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Multiethnic Ministry: Some Obstacles and Insights to Overcoming Them

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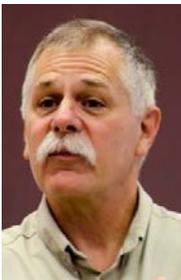
Editor's Note: The author was invited to respond to the preceding paper presented by Dr. Enoch Wan at the Multiethnic Symposium of Concordia Seminary, Jan. 24, 2017.

Abstract: Both missionary ministry and academic studies help identify barriers as well as bridges as cultures begin to live side-by-side. There are notable organizational as well as cultural and heart barriers which hinder robust partnerships between ethnic groups in the United States and established faith communities with whom connections are made. Some of these may be easily resolved. Others present significant challenges and subsequently require significant change.

Introduction

Multiethnic ministry is a noble goal, but it brings with it challenges that many individuals and organizations have yet to encounter. Through no fault of their own, people approach multiethnic ministry using lenses and worldviews from the world with which they are familiar, not recognizing the inherent flaws in that approach. This paper will attempt to take the normal 30,000-foot theological and missiological look at multiethnic ministry and bring it down to earth with everyday, on-the-ground practices and insights that the church might consider as it attempts to move toward a more multiethnic expression of the church in its own backyard. A teacher by trade, my thought process always moves toward the how to and what to do, and so this paper will share insights and ideas which you can take and apply or implement into your own ministry context.

This paper responds to a question that I was asked, “What do I know related to structural challenges which inhibit the ability of the LCMS to becoming a multicultural/multiethnic church, capable of *diaspora* outreach? How might the



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church navigate, or begin to navigate, the institutional challenges right here in the U. S. so we might be a multiethnic church body or at least working toward that dream?” Asked that question, I knew that I was limited in my ability to respond adequately; I am not an expert on multiethnic ministry. I have not tried to initiate a multiethnic church plant. I have not attempted to incorporate into an existing congregation a multiethnic expression of the church. Thus, my experience in this particular mission ministry is limited to say the least.

Having given reasons, and good ones at that, why you do not need to embrace the insights and ideas in this paper, there are reasons I believe I was asked to answer this question. I have worked in numerous cultures around the globe. I spent most of my boots-on-the-ground cross-cultural ministry in West Africa, but have worked across the African continent and taught and worked in Indonesia, the Philippines, Viet Nam, Kazakhstan, Mexico, Thailand, and a few other countries for shorter periods of time. I have spent time with mission leaders who have served in many places around the globe, including America; and our conversations have been robust and challenging. I have learned a few things along the way and hopefully some of those are translatable to our American context.

Probably the other reason you might consider embracing the insights and ideas in this paper, and maybe this the most important, is that I am not afraid to express my opinion, which of course, you are free to ignore, debate, or agree with and take and move to action.

One note as you wade through this paper—it seems that many, if not all, of the items I will mention are interrelated. When you touch on one issue, you are also touching a number of others. So please forgive me if this paper seems to repeat itself when entering a new topic.

Ethnic ministry as we are discussing it here is not a program. It is not a strategy. It is about people and at least two cultures, and all that they bring with it. If I were asked to tell you how Africans could do Caucasian ministry, you would think me a fool if I simply talked about one factor only: worship style, for example. That would not even begin to get the job done.

Let me share three pieces of wisdom—not my own, but I believe wisdom we could all take to heart.

First, it’s better to create something that others criticize than to create nothing and criticize others. In my church tribe, we have a tendency to do the second—offer up critique without giving valuable recommendations other than suggesting we continue to do the same things we have done in the past, only

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better. I encourage you to be creative, innovative, bold, courageous, and daring when wading into the waters of multiethnic ministry.

The second bit of wisdom, which I learned from Facebook of all places, is this: In times of change, learners become the leaders while the learned are the leaders of the world that no longer exists. If you are in a leadership position, be wary of your wisdom. The world is definitely in a time of change and those people who are in the midst of it, navigating it, investing deeply in it, and learning while they do so are the leaders within it. We need to listen more than we need to lead.

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Third, when beginning to form or gather a multiethnic community of faith, diversity must become a treasured value. The community must want it. And that will only happen when the community of faith experiences an uncomfortableness with the lack of diversity. Leadership needs to build a holy discontent. If a congregation or faith community truly and sincerely desires a multiethnic expression among the gathered faithful community, then movement can happen.

Once the movement begins based on a Christ-like desire for its reality, a multiethnic new normal will begin to supplant a desire to return to what was normal in the past. It will embrace what now is becoming and work hard to sustain it. Diversity must become a new normal in the life of the church. Tradition is a powerful motivator. If diversity becomes tradition, it will be difficult to change it.

1. Living in Exile—Ethnic Leaders Have Something to Teach Us

Regardless of how one labels or describes it, the church is no longer the center of the universe. It is living in a post-Christendom or postmodern world, or as some are bold to proclaim today, living in exile. And it has no idea how to do so. In my lifetime and yours, the LCMS has never been marginalized; never been pushed to the fringes. The church has worked and served and ministered in a world which respected and listened to its voice. The church has had privileged status. Add to that our white privilege—and the church has had a relatively easy row to hoe.

For Christians in the church of Acts, living as a church in exile was common from the beginning. Saul helped start the persecution, and it continued from the Roman emperor's throne. Peter wrote to the Christians who were living as a marginalized community, as a church in exile, persecuted and in fear, "Dear friends, I urge you, as foreigners and exiles, to abstain from sinful desires, which wage war against your soul. Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us" (1 Pt 2:11–12).

From the very beginning of his letter Peter labels them as such. He writes, “Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to God’s elect, exiles scattered throughout the provinces of Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia” (1 Pt 1:1). To paraphrase the comments of Rev. Dr. Robert Newton (President of the California-Nevada-Hawaii District of the LCMS) about these verses: Though a comma appears after the phrase “to God’s elect, exiles scattered”, another possible reading would be to remove the comma so it reads, “to God’s elect exiles, scattered,” reinforced by Peter’s follow-up comments from the verses in chapter two above. God, just as He chose the Old Testament Israelites to be His exiled people in the *diaspora* of Babylon and Assyria, people chosen by God to be scattered as seeds planted among the tares and weeds, chose these new Christians to be His exiles in the middle of a world they would have never chosen. And those new Christians began to learn how to live in that world and still impact God’s kingdom in powerful and effective ways. By the middle of the fourth century, some have estimated there were over 3.5 million Christians, populating over 50% of the Roman Empire. Now that is impact! How did they do that in three hundred years? What did they do?

Leap ahead two thousand years to today. Many people around the world today understand how to live in that world as exiles, marginalized and sidelined. Christians are jailed for being Christian. Churches are burned. Police halt gatherings. Governments give preference to non-Christian requests. They experience the persecution of the church, yet these modern-day Christians in exile still “git ‘er dun.”

Most of us in America have never experienced in any significant way or for any length of time—or even have a real sense of—what it is like to live and work as a Christian leader in places where the church is not at or near the center of the culture.

I was recently in Viet Nam several times to teach for the Lutheran Institute of Southeast Asia (LISA), the last time in Ho Chi Minh City. The church there is a quiet organization. It is not boastful or loud. And it is postured as such due to the constant watchful eye of the government over its work. But a few months before I taught there my second time, the Christian leadership development program was called into question by the public authorities. The LCMS missionary was present at that moment when they arrived. Try to put yourself in his shoes!

That missionary was also the one who received me in Ho Chi Minh City a few months later. He was subsequently told by the local Christian leaders it would be best if he were not around in Ho Chi Minh City while I taught. And I was told that we might have

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some visitors—and not the kind one is glad to see in your worship or teaching moment. How many of you even think about that type of possible persecution in America?

Many of the ethnic leaders in our midst know exactly how that feels, how that works, and how to manipulate the system in order to remain a ministry in those places. And they bring that mindset and worldview to America—a place where the church is slowly, at times quickly, and if not there already, moving ever so close to being the *diaspora* in exile. These wise, seasoned leaders understand that the church is not a given, that the ministry is always in jeopardy, that in a moment's notice, the doors might close and/or someone could be hustled off to the police station.

We Lutheran Christians in North America have much to learn from them. Multiethnic ministry will be possible only if we listen to these leaders and follow their lead as we enter this world of change. For as confident as we are about our understanding of our theology, we have much to learn about how to live that same theology in a new world which we have never experienced.

2. Partnership—What Is It?

When an organization has lived long with privilege and power and authority, and then add to that list a distinguished history as well as a powerful education system and assumed theological acumen as well as money, it is difficult for that organization to recognize the powerful platform on which it stands when trying to form partnerships in which each partner works together and alongside each other with equal privilege and power and authority. In multiethnic partnerships, it is difficult for the partner who has lived with privilege to share, let alone give away power and authority.

Let me share with you a short definition of partnership which has served me well. Shared Risk + Shared Responsibility = Shared Rewards. Partnerships need to be built on trust and mutual admiration for one another. Each partner brings to the table the resources, gifts, skills, and wisdom that his is able to supply in an honest, transparent, conversation and dialogue. No partner can assume authority and power over another simply because it seems to bring more to the table/partnership.

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Partnerships require several things. First of all, when dealing with two or more culture groups, cross-cultural competency is required, and not just from the dominant culture group, but from all culture groups sitting at the table. But let me say this to the dominant Anglo culture in our LCMS congregations: The ethnic communities

which surround you, which live among you and which drive to work each day and go to Walmart and McDonalds and the bank and sports fields and schools, know your culture far better than you know theirs. They negotiate and navigate our America each and every day—just in order to survive. They may not know why we do all the things we do, but you know far less about their culture than they know about yours.

Remember this when you begin to work toward multiethnic ministry: The visitor knows you better than you think they do, and you have very little knowledge about the life and culture of the immigrant in your midst. In that regard, as partnership conversations begin, might I suggest that you find people who are bi- and tri-cultural, who want to understand and are committed to understanding the cultures of people different from themselves. Those who are familiar with the consequences and outcomes when cultures come together have an invaluable contribution to make. Find people who dream in multicultural worldviews.

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Secondly, true partnerships can never be one-way conversations. One partner cannot determine the criteria for what is enough shared risk or shared responsibility or how much shared reward each partner receives in the equation. If one partner determines the criteria for what is enough shared, that partner then becomes a “super partner” with more power and voice. When one side dictates conditions and rewards, the outcome is a contract, not a living, dynamic partnership.

An issue closely related to this conversation is the following: Some ethnic communities would rather have an American partner invest resources into whatever project or program that partner chooses to support rather than lose the investment opportunity by pushing their own ideas. This has sometimes resulted in ministries started but never realized, assets accumulated but never used for ministry.

In my experience, very few national churches—and I believe it plays out in ethnic and multiethnic ministries in this country as well—believe that a mission vision they express will be supported. Why? They are afraid their vision will not connect with the vision of the powerful partner who is willing to share resources, and subsequently the ethnic community will lose the possibility of the investment. On the basis of past experiences with a host of mission funders, they have learned that unless their vision matches the partner’s vision *for them*, they will not receive support. As a result, ethnic leaders work very hard to determine which projects will

find better reception among their wealthier partners and pitch those particular types of projects, even if those projects do not support their real vision for themselves.

These conversations are genuinely courageous. But true partnership cannot exist if one party is perceived to hold the power and authority and is the final arbiter of decisions that need to be made, or if one or more parties are afraid to voice opinions, are afraid to share visions, or are afraid to participate fully because they believe that rewards will be changed if they do. Those scenarios describe a partnership in name only. Partnerships.Are.Not.One.Way!

3. Who Holds and Has Access to Leadership Authority and Power?

As I just mentioned, power and authority are significant issues in ethnic and multiethnic partnerships. In the LCMS, it is quite obvious who is in charge and holds the leadership and decision making powers. As many studies have shown, the LCMS is 95%+ white. And people in leadership reflect that reality even more starkly.

This fact is no different in our local congregations and faith communities. Local leadership on the church council or the chairs of committees reflect that same reality: almost all are members of the local white congregation, even in congregations desiring to move to multiethnic models.

One of the most obvious structural issues to address in moving toward a multiethnic congregation or faith community is found in the question, “Who has the authority, the power, the vote?” So consider your congregation’s church council or board of elders. How many people on those committees vote? And when the votes are counted, how many of them represent the white dominant culture? In my opinion, if 51% of the votes are white votes, you will never have an effective multiethnic faith community. The cultural superiority and decision-making processes are all slanted toward the local, normally white Lutheran church. If the faith community is to be white and Hispanic, over 50% of the votes need to be Hispanic. If the faith community is inviting several ethnicities into the community, then representation must be predominantly non-white vote.

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I have witnessed immigrant groups finally leave because they could not get along with the existing Anglo church, even though both sincerely intended it to work and tried hard to make it do so. The cultural distance was just too great, and the local white Lutheran congregation just could not embrace the differences or allow the immigrant group to lead; decisions were always made to benefit the existing Anglo church.

I have also experienced a courtesy allowed to ethnic groups to speak their mind and hearts, but a rigid, unrelenting ability to act on their wisdom. The local dominant church is simply not able to see through spectacles filled with multicultural lenses. Ethnic leadership as it begins to speak on those significant issues has local congregations listening, nodding politely, giving adequate moments to the issue being discussed, and they then simply ignore the comments and insights and wisdom shared and move on.

If a faith community desires to become multiethnic, the ethnic community or communities must have power and authority and voice and vote. In my opinion an Anglo dominant church that also holds the power and authority and voice and vote cannot lead a successful multiethnic faith community unless the ethnic communities coming together have already assimilated into American patterns, values, and worldviews.

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4. Generational Considerations in Multiethnic Ministry

Let me share another hurdle with which you all are probably aware. First-, second-, third-, and perhaps even fourth-generation realities exist. They cannot be ignored or overlooked. And though these few issues I will highlight are not exhaustive, they are important things to consider.

For example, it is difficult to create multiethnic community and worship when the heart language still needs to be spoken or at least used regularly for communication in worship or in meetings. Spoken language is a barrier, but so is nonverbal language: the styles and forms and practices. The various worldviews which shape people groups with their values and their presuppositions that underlie all manner of talk and thought and activity—all are barriers which need to be addressed.

Unfortunately, in my opinion, too many of us still hold to the presupposition that immigrants need to become like us in order for them to be successful in the West. They need to learn English, understand our Western customs and styles and forms, begin to think like Americans, and embrace our values; in the words of Nike, they need to be like Mike.

Assumptions that require those who come to America and wish to join Lutheran congregations or partner with Lutherans in beginning Lutheran congregations to become English speakers and thinkers must be re-imagined. If we hold that the Good News and theological constructs and doctrines can be clearly comprehended and understood only in English or German or Greek or Hebrew languages or translated

into another language from the texts we in the West have written and/or through American culture or Western forms and styles and structures, we are holding the Gospel hostage to an ethnocentric, myopic perspective contrary to Scripture. Remember Pentecost: The missionaries spoke in the languages of their ethnic visitors who came to Israel—it was not the other way around.

If the heart language (and all that term means) is the appropriate one for communicating the Good News, then multiethnic worship and ministry will be difficult. Ignoring this important part of anyone's world ignores that person's pre-suppositional starting points which make life work for him/her.

A second insight involves the type of ministries needed to help immigrants face the new world in which they now live. Local congregations that begin to connect with immigrant communities quickly discover that the types of ministries which they have highlighted and developed for their own communities do not meet immigrant needs.

Ethnic communities, especially those who are first and second generation, desire ministry programs that help them navigate issues most of us in this room have never addressed: immigration issues (green cards, work permits, government requirements), finding jobs and job interviewing, employer expectations of employees, security, accessing education, housing, ESL, time requirements, and many others we often pigeonhole as social ministry or social justice.

In matters of social ministry, a congregation's normal activity is often limited and realized, for example, by gathering bags of food for the food bank or heading to the nursing home to serve. Their normal practice does not allow the congregation nimbly to re-imagine and then refocus its ministries to reflect the immigrant needs. Check your church calendar, and you will notice that most ministries revolve around youth group activities, small groups, Sunday School, committee meetings, Bible studies, and maybe pre-schools/elementary schools. These ministries are very different from the ministry needs of many immigrant populations coming to America. It is important for faith communities to ask the multiethnic communities what would be most helpful and then boldly begin to develop those ministries.

Another generational barrier is the desire in most immigrant communities to remain connected to their homelands and countries of origin. When multiethnic groups gather, not all want to support the emphasis of one particular ethnic group in the same way. Connections, travel, communication, support, and participation in the life and lives of people back home draw similar communities together and mitigate against a multiethnic expression of community.

A good example is the Lutheran Sudanese community in the LCMS. As many of you know, they have developed a strong Sudanese Lutheran Mission Society which continues to connect in powerful ways with their family and church back home in Sudan. The Oromo Evangelical Lutheran Mission Society is a similar phenomenon.

For a multiethnic faith community to focus on one or even two ethnic communities back home, while neglecting other communities represented by other immigrant communities in their gatherings, requires a depth of understanding and willingness to do so. Rotating the support from one year to another might be a possible solution. But whatever the solution, it takes wisdom and Spirit-led leadership to navigate these difficult conversations

5. Seeing the Biblical World Through Different Cultural Lenses

Another issue which rankles our sensitivities has to do with understanding and interpreting Scripture. Let me begin with my own experiences as the former Regional Director to and local missionary in Africa. The use of Luther's Catechism was a handy resource. For the most part, Luther's contribution—the six chief parts: the Ten Commandments, Apostle's Creed, Lord's Prayer, Baptism, Office of the Keys, and the Lord's Supper—was helpful. But the farther one enters into that little book, the more obvious it becomes that the book was developed from a worldview asking questions that people in the West were asking.

For example, there is little, if anything, in the Catechism addressing polygamy, evil spirits, healings, sacrifice, local chieftom government forms, or communal life versus an individualistic life—all important issues in Africa. And there are many others. We have defined and explained sin from an individualistic guilt culture, which connects quite well in an American or Western context. But much of the world lives in a collective community, honor- and shame-based culture, where an act of sin or evil brings shame to the family or group, not just simply breaking a rule/commandment and subsequently feeling individually guilty about that act. How do you manage and implement Matthew 18, where the first step is approaching the other individual one-on-one when you live in a context where doing so is very inappropriate and forgiveness requires community involvement to solve interpersonal relationship problems?

The Catechism is just one example of how the West approaches biblical interpretation and teaching.

While at the seminary, I was told quite clearly that there was only one point of comparison, one main teaching or main truth in any of the parables. And that truth was exegetically dug out of the text with questions formed by a Western worldview. But when the Scriptures are being read and interpreted by other ethnicities, multiple comparisons and truths are identified. They are asking different and significant questions of the story and narrative.

While serving in Liberia, we studied the narrative of Joseph. I was taught as a young boy in Sunday School that the main teaching of the Joseph narrative was that despite the hardship, the difficult moments in Joseph's life, he persevered with God's help, that God never left him, that God had his back the entire 20+ years of that

journey. It taught me that I needed to continue to trust in God and His mysterious ways even when the road seemed difficult. God is in control.

I quickly found out that the Liberian Christians had a different main teaching. It was clear to them that Joseph, as a man of God, continued to care for his family, never forgetting them, even though they had done despicable things to him—selling him into slavery and precipitating all the fall-out that followed. Despite how Joseph (and people today) may have wanted revenge for being treated so poorly, a man of God will still love and protect and take care of his family. To the Liberian, Joseph’s life story clearly implied that taking care of one’s family is fundamentally important. It emerged as the moral of the story because their worldview—shaped by a community focus, not an individual focus—reigns supreme, and family is so very important.

In multiethnic ministry, Westerners simply cannot assume that we have the Bible figured out for all people in every culture. The task is to dig out the truth, preach it, and develop forms and styles which clearly communicate that message into the ears and hearts of those who listen. Remember St. Paul in Romans 10? He asked two questions: Did the Israelites hear the message and did they understand the message? If both of those questions cannot be answered in the positive, it is incumbent upon the communicators to re-fashion their communication modes so that the listeners are able to connect with God their Father.

But probably much more significant is the following. In the West, we emphasize facts and systematic structures and proof texts and doctrine and by so doing pay attention to the mind, ignoring the rest of the person. We simply do not know how to connect facts and faith with the real starting point for many who come to America from other places across the globe: the heart, soul, and body. Immigrant groups are constantly reminding us, that is, if we are willing to listen and learn, that Americans don’t live with God in every moment. For many people on this planet, all life is extraordinary. All life is supernatural. There is no separation between the physical, empirical world and the spiritual world. They are one. Unlike Americans who can leave God in church on Sunday morning, and then add Him at mealtimes, evening prayers, and devotions, immigrants realize His presence while harvesting crops, driving a taxi, going to work, simply breathing. Americans talk this reality but hardly ever experience it.

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explore scriptural truths together and allow the worldviews of the West to be informed and broadened by the insights and worldviews their ethnic partners bring to the reading of the same biblical texts. Christian leaders in the West might be able to talk theology, but many of them cannot decode another society. Western Christians simply cannot assume that we have the Bible figured out for all people in every culture. I believe this task requires Western partners to ask their ethnic partners how to address issues scripturally and how to understand narratives without first offering answers. In addition, Western partners need to learn and practice what it means to not only have faith in our heads, but to live and breathe it. Allowing our Christian brothers and sisters to teach and lead and model that reality to which we Americans give lip service is a start.

6. Structures, Strategies, Methods, Forms, and Styles

A significant stumbling block for successful multiethnic ministries is the LCMS's reliance and often insistence on specific forms, styles, methods, strategies, and structures. For example, while attending a conference in South Africa, a leader from one of the LCMS seminaries led morning worship. Each day we used Matins. The form is rather static. We stood for much of the worship. At one point during the day, the Bishop of the Lutheran Church of South Africa, in a conversation about using drums in worship, asked why we were told to stand for worship, especially when the Gospel was read. The response was that the form shows respect to God. The Bishop then noted that among the Zulu, when the chief arrives in the room, respect is shown by sitting down. Rather than using the appropriate form for the dominant Zulu members present, which communicated the awesome respect reserved for God, the powerful Western leadership in that room decided, unknowingly, that teaching a new way to show respect was necessary. They simply assumed that their form was universal. They had not learned the cultural patterns of the South African Zulu. And when they did realize the difference, they continued to practice their same form the following days.

Models used in international contexts from where ethnic leadership arrives are not, in my opinion, valued in the West. In fact the models, though often praised and applauded as they were implemented internationally, are ridiculed or severely limited when attempting to implement them in our own local mission fields. Ethnic church planters and pastors who arrive in the West and have not studied theology through an accredited institution, attended a seminary, or in our specific Western context, Ethnic Immigrant Institute of Theology or Specific Ministry Pastor models are not given the permission or credentials to serve as church planting leaders without the appropriate training the LCMS decides is necessary, including all the fiscal burdens associated with that training. And if some leaders are given permission to lead, it is usually with strings attached. They can lead, but are not given permission to do so in similar ways as they did back in their homes—as lay pastors in Word and Sacrament ministries.

An additional set of rules and regulations is placed on them if they desire to continue leading people into God's mission.

The assumption that the LCMS has developed correct responses and forms allows us to export them into international contexts with our partner churches. Liberian Lutheran leadership admitted to me just recently that they have adopted forms and styles of the LCMS without a clear reason for doing so other than that they believe partnership is based on similar forms and styles.

The LCMS recently was found teaching the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus (EECMY) leadership how to chant the Western liturgy, as if that will enhance and embolden their church's ministry. Yet, the EECMY, a fifty-eight-year-old church body, which was instituted as a National Church in 1959, 112 years after the LCMS, has 8,500 congregations, 4,000 preaching stations, and 8.6 million members. It regularly adds a 150,000 new people yearly to its membership, all in a country of 80 million people. On the other hand, the LCMS has been around since 1847—over 150 years—in a country of 315 million, and we have only 2 million members and are losing thousands each and every year. Yet the LCMS, in my opinion, acts and talks and postures itself as if it is the expert.

I believe the EECMY should be teaching us, not the other way around. How about this for structural change: Ethiopian and Eritrean Lutheran leadership in this country serve as District Mission Execs and/or in mission leadership roles in the LCMS's Office of International or National Mission? Who from these missionary-minded people groups are members on our LCMS Board of Mission?

Being the Church of God today does not mean dictating to people the right words, the right structure, the right model, the right forms, or which organization or Christian group is allowed to be a partner. If the dominant local faith community decides that a requirement is the use of traditional Western forms in order for ministry to thrive, multiethnic ministry will struggle. Ethnic groups need the freedom to develop partnerships and use the strategies and methods which they know connect with their communities, as well with as other ethnic communities that surround them. In our church, it is hard to imagine a single ethnic group being allowed this freedom.

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7. Resources—Ministry with or without Them

Though this may not be as important as other insights, I simply need to share it because once again, we do not have this value in our own DNA. Multiethnic ministry, as seen from a district office or a congregation, normally begins with a huge question for us in the West: “Where will we find the resources?” Most of us in the West don’t even begin to imagine and dream and vision unless all the resources are in place or at least the possibility to accumulate them is viable. It is how we sell the vision. Rather than selling a vision because of its mission to reach people for Christ, we sell a vision to people once we know the resources to begin and hopefully accomplish the vision are already in hand or promised; or we pitch the vision, knowing that the budget is up for grabs and we need our slice of the pie. That is a mindset of a people who don’t live in exile, who are not marginalized.

On the other hand, imagine living as a Christian in a place where the church has no access, no voice, no place or space or resources. How would we ever get anything done? I have yet to meet an immigrant leader who has asked for support and funds and other resources give up and stop his vision from being implemented when he is told there were no funds and resources available. Giving up is not the mindset of a Christian who grew up where the church is on the fringe.

It becomes difficult to maintain this mindset when well-meaning organizations and individuals pour money and resources into places where the Christian church has thrived without them. I constantly remind Christian leaders that it does not require resources to share the Good News found in Jesus Christ. But the model Western Christians bring to these places is one that starts with resources and hopefully ends with success.

Please don’t interpret these words as coming from someone who is anti-support. On the contrary, I am a firm believer in Christians’ supporting and helping other Christians. But the West has created dependency. It has created models which are unsustainable once resources required to develop and build and sustain are removed due to economic downturns, budget cuts, or, more often the case, a loss of interest in the particular ministry, and funds are diverted to the next exciting Christian adventure.

The West has much to learn from leaders who persevere in Christian ministry, and who even grow the church when resources are lacking. Any multiethnic expression of ministry needs innovative and creative ethnic leaders who see resources as only one obstacle

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in the way. This means that the Western mindset of resources first, then ministry needs to change. It must allow these creative and innovative ideas to flourish and

take root even when resources seem lacking. At the least, Western congregations need to listen and then step out in faith or step out of the way.

8. Money

As long as I brought it up, money is a problem but also a wonderful resource. So let me briefly address this touchy subject. As I mentioned earlier, money is clearly and closely associated with power and authority and often drives decisions on both sides of the checkbook. Resource decisions among partners is multifaceted. Subscribing to the partnership equation “Shared Risk + Shared Responsibility = Shared Rewards” is a start. But let me share specific suggestions and some personal advice based on my experience in working with this issue.

First and foremost, as resource agreements are made, support ministry, not ministry positions. Give support to the ministry in an undesignated fashion and allow the leadership receiving the support to determine how those funds should be used to support their vision. The request may include support for funding positions or people but do not designate support for positions. It is up to the ministry to decide how to use the support: salary/support for a position, programs, day-to-day budget needs, etc. Ongoing support designated for salaries binds a support partner and the receiving partner to that funded person’s ability to stay and do ministry. However, there is never a guarantee that a person is the right fit, that funds budgeted remain constant, or that the interest of the funding partner will continue. When the receiving church is in control of its own budget, it is enabled to grow in its ability to manage its own affairs and is reciprocated in trust-building between partners.

My second piece of advice: Don’t be the money police. If a program is funded, release the funds to the ministry to run the program. Do not distribute it in bits and pieces as reports are given that satisfy the grantor’s dreams. I understand that this is not always possible—large sums or long-term grants and other reasons might mitigate against this policy. But as often as possible, distribute the funds for the budget year in a lump sum. At year’s end, initiate required evaluations and assessments to determine reasons for success and failure, and move forward with future decisions from there. Do not be labeled as the money police.

Finally, never connect money with partnership agreements. When money is connected to partnership agreements, it is immediately and intimately connected to power, authority, influence, manipulation, and in my opinion egregiously so. I have recently

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seen international partnership documents from the LCMS that connect these two items. It is simply wrong to “buy” partners. Money should never be used as a tool to gain compliance from another.

Wrap-up

Attempting to form multiethnic ministries and faith communities is a God-given task blessed by Him and guided by His Spirit. It requires local, existing faith communities desiring diversity in their midst. Without an honest, Holy Spirit-, Revelation 7-driven desire, the outcome will simply be a white-dominated church with immigrants who are willing to be like Mike.

Let me close with a personal comment. I do not care what forms ethnic Christians—let me say that again, **Christians**—use in multiethnic Christian worship, in what order ethnic Christians place the parts of their worship, what day ethnic Christians gather, whom ethnic Christians as a congregation have chosen to be their leaders and pastors, what organizations are chosen to be partners, etc. And as those Christians make those decisions based on the faith they have been given by the Holy Spirit and guided by the Scriptures, authentic worship and praise will be sent to the heavens, and God will hear their gifts of praise and serve them with His gifts.

Having noted that, I may not agree with them. I cannot imagine I would agree with every decision made to move multiethnic ministry forward. I expect that some people, including me, would not be comfortable in some multiethnic community worship or ministry moment—even those in LCMS settings. But, in my humble opinion, we spend so much time criticizing Christians, even those among our own tribe, that those who still do not know Jesus live and die without Him. We expend energy and time trying to get the message right and coercing others to comply rather than getting the message out! We are so convinced that if we, and those we oversee, do not have it perfect, God’s Spirit cannot work and the result will be a faith which damns rather than saves. We need to stop making ourselves so important, quit believing that we are the gatekeeper of the Spirit’s work, quit the posturing which indicates that only we have the correct answer to all the questions being asked and let God through His Holy Spirit lead.

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If we are about His Kingdom building, and not our kingdom building, focused on people meeting Jesus and the claims He has on their life, then we need to get out of His way and let Him do His work, even if at times it might press us to reexamine our own truth and confess our sins rather than begin with an assumption that we are

right and they are wrong and thus free to condemn or criticize. I believe Gamaliel was wise, and maybe, just maybe, we should take his advice: “for if this plan or this work is of men, it will come to nothing; but if it is of God, you cannot overthrow it—lest you even be found to fight against God” (Acts 5:38–39). That just might mean giving advice only when we are asked.

Thanks for this opportunity to share. May God bless His efforts through us to impact heaven’s population.