

# ***Lutheran Mission Matters***



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## *Editorial*

# **Forgotten, That Is, Neglected, Treasures**

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With the coming of Jesus Christ into our world, God ushered in His rule and reign on earth. This good news for humanity's sake is at the heart of God who wants all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. God has commissioned His Church to witness this truth for the life and salvation of all God's creation (Mk 16:15).

Jesus taught that in Him the full revelation of God's kingdom is given to His disciples, even though it remains hidden from those outside His circle of followers (Mk 4:11). Jesus equated His kingdom's enigma to a treasure buried in the ground, perhaps for security reasons, to guard it from thieves, robbers, and looters (Mt 13:44). One shrewd individual, however, risked everything he had and invested in the property in anticipation of the hidden treasure (Mt 13:44). In every age, the gracious God raises up and empowers His baptized children to announce to outsiders the complete understanding of this profound mystery.

God bequeathed to the apostle Paul the stewardship of preaching and teaching the good news of Jesus Christ across cultures and continents, to the Jews as well as those outside the traditional Jewish households (Acts 9:15; 2 Cor 5:17). According to Paul, God has placed in His Church as stewards a variety of people in leadership positions, such as apostles and prophets, evangelists, and pastors and teachers, for training and equipping His people so that they serve the Church and world in a variety of ways (Eph 4:11–13). God continues to build His Church on earth as His instrument to spread the Good News of salvation in Christ throughout the world, locally and globally.

In New Testament times, landlords authorized stewards (οικονόμος)<sup>1</sup> and overseers (επισκοπος) (Ti 1:7) to serve as trustees to manage their property, assets, and their entire household. Stewards were invested with the power of attorney over everything under their masters' ownership as administrators and superintendents.

Our Lord used another one-verse parable to illustrate the role of God's people in unraveling His kingdom on earth. The people of God, who are given ownership of the most precious gift of the Gospel, are like the master of the house who brings out of this mysterious treasure what is new and what is old (Mt 13:52). They must therefore train well and sharpen their skills to participate in God's kingdom activities, unearthing the treasures God has invested in His chosen people. Christians

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rest assured that God uses them to accomplish His purposes in mighty ways far beyond human planning and strategizing.

Those who are placed in leadership positions are God's stewards set apart to serve people in the various callings God has given them. For the sake of God and His kingdom work, church leaders must deliberately stay away from controversies, polemics, and arguments that only obstruct Gospel proclamation and do not contribute to mutual consolation and edification. Under divine guidance, Paul exhorts that they must make every effort at working towards resolving conflicts, reconciliation, and peace-making, especially within the community of believers (1 Cor 3:6; 4:1–2; Col 4:1–4; 1 Tim 1:4).

In the same vein, God has privileged His Church of the twenty-first century to unravel in one voice the mystery of the Gospel across cultures and contexts. All Christians must acknowledge with Paul that they are God's chosen people, who are no more than earthen vessels and fragile clay jars (2 Cor 4:7), God's own instruments set apart for His mission to the world.

Christians in America today are on assignment to welcome to God's household especially the new immigrants from around the world. These people and their households have come to our shores to find their new home in the land the pilgrims envisaged for all who seek prosperity and freedom. For a fact, the early immigrants to America foresaw that God had primed this country for ministry and new mission starts. Lutherans, too, found their new American neighborhoods ripe for evangelism and mission.

In his book, *Gospel DNA: Five Markers of a Flourishing Church*, Michael W. Newman points out that the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS) during the early decades of its formation grew exponentially as a missional community. Newman observes that eventually, for a time, the church's true treasure got buried in the ground unlike that of their forebears, who zealously shared the faith with their friends and neighbors. "Our forefathers were heroic in their strenuous efforts to start new churches for those who had no access to faith communities and for many who had never followed Christ," Newman wrote.<sup>2</sup>

Early on, churchmen and theologians of the LCMS perceived that "the unchurched, that is, such as are not members of a Christian church, are the missionary's mission material."<sup>3</sup> Newman further augments his case with Walter A. Maier's assertion that the "mission would grow through converts, not through Lutheran transferees."<sup>4</sup> Lutheran leaders understood that the church truly is a place for those who do not yet belong. In recent years, however, most churches are in a hiatus, since institutionalism has impaired its vision and vanquished its mission direction for proclaiming Christ outside the church doors and beyond the borders.

A noticeable majority of the LCMS partner churches are experiencing a similar pause in their outreach and church planting ministries in our generation. Not only in theology, but in practical matters too, partner churches have carbon-copied their parent organization in minutest detail. These churches have built for themselves a hierarchal structure that simply squelches outreach and favors top heavy administrative institutionalism. A book titled *A Church in Mission* proves this point as it relates to the India Evangelical Lutheran Church (IELC), the first overseas mission of the LCMS.

*A Church in Mission*<sup>5</sup> is the aggregate of reflections on the IELC's formative years (1958–1978) as a missionary movement becoming an indigenous church body in a foreign land. Author Meinzen gathered information for his work from fellow missionaries, Indian church leaders, pastors' conferences, convention delegates, constitution committee members, lay fellowships, and youth groups to present a holistic picture of the church, especially during the first two decades of the church. The IELC experienced overall growth through Lutheran teachers and lay evangelists visiting with people in their homes, starting small groups and house churches, and later transforming such units into local congregations. Ordained clergy, who were in limited supply, served as ecclesiastical supervisors and circuit riders. The IELC has plateaued since, just as the constitution made provision for clericalism to dominate and institutionalism to prevail.

Meinzen's survey noted that "the growth of institutionalism has greatly weakened and stifled growth in the church," and "structures have no sanctity of origin, they only have a functional value. They should therefore be adapted to the missionary aim of the church."<sup>6</sup> Among numerous other significant observations, the IELC membership was highly critical of a clergy hierarchy in the church. They reiterated that their church "is so top heavy now that it cannot move," just as "a deeply clergy-centered set-up is choking the very life out of the church."<sup>7</sup>

*A Church in Mission* has identified the stagnation of the IELC primarily as a spiritual problem. Perhaps by oversight, the IELC's constitution was designed to protect *status* or *structure*. It hardly laid out objectives that stress the church's function to serve its membership and the communities surrounding them.

These narratives in some way resemble the third servant in the parable of the talents that our Lord first presented to His disciples. That servant buried the one talent the master gave him intended initially for trading and multiplying. The irony of this parable is that the first two servants understood the value of the talents they received and worked with them to maximize their potential. The third servant, however, did not see the immense value of the treasure his master had given him, nor did he want to grow and multiply it as the first two did. Such stupidity on his part made the master at his return address him as "wicked and slothful," a description he deserved because he was sitting on the master's invaluable treasure and hiding it

instead of investing it. The master did not mince his words. The story would not have the happy ending that the third servant may have been hoping for.

Faithfulness means faithfully engaging the tasks God has invested in His Church for His Gospel's sake. As the people of God, Christians in the world strive to do everything well, fully aware of the stewardship of the treasures that God has invested in them and maximizing their use for service in His kingdom. In each situation, our missionary God is inviting people of all nations to come to Him in Christ and celebrate His faithfulness. Our Lord is faithful. These pages show how God's faithfulness in growing His kingdom across the globe flourishes through ordinary people who share His desire for the salvation of all people.

## **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> R. Clark and D. McLaurin, III, "Stewardship," in *Lexham Theological Wordbook*, ed. Douglas Mangum, Derek R. Brown, Rachel Klippenstein, and Rebekah Hurst (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press 2014).

<sup>2</sup> Michael W. Newman, *Gospel DNA: Five Markers of a Flourishing Church* (San Antonio, TX: Ursa Publishing, 2016), 85.

<sup>3</sup> Newman, *Gospel DNA*, 89, quoting John Fritz, *The Practical Missionary* (CPH, 1919), 12.

<sup>4</sup> Newman, *Gospel DNA*, 90, quoting Paul Maier, *A Man Spoke, A World Listened* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1963), 105.

<sup>5</sup> Luther W. Meinzen, *A Church in Mission* (Vaniyambadi: IELC Concordia Press and Training Institute, 1981).

<sup>6</sup> Meinzen, *A Church in Mission*, 134, quoting the Rev. A. Enose, IELC General Secretary.

<sup>7</sup> Meinzen, *A Church in Mission*, 125, quoting a member of the IELC Constitution Committee in January 9–10, 1974.