

The Expanding Edge of Mission: Missouri's (uneasy) Relationship with Mission Societies

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Abstract: Ralph Winter contends that there are two structures at work in the church, the sodality and the modality, and that both are necessary. Utilizing that framework, the development of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod is briefly examined, with special emphasis on the development of foreign missions. Today, LCMS sodalities play a vital role in the expansion of foreign mission. Although the LCMS prefers to operate from the modal perspective, her history demonstrates that Winter was correct: both sodal and modal structures are necessary.

A rural Lutheran pastor, at odds with the ecclesiastical power structure, insists on preaching and teaching confessional Lutheranism with evangelical fervor. Moved by the plight of the unchurched and unsaved in foreign lands, the pastor takes it upon himself to recruit and train missionaries. Soon, his congregation is host to a full-blown mission society, sending Lutheran deacons and deaconesses to countries around the world.

Is this a report of a current situation in the LCMS? No, it is a simple summary of the ministry of Wilhelm Loehe, who is sometimes named as the “father from afar” of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod.¹ Loehe lived and ministered in Neuendettelsau, Germany, in the mid to late 1800s. In the early 1840s, Loehe was made aware of the great need for pastors in America and undertook the task of recruiting, training, funding, and sending missionaries—a number of whom were instrumental in the formation of the Missouri Synod.² “Over half of the ministerium of the newly-organized Missouri Synod was composed of Loehe’s men. . . . While Walther clearly emerged as the theological and organizational leader of the Missouri Synod, Loehe’s men exerted considerable influence in the formation of the Synod.”³ Loehe’s *Gesellschaft für Innere und Äußere Mission im Sinne der Evangelisch-Lutherischen Kirche*, also known as the Neuendettelsau Society for Home and Foreign Missions, sent over 80 missionaries to countries around the world during his lifetime, and over 800 missionaries throughout its history.

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The Neuendettelsau mission represents what Ralph Winter calls a “sodality,” or, in classical terminology, a religious “order.” Carl Wilson summarizes Winter’s structure in this way:

The church of Jesus Christ has always had two aspects of its functional organization. These have been likened to the two kinds of threads necessary for weaving a piece of cloth. There are the stationary threads on the loom and the moving threads on the spindle. Without both, the so-called warp and woof, there could be no cloth woven (see Ralph D. Winter and R. Pierce Beaver, *The Warp and the Woof*, Pasadena CA, William Carey Library). So God has two aspects of the church to make it grow. Dr. Winter has entitled these two forms sodalities (the voluntary orders) and modalities (the local congregations or churches).⁴

In his essay, “The Two Structures of God’s Redemptive Mission,” Winter highlights this symbiotic relationship throughout the history of the Christian Church with numerous examples, paying special attention to the relationship between the Roman Catholic Church (modality) and the monastic orders (sodalities). Winter contends that the Church consists of both structures, and each structure needs the other. At the same time, he makes the observation that, historically, “U.S. denominations . . . felt quite capable as denominations of providing all of the necessary initiative for overseas mission. It is for this latter reason that many new denominations of the U.S. have tended to act as though centralized church control of mission efforts is the only proper pattern.”⁵ He continues: “Thus, to this day, among Protestants, there continues to be deep confusion about the legitimacy and proper relationship of the two structures that have manifested themselves throughout the history of the Christian movement.”⁶

It seems clear that “there continues to be deep confusion about the legitimacy and proper relationship of the two structures” within the LCMS. Yet both historically and theologically, this should not be the case. From an historical perspective, we in the LCMS owe a large debt of gratitude to Wilhelm Loehe and his Neuendettelsau Society for Home and Foreign Missions. If it were not for the efforts of an independent Lutheran mission society operating out of a single congregation in Germany, the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod might never have come into existence.

From a theological perspective, we are well-acquainted with dual structures. We teach the dual nature of Christ; we talk about Law and Gospel, sinner and saint, old man and new man. Even our ecclesiology lends itself to modality and sodality: we affirm God’s good order in establishing the Office of the Holy Ministry, while also advocating for the Universal Priesthood of Believers. Of all Protestants, we of the Missouri Synod should be first to embrace the dynamic interplay of the sodal and modal structures.

However, both historically and in the contemporary situation, this has not been the case. It did not take long for the Missouri Synod to depart from its early mission beginnings and become primarily concerned with what Winter identifies as the focal points of the modality: the “mainly inward concerns,” including the preservation of her teachings, the care and well-being of her members, and the administration of her territories.⁷ From a purely evangelistic viewpoint, during her first fifty-plus years, the Missouri Synod demonstrated a remarkable lack of concern for the salvation of the un-evangelized, non-German people in other lands. This is even more surprising, given that during this same timeframe the “Great Century” of missions (the 1800s) was generating mission enthusiasm in Protestant denominations the world over, culminating in the Student Missionary Movement and the “Watchword”—“The evangelization of the world in our generation.” The Missouri Synod was largely a bystander.⁸

The Synod’s first missionaries, Rev. Theodore Naether and Rev. Franz Mohn, were not from Missouri at all, but rather were missionaries trained and sent by Germany’s Leipzig Mission Society (another mission society!). After leaving the Leipzig mission due to doctrinal differences, they were commissioned as Missouri Synod missionaries to India in 1894.⁹ Our second missionary—actually the first from among the ranks of the Missouri Synod), Rev. Christian Broder—was sent to Brazil in 1900 to seek out and gather German immigrants into congregations, which had been the primary *modus operandi* of the Missouri Synod in America.

A few years later, the Synod expressed a similar concern for the souls of the German immigrants in Argentina, sending her first missionary in 1905. However, outside of the formal structure of the Synod (in the sodal realm), “interest was being aroused for a foreign mission to be begun, not like that in India, i.e., with missionaries who were formerly attached to an outside mission society, but with the Synod’s own personnel—and not like that in South America, but rather among non-German ‘heathen.’”¹⁰

One such non-official effort was our mission in Cuba.

The mission work in Cuba began in 1911 when a certain Rev. R. Oertel of Nebraska traveled to the Isle of Pines, a smaller island to the south of the Cuban main island, to take advantage of medicinal baths that he had seen advertised in a magazine. He was evidently suffering from some health problem. He soon became acquainted with several English-speaking fishermen who had migrated to Cuba from the Cayman Islands. He and several short-term pastors and vicars ministered to these people on an occasional basis.¹¹

As an interesting side note, the Synod did not place full-time missionaries in Cuba until after World War II.

In 1912, Rev. E. Louis Arndt organized the Evangelical Lutheran Mission for China, an independent Lutheran mission society. Arndt raised funds by selling “tracts,” booklets that he wrote on various Christian themes. In 1913, his mission society sent him to China. The LCMS officially took over Arndt’s work “with considerable hesitance and reluctance” in 1917. According to Lutheran mission historian Dr. Paul Heerboth, “This late date is a sad commentary on our mission history and on the Synod’s ‘corporate inertia’ in starting a mission project with its own forces to bring the Gospel to ‘heathen’ nations.”¹² Thus, of the Synod’s first five foreign mission efforts (India, Brazil, Argentina, Cuba, and China), only Brazil and Argentina were initiated by the modality, and those efforts were aimed not at the unreached or un-evangelized, but at the German immigrant populations.

The history of our Synod’s mission efforts confirms Winter’s analysis of modality and sodality. Modal structures, such as the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, are rightly concerned with “modal things”—preservation of doctrine, the healing of divisions, administration of the Church’s affairs, and conservation of her “gains” or territories. These are important and necessary tasks if the Church is to remain the true Church. We need those people who dedicate themselves to the faithful administration of modal concerns. It is the sodalities, though, that are often the leading edge of mission. Just as we need the “modal-minded” to preserve the Church, we need the “sodal-minded” to bring the Gospel into new territories. The Church needs both the modalities and the sodalities.

In my own experience, the difference between sodalities and modalities can be summarized as follows: The sodality focuses primarily on the opportunity, and the modality focuses primarily on the potential difficulties. This is not intended to be a criticism of the modality—or of the sodality, for that matter. The modality has to be concerned with how this new work, mission field, or project is going to affect the “big picture” of the Church. All too easily, unbridled mission enthusiasm can give way to factionism, unionism, a loss of Lutheran identity, and in the worst case, a loss of the Gospel. Modalities are concerned with questions like these: How will we sustain the work across generations? How will pastors be trained? How will this emerging church relate to our Synod? Who will represent our Synod in that place?

Sodalities, on the other hand, are concerned with a different set of questions: Who will preach the Gospel if we don’t? How will these people be saved? How can we sit by and do nothing when God has blessed us so richly? Sodalities are consumed with a sense of urgency; they see the open door, and quickly organize themselves in order to take advantage of it “while it is day; night is coming when no one can work” (Jn 9:4, NKJV). Modalities, on the other hand, are consumed with a sense of responsibility and work hard to guarantee long-term success of the endeavor by “letting all things be done decently and in order” (1 Cor 14:40, NKJV).

God has granted to me the opportunity to see His mission from both perspectives—from within the modality as an LCMS missionary and as the Area

Director for Venezuela and the Caribbean, and now as the director of a Lutheran mission organization and president of the Association of Lutheran Mission Agencies.¹³ When I was the Area Director—and to a lesser extent, while serving as an LCMS missionary—the weaknesses of the sodalities seemed fairly evident to me. Indeed, I was skeptical of the value of sodal structures. As an officer of the Church and firmly entrenched in the modality, it appeared to me that the sodalities were largely driven by enthusiasm unhindered by sound missiology. It seemed to me that I spent an inordinate amount of time “cleaning up messes,” which I tended to blame on sodal “meddling in mission.”

My opinion began to change while I was still serving as Area Director for LCMS World Mission. The particular case of Lutheranism in Haiti (which, in brief, can be summarized as “sodalities run amok”) highlighted to me the valuable contribution made by our LCMS sodalities. As I met with the various Lutheran mission organizations that were working in Haiti, a picture began to develop which cast a different light on the question. During the early 1980s, on no less than ten occasions, Lutherans in Haiti made formal requests of the LCMS Board for Mission Services to begin work in Haiti, to provide assistance, and to train their pastors. And ten times, the BFMS refused.¹⁴ Starting with the Haiti Lutheran Mission Society (Nebraska) and simultaneously through individual pastors in Florida, Lutheran sodal structures did what the modal structure was unwilling to do. Nearly two decades later, the fruit of the work of those Lutheran sodalities was organized into two national churches, one of which was received as an LCMS partner church by unanimous vote in convention. True, the work of independent Lutheran mission societies in Haiti was often chaotic and lacked coordination, but the fact remains that if it were not for the efforts of sodalities, the Lutheran churches in Haiti would not be what they are today.¹⁵ As Dr. Glenn O’Shoney was fond of saying when I was an LCMS missionary, “Missions is messy.”

Haiti is one contemporary example, but a review of the origins of the Synod’s “mission fields” reveals that many were initiated through the efforts of sodalities of one kind or another, rather than from the Synod’s mission board (the modality). We already mentioned Cuba and China. The work in Nigeria began when Black pastors of the Synodical Conference raised funds to support a Nigerian who had come to the States to study at a seminary. The work in Mexico was started by pastors in the Texas district. The Jamaica mission was initiated by the Jamaica Lutheran Mission Society. In Russia and the Commonwealth of Independent States, tremendous work was accomplished through sodal efforts of the Orphan Grain Train, the Lutheran Hour, and the Tian Shan Mission Society. Many other mission fields that resulted from sodal efforts could be named.

As the director of a Lutheran mission organization and as president of the Association of Lutheran Mission Agencies,¹⁶ I am now viewing mission work from the center of the sodal camp. Contrary to what I perceived while I was an LCMS

Area Director, many of our Lutheran mission organizations are headed by people with years and years of mission experience as overseas missionaries, mission executives, mission coordinators, and mission volunteers. For example, among the three staff members of my small mission organization, we have over fifty years of overseas missionary experience. Within the modal structures, however, this same depth of missionary experience is not always evident. This is because the modality has a broader scope of concerns, and therefore the qualification of “mission experience” competes with other desired qualities, such as support for the modal priorities, institutional compatibility, or even preference for a particular style of worship. These other concerns can produce denominational mission leaders without significant experience as overseas missionaries, which is still an important skill set and experiential base.

Another factor that has made Winter’s “two structures” increasingly relevant in our day is America’s torrid love affair with non-denominationalism. As a professor at a local Christian university, I taught a class on Church History. The university drew largely second-career students from a variety of churches and backgrounds. On the first day of class, I would ask students to identify the church they attended, as well as its denominational affiliation. Fully two-thirds of the students would affirm that their church is “non-denominational,” even though in many cases, the church had only recently removed its denominational identifier from the sign out front. When asked for their opinion on the subject, the students (mostly adults) would state that they perceived denominational identities to be sectarian and exclusivistic, mitigating against authentic expressions of Christianity due to inflexible structures and to their inherited obligations to an external, human authority.

While I do not believe that an anti-denominational mindset has taken root in the LCMS modalities (congregations, Districts, and Synod), I see plenty of evidence that it has found fertile soil in the thinking of the individual members of our congregations. Though most of our members are not anti-denominational, it is safe to say that many can be described as apathetic towards our denomination and identify primarily with their local congregation rather than with the denomination. This environment, coupled with increasing globalization, has created a church culture where sodal mission efforts are seen as more immediate, relevant, and important than denominational initiatives. Most members, if told that their denomination does not approve of their overseas mission efforts, would respond, “So what?” That, indeed, is the question that the modality must be prepared to answer.

Somewhat counterintuitively, I believe that the path to increasing modal relevance and denominational engagement on the part of our congregational members leads through the sodalities. The core issue is trust. Church members who are engaged in mission or somehow participating in mission through a sodal structure build trust with that sodality. In comparison, it is exponentially more difficult to build trust with denominational or even District representatives, as I

experienced firsthand. In my role as LCMS World Mission Area Director, one of my assignments was to build partnerships with Districts, congregations, and mission societies. It was often difficult to even gain an audience, and my presence at those local meetings was initially met with suspicion and distrust. And that was over ten years ago! It is difficult to imagine that the situation has improved in the intervening years.

Sodalities, however, are effective at building trust relationships, because without the voluntary and enthusiastic support of their constituency, a sodality will not survive for long. If the sodality finds the modality to be helpful and beneficial to its mission, then it will advocate that relationship among its members. Conversely, if the sodality finds the modality to be a hindrance or an obstacle to its mission, then it will likely communicate that situation as well. Therefore, one way for the LCMS to become immediately relevant to apathetic (or even hostile) members is to find ways for the modalities to support the work of the sodalities

Of course, the inverse is also true: sodalities should support the work of the modalities. However, given the current realities of America's religious climate, globalization, and the autonomy with which most sodalities operate, it is clear that the modalities need to initiate the exchange. Additionally, most Lutheran sodalities that I know already are quite supportive of the modality and have been frustrated by the lack of reciprocity. A good place to start would be for leaders or officials at the Circuit, District, and Synod level, when they meet with leaders of mission sodalities, to ask questions such as, "What are you trying to accomplish?" "How can we support you?"

At the end of the day, it is helpful to remember that the mission is God's mission, which means that it belongs to God and not to us. We are not the owners of the mission. Rather than attempting to "manage the mission," we as a Synod will do better to acknowledge that "missions is messy" and celebrate what the Holy Spirit is doing around the world through His Church, modality *and* sodality.

Endnotes

¹ John T. Pless, "Wilhelm Loehe and the Missouri Synod: Forgotten Paternity or Living Legacy?" (Paper presented to the International Loehe Society, Wartburg Theological Seminary, July 12, 2005), 1, accessed Sept. 25, 2014, <http://www.ctsfw.edu/document/doc?id=284>.

² Much has been written on Wilhelm Loehe's contributions to Lutheranism, which are still energetically discussed by the International Loehe Society (a sodal structure, by the way). I recommend David Radtke's *Confession and Mission, Word and Sacrament: The Ecclesial Theology of Wilhelm Loehe* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2001).

³ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁴ Carl W. Wilson, “What is a Religious Order?” A Reference Document of the Worldwide Discipleship Association in *Lausanne II* (August–September 1989), accessed Sept. 25, 2014, <http://www.missionfrontiers.org/issue/article/what-is-a-religious-order>.

⁵ Ralph D. Winter, “The Two Structures of God’s Redemptive Mission,” (CA: William Carey Library, 1995), 13.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁸ For a good overview of the Missouri Synod’s mission efforts during her early years, see *Moving Frontiers: Readings in the History of The Lutheran Church: Missouri Synod*, edited by Carl S. Meyer (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1964).

⁹ Douglas L. Rutt, “A Brief Outline of LCMS Mission History,” (Paper presented at Concordia Theological Seminary, Ft. Wayne, IN, January 13, 2003), 1.

¹⁰ Paul Heerboth, “Missouri Synod Approach to Mission in the Early Period,” *Missio Apostolica* 1, no. 1 (1993), 24.

¹¹ Rutt, “A Brief Outline of LCMS Mission History,” 4.

¹² Heerboth, “Missouri Synod Approach to Mission in the Early Period,” 24.

¹³ The author served as an evangelistic missionary in Venezuela from 1988–2001, and as Area Director from 2000–2003.

¹⁴ Correspondence on file in the author’s personal files.

¹⁵ For a more detailed look at the work of mission societies in Haiti, see my article, “The Development of Lutheranism in Haiti: A Case Study,” *Missio Apostolica*, 17, no. 1 (May 2009): 46–55.

¹⁶ The Association of Lutheran Mission Agencies (ALMA) provides resources and networking to Lutheran mission organizations. More information can be found at www.almanetwork.org.