

“A Bishop’s House Church—Luther’s Thoughts” Some Mission Truths Regarding Missional Communities

James D. Buckman

Abstract: The Church in the first three centuries was a House Church community. A living example is the basilica of Santa Pudenziana—the oldest church in Rome. This basilica is literally an expansion of the home owned by a Christian family who lived when Constantine made our faith the religion of his empire. This House Church was also the residence of Pope Siricius. The Church today seems to almost frantically thrash about in search of a way forward. I suggest we consider when Christianity was persecuted; and reflect on the approaches of Paul and Peter as framed by our understanding in the Confessions—after all, the Church grew explosively in spite of those harsh conditions.

What is the *Missio Apostolica* today? It is the same that it has always been: to bring the *peace* of God that is found only in His Son’s atoning death and resurrection, through the *process* of God the Holy Spirit’s working through Word and Sacraments, using the *people* of God, both those already known to us and those in whose hearts and minds the Holy Spirit has preceded us and prepared ahead to do good works.

The *Missio Apostolica* is about *mission*, not *management*; and there is a difference. Mission is the messy midwife of church birth, always done in fear and trembling over the awesome nature of the task entrusted. Circumcision decisions are made in part, in context (Acts 15:2; Acts 16:3).

Today’s context in the United States calls for a strategic, long-term evaluation of how the church does *Missio Apostolica*: 4,000 congregations are started annually in the U.S., but 7,000 will close; we simply must look beyond a “brick and mortar” definition of Church.

James D. Buckman is a network supported urban mission strategist. He helps existing churches plant new worshipping communities using the House Church model; over 100 are enrolled (www.HouseChurchPlanter.com). He wrote iPray (available through Amazon), a practical workbook based on Isaiah 56:7 that helps churches use Prayer for Ministry, Mercy, and Multiplication. Jim and his wife Cathy live in Bridgewater, NJ with their five children, which they home school—Jacob, Jim, Sarah, John, and Grace. Camping is their favorite family vacation. Jim is a Chaplain with the NJ Air Guard and is currently deployed as the Deputy Wing Chaplain at Al Udeid Air Base, Qatar.

The U.S. Supreme Court, which once commented in the case of Church of The Holy Trinity vs. The United States, “this is a religious people. . . . This is a *Christian nation*,”¹ today pushes our nation in the direction of homosexual marriage, thwarts efforts to protect the unborn, and has legalized the coveting and taking of our neighbor’s property if it can be proved that this is advantageous for tax revenue.

It does not take an in-depth look at the Bible to find all sorts of statements that would qualify in certain people’s minds as “hate speech.” One only wonders when churches will be forced to perform unbiblical marriages or face legal action. The percentage of people interested in attending Sunday morning worship declines rapidly among the youngest in our country, and the postmodern, atheistic, evolutionary mindset is indoctrinated through tax dollars among the largest percentage of school-going children.

Someone once said, “The definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over, but expecting to get different results.” Jesus said, “*Every teacher of the law is like the owner of a house who brings out of his storeroom, old treasures as well as new*” (Mt 13:52). God has the treasures sufficient for even this day—even in our context. As we look and ask, “How do we do the *Missio Apostolica*?”, let us firmly and completely trust God.

I found this quote from Luther in his commentary on Philemon very interesting:

In Colossians 4:17, Paul calls Archippus the bishop of the city: “Say to Archippus,” who was the bishop of the Colossians and himself a citizen of Colossae. Use the proper title for each person... The bishop is joined by his wife, the church....

And the church [in your house]. Here you have Archippus and the church. He was most likely a rich townsman. But I believe that *the house was a place for prayer and preaching.* He deserved to be called a fellow worker, since he supported an entire church. Undoubtedly there were several churches, different houses in different cities, where ten people who had someone like Archippus would gather. Philemon, as well as Archippus, is surrounded by prayers, by flaming words, and by fires.² (emphasis added)

If memory serves, Paul was an apostle and did engage in *Missio*. As our Commission on Theology and Church Relations wisely quoted from the Formula of Concord, “the actual intention and meaning of the Augsburg Confession should not and cannot be derived more properly and better from any other place than from Dr. Luther’s doctrinal and polemical writings.”³

Luther calls Archippus a “bishop”; he says that Bishop Archippus personally led House Church worship and that there were *many* House Churches in these cities. The *Missio Apostolica* was/is planting House Churches.

The *Missio Apostolica* of sharing the Gospel must intentionally focus on planting new worshiping communities. Today, as we witness a sea change in our culture and country, we need to get back to our first love: planting worshiping communities. Look back before Constantine, all the way back to Christ. More than one person has said that the Church experience in this century will look more like the first century than the last century. The church in the first century was a House Church community.

There are high schools in New Jersey where over sixty languages are spoken in the homes of the students; these diaspora students live within five miles of their school. Today, there are more people in our country who live in the urban and suburban areas than in the rural areas. Our population is increasingly more concentrated. (This is a good thing if you like evangelism; you can get to people more quickly.)

Luther believed that worship should be offered in the language that people prayed in. We must have a *Missio Apostolica* that facilitates the planting of Word and Sacrament communities in the prayer language of the people we are trying to reach. As I read through Luther’s Works for this paper, I was very glad to see that we have some good reflection regarding this already in place—some of which I have quoted here, the rest of which you will be able to download from our website—www.HouseChurchPlanter.com.

As we look at our context for *Missio Apostolica* today, and we consider the role of missional communities in our efforts, I submit these mission truths for your review:

1. The Church must also happen beyond the walls of our church buildings.

“Greet also the church that meets at their house.” (Rom 16:5)

“Give my greetings to the brothers at Laodicea, and to Nympha *and the church in her house*. After this letter has been read to you, see that it is also read *in the church of the Laodiceans* and that you in turn read the letter from Laodicea.” (Col 4:15–16) (emphasis added)

“You know that I have not hesitated to preach anything that would be helpful to you but have taught you publicly and from house to house.” (Acts 20:20)

“The churches of Asia greet you. Aquila and Priscilla greet you heartily in the Lord, with the church that is in their house.” (1 Cor 16:19)

“He will speak words to you by which you will be saved, you and all your household.” (Acts 11:14)

“She and her household had been baptized.” (Acts 16:15)

When you look at these passages, it is obvious that the Church that Jesus planted was a Church that met in homes. It is equally obvious that Jesus' instructions to the Church were to go and do likewise. The phrase "House Church" is not a church growth technique; it is Scripture. Constantine unintentionally may have put House Church out of fashion in his desire to help, but the eagle of government is flying in a different direction these days.

Accordingly, this is what Jacob says: "This place in which I am sleeping is the house and church of God." Here God Himself has set up a pulpit, and He Himself is the first to preach about the descendants and about the uninterrupted continuance of the church.⁴

"A disciple of the apostles of Jerusalem or Antioch came to Rome and preached faith in Christ *in a few houses*; or, as was usual at that time, some Jews living in Rome, like Aquila and Priscilla, etc., went to Jerusalem for Easter and Pentecost, learned the faith there, *and brought it home* to their relations, both Jews and Gentiles in Rome. I am led to this by Romans 16, wherein St. Paul greets many saints in Rome by name, although neither he nor St. Peter had come there yet, for Aquila and all the Jews were driven from Rome by Claudius, . . . Acts 18 [:2], and yet were greeted first.

Now this is nothing for the Roman church to be ashamed of."⁵
(emphasis added)

Good Lutheran thinking goes like this: Most of the time, the issue is not either-or but both-and. Most of the time, there is merit in both sides; one thinks of Law and Gospel for example. The two must *both* be there. Church must happen both inside *and* outside of the walls of our church buildings; even as faith must be held dearly in our hearts *and* heard decisively from our mouths.

Unfortunately, we have often looked at the texts cited above mainly as *proofs* instead of as *pictures*. Sadly, we all too often turn to these texts as proofs of how to rightly think about faith but miss the fact that these texts are pictures, moving pictures of faith coming to life and being delivered to unbelievers. To be sure, doctrine is derived from these texts; but these texts were written to communicate the dynamic process whereby the Holy Spirit brought faith into the world. Let's not miss the forest for the trees.

In our pastoral formation process, missions are historically relegated to a subset of "practical" theology, when missions are really the mountain peak—the *summit*, not a subset—which the church strives for, and everything else serves as reliable tools for this journey. Missions and management are two different things.

Look at those texts again. Do you see the *picture*? Do you see the *Missio Apostolica*? Close your eyes, and let your mind picture what is happening in these texts: Paul's coming to a stranger's house; being welcomed; meeting friends, family, neighbors and community leaders; sharing the Gospel; praying; fellowshiping;

ministering to needs; singing; baptizing; instituting the Lord’s Supper; setting apart the overseers of these churches that met in homes.

Take a good look; this is the picture of Christ’s bride. This is the *Missio Apostolica*.

Luther speaks clearly of this picture:

Jacob saw this, his descendants also saw it, we too, and all who are now the church or will be the church after us see it, namely, that the church is the house of God which leads from earth into heaven. *The place of the church is in the temple, in the school, in the house, and in the bedchamber.* Wherever two or three gather in the name of Christ, there God dwells (cf. Matt. 18:20). Indeed, if anyone speaks with himself and meditates on the Word, God is present there with the angels.⁶ (emphasis added)

Church needs to happen on Sunday morning, inside our church walls. There are some extremists who say that Sunday morning church is of the devil and needs to be abolished; they are of the devil and need to shut up. Sunday morning church in America meets a large number of people’s needs; this needs to continue. Our model for House Church ministry teaches that House Churches should not gather when their congregation’s corporate worship is happening. That is because we always want it to be possible for House Church members to worship with the larger body of believers of which they are a part. In Colossians 4:15–16, we see a good example of the *ecclesia* (church) that gathered in one home also being part of the general *ecclesia* (church) in that city.

2. When we offer something as church that is not Church; we are not being the Church.

We need to be planting Word and Sacrament communities that gather outside the walls of our church buildings. In the urban setting, dozens of cultures and languages are found within blocks of our church buildings. A practical way to offer worship in the prayer language of these people is through their homes. If a pastor will invest his time in developing House Church planters who come from the cultures found in his community, he will (like Christ) be able to multiply himself through them. These House Church planters can help with the gathering of people, fellowship, ministering to their needs, translation, social media communication, etc. The House Church planter may also be a vicar, retired pastor, deaconess, etc. In these and other cases, the ministry they assist the pastor with will vary but will always be under his supervision.

In his commentary on Genesis 28:17, Luther says,

The place of the church is in the temple, in the school, in the house, and in the bedchamber. Wherever two or three gather in the name of Christ, there

God dwells (cf. Matt. 18:20). Indeed, if anyone speaks with himself and meditates on the Word, God is present there with the angels; and He works and speaks in such a way that the entrance into the kingdom of heaven is open.⁷

That this idea was important to Luther is illustrated in his use of child imagery in the Smalcald Articles, Luther's personal statement of faith: "God be praised, a seven-year-old child knows what the church is: holy believers and 'the little sheep who hear the voice of their shepherd.' This is why children pray in this way, 'I believe in one holy Christian church.' . . . Its holiness exists in the Word of God and true faith."⁸ This striking statement was quoted again by the Lutheran confessors of the next generation in the Formula of Concord Solid Declaration.⁹ In volume 41 of Luther's Works; we find the Seven Marks of the Church¹⁰:

1. The Bible
2. Baptism
3. Communion
4. Confession and Absolution
5. Calls Pastors and Other Church Workers
6. Prayer, Public Praise and Thanksgiving
7. The Cross

House Church may be a "small group" in terms of its numbers; but a small group is not fully the Church. Small group ministry can be a good thing, but small groups do not have the Seven Marks of the Church.

We need to plant new worshiping communities that have all Seven Marks. These other efforts can be fine; but they should not be allowed to distract us from the *Missio Apostolica* of planting the Church.

The comment here for consideration regarding missional communities is a question, "Are we trying to plant the Church?" Because the *church is the Bride of Christ*. Nothing else is.

3. We must be on guard against Absalom's spirit.

King David's son Absalom wanted to be king instead of his father. He was sneaky and crafty; he said that he had the people's best interests at heart. We need to be sure when considering mission models that they don't usurp authority from those who were properly entrusted with it. Sons of Peace have always had to be on guard against children of disobedience (Eph 2:2).

As St. Paul says in I Corinthians 14 [14:40], "All things should be done decently and in order." *And no one should (as no Christian does) ignore such order without cause, out of mere pride or just to create disorder, but*

one should join in observing such order for the sake of the multitude, or at least should not disrupt or hinder it, for that would be acting contrary to love and friendliness.¹¹ (emphasis added)

The Apostle Paul’s comments reflect the reality of Pastoral oversight: “If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not take him into your house or welcome him. Anyone who welcomes him shares in his wicked work” (2 Jn 10–11).

The church has one Shepherd, one leader; it is served by His under-shepherds. To ensure that we do not have false teachers, we reserve the pastoral office for those who are regularly and properly called. We do not want a model that facilitates Absalom’s spirit—the wrongful and prideful gathering of glory which is not ours.

Our church body has established multiple routes to ordination for those who want to exercise the responsibilities of the pastoral office and to prove themselves properly called for this ministry. Mission models should work harmoniously with the processes that our church body has in place to form pastors and encourage the utilization of our rich theological education system.

Absalom grieved his father and ended in destruction; this is not the path we want for the church.

4. We must look for Sons of Peace (Luke 10) in establishing the Church.

“After this the Lord appointed seventy-two others and sent them two by two ahead of him to every town and place where he was about to go. He told them, ‘... *When you enter a house, first say, “Peace to this house.” If a son of peace is there, your peace will rest on him; if not, it will return to you.* Stay in that house, eating and drinking whatever they give you, for the worker deserves his wages.’” (Lk 10:1–7). (emphasis added)

“You know that *the household of Stephanas were the first converts in Achaia, and they have devoted themselves to the service of the saints.* I urge you, brothers, to submit to such as these and to everyone who joins in the work, and labors at it” (1 Cor 16:15–17). (emphasis added)

“Lord grant mercy to the house of Onesiphorus, for he often refreshed me and was not ashamed of my chains” (2 Tim 1:16).

“Cornelius, a devout man and one who feared God with all his household” (Acts 10:2)

Here are some of the characteristics that we might see in Sons and Daughters of Peace:

1. Receptivity to the Gospel
2. Readiness to refer / endorse Gospel efforts to those they know

3. Reputations that are respected in the community

(Eric Bridges, Thom Wolf)

4. Resources shared to help the Gospel proclamation

5. Church must occur decently and in good order.

“As they traveled from town to town, they delivered the decisions reached by the apostles and elders in Jerusalem for the people to obey. So the churches were strengthened in the faith and grew daily in numbers” (Acts 16:4-5).

“They must be silenced, because they are ruining whole households by teaching things they ought not to teach” (Ti 1:11).

The infiltrating and clandestine preachers are apostles of the devil. St. Paul everywhere complains of those who run in and out of houses upsetting whole families, always teaching yet not knowing what they say or direct [Tit. 1:11]. Therefore the spiritual office is to be warned and admonished... Let each one who is a Christian and a subject be warned to be on guard against these interlopers and not to heed them. Whoever tolerates and listens to them should know that he is listening to the devil himself, incarnate and abominable, as he speaks out of the mouth of a possessed person.¹²

It is completely unnecessary to do away with the pastoral office in order for the Gospel to be proclaimed effectively. This is a nonsensical idea (at best). When you think of how the devil throughout the years used the Nazis, Communists, and Muslims to kill Christian pastors, why would we ourselves ever want to run off pastors from our worshiping communities?

When Paul came there later he undoubtedly organized and improved everything, as he promised, Romans 1 [:8-15], wherein he praised their faith highly, which neither he nor St. Peter had planted. St. Peter did the same thing, though he came to Rome at another time. In Crete, too, St. Paul's disciple Titus ordained bishops and founded churches, as St. Paul commands him to do in Titus 1 [:5].¹³

In the current system, pastoral candidates basically self-identify; this is really not biblical. Using a House Church model restores the pastor as a mentor and gateway for ministry.

6. There Continues To Be Room for a Certain Degree of Freedom in Church.

As we sort through what good Church practice looks like today; we can be thankful for the scriptural vision which we confess.

Let me first make it clear that in what follows I shall not argue about whether the holy sacrament is to be administered and received in both kinds, or whether the laity have the right to take it in their hands, or whether one has the right to administer it in vessels other than chalices, or in clothes other than the sacramental vestments, or in houses other than churches. *In these and other external practices, whether they be opposed to the pope or not, may God preserve us from extended disputes. On the contrary, in such matters we Christians should and will have the right and power to adhere to the institution of Christ in any way that we may see fit, without regard to the false and fabricated decrees of the churches, church orders, and the raging of all the tyrants, both religious and secular.*¹⁴ (emphasis added)

It will take them a good long while before they ever prove that Christ administered the sacrament in consecrated vessels, clothes, and houses, or commanded that it should be administered in that way, or that it should be placed in the mouth and not in the hands... For that would be to deny and condemn Christ who so strictly commanded us to be free. It is not at all in our power to change or surrender our liberty. . . .

They ought to be satisfied that we do not reject their ordinances and ways, and may even keep them. *However, when they try to make of them a requirement, as if it could not be done any other way, and when they bind consciences to them and insist that it is heresy to do otherwise, we refuse to tolerate it and shall resist it with life and limb.* The conscience must remain free to choose either way in this matter, and our liberty must remain unimpaired. This we must insist upon, and in this we shall have the help of Christ who gave us our liberty and commanded us to keep it.¹⁵ (emphasis added)

7. New Worshiping Communities Collect Needed Funds.

“The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honor, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching. For the Scripture says, ‘Do not muzzle the ox while it is treading out the grain,’ and ‘The worker deserves his wages.’” (1 Tim 5:17–18)

One of the least helpful things that has happened in LCMS urban missions was the creation of church workers and ministries that were not begun with the intentional design of being self-sufficient. It happened largely because the mission model of the LCMS was planting new worshiping communities through the work of a full-time church worker who was dedicated to no other church responsibilities. Often times, these full-time church workers were not from the area, let alone from the people group in the targeted community. Even more unfortunate are those examples of placing church workers from other church bodies into the pastoral office

of an LCMS mission effort prior to their completing any training, certification, observation or known LCMS ministry. These always ended poorly.

It is not a quick fix simply to identify men and women as potential House Church planters and to train them and use them in ministry under the supervision of their regularly called and ordained pastors. But one thing that this model does is to enable the planting of Word and Sacrament communities at almost no financial cost to the sponsoring congregation.

All of the House Churches that we have helped to plant are in the black financially. Because these ministries are financially viable, they are able to give support to the work of their sponsoring congregation. This is the biblical model. The Apostle Paul collected tithes and offerings from the House Churches that he and others had planted; these funds went to support the mother church in Jerusalem. When we plant House Churches in this way, we building up the financial resources of our established congregations; the key is to find men and women who want to help their pastor gather Word and Sacrament communities simply for the joy of helping to start new ministry. The good news is that there are a lot more of these men and women out there than most of us realize. There are a lot of baptized believers who get great joy out of helping new Word and Sacrament ministry get started. We truly *have* not, because we *ask* not.

As I listen to full-time pastors who want to focus on just starting new communities; one of the recurring laments is, “Where will I get the money?” Our church body is basically a congregationally based ministry. My suggestion to these pastors is to consider serving a congregation that will support your efforts to plant House Churches as a ministry and mission outreach of that congregation. You will bless the church and the church will bless you.

House Churches also collect funds to help their members who are in need:

Nevertheless, Paul gives precedence to those who are of the household of faith, because we have been bound to them with a closer tie, inasmuch as they are from the same house, the church, and from the same household of Christ, and have one faith, one Baptism, one hope, one Lord, and everything the same.¹⁶

In conclusion: Archippus was a Bishop who, according to Luther, led a House Church (Philemon commentary). Let us pray for our church today to be blessed with similar leadership. And may this be so to God’s glory. Amen.

Endnotes

¹ Ben Thompson, “U.S. District Court judge chooses to leave God out of the Pledge of Allegiance,” *Renew America*, Sept. 14, 2005, accessed June 12, 2014,

<http://www.renewamerica.com/columns/thompson/050914>.

² Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works, Vol. 29: Lectures on Titus, Philemon, and Hebrews*, ed., J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald and H. T. Lehmann, *Luther’s Works* (Phm 8) (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1999, c1968).

³ Commission on Theology and Church Relations, *The Natural Knowledge of God: In Christian Confession & Christian Witness* (St. Louis: The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 2013), 15.

⁴ Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works, Vol. 5: Lectures on Genesis: Chapters 26–30*, ed., J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald and H. T. Lehmann, *Luther’s Works* (Ge 28:18) (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1999, c1968).

⁵ Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works, Vol. 41: Church and Ministry III*, ed., J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald and H. T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1999, c1966), 323–324.

⁶ Luther, *Luther’s Works, Vol. 5: Lectures on Genesis: Chapters 26–30*, (Ge 28:18).

⁷ Luther, *Luther’s Works, Vol. 5: Lectures on Genesis: Chapters 26–30*, 250–251.

⁸ Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, ed., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, trans. Charles Arand, Eric Gritsch, Robert Kolb, William Russell, James Schaaf, Jane Strohl, Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 324–325.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 639.

¹⁰ Martin Luther, “On the Councils and the Church” in *Luther’s Works, Vol. 41: Church and Ministry III*, ed., J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald, and H. T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1999), 148–166.

¹¹ Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works, Vol. 41: Church and Ministry III*, ed., J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald and H. T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1999, c1966), 173–174.

¹² Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works, Vol. 40: Church and Ministry II*, ed., J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald and H. T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1999, c1958), 393–394.

¹³ Luther, *Luther’s Works, Vol. 41: Church and Ministry III*, 323–324.

¹⁴ Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works, Vol. 36: Word and Sacrament II*, ed., J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald and H. T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1999, c1959), 239–241.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 243.

¹⁶ Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works, Vol. 27: Lectures on Galatians, 1535, Chapters 5–6; 1519, Chapters 1–6*, ed., J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald and H. T. Lehmann, *Luther’s Works* (Ga 6:10) (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1999, c1964).