

Lutheran Mission Matters

In summer 2018, authors of the article, "A More Hopeful Future" e-mailed this question to over 500 individuals throughout the LCMS.

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, Districts and congregation pastors and lay leaders, with the aid of God the Holy Spirit, need to consider taking.

Following below are the responses received, slightly redacted to remove names and identifiable references, except to such as are in the public domain.

Yes, Individuals and congregations can focus on the people who live close to the aging city churches.

No, we see the hand-writing on the wall and must accept reality of the times.

When I read this I wonder, but we pray for the spirit of Ablaze to return and the numbers of people gathered will increase greatly.

Absent Increased communication and visibility in addressing societal issues and the need for Christ through whom salvation is alone possible, a hostile media will continue in its attack and onslaught further discouraging the lost and closing eyes and ears of those in greatest need. We, and our congregations, need not be ashamed of Christ and prepared to proclaim grace from the rooftops, lest the rock cry out instead. All glory and praise be to Christ!

Release congregations which are growing to continue the work the Lord is blessing rather than block and criticize their doctrine. Note a difference between doctrine and practice!

Engage community

Social ministry in the neighborhood of the church. Being open and welcoming to all who enter the church.

Decision by indecision is not only a logical fallacy, it is a shirking of the mandate of Jesus to make disciples. As the population increases and as the number of unchurched people grows, it is unconscionable to “plan” for decline. With the brutal facts before us, we need to use the gifts and identity God has entrusted to us to meet this 21st century challenge with a 21st century Biblical vision for our church. Perhaps we need to repent, change and use our theological prowess to learn from the One who teaches us His paths.

The Lutheran youth do not stay Lutheran. I imagine that is the biggest part of the problem. Why? Because atheist temples, our schools and colleges, evangelize them so thoroughly and we do nothing to block or counteract it. They talk science and we talk stories. They have days on end and we have at best a couple of hours a week. Steps to counteract this: 1. Take on Darwinism. it is very easily debunked. Genesis is correct. 2. Talk Truth in Bible classes and sermons. Those pastors that do have growing churches. That is take on abortion, so-called gay marriage, not in an unkind way in a loving way with compassion. COURAGE is necessary!

More pastors. 1. Stop requiring 4 years education at the atheist temples. The expense and debt that results is ridiculous! The pastors could have their seminary training and some years of mission experience until they can be interns and pastors. How much education do the pastors of huge churches have. The best actually are active in missions right in their neighborhoods.

Several decades ago an entity called Crossings introduced me to the concept of Gospel Platzregen and after almost 50 years in the ministry I am of the opinion that pastors, districts, and the Synod are trying to use a corporate business model to essentially “put butts in the seats.” Such a model will never work because as the concept of Gospel Platzregen demonstrates the Holy Spirit may very well have passed us by and moved on to more fruitful ground and no amount of marketing and other strategies will make a difference. So what would I do and what should we do: the answer is simple: continue to preach the Gospel and

administer the sacraments and give thanks that the Holy Spirit will work thorough our efforts in spite of us. All we have to do is give thanks when he does. Just do a study of church history and you will be reminded again and again the truth of this idea.

You mention God the Holy Spirit twice. May we keep faithful to God's Word but teach and encourage empowerment by the Holy Spirit. Our teachings are strong on the Holy Spirit's work to convert and keep us in the faith but weak on the filling and empowering for reaching. While every Christian has the Holy Spirit there is plenty to teach about the Spirit's power for the Spirit's work. Realize that God does stuff to reach people that may not fit in our tidy systematic theology boxes. (See Acts)

Focus on faith in the heart instead of assuming all who are physically baptized are magically solid Children of God. (Luther was baptized as a baby, but was there true faith in his heart when he was striving with works?). Teach the means of grace as means not ends. Be a church body of people certain of salvation through personal faith in Jesus Christ as the eternal God who came in the flesh to make full payment for our sin. Be people alive in relationship with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Personal testimonies of converts could be shared with emphasis in congregations and all publications. Focus on prayer for unbelievers and reaching them as much or more than we pray for earthly issues. Time together sharing about witnessing conversations, training and discussions on how to effectively reach people with the Gospel more than discussing the business and budget of the organization. Truly devote ourselves to seeking God's leading for outreach.

Repent of motivations for outreach trying to save congregations or a church body and reach out as Christians to bring the saving Gospel to the lost. Love people and especially love Jesus more than our buildings and institutions.

Emphasis being Christian witnesses and servants in the home and community. Recognize people who are being Christ like in day to day life and applaud them even more than service to church institutions.

STOP talking about being German and focus on being Christian. Our churches should be a place where ethnicity is not an issue and our church body a place where having certain last names does not bestow favor.

Focus on presenting the clear Gospel of Jesus Christ in each worship service in the language people understand. Remove unnecessary ecclesiastical clutter than has great meaning but confuses the visitor. Become a people who are recognizably engaging body, mind and soul in worship and praise to God.

1. Prioritize mission and outreach
 - a) in pastoral training
 - b) in congregational gatherings
 - c) in lay leadership development
 - d) in resource usage
2. Encourage and allow diverse approaches to mission and outreach
3. Set goals locally regionally nationally that are accountable and demonstrable
4. Measure and evaluate
5. Prayer - promote and develop ministries of prayer

For the LC-MS to grow we need an active membership. To have an active membership we need to stop dividing body and soul. Faith is not only thought but involves the whole human. The gift of faith involves action. First God's action in creating faith and then our involvement in God's wanting all people to come to the knowledge of the truth. We must push against the Gnosticism that is so prevalent.

Someone once said "Unless I am convinced by the word of God" he would not change his position. My point, we need to get back to basics regarding the mission of the church - in both Bible study and Gospel proclamation from the pulpit regarding God's mission and the church's role in that mission. We have been captured by the consumer philosophy of "what's in it for me" and lost the call of God to each of the baptized to be his agents in the on-going mission,

"Both the hummingbird and the vulture fly over our nation's deserts. All vultures see is rotting meat, because that is what they look for. They thrive on that diet. But hummingbirds ignore the smelly flesh of dead animals. Instead, they look for the colorful blossoms of desert plants. The vultures live on what was. They live in the past. They fill themselves with what is dead and gone. But hummingbirds live on what is. They seek a new life. They fill themselves with freshness and life. Each bird finds what it is looking for. We all do." Steve Goodier, Quote Magazine, in *Reader's Digest*, May 1990.

It is so easy in the church to focus on what is dead and dying and to feast off that diet. It is easy for our LCMS churches to see the declines in attendance and income and become defeated by what they see. You begin to look around, and all you see is what was. There is often so much that is not working around us that the small church loses sight of the blossoms. I pray that we can point our people to the blossoms, to what can be, to desire to seek a new life cycle for our ministries, our districts, our denomination. In doing so, we can change the perspective of our congregations.

The problem with our declining churches is not that the Word of God has lost its effectiveness. It has the same power to save today, in this culture, as it has through all eras of human history. The church is struggling to adapt. Its strategies outdated. God's unchanging Word has the power to meet these new challenges. It still brings those people outside of God's grace into a saving relationship with Jesus. We have good, faithful, doctrinally sound congregations carrying out their mission. We have gifted, caring, mission-minded pastors, who have good intentions but lacking the knowledge and expertise to adapt. Church leaders and pastors have seen the ship hit the iceberg. They feel helpless to stop the boat from sinking or save the scared and frightened passengers. What Synod leadership is pick up on are some warnings signs our congregations may be taking on water. What they lack is any real sustainable ideas to combat that.

Too Many of our churches have become internally not outwardly focused.
There is concern over how we will continue/thrive.
The majority of meeting time is on budget issues or control.

We have reduced ministry to transactional relationships.

I served the majority of my parish ministry in urban at-risk congregations. I recognize the signs. I understand the fear that drives the meetings. I dealt with the frustration and asked the uncomfortable questions. There were several times when our congregation reached the breaking point. They had the mindset of when all else fails, point the finger of blame at the pastor. As groups struggle with diminishing attendance. Struggle with declining church offerings. As the population ages, the stress level rises from a warning yellow to crisis red. As the issues become, more intense the usual tendency is to double failing efforts. These problems focus the leaders even more intensely inward. Internal questions such as How do we get more people and more money? How do we get members to grow deeper in their commitment? We know that our members are overtaxed and overly committed. But we need to demand even more, or we will not survive. So we are forced to do a guilt-ridden stewardship campaign. Here we reminded the faithful of how much Christ gave up for them. That should move them. That is a misuse of Law/Gospel preaching and is entirely ineffective. When used the law in this manner it does not motivate, it only condemns. The thinking is if we let members know how dire our situation is maybe we can raise enough funds to keep things going a little longer.

Another tack is to go after the lost inactive members. So we spend precious time, and the low energy our people have on going after people who have written off the church for whatever reason long ago. The success rate on this is less than ten percent. We invest all our time and energy on internal solutions. Meanwhile, the church keeps taking on water, and the passengers become even more restless and frightened, and the ship keeps sinking.

Would it be better to get our churches focus their time and energy on those who are outside their walls? Who don't have a history with them? Who as Jesus described as sheep without a shepherd? Imagine getting back to the reason the LCMS and its congregations were founded to reach those far from God?

You have to start small because it has been a long time for far too many. Asking the question: What can do that by using your existing ministries but doing things like this:

Sing at Nursing Home > Build relationships with residents
Feed my starving children > Interview local food shelf about local needs
Jump Rope/Hearts > Have EMT and first responders share how faith factors into their work
Sister schools > Share testimonies with students from other schools
Junior High > Bring back Freshman to discuss faith challenges
Church has left the building > do good to the neighbors around you, rake leaves, pick up trash, have a block party, do mercy ministry.

It is not too late but we have to change the conversation now! We are only taking away the spirit of our members not inspiring them.

Demographic reports identify what the current situation is and based on past studies seeks to project future trends. They provide a snap shot of today and a history of yesterday.

Many congregations work the same way when it comes to financial planning and budget projections. In spite of these projections which prophecy a congregation will be out of financial resources in a specifically projected time God has always provided for what was needed, often not before. God receives all the glory.

As a District Mission Exec, I approach congregations and new missions the same way. Looking and identifying the culture of the congregation, the context in which that ministry is established or will be established, acknowledge the resources we have currently and looking for God's provision as we move forward into the future that God has in heart. God gets all the glory.

I acknowledge our Synod's due diligence in examining the current demographics of our Synod and Districts. As a corporate entity I do think this is both responsible and needed. But I entrust myself and my service in God's kingdom to Him, yet will I trust in the Lord.

I invite you to check out the following link:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X__9r9nEN7I&feature=youtu.be

This endeavor was supported by our District in convention by 93%. There is momentum building and many congregations have already started it ahead of the suggested Sept 1st start date.

Many doing little accomplishing great things.

Much less emphasis on liturgy and all sorts of bowing etc. and more informality would be more appealing in modern society.

I believe we are living in an age that is anti-denominational. People gravitate to communities in which they find acceptance and unbiased love. The edicts or programs from national or regional church body offices are basically irrelevant to them. People are hungry for the unconditional love of Christ. They need to hear regularly, "All are welcome and none are turned away."

A much more hopeful future comes from the Author of Hope Himself - God has a vision for His Church and while congregations and denominations may decline, Jesus has promised that He will build His Church and that the gates of hell will not prevent that. In fact, God will use His Church, His people, to tear down the gates of hell to release those who are held captive to sin, death, despair, depression, addiction and whatever else holds people in Satan's chains. Jesus Himself announced it in His first recorded sermon, Luke 4. Steps to the wholeness and mission life that God intends include parents discipling their children (family devotions are a good start), using our Lutheran schools as mission training centers - focusing children, parents, congregations on active discipleship, living and sharing God's gifts in their daily lives and activities. Congregations will see themselves not only as a "place" for Sunday Worship and a few other religious activities, but as the locus for engaging people in their Vocation - namely to be witnesses (Acts 1:8) - training, deploying, discussing/mentoring and cheering them on. Districts will focus on engaging leaders in the mission of God and Denominational leadership will do the same - providing platforms for those who are active in mission to share their stories and practices with others. Seminaries will train pastors who fully understand and are committed to God's mission. Each church member, from pastors to lay leaders, to grandparents, parents and children will see himself or herself as a missionary servant, confident and ready to live, speak, and model the Good News of Jesus in their stations of life. I truly believe that the LCMS needs a heart-transplant, exchanging consumeristic, institutional, hearts for God's own heart - which seeks and saves the lost. The Means of Grace are means - not ends, and are the tools God has given to accomplish the revitalization needed (Matthew 28:18-20). I don't think this is anything new... but I think this is the movement that the Holy Spirit will use in this denomination - or any other - to accomplish His purposes.

The thought that ran through my mind was, "why should we let the projections of the Barna Associates" determine our outlook. Let us look rather to see who our Lord is and what He has done for us, and let that influence us. Because of what He has done, we are part of the priesthood of all believers. It is a corporate concept, a collective noun, as virtually all of the

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nouns describing the church are. Since that is so, we must begin seeking to incorporate the whole Synod into the decision-making, into the witnessing, serving, and interceding. Let's not push one agenda over another; rather let the Lord's mission guide us. Let's have the floor committees in our convention represent the diversity of perspectives we have in our church body, fostering a sense of inclusion, rather than pushing only one way of carrying out the Lord's work. By having Synod leaders including those who hold a somewhat different perspective than they, we can foster a sense of working together as His people. Let's admit that we are living in a pagan society; evangelizing will likely be taking more time than earlier!

unsure

- (1.) Considering what is going on in the public-school system these days, I would suggest that the Synod consider promoting parochial school systems as a solution for those parents that are looking for a better education for their children. This would, undoubtedly, mean more financial support from Synod in order to allow more outreach to those living in less advantageous circumstances. Education at all levels should be priority for the Synod.
- (2.) Allow women to be full partners, with the exception of the pastoral office, in congregational offices and chancel participation i.e. presidents/leaders of congregations, consecrated communion service, elders.

Consider the number of up and coming young leaders in our church and not just listen to them but put them in positions of leadership within our church. Seek out those places that are starting new ministries and new congregations. Invest in new workers in new models delivering the great message of hope that we have. I see it happening locally in circuits and congregations that are focused on reaching the lost and aren't afraid to get a little messy knowing that you will get messy if you are reaching people who are far from Jesus. Invest heavily in leaders whose cultural background is not the majority of our synod.

First of all, I reject the conclusion. Period. If we want to talk demographics, then let's recognize that our nation will soon be a nation of minorities. There is no one size fits all answer to the LCMS shift from our current demographic to becoming a church of minorities; but I believe it's God's vision for His Church. . . and a sign (a good one at that) of the return of Christ. For the LCMS I believe it begins with celebrating and inspiring more churches to welcome new immigrants to form communities alongside of their own. The most promising move I see is

when the tribe multiplies and the 1.5 generation youth connect with their peers in multi-ethnic communities. One out of every four births today in the US is to a foreign-born mother and that demographic is increasing. The challenge we have is not merely crossing cultures, I believe it recognizing leaders among those children and immigrants, discipling them, and empowering them for ministry. Many of them won't need to be Western-style educated pastors. We need simple processes that don't presume leaders must be career clergy. We need evangelists, elders, men and women who make disciples.

I am not at all confident that the LCMS will “get it”, nor do I believe she is capable of doing so. The LCMS was founded on a dysfunctional family system and that system remains. I became a Lutheran as an adult, from Roman Catholicism. Not knowing that there were different “flavors” of Lutheran, I just happened to join an LCMS church. I found a great parish and thrived, to the point of entering the Holy Ministry through an excellent apprenticeship, much self-study, a DMin and Colloquy Committee. I was a Vatican II Liturgy practitioner with emotion and great sincerity. I endured numerous attacks from the “Confessionals” of our Synod but endured. I have now retired after serving as a worker/priest.

I share this to illustrate a point: The split in culture in our Synod are part of our dysfunctional family system. The now hyper-liturgical, theologically rigid “confessionals” and the “missionals” represent two distinctly different models for reaching people with the Gospel. While the “missionals” have often become what someone called “Evangelicals with sacraments”, this illustrates the extreme attempts to reach folks while being willing to sacrifice whatever Lutheran distinctives are useful and effective in sharing the Gospel.

Unfortunately, Seminex shows us what happens to Lutherans who look to success rather than faithfulness: they let personality, rigidity, and stereotyping to form extreme factions and then split. The LCMS is headed for the same fate because I am convinced that the Synod is not systemically capable of compromise and cannot see beyond rigid extremes. I see no way for this Synod to move beyond the historically extreme factionalism that has plagued her history since Perry County. We are doomed to oblivion. . . . and I haven't even gotten into the current American postmodern culture that has rejected institutions in favor of an internet fueled individualism. . . . Whatever happens to this little speck in the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church, Christ will return to end this thing called time and we shall all be changed in an instant and return to the eternal life in a new heaven and earth as we were originally intended to be! Come, Lord Jesus!

I, too, have observed a sour, almost depressed outlook by many pastors, leaders, and congregational members within the LCMS. It seems that many people have come to believe that the decline within many congregations is more than just expected. . . it is actually acceptable. It is, in their mind, acceptable because despite the decline, “we stayed true to the

historic Church.” I wholeheartedly disagree. Let me explain in more detail.

It is well-accepted within LCMS circles that the culture has moved away from the ‘churched’ culture we enjoyed 60+ years ago. The question before us is this: “Who will build the bridge between the Church and the culture?” It is my observation that the growing polarity within the LCMS has resulted from differing answers to this question. Those who say that it is the Church’s responsibility to build the bridge to the culture (i.e. to incarnate the gospel in a new culture) tend to be more adaptive to the culture, which requires flexibility and forsaking some of our traditional forms of worship. Those who resist changing forms of worship expect the culture to build the bridge toward the Church, saying that it is our ‘duty’ to maintain the historic roots of our Church (e.g. the liturgy, vestments, etc.). The former group steps into the uncharted waters of an ever-changing culture, creating new connections to the current culture, while the latter group retreats to the ‘safety’ of history and tradition, becoming even more removed and distant from the current culture. The former group is willing to lose the ‘authority’ of the Office of Ministry in the culture at large and in so doing finds greater receptivity and respect, while the latter retreats to the enclave of the Office of Ministry and as a result experiences a greater loss of respect and authority from the culture at large.

In summary, then, both sides of the polarity within the LCMS desire to be missional and to connect Christ to the culture (i.e. to rebuild a bridge). . . but the difference in practice and in outlook results from a different understanding of where the responsibility lies when it comes to bridge-building.

In my view, the Church’s God-given mission is to incarnate the unchanging Gospel message and the truths of our doctrine in culturally-appropriate ways. We flex where we can, knowing that the Church’s practice has changed over time. More importantly, we flex knowing that the power of God resides in His Word alone and not in the cultural traditions that the Church has bound to His Word.

With that understanding, then, the LCMS is at the cusp of the greatest mission opportunity in our nation than we’ve ever experienced. I am not addressing here concrete steps in mission and outreach that can be taken, but instead addressing the mindset that will help us to be more intentional and effective in mission and outreach as we step into our future. Concrete steps are location- and culture-specific and cannot be prescribed in detail by those outside of that culture. Having the right mindset, though, will drive pastors, leader, and congregations to seek the Holy Spirit’s direction.

Equip and release the laity as the holy priesthood. Develop an attitude of “yes” rather than control. We also need to intentionally partner with ethnic Christian communities seeking men and women of peace who will better enable us to become much the diverse.

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Be creative and energetic in translating the Gospel into language that the post-church culture can understand. The Gospel still works. . . the scripture is still the Word from God. . . the Spirit of God is still calling people into faith and gathering them in communities. . . it is just happening differently these days.

There is a more hopeful future if we focus outward. We need to allow diversity of our country reflect in our membership. This should include openness to varied styles of worship and music. It should include all irregardless of ethnicity, gender, social class.

The reports delivered to districts which address the decline has offered answers to mitigate the decline based on two items: retain the baptized/confirmed, and focus on families. Instead, the focus needs to be on mission and evangelism from our top leadership, not keeping our own. To reverse the decline in the church, let's begin to see the demographic right outside the doors of the church. And the demographic details show that there is a harvest outside of our own demographic - and not just referencing immigrants or non-white. The white population in our congregations is declining - our normal, typical target group - and we have not focused on mission and evangelism to those who are even most like us. And when we do, we find they are no longer like us anymore - at least as it relates to assumptions about faith and eternity and absolute truth and morality. We also need to redefine/consider the definition of church - especially as it relates to size required to be considered congregation, as well as those who are "necessary" to be called to lead that group in order for it to be considered congregation. The hyper clericalism present in our synod inhibits the ability of congregations to be creative and innovative. The presence of the Word and Sacraments is non-negotiable. But several of the other marks might be debated.

Let us begin with repentance. Repentance always precedes revival. Then let us pray that God would allow us to be part of his redemptive story in the lives of the people all around us. I believe the issue is one of an attitude of prideful superiority toward other Christians who are "not doing it right." This disrupts the unity we have in Christ and thwarts our witness to the world. Rather than pointing fingers, we must in humility point out error and point people to Jesus. It starts with humble, repentant, fervent prayer for the Lord of the Harvest to send people into the harvest. We don't need to study how to do it. We need to invite people to come and receive the living water without price.

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Let's lift up disciples who are connecting with their communities, making heroes of them, and urging them to bring others along in their connecting ministries and mission efforts. I believe the airing of the challenges before us is a good thing. We need to "face the brutal facts." We need, also, to hold onto hope. This is the Stockdale Paradox. When it's all said and done, I believe our only hope is that God would use us as his servants and instruments of redemption. We must pray. Let's have a focused season of prayer: Repenting of our failure to respond to the opportunities God is constantly putting before us. Repenting of our fractured unity and our prideful arrogance. Praying for God's favor and a movement of his Holy Spirit in our hearts. Praying for workers (all of God's people) to be workers sent into the harvest. Praying for courage to speak when we need to speak. Praying for discernment to listen when we need to listen. Praying for the privilege to be part of God's redemptive work in our communities.

Please what are the reasons given for this drastic loss of membership? Answers to those questions could help, trusting the Holy Spirit's guidance and also trusting that the mission is the Lord's (missio Dei).

I just returned from a wonderful weekend looking at the world-wide outreach ministry of Lutheran Hour Ministries. Over 100 million people each week are hearing about Jesus through their efforts. Partnerships with Barna Research and Inter Varsity Press, digital outreach to the next generation through the THRED Facebook community, launching ministry initiatives overseas, and the list goes on. They encourage a focus that reflects our Lord's - not on self but on the lost. Not on "church" as an end but as a means. Not on numbers but on people. The future is bright because we have a God of grace that has called us, fit us together, and filled us with Himself (1 Peter 2:5-12). Let's learn to follow our leader and Lord - and encourage other like-minded believers to do the same.

I think that our Seminaries need to be teaching about outreach as a required course. We have forgotten the basic tenets that churches exist "to feed the found" and "to seek and to save the lost."

We must get past the idea that everything that goes wrong is what God designed.

Outreach does not take place in the church building at a church service.
Try to make our leaders understand leaving the building to find the lost is not a sin.

Yes! There is a more hopeful future IF most of us come to believe that the church is not the mission, but is rather the means for accomplishing God's mission.

Since the founding of the synod, the emphasis in foreign mission work has been going into an area never expecting to discover German Lutherans waiting for a church. Quite the opposite is true in domestic work which is seldom called mission work, but as you state in the question "church planting."

So, what is the difference? Mission is seeking the lost. Church planting is gathering the found and as has been oft mentioned, the boats from Germany have stopped coming.

What would it take to see the USA as a mission field, more than just saying it?

Develop an understanding of missionaries in the US as more than church planters.

See the entire family as a mission team as we do with overseas missionaries where the wife and children are called missionaries as well with associated perks. My daughters were babysitters for the home meetings and early worship in each of the churches I started but were never called missionaries after all I was the church planter.

Develop a cadre of domestic missionaries whose purpose would be to reach the lost. This would involve identifying candidates as is done with the overseas. These candidates would be identified by passion and natural skills, not just "trained" to be church planters.

These missionaries, regardless of gender or education level, would be sent by the seminary, or while there are still, a district or board to open a new area, location or people group, and would move on to a new field. This is what I wanted to do in my first call, but was told, "nobody wants to do that!" To which I responded, "have you considered Paul?" Paul should serve as the model, example, of what we need as domestic missionaries.

In regards to revitalization

Do not assume the members have the slightest idea why they are there. Do not assume there is any interest in reaching the lost. Because most of our congregations were formed by gathering the found, they are there because they are Lutheran. At my last call, in the interview, I ask why were they there? Blank stares. Then I asked, if you continue going the way you are going, where will you be in ten years? Closed was the answer.

Do not assume that a missionary was involved. Many of our new churches were self-starters. A group would gather, then call on the district to send them a pastor and it did and sent them money. Of course, being a mission meant getting money, not reaching the lost.

Start revitalization with rebirth. You can't revitalize the dead, but the dead can be reborn. Start

with why are they there. Start with why Christ died. Start with we are all beggars that can show others where the bread is.

Start with really long vision. The average congregation lasts 80 years because the average member lasts 80 years. Most people don't plan beyond their lifespan. Toyota has a 400-year vision. What would happen if we envision what our grandchildren would do?

"The current efforts in evangelism, church planting and revitalization" would have to be consigned to the dust bin of history and we would need to start over in all three areas so those for whom Christ died would be more important than the organization.

That might be what the future would look like.

Since we have, without a doubt the best theology and theological education bar none, it may be that our future would be in this area. Imagine, infecting Christianity around the world with LCMS understanding of Word and Sacrament. Could it be that we would be a "legacy denomination" in which we would build a financial base without a national structure? This base would allow us to raise up missionaries who would go out and do the work of the Lord without annual reports, districts etc.

Yes, they would have to raise their own support but so do our overseas missionaries. There would be no district support. They would have to be bivocational or live off the offerings.

No, we would not have a big, strong national organization but we would fulfill our calling to go into all the world, and be all things to all people so that some might be saved.

And through it all the banner of the LCMS might be one of training not in making a difference in the world, but making the world different. SDG

Yes - focus on equipping people of ALL ages to celebrate and serve the Lord through family, community, congregation and world. Position the church as a positive YES force in society rather than a NO source, through the joy and forgiveness in Christ! See aging as a gift to celebrate rather than a burden to bear. Equip people of ALL ages as ministers of Christ! Free congregations up to "own" their ministries as they respond to sharing the gospel locally, nationally, and world-wide. Encourage the younger and the older to mentor, minister, and mingle together in celebrating life in the Lord!

Yes, I have witnessed it happening in some of our ministries of the church. In the past we have been content to be a church "in" our communities and were recognized as the same. However, with the changes in both society and the church, we can no longer be a church in the community, but must be a church "of" the community, engaging them by investing in the community. In other words, we can no longer offer ourselves as a destination place for the community, but must be involved beyond our front door. We must never lose the foundation

on which our Lutheran faith is built, but the ministry we build upon that foundation is quite different.

(1) National Time of Repentance for neglect of The Great Commission, inward focus, politicization of missions, etc.; (2) Emphasis on Prayer & Fasting; (3) Leaders exemplifying and emphasizing Personal Witness & Discipleship; (4) Training in Personal Witness & Discipleship; (5) Establish network of Congregations skilled in Outreach, Church Planting & Revitalization; (6) Connect these Best Practices with those interested in learning

Congregations that are subtracting members or are simply surviving (plateaued) constantly communicate a “please stay” message to their members and surrounding community. “We can’t take another hit. We can’t afford another loss. You cannot . . . you DARE NOT move on or move out of this congregation or we won’t survive. PLEASE STAY! [Subtracting and Surviving congregations make up about 80% of all Christian congregations in North America.]

Congregations that are, by God’s grace, adding new members usually are communicating a “Please come!” message to their constituents. “We are being blessed. We are experiencing spiritual and numerical growth. We are helping people with and through the Gospel, and we want you to be a part of it. Please come and join us in this exciting mission and ministry!” [Congregations that are actually adding people to their fellowship make up about 16% of all Christian congregations in North America.]

Should a congregation that’s been adding new members step out in faith and plant a new congregation, however, it has begun to make the difficult, yet necessary transition from addition thinking to reproduction thinking. Here a new momentum is gained as the congregation is blessed to see the fruit of its labors, and is energized to invest more and more in Kingdom growth by intentionally raising up disciples who make disciples who plant churches that plant churches.

The feelings of breathless awe and wonder, humble joy, heartfelt thanksgiving, and eager anticipation for what God is doing and will do next that are part and parcel of church planting and church multiplication all combine to create a congregational culture and message that cries out to those who make up the membership, “Please go! We’re glad you’re here, but we can’t wait for you to leave! You’re baptized, you’re saved, and you’ve been equipped to play a part in God’s mission of seeking and saving the lost. So, we’re sending you out on that mission. We’re sending you out to help start a new ministry or help plant a new church that under His guidance and blessing will win new people for Jesus. Please go!” And so, the measure we use and come

to value more than a congregation's "seating capacity" is its "sending capacity."
The more the people in our congregations please go, the more the Kingdom of God will grow.

I absolutely think there is a more hopeful future! To put it simply I would say we need to recommit ourselves to the mission of God, a recommitment that flows out of an overwhelming realization of the width, length, height and depth of God's love for us (Eph. 3:17-19). Being internally strong and externally focused with the eyes and heart of our gracious God! How can I love my community and neighbors?

Worship wars and a preoccupation with "Lutheran identity" are siphoning energy and resources away from the primary task of reaching the lost. Synodical and District leaders should devote their time and energy to identifying and celebrating those congregations, individuals, and mission organizations that are doing amazing work in the vineyard, and holding them up. Instead of seeking more control, Synodical and District leaders should give away ownership and partner with mission societies - rather than trying to get everyone to work FOR the Synod/District, work WITH others. The message coming down from above is currently, "use your gifts/passions/talents to do my priorities." The message should be, "how can I help you do what you are passionate about?"

Quite honestly, I do not have much hope for the future of Synod. I unhitched my wagon from the Synodical train a long time ago. Though I am still a member of Synod and love my Synod, I do not want my ministry to go down if/when Synod collapses.

The projections given at the recent LCEF conference and the many district conventions is a cause for much grief over the lack of faith in the power of the Holy Spirit through the witness of His people to the resurrection of the Christ! For Pete's sake! The demographic study was done on the LCMS. SO WHAT!!!!??? The demographic study I do when I am seeking to reach people who are yet outside the Church and outside faith in Christ is to gather data on my community and context of ministry. Like Paul, I would seek to become all things to all people in order that I might win some. Pure doctrine framed to speak to a cultural context enables the Church to share the saving message of Christ Crucified and risen from the dead for the salvation of the world, effectively. People hear. The Holy Spirit convicts and brings to faith. Great compassion ministry can lead to great commission ministry. . . but not "bait and switch." Our people rub shoulders with the unchurched every day. They have relationships of care and influence in their families and in the marketplace. God's people must be released to be in ministry wherever they are. Let's recapture the Reformation (Biblical) teaching of vocation. Empower

and engage our people to minister where they are! Let's raise up a clergy who are not threatened by gifted and enthusiastic lay people; but rather are eager to train and guide them for the harvest of souls that God is preparing!

Also, since the U.S. population and that of most of the world is migrating to the largest urban areas, we'd better learn how to do ministry in urban centers better than we have in the last generation or two! That will be a whole learning curve to itself for the rural-rooted LCMS. This will also assume cross-racial and cross-cultural and cross-economic ministry effort. We must have a teachable and humble spirit. That is NOT what I see in our present leadership. I see arrogance and a spirit of condescension. We actually need others to lead us and teach us. Not the other way around!

I think that part of the problem for Synod is imbedded in the question as it assumes that something must be done by Synod, districts, etc. It assumes control by someone. Sunday morning worship, the pastor, the synod, etc., should be supporting the baptized in God's mission. Where we are out of control then we see God in control of His work. Give them experiences where they are out of control and feel what it is like to let God be in control.

Teach prayer, meditation and reflection on God's Word.

Equip members to honestly reflect on their own lives in God's kingdom work.

Once the control mindset is set aside, we need to cut lose the priesthood of believers. Send them. Give them resources to help them point people to Jesus. Teach them to tell their own stories. Help them talk about the Kingdom of God and not about church. Help create a place where they can bring new believers that is safe and welcoming.

But you know all this stuff already.

Repentance for not caring about the eternal destination of our neighbor. Repentance from sectarian strife in our synod.

Ernest prayer asking God to grant us revival, because we cannot do this on our own.

Our synod membership does not reflect the diversity of our nation. While we continue to pour resources overseas, we neglect the mission field in our back yards. Yes, the birthrate of white people is in decline, the birthrate of other non-white US citizens and immigrants are rising.

Yes. A vigorous campaign to recruit men for the Office of Holy Ministry and men/women for teaching at Lutheran schools, here in the USA—especially in the major population centers (large cities)—and throughout the world. We know the need. We have the ability to fully fund education for teachers/pastors/missionaries if the leaders lead (and I include parish pastors in leaders; most lay leaders I talk with want a vision to be cast that they can support). See the model for mission funding recently adopted by the English District titled “A Dollar for Mission,” aka (1-1-1). Church political games must stop. DREAM BIG!

Cultural barriers remain a challenge as our church body depends upon programs to accomplish what should be occurring naturally through relationships. Intentional relationship building through such as hospitality, hosting events friendly to outsiders and witnessing one’s faith to others in a manner that they can understand (not shake their head at) are all intentional steps towards building a foundation upon which to build.

These demographic trends are being studied by students in high school in their cultural geography classes (in other words, duh, you are talking about stuff most high school kids understand), and are by and large common to the developed nations of the West. Every organization and institution require a leap forward with the next generation of leaders if it is to survive. It may not be a bad thing for the LCMS as an institution to not make it. As a Lutheran Movement, we have the opportunity to step into a hopeful future that includes many tribes and languages and age groups, and sees many baptisms and growth in local faith communities. For all the repentance preached at the moment, there is little activity in specific corporate repentance for our mostly Anglo-driven and colonial tendencies. Step one for Synod would be a national year of repentance and listening for the LORD. Step two for Synod would be to move from developing more programs and workshops to networking the existing organizations and leaders towards the common goal of identifying new leaders to launch new starts and revitalize faith communities. Step three for Synod would be to institutionally divest itself of everything that is in the way of step two (this includes any emphasis on structure or programs rather than clarifying the type of leader and then looking for them and inviting them into leadership). Step four for Synod would be to set a common date in five years for evaluation of the change. For Districts and congregations, the focus should be similar to the above with the common understanding that the best work happens closest to the ground. Districts can work with congregations and leaders to identify the next generation of leaders and invite them to lead. The change must fundamentally start with identifying a new generation of leaders who will know how to lead in the coming era. We are already behind. Focus on structural or programmatic changes may assist in a supplementary manner, but it will NOT help us make the

turn from institution to movement. Focus on leadership identification and development is the way forward.

We need to stop focusing on legalism and start focusing on Jesus, and trusting in His power to transform lives. I believe it starts by simply investing in relationships.

Mission revitalization will be led by (mostly young, increasingly bi-vocational and not exclusively clergy) Spirit-led, entrepreneurial, passionate leaders. They will recapture our historic roots of gospel outreach through bold proclamation of the Word and proper administration of the Sacraments. The steps in facilitating this mission and outreach will come through (1.) Recruitment from among this new generation of young people who want to change the world for Christ; (2.) Equipping through mission focused seminary (and other) training; (3.) Self-Care (spiritual, relational, emotional, physical) because this is dangerous territory; (4.) Trust, so that when we recognize that God is doing His work on earth among us we will stand out of the way of those who are being used by God; and (5.) Partnerships among leaders and congregations who know how to manage well the polarity of faithfulness and outreach and who recognize that they will need each other for wisdom, encouragement and support.

The U.S. is the third largest mission field in the world. The future needs to look like how we use to do mission work overseas. Missionaries need to first learn the culture, develop relationships, make disciples, train new indigenous missionaries.

Our congregation grew through “small groups” 70 of which were established before I left as pastor to become a D. P. Many of these groups had non-members in the ministry of the group. Churches need to be open to new ministries - new and different peoples and be more OPEN in so many other ways - not closed to outsiders, as the LCMS has been labeled. Our congregation had people of many races and ethnic backgrounds - as did its church school. Pastors need to be known and active in the local community.

As most LCMS leaders know, a major issue related to the LCMS' future has to do with our aging membership. Attendance at many, if not most of our congregations includes a majority of people over 65 years of age. These are faithful people who love their church. Missing in our churches are the youth and young adults who are being led by our popular culture into beliefs and actions that are at variance with scripture and the teachings of the Lutheran church. Examples include the high percentage of young people who are living with a partner who is not their spouse and the wide acceptance by this group of all manner of sexual orientations that challenge the notion of traditional marriage. Pastors and congregations that challenge these behaviors and attitudes are seen as uncaring and judgmental.

So we are losing more people than we are gaining as young people drop out of our congregations shortly after confirmation. To address this problem, instruction needs to be balanced with involvement. We can't wait till our young people are 40 years old to give them a role in God's church. We also need to move away from a focus on head-knowledge and find ways to engage young people through mission opportunities that are appropriate for their age level and experience.

Even when congregations do a good job of involving their youth in meaningful ministry opportunities and are relevant to that age group while remaining faithful to scripture, the popular culture itself is very powerful and pulls our young people into its vortex. Even when it is not a fair and accurate accusation, the popular culture of our time convinces many youth and young adults that the church is irrelevant and judgmental. Since young people today have embraced the culture of acceptance in our society, they see the church as out of touch and behind the times.

In terms of what can be done to stem the "bleeding," the church at all levels needs to embrace in every way possible outreach to ethnic groups—especially Hispanic individuals and families—who tend to have more conservative views on topics like the family and marriage—and who also tend to have larger families. The denomination and districts also need to take bold steps to speak out publicly in favor of immigration and encourage and help refugees who want to come to our country and are often open to the Gospel, especially when it accompanies acts of mercy demonstrated in practical ways.

While I do not want to paint all LCMS leaders, pastors and congregations as hostile toward immigrants and refugees, the old adage that "the LCMS is the Republican party at prayer," is more true than we might like to admit. In my own congregation, otherwise loving individuals are very hostile to any suggestion that refugees and immigrants are an asset for our country and see them instead as criminals and freeloaders. These attitudes are far too common and hinder our stated desire and the many district and synod resolutions that encourage outreach to people of all backgrounds.

In short, we need to repent of such attitudes and be more bold in encouraging outreach to

minorities. One key way to do that is to be more proactive in promoting and encouraging election of qualified representatives of minorities to congregational, district and synodical offices.

While we have some very well-trained ethnic pastors in our church body who know and accept our theology, they often demonstrate the same timidity as their Anglo brothers and sisters in terms of evangelism and outreach to their own people groups. I continue to be dismayed at the lack of growth of our Hispanic congregations and membership. As the Hispanic population in the USA has mushroomed in recent decades, our own LCMS statistics have not demonstrated a similar growth—despite the fact that many Hispanics today come from Mexico and Central America with an openness to the Gospel and potential membership in an evangelical church. Guatemala for example now has as many evangelicals as Roman Catholics, so it is simply not true as many of our pastors assume that they would not be open to the Lutheran church and our beliefs.

There must be a firm resolve, not at the Synod level, but at the congregation level (and best orchestrated through the District) to commit to a threefold approach that includes (1) remaining firm in our confessional basis of faith (the right administration of the sacraments and the preaching of God's inerrant Scriptures); (2) acknowledging that forms of worship and practices associated therewith are not bound by our confessional understandings and may be as wide and varied as cultural communities demand and respond to; and, (3) the uplifting of the Priesthood of All Believers such that the laity of our church body is empowered to be an active tool in the advancement of God's Kingdom.

Thank you for your inquiry. This is important work for our synod and the church. Of course, there are many issues involved in your question.

I see three ingredients as vital to creating a real shift in our synod's trajectory.

1) Congregational specialization - focus - vision. Before one can identify strategy there is the question of the end goal. Determine that and then you can identify strategy with which to focus. Among all the things I have seen or heard as "solutions" one that I have not read about is the issue of focus or specialization.

When the vision of a church is assumed then there are multiple visions or a "least common denominator vision." A related assumption is that churches seek to be all things to all people. No matter how big or small they feel they need a men's group, a women's group, a youth group, and so on. They are by default a "general interest" church.

This is like the church seeking to be Walmart or Target. These stores seek to provide everything

(with great investment and expense) yet they cannot specialize. When people want “good enough” or “low price” they may go to these stores. But when they want something better or more than the “standard items” in these categories they go to a specialized store (grocery, hardware, men, women, etc.). The same is true in the restaurant industry: perhaps buffets and diners offer a lot of variety yet there is a far larger amount of restaurants that specialize, not only in types of food (Mexican, burgers, Italian, etc.) but also in the experience customers are looking for (fast food, fast casual, fine dining, etc.). Rarely do churches specialize or focus their efforts. Most assume they need to be “general interest” churches that do a little of everything.

Yet I would argue specialization is vital. It is a matter of stewardship. This would recognize ministry context or community needs, a church’s giftedness (perhaps through an appreciative inquiry type workshop) and the will of God as revealed in the scriptures. The intersection of these three is the place of focus. Then after this homework there would need to be a disciplined approach to program toward that focus (vision) and admit that they cannot be a “general interest” church or “something for everyone.” In this way churches can more intentionally say “no” to some things and “yes” to others. This focus or purpose will resonate with some and not with others so self-selection will occur. Along the way they can be doing it all “in the name of Jesus” and bringing people into contact with the means of grace and God willing, saving faith. Others who do not resonate will find their way to other communities of faith.

To be sure this is a huge shift in mindset, priorities and choices which will disrupt the status quo or culture of a particular church. It would also require a co-creation approach of members and leaders and rostered/ordained leaders.

2) This brings us to the second ingredient. The above requires a new skill and way of relating called “coaching” when compared to our more familiar helping or leading. It is helping people to change without telling them what to do, which can be off putting and often counterproductive

3) Finally a large-scale shift to developing people through an apprenticeship process is critical. This shift takes people away from a “consumer” of spiritual goods and services to intentionally living out their faith (Eph 2:10; Matthew 28 “teaching them to obey” etc.). Properly designed and carried out it will combine spiritual untruth through Word and Sacrament with service and leadership development which is critical to any large-scale transformation efforts.

God bless your work! I’m sure there are many other ingredients which are important yet these are on my heart and mind. Thank you for seeking a more positive approach and outcome than has been shared. We join our prayers to yours for a God honoring future where more spend eternity with Jesus.

We cannot depend on births to continue to fill our churches in the future. But there are many immigrants moving to the U.S. from Lutheran churches in other parts of the world and immigrants who are open to evangelism through concerted efforts of our existing area churches, pastors and members. We need to commit ourselves to reach these immigrants and create appeal among younger generations in order to reverse the trend of decline in our churches.

Yes, I believe there is a more hopeful future empowered by the Holy Spirit . . . and I believe that Lutheran Hour Ministries has identified the reasons why our synod is losing members: Please read their SENT brochure:

2/3 of the world's population does not follow Christ

More Americans both in the church and outside of it are pledging allegiance to the "morality of self-fulfillment" which is rapidly becoming the culture's moral norm.

Islam is the world's fastest-growing religion and is projected to surpass Christianity in the second half of this century.

WHY IS OUR CHURCH NOT RECOGNIZING THIS . . . WE DON'T HAVE AN OVERALL PLAN TO REACH THE UN-REACHED – AND MOST PEOPLE IN THE PEWS ARE NOT AWARE OF WORLD-WIDE MISSION AND JUST HOW MANY HAVE NEVER HEARD.

From LHM. . . "more than half of all Christians have not shared their faith with even one person in the last year.

Close to 90% of mission work by North Americans is done among people who already have access to the Good News of Jesus.

I will direct my mission energy and dollars to LHM.

We all need to strive to be Christ like.

Putting your faith on the street, talking to neighbors, friends with a Gospel conversation.

We spend thousands on updating our facilities . . . but I think in the next decade churches will no longer be housed in buildings but in homes, where prayer, breaking of bread, and sharing the Gospel are what happens, and the potlucks, bake sales, socials are gone. We need to evaluate everything we do in the light of the question, "Is this activity proclaiming Christ and His redemptive work?"

Our members including myself need to take seriously these commands. . . . to go . . . to tell . . . and to witness . . . in all we do. Before we plan a church activity . . . see where the Gospel is . . . is it the center of the activity or just a tag.

Psalms 96:1-3 GNB

Sing a new song to the LORD! Sing to the LORD, all the world! Sing to the LORD, and praise him! Proclaim every day the good news that he has saved us. Proclaim his glory to the nations, his mighty deeds to all peoples.

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If we do this. . . . we will see a change!

Enemies of the Gospel today include our public schools and universities where a corrupted vision of science and sex without God is taught. Our children hear one thing at home another at school—is it any wonder that our young people are missing from church?

The media has become a god of sorts for some people, and the true Christian life is obscured. LCMS must focus on Christ's words . . . not just for pastors and LCMS workers but for everyone sitting in the pew. . . . we are HIS people called to tell HIS story . . . to all people.

A repentance, change of mission thinking and direction based on The Word. For a context of this statement, see an attachment to be sent about A "Missio Dei" Church and the suggested "steps." Through the power of the Holy Spirit it means the creation by God of a "clean heart" and a renewed spirit - a Missio Dei habitus. This matter is systemic and it takes more than programmatic steps or practices.

Gentlemen,

Where to begin?

To understand where I am coming from, let me share how as a boy on Christmas Eve I dressed in a cape and read the birth narrative in Luke 2 to my parents: the message of Good News. As a youth with a primitive tape recorder, I taped – with sound effects, in our garage – the appearance of our Lord in the synagogue in Nazareth to read, as Jesus, from the scroll: "The Lord has appointed me . . . to preach release to the captives . . ." etc.: the message of release through God's grace. In my seminary years the promise of the "Mission Affirmations" pointed the way to a broader vision for the LCMS and my role in it.

I think there's no argument that since those days the synod has been led to an even more conservative, restrictive vision of its ministry than in previous generations, a vision of conserving the heritage of post-Concord systematians, Pieper, a Brief Confession, etc. at the expense of our Gospel freedom.

In my opinion, under our current administration the synod has fallen headlong into American Evangelicalism, a right-wing, fearful, protective, supposedly patriotic stance, choosing to purge dissent rather than allow or honestly consider whether there might be a better way, more faithful to the Gospel.

As a result, my sad conclusion is that our leadership, but thankfully not all of our parishes, has abandoned the very Gospel of freedom we thought we protected as a church of the Reformation.

A personal, painful illustration: My own mother, as death approached, (in the aftermath of their negotiated stance on LGBTQ Christians) pleaded with me never to join the ELCA because, “I want to see you in heaven.” Obviously, to this life-long LCMS member, salvation depended on my being in the denomination with the right doctrine.

So, you wisely ask the Church, *quo vadis* LCMS? To me, this raises serious questions: Can a denomination change? Can The LCMS view its doctrinal statements as limited by historical perspective and available knowledge, rather than deeming them next to the Confessions and Creeds? (I know, the Church cannot ever admit having been wrong. But it can and has interpreted its way out of doctrinal dead ends.)

More to your question, and more positively, The LCMS can reclaim the energizing power of the Gospel good news of release and acceptance, Jesus’ earliest and life-long message, sealed and demonstrated with his sacrifice in the face of political and religious powers to marginalize, demonize and destroy those who challenge them. Who will share that Spirit with them?

The LCMS can respond to the leading of the Spirit to open its arms to many whom it has excluded through well-intended but pharisaical walls that prohibit, rather than encourage, expression of the Gospel of grace, welcome and freedom in the community of Christ. Who will bring that message?

The LCMS can listen to the leading of the Spirit in our hurting world—and not only overseas—and focus much less on itself and its preservation (as institutions characteristically are wont, and dangerously obligated, to do). Can it learn from some of its parishes to value ministry to the righting of systematic injustice and prejudice, as well as personal expressions of the same. (The continuation among us of hate groups demonstrates, in part, the failure of churches to understand and communicate the Gospel [!] among its pious members.)

What shall we envision? LCMS parishes (not only in urban settings), led by the example of its leadership on all levels, openly welcoming—seeking!—strangers, non-white, LGBTQ and others we’ve assumed are unlike us.

LCMS parishes welcoming to the Lord’s Table those who present themselves for worship—say, members of the ELCA, the Catholic spouse of Lutheran member, the Presbyterian relative in town for a holiday, etc.

LCMS chaplains in institutions and the military, human care agencies, mission endeavors permitted, no, encouraged to cooperate and pray in their ministries with other Christians, certainly, and other religious allies in the community.

Enough. One might go on, and on. But I admit that I have little hope—perhaps, little faith, as our Lord might see it. It will likely take generations and several administrations for The LCMS to change as I envision a church of the Gospel. And I fear, The LCMS doesn’t have that much time.

Even today, more progressive LCMS parishes must live under the threat of censure for transgressing institutional prohibitions. Each new generation senses the closed, restrictive atmosphere of their parishes. Even if new outrageous synodical actions do not make national news coverage again, local expressions of exclusion and marginalization will drive our young people away. And I doubt that the LCMS birth rate will rise to the occasion to offset that. As a result, unless our synod has a change of heart, it—we—cannot long continue to exist. And we won't deserve to, having exchanged the Gospel for doctrinal agreements and uniformity in our life together.

You, having worked in and with The LCMS and at the IC know what we are up against. “We have met the enemy and they are us.” I truly sympathize with the many I've know who work there, balancing somewhat schizophrenically between institutional survival and personal beliefs. I sincerely hope that The LCMS can return to the Gospel that promises—and effects!—*der freyheit eynes* Christen to live and be and know the life of Christ.

I think that the LCMS needs to work at meeting young adults where they are rather than where the previous generation thinks they should be. This is not to say we are to compromise anything we believe and confess as evangelical confessional Lutherans. Rather we are to explore whether there are instances where the synod places unnecessary barriers to the core of our Christian faith. For example, the recent CTCR report “Women in Combat” refers to the subordination of woman to man. Given the common meaning of the term subordination, I submit young men and women will reject this understanding of the relationship between man and woman.

I believe one of the aspects that our church as a whole needs to address better is in the area of hospitality and guest centered focus. My family and I have visited 13 different churches in the area the past year and only two of those churches we felt welcomed and greeted. It seems in many of the congregations that we have visited the focus seems to be inward and already established relationships. We have a family of 6 with 4 children that I would think would be a welcomed site in many churches who are declining but only 2 churches greeted my kids during the whole first visit. It's not a surprise to us that the two friendliest churches are the ones my kids like the best. They are also the churches who have a focus on serving their community and spending time in the worship service explaining things to make it easier for the guest worshipping that morning. The other thing that has surprised us is how few of the churches are talking about their connection or ministry with the community. Once again seems to be a lot of churches focused inward and needs to be a much better balance.

Another aspect it practicing that hospitality in our neighborhoods. To encourage people to be

missional communities in their neighborhoods inviting people over to break bread together and getting to know their neighbors. To look for ways to serve and take care of those in need.

There needs to be less competition for funds from churches (RSO's, Synod, other denominations, etc.) so as leaders are identified and equipped to lead (lay or ordained), there are funds available from Districts to establish the necessary foundations for new or redeveloping churches.

Second, the constant tension regarding worship styles makes this endeavor difficult as various perspectives will only support (time, talent and/or treasure) those churches that utilize their preference.

Third, we need to really work on shoring up existing churches as there seems to be a heavy reliance and encouragement on new plants. Training and equipping leaders of churches for stabilization/revitalization also needs to be utilized.

Fourth, a clear delineation between mercy work and evangelism needs to be explored and resources made available for training/awareness.

Lastly, I believe that we need to coordinate better with our seminaries and universities on preparing church workers for service in communities (mercy work, outreach, community presence and engagement). Mission track studies appear to have been eliminated or reduced thus making it difficult to find prepared/qualified church planters, etc.

It is important today for congregations to understand their community and find ways to connect with that community. Congregations need to be willing to take risks and “get their hands dirty” in their community.

Districts can be encouragers to their congregations and provide training in how this can be done. Pastors and lay leaders need to be trained together with hands on experiences. We need synod leadership which casts a vision for community connections rather than building walls to protect us from the “evil” in the world around us.

LCMS leaders on all levels need constantly to encourage pastor and congregations to do something new in their community, meeting unmet needs of people, clearly in the name of Jesus. Human care/mercy ministry is the best form of outreach in our current culture – it's also biblical (Acts 10:38, Galatians 6:9, 1 Peter 2:15 and many others.) This encouragement needs to be accompanied with clear biblical teaching on both conversion and the mission. Devil, world

and flesh do everything they can to keep pastors and congregations from carrying out the mission, so leaders must be relentless in reminding, encouraging and giving examples of how to do outreach.

The numbers we are facing are not an indication of the health of the church. They are an indication of the health of an institution—the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. We make a grave error if we equate the church with any of its institutions.

Our Lord Jesus inaugurated a movement when He commissioned His people to make disciples by taking the Gospel to the ends of the earth. As Christianity became more a part of the culture, institutions were created in an effort to support this movement. This was a blessing to the movement of the Gospel.

We are now at a point where some would have the institution supersede the movement. This is a backwards way of thinking about the mission of the Gospel in the world. What brings me hope is a fervent belief that Jesus is still the Lord of the Church. He will do what He chooses to further His mission, and I believe He may be doing a new thing. The question before us is whether we will follow Him into that future or cling to the institution we have known.

In our District, it is our goal to empower leaders, lay and professional, doing ministry on the ground to have what they need to do their best work. We seek to do this by asking good questions, providing helpful resources, assisting them in addressing and answering their questions, and allowing them freedom in the Gospel to fulfill their calling as the people of God.

I believe we're all in the process of learning and discovery. We're seeking to learn and discover where God is leading His church. We take with us His encouragement to be in prayer that we might remain teachable and the Gospel message by which people are saved. With these profound gifts, it's hard not to be people of hope.

- 1) Nationally coordinated plan for planting new churches and schools—nurtured by prayer, Bible studies, and networks of support and accountability
- 2) Return of Great Commission Convocations perhaps under new name—inspirational with a focus on worship, training, prayer, and networking
- 3) National movement of neighborhood Bible studies
- 4) Development of the office of evangelist with a goal of having a trained evangelist in every congregation

From my perspective, or standpoint, as a social scientist the anticipation of the loss of 500,000 members over the next 10 years seems a supportable prediction. Mainline denominations across the country are experiencing dramatic membership losses. We should not expect it to be different for us.

Our churches are products of place and time. Today, with their impressive buildings, elaborate programs, and swelling budgets, our churches look very unlike the Christian church of the first centuries. Our church institutions are “cultural,” situated in a context. Neither the context nor the church has looked this way before and we may find ourselves in a much different context very quickly.

We should expect our church institutions to look much different in the future. But these institutions are not our faith. We serve the One who transcends our space and time (our culture). Perhaps the church on earth will no longer be a potent force within our cultural context. And that is not inherently a spiritual tragedy. We have no guarantees that our church institutions will continue on. The Church, to be sure, will. The Christian Church will continue with or without the sanction of culture. For the Church is not an institution. It is a community of believers, called and gathered by the Spirit of God.

It is problematic when we equate our human church institutions with the Kingdom of God. The church is not the Church. We can trust the ever-present and moving Spirit to bring faith and growth in new and meaningful ways. As the social contexts change so do sentiments and values systems. We must not fear a changing world, but embrace it as the fresh canvas for the working Spirit.

Our culture seems to be getting more hostile (less sympathetic, or less defaulted) toward Christianity. However, we don't need our culture's blessing to be Christian. In the United States we should not expect our neighbors to be like us, nor to worship like us. Our nation is built upon the fundamental disconnect between our constitutionally protected religious pluralism and the exclusionary claims of Christianity. We should always view our greater culture with skepticism.

Regardless of the cultural context, we must continue to do the work which God has given us to do. For some of us that means organizing to influence culture by pressing for public policies, voting against propositions, and protesting bad politics. For others of us it means remembering that our interaction with the antagonistic, non-Christian fellow citizen is with “our neighbor” whom we are called to serve.

I've been tracking headlines: “Millennials are killing . . . Applebee's, napkins, Bud Light, golf, fabric softener, football, diamonds . . . and churches.” They are not killing any of these, instead they are not embracing or supporting them and therefore they are fading. There are no guarantees that any of these products/institutions will continue. They survive only because they are supported--they are “bought into.” Traditions that seem eternal in one generation can and are discarded as irrelevant in the next. I find insight, comfort and hope in the following observation now 150 years old:

Every generation must do its own seeking and its own finding. The fault of the fathers often is that they expect their finding to stand in place of their children's seeking—expect the children to receive that which has satisfied the need of their fathers upon their testimony; whereas rightly, their testimony is not ground for their children's belief, only for their children's search. That search is faith in the bud. No man can be sure till he has found for himself. All that is required of the faithful nature is a willingness to seek. He cannot even know the true nature of the thing he wants until he has found it; he has but a dim notion of it, a faint star to guide him eastward to the sunrise. Hopefully, the belief of the father has the heart in it which will satisfy the need of the child; but the doubt of this in the child, is the father's first ground for hoping that the child with his new needs will find for himself the same well of life—to draw from it with a new bucket, it may be, because the old will hold water no longer: its staves may be good, but its hoops are worn asunder; or, rather, it will be but a new rope it needs, which he has to twist from the hemp growing in his own garden (George MacDonald, 1870, *Miracles*, VI. MIRACLES GRANTED TO THE PRAYER OF FRIENDS).

Instead of desperately clinging to a fading institution we should invest our resources to assist the next generation in developing meaningful responses to the eternal Word of God.

Demographic projections don't make a wit of difference to me or my message to my district. They are primarily a source of abuse of Christ's mission. On the one hand, they may be used as a salve by the lazy; "See, there is nothing we can do." On the other hand, they may be used to induce panic by the self-sufficient; "See, we had better get busy, because it all depends on what we do." Is there a hopeful future? Of course. Christ promises His church will endure to the end of the ages, His Word will be proclaimed. There is nothing more hopeful than the Word of Jesus. Now is not the time to circle the wagons. Nor is it time to take things into our own hands at the expense of the Gospel. The church is called and equipped by God to speak the Word, faithfully, boldly, and joyfully; trusting that the Word will do its work.

Of course, one can always hope and pray for more people to be gathered around Word and Sacrament. The important thing, however, is not how many people show up on the books as members of Missouri Synod congregations. Some of them may be hypocrites, closet unbelievers. No, the important thing is how many people hear the true Gospel of Christ and believe it. Of course, no human being can make anyone else believe; faith is a gift that God gives through the Gospel to those who hear the Gospel. The church's challenge is to bring the Gospel to as many people as we can. Regardless of projections, whether we find them delightful or discouraging, the church is called to keep on keeping on—keeping the message straight and getting the message out. Let's determine to leave the "results" to the Lord, without letting this determination turn into an excuse for being ashamed of the Gospel. Getting the

message out will likely start close to “home,” as it were, with pastors and laypeople alike first wanting to talk of Christ with unchurched family and friends, then actually doing so. It will involve noticing under-reached populations—such as those who speak a different language or live closer to the poverty line than most of us—and taking steps in their direction with the Good News of Jesus. It could entail brand-new church starts. Yet it might also take the form of old congregations determining to reach out with the Gospel in new ways, or at least ways new to them.

As I ponder this question I cannot help but remember Jesus’ words in Luke 18:8: “Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on earth?” Luke tells us that Jesus spoke the parable to which these words are added to encourage His hearers “to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart.” Then follows the parable of the persistent widow and the promise that justice will prevail speedily! And we wonder why Jesus asks the question about finding faith on earth when the Son of Man comes. Does He foresee what is happening among us? If so (as I believe) we ought not “lose heart”, expect it to continue and pray all the more for His guidance.

I began my ministry as a missionary in Japan (60 years ago), a country of slow growth (and no growth) in regard to “church membership.” It was an extremely frustrating and depressing experience which more than once tempted me to ask “Why am I here?” Then the Lord opened my eyes (and heart) to realize it was not about numbers of people - but of people and the Gospel. It was reading what Paul said in Corinthians 1, “I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius” and then commented on perhaps a few more that made me wonder. It seemed a strange thing for a missionary to say.

The answer was, of course in 1:17 where Paul says Christ did not send him to baptize but to preach the gospel. It is not about numbers of people or “church growth” or survival. (Will the Lord still be able to accomplish anything if the LCMS disappears altogether?) It is about proclaiming the gospel and how we do it. That's all. The rest is up to the Spirit.

But how to do that in the 21st century? I think we have to look at our sisters and brothers in the first century (for whom especially our New Testament was written) and take seriously Peter’s words and encourage our people to always be ready to make a defense to anyone who asks for a reason of the hope that is in them (1Peter 3:15 ff).

In a world filled with hopelessness and despair a message bringing genuine hope is of the utmost importance. Our people need to be filled with that hope, enough so that others ask where it is from. We do not need large congregations (as Gideon learned) but we need congregations of hopeful people who radiate the Gospel as they share it with those around

them. We may “die” in the process, but we will be fulfilling our mission. It not about numbers and assets. It’s about quality - not quantity.

Thanks for asking!

- 1) We need to set goals for new church plant starts in the coming decade.
- 2) We need to re-imagine how we train future pastors. Right now, it is very hard to “get in” (4 years) . . . and very easy to “stay in” (we struggle with pastoral accountability). Our seminary education should become more regional to provide for regional, missionary cohorts of pastors to be developed. Our seminary education also needs to become more affordable and accessible. Raising up working-poor, indigenous leaders is very difficult in our current structure. We also need more strategic alliances to help us think “outside our small box” when it comes to both pastoral and lay leadership development.
- 3) Active discipleship of the found to reach the lost needs to be established. We have very few recognized routes for on-going theological education for the numerous gifted lay leaders in our congregation.
- 4) I have many more thoughts regarding 2 and 3. :)

(1.) There needs to be an intentional movement to get our people back into the Word. That’s foundational! (2.) A concentrated effort to train our Pastors to do the work of an Evangelist. (3.) Train lay people to be winsome, invitational, and equipped to witness. (4.) Corporate divisiveness needs to be addressed. Unity and oneness should be strived for. If fishermen aren’t fishing they’re fighting!

I strongly believe that we need to go back to basics, forgetting “evangelism programs” that never worked. Jesus summarized the commandments into these two: Love God and love your neighbor. For me, “love your neighbor” is a mission statement. We need to love them enough to share with them the most precious gift we have: Jesus. One of our major LCMS problems is that we pick the neighbor that we want to love, hence, we need to focus on the seriousness of the reason why God put a church on hearth: to make disciples, and we start making them by loving them.

Partnerships. We need to get better at building ministries around meeting community needs. Preschools are a great example, and we need to expand on that model. For example, adult day

care centers, nursing homes, exercise gyms. The “business” pays for the place while also providing foot traffic and shared interests that allow for genuine friendships to develop

More thoughts: We are confused about what the mission of the church is - and sometimes end up acting like the third servant of Matthew 25 - which addresses the confusion about the mission of the church. Is it to above all preserve, or, above all to get the Word out? Wisdom is required to balance these - but as a church body we have not had that conversation. Because we are afraid? Or? I am afraid we have not been faithful.

There is always a bright future in missions because God is alive and His kingdom is expanding. There's a lot of mission work being done by the districts which were not counted (preaching stations). The demographic only looked at numbers of membership, and this is fine, but not attempt was made to find out what districts were doing in their mission efforts. The Texas District planted the most Word and Sacrament ministries in the Synod, and yet many of these are not yet chartered congregations. Synod has the number of “preaching stations” and could have used that number as an encouragement to the Synod. Also, the Texas District has just launched a Lay Evangelist Training Program that releases lay people into ministries that share the Gospel. The District has a goal of training and using a combination of 500 lay evangelist and/or church planters by 2031. There's more going on than just a projection of losing 500,000. I will not let this number discourage me from engaging in new mission starts. I believe that there are many good things happening in our districts in the area of missions that Synod doesn't know about or doesn't want to recognize because it might not be “Lutheran” enough for the leadership of Synod.

Many will talk about new programs or initiatives to restore hope for the future - to allow us as a Synod to joyfully move forward to win 500,000 new souls, and reject a spirit of despair and acceptance of losing another 500,00. President Harrison's study of how our church might grow in the next twenty years painted a bleak picture, with no new ideas or commitment to stem the losses or even grow.

I believe new initiatives, new programs, are needed - I also believe we need a change of heart, or any new initiative will have only a minor effect. I believe there is something wrong with the heart of the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod. This is something only the Spirit can heal.

John says, “God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them” (1 John 4:16). In 1 Corinthians 13, Paul concludes, “Faith, hope and love abide, these three, but the greatest of

these is love.” And John (Jn 13:35), “By this everyone will know you are my disciples, if you love one another.” If we ask how is the LCMS known in North America, I do not believe people outside or even inside would say, “Look how they love one another,” as Tertullian observed the Roman view of Christians.

In my opinion, the LCMS is infused with fear. For a church body that has valued its history of gospel proclamation, this presents a dilemma. How do we have honest conversations when rules have become more prominent than love; mistrust more prevalent than “Explain your neighbor's actions in the most kind way”?

How is the LCMS known in America? In the recent past headlines and stories in secular newspapers have shown approbation at our treatment of a District President who stood with his community after a horrific attack on America where more than two thousand Americans were killed. The same happened after a pastor stood with his neighborhood after the massacre of elementary school children. The response of “rightness” was shown to be more important than expressions of love. We have a persona of judgment not of kindness. We swim in the waters of suspicion, but needed to remember the waters of baptism that renews our lives with love and hope.

Today, while mission budgets are squeezed, the LCMS has placed a full time representative in Washington to back politics of the right.

As a church founded by immigrants we are confused about our reception of the gifts God is giving us of new missionaries from other lands. President’s Harrison’s demographic study warned us not to commit new funds or energy to reaching ethnic groups different from our white, English speaking past. Many are afraid, afraid of losing a part of our German heritage, afraid of losing an ancient liturgy. Fear can make us blind to the gifts God is giving His church in America. As a church fueled early on by immigrants, we can give a more hopeful message to the immigrants, and to the church, and to America.

We need to remember that the waters of baptism made us one people, the people of Jesus, the people of God. We need to hear more the gospel of love and forgiveness preached and taught; we need to find strength in His body and blood, around an altar that invites us all to love God and love each other. We need to turn from a church of rules to a church of charity.

This is Lutheran double predestination. It makes no difference what any one does God has determined that these people will be lost eternally. I say this because along with this statement is the statement that it is happening in all church bodies. We cannot save people this is the work of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, God has decided and he is a liar when he says he desires all to be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth. We are not called to save but we are

called to witness to the hope that we have. If we are only faithful in our receiving the gifts of grace our witness is incomplete. When we proclaim our Joy is in being Lutheran we weaken our witness as we point to our heritage and now Jesus as the source of our hope and Joy.

Look at the growing churches. What are those pastors doing? And I don't mean bands. Our FL church has a band. It is not a well-attended service. No youth are there.

(1.) A church in our area is growing, growing, growing and has been for years.

The pastor is a real pastor and a no-nonsense pastor. Everyone knows where he stands on the issues of the day and he stands with God's word!

(2.) Training of pastors. Growing churches do not need a pastor with 4 years of a nasty-liberal-arts college degree. Make seminary 4 years give the pastor a year of real history and literature first and skip college. So he's too young for the pastorate after seminary. Put him in college now as a missionary for a couple of years, send him on the mission field for a couple of years, put him with successful men and give him real experiences.

(3.) PLI has an excellent idea in bringing the wives into a shared ministry with them.

(4.) In other words it's time for a paradigm shift. We do not need men who know biblical languages. We do not need "bookish" pastors looking at their shoes or great in Lutheran doctrine debates. (I love Lutheran doctrine.) Be sure they all take the 3 classes offered by Dale Carnegie as part of their training. That is speaking through engaging the other, sales (we are Always selling!), and management (A church needs managed.).

Stay truth to Scripture. Congregation members need to build relationships with persons outside the Church. Pastors needs to build stronger relationships with persons within the congregation and without - other community leaders especially police, fire, school, politicians and business leaders.

OK. I give in. I'll share my troubled heart. Thank you "LCMS" (whatever that now means) for bringing me the Gospel but I think you've almost lost it now as an institution. There are many who still get and follow/share Jesus within your body but only empowered by the Holy Spirit will the LCMS thrive as an institution. Please take my words below as a desire to see you whole in Jesus.

Please . . .

1. Call for an extended period prayer and fasting. Cut the potlucks and old home celebrations. Actually repent. Actually pray. Quit talking and listen to God. Maybe take an entire denominational sabbatical, for a year.
2. Close Fort Wayne Seminary and provide training by extension for people interested in church work. Quit worrying about accredited education and keeping the ivory towers open. Trust pastors who are already trained to train other pastors. Start worrying about what actually works in God's global kingdom. Return to theological education by extension. Rightly dividing law and gospel is learned in the school of experience, correct?
3. Humble ourselves and actually listen and learn about spirituality from those who are from Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Promote our brothers and sisters from other ethnicities rather than German Americans. Admit that the European dominated Western World has a blind spot covering our view of the spiritual. We need to recalibrate our denomination's collective mind and heart to recognize and honor the spiritual.
4. Reduce our focus on pastoral ministry as the answer. As much as possible, equalize the pay scale for all church workers as opposed to having pastors paid more. Get back to Acts 2 model. Also encourage tentmaking ministries instead of full-time churchwork. Train all church workers in another skill besides churchwork.
5. Close the International Center building. Sell it. Use home offices, videoconferences, and meet in local churches for other meetings as necessary. Get rid of any other church properties that aren't paying for themselves across the nation and church buildings that aren't being used at least 6 days a week. Use the money raised to pay off debts of all current and retired church workers, no questions asked.
6. Change the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod name to Lutheran Church Missionary Services or something like that. Eliminate Missouri and Synod words from our vocabulary. They are confusing and frankly, irrelevant.
7. Listen to and rightfully acknowledge the pains of the many church workers and their children who have been wounded by the church and figure out how to truly reconcile with them until they can say they are whole again.
8. Stop joking about alcohol as the Lutheran thing. The abuse of alcohol is a HUGE problem in the LCMS and it is killing our people and our leaders.
9. Entirely restructure to a discipleship structure that doesn't allow anyone to be pastoring/discipling more than about 12 people. Start with the denominational offices, mission department, university systems, etc., and then empower others to do the same. No one person can really care for more than about 12 people if they are really caring for them.

10. Quit collectively avoiding community meetings and get to know people from our neighborhoods other denominations and religions. We don't have to agree with others but we have to get out of our arrogance. We need to quit being so exclusive and arrogant about our perspective on everything.

And with that, I am realizing my own verbose arrogance. However, frankly, I'm more hurt than anything by my experiences in the LCMS and truly wish I didn't even have to think about these things.

Anxious thinking leads to internal focus and a loss of creativity. We have to look to a change in our approach if we want to change our future. There is a clarity of perceived outcome, but very little clarity surrounding the source or reason for such a prediction. There remains a need to clarify our self-perception and what has brought us as a body of believers to this reality. We must find a way to look past our own needs to the needs of others - especially those who do not know Jesus Christ. This is not about survival, it is about the Kingdom of God, it is about salvation and life eternal.

While I think I understand the sentiment underlying this plea for a better answer to the current projections in the LCMS, I think it wise to consider why such projections make us uncomfortable. I don't know if I have answers. I do have questions. Does losing half a million members mean we are failures at mission? If so, what does that say about the *missio Dei*? Is a "more hopeful future" merely quantitative? According to Iris Murdoch, it is always a good idea to ask a philosopher, "What are you afraid of?" Perhaps it is good to ask a churchman the same question. Our fears often reveal our idols. Idols always demand sacrifice. And the sacrifice tends to be the very thing one desired to get from the idol in the first place. I think the first step we need to take is to stop being fearful of a future we're uncomfortable with. Step two is to be the church. We simply be who God has called us to be by gathering together, caring for one another, preaching and teaching the Word, and giving and receiving the sacraments. We do what God gives us to do and God does what he does. If we lose half a million members in the next decade because we are being the church as we are called to be, what else can be done? While we may lament, there is also great freedom in trusting God to take care of his church in the way he sees fit. We also have freedom to proclaim the Gospel in love and joy instead of in fear.

1. At the Synodical, District, and congregational levels an intense effort must be made to see ourselves in a missionary, rather than a churched society. Hopefully this will focus our attention on the New Testament patterns of missionary activity rather than on the emphasis of being a church loyal to the Lutheran Confessions and traditions

2. In light of this insight, the seminaries should be teaching the majority of their students to be apostolic missionaries rather than parish pastors. These missionaries should operate in the pattern of St. Paul is starting self-supporting word and sacrament ministries led by local elders, evangelists, deacons, who are equipped for their ministry at the local level through distance learning, mentor-ship, and Bible studies designed to prepare them for ministry. Such ministries, led by men and women who are retired, or have other sources of income, need have neither buildings or a paid staff making it easy for them to be self-supporting even though they may remain small.

3. Special efforts should be made to plant such churches among the disaffected young people who have left the organized churches but still might respond to Jesus' call and a new pattern of church life.

4. Change Synodical leadership for that Word and Sacrament ministries led by non-seminary trained individuals would be welcomed as authentic New Testament patterned ministries, rather than forbidden by Synodical resolution.

Eleven years in my current parish have taught me that this is a very complex issue, but one that begins with (again, from my personal experience) a real lack of Great Commission zeal on the part of most LCMS congregants. Our current church culture (not necessarily restricted to the LCMS) is predominantly what I call "Sunday Mass Syndrome" by which the MAJORITY of church members are convinced not only that Sunday church attendance is the most important thing (or perhaps the ONLY important thing) but that, therefore, church is a club designed to meet their personal tastes and needs on Sunday morning.

For most people there is little thought or concern for those outside of God's kingdom, often including their own children or grandchildren who "they raised better than that". The "Christian Checklist Mentality" also feeds into this (baptism-check, confirmation-check, you're good to go).

The "Circle the wagons and protect the flock until the second coming" mentality that some of our conservative LCMS leaders seem to have contracted from the big-name evangelicals is the next big roadblock to connecting people with God's kingdom. I have told this to my congregation on several occasions: "You cannot successfully witness to the very same people you are openly demonizing." The synod engaging in public conflicts through the press, government, ADF, etc. only makes our mission work more difficult.

So before we even get into programs or directions I would suggest that we need to address our own attitudes towards the “lost”. We need to consider the ways in which we have made it difficult for the “gentiles” to come to faith in Jesus (Acts 15) with our adiaphora and man-made rules and the internal conflicts that have arisen because of them.

After this (again from my own parish experience): (1) Quit wasting time and precious volunteer energy on tired old programs that really don’t achieve any desired results (there are many sacred things discussed in the Bible but none of them are cows). (2) The church must focus on our Biblical “core competencies”—word and sacrament. This is not to exclude social ministries or even some social gatherings, but we “have the worlds of eternal life” (John 6:68)—where else does one go to hear these truths? The LCMS has one of the greatest legacies for teaching God’s Word in purity so this is one of our greatest strengths in today’s environment. How we PRESENT them and ENGAGE people with them needs to change to accommodate our changing culture. (3) Our folks need to LIVE their faith and not simply display it as a political badge of honor or persecution (Ephesians 4, James 3, etc. and especially 2 Timothy 2:23-26). (4) Congregants need to understand that THEY have a greater influence individually over those outside of the church than the pastor, programs, worship, etc. Focusing on INTENTIONALLY building PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS is the key—not advertising, clever signs, etc. LIVING the word is more effective than PROSELYTIZING.

Come to think of it . . . as I reviewed my comments I realized that the major theme seems to be that the future is in the hands of our congregants, and we just need the synod to encourage this while not creating a hostile/divisive climate of its own.

I believe God has a plan to continue to bring the saving message of the Gospel to all people. At our urban congregation we have taken some new steps to follow a path we cannot see, but walk by faith. We embarked on a journey to hire and retain younger people in ministry leadership roles. This is not always easy with a middle-aged pastor and a mature staff. (Average tenure for staff of 20 is over 12 years). It is even more difficult because the major cultural shift we saw and continue to see is technological and tied to relationships/communications, not country of origin or language.

Last summer (2017) after 9 months of planning and fundraising, we opened a training program School of Young Leaders. We did this in partnership with <edited out> and the <edited out>, although our Church provided the initial fundraising, administrative support, and leadership. SOYL brings in young adults for an intensive summer of Bible teaching, communication instruction, life-skill building, and a chance to hear from older adults about how their faith and life have worked together.

We now (after 2 summers) have 8 students and two leaders housed in two locations with very reduced rent. We are working to help them find stable jobs, being/finish college level educational plans, and volunteer at local churches with their ministry talents.

These young people network VERY DIFFERENTLY than former generations. I do not understand because I did not grow up with a phone in my hand - a phone by the way which they rarely use as a phone! These young people grew up with a computer attached to their hand which allows them to communicate with anyone, anywhere, at any time.

We are beginning to see the fruit of our labor. A new praise team at my congregation led a new service with a coffee shop and music lounge. SOYL has led to congregations offering support in ways never expected. People are yearning to find a way to help missions if only they can see a tangible way to help. I am happy to talk about what we have seen and experienced. I do not pretend to have all, or even some of the answers. However, my outlook on ministry has been rejuvenated!

Absolutely! Open hearted ministry that engages the community should be encouraged. A posture of qualifying people for the kingdom, instead of coming up with reasons to disqualify people needs implementing. Encouragement to not rely on the professional clergy to do all the work of the church should be lifted up. Binding consciences and practices to unbiblical constraints need to be implemented.

Some of us represent very aware missional congregations that get it. Others of us (pastors) within the synod represent congregations and ourselves that sees the only form of mission as preserving what we have. I don't think this works out historically, but as much as these years grinds and hurt, I think we are getting closer to a stronger missional character. I hate to say this, but if we lost our buildings and traditions, we just might be forced to develop missional priorities within our congregation. I represent a large rural congregation soaked in "yesterday." Hearing thought/news that our synod and/or districts could go bankrupt for various reasons (poor decisions, being sued), I can actually see a force of the hand where the missional character just might be more prioritized. My first decade plus of ministry have not been easy. The generation of pastors retiring now got into ministry and probably had a lot of support from people their age. Most of my friends through my first 20 years have already left the church. The difficulty is the difference in perception of the church. There is one group that will not adjust, change, and seeks to preserve. The other grouping is folks who are ready to try anything, sometimes too much, but it's because they can see the future. What is the answer? I hate to say it, but the sooner we die, the sooner we can become alive. So, maybe the answer isn't "we're dying," but the answer is how can a congregation be made alive. The era of district

workshops and top down advice and programs is gone. The synod and the district would spend money better by helping congregations find the answer and develop their one unique programs. Has the industrial revolution finally peaked? Can we return to more realistic uniqueness amidst every congregation. . . . centered upon unity in Christ of course.

Invite worshippers to subscribe to text or email devotional materials and to share these materials with family, friends, kids at college, etc. Of course, not every pastor has the time, finances, etc. to prepare high quality materials but synod, district, communication specialists could do this.

Use as much audio/visual materials as possible in the worship service. Have as much congregational involvement as possible.

Serve Communion at every service. Encourage Bible memory work and Bible studies. Encourage community service for every church member.

Good morning. As I see your email, I figure that I can give you my opinion.

I would break this in some different principles.

First: Evangelism in this country on the street, social media, youth, Spanish is need to be intentional, and prepare to reach out constantly in front of every community in this country.

Second: I don't see the Lutheran Church reaching out for new people in the community with an update outreach program. Informing people about the church will play an important role in getting people through the doors of the church

Third: as a Spanish person, I haven't seen the investment in the pastors and leaders with for example, buildings, budget to be use to attract the people to the church. we are not living in the time when people use to come to church, because it was part of the culture, now we have to compete with the malls, the beach, the picnic, the graduations from colleges and people working Sundays and more. we have to create a way, flexibility in the shift that have become the norm and counter punch the enemy strategy.

Forth: Spanish communities are growing, so different denominational churches are growing fast. Why? they are using the right tools, the right cultural worship music, the right instruments, to attract them to come to their doors and after that they do assimilation, follow up, welcoming, hospitality, branding among them, outreach to their families, discipleship in a practical way etc.

Fifth: Being Intentional, investment, social media, special outreach, ministries with variety of approaches will help the church stop the bleeding.

well that is some of my opinions. God Bless you and I hope your church keep growing, not diminishing. I concentrate my principles in the Spanish community, because is one that maybe you need to pay more attention, so you can see the grow.

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