnabas and Saul being set apart and then released for mission as a model of the sending and the going. Then the Centurion is such an example of faith in the power of Jesus. The purpose of this article is to help others to see Jesus, to go to Him, and then to be released for mission.

Reading and studying the Bible account of the centurion who wanted Jesus to heal his servant/slave made me take a good look at myself. At the same time, Lutheran Mission Matters announced the theme for this issue—“Released for Mission,” which is a good translation of Acts 13:1–3. I have been thinking about what this phrase can mean to a layperson like myself.

What does “Released for Mission” really mean? Who is and how is one released for mission?

I am on the foreign mission field. I have left my home and family to travel far away to a new culture with new strange foods. I have this all in order. I have been released for mission, right? Being on the foreign mission field has nothing to do with this statement other than it says where I am at this time. It gives my location.

Released for Mission is a state of mind. In whom do I trust? Do I worry about what I need to do? Am I proud and pat myself on the back for a success? Wherever I am, it is so easy to become bogged down in my own abilities. I think I can do something or I am afraid of trying something new or challenging. Each of us has

Miriam Carter is a retired, LCMS-trained elementary teacher. She has lived in several different countries with her husband when he taught in seminaries overseas. Even when in the United States where they spent twenty-five years in St. Paul, Minnesota, Miriam would try to work with refugees or immigrants to share Jesus and to help with English. Now this work has continued in Hong Kong where she and her husband are missionaries. Miriam is married to Richard and they have two children, Jeanette Dart and Nathan who have shared in cross-cultural work. miriam.carter@gmail.com

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God-given abilities that we can and should use. However, I think that the phrase “Released for Mission” does not mean looking at my abilities and what I can do. The focus cannot be on me. Someone rightly stated before we headed off to Hong Kong, “It is not about you!” It hurts my pride but it is so true and a good reminder.

In reality, I have to ask, “Where did I start going wrong?” So many things pull me in all directions. Some of these things are political questions, right liturgy, recognition on the foreign field, popularity, hurt feelings, worries about tasks, pain in our families, too many tasks, an unanswered prayer, etc. Amid all this chaos is the question, “In what are we grounded?”

In Luke 7:1–10, we are told that when the centurion heard about Jesus, he sent word to Jesus to heal his servant. Wow! The centurion heard of Jesus and went to Him for help. This is the foundation of the expression, “Released for Mission”: to hear about Jesus and to go to Him. There are probably many other things we can learn from this story in Luke 7, but I want to hang on to this special foundation. When we hear of Jesus, we are to go to Him. Jesus can’t be an after-thought but rather the starting point. We are all in the fast pace of today’s world and can very easily get caught up in busyness and many tasks. Who has time to be still and know that He is God?

How do we put Jesus first in our lives? How do we not get caught up in the many political factions, false pride, worries about loved ones, many tasks and deadlines? We are human, and there are troubles in families, in workplaces, and even in our churches.

How do we focus on Jesus as our power and force? Yes, we have been given many abilities. The centurion also was an important man. He had many men under him and gave orders that were followed. He was a powerful man. He still went to Jesus, though, because he recognized that Jesus had the power he needed. As lifelong Christians, do we still see the authority of Jesus? Do we recognize His power as what we need in our lives? Do we hear about Jesus and go to Him? We do hear about Jesus in church and in our Bible reading. What is my response? Do I run to Jesus and seek His authority and power in my life?

About my Bible reading—if I say that I read my Bible daily, many would consider this a very good thing. I also like to think it is a good thing. To be clear, the Word is powerful and so it can get in, even if I am distracted. To be honest, I have to admit that I have already read a chapter of the Bible one day, and then the next day I wonder if I had read that chapter. Now, it’s true that God can still use His Word even when I am distracted. Saying that though does not imply that the situation is good. Recently, I was at a presentation about how to hear God in Bible reading. It was

“It’s not about you!” . . . Jesus can’t be an after-thought but rather the starting point.

good to look at what I do and how it could be better. The first thing was to pray for
the Holy Spirit before reading. Then read the chapter, section, or even verse several
times to let something hit you as something meaningful for your life. (There was a
cautions not to get caught up in something that you don’t understand. Why did this
happen? Why is this different from another Gospel? These kinds of questions are for
research and are good in their place but not for listening to God in our lives.)

Personal Bible reading has a spiritual goal, not an academic goal.

When we are truly living in the authority and power of Jesus, then we can be
released for mission. It is not about me, but about Jesus. How do we do this? I think
everyone needs to find his or her own way.

For example, if I am checking off Bible
reading as one more task in my day, or if I do
one of my many tasks and later remember to
ask God to bless my efforts, Jesus is an after-
thought and not the foundation. These can be
used as guidelines to shake up the system.

When Jesus is the foundation of everything,
only then are we ready to be released for mission, whether it is in Hong Kong,
Africa, Chicago, or South Dakota.

So what could life be like when we are released for mission? My first thoughts
are that the outcome doesn’t matter when I am out of the picture. I don’t need the
success. The result is in God’s hands. This is very freeing. If I am going into a
project or decision and talking with God about it, trusting in Him, I know that He has
my back. I have heard this expression a lot lately, and it means much in a
relationship. When we trust in God, He has our back—through the process and into
the result. When I think of God’s having someone’s back, I think of Moses. God
wanted Moses to go and take His people out of Egypt to the Promised Land. God
showed Moses many ways how He would have his back, and yet in Exodus 4, after
God says again that He’s got it, Moses still shows a lack of trust: “Now go; I will
help you speak and will teach you what to say.” But Moses said, “Pardon your
servant, Lord. Please send someone else” (vv. 12–13). Moses did eventually go, but
this account also shows good conversations with God. To be released for mission, we
do need this time of conversation with God. For some of us we need more time in
prayer. We also may have relapses when we again try to be in control. God is there,
though, when He pushes us out of our comfort zone to work for Him.

My story includes my resistance to getting out of my comfort zone. When we
decided to go overseas after retirement, it was so that my husband would be able to
teach overseas and I would go along to take care of him and do some volunteering.
When we were asked to come to Hong Kong, I was told that I would also have to
work in a school. That was not part of my plan. I retired much sooner than my
husband and was doing just fine without a position of my own. When I prayed about

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this, I told God that if we were to make this move, He would have to give me what I needed to do the work. I felt very inadequate. I was put in a secondary school with eight hundred students and fifty teachers. It is a Cantonese school and most people don’t really want to speak English. It is a challenging situation. I am to help with the English and also share Jesus in a busy high school setting. It was out of my comfort zone, big time. I won’t say that I have made this move always with grace and confidence, but God has put me into this school and He is using me even when I flounder. I still have times when I am like Moses and ask, “Do I really have to do this?” but I am remembering to talk with God more. Being Released for Mission is ongoing. God has our back as we go out, releasing us to forget about ourselves and do things for God and others.

In closing, I would like to go back to the centurion. We hear about Jesus, we go to Him and are on the way into Mission. We are “Released for Mission.”

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Reviews


In this book, Michael Gorman builds on the results of his innovative research on Cruciformity: Paul’s Narrative Spirituality of the Cross (Eerdmans, 2009). Becoming the Gospel argues skillfully for connecting the church life of Christians directly with their daily living in God’s world. What is heard and taught in Christian congregations ought to motivate Christians actively to engage the world with the transforming power of the Gospel. Under divine ordinance, Christians embody the Gospel as they influence neighborhoods, communities, and the nation with the all-encompassing message of justice, peace, and love of God.

Gorman recapitulates the life and teachings of Jesus Christ as a launching pad for capturing the apostle Paul’s person and work as Christ’s missionary and minister, theologian, and author of the New Testament letters that bear his name—all within the first twenty years after Jesus’ resurrection and ascension. Paul’s compositions are invaluable and timeless, and they apply directly to the ministry and mission of the Church through the ages and generations. In his letters, Paul replays the Jesus story in concrete and contextual language that resonates with the situation and spirit of his readers, most of whom had become his partners in the Gospel.

Becoming the Gospel is the author’s way of inviting readers to participate in the mission of God, as did the first-century Christians, to make a difference among peoples and communities in the name of Jesus. He carefully walks them through each epistle of Paul to become acquainted with the mission direction in each of them. Paul’s letters bespeak a comprehensive vision for mission wherever Christians are placed as Christ’s witnesses. Christians must not merely believe the Gospel but become the Gospel and thereby advance the Gospel (297). They do so by participating in the very life and mission of God through proclamation, praxis, and even persecution. The challenges that today’s Christians may be going through predictably are the ones Paul’s letters address, if only they are to be dealt with carefully and cautiously as the emerging situations dictate.

If the Gospel is the “greater unifier of human beings” (195), then the Church’s mission needs to be holistic, “the whole, the essence of the church’s existence” (53), as opposed to, for example, a small line item in the congregation’s budget. Such a perspective behooves the Church to reform itself as an agent of peacemaking, inclusive of all people groups that otherwise may be in conflict in their life in the world. The Church needs to become a sanctuary on which all may converge, where reconciliation might take effect in concentric circles, beginning with the Church itself, and extending to the homes, the community, the nation, and the wide world.
Though countercultural and constantly held in tension, the Church’s life in the world must be inextricably connected to practical human virtues enabled by the Holy Spirit, such as faithfulness, love and peace, reconciliation, and righteousness (18, 146). This is God’s design for His new creation held together in Christ as a Spirit-empowered multicultural community where the love of God spills over in all directions in actions of love, peace, and justice.

The people of God embody the Gospel, inextricably connected to the divine traits and the practice of human virtues as they live the Gospel in concrete life situations. They practice gift-giving to meet the needs of others. As a demonstration of the generous justice of God, Paul wants Christians to express justification in a “harvest of [their] justice” (252, citing such passages like 1 Cor 9:10), thus making justification a hands-on experience in daily life. As the community of God’s justified people, the Church as God’s instrument on earth must address and repair the current human condition of injustice and violence and serve the world as agents of liberation, peace, reconciliation, and transformation (225).

_Becoming the Gospel_ can become an instrument for transforming peoples and cultures in today’s postcolonial and post-missionary context, building a case for it on the cross of Christ that has disarmed and triumphed over the forces of evil that enslave humankind (e.g., Col 2:15). This volume offers a cruciform God who is at work, informing His people of a cross-centered spirituality. Gorman characterizes such endeavor as the “cruciform communal theosis.” “Theosis” for Gorman is a rhetorical device that embellishes the inestimable ramifications of justification relative to God’s activities gearing toward a new creation (294). For Gorman, the new creation is the doctrine on which the Church’s mission stands or falls, as it were.

Understandably, Lutheran readers may be suspicious of Gorman’s advocating “theosis.” One reason is the much-discussed proposal of the so-called “Finnish School,” which described justification in terms of “theosis.” My colleague, William Schumacher, has already published a book-length study and critique of the theosis theology of Finnish Lutherans in _Who Do I Say That You Are?: Anthropology and the Theology of Theosis in the Finnish School of Tuomo Mannermaa_ (Wipf and Stock, 2010). But Gorman speaks about “theosis” to propose a way to understand sanctification, not justification, just as “becoming the Gospel” is not a replacement for “preaching the Gospel” but rather a concrete proposal for evangelism. Once again, the term, “theosis,” for Gorman, is about the ramifications of justification; in Lutheran jargon, these ramifications comprise our “sanctification.” Thus, it may be helpful to see Gorman as proposing a way to embrace the model of Paul as in his directing the followers of Jesus to “imitate me as I imitate Christ” and praying for his fellow believers that he was groaning as if in birth-pains until Christ be formed in them (cf. 1 Cor 4:16; Gal 4:19).
Gorman’s work is an encouragement for Christians to participate in activities that effect social transformation. Lutherans who study this book must exercise caution to distinguish mystical living from a life of sanctification guided by the crucified and risen Lord. God’s redeemed serve fellow human beings not as they ought, but as they are able, empowered by the Gospel of Christ. The book, however, helps Lutherans wisely engage contemporary American culture.

_Becoming the Gospel_ is part of a series of Eerdmans publications that aims “to foster the missional encounter of the gospel with North American culture” (inside cover). Interpreting the Gospel contextually is a challenge that can never be overworked! Hurdles of thistles and thorns are aplenty in this field that is yet being ploughed.

Victor Raj


Zondervan has presented to readers a compendium of _Four Views on the Church’s Mission_ in their familiar Point-Counterpoint format. These views are represented by four veterans in the mission circle hailing from three denominational backgrounds: two Presbyterians, one Anglican, and one Baptist.

Jonathan Leeman, Christopher Wright, John Franke, and Peter Leithart have each written a chapter respectively on Soteriological Mission, Participatory Mission, Contextual Mission, and Sacramental Mission. The descriptive subtitles of each chapter indicate that “soteriological mission” bespeaks the mission of redemption, “participatory mission” entails the mission of God’s people revealed in the whole Bible story, “contextual mission” embodies bearing witness to the ends of the earth, and “sacramental mission” showcases an ecumenical and political missiology. In each instance, the reader will notice the author’s struggle to locate within the mission of God key elements, such as corporate worship, liturgy, sacraments, rituals, care for creation, contextualization, social justice, and the Christian’s socioeconomic and political engagement with the community.

By design, the authors dialogue, and, at times, argue with one another on issues they think are vital for the missional life of the Church in their attempt to cast a comprehensive missional vision for today’s Church. Each essayist presents his thesis at length, and the other three contributors register their responses individually by means of critical reflection and cross-firing. The book’s dialogical format keeps the reader engaged fully with the entire conversation, at least as long as the reader remains cognizant that the authors are demonstrating their positions as biblically founded and faithfully derived from the faith traditions to which they belong.
Editor Joel Sexton’s introductory, as well as concluding, remarks on “recalibrating a church for mission” puts the contributions in perspective: How do Christians collectively engage in a common mission without sacrificing their intrinsically unique individual identities? The reader finds in these pages a skillful blending of what was once considered two extremes in Christian theology, that is, the Social Gospel and evangelicalism. Yet, by default, the roads they travel must veer off in different directions.

How the kingdom of God and the mission of the Church correlate is the question this volume addresses, from four different viewpoints. The authors and the editor acknowledge that they are tackling contemporary missional opportunities for Christians in North America; and they do not claim to have exhausted all issues relative to mission, such as the racial, gender, and multicultural challenges that are lurking within American Christendom. Interestingly, however, the examples they champion are primarily from the majority world to which they have been connected either as missionaries, mission facilitators, and/or theological educators.

This reviewer maintains that international and cross-cultural experience and its sensitivities are crucial for ministers of the Gospel whose calling it is to serve the Church and the contemporary world in the name of Jesus Christ. This volume reiterates that conviction, as arguably the contributors indeed are building further on some of the seminal missional ideas of Lesslie Newbigin on the topic. Newbigin differentiated the ministry dimension and ministry intention of the Church. “Ministry dimension” consists of the people of God serving Christ, one another, and society in multiple ways, while “ministry intention” assumes specific forms, callings, and orders of ministry that Christians undertake, especially outside the Church.

A seasoned missionary endowed with the richness of decades-long churchmanship overseas and the inspiration behind the missional think tank in the West that bears his name, Newbigin proposed a mission-shaped theology that emerges from an ongoing interaction among the Gospel, cultures, and the Church throughout the world. Genuine theologizing must account for the contextual realities of the time and validate the local, indigenous character of all theologies, insofar as they remain faithful to the biblical story. Missional interpretation must therefore engage, involve, and interlock indigenous Christians in the interpretive process, giving due consideration to their worldviews and the varieties of expressing the one true faith. Doubtless, Christians from other cultures read and engage biblical texts in different ways that may surprise some Christians who may be attuned to traditional and stereotypical ways, while a new theology may be emerging from that process.

This book is a challenge for Lutherans to do their missional homework more vigorously and creatively. True, in the pages of this journal we are pursuing a comprehensive vision for mission in the twenty-first century. The insights and inferences in this book are incentives for Lutherans to work further along in the
mission of God with the wisdom that is contained in the Lutheran tradition. For example, Christopher Wright has put forward a good takeaway for Lutherans, as he calls for “a mission-centered theology of the cross and a cross-centered theology of our mission” (74), a point that needs the careful unpacking that Lutherans can do especially well. This book invites our readers to work very hard at this important assignment with intentionality.

Victor Raj
“Faithful in Mission: A look at the church in America in light of Matthew 25:14–30” is the theme of the Spring 2019 issue of Lutheran Mission Matters. A critical look at the culture of twenty-first century America will prove there has been a decline of “faithfulness” in friendships, in marriages, in politics, and in religion. What has that lack of being faithful done to the broader culture? Why has it occurred?

A concomitant issue is why so many who were brought into Christ’s kingdom through water and the Word proved to be so unfaithful. We ask the question in the light of the loss of millions of souls from Christian denominations in America. There is a richness in Scripture to be mined about faithfulness, and unfaithfulness and covering all of our trespasses with the eternal faithfulness of a loving God.

We ask you to focus on Jesus’ teaching on faithfulness from the background of the three stewards in Matthew 25:14–30; the Lord does not say to the first two stewards, “Well done good and ‘successful’ steward,” but He calls them “faithful.” The third steward is condemned because he buried what his Lord had given him, and had no return. We are looking for articles that treat the text from exegetical, systematic, historical, and missiological points of view.

The question begs to be asked, “Has the church in America, which for almost fifty years has been losing more members than it has won for Jesus been unfaithful? Are we like the third servant in the text?” As a result of his unfaithfulness he lost even what he had, lost it all, and more. A case could be made that the American church has been given much more than one talent—more than three talents, but is in the process of losing them. Has the church in America been that third, unfaithful, steward? Is now the time for repentance? And what would repentance look like?

LMM articles are generally about 3,000 words in length, although longer and shorter articles will be considered. LMM includes space for academic research and for personal encounter in mission. For good reasons the desired deadline of March 15 is negotiable. More can be learned at https://www.lsfm.global/papers.html.

Attention to the theme in any particular issues does not prevent, space permitting, attention to other mission matters. Please let us know of your interest in this publishing effort. Send your comments and questions to the editor of the journal, Dr. Victor Raj (lsfmissiology@gmail.com).
A Note to Contributors

We welcome your participation in contributing to Lutheran Mission Matters. Please observe the following guidelines for submission of manuscripts.

Lutheran Mission Matters publishes studies of missiological issues under discussion in Christian circles across the world. Exegetical, biblical, theological, historical, and practical dimensions of the apostolic mission of the church are explored in these pages. (See the mission statement below.) While issues often focus on a theme, the editorial committee encourages and appreciates submissions of articles on any missiological topic.

Contributors can familiarize themselves with previous issues of Missio Apostolica and Lutheran Mission Matters at the Lutheran Society for Missiology’s website (https://lsfm.global). Click on the Publications link to view PDFs of previous issues.

Book reviews: LSFM also welcomes book reviews. Submit reviews of no more than 500 words. E-mail Dr. Joel Okamoto (lsfmissiology@gmail.com) if interested in writing a review.

Mission Statement

Lutheran Mission Matters serves as an international Lutheran forum for the exchange of ideas and discussion of issues related to proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus Christ globally.

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