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Confessions of a Fourth Steward

Robert Scudieri

“Did God give these gifts to the church for nothing? Does not our God clearly show by these gifts that every Christian is a fellow laborer in His vineyard? Yes, indeed, our Lord spoke not only to Peter but to every Christian when He said, ‘When you have turned back (are converted), strengthen your brothers.’ Or again, St. James says to all Christians, ‘My brothers, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring him back, remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save him from death and cover over a multitude of sins.’”¹

“Lord, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you have not sown, and gathering where you have not scattered seed. And I was afraid, and went and hid your talent in the ground.” Matthew 25:24–25a

Abstract: This article follows the emphasis in the Fall 2018 issue. In that issue, authors offered a more hopeful vision of the church in America than what was presented in a statistical report to the Synod, demonstrating a loss and projected further loss in the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod of five hundred thousand souls.

This article looks at the hemorrhaging that has taken place in light of Jesus’ parable in Matthew 25:14–30. It is the belief of the author that the church in America has been unfaithful, and he suggests what might be done to restore her as a faithful steward. The article will share ideas for a conversation about what faithfulness means in Christ’s mission and suggest a few practical ways for the church in America to once again become a faithful steward.

In 1992, as the new executive for national missions for the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, I shared my first update on the Synod’s mission in America. It was at the annual meeting of the Synod’s North American Mission Executives (NAME) conference. A decline in the number of members in the Synod had already begun.



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The title of my presentation was “Aspirations of a Fourth Steward.”

Obviously this was a reference to Jesus’ parable in Matthew 25:14–30, the parable of a landowner who leaves on an extended journey and puts three servants in charge. To each he gives resources for the work ahead. The focus of my sharing was on being “faithful.” After all, in the parable, the Lord does not commend the two productive stewards for being “successful”; He says, “Well done good and faithful servant.” The third steward, who buried his trust, is labeled unfaithful. The “fourth steward” was someone who faithfully worked to serve the master, but could rely only on forgiveness. It is the final grace each of us must embrace.

During the eighteen years I served as head of national missions, we learned to distinguish between “inputs” and “outputs”—inputs being the resources we put into a project and outputs were the solid results. The outputs were more disciples of Jesus, a la His co-mission in Matthew 28:16–20.

We know that only God’s Holy Spirit can work in the heart of a human being to bring him to faith. Obviously God’s gifts of His Word and the Sacraments are the means the Spirit uses to re-create human beings dead in sin to make them alive in Christ. Our question was what it would take to deliver those life-giving means to the most people. The means of grace are the “inputs.” The “outputs” would be souls won for Christ.

In addressing the first Iowa District convention, C. F. W. Walther said,

The church is the mother of us all (Galatians 4:26). Just as surely as we are now members of the church so surely we should also be fruitful mothers, and if we are not fruitful mothers, i.e., if we do not produce spiritual children or fail to do those things whereby such children can be produced, then we are not obeying our calling, and then God will not say to us, “You pious and faithful servant.” But he will say to us, “You unfaithful servant.” God grant we never hear those words.²

But those very words are being directed at us today.

God has given the church in America many resources; we have much to be thankful for. It is necessary to look at how faithful we have been in using those resources to carry out the mission of Christ—making disciples. If we are not making disciples, if we are instead losing souls, we are in a most sorry state. We may have fine buildings, a billion-dollar church extension fund and properties around the world. But if we are falling behind in new

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disciple making, there is something wrong.

The only time I shed tears in my role as national ministry executive was the first time I tried to work with our thirty-five district mission leaders. We were at a meeting to set goals and objectives for reaching the lost in America. That effort ended in a blunt refusal on their part. They did not see this as their responsibility. My inexperience clouded my ability to lay a groundwork for cooperation to accomplish the mission. As time went by, a majority of districts did come to work with the national church body, and significant advances were made to address the losses we had seen over the past twenty years. In the end, this was not enough.

The districts of the LCMS invested mightily with human capital, financial resources, and prayer; however, looking back twenty-seven years to the beginning of my time as a leader of the mission in the United States, it seems we have not been, in the light of Jesus' words in Matthew 25, faithful. The evidence is clear.

During the last round of district conventions, we learned as much from a demographic study³ the Synod commissioned. While many congregations of the LCMS have brought more people to Jesus, the demographic study showed that in the last forty years as a church body we have lost over five hundred thousand souls; and, it has been suggested, it is possible we will lose another five hundred thousand. What was astounding to me was that this was accepted as inevitable. The message of the demographic study was, "Accept it—there is nothing we can do, except encourage LCMS families to have more children. We have to plan for this new reality." There was no rallying cry, no special initiative, no hope, only acquiescence.

According to Merriam-Webster, the defense mechanism of "denial" is defined as "avoidance of a confrontation with reality." But, as everyone knows, in the long run, denial does not work. Reality breaks in. Inevitably denial becomes "blame," which shifts responsibility onto someone or something else. Where there's denial, blame is always available to ease the pain when reality bites. In our circles it seems some want to blame God. They explain our decline as something God has done, maybe to punish America for drifting from His truth. I do not think so; it seems to me that we in the LCMS are not doing "*those things whereby such children can be produced.*"

I am doubly chagrined, since a successful effort to win more to Christ had been under way but was terminated. Under the leadership of President Jerry Kieschnick, the Ablaze! Initiative had raised millions of dollars for mission, and more gifts were lost by its early ending. Its termination was surprising more so, since Ablaze! had been the result of actions taken by previous Synod presidents and national conventions—actions that laid a groundwork for winning more for Christ.

One of those early attempts had begun in the 1980s under President Ralph Bohlman and Mission Executive Ed Westcott. It was called the "Mission Blueprint

for the Nineties.” For the first time, North America was declared a world mission field. Efforts begun in “Blueprint” opened doors into areas where our church body had not been involved in substantial ways. It is well known that Lutherans in America are more than 90 percent white English speakers—a demographic group in which there are more deaths than births in America. The Mission Blueprint for the Nineties recognized this. A 1996 report from the US Department of Commerce showed that for every African American who died in America, he or she was replaced by three African immigrants and births of African American children. Each Spanish-speaking American who died was replaced by eleven. For every one Asian American who died, more than twenty Asians immigrated to the United States or were born here.

During the Mission Blueprint for the Nineties, leaders of new immigrant groups were identified, and volunteers from those new groups were empowered and recognized as task forces of Synod. The leaders were brought into formal teams and given education and support to begin more new mission stations/congregations. More leaders were identified and empowered with prayer, with education, and with funding to reach more and different ethnic groups. Most district leaders recognized the opportunities God was giving us for sharing the Gospel with immigrants, many of whom were not able to hear the Gospel in their own lands.

Blueprint set the stage for the new century and Pentecost 2000. Leaders of the Synod, its districts, congregations, and new ethnic leaders were challenged to begin a thousand new cross-cultural ministries. Why cross-cultural ministries? In an article in the January 10, 2019, *Religious News Service* Wesley Granberg-Michaelson shared:

Where there is growth in American Christian denominations, it is driven by nonwhites, whether Catholic or Protestant, evangelical or mainline. Over the past half century, 71 percent of growth in Catholicism, for instance, has come from its Hispanic community. In the Assemblies of God, one of the few denominations to show overall growth, white membership slightly declined while nonwhite membership increased by 43 percent over 10 years.

Our own P2K effort (Pentecost 2000—an effort to begin one thousand new cross-cultural ministries in the LCMS) was blessed with *more* than one thousand new cross-cultural ministries. Doors were opening, new church doors. And existing church doors were opening to new ethnic groups that were growing in numbers in the United States. Today the largest LCMS congregation in the city of New York is an African immigrant church; that is true also in other large urban areas. On average, three hundred ethnically diverse worshipers attend Christ Assembly Lutheran Church on Staten Island. Worship services are two to four hours long, enhanced by a band and words and music not always from the *Lutheran Service Book*.

However, Ablaze! would not last. A new president sought a different way forward. Furthermore, while the LCMS has continued to emphasize new church development, it does not fund the mission in the United States at nearly the level we support new work overseas. In essence, we are extending our reach overseas while our base at home shrinks.

When I pastored Christ Memorial Lutheran Church in East Brunswick, New Jersey, a new retirement community was established, with possibly the worst logo ever: a frog on a lily pad. People in our area said the message was, “Come here and croak.” If we continue our present path, someday the LCMS will be a shell of its former self.

The church in America has been unfaithful. While church bodies around the world grow at incredible rates, the church in America is in decline. This is a time for repentance. Repentance for unfaithfulness is not a result of the law. It is a result of the working of the Holy Spirit, who uses the law to convict us. But the old Adam does not like to hear the law. It makes us uncomfortable, so we deny, we blame others.

Only by the power of God’s Holy Spirit can a change be made, new actions taken and our church become faithful once more.

But then, we have a question in our church body about what it means to be faithful.

What Does It Mean to Be Faithful?

In my opinion, one of the major causes for our unfaithfulness in mission is a confusion over what it means to be faithful.

First, there is a difference between faith seen through the lens of the Second Article of the Apostles’ Creed, and faithful in the Third Article. This is a distinction between justifying faith, a gift of God’s Holy Spirit, and sanctifying faith, a Spirit-led response to God’s grace. It is justifying faith that saves. Sanctification is the result. In this paper we are talking about faithfulness to the mission of Christ, a Third Article subject. Our success or failure in Christ’s mission will not save us or damn us. In Baptism our Lord has made us His own. Nothing and no one can take us away from Him. But we can turn away, disobey Him, and become unfaithful.

One of the major causes for our unfaithfulness in mission is a confusion over what it means to be faithful.

We are “*simul Justus et peccator*.” In his commentary on Romans, Luther wrote, Note that every saint is a sinner and prays for his sins. Thus the righteous man is in the first place his own accuser. And again (Ecclus. 39:5), the

righteous man “will make supplication for his sins.” And again, Ps. 38:18: “I confess my iniquity, I am sorry for my sin.” Therefore, wonderful and sweet is the mercy of God, who at the same time considers us both as sinners and nonsinners. Sin remains and at the same time it does not remain.⁴

We are sinners from birth (Ps 51:5; Gn 6:5). No one is righteous in God’s sight (Rom 3:10; Ps 12:1). We have been given a mission, and in America we are failing. Thank God there is forgiveness. We see that in St. Peter (Jn 18:13–27), who had only His Lord’s sacrifice to lean on. He gained strength from God’s love, and his life demonstrated his repentance. Only One has been faithful enough. The rest of us poor missionaries must live in His forgiveness.

What Is the Mission of the Church?

We have another distinction to make before focusing on what it means to be faithful on the American mission field. The focus is faithfulness in *Christ’s mission*—but what is the mission of the church? We preach Law and Gospel, we share the Sacraments, but to what end? It seems to me that for some, those are ends in themselves. In other words, Word and Sacrament become ends in themselves.

In my opinion, for some in our national leadership, being faithful means a return to sixteenth-century European roots—in contemporary parlance, the mission is to “Make the Lutherans Great Again.” To be honest, at times in my ministry, I made preference for a northern European culture more important than contextualizing words, music, and format to reach a group with a different culture.

But the co-mission we have, using Word and Sacrament, is to make disciples, not to preserve a particular culture. That takes courage, creativity, and compassion; but as we do that, Jesus will be with us—always.

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Pastors became derailed, thinking that as long as we preach the pure Gospel and celebrate Holy Communion and Baptism correctly we were being faithful. But if, as we believe, it is the Gospel that changes hearts, and if more people are not being brought into the Body of Christ, we should question if we really are preaching and teaching Gospel, or, if we are, if we do have a pure Gospel to share, then we should consider if we are doing that teaching and preaching effectively.

Being productive in the mission means making disciples.

Early on Missouri was very clear on this. Walther, in a sermon preached on the Twelfth Sunday after Trinity in 1842, told his parishioners:

Dear friends, through faith a Christian receives not only the holy desire to bring souls to Christ, he receives this task as a sacred duty. No one should say, “I am not a pastor, a teacher, or a preacher; let them teach, instruct, comfort, and lead souls to Christ. I wish to remain in my own vocation.” No, Christian, you are baptized, and through holy baptism you have already been called and anointed to be a priest of God.

Through holy baptism, every Christian has been consecrated, ordained, and installed into the ministry to teach, admonish, and comfort his neighbor. Through holy baptism each Christian has obtained not only the authority, power, and right, but also the high, holy obligation—under pain of losing the divine grace—of rousing himself to care and to help so that others may be brought to Christ.⁵

The mission given to God’s church is to make disciples.

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What Does It Mean to Be *Faithful* in Christ’s Mission?

A while back I sent an email to leaders in the LCMS asking them to send me a brief response on how they understood what it means to be faithful. The answers were all over the board. A district president responded, “To be faithful in the Lutheran sense is to be faithful in teaching the whole counsel of God revealed in Holy Scriptures . . . and to be true to the doctrines as interpreted and expounded in the Lutheran Confessions.” A Lutheran school principal wrote, “Hebrews 11, of course, recounts a number of those who were ‘faithful’. None of them were ‘Lutheran.’” From a pastor, “Faithful in LCMS terms is really adherence to the institutional standards like worship, closed communion, tradition, etc.”

When we talk about faithfulness, we need to see both doctrine and practice in light of their ability to win souls for Christ.

As part of the mission leadership of the LCMS, this is my confession—the confession of a fourth steward, one who has tried to remain faithful and has often failed. As a Synod we have buried our talents—for example, when we have insisted the cultural aspects of our traditional liturgy cannot be changed—creating barriers to understanding the Gospel focus of the Lutheran liturgy.⁶ We have buried our talent when we have not recognized the importance of “home” missions, not appreciating

the significance of North America becoming the third largest mission field. We bury our talents when we have eschewed the use of human reason in our planning to carry out the mission (reason is a gift from God, if you believe Luther's explanation of the First Article). We have buried our talent in the way we have traditionally formed church leaders as we prepared them to serve those already gathered into Christ's church and not sufficiently teaching the importance and opportunity to bring to Christ those outside the faith and so not providing enough preparation for our church workers to reach them.

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From my perspective, we have buried these "talents" because we have been afraid—afraid we might lose—lose members, lose our heritage, lose our identity. In repentance, everything should be on the table, especially the Lord's Table where forgiveness for past sins and strength to start over are found.

Some Ways Back to Faithfulness in Christ's Mission

What might repentance look like? We are seeing signs, tender sprouts that have risen out of the soil of the mission in America. For instance, we are seeing more effective ways of forming missionaries for America. New strategies at schools and our seminaries equip missionaries, not only pastors, for America. There are still many faithful pastors and congregations that are winning more for Jesus than they are losing. But have we studied all those pastors and churches, LCMS churches that are preaching pure Gospel and growing, growing even in areas where the population is declining? What can we learn from these faithful pastors and churches? Do we know the gifts given to graduates or our seminaries so that those who have the gift of starting a new mission or reaching new people are identified and prepared for this work?

There is an increasing number of new ethnic groups whose churches are reaching many for Christ. As was done by the LCMS of old, these ethnic groups (new to Lutheranism) focus much of their mission work on new immigrants arriving here. Instead of German immigrants, they reach Vietnamese, Sudanese, Ethiopian, Eritrean, Korean, Chinese, Japanese, Mexicans, Dominicans, Venezuelans, Nepalese, Guyanese, and a host of others. These new immigrants and refugees contribute to our ability to reach many more for Christ.

Furthermore, out of love for us, our God has also been sending missionaries from other parts of the world to strengthen His Church. Missionaries are being given to us as gifts from our heavenly Father. They have helped us see with new eyes the

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opportunities and challenges and a new passion for re-evangelizing a White Anglo population that has drifted away. And there are other “talents” given to us to do our Master’s work.

The Center for US Missions was begun as a partnership between the Synod and Concordia University, Irvine, after the Synod recognized the United States as a world mission field. Up to that time, it was assumed that all pastors had to be “formed” in the same way. That was true when our church body had a predominantly northern European heritage, and we were starting churches for sister and brother Lutherans who had moved “over there.” Today America is more ethnically diverse; what would reach the souls of European people is not necessarily the same as what can reach Asian and African and Latin or Middle Eastern seekers. The Center provides help in finding and forming missionaries—a vocation different from that of pastor or teacher.

The Ethnic Immigrant Institute of Theology was started during Pentecost 2000 to form leaders in and for their context. We are able to provide the doctrinal formation necessary without imposing uniform practice. This was extended to American citizens through the Specific Ministry Pastors program. Churches in rural areas in need of a pastor and congregations in need of a leader with a specific talent now were able to benefit from public ministers of the Word. This was home missions catching up with what had been done for over a century on the foreign mission field. These programs require nurturing as we continue to learn how to be more effective in forming missionaries for America.

The Master has given His servants in the LCMS many wonderful talents and resources to accomplish His desire that “All be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth” (1 Tim 2:4). The still emerging digital age is being capitalized on by Lutheran Hour Ministries in very effective ways; the Lutheran Women’s Missionary League provides vision and funding on a scale never imagined by its founders; our large Church Extension Fund provides us with more capital than we need to build new missions and enlarge existing church outreach; our National Missions department understands the challenges and is working very hard to provide resources to the districts. The Transforming Churches Network is a resource for congregations that know they need to refocus their “talents” on bringing Christ to their neighbors. What will we do with these “talents”?

For one thing, move away from seeing our mission as re-creating sixteenth-century Lutheran practices, for example, in worship.

It is in worship that most people in America today will hear the Gospel. I think as a Synod we have done a disservice by not embracing worship services that use contemporary songs and hymns and more variety in instruments, i.e., drums and guitar. Contemporary words and music that could have benefited from an influence by LCMS worship leaders and seminaries have been lost—not to mention the loss of

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influence we might have had on other church bodies because we have only affirmed a traditional form of worship.

Too much of what I have seen and heard about worship style is more about personal taste than about effectively preaching and celebrating the Sacraments so that disciples are made. I believe there are hundreds of LCMS churches that in an effort to reach young and contemporary people are using a truncated form of worship that does not effectively offer the pure Gospel. Much of this is because they have not received support to design such a service. Under the current leadership of our church body, many I know feel apologetic about using liturgies other than what is found in the *Lutheran Service Book*.

I am adamant about this because for many in America the worship service is the first place they can clearly hear the good news of salvation. I am not suggesting doing away with traditional Lutheran worship. I do believe there

I do believe there needs to be places where new Christians can experience God's love without having to surmount high cultural barriers. Championing a greater variety of styles in worship is another way that would allow us to be more faithful in Christ's mission.

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Now Is Our Time to Repent

We are "*simul justus et peccator*." We have not always been faithful. There is no perfect person or perfect church, perfect pastor or missionary or professor. Not one. There is no perfect teacher or mission executive or denominational leader. But there is a perfect God, a perfect Savior. We have not been faithful, but what is more important is that He is faithful. God is giving us another chance, a new day; washed in the waters of Baptism we can begin again. When He returns, we cannot plead our success; and we cannot be faithful without His aid. We have all we need from Him.

The amazing thing is that our Lord still stands with us, continuing to pour "talent" upon "talent" upon us. Jesus stands in front of us, our advocate, barring the door to "outer darkness, and weeping and gnashing of teeth." With His love, He is moving us to examine our past failure to win souls for Christ. That is all a fourth steward can depend upon.

There is no reason we have to lose another five hundred thousand souls. With the proper leadership at the national and district levels, a new day of first stewards is possible. Right now we should set in place a time of repentance and prayer, asking

for forgiveness, and for the Lord to allow us to gain five hundred thousand souls in the next ten years!

Pray to the Lord of the harvest that it may be so.

Endnotes

¹ C. F. W. Walther, Sermon for the 12th Sunday after Trinity, 1842 AD in Donald E. Heck, ed. and trans., *Year of Grace* (La Valle, WI: Donald E. Heck, 1964), 269–270.

² “Duties of an Evangelical Lutheran Synod,” First Iowa District Convention St. Paul’s Church, Fort Dodge, Iowa, 1879. Translated by Everette Meier and included in *At Home in the House of My Fathers*, ed. Matthew C. Harrison (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2011), 328–29 (in the section Thesis IV).

³ Special Issue, *Journal of Lutheran Mission* 3, no. 3 (December 2016).

⁴ Martin Luther, Lectures on Romans. *Luther’s Works* 25. Hilton C. Oswald, ed. (St. Louis: CPH, 1972), 258.

⁵ Walther, 12th Sunday, 270.

⁶ Liturgy is a complicated question as we try to retain our unity with the church catholic and consider important cultural contexts.