

# ***Lutheran Mission Matters***



Volume XXVII, No. 1 (Issue 54) May 2019

# Lutheran World Relief: Seventy-Five Years of Faithfulness in Mission

Jon Diefenthaler

**Abstract:** Founded in 1945, out of a desire to send emergency aid to war-torn Europe, Lutheran World Relief is now engaged in “relief” and “development” projects designed to meet the physical needs of victims of natural disasters as well as families facing abject poverty on a daily basis in forty-two countries around the world. This article argues that an examination of the nearly seventy-five-year history of this independent, pan-Lutheran organization provides another example of the faithfulness in mission that Jesus’ parable in Matthew 25:14–30 highlights for us. At the same time, the author asserts that LWR has remained true to the Lutheran tradition of human care, and that it is currently modeling several pathways that may help lead to the revitalization of Lutheran churches in post-churched America.

The year 2020 will mark the seventy-fifth anniversary of Lutheran World Relief (LWR). Lutherans throughout North America are already being asked to observe this important milestone by giving thanks for all that God has accomplished through the work of this organization and to renew their commitment to serving their international neighbors who face poverty, suffering, and injustices on a daily basis. Delegates to the 2019 Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS) Convention in Tampa will be given an opportunity to consider encouraging their congregations to set aside an annual Sunday to bring the work of LWR to the attention of their members and to avail themselves of the tools and resources that it will freely provide to educate, inspire, and motivate them to support this same organization with their prayers, hands, and financial gifts.<sup>1</sup>

Several members of the Lutheran family of denominations in North America founded LWR in the immediate aftermath of World War II in Europe. A visit to a defeated Germany, devastated by heavy Allied bombing, on the part of Ralph Long, who at the time was serving as the executive director of the National Lutheran



*Rev. Dr. Jon Diefenthaler is a president emeritus of the LCMS Southeastern District. He is currently serving as a church-relations advisor for Lutheran World Relief and as an adjunct professor at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis. He received his PhD in American Religious History from the University of Iowa, and he lives in Columbia, Maryland. [jtdiefen@aol.com](mailto:jtdiefen@aol.com)*

Copyright 2019 Lutheran Society for Missiology. Used by permission.

View Lutheran Mission Matters 27, no. 1 (2019) at <https://lsfm.global/>.

Membership in LSFM is available at <https://lsfm.global/joinlsfm.html>.

E-mail [lsfmissiology@gmail.com](mailto:lsfmissiology@gmail.com) to purchase a print copy of a single issue.

Council (NLC), Augustana Synod President P. O. Bersell, and Lawrence Meyer of the LCMS, followed by another visit that included LCMS President John W. Behnken, provided the impetus. The spectacle of thousands of people, some of whom had Lutheran relatives back in the United States, who were displaced, homeless, and on the brink of starvation, deeply moved them. Without delay, therefore, LWR was incorporated in October of 1945 as an independent nonprofit organization for the purpose of giving Lutherans in America a way to respond to this life-or-death humanitarian crisis.<sup>2</sup>

Since its inception in 1945, LWR has expanded its efforts to provide particularly Lutherans with opportunities to put their faith into action. The current list includes forty-two countries, located in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and more recently the war-torn Middle East. Emergency aid in the wake of earthquakes, hurricanes, and famines, as well as human disasters, continues to be dispatched in the form of hand-crafted quilts, all fashioned in Lutheran churches and homes across the country, along with personal care and school kits assembled most often by various other groups within their congregations, plus food and clean water supplies. Such “relief” is often augmented with cash-for-work programs, shelter repair kits, and tools for teaching aid recipients how to be better prepared in the event of future disasters. In addition, the mission of LWR has become one of helping end poverty in our world. “Development” projects are purposely designed to enable regional partners to come alongside small, local farmers to equip them with better agricultural techniques, to organize them into cooperatives, to help them with short-term loans, and to assist them with the marketing of what they grow. The objective is “lasting results” that will put them on the way to self-sufficiency and give their families and communities the hope of a better future.

The objective is “lasting results” that will put [local farmers] on the way to self-sufficiency and give their families and communities the hope of a better future.

For the past three-quarters of a century, LWR has clearly demonstrated faithfulness in mission. It has been true not only to the mission of God in Christ in our world, but to the Lutheran heritage of human care. Such faithfulness also has been reflected in its administration of the resources that Lutherans and other agencies have supplied, and, like the faithful servants in Jesus’ parable in Matthew 25:14–30, LWR has prudently invested these in ways that have served to transform the lives of millions of people in need around the world. At the same time, or so I will contend in this article, there are features of the LWR’s faithfulness in mission that can serve to strengthen Lutherans and their congregations in bearing witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ as they reach out to their neighbors in the post-churched environment of twenty-first century North America.

Copyright 2019 Lutheran Society for Missiology. Used by permission.

View *Lutheran Mission Matters* 27, no. 1 (2019) at <https://lsfm.global/>.

Membership in LSFM is available at <https://lsfm.global/joinlsfm.html>.

E-mail [lsfmissiology@gmail.com](mailto:lsfmissiology@gmail.com) to purchase a print copy of a single issue.

## **Faithfulness in Christ's Mission to the World**

LWR has been faithful throughout the course of its history in furthering the mission of God in Christ. All of the New Testament Gospel writers make numerous references to the fact that Jesus sought to address the physical as well as the spiritual needs of the people whom He encountered during His days on earth. In Luke 6:17–19, for example, the author tells us of the great crowd of people from all over Palestine and beyond who came “to hear him and to be healed of their diseases.”<sup>3</sup> They “all tried to touch him, because power was coming from him and healing them all.” It is only then that St. Luke goes on to set forth his version of Jesus’ Beatitudes. For evidence of Christ’s concern for hungry people, moreover, one has only to read Luke 9:10–17, where Jesus saw to it that five thousand of them were fed.

The disciples whom Jesus called to be His apostles clearly sought to carry on these same aspects of His mission to the world. Already in Acts 3:6, St. Luke informs us that it was Peter, as he was being accompanied by John, who said to the crippled beggar at the temple gate, “Silver and gold I do not have, but what I have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk.” In Acts 5:12–16 we read of the people who “brought the sick into the streets and laid them on beds and mats so that at least Peter’s shadow might fall on some of them as he passed by.” And in Acts 6:1–6, we learn of the “seven” who were chosen to look after the well-being of widows in “the daily distribution of food” among the growing number of Jesus’ followers.

Throughout the course of its history, LWR has sought to create significant ways for Lutherans in particular to implement this same apostolic mandate. The emphasis it has consistently placed on meeting the physical needs of people without any religious, ethnic or political conditions, however, has been the subject of conversation, and even debate, within, as well as outside of, the organization. “How does LWR bear witness to the Gospel that is at the center of the Christian confession of faith in God?” is a question that has been asked many times over the years. A “Critical Review” of its operations in the early 1960s stated that LWR “recognizes that the purpose of its existence is to provide explicit Christian witness through service related to specific needs and that normally the witness will be expressed in

There are features of the LWR’s faithfulness in mission that can serve to strengthen Lutherans and their congregations in bearing witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ as they reach out to their neighbors in the post-churched environment of twenty-first century North America.

the lives of the people who carry out the program.” It also asserted that LWR seeks to give “special consideration” to projects where there is “a strong Lutheran presence” and to ones that serve to extend and to strengthen “the life and witness of the church.” Veteran LWR board member, Paul Empie, added that while relief “should not be an instrument of evangelism,” the “style of service and Christian personalities of staff bear witness to Christ.”<sup>4</sup>

Since then, LWR leaders have continued to insist, as chief executive Kathryn Wolford did in 1988, that “the healing, reconciling and transforming ministry of Jesus is an act of discipleship” and that it is “our individual responsibility as Christians and our corporate responsibility as the Church to serve people in need throughout the world.”<sup>5</sup> Others have argued that by giving witness to the Christian faith in nonverbal ways, LWR has avoided the impression of using food and other forms of material assistance in order to seduce people into becoming “rice Christians.” And still others have stated that when LWR is permitted to work in countries where the church is excluded, it has a God-given opportunity to correct negative images of Christianity.<sup>6</sup>

More recently, LWR has purposely sought concrete ways to work with churches abroad and at home in their efforts to reach overseas populations through Gospel proclamation. It recognizes that the seeds sown by evangelists and missionaries are more likely to take root in places where the soil has been prepared for them through the meeting of people’s physical needs. This, in fact, is one of the reasons the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania (ELCT) and LWR have continued to maintain their strong partnership. While ELCT’s diocesan network of congregations and preaching stations function as the delivery system for the material resources that LWR supplies for the prevention and treatment of malaria, the life-saving difference this effort to alleviate human suffering makes in people’s daily lives has helped to fuel the ELCT’s rapid membership growth.<sup>7</sup>

LWR has purposely sought concrete ways to work with churches abroad and at home in their efforts to reach overseas populations through Gospel proclamation.

“Isaiah 58:10—Project Kenya” is the name of a current effort supported by five of the largest congregations in the LCMS. Here LWR, at the request of the senior pastors of these same churches, has partnered with Lutheran Hour Ministries (LHM) in order to address the spiritual as well as the physical needs of people in one of the poorest regions of East Africa. LWR has focused its expertise on helping the impoverished farmers and their families become more self-sufficient. In this regard, programmatic elements have included the planting of varieties of crops that better withstand drought and heat, the introduction of poultry as an additional source of

income, the establishment of village savings and loans, and business-plan training for farmer organizations. In turn, LHM has aimed at building the capacity of Lutheran congregations in this same region through the use of training programs for evangelists. As a result of this partnership, the lives of some twenty-five thousand people have been transformed.<sup>8</sup>

## **Faithful to the Lutheran Tradition of Human Care**

In seeking to fulfill its mission, LWR has been faithful to the robust Lutheran tradition of human care. As a figure in history, Martin Luther was a “game changer,” one who turned the commonly held understanding in his day of what it means to be Christian upside down. While the accent of medieval Christianity was on how we, with the aid of clergy-directed church rituals and practices, must come to God, Luther emphasized how God comes to us through Word and sacraments. Justification by grace through God-created and God-sustained faith in His Son Jesus Christ’s accomplishments, rather than one’s own, became the article on which the church stands or falls. As Reformation scholar Robert Kolb has pointed out, one of the key ways Luther framed his revolutionary thinking was with his two-kingdoms distinction, one that emphasizes how God is the ultimate ruler in both the “temporal” and the “spiritual” realms of life in this world.<sup>9</sup>

Luther’s “temporal” realm focuses our attention not only on God as the Creator of the world, but on His ongoing determination to preserve, to protect, and to further the wellbeing of everyone and everything in it. This is indeed the realm in which God works through governments and rulers in authority. But God has also given these same “temporal” responsibilities to every member of the human family. In Genesis 1:28, God commands us to employ beneficent ways to “rule over” not only the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, but over “every living creature that moves on the ground.” In Genesis 2:15, moreover, we have the example God putting those whom He has created in His own image into the Garden of Eden to “work it and take care of it.”

Luther’s “spiritual” realm, on the other hand, is grounded in the work of redemption performed by Jesus Christ. The chief center of its activity is the church, where the Gospel is proclaimed and delivered to people through the sacraments as well as in the word of God. The work within this realm is carried out by pastors and other church workers. But their objective is always to empower the laity whom they serve to give witness to the Gospel in all of their callings in life, through both the faith they place in God above all else and by means of their acts of love toward their neighbors in the world around them. For all of Jesus’ followers, it is a matter of living out the “great commandment,” to which He still directs our attention (Mt 22:37–39). While their purposes clearly differ, the two realms, as Luther saw it, constantly intersect with each other in the daily lives of every follower of Jesus

Copyright 2019 Lutheran Society for Missiology. Used by permission.

View Lutheran Mission Matters 27, no. 1 (2019) at <https://lsfm.global/>.

Membership in LSFM is available at <https://lsfm.global/joinlsfm.html>.

E-mail [lsfmissiology@gmail.com](mailto:lsfmissiology@gmail.com) to purchase a print copy of a single issue.

Christ. As human beings, we are indeed called in the “temporal” realm to partner with God the Creator in furthering the preservation and care of everything in the world that He first brought into being. But at the same time, it is in the “spiritual” realm that we partner with God in the redemptive work of His Son, whose Spirit sustains us so that we might be empowered on the basis of love for our neighbors to actually carry out our God-given “temporal” responsibilities.<sup>10</sup>

Care for the poor is one of these same “temporal” responsibilities that Luther modeled for us in his *Ordinance of a Common Chest*. In this treatise, he upended the medieval view of poverty. The church had tried for centuries to make it a virtue. The vow of poverty turned monks and mendicants into beggars, whom he and others encountered in public places almost everywhere. In addition to this, “handouts” given to the poor had become just another way for the more pious rank-and-file to merit their salvation. In contrast to this ecclesiastical perversion, Luther’s desire was to alleviate, if not to end, poverty. For this reason, he helped see to it that a “common chest” was set up in Wittenberg, as well as in the nearby town of Leisnig, and seeded with money from the income of monasteries and other church properties that the Reformation movement had now put at the disposal of local and regional governments in various parts of Germany. The “chest” made gifts and loans available to all the needy in the land. Ongoing funding for this experiment in

As human beings, we are indeed called in the “temporal” realm to partner with God the Creator in furthering the preservation and care of everything in the world that He first brought into being. But at the same time, it is in the “spiritual” realm that we partner with God in the redemptive work of His Son, whose Spirit sustains us so that we might be empowered on the basis of love for our neighbors to actually carry out our God-given “temporal” responsibilities.

“social welfare” came from the alms and coin boxes in churches and a quarterly tax that the government levied on its citizens. Administration of the “chest” was assumed by ten trustees, who represented all classes in the community, rural peasantry as well as the nobility, among whom keys to four separate locks to the “chest” were distributed. The motive for this “common chest” that Luther articulated in his treatise was that “all internal and external possessions of Christian believers are to serve and contribute to the honor of God and the love of the fellow Christian neighbor.”<sup>11</sup>

Helping the poor and other forms of human care remained an integral part of the Lutheran tradition that followed Luther’s Reformation. The Pietist movement that

Copyright 2019 Lutheran Society for Missiology. Used by permission.

View *Lutheran Mission Matters* 27, no. 1 (2019) at <https://lsfm.global/>.

Membership in LSFM is available at <https://lsfm.global/joinlsfm.html>.

E-mail [lsfmissiology@gmail.com](mailto:lsfmissiology@gmail.com) to purchase a print copy of a single issue.



swept through its European churches in the eighteenth century tended to accentuate this. At the University of Halle, for example, August Herman Francke's compassion for the needy as well as the lost led him to establish a school for poor children, an orphanage, a home for widows, and a pharmacy and hospital for the sick. Halle soon became the center of Lutheranism that helped facilitate the sending of Henry Melchior Muhlenberg to America, where this Lutheran "patriarch" faithfully ministered to families scattered throughout the colonial landscape. What Muhlenberg, as well as other Lutheran missionaries, provided for those who were in need of healing was not only prayer, but medicines from the case with which Halle had furnished for them.<sup>12</sup> Among Lutherans in America during the nineteenth century, it was William A. Passavant in particular who, much like the champions on the German home front of the "inner missionary" human-care movement, stood out because of his dedication to founding and promoting of Lutheran orphanages and hospitals and, in conjunction with them, establishing programs for the training of female deaconesses capable of attending to the physical as well as the spiritual needs of patients.<sup>13</sup>

In Germany at the time, Wilhelm Loehe's heart for mission was similarly "holistic." It prompted him not only to establish a missionary training center, but to found first a deaconess house, then a rescue home for the poor, and then hospitals for women as well as men. Loehe's "Institute" in the Bavarian village of Neuendettelsau also appears to have performed a role similar to that of Halle for some of the earliest Missouri Synod Lutherans, one that served to encourage the missionaries he sent to the American frontier to set up ministries for persons with disabilities and special needs. Interestingly, Pastor G. Speckhard, a great grandfather of the current LWR President and CEO Daniel Speckhard, was a pioneering leader during the 1870s in work begun on behalf of the LCMS among deaf persons in Detroit and throughout the state of Michigan.<sup>14</sup>

On his visit to war-torn Germany in 1945, LCMS President John W. Behnken found himself haunted at the sight of refugees, some shuffling along the roads while pushing carts or carrying bundles of all their remaining possessions, others in long queues waiting for a bowl of potato soup, and still others huddled closely together in the railroad station corners in order to keep one another warm. "Obviously something had to be done, and very quickly," he wrote in his memoir, "for the relief of these homeless, wandering, suffering thousands."<sup>15</sup> Behnken's Missouri Synod did not officially affiliate itself with LWR until 1955, choosing instead, as it had in the past, to employ its own "Emergency Planning Council." The unofficial support LCMS congregations provided for LWR's "relief" effort, however, was significant.<sup>16</sup> In addition, Behnken, ever-mindful of Missouri's "fellowship" concerns, had already drawn a distinction in 1941, on the eve of America's entry into World War II, between the "physical" and the "spiritual" side of joint Lutheran ministries.<sup>17</sup> By the 1960s, therefore, the LCMS was ready to affirm his rubric of "cooperation in

Copyright 2019 Lutheran Society for Missiology. Used by permission.

View *Lutheran Mission Matters* 27, no. 1 (2019) at <https://lsfm.global/>.

Membership in LSFM is available at <https://lsfm.global/joinlsfm.html>.

E-mail [lsfmissiology@gmail.com](mailto:lsfmissiology@gmail.com) to purchase a print copy of a single issue.



externals” (strictly humanitarian ministries). The LCMS also saw fit in convention in 1965 to adopt a ground-breaking series of “Mission Affirmations.” Among these was the assertion that “The Church is Christ’s Mission to the Whole Man,” which went so far as to state that “God’s mission to the world in Christ brings human life to its fullness” and that the “whole man, not only the soul, is meant to have eternal life here now in time and to have the full realization of it when he enjoys full fellowship with God beyond the limitations of space and time.”<sup>18</sup>

In seeking to be faithful to this long-standing tradition of human care, LWR has sought to expand the scope of Lutheran efforts to respond to physical human needs out into the world beyond our North American borders. Like Martin Luther, this organization recognizes that ending poverty and alleviating human suffering are “temporal” responsibilities to which we as human beings, created in God’s own image, are called to carry out in the world their Creator is determined to preserve. At the same time, LWR continues to welcome ways to partner with churches committed to the “spiritual” task of Gospel outreach in ways that will strengthen the efforts of both parties. For example, LWR is currently providing a “mercy” component that complements the “witness” efforts of the LCMS and some of its partner churches in Latin America. Projects involve everything from much-needed services for intellectually and developmentally delayed young adults in the Dominican Republic, to after-school programs that support inner-city children in Chile and Peru, to building community centers in rural regions of Uruguay and Paraguay.<sup>19</sup> Above all, LWR has been faithful in creating opportunities for Lutherans in America to exercise the love of neighbor that remains a chief outcome of their Word and Sacrament ministries, and thereby to put their faith in Jesus Christ into action in ways that promise to bring the hope of new life to millions of people around the world.

### **Faithful Stewards of God’s Gifts**

“Well done, good a faithful servant!” was the commendation in Jesus’ parable in Matthew 25 that the master heaped upon each of the two servants who had wisely invested what he had entrusted to them. “You have been faithful with a few things,” or so he told them; “I will put you in charge of many things” (Mt 25:19–23). Throughout the past seventy-five years, LWR has likewise attempted to make the best possible use of the support it has received from every funding source in order to enlarge the scope of its God-entrusted mission to impoverished populations and to disaster victims on the world scene. Already in 1945, when the government in Washington was resisting the idea of providing “relief” for recent mortal enemies, President Franklin Clark Fry of the United Lutheran Church in America (ULCA) went to the White House and helped persuade President Truman to intervene on behalf of LWR. By March of 1946, therefore, sorely needed “relief” began to flow through LWR from America into Germany. During the Cold War of the 1950s,

Copyright 2019 Lutheran Society for Missiology. Used by permission.

View *Lutheran Mission Matters* 27, no. 1 (2019) at <https://lsfm.global/>.

Membership in LSFM is available at <https://lsfm.global/joinlsfm.html>.

E-mail [lsfmissiology@gmail.com](mailto:lsfmissiology@gmail.com) to purchase a print copy of a single issue.

moreover, when objections were raised to aiding people whose governments might not be sympathetic to America's foreign policy or to the beliefs of Christians, Edwin Nerger, an LWR board member and venerable LCMS pastor of historic St. Paul's congregation in Ft. Wayne, Indiana, called attention to the New Testament words of Jesus, "If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you?" (Lk 6:33) and to the apostle Paul's imperative, "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him drink" (Rom 12:20). As a result, LWR was able to help provide the breakfast and lunch that nearly two million public-school students in Yugoslavia might not otherwise have received.<sup>20</sup> This same policy of aiding people in need without discrimination remains one that LWR for the sake of its God-given mission has consistently sought to follow.

This same policy of aiding people in need without discrimination remains one that LWR for the sake of its God-given mission has consistently sought to follow.

In order to multiply its impact as a comparatively small organization with limited resources, LWR has taken a number of other notable steps over the years. For one thing, as "relief" work in Europe was being supplanted by equally urgent opportunities on other continents, LWR's leadership at the outset of the 1960s decided that, in the interest of becoming as effective as possible, it would be best to concentrate the organization's resources on international emergencies and to let Lutheran and other church bodies and agencies, with few exceptions, deal with domestic disasters. In addition, these same leaders realized that the "relief" LWR was providing was only temporary and that more than a "hand-out" would be necessary if people were to get to the point of standing "on their own two feet." As a result, the new decade brought a shifting of more of LWR's resources to "development" work. Newer projects began to help furnish impoverished farmers with irrigation wells and water-retention dams, improved farm-to-market roads, schools and community centers, nutrition programs, and health-care services. This same emphasis on giving families in some of the poorest regions of the world a "hand-up" so that they, along with their communities, might have the hope of achieving self-sufficiency is what sets LWR apart from many other human-care organizations; and this emphasis continues to be a major stimulus for interest and support on the part of U.S. Lutherans. Furthermore, the 1960s brought a clearer recognition that partnerships forged with other non-government organizations were essential to the fulfillment of any of the life-changing projects that LWR might envision. Hence, the role that LWR still tends to assume in its overseas projects is "non-operational." Rather than actually carrying out these projects, staff members cooperate with local partners to see to it that the work is effectively accomplished.<sup>21</sup>

Commitment to the principle of “accompaniment” in the decades following the 1960s is another feature of its “relief” and “development” work that underscores LWR’s faithfulness in mission. “Accompaniment” implies walking and working together on a project, and it means that LWR does not see itself as performing the paternalistic role of offering assistance for what it deems to be the good of the people in need. On the contrary, it seeks to come alongside such people, enlisting their ideas and their participation in every phase of a project. Obvious benefits of this kind of investment include ownership of the project on the part of the people who are served by it, the identification and development of leaders who are likely to make the project a more enduring success, and the empowering of their communities to leverage their influence in dealing the political and social systems of their region or nation.<sup>22</sup>

“Accompaniment” implies walking and working together on a project, and it means that LWR does not see itself as performing the paternalistic role of offering assistance for what it deems to be the good of the people in need. On the contrary, it seeks to come alongside such people, enlisting their ideas and their participation in every phase of a project.

Not to be overlooked is the “stewardship” that LWR has faithfully exercised in other aspects of its work. As this organization entered the 1980s, it began to establish regional offices in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. This change in LWR’s operations, as some stakeholders feared, did not dilute the impact of its projects. On the contrary, it proved to be an additional source of efficiency and effectiveness. Since the regional offices were staffed with indigenous employees, LWR now had persons on the ground who spoke the local language, who had a better understanding of the culture and an ability to identify local partners with whom relationships might be established, and who, especially in times of disaster, tended to know where and how the “relief” they might offer to its victims could best be utilized. In addition, since the 1990s, “accountability” and “evaluation” have become paramount in all aspects of LWR’s operations. The home office in Baltimore and regional staff have, in fact, carefully monitored the work of project partners, and those who fall short of expectations are quickly replaced. For this same reason, LWR has scrupulously sought out local organizations and individuals who see to it that material resources, such as quilts and kits, get to their intended recipients. In general, management and fund-raising expenses also have been purposely kept to a minimum. “Evaluation” of all LWR projects, moreover, has become an ongoing process in which everyone who is in any way responsible for them participates.<sup>23</sup> Hence, the “stewardship” that Jesus lauds in His Matthew 25 parable is indeed what LWR has exercised with the gifts its

Copyright 2019 Lutheran Society for Missiology. Used by permission.

View *Lutheran Mission Matters* 27, no. 1 (2019) at <https://lsfm.global/>.

Membership in LSFM is available at <https://lsfm.global/joinlsfm.html>.

E-mail [lsfmissiology@gmail.com](mailto:lsfmissiology@gmail.com) to purchase a print copy of a single issue.

supporters supply, and it remains one of the reasons this organization still possesses such a high degree of respect and trust among Lutherans and others, especially those who desire to be faithful in mission to their neighbors on a global scale.<sup>24</sup>

## **Twenty-First Century Faithfulness in Mission**

As the third decade of the twenty-first century is about to begin, Lutherans, along with other Christians, in North America have become more completely aware of the post-churched culture in which they are now living. All of their denominations are experiencing steep declines in total membership, and perennial revenue shortfalls suggest that the appetite for institutional expressions of the church is on the wane. Wearisome, as well as worrisome, are political divisions and reoccurring skirmishes within their ranks. For the most part, congregations and their leaders are no longer as influential in the community as they once were. Instead of a Sunday-morning monopoly, they must now compete for people's time with a host of other activities. In many cases, therefore, regular attendance at worship is ebbing, and once-robust Sunday School classes are only sparsely populated with children. Older and largely Anglo members drawn from "builder" remnants and early "boomer" generational segments of society are living longer, and they are often still willing and able to support church budgets and clergy salaries. But often noticeably absent on Sunday morning, especially in smaller congregations, are persons who are under fifty years of age and young couples with children. Hence, there is a growing sense that a congregation's days may be numbered.

In this same post-churched environment, LWR's faithfulness in mission offers a measure of hope for the Lutheran congregations of North America. For one thing, LWR in 2011, in the interest of steering clear of external and internal denominational conflicts, reaffirmed its independence as a nonprofit organization that is wholly committed to meeting the human needs of people in the greater world that lies beyond any institutional walls that church bodies might put up. Support for the work of LWR since then has continued to grow. In addition, while it has not as of yet been explored in any place, LWR's emphasis on "development" work for lifting families and communities out of poverty overseas might well be ventured in domestic urban neighborhoods that Lutherans

LWR in 2011,  
in the interest of steering  
clear of external and  
internal denominational  
conflicts, reaffirmed  
its independence as  
a nonprofit organization  
that is wholly committed  
to meeting the human  
needs of people in  
the greater world that lies  
beyond any institutional  
walls that church bodies  
might put up.

have tended to abandon for the past half century. Projects designed to provide job training, housing assistance, and health services might become a first step toward restoring the credibility of congregations in this largely neglected setting. Finally, LWR is clearly doing the kind of ministry that so many members of today's younger generations, as well as numerous de-churched individuals, have found to be missing in churches. Surveys and studies have constantly revealed that, for them, most congregations seem to have no real interest in making a difference for the good of the world beyond themselves and that this is one of the reasons they do not wish to set foot in any church sanctuary.<sup>25</sup> In their view, "deeds" are clearly more of a motivation than lofty "words," and it is only when they see real evidence of such that they may be ready to listen to the church's message. LWR, on the other hand, is a Lutheran organization that is actively transforming the lives of millions of people in today's world; as such, it is setting an example not only to the contrary, but for struggling congregations in particular to emulate in the post-churched environment of the twenty-first century.

The year 2020 will indeed warrant a seventy-fifth anniversary celebration for Lutheran World Relief. Since the close of World War II, this organization has been faithful in carrying out the mission of Christ in the world and to the Lutheran tradition of human care. It has wisely invested and multiplied the God-given gifts with which it has been supplied. As a result, LWR is currently serving directly or indirectly 2,896,387 people with 133 different "relief" and "development" projects in 42 different countries.<sup>26</sup> In the process, it is outlining for North American Lutheran churches a more hopeful pathway toward revitalization.

LWR . . . is a Lutheran organization that is actively transforming the lives of millions of people in today's world; as such, it is setting an example not only to the contrary, but for struggling congregations in particular to emulate in the post-churched environment of the twenty-first century.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> See "Overtures," 2019 LCMS Convention Workbook.

<sup>2</sup> John W. Bachman, *Together in Hope: 50 Years of Lutheran World Relief* (Minneapolis: Kirk House Publishers, 1995), 14–20.

<sup>3</sup> All Scripture quotations referenced are from the New International Version (NIV).

<sup>4</sup> Bachman, *Together in Hope*, 64–66.

<sup>5</sup> Bachman, *Together in Hope*, 178–180.

<sup>6</sup> Bachman, *Together in Hope*, 178–180.

<sup>7</sup> Based on author's LWR Board Monitoring Trip to Tanzania in January 2010.

<sup>8</sup> Internal LWR Report, January 2019.

<sup>9</sup> Robert Kolb, “Luther’s Hermeneutics of Distinctions: Law and Gospel, Two Kinds of Righteousness, Two Realms, Freedom and Bondage,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Martin Luther’s Theology*, ed. Robert Kolb, Irene Dingel, and L’ubomir Batka (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 168–169.

<sup>10</sup> See Joel Biermann, *Wholly Citizens: God’s Two Realms and Christian Engagement with the World* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017), 73–106.

<sup>11</sup> *Luther’s Works* 45, 169–194.

<sup>12</sup> Theodore G. Tappert, “The Church’s Infancy,” in *The Lutherans in North America*, ed. E. Clifford Nelson (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1975), 71–75.

<sup>13</sup> Mark Granquist, *Lutherans in America: A New History* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015), 196–197.

<sup>14</sup> Walter A. Baepler, *A Century of Grace* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1947), 183–184.

<sup>15</sup> John W. Behnken, *This I Recall* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1964), 94–95.

<sup>16</sup> Bachman, *Together in Hope*, 18–20.

<sup>17</sup> E. Clifford Nelson, “1930—The New Shape of Lutheranism,” in Nelson, *The Lutherans in North America*, 478.

<sup>18</sup> August R. Suelflow, ed., *Heritage in Motion: Readings in the History of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 1962–1995* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1998), 323–324.

<sup>19</sup> Email exchange with LWR Staff Member Martha Piedrasanta, March 25, 2019.

<sup>20</sup> Bachman, *Together in Hope*, 24–25.

<sup>21</sup> Bachman, *Together in Hope*, 52, 71–71, 78.

<sup>22</sup> Bachman, *Together in Hope*, 88–98, 137–139.

<sup>23</sup> Bachman, *Together in Hope*, 142–143, 152–153.

<sup>24</sup> See, for example, *Consumer Reports* magazine, recent ratings of nonprofit relief and development organizations. LWR is always in the top tier.

<sup>25</sup> See, for example, David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons, *UnChristian: What a New Generation Thinks About Christianity . . . and Why It Matters* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008). Also David Kinnaman, *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians Are Leaving Church . . . and Rethinking Faith* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011).

<sup>26</sup> See “LWR By The Numbers,” [www.lwr.org](http://www.lwr.org) under Technical Resources.