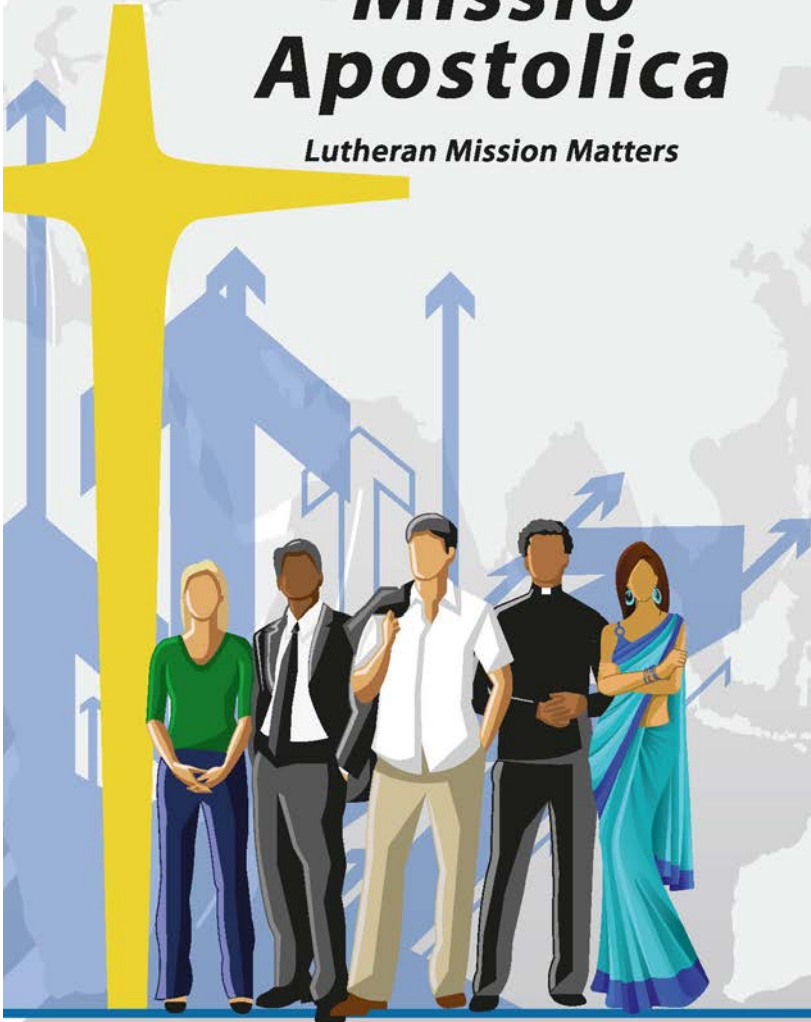


**If you would like to order  
a print copy of this issue  
of *Missio Apostolica*,  
e-mail [lsfmissiology@gmail.com](mailto:lsfmissiology@gmail.com).**

# *Missio Apostolica*

*Lutheran Mission Matters*



*Volume XXII, No. 2 (Issue 44) November 2014*

**MISSIO APOSTOLICA**  
**Lutheran Mission Matters**  
**Journal of the Lutheran Society for Missiology**

**Volume XXII, No. 2 (Issue 44) November 2014**

**[www.lsfmissiology.org](http://www.lsfmissiology.org)**

**MISSIO APOSTOLICA**  
—Journal of the Lutheran Society for Missiology, Inc.—  
**ISSN 1068-3151**

EDITORIAL COMMITTEE:

Rev. Dr. Victor Raj, Editor & Chairman	Mr. David Berger
Rev. Dr. Robert Kolb, Editor	Mr. Mark Kempff
Rev. Dr. Joel Okamoto, Book Editor	Rev. Dr. Jon Diefenthaler
Rev. Jeff Thormodson	Rev. Dr. Rudy Blank
Rev. Dr. Daniel Mattson	Rev. Dr. Rich Carter, DCE
Rev. Dr. Douglas Rutt	Mrs. Miriam Carter
Rev. Dr. Robert Scudieri	

ALL CORRESPONDENCE SHOULD BE SENT TO THE OFFICE OF THE EDITOR:

<i>MISSIO APOSTOLICA</i>	TEL: (314) 505-7115
801 Seminary Place	FAX: (314) 505-7393
St. Louis, MO 63105, USA	

BOOKS FOR REVIEW SHOULD BE SENT TO THE BOOK EDITOR:

Joel Okamoto	TEL: (314) 505-7152
801 Seminary Place	E-mail: <a href="mailto:okamotoj@sl.edu">okamotoj@sl.edu</a>
St. Louis, MO 63105, USA	

EDITORIAL ASSISTANT:

Stacey Parker	
c/o Dr. Victor Raj	
801 Seminary Place	E-mail: <a href="mailto:lsfmissiology@gmail.com">lsfmissiology@gmail.com</a>
St. Louis, MO 63105, USA	

*Missio Apostolica* is published twice a year in the spring and fall by the Lutheran Society for Missiology, Inc. (LSFM). *Missio Apostolica* serves as an international Lutheran forum for the exchange of ideas and discussion of issues related to proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus Christ globally. The views expressed by the individual writers, however, are not necessarily the views of the editors, Editorial Committee, or the Board of Directors of LSFM.

The journal is an open-access publication and is available online at <http://lsfmissiology.org/>. Subscriptions to an identical paper copy are available at a modest cost per year as well.

The journal is indexed in the ATLA Religion Database (online journal index of the American Theological Library Association) and its related online full-text component, ATLAS (American Theological Library Association Serials). ATLAS may be accessed at no charge by alumni of many seminaries upon request to the library of their alma mater including Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, Missouri, USA, and Concordia Theological Seminary, Ft. Wayne, Indiana, USA.

©Copyright 2014, The Lutheran Society for Missiology, Inc., St. Louis.  
Cover design by Justin Kumfer



# MISSIO APOSTOLICA

Journal of the Lutheran Society for Missiology, Inc.

Volume XXII, No. 2 (44)

November 2014

## CONTENTS

About the Cover.....	168
Inside this Issue.....	169
Editorials .....	170

## ARTICLES

Fresh Wineskins for Christ's Mission Robert Newton.....	176
The Expanding Edge of Mission: Missouri's (uneasy) Relationship with Mission Societies James Tino.....	195
Mission of Christ Network Kermit W. (Butch) Almstedt.....	203
Vulnerability in Mission Rich Carter .....	212
Building Bridges: Toward Constructing a Christian Foundation for Inter-Religious Relationships in the Shift from Religious Privilege to Spiritual Plurality Ken Chitwood.....	225
Reaching Out to the Non-Baptized Believers: Missiological Implications from a Lutheran Perspective Sam Thompson .....	247
Contextualizing the Faith in Amerindian Culture John Babbitts .....	259
The Korean Lutherans' Perspective of Lutheranism and Lutheran Identity Jin-Seop Eom.....	270
LCMS Missionaries and an Alien Indian Culture: A Gospel-Culture Engagement at the Margins of Indian Society Stanish Stanley .....	294
HMong Mission in LCMS Kou Seying.....	309
Transformational Mission Work—A Definition Paul Mueller .....	329

BOOK REVIEWS.....	342
-------------------	-----

# LUTHERAN SOCIETY FOR MISSIOLOGY

---

## EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE:

Rev. Dr. Daniel Mattson, Chairman  
Professor Phil Johnson, Vice-chairman  
Rev. James Pressnell, Secretary  
Mrs. Ruth Mattson, Treasurer  
Rev. Jeff Thormodson, Executive Director  
Rev. Dr. Victor Raj, Editor  
Rev. Dr. Eugene Bunkowske (ex-officio)

## EDITORIAL COMMITTEE:

Rev. Dr. Victor Raj, Editor & Chairman  
Rev. Dr. Robert Kolb, Editor  
Rev. Dr. Joel Okamoto, Book Editor  
Rev. Jeffrey Thormodson  
Rev. Dr. Daniel Mattson  
Mr. David Berger  
Rev. Dr. Douglas Rutt  
Mr. Mark Kempff  
Rev. Dr. Robert Scudieri  
Rev. Dr. Jon Diefenthaler  
Rev. Dr. Rudy Blank  
Rev. Dr. Rich Carter, DCE  
Mrs. Miriam Carter

## About The Cover: You Can Judge This Journal By Its Cover

“Lutheran mission matters.” Yes, it does; and yes, Lutheran mission matters are what you read about in *Missio Apostolica*, now in its twenty-second year of publication. Ambiguity, double meaning—call it what you will. The journal’s subtitle packs much meaning into few words. Lutheran mission matters because it is based on God’s gracious gifts: His Word and His Sacraments. The Spirit plants faith in hearts as He wills, and so Lutherans ground their work of God’s mission in the tools that His Spirit supplies: His saving Word and Sacraments. The Lutheran mission matters in *Missio Apostolica* reflect the thinking and practice of Lutherans in many walks of life: theologians at seminaries, missionaries in the field and retired missionaries, pastors in the parish, teachers in classrooms, laypeople who bring God’s Word to their neighbors.

The new cover illustration, the subject of extended discussion by the editorial committee, is intended not to supersede the LSFM logo of a cross on an open Bible against a background of the globe. Rather, it is to expand on it—to display graphically that mission is about people, people of all cultures and colors. The stylized gathering on the cover depicts a representative sampling of all those who spread the Word and those who hear it. That the people stand in the southern hemisphere is no accident. It reminds us of the growing vibrancy of Christ’s church in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, even as Christians in the “old” countries of Christendom, and even the “new world,” in the north struggle to maintain a vital presence. Mission is not a one-way street from north to south or from west to east. The arrows point in all directions, and the cross remains at the center of it all. God’s mission is everywhere, just as it always has been.

David O. Berger

## Inside this Issue

The contributors to this issue of *Missio Apostolica* present a wide array of subjects that pertain to the organic way in which the Gospel reaches out to people's hearts and how those who hear the message confess the faith in the one Lord Jesus Christ as they live and make a living in the places and locations God had allotted specifically for them on the face of the earth. At the cutting edge of mission and church planting, they are in different ways rediscovering and possibly returning to the first-century mission models, trying to emulate what the early apostles and evangelists were attempting as they were reaching out with the Gospel to peoples and communities existing outside their own socio-cultural and religious comfort zones.

Authors who understand Native American and Asian Indian cultures and religions speak as insiders on how the biblical message requires different ways of expressing the Gospel of salvation as it involves cultures that are saturated with a variety of religions and philosophies that do not directly coordinate with the biblical worldview. At the same time, some authors address the new and emerging challenges for the church's ministry and mission in North America, as in this historically famous sending place of Christian missions the Christian religion exists today as one of many choices in the marketplace of religions and its exclusive claims are constantly and intentionally attacked by the prevailing pluralism of religions.

Here we hear clearly from those who have served and continue to serve the Lutheran Church as missionaries, district presidents, mission executives, seminary professors, and researchers and learn from them new lessons on issues and questions that pose serious challenges to the status quo of traditionally established mission methods and the existing policies of some mission boards.

Mission society leaders' voices also represent numerous others like them whose missional directions conflict with the traditional institutional models although everyone in their heart desires to reach out to others in the name of the Gospel. Inside this issue of *Missio Apostolica*, numerous missional questions are posed before the reader to consider and reflect on for the sake of those who do not yet belong. The two guest editorials strongly suggest how missional institutional churches can become if only they returned to their own formative history and followed the vision their founding fathers had cast for the church.

As a living organism, the church of Jesus Christ in every age will always live in the world, confronting new challenges for mission and ministry. Yet Gospel proclamation will prevail incessantly counting on the promises of God who always remains a missionary God. Read along in prayer and in faith in the faithfulness of God.

V. R.

## Editorials

### Modalities and Sodalities

Allan Buckman

Though unfamiliar to most Christians, even those within the mission community, these church/mission structures have been around a long time. Credit for the rediscovery of these helpful and dynamic concepts goes to Dr. Ralph Winter, who first drew attention to these realities in an address given to the All-Asia Mission consultation in Seoul, Korea in August 1973. A full blown treatment later appeared in *Perspectives in the World Christian Movement*, under the title, “The Two Structures of God’s Redemptive Mission.”<sup>1</sup>

Gifted with a brilliant mind, and with degrees in engineering (Caltech), theology (Princeton), education (Columbia) and linguistics/anthropology (Cornell), Winter became widely known for his many conceptual breakthroughs and unique approaches to mission challenges.

Examples include his work as co-founder of the TEE global mission initiative (13,000+ graduates), typing the entire unreached global population into just three categories (E-1, E-2, and E-3, each with its own unique linguistic and cultural challenge and each requiring its own unique evangelistic approach), as well as the founding of the Perspectives on the World Christian Movement initiative, with more than 80,000 alumni in the USA alone.<sup>2</sup>

Perhaps his most widely known contribution, however, is his *unreached peoples* concept first presented at the 1974 Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization. This shifting of emphasis from countries to people groups completely refocused the remaining task in global missions. Correspondingly, the resources of numerous mission agencies were shifted to accommodate this new concept.

All of this and more prompted *TIME Magazine* to include Dr. Ralph Winter in the cover story for its February 7, 2005, issue as one of “The 25 Most Influential Evangelicals in America.”

The modality concept can probably best be understood by equating it to the congregation that faithfully carries out its primary responsibilities of preaching, teaching, encouraging, and otherwise serving those who regularly gather to receive the Word and the Sacraments. The biblical antecedent may be found in the Jewish synagogue and the early Christian gatherings that followed from that structure.

Sodality references those believers who gather for the specific purpose of taking the Gospel to those who have not received it, and who are often hidden behind



barriers of language and culture. The biblical antecedent would be the missionary bands sent out by the early Christian congregations as, for example, the Apostle Paul and those with him sent by the church at Antioch (Acts 13:2ff.)

In the Roman Catholic Church, the diocese compares to the features of the modality and the orders to those of the sodality. Among Protestants, modalities compare to the congregations and sodalities to the mission societies. Lutheran examples of the latter would be the Lutheran Bible Translators, World Mission Prayer League, Christian Friends of New Americans (referenced below), and almost any of the 69 societies currently listed with the Association of Lutheran Mission Agencies (ALMA).

As Winter advises, a major implication of the modality/sodality concept is that both structures must be accepted by the Church as legitimate and necessary, as well as part of the people of God, i.e., the Church.<sup>3</sup>

At present, unfortunately, this understanding and vision is not sufficiently present in the Lutheran ecclesial and mission communities. Indeed, Ralph Winter commented on this noting that the Lutheran Reformation did, with its congregations, produce a diocesan structure comparable to that in the Roman Catholic tradition. In a comparable sense, however, the Lutheran Movement did not re-adopt the sodalities, i.e., the Catholic orders. He goes on to note, “this omission, in my evaluation, represents the greatest error of the Reformation and the greatest weakness of the resulting Protestant tradition.”<sup>4</sup>

To illustrate the dynamic quality of the relationship between modalities and sodalities (congregations and mission societies), the recently established Christian Friends of New Americans (501c3 in 2008, LCMS RSO-2010) is offered as an example. Working primarily out of a two-story 5,000 sq. ft. street front mission center in south St Louis city, it seeks to reach out primarily to the 600–800 refugees from numerous birth nations, who are being resettled in that part of the city each year.

One of its primary goals is to reach a minimum of 200 recently arrived refugees (New Americans) annually. It does this through “quick link” (contact within one month of arrival) ministries, such as the delivery of welcome packages, monthly Health and Wellness screenings, ESL classes, and more. The 200-300 New Americans with whom it links each year typically come from eight or more nations in Africa and Asia (Ethiopia, Eritrea, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Sudan, Somalia, Nepal, Bhutan, and Burma).

During the past three years, two large home Bible studies have been established as a result of this effort with a combined weekly attendance of over 60, each of these closely associated with an LCMS congregation. From these have emerged two Nepali Lutheran Fellowships, one with an average Sunday attendance of 60, and the other between 15 and 20. Each is closely associated with one of two LCMS

congregations (Ascension and Messiah); and, in both instances, these prayer and praise gatherings are in the Nepali language.

*It is interesting to note that this is happening in ethnically diverse urban St. Louis, where 22 of the 24 LCMS congregations have been in continuous decline for more than 30 years.*

In this environment, CFNA operates entirely as a mission station, not as a congregation. Using its “draw-bridge-home” model, it seeks to link with New Americans through a half dozen service ministries. Through these it brings New Americans into the CFNA network and bridges them from no understanding of CFNA, or even the Holy Scriptures, to some level of awareness and, perhaps, even acceptance. This is accomplished by CFNA staff, as well as by numerous volunteer workers, primarily lay, but also with numerous clergy.

The last step is the “home” represented by an LCMS congregation. During the past three and a half years, there have been more than 110 baptisms and/or confirmations, all of them among New Americans from the nations referenced above. Most occurred in congregations (the balance at the Peace Center), and all of these New Americans now hold membership in one of four nearby LCMS congregations with which CFNA is closely affiliated.

On any given Sunday, upwards of 150 New Americans now attend LCMS congregations and/or the closely related ethnic Lutheran Fellowships. As recently as three years ago, most of these recently arrived New Americans would not have been present in these congregations and/or fellowships.

In densely packed multi-ethnic urban environments, a congregation acting on its own or even as a group of loosely aligned congregations, is at a severe disadvantage when attempting to cross barriers of language and culture. The very nature of these close-knit ethnic communities precludes the establishment of meaningful relationships through incidental, occasional contact with individual members of the ethnic community.

This is especially true if these contacts are primarily made with young people. Though often much more open, they cannot provide the all-important endorsements available only from the trusted, older and most respected community leaders. A challenge of this magnitude requires focus, patience, persistence, kindness, service, and more, all of it on a consistent ongoing basis.

Almost always beyond the capacity of pastors with their usual heavy work schedules, this is the perfect challenge for a well-focused, well-organized and well-connected mission society. Societies such as CFNA possess a demonstrated capacity to generate links within indifferent, or even resistant, ethnic communities and to intensify these links into relationships. Moreover, these links can be, and often are, generated within multiple ethnic communities simultaneously.

Having stepped into the network, many have also demonstrated a willingness to continue the progression and become part of a home Bible study, Ethnic Fellowship, or Lutheran congregation. These people, who have been pushed from country to country and have come to question not only their social status, but also their very identity, are finding a new identity in Christ, all within the context of a Lutheran congregation.

It should also be noted that most of those making this journey are doing so from within the context of Buddhist, Hindu, and sometimes even Muslim backgrounds. The truly interesting part is that, with few exceptions, they do so with the consent or tacit approval of the leadership of their various ethnic communities.

In a time of uncertainty regarding the future of Lutheran congregations in densely packed multi-ethnic urban settings, CFNA affords an example of mission/church solidarity already under way, and which is almost indefinitely reproducible.

In the past, The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, and other Lutheran denominations as well, have become accustomed to reckoning their presence in any urban or geographic area in terms of Lutheran schools as well as the number of established congregations—as well they should. Perhaps now would be a good time to expand this view to take into account the presence of well-connected mission societies as well.

## **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> Ralph D. Winter, “The Two Structures of God’s Redemptive Mission” in *Perspectives in the World Christian Movement*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2009), 244–253.

<sup>2</sup> E-1 = same language, same culture.

E-2 = similar language (dialect), similar culture.

E-3 = different language, different culture.

<sup>3</sup> Winter, “Two Structures,” 244.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 250.

# Observations of a District President Emeritus

“Thank God! At last we have a pastor! He will perform the marriage of our daughter, baptize our grandchildren, and be on our doorstep whenever we need him!” Such words are commonly heard when a pastor or seminary graduate accepts the call to one of our congregations. They also are sentiments that seem to me to be reinforced by the wording and spirit of the rites of Ordination and Installation that we tend to use in our churches, almost without exception. “Tending the flock,” through preaching, instruction of young and old, ministering to the sick and dying, and forgiving the sins of the penitent, are held up as the primary functions of anyone who assumes the pastoral office.

I address this issue, rightly raised by President Newton, as one who served as district president within the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod from 2003 to 2012. The Southeastern District came into being in 1939 in order to “exploit the mission opportunity” in the five-state region from Delaware to South Carolina, and since then our leadership, in a variety of ways, has continued to pursue this same objective. Soon after I took office, therefore, I saw the Ablaze movement in the Synod as yet another opportunity to take our congregations and church workers in this same direction. In convention, our district congregations, in light of the impending Reformation anniversary in 2017, adopted a set of ambitious mission goals; and we successfully partnered with the Synod in the raising of over six million dollars, primarily for new ministry starts. For this reason, when I presided at the ordinations and installations within our district during this same period, the absence of any reference in the promises a pastor makes, and presumably to which he is to be held accountable, to the work of “mission,” or “seeking the lost,” or reaching the “community” with the Gospel, never ceased to get my attention. My questions were: “What are we saying not just to the candidate, but to God and to each other as the church? Is tending the world beyond the church just an option? And is what we are seeking to do together right now as congregations of this District only to be ranked as secondary in importance?”

Early in my tenure, I discovered that there were other district presidents who felt much the same way I did. In one of our meetings of the Council of Presidents, I was encouraged when those who were involved in crafting an agenda to accompany a new hymnal for the Synod sought input from the 35 of us who conduct hundreds of ordinations and installations. The need for making more explicit connections between mission and the pastoral office in particular, as I recall the discussion, was clearly emphasized. It was much to my disappointment, therefore, that, when the new agenda came out, none of this appeared to have “made the cut.”

While people in our pews these days may indeed be grateful that they have a pastor to tend their flock, they also, in my view, know what the “score” is for the

church in our land. The daughter for whom they hope the new pastor will perform a marriage may not be a churchgoer, and the baptism they want the pastor to provide for their grandchildren may be the last time they are in a church, or its Sunday School, for many years to come. In their more emotional moments, these realities can bring them to tears. On Sunday mornings, they often stand in sanctuaries that are at best half-filled with worshipers; and, hence, in the self-study documents the leaders of their congregations prepare for the district president, as he seeks to assist them in their call process, they often strongly indicate that their greatest need is for a pastor will help them find new ways to reach their community. In part, their motivation may be to “get more members,” especially young families, and to improve the sagging offerings. In addition, some of them may be reluctant to accept any real changes that most assuredly will need to be made in the weekly schedule of any pastor for the sake of the flock he is seeking to tend beyond the congregation’s current membership. But in their heart of hearts, they often know that times have changed. The culture in which we are now living in all of North America is mission territory.

Some may want to say that just a few words here or there cannot make much of a difference. However, I believe that they do. The words a district president speaks in the rite of Ordination or Installation, because they have become so familiar to him, can smoothly roll from his tongue. The other pastors who are there for the laying on of hands may find themselves nodding off because they have heard them almost as many times. But the people in the pews are more likely to be paying close attention because many of them are hearing them for the first time. I also think that district presidents, in consultation with other members of their leadership teams, or congregations for that matter, might consider amending what “the book” calls upon a pastor to promise at his Ordination and Installation. There may in fact be some who have done this already. In any case, what I would eventually hope to hear more often at such precious moments in the life of any congregation is this: “Thank God! At last we have a pastor who will care enough about us to put us to work as he leads us into the mission field that lies right outside the doorstep of this church!”

Dr. Jon Diefenthaler, President Emeritus  
Southeastern District—LCMS

# Articles

## Fresh Wineskins for Christ's Mission

Robert Newton

*No one puts a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old garment, for the patch tears away from the garment, and a worse tear is made. Neither is new wine put into old wineskins. If it is, the skins burst and the wine is spilled and the skins are destroyed. But new wine is put into fresh wineskins, and so both are preserved (Matthew 9).*

**Abstract:** Congregations and leaders in the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod have been called into a new era of ministry, a missionary era. As a church rooted deeply in Northern Europe it enjoyed, until recently, the favor of America's dominant "White, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant" culture and structured its ministries accordingly. Those days are gone, that favor has waned, and many Christians find themselves underequipped and inadequately structured to proclaim the Gospel in their once churched America, now turned mission field. Along those lines, Jesus drew attention to the church's "wineskin" and its capacity to hold effectively the "new wine" of His missionary Gospel. This article encourages us to examine our church's wineskin in light of His missionary calling.

I have the privilege of writing this article from two distinct but symbiotic positions: (1) district president of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS) (what other church bodies refer to as a "bishop," and (2) a Lutheran missiologist. Most of us share a rudimentary understanding of the word Bishop with its responsibilities of watching over the theology and practice of the churches and church workers in a given geographic or linguistic arena.

However, having often been met with blank stares at the mention of the word "missiologist," I've come to realize that "missiology" does not enjoy the same universal understanding as other disciplines in the church. Instead, it occupies a very particular and perhaps peculiar place in the life and faith of the Christ's church on earth. Lutheran missiologists would argue that given our Lord's self-proclaimed—

---

*Robert Newton is the President of the California-Nevada-Hawaii District. Previously, he served as an evangelistic missionary in the Philippines, a professor of missions at Concordia Theological Seminary, and Senior Pastor of First Immanuel Lutheran Church, San Jose, CA. Robert and wife Priscilla have four grown children and eleven grandchildren.*

“to seek and to save the lost” (Lk 19:10)—His mission should occupy the center stage of the church’s life and work, and, therefore, missiology should play an essential role in shaping our theological understandings and applications.

Yet, the question persists among us, “Since missiology is so *particular* in the church that it commands the attention of only a few, should it play an essential role in influencing the *whole* of theology?” That question lies at the heart of one of the great distractions in my church body today: The separation of and competition between so-called “Confessional Lutheran theology” and “Lutheran Missiology.”

## **Missiology and Christology**

We would protest with every fiber of our being if a wedge were being driven between Confessional Lutheran theology and Christology. How can one separate the two? Isn’t the crucified and risen Christ the heart and soul of the faith we confess? Isn’t His person and work (AC, III) the core of the central teaching of Confessional Lutherans—justification by grace through faith alone (AC, IV)? That said, I would suggest that the same vigorous protest be raised over the wedge being driven between Confessional theology and missiology.

Why? Simple. It is impossible to separate the essential missionary character of our Lord Jesus Christ from our faithful study of His person and work and our confession of Him as Lord of all (Christology). The entire confession of our faith in “Jesus Christ, His only Son our Lord,” centers in His missiological intention “to seek and to save the lost.” Any attempt by the Church or its theologians to distinguish or separate Jesus the Christ from His mission will end up rejecting the very Christ it claims to confess (Lk 4:28–30). Missiology—that is, the careful study of and application of Christ’s mission to the world—is inseparable from and essential to Biblical Christology. As such, missiology must thoroughly inform our Confessional Lutheran theology and practice if it is to be truly Christological.

While missiology, by its Christological nature and intention, must pervade all Lutheran theology, missiologists themselves would (should) admit that their discipline is, in large measure, a study in personal limitations. Thus, the great missionary St. Paul confessed, “We see through a glass darkly” (1 Cor 13:12). Any honest missionary will tell you that our ignorance is reinforced on a daily basis by life and work on the mission field. Ask the Kankanaey Christians who patiently taught and retaught me about their world as I lived and served among them for six years in the Philippines. Or ask the church leaders in the Gutnius Lutheran Church of Papua New Guinea why this missiologist with all of his expertise spent the better part of a day in a municipal jail. Or, closer to home, ask my present staff that joins me daily in wrestling with the challenges in mission faced by the congregations in our district today. If being a missiologist implies that one is an expert in Christ’s mission to the world, then count me out. If, on the other hand, missiological

expertise (if there is such a thing at all) is measured more in its ability to ask questions than by offering answers, then count me in.

## **Missiology and the Business of Asking Questions**

Missiology must constantly address new (and old) questions that arise from unchurched people as the saving Gospel of our Lord Jesus penetrates their world. That's what makes it so interesting. That's also what often makes it unsettling for those of us who are already part of the established church here and abroad. The established church carries the responsibility to "follow the pattern of the sound words" and to "guard the good deposit entrusted to [us]" (2 Tim 1:14). Our Lord exhorted us to the same with His words, "Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and keep it" (αὐτός δέ εἶπεν μενοῦν μακάριοι οἱ ἀκούοντες τὸν λόγον τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ φυλάσσοντες) (Lk 11:28). The Greek verb φυλάσσω carries the meaning "to guard, defend, keep safe, preserve." Such concern naturally tends toward the need for churches to set boundaries theologically and institutionally in order to preserve what we understand as the true faith and to "nail things down" as exactly as we can in every aspect of our theology and practice.

Missionaries, because they regularly encounter new phenomena (at least new to them and their established churches), are required to ask questions of themselves and the churches they serve. These questions often bump up against what the churches have already determined as settled issues and, in so doing, seem to soften theological boundaries. And that unsettles things for the churches. Consider some of the missiological questions raised by Gentiles receiving the Gospel and the challenges these questions presented to the established church in Jerusalem. "Can Jews enter Gentile homes and eat with them?" "Must Gentile men be circumcised in order to be Christian?" These questions seem almost insignificant to us, but they rocked the New Testament Church down to its foundation.

While these missionary questions unsettled the Church, they also enabled it to reexamine its established theological understandings of God's Kingdom (Kingdom of grace, not law) and how He is spreading His Kingdom throughout the world (Acts 15:6–12). Both in the light of God's Holy Word (the inspired record of God's work in the Old Testament) and the witness of missionaries (Paul and Barnabas) to what God was presently doing, the Church grew in its understanding of God's will and adjusted its thinking and behaviors to align with the mind and will of Christ.

## **The Issue of Wineskins**

Our Lord Jesus Christ, in speaking about the Kingdom of God, referred to two kinds of wineskins: old and new. In Matthew 9, He noted, "Neither is new wine put into old wineskins. If it is, the skins burst and the wine is spilled and the skins are destroyed. But new wine is put into fresh wineskins and so both are preserved."



What kind of wineskin is our Lutheran theology intended to be: “old” or, as Jesus said, “fresh”? Along with our theology, what kinds of wineskins are our structured patterns of local congregation, our understanding of the ministry of the Gospel, theological education, or mission outreach supposed to be? Good wineskins, whether fresh or old, have the same purpose: They keep out destructive contaminants while the wine ferments and then is stored. We want our confession and derived patterns of mission and ministry to keep us centered on our Savior and to protect us from “every wind of teaching” caused “by the cunning and craftiness of men and their deceitful scheming.” Our singular focus on Jesus and avoidance of all false doctrine is the business of a sound wineskin. The question, then, is not whether we need a wineskin (we most certainly do), but what kind should it be, fresh or old. Has our theological wineskin grown old, that is, having brought to completion the expansion (development) of our Confessional doctrine, it exists for the primary purpose of keeping and preserving this pure wine for all to enjoy? Or would our Lord desire that our Confessional wineskin remain fresh, that is, expandable? While it continues to preserve the pure wine of the Gospel, it also maintains the theological elasticity needed for continued expansion of the Gospel into a world very different from our own.

In the end, the question is really not about our understanding regarding our theological wineskin—whether it is fresh or old—but rather about the nature of our theology. Is our theology complete, with no more room to grow, no new things to learn from other peoples and cultures as they receive the Gospel? Or is our theology still fermenting among us? The mission enterprise, by its very nature, continually adds new and wholesome yeast to the wine. As the Gospel of Jesus Christ crosses new boundaries, new peoples, like fresh yeast, are added and theological fermentation continues.

The church’s wineskin therefore is forced either to expand or to explode, depending on the condition of the wineskin—whether it’s fresh or old. And it’s in this understanding that the LCMS must wrestle with what it means to be a Confessional church body. Were our Confessions intended to be a theological container with intentionally fixed boundaries, unaffected by changing contexts or new people groups that encounter the Gospel? Or were they intended to be a launching pad—hermeneutically, theologically, and missiologically—that equips and assists us in reaching human contexts exotic from our own with the Gospel? Do our Confessions intend to provide all the answers for all time, or do they give us the Gospel-centered ability and confidence to ask new and necessary questions in the Name of and for the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ?

### **The Mission Field among Us**

This business of asking questions is perhaps more critical today than ever before

in our life as the people of God, in general, but particularly for those engaged in mission work in the United States and abroad. The LCMS has awakened to an epochal shift that is taking place in the world (at least in the Western world) regarding the role and significance of the Church. In many areas of the Western Hemisphere, society has concluded that it has outgrown Christianity or at least Christendom. I have referred to this phenomenon in other writings as the post-church era of missions. I've suggested that we might distinguish three different eras of mission work: pre-churched, churched, and post-churched:

*Pre-churched* mission work takes place among people groups where the Gospel has not been proclaimed, and, therefore, local churches have not been established. As the Gospel advances, the church grows not only in size but in influence within the larger society. This growth signals the shift from a pre-churched to a churched context for missions.

Missions within the *churched* context is quite different, in that the church now holds the pole position in the larger society. It enjoys cultural, social, political, and economic prestige within the community. People come to the church seeking answers for life's questions and seeking the church's guidance in making decisions regarding ethics and morality.

Just as the waxing of the church's influence signals a shift from a pre-churched to a churched mission context, its waning indicates a shift from a churched to a *post-churched* context. As the church's position and influence diminish, the society begins to reflect the cultural characteristics of a "pre-churched" world once again. Knowing which era or phase of church we find ourselves is critical to knowing how to proceed in mission.

Four questions are essential to the task of mission, that is, to speaking the Gospel of Jesus Christ to those who have not yet heard. *Who* is considered credible to weigh in on life issues and, therefore, be a purveyor of the Good News? *Where* do conversations regarding the Gospel take place? *When* do those conversations take place? And perhaps the most significant question of all, *what* is the starting place for these conversations?<sup>1</sup> The "who, where, when, and what" starting place of a conversation about our Lord Jesus Christ is determined by the people who are culturally in charge. Therefore, knowing who is culturally in charge greatly informs our approach to mission. Are we in an era where the church is culturally in charge and therefore is responsible for answering the "who, where, when, and what"? Or are the unchurched people in charge, so that they ultimately determine who speaks, where and when those conversations take place, as well as what is the starting place of conversations that the missionary uses to point to the person and work of Jesus Christ?

Missionaries understand that they are not in charge. In fact, a practical definition of missions is simply the proclamation of the Gospel in contexts in which the church

is not in charge. That's a radical shift for most Western missionaries who grew up in a church environment, an environment in which the church mattered and its values were shared by the larger community.

Take Good Friday, for example. I remember as a young boy growing up in Napa, California, that many of the shops on the main streets of our town posted signs in their windows announcing their closure from the hours of 12:00–3:00 p.m. in respect for the suffering and death of Jesus Christ. There was also a crèche on the town square at Christmas. That isn't the world that many of us live in now. Our world much more reflects the pre-churched culture in which the organized church has no priority whatsoever. We've experienced a radical loss of the power and prestige that we once depended upon to proclaim the Gospel. Who are we Christians in relation to the world in which God has placed us and to which we proclaim the saving message of Jesus? We've experienced a radical dislocation of our place in the context in which we are called to minister.

This dislocation is as radical for us as it was for God's Old Testament saints when they woke up one morning not in their beloved Jerusalem or Judea but in the distant and cruel nation of Babylon. Gone was their sacred Temple. Gone was their theocentric government and shared social and moral values as followers of Moses. Gone was everything that they understood as norm, anchor, and home—spiritually, socially, culturally, politically. Consider the lament of these Old Testament brothers and sisters as they were exiled in Babylon.

By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down and wept, when we remembered Zion. On the willows there we hung up our lyres. For there our captors required of us songs and our tormentors, mirth, saying, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!" How shall we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land? (Ps 137:1–4)

Many Christians in North America today share those deep feelings. The seemingly sudden loss of the significance of our churches in their culture and communities has caused us to lose our balance as Christians. We feel exiled, pushed to the periphery, socially and politically forced to forfeit our place as decision makers in the society. While our lament is not nearly the same as that of the Old Testament saints, our questions are similar. How do we relate with people who do not know Christ and don't value the church? How do we learn to live now as strangers and foreigners in a country that once was our own, where we were viewed as important leaders?

One of the great culture shocks to a new missionary is his or her loss of role, understanding, and personal and professional expectations. Who am I in relation to this new people among whom I live and work? What is my role in this community? The same shock can be experienced at the corporate level. Consider the LCMS. The shift from a church to post-church mission context<sup>2</sup> has rocked the Synod's

identity. Until recently, we understood our role as a Confessional lighthouse within Christendom, the voice of biblical truth among other Christian churches. We expected other Christians to see our light and be attracted to it. As if to Solomon's Jerusalem or Constantine's Christendom, the nations would be drawn like night bugs to the light of our Gospel-centered theology.

Many LCMS congregations struggle over the profound loss of significance that the Christian churches are experiencing in America. We don't live in a contemporary version of "Solomon's Jerusalem"; rather, we live in a contemporary version of Nebuchadnezzar's Babylon. What does it mean to be a Confessional lighthouse in this context? The great shift in our place in the culture has a profound impact on how we go about our business.

Biblically speaking, when the children of Israel were exiled and dispersed in Babylon, it was perhaps the very best thing that could have happened to them. In exile, Israel returned to its roots as God's people, elect and set apart for the nations (Exodus 19). In so many words it returned to its vocation as a missionary people. I would suggest that more nations came into contact with the saving Name and reputation of Yahweh while God's people were scattered in Babylon than when they were united around Solomon's Jerusalem and Israel was the leading political, economic, and perhaps cultural force among the nations (1 Kings 10).

### **The Recovery of God's Missionary People**

The dispersion of God's people in Babylon was known as the diaspora; they were primarily a scattered laypeople. They looked at their condition as a curse not a blessing. But it was in and by their experience in Babylon that God re-birthed His missionary people. Thus, St. Peter referenced the audience of his first epistle to the "elect exiles of the diaspora" (1 Pt 1:1). From God's vantage point, the diaspora was not an unfortunate accident. It was His will, the will of a missionary God. Our Lord Jesus Christ made specific reference to the diaspora in His parable regarding the wheat and the tares. In His explanation of the parable to His disciples, He stated,

Just as the weeds are gathered and burned with the fire so it will be at the close of the age. The Son of Man will send his angels and they will gather out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all lawbreakers and throw them into the fiery furnace. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their father. He who has ears let him hear. (Mt 13:40-43)

The disciples would have recognized that Jesus was paraphrasing His own words, first spoken in the last chapter of Daniel: "And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth will wake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. And those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the

sky above; and those who turn many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever” (Dan 12:2–3).

God spoke these words to Daniel while he and his friends were exiles in Babylon, bearing witness to the good news of their faith in a context in which they were not in charge. In referencing His words from Daniel 12, Jesus was teaching His disciples that being exiled and being a Christian minority (the wheat) in the midst of those who do not know or care to know the living God (the tares) is by His deliberate design. Through the testimony of exiled laypeople, even a pagan king such as Nebuchadnezzar came to embrace the true faith.

Jesus revealed the divine purpose of the diaspora: God loves the nations and, because of His love for the nations, He plants His people among them where they grow as His people and let their light shine in that place so people might see their good works and glorify the Father who is in heaven. Our Lord drove the point home when, during Holy Week (in response to the Greeks who were seeking an audience with Him), He declared,

Truly, truly I say to you unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies it remains alone but if it dies it bears much fruit. Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. If anyone serves me, he must follow me; and where I am, there will my servant be also. If anyone serves me, the Father will honor him . . . And I when I am lifted up from the earth will draw all people to myself (Jn 12:24–27, 32).

In His crucifixion, resurrection, and the pouring out of His Holy Spirit on the Christian Church, our Lord Jesus Christ launched His mission of drawing of all peoples to Himself.

During the forty days following His resurrection, the disciples asked a key question: “Lord will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?” (Acts 1:6). Recognizing that the resurrected Lord was indeed the promised Messiah, David’s greater Son, it was only natural for them to ask Him about the consummation of God’s Kingdom (His Divine rule) and Israel’s place in it. However, they did not yet understand the extent of that restoration, globally or ethnically. They envisioned God’s restored Kingdom to be something like Solomon’s Jerusalem with the nations streaming to meet the resurrected Lord. In response to their question, Jesus explained that Jerusalem would no longer be the “come to” place for the nations. Rather, it would be the “go from” place, and the Kingdom would come as they gave witness to Him in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and, finally, the ends of the earth. Christ’s Kingdom would come to every place they traveled, and their witness of His death and resurrection would invite peoples of every nation to join it.

The Lord envisioned a holy diaspora, or scattering, of His people among the nations so that all the nations would receive Him as Lord. That scattering took place

in earnest when St. Stephen was martyred for proclaiming the true faith (Acts 8:1). Jesus' church was scattered as life-giving Seed sown by God Himself in all the world. As Luke recorded, "There arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria. And those who were scattered went about proclaiming the good news" (Acts 8:1, 4). He continued later in his account, "Now those who were scattered because of the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word" (Acts 11:19). God's church had become His elect diaspora among the nations once again.

It seems that the Lord is doing the same to and for His own here in the United States. America is an increasingly unchurched society, and, as such, the church is becoming socially and culturally estranged, (exiled) within its own borders. What does it mean to be God's people living in an unchurched society? What does it mean for God's people to be living as exiles in their own country?

For centuries we Lutherans defined ourselves as a Confessional movement within Christianity. What does it mean to be a confessional movement now outside of Christianity? How do we communicate the Gospel when we no longer hold a credible voice in the society? These are missionary questions, and we Lutheran Christians are being required to ask them. We must learn the grace and humility of being able to ask such questions, believing that God answers faithfully in His Word. The Word of God that so faithfully led us before springs to even greater life in this new and exotic (missionary) context. We bow our heads in humility and thanksgiving that the Lord in His mercy has brought us to this day.

### **Fresh Wineskins for the Mission of Christ**

What kind of *theological and ministry* wineskins, then, are needed for the missional contexts in which we find ourselves here in America and abroad? How do we learn to live as "strangers and exiles" in a society in which we were once appreciated as cultural insiders, even cultural designers? How do Lutherans confess the Gospel outside of the Christendom it was called by God to reform? The missional contexts in which we find ourselves raise profound questions. Missionary questions unsettled the Early Church, enabling it to grow in its understanding of God's Word and to make fresh, faithful applications for its participation in Christ's mission. How might contemporary questions assist us to do the same in the twenty-first century? In particular, what missionary questions must we ask both regarding our understanding and practice of the ministry of the Gospel—"the teaching of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments" (AC V)—and regarding how we organize or structure that ministry according to Christ's missionary intent?

In my roles both as a district president and a former evangelistic missionary, I have had the privilege of observing (and participating in) the ministry of the Gospel

organized in different ways, each striving to be faithful to God's Word and our Lutheran Confessions. The differences in ministries stemmed from a variation in contexts, not Confession. As district president, I presently oversee the Gospel ministry as it has developed within a "churched"-dominated context, organized almost exclusively around established congregations with the ministry of called and ordained pastors at the center. As an evangelistic missionary, I oversaw the Gospel ministry as it developed in a pre-churched or missional context—organized around the non-Christian communities, with the ministry of the baptized as central. Both ministry structures maintain a symbiotic relationship between the baptized and the pastors, but are arranged almost oppositely. The *churched* model (or structure) focuses primarily on the baptized, who support the Gospel ministry as carried out by the pastor; the *mission* model focuses on the pastor or missionary, who proclaims the Gospel to the unchurched, while equipping and supporting the baptized to do the same.

Structures or models of Gospel ministry are God's gifts for serving both the Church and the world, proclaiming the Gospel to all creatures and faithfully keeping and passing the faith on to future generations. These structures remain effective as long as they (1) remember that they, like wineskins, "house" the ministry of the Gospel but are not the ministry itself, and (2) accurately reflect the context for that ministry. They must remain supple as long as the new wine of Christ's Kingdom is in the making. Our Lutheran fathers grasped this dynamic understanding of the Gospel ministry when they confessed,

The Ministry of the church

So that we may obtain this faith, the ministry of teaching the Gospel and administering the sacraments was instituted. For through the Word and the sacraments, as through instruments, the Holy Spirit is given, who effects faith where and when it pleases God, in those who hear the Gospel (AC V).

As Dr. Robert Preus noted in his article "The Confessions and the Mission of the Church," Melancthon made no mention here of the pastoral office.<sup>3</sup> Rather, he spoke of the Gospel ministry as a function or activity by which the Holy Spirit creates faith in the hearts of those who hear. The Holy Spirit, then, in partnership with His Church, develops the necessary and appropriate structures for the Gospel ministry to proceed into the world.

## **Gospel Ministry in the New Testament**

The earliest "structure" for Gospel proclamation is the Lord Jesus Himself, "the Word made flesh and tabernacled among us." In His case, the structure (His Person) and the Gospel ministry of the Holy Spirit are One. He is the Gospel preached and the Sacraments administered. He proclaimed the Gospel to His disciples following His resurrection and made note in teaching them that, in fulfillment of the Scriptures,

He would continue to proclaim the Gospel to all nations through their witness (Lk 24:44–46). St. Paul stated the same most clearly in his testimony before King Agrippa:

Therefore, O King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision, but declared first to those in Damascus, then in Jerusalem and throughout all the region of Judea, and also to the Gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God, performing deeds in keeping with their repentance. For this reason the Jews seized me in the temple and tried to kill me. To this day I have had the help that comes from God, and so I stand here testifying both to small and great, saying nothing but what the prophets and Moses said would come to pass: that the Christ must suffer and *that, by being the first to rise from the dead, he would proclaim light both to our people and to the Gentiles* (Acts 26:19–23, italics added).

Following our Lord’s ascension, His Gospel ministry continued through the eyewitness testimony of the Apostles, whose preaching and teaching of Christ laid the foundation upon which the Church is built and all Gospel ministry proceeds (Eph 2:19–21). Their participation in His ministry began in Jerusalem on the Feast of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit was poured out upon them and the other disciples gathered there (Acts 2:4). Their preaching targeted those who had not yet heard or believed that Jesus was the Christ or that God had raised Him from the dead for their salvation. Thousands came to believe and were added to Christ’s Church. The next few chapters describe the continuing ministry of the Apostles as they faithfully discipled the new believers and daily went up to the Temple to proclaim the Gospel to those who had not yet heard, or in hearing, had not yet believed.

At the same time, the baptized believers participated in this ministry in their various spheres of influence. St. Luke records,

And they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. . . . And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved (Acts 2:42–46).

St. Peter attested to the reality that all believers by virtue of their Baptisms into Christ would receive the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:37). This “promise of the Father” (*ἐπαγγελίαν τοῦ πατρὸς*) was sent by Jesus to equip them to proclaim the Gospel (Lk 24:49, Acts 1:4–5; 2:33). Peter noted that this promise is not particular to the Apostles or to any other group within the Church. Rather it was (is) a gift poured out on all believers: “For the *promise* is for you and for your children and for all who



are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself" (Acts 2:38, italics added).

By Acts 6, the church had grown to a point where ministry to its members (the daily distribution to widows) was beginning to eclipse the apostolic preaching. Recognizing the dilemma, the Apostles and church set aside seven men to oversee the growing ministry to the saints. They developed a structure to serve specific needs of the church and at the same time guarantee that Gospel proclamation to those inside and outside the church would not be hindered. Important to note is that this ministry of serving the saints was additional to the ministry of the Gospel in which these seven also participated, at least in the cases of two of them: Stephen and Philip. Luke records that these men publicly proclaimed the Gospel and baptized (Acts 6:8–10; 7:2–53; Acts 8:5–12, 35–40).

Persecution soon broke out against the church in Jerusalem and scattered the Christians across Judea, Samaria (Acts 8) and beyond (Acts 11). These unnamed believers proclaimed the Gospel (εὐαγγελιζόμενοι τὸν λόγον) wherever they traveled and new churches came into being. No specific structure for this missionary movement is identified. It appears that the missionary expansion was spontaneous and unorganized (by human standards), not bound to a specific institutional office. Baptized men and women simply proclaimed the Good News, people believed and were baptized, and churches were formed.

Just as the Spirit descended upon the first Jewish disciples, equipping them to proclaim the Gospel, so He repeated His action each time the Gospel crossed a cultural boundary to be received by non-Jewish nations, Samaritans (in Acts 8) and Gentiles (in Acts 10). In each case it seems that the Holy Spirit impressed upon the Church His intention that all nations would both receive the Gospel and in receiving it participate fully in its ministry. Peter testified to this reality when challenged by certain members of the Jerusalem church for "[going] to uncircumcised men and [eating] with them" (Acts 11:3). He recognized that the Spirit was calling all peoples, circumcised or not, to full participation in His Kingdom. He noted,

As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell on them just as on us at the beginning. *And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he said, "John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit."* If then God gave the same gift to them as he gave to us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could stand in God's way (Acts 11:15–17, italics added).

Through these experiences, the established church (and leaders) deepened their understanding of Christ's mission and realigned their Gospel ministry to match Christ's will, which embraced all peoples. After their experience with the conversion of the Samaritans and the pouring out of the Spirit upon them, Peter and John preached the Gospel in many Samaritan villages (Acts 8:25). Likewise, Peter's testimony about the Spirit's coming to Cornelius and his entire household silenced all

criticisms and caused the church instead to glorify God for the fact that the Gentiles had come to faith.

The next step in the story of Christ's mission was again directed by the Spirit Himself. Luke reported,

While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "*Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.*"

Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off. *So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit, they went down to Seleucia, and from there they sailed to Cyprus* (Acts 13:2–4, italics added.)

This action by the Holy Spirit inaugurated a "missionary cohort," a seemingly loose structure made up of baptized men and women specifically dedicated to Christ's missionary enterprise. It functioned for the next several years under the leadership of St. Paul (Acts 13–28). Luke employed four key verbs in recording the Holy Spirit's instructions and the consequent action by Him and the church leaders in Antioch.

While the spiritual leaders of the church in Antioch were worshiping, the Holy Spirit ordered that they "*Set apart*" (ἀφορίσατε) for [Him] Barnabas and Saul for the work to which [He] was calling them." (The verb means literally to rail off, or separate.) The Holy Spirit wanted Barnabas and Saul to be *set apart* from the ministry of the Word taking place in the congregation in Antioch. This separation needed to take place so that they could respond to a specific assignment to which the Holy Spirit was *calling* (προσκέκλημαι) them (literally, appointing them). Barnabas and Saul, along with the other disciples in Antioch, understood this request as a direct order from the Spirit Himself to proclaim the Gospel in regions beyond the established church. (See also Acts 16:10).

In response to God's personal request the church's leaders fasted and prayed, laid their hands on Barnabas and Saul, and "*sent them off*" (ἀπέλυσαν). (Literally, the verb means to release from responsibility, to divorce, to send away, to loose from a burden or obligation). Significant to note is the fact that the church of Antioch, through the laying on of hands by the leaders, affirmed the Spirit's call of Barnabas and Saul (Acts 13:3) and commended them to the grace of God for this new work (Acts 14:26). However, the church did not send them out under its direction or authority. Luke recorded that the church at Antioch simply *released* these men from all ministry responsibilities and obligations to it in order for them to be free to take up the missionary responsibilities to which the Spirit was calling them.

It was the Spirit who sent them out: "So, being "*sent out*" (ἐκπεμφθέντες) by the Holy Spirit, they went down to Seleucia, and from there they sailed to Cyprus. This deliberate "sending out" by the Holy Spirit launched the first of a number of missionary journeys made by St. Paul and his companions. In fact, the book of Acts from this point on (except for chapter 15) is dedicated entirely to the missionary outreach of St. Paul and his missionary cohort.

While distinct from the twelve Apostles and St. Paul (who were eye witnesses of the Resurrected Lord and bore apostolic authority among the churches), a number of St. Paul's companions are identified as apostles. Luke named Barnabas in Acts 14. Paul named Titus, along with others, in his second letter to the Corinthians (2 Cor 8:23), Silvanus and Timothy<sup>4</sup> in 1 Thessalonians (1 Thes 2:7), and Epaphroditus as an apostle sent specifically from the church at Philippi to assist him while in prison (Phil 2:25). A most interesting reference, and one that has sparked a great deal of debate,<sup>5</sup> is St. Paul's reference to Andronicus and Junia as "outstanding among the apostles" (ἐπίσημοι ἐν τοῖς ἀποστόλοις) (Rom 16:7). Fathers of the Early Church understood this passage to mean that this man and woman (husband and wife?) were esteemed members of St. Paul's apostolic (missionary) cohort.<sup>6</sup>

These apostles served to establish and strengthen congregations in specific locations, appoint elders (pastoral overseers) in each place, and then move on to other locales where the Gospel had not been proclaimed. While connected symbiotically with already established congregations, such as those at Antioch or Philippi in both reporting (Acts 14:27) and mutual support (Phil 1:3), these missionaries seemed to function autonomously from the local churches, taking their orders from the Holy Spirit. The "apostles" are listed among other gifts given by Christ for the proclamation of the Gospel, including prophets, evangelists and pastor/teachers (Eph 4:11). They served as yet one more ministry expression or structure within the larger ministry of the Gospel.

This snapshot of Gospel ministry in the New Testament, while very brief and non-technical, suggests that the Holy Spirit moved through structured and non-structured means to create faith through the proclamation of the Gospel and administration of the Sacraments. The unbroken thread throughout the story of Christ's mission in Acts is the ongoing ministry of the Gospel by those who heard and believed it, were baptized, and divinely equipped through their Baptism to speak the Gospel. Specific offices were raised up by the Spirit for ministry to both the churches and those beyond their earshot (Acts 20:28–32; Acts 13:2–4). These offices, however, did not replace or eclipse the ministry of the Gospel as exercised by the entire church.

## **Gospel Ministry in the LCMS**

Two thousand years later (seventeen hundred of them lived under the banner of Christendom), it should not surprise us that we find a very different picture as regards Gospel ministry today. We must immediately recognize that in contrast to the New Testament context, which was thoroughly "pre-churched" (missional), Gospel ministry in the LCMS was framed almost exclusively by the ministry worldview and priorities operating in a "churched" culture for centuries. Given that the church enjoyed institutional position and favor within the larger society, it stands

to reason that the ministry of the Gospel would take on institutional trappings as well—relocating the ministry of the Gospel from the entire church to that of a specific structure, the Office of the Holy Ministry.

Lutheran theology upholds the divine origin of this office, attributing its institution to the very words of our Lord Jesus. The Agenda to the Lutheran Service Book professes,

Hear what Holy Scripture says concerning the institution of the Office of the Holy Ministry

Jesus came and spoke to them saying, “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.” (Matthew 28:18–20)

Jesus said to them again, “Peace be to you! As the Father sent Me, I also send you.” And when He had said this, He breathed on them, and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them, if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.” (John 20:21–23)<sup>7</sup>

Our Lord indeed instituted the ministry of the Gospel, as these Scriptures attest. A missionary question arises, however, regarding our understanding of the scope of this ministry. Did our Lord with these verses institute the pastoral office particularly (as identified in AC XIV) or the activity of “teaching the Gospel and administration the sacraments” by which the Holy Spirit creates faith (AC V)—a ministry in which the entire church participates? Our LCMS practice suggests the former, the New Testament suggests the latter.

This question is critical for the LCMS as its congregations, leaders, and members steer a course into the missional waters of the “pre- and post-churched” populations of America. It is an equally critical question for those in the Synod who are charged with shaping our missionary strategy abroad in partnership with other Lutheran churches. A restrictive view of the Gospel ministry—one that binds it specifically to the ministry of the ordained clergy—disastrously affects the ministry of the Gospel, especially in missional contexts.

The Rev. Dr. Albert B. Collver serves as the LCMS director of Regional Operations for the Office of International Mission and, as such, is the chief mission strategist for the LCMS world mission endeavor. In a recently published essay, he carefully laid out what he believes is a true articulation of Lutheran missionary practice.<sup>8</sup> His mission strategy explicitly places the ministry of the Gospel within the arena of the local church, and more specifically around the ministry of the called and ordained pastor.

The first assessment examines if a church has enough pastors to provide for the altars and pulpits in the church. The proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the administration of the Sacraments are at the heart of salvation and the heart of the church. . . . The first dimension of this assessment is to explore whether or not the church has enough men available to preach. It evaluates if the church is using missionaries or pastors from other church bodies to serve at their pulpits and altars. It next evaluates if there are enough pastors to provide pastoral care in a responsible manner. For instance, if a congregation or preaching station only receives Communion once every six weeks because there are not enough pastors available to provide it, this would be reflected in the assessment.<sup>9</sup>

The model he espouses assumes the presence of churches on the mission field equipped with their altars, pulpits, and pastors. Sound mission strategy, however, must begin with the understanding that missional proclamation of the Gospel, by definition, takes place beyond the walls of the church, beyond its altars and pulpits. It also takes into account the power and mobility of the Word distinct from and far beyond those altars and pulpits. This understanding of the Word and, therefore, the ministry of the Gospel, is deeply rooted in our LCMS history and theology and needs to re-inform our current missional thinking. It is built on the truth that the church (and all believers) have been entrusted with the Keys and, therefore, the ministry of the Gospel. An ordained priest or pastor does not precede the church or give it life; the Gospel alone does that. All believers possess the Gospel, and from that possession they have Christ's authority to proclaim the Gospel and to call pastors to oversee that Gospel ministry in the congregation and community.

As a missionary I labored to teach this Lutheran reality to the congregations and preaching stations I served in the Philippines. Given the significant Roman Catholic influence in the Philippines, the Christians in my station believed that the Gospel belonged to me the missionary (the ordained shepherd), and so the operation of Word and Sacrament belonged to me not to all of us. Baptisms could not be performed by any other person than me, and congregations could not celebrate the Lord's Supper without me present to consecrate the elements. That created real and unnecessary hardships for the saints, as I was responsible to serve ten churches and four preaching stations. When the people understood that they actually possessed the Gospel treasure themselves (as church) and, with that treasure, the authority to "appoint elders" and organize the ministry of the Gospel in their place, they truly rejoiced; and the ministry of the Gospel exploded. All of the saints—lay and elders—proclaimed the Gospel to other people and other villages. Even non-Christians were instrumental in carrying the Gospel to new places where we did not yet have churches.

## Churched-focused Ministry

Returning again to our Lord's institution of the Gospel ministry, we find other missionary questions that need to be addressed by/for LCMS congregations and leaders in order to serve faithfully in this missionary era. Of particular note, "What (who) were the intended populations for whom our Lord instituted the ministry of the Gospel?" In the Matthew 28 passage above, Jesus specifically referenced "*the nations*," that is, the unreached peoples of the world. Jesus made no specific reference to population in the John 20 passage. However, He clearly indicated the universal focus of the ministry: "*As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you*," (καθώς ἀπέσταλκέν με ὁ πατήρ, πέμπω ὑμᾶς). Earlier in John's Gospel, Jesus identified the scope of the mission upon which His Father sent Him, "For God did not send his Son into the world (οὐ γάρ ἀπέστειλεν ὁ θεός τόν υἱόν εἰς τόν κόσμον) to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him" (Jn 3:17). It would be totally proper then to read His words in John 20 as "*As the Father has sent me into the world, even so I am sending you.*"

The recipients for whom He instituted the Gospel ministry raise significant questions regarding the purpose and scope of that ministry. Jesus instituted it for the whole world, including all of its people groups (nations). Explicit in His words are the *unsaved peoples* of the world. Do we understand or apply the ministry in the same way? That is, do we view the Gospel ministry as a ministry *for the world*, particularly, *the unsaved*? We would not hesitate to say, "Absolutely."

However, our practical understanding of this ministry is framed for the most part by ministry to baptized Christians of local congregations. Our practice testifies that we believe it was instituted primarily for those *inside* rather than those *outside* the institutional church. Consider the brief list of duties listed in the Rite of Ordination, which the pastoral candidate promises to perform:

Will you faithfully instruct both young and old in the chief articles of Christian doctrine, will you forgive the sins of those who repent, and will you promise never to divulge the sins confessed to you? Will you minister faithfully to the sick and dying, and will you demonstrate to the church a constant and ready ministry centered in the Gospel? Will you admonish and encourage the people to a lively confidence in Christ and in holy living?<sup>10</sup>

The list focuses on pastoral responsibilities carried out within the context of the local congregation.

Where in the rite do candidates commit to proclaiming the Gospel to those outside the church, that is, the lost and erring? One might respond that the list is not meant to be exhaustive. Furthermore, that Christ's mission to those outside the church is implicit within the duties identified. That granted, we must acknowledge the problem raised by that very point—His mission "to seek and to save the lost" is at best *implied* in our ordination rite; it is not *explicitly identified*. Duties specifically

identified in the rite of ordination indicate ministry emphases, if not priorities. How does our stated set of ministry emphases compare with Christ's understanding and purpose of the ministry that He instituted? Given that the scope of the pastoral office shapes the ministry for all of the Church, what are we teaching our people regarding the mission of Christ? Gospel ministry as our Lord taught and practiced it intentionally focused on two populations: those inside His church and those outside, with particular emphasis placed on the latter (Luke 15; 19). The Lord would not have either one of these foci eclipsed.

The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod has developed a strong and comprehensive structure (wineskin) for the provision and oversight of the Gospel ministry to those within the local congregation. It has developed excellent programs and facilities for the preparation of its pastors. It has set in place a system for the pastoral (theological and practical) oversight of both the congregations and their pastors. The appeal being made in this essay is that the LCMS develop just as strong and comprehensive structure for the other focus: Gospel ministry to the lost.

As we find ourselves, like the Early Church, immersed in a rapidly growing mission field—both in its pre- and post-churched dimensions—we need to ask missionary questions. Does the wineskin of our present Gospel ministry—developed for the most part from a churched rather than missional context—need to change? Is it sufficient and supple enough to manage the unique challenges that come with missionary expansion? Gospel ministry on a mission field is borne primarily by the baptized. What new roles do our pastors and laity need to learn in order to recover this missionary dynamic? The Book of Acts reports that the Lord of the Church attended to both the *propagation* of the Gospel and the *preservation* of the faith as the Holy Spirit equipped His baptized to proclaim the Good News and sent them into all the world. He established offices for specific missionary service (Acts 13) and for pastoral oversight of the ministry in and through local congregations (Acts 20). The wineskin of the Early Church's ministry proved supple enough for the global Gospel expansion that the Holy Spirit intended. It behooves us as faithful disciples of our risen Lord to examine our ministry wineskin and to seek the Lord of the Harvest graciously to make us an apt vessel for His missionary purpose.

## **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> Note. The ending place of a Gospel conversation is not in question. The Word of God has provided that answer. It centers in our Lord Jesus Christ, crucified and raised from the dead for all people.

<sup>2</sup> Not every population in North America fits neatly into the "post-churched" context. For example, people groups having ethnic and linguistic roots in Latin America maintain a much stronger affinity with their church (Roman Catholic) than people groups with Anglo roots. (See "*Nones*" on the Rise: *One-in-Five Adults Have No Religious Affiliation*. Research Study from the Pew Research Center Released October 9, 2012.)

<sup>3</sup> Robert D. Preus, “The Confessions and Mission of the Church,” *The Springfielder* 39, no. 1 (June 1975): 23–24.

<sup>4</sup> Silvanus and Timothy are not mentioned by name in Paul’s reference, “Nor did we seek glory from people, whether from you or from others, though we could have made demands as *apostles of Christ*” (italics added). However these men are identified as co-authors of his missionary letter to the Thessalonians. Both Silvanus and Timothy played critical roles in the founding of the congregation. Silvanus (Silas), along with St. Paul, was the first to proclaim the Gospel in Thessalonica (Acts 17). The missionary work that St. Paul and Silas conducted in Thessalonica was cut short by persecution, so St. Paul later dispatched Timothy to continue that ministry—“to establish and exhort [them] in [their] faith” in the face of ongoing affliction (1 Thes 3:2).

<sup>5</sup> Commentators divide on two issues regarding the reference to Junia (Ἰουνιά): (1) Whether or not the name refers to a man “Junias” or to a woman “Junia”; and (2) whether this person is numbered among and highly esteemed within the circle of apostles (in the less technical sense of the word as referencing the Twelve) or outstanding in the eyes of the apostles.

<sup>6</sup> “The possibility, from a purely lexical point of view, that this is a woman’s name: Ἰουνία, ας, *Junia* (Mlt-H. 155); ancient commentators took Andronicus and Junia as a married couple.” BAG; the most cited reference is from John Chrysostom (347–407): “Oh! [How] great is the devotion (φίλοσοφία) of this woman, that she should be even counted worthy of the appellation of apostle!” But here he does not stop, but adds another encomium besides and says, “Who were in Christ before me.” *The Homilies of St. John Chrysostom, Archbishop of Constantinople on the Epistle of St. Paul the Apostle to the Romans in Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Vol. 11*. American Edition, Philip Schaff, ed. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 555.

<sup>7</sup> The Commission on Worship of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. *Lutheran Service Book: Agenda* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 2006), 162.

<sup>8</sup> Albert B. Collver, “Ecclesiology, Mission and Partner Relations: What it Means that Lutheran Mission Plants Lutheran churches” in *Journal of Lutheran Mission* 1, no.1 (March 2014): 20–27.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>10</sup> *Lutheran Service Book: Agenda*, 166.



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

James Tino

**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.<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup> “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.”<sup>3</sup> 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.

---

*James Tino is the director of Global Lutheran Outreach and the president of the Association of Lutheran Mission Agencies. He and his wife, Liisa, live in Santiago, Chile, where they are serving under the auspices of the Confessional Lutheran Church of Chile.*

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).<sup>4</sup>

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.”<sup>5</sup> 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.”<sup>6</sup>

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.<sup>7</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup>

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.<sup>9</sup> 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.’”<sup>10</sup>

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.<sup>11</sup>

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.”<sup>12</sup> 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.<sup>13</sup> 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.<sup>14</sup> 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.<sup>15</sup> 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,<sup>16</sup> 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**

<sup>1</sup> 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>.

<sup>2</sup> 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).

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>4</sup> 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>.

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

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>8</sup> 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).

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

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

<sup>11</sup> Rutt, “A Brief Outline of LCMS Mission History,” 4.

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

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

<sup>14</sup> Correspondence on file in the author’s personal files.

<sup>15</sup> 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.

<sup>16</sup> The Association of Lutheran Mission Agencies (ALMA) provides resources and networking to Lutheran mission organizations. More information can be found at [www.almanetwork.org](http://www.almanetwork.org).



# Mission of Christ Network<sup>1</sup> (A “New Kid on the Block”)

## *It’s All about Intentional Gospel Proclamation!*

**Kermit W. (Butch) Almstedt**

**Abstract:** The following article provides the reader with a glimpse into an exciting new, laity led, mission society—called Mission of Christ Network (or MCN)—that has but a single, yet critically important, purpose that is about intentional Gospel proclamation, under a long-term strategy of involvement with connection to local Christian worshipping communities. MCN as the reader will discover, will seek to achieve its purpose by **identifying** opportunities for intentional Gospel witness; **matching** those opportunities to individuals and/or organizations who want to become involved; **training** those who will go; **supporting** those involved in the Gospel outreach through funding and other required needs; and providing for on-field and post-field **discipleship**. MCN, through a networking philosophy of bringing together best practices, will seek to multiply the number of individuals and/or groups actively involved in furthering our Lord’s command to bring the Good News of salvation through Jesus Christ alone to Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and to the ends of the world. Read on.

### **Introduction . . . What underlies this “new kid on the block?”**

In his book, *Evangelism in the Early Church*, Michael Green discussed the presence of “what one might loosely call ‘professional Christian propagandists,’” i.e., the apostles and other “roving missionaries sent out by the churches and supported by the gifts of the faithful.” He then goes on to state (referencing another church historian) that “we cannot hesitate to believe that the great mission of Christianity was in reality accomplished by means of informal missionaries.”<sup>2</sup> The author further posits the fact that “Christianity was from its inception a lay movement . . . as early as Acts 8 we find that it is not the apostles but the ‘amateur’ missionaries, the men evicted from Jerusalem as a result of the persecution which followed Stephen’s martyrdom who took the gospel with them wherever they went.”<sup>3</sup>

---

*Kermit W. (Butch) Almstedt is the President of Mission of Christ Network. He served twelve years as a Trustee on the LCMS Foundation (1995–2007), served on the Synod’s prior Board for Mission Services (since 1993 and as its Chairperson from 2001 to 2010) and currently serves on the new (established at the 2010 LCMS Convention) Board for International Missions. He practiced law for 35 years.*

They were evangelists, just as much as any apostle was. . . It was an unselfconscious effort . . . . This (would have occurred) most often not (through) formal preaching, but the informal chattering to friends and chance acquaintances, in homes and wine shops, on walks, and around market stalls . . . . They went everywhere gossiping the gospel; they did it naturally, enthusiastically, and with the conviction of those who are not paid to say that sort of thing.<sup>4</sup>

In sum, as the same author opined in another of his books, *Thirty Years That Changed the World*, as to how the Gospel spread: It spread

most of all by the enthusiastic witness of nameless people who loved Jesus and could not keep quiet about him. It was a people movement, this early Christianity. That is why it succeeded. It did not depend on big names, but on little people who had a big God and were not afraid to put him to the test as they went out in his name. And if that is not a challenge and a rebuke to the modern church, I do not know what is.<sup>5</sup>

And that is what Mission of Christ is all about. A people movement! A lay-led, people movement that has its origins in the activity of the early Christian church of simply going out “to the end of the earth” engaging in intentional Gospel proclamation.<sup>6</sup>

### **The Formation of Mission of Christ Network (“MCN”) . . . How did it get started?**

Eighteen or more months ago, a group of laity and church workers—also members of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod—came together with a desire to establish a network of individuals, congregations, or any other entity or group with the single purpose of boldly, intentionally, and faithfully making known the light, love, and peace of Jesus Christ, by word and deed, to those who live in spiritual disbelief, darkness and despair (the “mission statement” of Mission of Christ Network). In a nutshell, MCN was formed to identify witness opportunities around the world; to encourage (and thereby multiply) participation in such opportunities to share God’s Gospel; and, to support the local Christians in their collective efforts around intentional Gospel proclamation throughout the world!

### **The Organization . . . What does it look like?**

MCN was incorporated in the State of Texas in September of 2013 for the exclusive purpose of conducting charitable and religious activities under the corporate name of Missio Christi Network (doing business as Mission of Christ Network). In June of 2014, MCN received its 501(C)(3) exempt status from the Internal Revenue Service.

MCN organized itself around a lay-led Board of Directors of like-minded and mission driven individuals. Its Board of Directors comprises members of congregations within the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod.<sup>7</sup> MCN has an Executive Director, John Rodewald,<sup>8</sup> and six operational/committee working groups chaired by persons with experience in the particular area of that working group. MCN’s Board is directly assisted in its work through a group of advisors, consisting of both laity, pastors, and other church workers with backgrounds and experiences in relevant, mission-related fields. The six operational/committee working groups are: Mission Activities (inclusive of organization of the Cornerstone Congregations),<sup>9</sup> Strategic Alliances,<sup>10</sup> Development and Advancement,<sup>11</sup> Media,<sup>12</sup> Administration and Finance,<sup>13</sup> and Intercessory Prayer.<sup>14</sup>

### **MCN’s Primary Objectives . . . What are they?**

MCN has four primary objectives.

1. To multiply the involvement of individuals, congregations, and organizations to accomplish intentional Gospel proclamation.

MCN will work with and through a network of congregations and other organizations and entities (both formal and informal) that will take a leadership role in advancing Gospel proclamation through mission outreach activities. The experiences of these leadership-network groups will be shared with others. The latter will then be invited to participate in mission outreach activities to learn from experienced and trained individuals, thereby expanding, i.e., multiplying, the number of people and groups involved in Gospel proclamation.

2. To identify existing barriers on mission fields to Gospel proclamation and address these barriers to carry out more effectively intentional Gospel proclamation.

MCN will accomplish this objective through “best practices” and the training of individuals and groups that go into mission fields sponsored by or associated with the network of MCN participants. MCN will rely not only on its own Board members and advisors, but also on its network partners, who bring to MCN significant experiences in Gospel proclamation, knowing the “ins and outs” of effective outreach.

3. To establish strategic relationships and alliances, linking resources—human and financial—to mission needs.

MCN will work with existing organizations, ad-hoc groups, mission societies, and other entities (both inside the organized church and those not directly related to a particular Christian church body) that already are working in or associated with work

in a particular mission field. These organizations bring experience and expertise, i.e., “best practices,” to mission work in fields where MCN will be active in intentional Gospel proclamation. It is not the purpose of MCN to “reinvent the wheel” but to utilize the expertise and experiences of those who “have gone before” and are currently involved in “best practices” in a particular mission field or mission endeavor. MCN’s attitude is simply, “can we join with you?”

4. To pursue long-term strategies of involvement in mission fields throughout the world to accomplish intentional Gospel proclamation.

MCN will adhere to its stated objective that its work in mission fields will be undertaken (1) in conjunction with a long-term commitment of involvement in that field<sup>15</sup> and (2) associated with local/indigenous Christian worshipping communities who share MCN’s core biblical values.

---



### The MCN Concept in Graphic Presentation<sup>16</sup>

If one would attempt to “picture” the concept of MCN, here is what MCN would look like an inverted pyramid where all effort, i.e., the mission, is concentrated on “Kingdom growth” through intentional Gospel proclamation under a mission strategy of long-term involvement alongside local Christian worshipping communities

throughout the world. The work is undertaken through the “network” of MCN teams, individuals, partnerships, and associations supported by and through the six operational/committee working groups of the corporate MCN under the overall direction of the Executive Director (and staff when hired) of MCN under the immediate supervision of an Executive Committee of the MCN Board of Directors.

### **MCN’s Core Biblical Values . . . from which MCN will not deviate!**

Individuals, congregations, and organizations that are involved within the network of MCN activities must share MCN’s core biblical values. First, is the understanding and acceptance, without reservation, that the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are the written Word of God and the only rule and norm of faith and practice. In particular, the central teachings of Holy Scripture that Jesus Christ, the second person of the Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, alone is the Savior of the world, and that only out of grace for Christ’s sake through faith in Him is there forgiveness of sins, eternal life, and salvation.<sup>17</sup>

Second, and in light of the above stated core belief, there are six basic understandings of the mission that underlie MCN’s work. Specifically,

- **The mission belongs to God and begins in the heart of God.** From God’s first promise that He would “take action” to save His people (Gn 3:15), to His command to Abraham “to go” (Gn 12:1–3), to His prophets who were sent throughout the Old Testament to give witness, to Christ’s command to the seventy “to go,” (Lk 10:1–3) and Christ’s command of Matthew 28:19, God is active in mission.
- **God’s mission is to and for everyone.** God’s desire is that all of mankind are to be saved (1 Tim 2:4). As such His Gospel is to be proclaimed throughout the world, with no exceptions (Lk 24:46–48; Acts 1:8).
- **God’s mission involves all Christians.** All Christians are missionaries (1 Pt 2:9). Christians are not only to live lives that glorify God (1 Pt 2:12) but are to seize every opportunity presented to share His Gospel of salvation through Jesus Christ to all (1 Pt 3:15). While some may be called into the specific ministry of Word and Sacrament (the ordained), and some may be sent to accomplish specific tasks in missionary service (Acts 8:28–31)—whether witness proclamation or acts of service, all are called to be His witnesses (Acts 1:8–10).
- **God’s mission is empowered by the Holy Spirit.** Not only was the Holy Spirit active with the Father and the Son in His creation (Gn 1:2), but the Father and the Son sent the Holy Spirit (Jn 14:26; 16:7) so that mankind may receive the benefits of Jesus’ redemptive work (1 Cor 3:5–6). And, as the Holy Spirit empowered the church on the day of Pentecost to proclaim

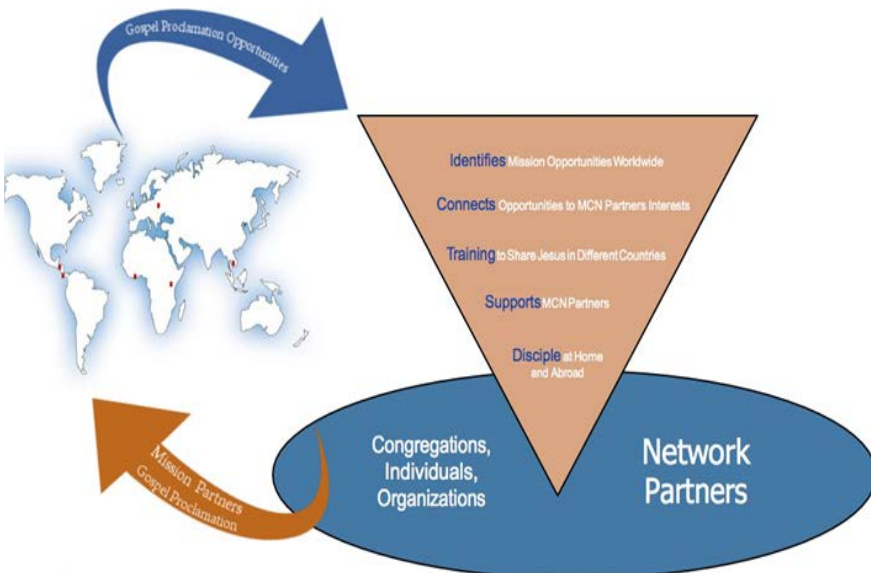
God's message (Acts 2:33), so the Holy Spirit continues to empower all believers in Christ (1 Jn 4:13).

- **God's mission is urgent.** Every second of every day, people, not knowing through faith Jesus Christ as their Savior, die an eternal death (Jn 9:4). Yet, God's desire is that all are to be saved (1 Tim 2:4).
- **God's mission must be my mission.** As Christians we must be prepared at all times to give witness (1 Pt 3:15) to the core of God's mission proclamation, i.e., John 3:16. We cannot, therefore, leave the work of God's mission to "the church" in general or to "others," for each of us is a personal ambassador for Christ to the world (2 Cor 3:2–3).

### **MCN's Operational Focus . . . Five active words that define MCN's activities!**

Five active words encompass what MCN is about in order to accomplish its stated goal of intentional Gospel proclamation through long-term commitments of activities associated with and around local Christian worshipping communities. These words are to:

- Identify
- Connect
- Train
- Support
- Disciple



MCN will not only search for opportunities for intentional Gospel proclamation but will be ready to listen to individuals, organizations, or any group or institution that has ideas for the involvement of the MCN network to accomplish intentional Gospel proclamation. As such, MCN will be involved in **identifying** opportunities where intentional Gospel proclamation is at the core of the mission effort.

MCN will then, once an opportunity is identified, search for and **connect** individuals, organizations, or any group that shares the core biblical values of MCN with the opportunity for intentional Gospel proclamation.

Having identified opportunities and connected individuals and/or organizations to that opportunity, MCN will offer “best practices” for its **training** of short-term teams and mid- or long-term individuals (Mission Partners) going into the mission field. Such training will be conducted by experienced missionaries who bring decades of on-the-field, practical experiences to the training session. Training around such topics as the meaning of “the mission of God”; “barriers to Gospel proclamation” and how to address them; a “cross-cultural worldview”; “engaging one’s faith”; handling of “culture shock”; and understanding “spiritual warfare” on the field, among other topics.

Then, having trained, through a “best practices” approach, MCN will provide the necessary **support** to the individuals (Mission Partners) and short-term teams sent under and through the MCN network. This will include all aspects of on-the-field support from transportation to and off the field, housing, health, and evacuation insurance and the myriad of all the necessary details that must be in place so that the Mission Partner or team can concentrate on their mission, i.e., intentional Gospel proclamation.

Finally, having identified opportunities, connected opportunities to individuals and/or organizations, trained the latter, and provided the necessary on-field support, MCN will undertake programs to **disciple** those participating in the network of MCN outreach activities both on the field and after returning from field work.

*Identify, connect, train, support, and disciple* are the five active words that define the ongoing activities of Mission of Christ Network.

Come join us or let MCN join you. Visit [www.missionofchrist.org](http://www.missionofchrist.org) to learn how to connect with this lay-led mission outreach of intentional Gospel proclamation and keep current with all the activities, people, and projects associated with MCN.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> More information about MCN, with particulars about its Board, leadership teams and advisors, alliance partners, current activities, and mission endeavors may be found by going to [www.missionofchrist.org](http://www.missionofchrist.org).

<sup>2</sup> Michael Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2003), 236, 242, 243.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 243.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Michael Green, *Thirty Years That Changed the World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2004), 194.

<sup>6</sup> Acts 1:8

<sup>7</sup> For information on each of the Board members, visit [www.missionofchrist.org](http://www.missionofchrist.org).

<sup>8</sup> John A. Rodewald brings not only a commitment to intentional Gospel proclamation to his work for MCN but has a strong financial background and experience in international operations. In particular, John was a partner in a CPA and consulting firm; was a partner, CFO, COO, and CEO in a company that focused on helping non-profits raise money through direct mail and direct marketing efforts; and, most recently served as the business manager for LCMS Office of International Mission, Eurasia.

<sup>9</sup> The Mission Activities Operational/Committee Working Group will identify, connect, train, support and disciple individuals for engagement with short-term mission teams and/or for mid-term and long-term mission work (referred to as Mission Partners) throughout the world. Inclusive within this operational/committee is a separate group charged with the responsibility of establishing a network of what will be called “Cornerstone Congregations” (congregations that will be encouraged to be leaders and assist in the identification and development of other congregations for participation in the MCN network). MCN, through its advisors and others associated with MCN, is blessed by a group of individuals with over 150 years of collective experience working in foreign countries. Many of the trainers for MCN are career missionaries who have been in the field themselves overseeing missionaries, and others have been in leadership roles placing and coordinating those for field work. MCN also has a team of people, who have years of experience leading short-term teams throughout the world including in the United States, to intentionally proclaim the Gospel through mercy-related and direct witness experiences.

<sup>10</sup> The Strategic Alliance Operational/Committee Working Group will identify organizations and individuals who have expertise and experience that MCN could utilize in its tasks of identifying mission opportunities; connect mission opportunities to individuals, congregations and other groups; and train MCN-placed short-term teams and mid- and long-term individuals (called Mission Partners), thereby providing the necessary pre- and in-field support and logistics along with discipleship while on the field and post-field work.

<sup>11</sup> The Development and Advancement Operational/Committee Working Group will be responsible for the funding streams to support the primary focus of MCN, which is to place and support short-term mission teams and mid- and long-term Mission Partners of MCN, as well as the underlying organization of MCN. Along with donor identification, the Development and Advancement Operating Group will be charged with donor communication (along with the Media Operational/Committee Working Group) for the varied projects, teams, and individuals being supported by MCN.

<sup>12</sup> The Media Operational/Committee Working Group will facilitate communication in and around the organization. Through websites, social media, email marketing, crowd funding and online video, MCN will spread the Gospel. In addition, the Media Operating Group will assist in the training of new mission teams and Mission Partners.



<sup>13</sup> The Administration and Finance Operational/Committee Working Group is charged with the responsibility of maintaining the legal status of MCN, proper state and federal filings and maintaining the minutes of all Board meetings and the financial record-keeping required as a Texas incorporated, 501(C)(3) non-profit corporation.

<sup>14</sup> The Intercessory Prayer Team will be praying, and seeking the prayers, for all aspects of MCN. This will include MCN board members, partners, advisors, organizations within the “network” of MCN, Mission Partners on the field, short term teams, and any situation or person brought to the attention of this MCN.

<sup>15</sup> While MCN has as one of its stated objectives long-term commitment to involvement in mission fields, such involvement may be accomplished through the sending and support of short-term mission teams under a strategy that encompasses a long-term commitment to that mission field.

<sup>16</sup> Sharper images are available in the issue posted on the LSFM Web site ([www.lsfmissiology.org](http://www.lsfmissiology.org)). Occurrences of images in this issue that do not project the sharpest quality on the printed page are on 206, 208, 213, 327–328, 345, and 346.

<sup>17</sup> John 3:16; 1 John 2:2; and, Acts 4:12.

# Vulnerability in Mission

Rich Carter

**Abstract:** This article explores personal vulnerability in eight facets of human and mission life: spiritual, intellectual, occupational, physical, financial, social-interpersonal, sexual, and emotional. Professional readings and a number of missionary stories illustrate vulnerability in these facets. Confidence for the exploration comes from Christ's Gospel vulnerability for us.

In the beginning of the first period of the course on Christian doctrine, I jumped up on a classroom table. Three cell phones whipped out to take a picture of the professor in an odd place. Pointing to myself, looking down at the students, with a commanding air and a passion hard to convey in printed word, I announced, "Three masters degrees and one and two-thirds doctorates! Who has all the answers here?! Who knows the territory? Are there any questions?" The humor of the moment—the picture taking—died down and sobriety set in. It was clear who was in control. "Unless, of course," I said, stepping down gently from the table, taking a seat on the floor in the midst of the students at their tables, looking up at them, "unless, of course, I am witnessing from my vulnerability."

I adapted that line from a textbook for the course. I continue to use it.<sup>1</sup> Here I apply it to mission endeavors. Not only in the classroom but also in mission, "we witness from our vulnerability." In this article, "mission" refers certainly to the common and useful concept, "overseas or at least cross-cultural sharing of the Gospel." Many of the comments and anecdotes to follow will relate to cross-cultural, overseas mission. But I have come to recognize that my parents engaged in mission in the San Francisco Peninsula sixty-five years ago. They opened our home for a Sunday School in a community without one.<sup>2</sup> "Mission" in this article refers broadly to God's work getting out God's Word—Himself—in Jesus' name, however we name the mission workers, whatever their geography.<sup>3</sup>

In this article, "vulnerability" refers to human weakness. Chinks in the armor. Gaps. Non-perfect places (there are lots of those) in our lives. Yes, *our* lives—human, Christian. This article on vulnerability in mission is part research, part observation, part personal engagement. I invite you to get (more deeply) acquainted

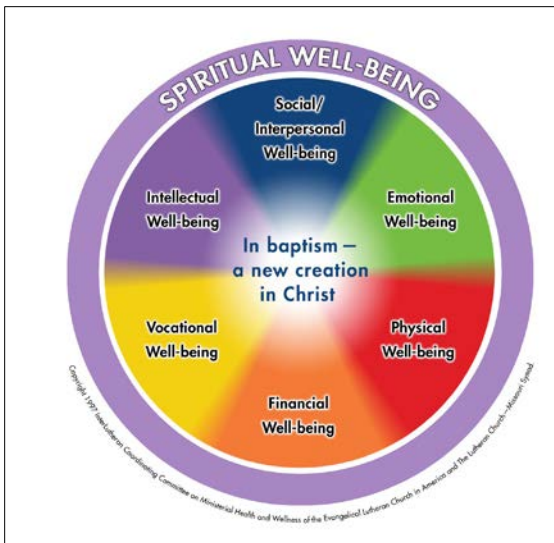
---

*Rich Carter earned degrees from Concordia, Chicago; Concordia Seminary, St. Louis; and Yale Divinity School; earning his ThD at Luther Seminary in St. Paul in 1991. He taught at Concordia University, St. Paul from 1991 – 2013 and has taught in Lutheran seminaries in Africa, Europe, and Asia.*

with your vulnerabilities. Given that our Lord was vulnerable, even unto death, I invite you to recognize the permission to embrace your weaknesses, your vulnerabilities—and to anticipate the surprise of the resurrections God can provide.

## A Wheel of Vulnerability

A frame of reference for looking at (personal) vulnerability in mission is the Wholeness Wheel prepared by the InterLutheran Commission on Ministerial Health:<sup>4</sup> Not least for our death (vulnerability) and resurrection in Baptism at its center, and spiritual well-being surrounding all other forms of well-being, this diagram serves



well for personal planning and reflection. It is called a Wholeness Wheel but can help us see our holes. A weakness of the diagram is its use of “vocational.” A Lutheran understanding of vocation hears God calling in every sphere, every slice of this pie and its spiritual frame/crust. The designer could have served better by naming this segment “occupational.” A strength of the wheel, besides its center and circumference, is the interconnection of all the slices of the pie. The distinctions in six categories

are useful, but the categories cannot be separated one from the other any more than with a good apple pie you can neatly put the apple slices in one segment or another.

This diagram serves here as a catalog of categories of vulnerability. Comments or stories will explore some vulnerability in each slice of the pie. In each category, I offer a strong, healthy recognition of weakness, in some cases preceded by stories of a masquerade, that is, trying to hide weakness with strength or control rather than face it. Not least because our Lord comments that His strength will be evident in our weakness, and that He became weak for us, I invite you to taste the various slices.<sup>5</sup>

## Spiritual Vulnerability

“Spiritual vulnerability? Excuse me? Christ is risen from the dead. Why speak of weakness among us victorious Christians?” Well, yes. The war is over, but there

are still battles to be won. If I understand correctly recent practice of mission by the Board and Office of International Mission of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS), pastoral/spiritual care for (overseas, cross-cultural) LCMS missionaries is a significant priority. If we believe that God acts graciously by Word and Sacrament in the Office of Ministry (Augsburg Confession V), then such pastoral office attention to spiritual weakness is a wise and natural part of mission work. But there is more to consider of our spiritual weaknesses.

Commonly in the Western tradition, “spiritual” has to do with our sinfulness and sins. We know about those, that kind of vulnerability. Much of the world and our Christian sisters and brothers can teach elements of vulnerability to spirits quite new to Western ways of thinking. What might we learn of spiritual vulnerability from colleagues in mission?

Former U.S. missionary to Africa Paul Bruns tells this story from Nigeria among several stories of spiritual vulnerability (and God’s strength): **“Peter will die in two days.”** Peter, a typist from the beginning for the Bokyi translation project, got very sick in the closing weeks of the project. Called on by Peter’s Christian aunt Katherine, translator/missionary Bruns drove to the juju [spirit] priest’s compound to bring Peter home. The priest stepped in the way, objecting. Missionary Bruns continues:

I don’t remember the exact Bokyi words that I used, but I told him very sternly, “In Jesus’ name, get out of our way because Peter is coming with us!” He reacted like I had struck him with a *physical* blow! He jerked back and stepped aside; and we got in the car and drove away. (Obviously they were not merely my own words but had the authority of our Lord himself.)<sup>6</sup>

They brought Peter to Paul’s house, where the visit and spiritual warfare continued. In an animistic setting,

*physical* illness is viewed as merely a symptom of a *spiritual* illness; and it can only be cured by the medicine...of animistic sacrifices. . . . Since most of Peter’s family believed the priest when he told them that Peter would die in just two days, they sent two delegations to Paul’s house hoping to take Peter back to the priest, but Paul, of course, refused to yield. And then two groups of Christians surprised Paul by coming to support Peter with their prayers.<sup>7</sup>

Missionary Bruns concludes, “Peter stayed with us a few more days. . . . He slowly recovered and returned to work a few months later. Thank you, Jesus!”<sup>8</sup>

Paul tells this story of fellow missionary to Nigeria, John Fajen.

The Fajens had been living in Ukele about ten years. . . . One day his village Chief and some village elders came with a request. “Would you please come and (physically) destroy this *juju* [“idol”] for us? It’s killing too many

people and we're afraid to do it." John said, "Thank you very much! What makes you think that it won't kill me?!" They said, "Oh, we've tried *that* many times and it *never worked*." (And because it was they who requested him to do so, John went and destroyed it in Jesus' name . . . .)<sup>9</sup>

The good news, says Bruns, is that the longer we lived in the midst of Animism the wiser we became. Every day we saw a society that St. Paul describes perfectly in Galatians 5:19–21. And, of course, our daily devotions and prayers became much more important to us. How much [my wife] and I needed each other and the prayers of those who were supporting us!<sup>10</sup>

HMong Lutheran Pastor Kou Seying notes from Ephesians 6:12 that "our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms" (NIV). He writes, "There is no denial that the biblical worldview and the worldview of the traditional HMong people . . . share the same reality, unlike the secularized minds that deny the real world of spiritual forces that are active on earth."

Seying notes further, "Since the line between physical and spiritual realm cannot be drawn, [all] afflictions are spiritual." He recounts the story of a HMong family moving into and out of Christian faith as they struggled with illness in the family. A turning point came when the long-ill daughter, attending the baptism of a granddaughter, found peace and comfort in the Christian worship service. Still he notes a challenge in the neighborhood of miracles,

The line between sacramental efficacy (a blessing from God) and magical efficacy (Satan's manipulation of power through the human acts) becomes quite blurred when the power encounter is not clearly defined. On the one hand, the Christian operates from the point of grace through faith that the power of the Holy Spirit is at work. On the other hand, the animist will operate from the manipulative realm of spiritual power that can only be understood under the category of magical efficacy. If not careful, the Christian can easily fall into the magical efficacy without even realizing it. This is a real danger in the mission context since the pressure is so great to "perform" a miraculous act by turning God's circumstantial will into His ultimate will.<sup>11</sup>

## Intellectual Vulnerability

As the LCMS practices mission internationally and nationally,<sup>12</sup> she sends out highly educated servants. That practice emphasizes the Office of Pastoral Ministry. Recently, the LCMS has opened wider the doors to pastoral ministry not requiring four years of residential seminary study. Churches around the world are served by

pastors with much less training; and the heritage of the LCMS includes men serving with much less preparation. Intellectual strength is valuable but may cover blind spots and weakness.

In 1981 orientation to missionary service on behalf of the LCMS, Rev. John Fajen taught intellectual vulnerability. A major theme of his presentations was this: Where you are going, whose country and culture is it? Who knows the territory? Who knows how to get things done? We were invited, virtually ordered, to a position of intellectual vulnerability.

In spite of Fajen's teaching, I carried my weakness and blindness with me overseas. What did it look like? Two stories. At a time when I with my family was alone (in the midst of half a million Nigerians in our city!), with no nearby American missionary competence, our manual water pump would not work. I fussed for how many days? When I asked for help from my Nigerian neighbor, he fixed it in five minutes. Also, at the time of a major community gathering in our area, I was walking ahead of two Nigerians engaged in animated English conversation about the loss of local culture and tradition, not least traditional knowledge of spirits. Knowing that the one who had just spoken was a professor holding an earned doctorate, I thought and felt to myself, "How can anyone who is so intelligent as to hold a doctorate actually believe in spirits?!" My intellectual "strength" had cut me off from perspectives and realities better known by friends and neighbors around the globe, schooled or not.

Most recently I saw intellectual strength and weakness in a story told by Rev. Nathan Esala, overseas missionary for Lutheran Bible Translators in Ghana: "Foxes and Rabbits."<sup>13</sup> Esala is intellectually strong enough to be earning a doctorate, but it was the local Ghanaian pastor with limited formal education who taught Esala a significant theological point. In the pastor's preaching, he made a point about the local language and culture that Esala had missed and simultaneously preached to him a deeper view of a Luke passage and the Gospel of Jesus' suffering for us.

Against Western, English, and LCMS intellectual strength, Esala noted that "further research into the Palestinian world at the time of Jesus suggests that 'fox' was not even the animal being referenced there. Instead it was more like a jackal, a pack animal, and it was not necessarily known for its craftiness or wisdom even in the Bible. This could easily have been an insult that Jesus was giving to Herod. We are not even the best scholars it turns out."<sup>14</sup>

### **Occupational (Vocational) Vulnerability**

You may have heard this comment about occupational responsibilities in overseas mission: On the surface, it appears that the guy—the pastor—has the challenge and the spouse has things easy. Things at the house are normal, cooking

and laundry. The occupation is hard, in a different language and culture, perhaps in a different time orientation, etc. The overseas missionary (pastor) has a tough row to hoe while the spouse just covers the home front. Below the surface the reverse is true. The missionary still heads off to work, even if that means walking the streets of a village rather than heading to the office at church, while the spouse has to figure out whole new ways to cook and wash clothes. Identity as one who manages household tasks is much more at risk than identity as one whose profession is going out to be helpful to people.

But there is risk also on the “job” front. I watched a pastor, fresh from seminary and all those years of professional schooling, stumble, fall, and head back to the U.S. The assumption was a failure of the pastor and his family’s adapting: They couldn’t cope overseas, cross-culturally. A reasonable assumption, but perhaps the pastor had ever before had to work, actually, in any setting. What he took to be failure in the overseas cross-cultural context may well have been failure in the hard knocks of getting and holding one’s first, serious job.

A personal and/or professional mission statement is a tool for acknowledging and responding to occupational vulnerability. Having taken time to develop and review my mission statement, I can more freely acknowledge detours and wrong turns in the attempt to serve in mission. I once walked out of a classroom at the end of an hour having completely missed my objectives for that hour. But my overriding mission in teaching is “to engage these participants with this material.” Clearly we had engaged. I could find strength in the midst of my weakness, in the midst of the apparent failure. The same could be said, e.g., of language learning. SMART objective for the day: ten new words correctly pronounced in the local language. A failure—well, OK, a “D”—if at day’s end I am pronouncing only six correctly. I am still, with my weakness, making progress in the larger mission goal. I grew professionally when my language helper chided me one afternoon. I was trying to pronounce words exactly right in the local language with its tonal variations. I was putting my all into it, and not getting it. (The difference between what in English is “lord” and “mosquito” was the slightest change of emphasis on one syllable in the local language—two entirely different sermons if you don’t get that right!) “Don’t worry,” he said to this white American in a Black African context. “They never will mistake you for a native.” There was success in the missionary occupational goal even in the midst of objective failure.

### **Physical Vulnerability**

One of the origins of this article is the vulnerability of a friend intentionally in mission in a country I can’t name. Email addresses and their content need to be neutral. If I and others who care for him miswrite him, he would be at least at risk of physical removal from the country where he serves, if not at risk of imprisonment or

immediate harm. You may well know people in comparable or worse situations. I have read recently of the remaining local Christians in Mosul, Iraq, and the tragedy of their being forced from or choosing to leave their homes in the context not just of war but of intentional removal by Islamic civil war leadership in their area. Their mission, along with their daily lives, is physically at risk.

Other physical vulnerabilities also affect serving in (overseas, cross-cultural) mission. Ivan Rasch grew up as a missionary kid (MK) in Nigeria; his father was an MK who grew up in India. His older brother Michael was diagnosed in 1972 with Duchene Muscular Dystrophy; that physical vulnerability did not settle the family back in the U.S. The physical vulnerability that settled them in the U.S. was the father's death. Enough siblings and friends supported Ivan's mom and brother, however, that Ivan, his wife, and children went on to serve for more than a decade in Nigeria. In July 2013, as the physical stress on the home front with Michael increased, Ivan asked his mission agency for permission to be based in Texas. He would support stateside orientation for and then actually host overseas mission teams to West Africa. The request was denied; the physical vulnerability of the extended family brought the missionary home.

Ivan's wife, Jennifer, ran into her own physical vulnerability while the family served in West Africa. Jennifer served overseas for more than a decade, teaching music in Hillcrest School in Nigeria through 2012. The sudden onset of seizures in 2010 upended her normal work routine, but high school students and parents helped her deal with the seizures and fear of seizures. The physical—and occupational—vulnerability appeared with full force in 2012. Her mission agency pulled her and her family from Nigeria for what they viewed as the physical risk of mission families remaining in that country.

Physical vulnerability for Jack Carlos appeared in West Africa some years back in the form of Atypical Parkinson's Disease. He notes,

I was in a health situation that I could no longer manage myself on the field. I was a risk to not only myself but also my wife because of my declining physical health. I was at risk because of my balance which caused falling, [and] blood pressure drops which would cause me to pass out. . . . Because of the situation everyone had been put into risk because they are trying to take care of me. . . .

The focus of God's mission was lost because instead of sharing the gospel, people became focused on my health situation. My health situation will not improve so it is not an option to return [to West Africa].<sup>15</sup>

"God will continue God's mission," Jack notes confidently, but Jack's physical vulnerability has rearranged how that will happen.<sup>16</sup>



## **Financial Vulnerability**

Mission sending agencies may insist on financial strength with good reason. “We will not allow you to leave for your (cross-cultural, overseas) mission assignment until X% of your annual costs is committed in pledges/in the bank/etc.” That is one way to address financial vulnerability, to meet it with financial strength. As I understand this kind of choice in the practice of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, it relates to the loss, some years back, of many in (cross-cultural, overseas) service when the “bank” in St. Louis pretty much ran dry. The Synod’s financial weakness in mission brought missionaries back to the U.S. Behind the strength of an apparent sturdy church body loomed serious weakness which eventually handicapped the mission.<sup>17</sup>

A contrast involves accepting rather than defending against financial vulnerability. In the current practice of the World Mission Prayer League (WMPL), home office staff and those serving outside the U.S. share a common “pay” (stipend) scale, adjusted for the number in the family. There is a common pot to sustain those whose individual donations for a month might not reach the stipend level, but if that pot is only 85% full, then for those individuals, support for the month is 85% of the stipend. Accepting financial vulnerability shows up most clearly this way in WMPL: its commitment and practice that those connected with it do no fund-raising. The League understands itself not as a mission sending agency, which could include fund-raising, but as a mission prayer agency, trusting God to provide finances as He sees fit in response to praying, in the context of His Gospel.<sup>18</sup>

## **Social-Interpersonal Vulnerability**

Kurtis Smith, an LCMS Director of Christian Outreach, notes the value of social, shared vulnerability from his experience in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.

It was not my desire to call FEMA at 2:00 a.m., but it needed to be done. Like thousands of others, our house in Slidell, Louisiana, was damaged by the storm. . . . When the word came that the best time to call FEMA was in the middle of the night, I cussed under my breath and made the call—despite my desire to be in bed.

Several months later, [when I was] serving as a disaster relief coordinator, my story about calling FEMA at 2:00 a.m. and other such personal recovery experiences allowed me to connect with other victims in ways that most disaster responders were not able. I made immediate local connections and was easily able to build relationships of trust with those in need. I was one of them. We shared frustrations. We shared stories about the challenges of raising our young kids in a horrific scenario. We shared tears. Victims could

find hope in the fact that our family had gone through their same struggles, “come out on the other side,” and I was now able to now help them.<sup>19</sup>

Kurtis continues:

I do not wish disaster, calamity, or any struggles upon others. Nobody in their right mind enjoys suffering. Personally, I questioned God and had to release control of my entire life at the point when all seemed lost: our money wasn't accessible, our telephones didn't work, I didn't have a job, our house was damaged, our neighborhood was inaccessible, our government was absent, we couldn't even find our pastor or other church members and questioned if some of our friends were dead. However, I must admit that God used my own family's Hurricane Katrina experience, our vulnerability, our pain, and our tears in order to open doors for outreach and share Jesus' love to others over the course of our next five years of disaster relief. It wasn't my plan but it was His mission. To God be the glory.<sup>20</sup>

Social-interpersonal vulnerability in the context of mission overseas may be connected with culture shock. We in the U.S. are perhaps far enough down the road that most missio-sending agencies provide orientation to culture shock, even to reverse culture shock and to care for TCKs (Third-culture kids) when they return home. TCKs live not quite in this country or that one but in a blended, challenging and invigorating land. A young friend Timmy tells his story this way:

I lived in Nigeria for 12 years. It was my home. LCMS ripped me from my home with only two days' notice because they viewed Nigeria as a war zone. What they didn't realize was that they were pulling me out of paradise and putting me in a war zone called American Public High School. I have spent the past two years of my life trying to figure out this foreign planet that is supposed to be my home and have had little to no success until this summer when I attended an MK reentry seminar. If not for that, I would still be feeling lost and hopeless.<sup>21</sup>

## **Sexual Vulnerability**

Nowhere in the circle, but likely spread through many of the pieces of the pie, would be sexual vulnerability. This point, not least in a hyper-sexualized American culture, could be both skipped over—can we get on with the rest of life, please?—and seriously tended to.<sup>22</sup> How do we address in Christian context the reality of our sexual selves and sexuality? Our sexuality was created good by God in Eden. It has been so trashed since, but comes with us into the new creation. We can choose to find appropriate conversations and relationships in which to address our vulnerability and celebrate the gifts.

## Emotional Vulnerability

In part I write this entire article attending to the various slices of the pie of mission vulnerability because of this category: emotional life. In my life, at least, it has been too easily neglected.

Such neglect is a premise for the book, *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality*. The author proposes that acknowledging emotional weakness—embracing it—is a mark of health; denying or not seeing our emotional weakness is a choice that can kill ministry and mission. I am quoting him here at length for your consideration.

*Emotional health* is concerned with such things as:

- naming, recognizing, and managing our own feelings. . .
- being aware of how our past impacts our present
- developing the capacity to express our thoughts and feelings clearly, both verbally and nonverbally; . . .
- learning the capacity to resolve conflict maturely and negotiate solutions that consider the perspectives of others; . . . and
- grieving well.<sup>23</sup>

. . . The sinister voices of the surrounding world and our pasts are powerful. They repeat the deeply held negative beliefs we may have learned in our families and cultures growing up:

I am a burden. . . .

I am not allowed to make mistakes.

I must be approved of by certain people to feel okay. . . .

I don't have the right to assert myself and say what I think and feel. . . .

I am valued based on my intelligence, wealth, and what I do, not for who I am.<sup>24</sup>

Getting off our thrones and joining the rest of humanity is a must for growing up. A part of us hates limits. We won't accept them. This is part of the reason why grieving loss biblically is such an indispensable part of spiritual maturity. It humbles us like little else.<sup>25</sup>

. . . We [can] quit pretending to be something we are not. We admit our weaknesses and limitations to a friend, spouse, parents, or someone else who cares about our development. [unless we choose not to develop].<sup>26</sup>

But remember, resurrection only comes out of death—real death. Our losses are real. And so is our God, the living God.<sup>27</sup>

There are many rich fruits that blossom in our lives as a result of embracing our losses. The greatest, however, concerns our relationship to God. We move from a “Give me, give me, give me” prayer life to an intimate, loving

prayer life characterized by loving union with God. When we grieve God's way, we are changed forever.<sup>28</sup>

Jesus himself said, "I tell you the truth, unless a kernel of what falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds."<sup>29</sup>

### **Christ's Vulnerability**<sup>30</sup>

To this point, this article focuses on vulnerability in the practice of mission, whether that mission is overseas or in the house where I grew up. Each slice of the pie matters, as does the crust, the surrounding frame of spiritual wellness and vulnerability. This article invites the reader and everyone in mission to get acquainted with, respect, and handle with care their various vulnerabilities. That invitation can be extended because of the context of the Christian Gospel—because of the baptismal center of the Wholeness Wheel. To be in Christian mission is to be in the context of the God who made Himself vulnerable, vulnerable even unto death.

While it is monstrosly tempting to count ourselves as strong and successful in mission—we can, after all, pluck the fruit off the tree—counting ourselves as limited, weak, and vulnerable is closer to the truth and the Truth. The person "deserves to be called a theologian [and missionary] who comprehends the visible and manifest things of God seen through suffering and the cross."<sup>31</sup> "Christian theology must address itself to the experiences and realities that mark the fallen character of human existence, since the Christian kerygma itself is a message of God's response to human need and thus is the answer to those experienced realities."<sup>32</sup>

God's response? A recent sermon put it this way: "Instead of identifying with Christ as ever faithful, loving servants of all people, we could better identify with those whom Christ served, the weak and the needy."<sup>33</sup>

Climb down from the table. Look up at those in whose midst you are in mission. Thank God that He was first in your place, in Christ.

### **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> Robert Kolb, *Speaking the Gospel Today*, 2nd ed. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1995), 16.

<sup>2</sup> The Sunday School grew into a congregation. If I have understood the story correctly (I was four at the time), when the gathered Sunday School families tried to organize as a congregation of the LCMS, they were at first rebuffed by the mission leaders of the district. I wonder what strengths and weaknesses were at work.

<sup>3</sup> Richard Carter, "What Do Simple Folk Do: A Lutheran Doctrine of Vocation as Mission Work," *Missio Apostolica* 14, no. 1 (May 2006).

<sup>4</sup> The fine print on the wheel tells you that it is copyright 1997 by the InterLutheran Coordinating Committee on Ministerial Health and Wellness of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, available at <http://www.wheatridge.org/wholenesswheel>. David Muench, Director of Ministerial Care for Concordia Plans, has shared a slightly modified version of the wheel at <http://www.concordiaplans.org/DetailPage.aspx?ID=462>, and writes that “if you go to [www.ministrycare.net](http://www.ministrycare.net) you will find the Concordia Plans version in an interactive format, as it is used to organize various resources for ministerial care. (Personal communication, July 28, 2014)

<sup>5</sup> My thanks to the many people who in the preparation of this article have shared their experience with vulnerability. My thanks to all of them for their strength and their willingness to contribute to an article about weakness.

<sup>6</sup> Personal communication, July 29, 2014 and Oct. 1, 2014, about his recently published memoirs, *How Gracious of God!* (St. Louis, Lutheran Society for Missiology, 2014).

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Personal communication, July 30, 2014.

<sup>12</sup> The LCMS structures mission under two boards, one for international and one for national mission. An Evangelical Lutheran Church in America leader commented to me two decades ago that the LCMS was a pioneer in recognizing the U.S. as a mission field.

<sup>13</sup> See “Foxes and Rabbits” at <http://esalas.org/building-the-walls-video/>.

<sup>14</sup> Personal communication, July 25, 2014.

<sup>15</sup> Personal communication, July 30, 2014.

<sup>16</sup> Personal communication, July 30, 2014.

<sup>17</sup> Financial vulnerability as an intentional choice as part of the practice of contextualization appears in this link <http://www.vulnerablemission.org/>, which notes also language and culture learning struggles touched on here under other topics.

<sup>18</sup> My thanks to Jeff Dahl of the World Mission Prayer League staff for updating and clarifying the financial operations of the League.

<sup>19</sup> Personal communication, August 1, 2014.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Personal communication, August 1, 2014.

<sup>22</sup> In one particular missionary orientation/training program, this was the only vulnerability to get its own session. Good that it was mentioned; but what about weakness and sin in other areas of our lives?

<sup>23</sup> Peter Scazzerro, *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2006), 45.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 53.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 149.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 150.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 152.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 152.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 152.

<sup>30</sup> If the emphasis on Christ seems limited in quantity in this article, be assured that that does not mean a limit in quality. Pastor Jim Bender (at that time at St. Stephanus in St. Paul, MN)

preached some years back on the Gospel reading about the man born blind. “Who sinned?” was the question, “this man or his parents?” Pastor Bender spent about eleven minutes and thirty seconds on “law,” on the reality of parental “damage” to children, its impact in families, and the importance of our caring for those whose families have given them a problematic upbringing. “Of course, that kind of upbringing has happened to all of us. It’s called sin. That’s why Jesus died for us. Amen.” The proportions of time were way out of balance in favor of law, of things for us to do. The impact was way out of proportion in favor of Gospel. May you find this article at least a little similar in its proposal that we are all vulnerable and that, in Christ, that’s OK.

<sup>31</sup> Martin Luther, “Heidelberg Disputation,” as cited in *Luther’s Works*, Volume 31, Career of the Reformer: I (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1957), 40.

<sup>32</sup> Matthew Becker, “Werner Elert (1885–1954),” in *Twentieth-Century Lutheran Theologians*, Mark C. Mattes, ed. (Goettingen/Bristol, CT: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013).

<sup>33</sup> Vicar Peter Vang, speaking at St. Stephanus Lutheran Church, St. Paul, MN, July 27, 2014.

# **Building Bridges: Toward Constructing a Christian Foundation for Inter-Religious Relationships in the Shift from Religious Privilege to Spiritual Plurality**

**Ken Chitwood**

**Abstract:** Religious pluralism is a fact in an ever more globalized, individualized, and post-modern society. The reality of religious pluralism, and its attendant ideology of tolerance, presupposes a serious shift for the Christian Church from a position of privilege to one of marginality among many. It is necessary then that faithful, missional, Christians reconsider their foundational theology concerning other religions and worldviews and begin constructing a revitalized and benevolent approach to the “religious other.” This paper is an attempt to not only outline the facts, trends, and philosophy of religious pluralism, but also sketch a blueprint for a friendly, missionary, encounter with other religions founded on God’s Word.

## **Introduction: The Architecture of Modern Religious Pluralism**

Architecture may seem a strange term to introduce a discussion of Christianity in an age of pluralism. Even so, religious buildings reflect the religious and cultural *Zeitgeist*. For example, in past millennia Christian cathedrals stood at the center, and at the highest points, of Christian communities. Mosques dominated Islamic territories. Monasteries, temples, and stupas dotted the landscapes of Buddhist areas. Where one religion superseded another, often as a show of imperialistic dominance, a house of worship of the new dominant religion would be built upon the ruined foundations of the former faith. Such was the case when mosques were built on Jewish holy sites in Israel or Christian cathedrals were constructed on top of Incan temples in Peru. The latter examples of religious architecture highlight, albeit negatively, the connotation of privilege inherent in the ability of ascendant or authoritative religious groups to build as, where, and how they please. In the modern world, this is not a possibility; the age of religious imperialism has, if not come to an end, been found suspect.

---

*Ken Chitwood is a religion scholar and appointed PhD student at University of Florida studying Religion in the Americas with attendant emphases on globalization, transnationalism, immigration, Latina/o religion, and Islam. Chitwood is also a forward-thinking Lutheran theologian, preacher, and popular speaker who weaves together historical context, societal exegesis, and a winsome voice to address relevant issues in mission and ministry.*

In the twenty-first century, public *and* private space are contested by a plurality of competing religious constituents. Buddhist statues are destroyed in Afghanistan, Christian churches are razed in Iraq, and mosques are the victims of arson in the United States. In publicly neutral spaces, another phenomenon has begun. Multi-faith, or interfaith, spaces are common in “airports, hospitals, prisons, shopping malls, entertainment complexes, and universities”;<sup>1</sup> and the populace, for the most part, is comfortable with such religiously neutral locales. What these spaces suggest is the rise of religious pluralism in the public square. As Bender notes, “we can trace the genealogies of ‘expanding’ religious pluralism,” via architectural developments. By way of illustration, an architectural competition was staged in Berlin recently for the design of a private, stand-alone space for Muslims, Jews, and Christians to worship as neighbors under one roof.<sup>2</sup> It is being called the “House of One” and was described sarcastically as “the world’s first churmosquogogue.”<sup>3</sup> This project is not unique,<sup>4</sup> and the trend toward interfaith architecture is telling; it reveals not only the fact, but the *ideology*, of religious pluralism.

The fact of plurality is evident when one considers statistics. Despite the claims of philosophical secularism and “the secularization theory,”<sup>5</sup> religion remains a potent force in the world today. Upwards of 5.8 billion people (83%) around the world identify with a religious group.<sup>6</sup> Approximately one-third (32%) of the global population is Christian, another quarter (23%) Muslim, 16% are “Unaffiliated,” another sixth (15%) are Hindu, and a significant sliver (7% and 6%) are Buddhist or follow a “folk religion,” that is, beliefs and practices closely tied to a particular people, ethnicity, or tribe with no creed or formal clergy (including African indigenous religion, Chinese folk beliefs, Australian aboriginal customs, and Native American Indian practices).<sup>7</sup> These sundry faith traditions and practices are widely distributed across the globe. While many remain largely concentrated in particular regions, e.g., Hinduism in India, Chinese folk religion in China, all are globally dispersed to some extent, even if some not as much as others, e.g. Christianity, Islam, Judaism. This extensive geographic distribution of religion arises from globalization, trans-nationalism, and immigration. Due to the influence of these flows of people, ideas, and institutions, the religions of the world are now omnipresent in just about every nation on earth. There are Hindus in Holland, Muslims in Mexico, Christians in China, and Buddhists in Burkina Faso.

Indeed, religious diversity is part of the very fabric of the United States. Not only is our nation inherently secular (thanks to the aforementioned First Amendment), but it has always been shaped by individual liberty, choice, and the free flow of people and ideas. While religious diversity was more Protestant and Roman Catholic in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and more Judeo-Christian in the early to mid-twentieth century, today our religious diversity is stunningly eclectic. It is common today to have a Hindu co-worker, a Mormon neighbor, and a “spiritual, but not religious” nephew, not least because there are more than 1,700



religious groups in the U.S., 600 of which are non-Christian entities.<sup>8</sup> These various faiths compete for the nation's soul. Forty-two different religious bodies, including Baptists, Roman Catholics, Lutherans, Methodists, the LDS, and indigenous religions can claim to be the largest religion in specific, selected U. S. counties.<sup>9</sup> When it comes to the principal non-Christian tradition by county, this list expands to include Bahá'í, Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, Hinduism, Islam, and Judaism.<sup>10</sup> In Houston, the fourth largest city in the U.S., and labeled "the most diverse city in the United States" and "a glimpse of America's future,"<sup>11</sup> there are four times as many Muslims as there are Lutherans.<sup>12</sup> Certainly, the U.S. is a religiously diverse landscape contested by various spiritualities.

Several trends that have led to this situation and several antecedent results of this assortment deserve analysis before we explore options for responding to religious diversity from a Christian perspective. Diana L. Eck notes that "the religious landscape of America has changed radically in the past thirty years, but most of us have not yet begun to see the dimensions and scope of that change...so gradual has it been and yet so colossal...an astonishing new reality."<sup>13</sup> Observing this subtle but significant new spiritual reality, Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell identified as causes "a shock and two aftershocks." The shock was in the 1960s—the sex, drugs, and rock 'n' roll culture. The first aftershock was the conservative religious reaction steered and channeled by charismatic leaders into an evangelical "religious right" movement. The second aftershock was a reaction provoked by the first aftershock: the abandoning of the church in the 1990s by many young people, repulsed by the politicization of religion.<sup>14</sup> These domestic trends melded with the advent of the global transfer of information via the internet and other communication technology; the increased immigration flows from Latin America, Africa, and Asian nations; and the combined effect of transnational flows of people, goods, and ideas to create the current religious topography of the U.S. This spiritual panorama includes the following trends:

- the rise of secularism and "the nones"<sup>15</sup> concomitant with an acceptance of secularization and its attendant consequence of the privatization of religion
- the increased numbers of "spiritual, but not religious," wanderers who mix-and-match their spirituality in America's buffet style religious marketplace<sup>16</sup>
- the swelling influence of Latina/o religion, including the reshaping of American Catholicism and the rise of Latina/o Protestantism, Evangelicalism, Pentecostalism, non-religion, and Islam<sup>17</sup>
- a surging multi-cultural, multi-generational, and marginalized Muslim population

- the proliferation of Asian religious influence via traditional sources such as Hindus and Buddhists (although with new communities in unlikely locales, like the American South), but also Sikhs, Bahá'ís, Chinese folk religions, and Western interpretations of Asian religions (Western Zen, popular Yoga, etc.)
- the widening scope and sequence of conflict and mutual compromise in regard to religion in the public square

Beyond these factual trends, there is also the *ideology* of religious pluralism. Lesslie Newbigin wrote, “it has become a commonplace to say that we live in a pluralistic society—not merely a society which is in fact plural in the variety of cultures, religions and lifestyles which it embraces, but pluralist in the sense that this plurality is celebrated as things to be approved and cherished.”<sup>18</sup> This cherishing of pluralism is what educator and author Andy Wrasman calls “metaphysical pluralism”<sup>19</sup> and is elsewhere referred to as “literal,” “transcendental,” or “agnostic” pluralism. This pluralism is in apposition to “social” or “religious pluralism in the public square,”<sup>20</sup> which reflects the pure facts of pluralism. The ideology of religious pluralism not only celebrates pluralism, but seeks to point to a sole, transcendent, truth to which all religions aspire, but none individually apprehends.

As the architecture of religious pluralism continues to expand, it looms large in the façade of Christian privilege. Essentially, both the fact and mythos of religious pluralism threaten to erode the foundations of Christian privilege. Not only is Christianity no longer privileged as *the* religion in the United States, let alone globally; but, philosophically, many religions now compete with Christianity in the marketplace of spiritualities. Betwixt and between pluralism as fact and ideology, Christianity shifted from the center to the margins, “from privilege to plurality.”<sup>21</sup> The above overview provides a foundation for understanding the pluralism on the rise around the globe and calls into question the Christian foundations of society that many still hold dear. What follows is an attempt to provide a blueprint for how Christians can successfully navigate a pluralistic world, with or without Christian hegemony.

## **The Eroding Foundations of Christian Privilege**

Fear that the architects of plurality are deconstructing the foundations of our Christian privilege often leads to a typical response to plurality and the concomitant posture toward other faiths: aggressive engagement. An editor for a popular book review publication recently rejected my request to review two apologetic books dealing with the world’s religions. The refusal was not based on the specific content of the books, but on their genre. The editor lamented, “All I am seeing from publishers right now is apologetics books. Enough already.” Why the exasperation?

The popular posture of aggressive, apologetic, engagement with other religions is indicative of a desire to shut out the pluralism, to draw strict boundaries between Christianity and other religions, and to reassert Christian privilege. At its best, this posture engages in combative apologetics and/or polemics; at its worst, it espouses physical violence against “the religious other.” At this posture’s core is a philosophy that says Christians must fight fire with fire and aim to deconstruct errant beliefs, cast down idols and, if absolutely necessary, destroy those who would deny the Lordship of Jesus Christ. Those who propose such an approach believe that if our commitment to Christianity is strong, then our response to other religions must be bellicose. That is a false correlation. First, physical violence against those of other faiths in the name of Jesus has no place in the Christian community. Second, in our current climate there is no way that even a verbal strike (in the form of assertive apologetics or vigorous polemics) is the most effective way to interact with people of other religions. Often, books that are written to defend the Christian faith and undermine other religions are read only by the choir to reinforce their worldview and to act as a comfort blanket for them in a religiously pluralistic world. The response of many non-Christians to such approaches is one of accusation—that Christians are arrogant, believing that they are the sole arbiters of truth and, therefore, superior to other believers and practitioners. For good or for ill, amidst “this cultural milieu, the confident announcement of the Christian faith sounds like an arrogant attempt of some people to impose their values on others.”<sup>22</sup> As one young person shared with Timothy Keller in New York City, “It’s arrogant to say your religion is superior and try to convert everyone else to it.”<sup>23</sup> With this posture of aggressive engagement, Christians are not only not gaining a hearing but are in danger of confirming the rumor that they are more akin to “founders of empire” than “fishers of men.”<sup>24</sup>

Such a perspective derives from the perception that Christianity has long enjoyed its position of privilege at the expense of other religious and spiritual voices. From the fifteenth to the twentieth centuries, Christianity was associated with empires, empires that marched on as colonial powers, carving up the world and claiming indigenous lands for their own. These hegemonic powers sought to replace older world systems with their own civilization and, hence, their own religion—Christianity.<sup>25</sup> In the late twentieth century, there arose a desire among post-modern and post-colonial researchers to permit “the lesser voices of history to speak.”<sup>26</sup> These “lesser voices” are the voices of indigenous populations, of subjugated peoples and, often, non-Christian religions. In India and Latin America, in Africa and Oceania, these “subaltern” voices<sup>27</sup> are attempting to counter the hegemony of Western, Christian, imperial representations, research, and religions by re-telling, re-writing, and re-presenting their story to the world. With increasing globalization, syncretism, and plurality, hybridity or fusion becomes their point of resistance and their platform for recognition. And so, Christians who speak out against these voices with aggressive engagement, seeking to shut them down or drown them out, are

quickly accused of neo-imperialism or worse. Employing a posture of aggressive engagement with other religions and worldviews in this pluralistic world puts Christians in danger of being perceived as self-important presumptuous preachers who seek the reassertion of their privilege rather than peaceful prophets in an age of plurality. This will not do for successful encounters with the world's sundry spiritualities.

Regardless of the degree of the entanglement of Christianity with imperialism (the overriding perception of Christendom by popular culture) and Millennials' suspicious perceptions of traditional Western institutions (especially the Church) preclude any attempt by Christians to re-establish privilege or engage in any form of aggressive engagement. The cry for the subaltern voice to be heard means that in order to gain a foothold for proclaiming the Gospel, the Christian may first have to be silent. Lesslie Newbigin suggests that "we must now learn to listen humbly to the voice of other cultures. In this climate all judgments about culture and about the relation of the gospel to culture are colored by this profound pessimism about our own."<sup>28</sup> Yes, in moving from privilege to plurality, Christians will have to adjust their posture from one of aggressive engagement to something else if they wish to gain a hearing in a hybrid context. It may seem paradoxical, but the importance of such a posture—this "sacred duty" or "friendly engagement"—will be elucidated more fully below.

The good news is that, in navigating such a seemingly perilous landscape, we are not left without guidance from Scripture. Christianity has always, in one way or another, existed in a pluralistic context. Whether it was the religious milieu of the ancient Near East, the imperial cultus of the Roman Empire, the mixture of Germanic fetishisms, Islam, Medieval spirituality, or the contemporary pluralism in the West, the Christian church has always had to construct its character in a context of multiplicity.

## **Foundations for Inter-Religious Relationships**

In seeking to address religious pluralism without engaging in aggressive apologetics, we must first ground ourselves in our own Scriptures and search out how we can shift from a strong, aggressive Christianity to what Brian McLaren calls "a strong, benevolent" one.<sup>29</sup> The space of this essay, and its chosen scope, does not warrant a full exposition of the passages that can be mined to help us re-construct our approach to other religions, but a few comments on three key passages will suffice.

### *Genesis 1—Shared Creation, Shared Fall*

One of the central moves I propose Christians make in order to engage other religions in a pluralistic world is to deconstruct the "us vs. them" mentality,

resurrecting an “us *for* them” attitude. This would mean turning “us *apart from* them” to “us *with* them”; “us *above* them” to “us *alongside of* them”; and transforms “us *in spite of* them” into “us *respecting* them.”<sup>30</sup> To cultivate that type of attitude, friendly engagement, and love, we need to search our beginnings. As I said before, Christianity has always existed in a pluralistic context. Thus, as African post-colonial philosopher Mandivamba Rukuni advocated, “to know where we are going, we must know where we come from.”<sup>31</sup> Therefore, the best place to start in our search for source material for the friendly engagement of other religions is in the narrative poetry of Genesis 1.

The creation poem, “in the beginning,” reveals the foundational elements of humanity—who we are, what we are made from, and who made us. Thus, looking back on Genesis, we get a sense of how to navigate our world. There are two things in particular from the account of creation in Genesis that are relevant here: (1) all of humanity and its people—Confucians, Christians, and Candomblé initiates—are all created in the *imago dei* (the image of God); (2) likewise, we all share in the fallenness of humanity and creation. We also see here in the book about beginnings that, “human life is both personal and corporate. [That] [n]o human life can be rightly understood apart from the whole story of which each life-story is a part.”<sup>32</sup> As Timothy Keller offers, “Christians believe that all human beings are made in the image of God...[which] leads Christians to expect nonbelievers will be better than any of their mistaken beliefs could make them.”<sup>33</sup> The *imago dei* says we are all alike in creation—Christian and Muslim, Hindu and atheist. We are all interwoven into a divinely woven tapestry of life and human history. Therefore, we can view one another positively, sharing in a common humanity and a common Creator. But that isn’t, unfortunately, the end of the story. We fell from this unity. We lost this communion. Now we live with this heritage of hate, the original sin of the “us vs. them” divide. Where once we shared in a pure *imago dei*, we now share in an impure *imago ipsum*—an image of selfish desire. As Brian McLaren writes, “The tensions between our conflicted religions arise not from our differences, but from one thing we all hold in common: an oppositional religious identity that derives strength from hostility.”<sup>34</sup> Keller adds, “[t]he biblical doctrine of universal sinfulness also leads Christians to expect believers will be worse in practice than their orthodox beliefs should make them.”<sup>35</sup> Thus, part of the restoration project of the universe that we see in Jesus is the goal of bringing unity out of diversity, wholeness out of division, *ubuntu* and communion out of disunion and discord. Jesus is the realization of a new genesis that interrupts the regression of human history. He is the embodiment of divine creativity, and, as such, Jesus is an end to the era of hostility and a restoration of that which truly unites us—our Creator.

*John 4—Not Just Red Text . . .*

You see this restoration clearly in John 4, when Jesus grabs a drink with a woman of scandal at the local watering hole. In this episode, we see Jesus breaking down many barriers. First, he is with a woman at the well in the middle of the day. Not only is this not *kosher* (a man and a woman together like this in public is scandalous), but he is a Jewish rabbi and she is a Samaritan woman of ill repute. Yet, beyond these massive gender issues there is also a significant religious divide that Jesus bridges as he sits down to dialogue with her. Samaritans were not simply the Jews' neighbors to the north, they were a splinter religious sect that worshiped on a different mountain and, by extension, a different deity. In the eyes of the Jerusalem establishment, Samaritans were non-Jewish "others." Samaritans were "them." Realizing this significant split, the woman said, "'You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?' (For Jews do not associate with Samaritans)" (Jn 4:9).

Even so, Jesus wades into this woman's world at the well, drinks with the "them" in the flesh and, shockingly, talks *with* her, not *at* her. Yes, Jesus preaches a corrective; He brings conviction, but He does not lecture, pontificate, or sermonize. As I like to say of this passage, *it is not all red text*. It is black and then red.<sup>36</sup> She talks, and then Jesus talks—dialoguing. Jesus appreciates what this woman has to say and listens to her talk about her faith, her practice, her religion. She shares according to John 4, "'Sir,' the woman said, 'I can see that you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem'" (Jn 4:16). Jesus does not exactly sidestep this argument over right practice and worship; rather, He speaks the truth in love and invites her to drink from His "spring of water welling up unto eternal life" (Jn 4:13) and, with a fair bit of invitational mystery, promises that despite present religious differences there will come a day when we all will worship the Father in Spirit and truth (Jn 4:21–24). Listening to Him, the woman apperceives that the promise of a Messiah who is going to come to restore all things—even worship—is realized in this man sitting next to her. He Himself is that One. Jesus does not end by telling her how wrong she is, how horrible she is, or how she is going to burn in hell. Instead, Jesus simply reveals Himself. He shows her Jesus. We might do the same when interacting with people of other religions, seeing that "the essential contribution of the Christian to the dialogue [not the lecture, sermon, or diatribe] will simply be the telling of the story, the story of Jesus, the story of the Bible."<sup>37</sup> When all else fails, it seems, the best course of action is to share the story of Jesus.<sup>38</sup>

*Acts 17—That They Might Grope Their Way*

Even so, Jesus tells the woman, concerning her religious ritual and that of the Samaritans, "you worship what you do not know" (Jn 4:22). Similarly, in Acts 17,

we see that Paul not only illustrates that he is educated in the beliefs, history, and practices of the Athenians, but he also offers them something more, something they have been looking for but did not know. Let us take a deeper look at this exchange.<sup>39</sup>

Without a doubt, Acts 17, specifically Paul's encounter with the philosophers and interlopers at the Areopagus, abounds with wise insights for engagement with other worldviews. First, we notice that Paul was provoked by what he observed in the city of Athens, a city described as "full of idols." Here, Paul provides an example of being aware of the religious scene of the people and engaging with it. Moreover, his engagement with, and even exasperation over, the pluralism he saw led him to the spiritual centers of the city: the synagogue, the city streets (marketplace), and the town hall. The synagogue was the spiritual center of his religious homeland, the marketplace the locus of the popular multi-religious milieu, and the Areopagus the place where issues and ideas were discussed and decided upon. Following Paul's precedent, we might be led to engage with pluralism not only in our religious comfort zones (church/synagogue), but also in places where the religious debates of our age are being waged—in popular media and pubs, on university campuses, and on the internet.<sup>40</sup> While not forgoing Bible study, that should not be where our religious education or engagement ends. We should be able to balance the both the private and the public, the practice of biblical interpretation and cultural exegesis—to "keep our look in the book and our feet in the street."<sup>41</sup> This approach will produce results; notice how Paul's popular encounter and presentation of Jesus (cf. Jn 4) led to an invitation from those Paul wanted to engage.

The second and third elements of Paul's method to consider involve respect and revelation. Invited to address the Areopagus, Paul began from a place of commonality and publicly voiced his respect for the very same "idolatry" that had so irritated him upon initial contact.<sup>42</sup> Following his initial offense at pluralism, Paul was urged on to talk with the people in the synagogues and in the streets. Listening and learning, he came to an appreciation of where the Athenians were in their religious ritual and devotion. He expressed his respect for and knowledge of their traditions when he said, "I perceive that in every way you are very religious."<sup>43</sup> Upon beholding their religious devotion, Paul expressed his respect for their religiosity and appealed to the common ground that he and the Athenians shared in their beliefs and practices, referencing God's hand in creating and crafting cultures like his *and* theirs. He affirmed God's will that the Athenians be Athenian. In so doing, Paul asserted that the ethnography of cultures and the sociology of religions are teeming with divine promptings and religious intimations.<sup>44</sup> This respect then led to a point of revelation concerning "the God who made the cosmos and everything within it" (v. 24).<sup>45</sup> Through Paul, it is revealed that these cultures, created by God, and their attendant religious doctrines and practices are a means by which the people of the cosmos might "grope their way to God as if in the dark."<sup>46</sup> Other religions, philosophies, and worldviews are therefore preparatory programs for the revelation

of Jesus. John Howard Yoder states that there is no sense of supplantation, superiority, synthesis or syncretism called for in the collision of the revealed story of Jesus with other religions, but rather a sense that other religions are *preparations* and, in light of Christ, are in need of *reconception*. Paul proclaimed, alluding to the people's own poets and prophets, the uniqueness of Christ as the remodeling factor of their historical religious outlook. In this sense, there is less a deconstruction of their religions than a reconnection of their culture and story with the narrative of the cosmos and its Creator in, and through, the testimony of Christ.<sup>47</sup> In these ways, Paul not only respects the Athenian religion, but reveals the fullness of their spiritual quest in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

These references, as well as their short explications, are just the beginning of the biblical basis for bridge building between Christianity and other religions in a pluralistic age. What follows is a fleshing out of some key concepts that are derived from the passages above.

### ***Toward Constructing a Friendly, Christian, Approach***

Below is a six-step process for better engaging with individuals from another religious point of view. It draws on the Scripture passages above and from my own experience as a ministry leader and interfaith activist over the last decade. The process is not meant to be comprehensive, but a sketched blueprint for your own constructive efforts as an individual or, as I suggest, as a congregation.

#### ***Pay Attention***

The first thing any of us must do in understanding other religions and responding to them is to attend to what is happening around us. While this paper presented some national and global trends in religion, non-religion, and spirituality, it is good to remember the axiom that "religion is always first and foremost local; it lives and thrives in particular places, cultures, and people."<sup>48</sup> Thus, it is important to pay attention to your neighborhood, your city, your community, your workplace, your family, and your friends. Mark Labberton of Fuller Seminary writes, "[h]uman existence, including global theology, involves acts of paying attention to God and paying attention to the world (to the particular world of people, relationships, culture, economics, religion, sociology, power, art, land, and more) in God's name...."<sup>49</sup> Thus, it is good for you to ask: What religions are present in my locality? What is the religious and spiritual make-up of my community?

While the "religion question" is not posed on the U.S. census, other resources are available. Discover your resources, whether they be census data or polling percentages or studies from organizations such as Pew Research Center or Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI). If the data is scant, use Google to discover



places of worship. You can learn a lot by mapping where religious institutions are. Is there a Buddhist temple in your community? Where is it? Is it on the outskirts of town? Why is that? Is there a local *masjid*? Where is it? How easy is it to find? Who lives on your street? Do your own informal polling of your community and discover what religions are around you. Religion is everywhere. It is in our hearts and in our hands. We see it in coffee shops and on college campuses, on street corners, and in the local mall. Have you taken the time to notice how much of a *melange* your hometown is? The U.S. is growing more diverse by the day. Maybe you live in a small town and you feel like you're trapped in a homogeneous cage. Look again, and you will find pockets of religious and cultural miscellany in the most unlikely of places. Take a moment the next time you are in a public place—a mall, a post office, or an airport—and recognize the mosaic that is your community. You might be surprised at what you find.

### *Find, and Form, Friendships*

The next step in the process might be the most radical of them all—make a new friend. One of the most central moves that you can take to reach people of other religions is to form an intimate relationship as a friend. While this may not seem revolutionary, it is positively progressive.

We “need more ordinary radicals”<sup>50</sup> who are willing to build friendships for the sake of the Kingdom of God. The Pew Research Center’s Religion and Public Life Project report that favorable opinions of Muslims in the U.S. continue to decline (since 2005) and posit that one of the reasons for this may be that only 41% of Americans say they are acquainted with someone who is Muslim.<sup>51</sup> Putnam and Campbell proposed that where interpersonal religious tolerance and religious diversity grow, it is due to the fact that increasing numbers of Americans know someone of a different faith through social networks or via family. The authors call this the “Aunt Susan Principle” and claim that it is “the most important reason that Americans can combine religious devotion and diversity.”<sup>52</sup> The corollary to this familial connection is the “My Friend Al Principle,” reflecting connections across religious boundaries through non-kin social networks. The authors suggest that these connections, these friendships, engender a small, but comprehensive, religious tolerance and can mitigate the potentially divisive aspects of religious differences in the U.S. We need people who are willing to take bold, but simple, steps to befriend the people they live next to—even if it stretches you, pushes you out of your comfort zone, or grinds against your prejudices. The simplest step can often be the most difficult. The good news is that you may already know these people—they may be part of your family, your best friends, your teachers, your co-workers. Take the step to become a friend, rather than just an acquaintance. Make the radical move to

change the party line from, “I’m friends with a Muslim even though I’m a Christian to I’m friends with a Muslim because I’m a Christian.”<sup>53</sup>

To do this, it is best to seek “persons of peace.” In Luke 10, Jesus introduces the idea of “persons of peace” as those who open their doors to you, invite you in, and provide you with hospitality. While these physical elements may not be present, there is also a psychological and spiritual side to this concept, that is, individuals with whom you can more naturally build a relationship. Lean into those relationships. Furthermore, drawing on the story of Jesus and Zacchaeus in Luke 19, Mike Breen states that once you “find the person of peace, the person who is open to you, interested in you, likes you, wants to be around you: go to *their* turf, where they’re comfortable; allow them to serve you, show you hospitality; spend intentional time with them; and be ready to do the works of the Kingdom and speak the words of the Kingdom (in appropriate ways).”<sup>54</sup> However, on this last point, be sure that as you find, and form, a friendship with a “person of peace” that the relationship is not a means to an end, but the end in itself. Simply be a friend of someone of another faith. That is radical, and world-changing, as it is.

### *Listen and Learn*

When asked about the most important step in witnessing to people of other religions, I often reply, “shutting our mouths.” While crass and potentially disturbing, I frame my response with such disquieting language to prove a point—the U.S. is suffering from a case of multi-generational, multi-national, and multi-cultural religious ignorance, a religious illiteracy, or what Stephen Prothero calls, “religious amnesia.”<sup>55</sup> The United States, in spite of its established secularism, is a thoroughly pluralistic nation with robust expressions of myriad world religions, from the wheat fields of Iowa to the buckled asphalt of Los Angeles. Yet, we are simultaneously “a nation of religious illiterates”<sup>56</sup> who flunk the most basic of quizzes on religion—even our own. It seems, “[m]ost Americans remain far more committed to respecting other religions than learning about them.”<sup>57</sup>

In 2010, The Pew Research Center noted in its Religious Knowledge Survey that America is one of the most religious countries in the developed world.<sup>58</sup> However, as their report revealed, atheists and agnostics, not people of faith, recorded the best scores on a test that examined individual knowledge of various religions. Questions ranged from topics such as the Hindu pantheon to who sparked the Protestant Reformation. It seems that white evangelical Protestants had some of the least knowledge concerning other religions, averaging only 16 correct answers out of 32 questions on the quiz. On the other hand, atheists and agnostics “excelled” with an average of almost 21, just beating out Mormons and Jews, who averaged closer to 20. Although most Christians missed questions about other religions, even questions from an individual’s own religious tradition proved stumpers, as Catholics

failed to identify transubstantiation as their own belief and Protestants did not know that Martin Luther initiated their own church movement. With that said, Mormons and Protestant evangelicals scored the highest on questions of a biblical nature. Rather than making atheists and agnostics look like religious gurus and white evangelical Protestants look like stereotypical uneducated bigots, the survey points out an altogether more depressing fact—the U.S. is fundamentally ignorant when it comes to the world’s major religions. If the best average of any demographic is 21 out of 32 (65%), Americans fail in making the grade on religious knowledge. In one of the most religiously diverse nations in the world, it is not acceptable that our religious knowledge is somewhere between failing and barely passing.

Advocates of religious literacy say that one of the crucial components in combatting religious ignorance, and the related bigotry and religiously motivated violence, is better education. David Smock of the U.S. Institute of Peace observes, “[o]ne antidote to hatred among religious communities is to teach communities about the beliefs and practices of the religious other.”<sup>59</sup> Yet, books and lectures alone are insufficient. As Yehezkel Landau urges, “[W]e need to develop educational strategies to overcome the ignorance that leads to prejudice, which in turn leads to dehumanizing contempt, which in turn breeds violence.”<sup>60</sup> Thus, champions of religious literacy will encourage individuals to study other religions in the presence of “the religious other” and to make sure that what they are learning is true to that religion’s own perspective and grounded in its local experience. Such experiences “re-humanize” the religious “other” more than any lecture or in-class discussion.<sup>61</sup> Those with more education on religion, particularly those who took a course on the subject, did much better on the quiz than the average American. Although there are those who rightly point out that religion is more than head knowledge, that faith involves experiential knowledge as well, a basic education (whether experiential or book based) covering other religions goes a long way in building bridges. This is why I fully advocate the Christian’s friendly study of other religions, particularly in the context of cultivated relationships, and fully agree with Mahatma Gandhi who said that, “the friendly study of the world’s religions is a most sacred duty”<sup>62</sup> and Lesslie Newbigin who held that, “mission [is] not only a matter of preaching and teaching, but also of learning.”<sup>63</sup>

### *Dine, Dialogue, and Do Together*

There are distinct ways that Christians can foster these relationships and create environments that are conducive to the friendly study of other religions. In particular, I think there are three means by which Christian individuals and churches can take the next step in learning about other religions: dining, dialoguing, and doing together.

While I continue to advocate classes, programs on other religions, and visits to other places of worship/devotion for the sake of learning, we must be careful to not conduct these courses in isolation. Instead, they should be informed, in some way led and shaped by “the religious other.” Too often, Christian studies of other religions are centered around straw man arguments and ex-member testimonies. While apologetic/polemic studies may seem helpful, they are often taught by a pastor or leader who lacks expertise in other religions. These types of studies usually treat other religions as simple worldviews that can be easily deconstructed. In real life, this is not the case. For example, Hinduism cannot be understood by reading one book, listening to one podcast, or in one 45-minute Bible study. It is an ancient, complex, and multifaceted faith practiced by nearly one billion people. Thus, these studies do little more than affirm Christians in their superiority and privilege and do little to educate them about other religions as they are really and truly believed and practiced. And, although ex-member testimonies can be useful, they are often biased and unreliable for an accurate, comprehensive, picture of that religion or sect. In both cases, it is a one-sided conversation, and the careful student of religion will have to “listen to the testimony of [both] the disillusioned apostate and the enthusiastic convert” from a perspective of critical evaluation.<sup>64</sup>

Instead of relying on untrained pastors without proper religious studies training or on ex-members with an axe to grind I suggest co-taught studies or a *dialogue* series that involves the leadership of a Christian pastor or theologically informed layperson alongside a practitioner or advocate of another faith or worldview. These dialogues should be shaped around mutual interests and not be focused on a central divisive question or organized as a debate. “The dialogue [should] not be about who is going to be saved. It will be about the question, ‘what is the meaning and goal of this common human story in which we are all, Christians and others together, participants?’”<sup>65</sup> This gives both sides an opportunity speak to their beliefs and rituals and gives the Christian an opportunity to embody the story of Jesus, rather than proclaim it through a bullhorn on top of the nearest egg crate or soapbox.<sup>66</sup>

Meals are sacred events. Lutherans, of all people, should comprehend the vast mystery involved in sharing a meal with another. While we accept the Lord’s Supper as a sacramental meal because of its institution by Christ and by His command, we also recognize the communal blessedness of a shared meal—just look at our potlucks! Therefore, it is good if we *dine* together with people of other religions. Beyond this notion of consecrated collations, we also value the gift of hospitality. There are numerous examples of the divine nature of having someone into your home, over for a meal, or allowing them to invite you in to dine with them.<sup>67</sup> Inviting someone over for dinner, even (or especially) when it involves going above-and-beyond for those who have specific religious dietary restrictions (e.g. Kosher, Halal), is a supreme example of hospitality. If one is not keen on having someone over for a meal, instead share a coffee, a curry, or a cold beverage with a friend from another

religious perspective and use this as an opportunity to deepen the relationship and dialogue. Sharing some companionship over a meal, you can, in the words of McLaren: “[a]sk them questions. Display unexpected interest in them, their traditions, their beliefs, and their stories. . . . Enter into their world, and welcome them into your world, without judgment. If they reciprocate, welcome their reciprocation; if not, welcome their nonreciprocation. . . . Join the conspiracy of plotting for the common good together.”<sup>68</sup>

Finally, it is advantageous if we engage in *doing* interfaith work projects together. As Christians, we should be eager to cooperate with people of other faiths in all projects which are in line with the Christian understanding of God’s purpose in history and, according to the “Left Hand Rule of God,” those projects that honor and bless our neighbor. Patel shared that dialogue is not enough, that interfaith action and social justice is key to not only repairing relationships between different religions, but also between the realm of religion and the world at large.<sup>69</sup> As Newbigin offered, “[i]t is indeed the duty of Christians in multi faith societies to cooperate with people of other faiths in seeking a just ordering of society, but this is in no sense a substitute for the missionary preaching of the Church.”<sup>70</sup> What projects could we share in? Habitat for Humanity offers “interfaith work projects,” and many homeless shelters permit multiple faith groups to work together on site. Other projects that various faith-bodies could work together on could be a park clean-up or the provision of shelter for the local homeless population during the winter months—mosques, synagogues, churches, and temples offering the gift of hospitality to those without a home in mutual extension of “good faith.” Times of community crisis also provide ample opportunity for various religious groups to come together and offer a unified response to the needs of the community they share. Whatever the project, as long as worship services are eschewed, there is nothing blocking interfaith cooperation in the civil, left-hand, realm. All the while, these shared undertakings continue to deepen the bonds between Christians and non-Christians and build bridges for understanding, appreciation, and continue dialogue and peacemaking.

### *Discern*

A wise and loving Christian will also seek to know how, when, and why they might be able to share the story of Jesus in thought, word, and deed. Even so, the most important prayer for the Christian engaged in a friendly association with someone from another religion should be, “Thy will be done.” Newbigin, again, said “[t]he central responsibility of the Church is indicated by that prayer. It is to seek the doing of God’s will of righteousness and peace in this world.”<sup>71</sup> This prayer not only leads us deeper into relationship with our Heavenly Father and His divine desires and decrees, but also permits us the freedom to accept the course that our relationship with the religious other takes—no matter the outcome. All the same, the thrust of our

discerning prayer will be when to witness to the worldview of those we love and cherish in interfaith kinship.

### *Witness to the Worldview*

An honest friendly engagement with individuals from another worldview will involve being fully ourselves. It will incorporate transparency and full disclosure. That will mean sharing our story and its part in the divine record of history. And yet, we do not want this witness to be cast into a context without proper reflection and forethought. It must take root within the worldview of the one to whom we are witnessing. This will not only require a deep, intimate, knowledge of another person's worldview and religious narrative, but also the sensitivity and sagacity to know exactly when and where to turn on the light—to know what the Gospel looks and sounds like to the person from this particular spiritual perspective.

To appreciate the science of interfaith engagement, we turn again to Acts 17 and Paul's interaction with the people of Athens and his witness at the Areopagus. As we mentioned earlier, Paul knew the religious belief of his audience, their history, and showed them his respect, speaking their language, in their idioms, quoting their own poets and including their culture in the divine, and abiding, strategy of God. To turn the light on for those "groping around as if in the dark," Paul shared the story of Jesus, pointedly in the context of the altar to "the Unknown God." Eventually, regardless of our method or delivery, "what we are trying to convince people *about* is a story."<sup>72</sup> This is the content of our proclamation, and, in witnessing to the worldview of the religious "other," we affirm that these "other" "stories have validity to the extent that they share similarity to Jesus' story."<sup>73</sup> We see this missiological approach to witnessing to people of other faiths clearly in Acts 17.

This form of approach is also grounded in the concept of "mission as translation," advanced by the missiologist Lammin Sanneh. In his book, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture*, and several other essays and works, the Yale scholar expounds upon the idea that "translation" is embedded in the Christian message, and particularly in the life and ministry of Jesus. From a missionary perspective, "Christianity is recognizable only in the embodied idioms and values of the cultures in which we find it."<sup>74</sup> There is much potential here, as Sanneh intimates, "[for] the receiving culture [to become] the decisive destination of God's salvific promise. . . ."<sup>75</sup> However, there is also inherent danger, as "mission as translation" commits to a bold and radical step that must be accompanied by attendant safeguards against syncretism or imposition. There is an assortment of methodologies for engaging in "mission as translation" (a subset of the field of "contextualization"),<sup>76</sup> but at their heart is the notion that the story of Jesus must be told, and embodied, in such a way that it is simply an extension or re-conception of the religious story these loved ones already know. It is asking the question, "What

does the Gospel look/sound like for these people?”<sup>77</sup> Or, in the words of Newbiggin, “How can the Gospel ‘come alive’” in this cultural context?<sup>78</sup> This is the essential query of “mission as translation” and the foundation to witnessing to the worldview of the religious “other.”

All the while, in this final step, we must be ever mindful of not forsaking a friendship. The friendship we forge with a person from another religion, we remember, is not simply “a means unto an end,” but “an end unto itself.” I must not, as a witness to the story of Jesus, abandon a relationship because the proclamation of the Gospel was not received. The friendship must endure, for this very act is part of the irresistible force of the resurrective, restorative, and recreative kingdom of Jesus—to bring unity and fellowship where there was disharmony and division.

As an example, let me tell you of my friendship with a Hindu man, whom we will call “Soumil,” a dealer in deities who imports bronze and sandstone sculptures from India for use in *puja* and *bhakti* (Hindu ritual and worship of their gods/goddesses). He and I would, on regular occasion, gather for a good Thai lunch and discussion of our metaphysical opinions and personal stories. In the course of our conversation, I would share the story of Jesus and he would share his testimony to the divine mysteries and embodied practice of Hinduism. His Hinduism could always accommodate my Jesus, but my following of Jesus could not accommodate his ritual devotion to Sai Baba or Ganesha. In time, it became clear that, spiritually, we were at an impasse. He was not going to convert me to broaden my horizons and become a Hindu. I was not going to usher him through the pearly gates and into the kingdom of Christ. And that was okay. Really. Our lunches did not end. Our friendship did not cease. Our mutual exchange of hospitality continued and our friendship endured. Still to this day, I count Soumil as my friend and that will never change. As I sit in my office writing this article, I glance at the bronze sculpture of Lord Shiva that Soumil gave to me. It often reminds me of our connection, of my learning, and of my appreciation and respect for Soumil’s sincere faith; but, most of all, it prompts me to remember the divine purpose and the beatific tenor of our friendly encounter with one another over pad thai and Singha beer.

## **Conclusion**

This essay is a beginning. It is meant to work *toward* a blueprint, not be the blueprint itself. There will be revisions, additions, subtractions, and perhaps a crumpling of the entire project and a total rewrite before we can, together, build a “strong, benevolent Christianity” that can successfully navigate a context defined by religious pluralism. What is evident are the following points: Christian privilege can no longer be assumed; trying to reassert Christian privilege will not prove successful in the current context; Christian Scripture warrants a different approach; and, finally, the Christian Church can seek helpful, orthodox ways forward in friendly encounters

with the religious “other.” Certainly, there are blind spots in this work, further research that can be done, and more teasing out of this proposal to be accomplished. Even I am unsure of exactly where this might lead and how best to move forward. For now, it is a conversation starter for a new (and yet, *renewed*) friendly engagement with other religions and worldviews that, I believe, is best suited for our age.

Given the current pluralistic landscape, the attitude that accompanies this spiritual atmosphere, and the ever-increasing religious hybridity of our time, it is necessary for the Christian Church to encounter the world’s religions with a posture of open eyes and open ears, open hearts and open minds. It is time that we set aside our polemics of aggressive engagement in favor of the peacemaking of friendly engagement. This does not equate to a forfeiture of the Gospel; rather, it is an amplifying of it, a commitment to Jesus’ kingdom of peace and reconciliation, a restoration of a Gospel that invites all of humanity into the riches of His resurrection and the eternal and global human story. Hopefully, this essay moves us closer toward the future hope and potential reality of an architecture of bridges built between Christian and the world’s sundry spiritualities. This bridge building effort, not to mention its final product, is most definitely a sacred duty we must not disregard in the present age.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Courtney Bender, “The Architecture of Multi-Faith Spaces: An Introduction,” *Reverberations: New Directions in the Study of Prayer*, August 4, 2014, accessed August 7, 2014, <http://forums.ssrc.org/ndsp/2014/08/04/the-architecture-of-multi-faith-spaces-an-introduction/>.

<sup>2</sup> Stephen Evans, “Berlin House of One: The first church-mosque-synagogue?” *BBC News Magazine*, June 21, 2014, accessed August 5, 2014, <http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-27872551>.

<sup>3</sup> Peter Sagal, “Panel Round Two,” *NPR’s Wait-Wait-Don’t-Tell-Me News Quiz*, July 11, 2014, accessed August 7, 2014, <http://www.npr.org/2014/07/12/330786002/panel-round-two>.

<sup>4</sup> Zahra Ahmed, “Interfaith Peace Garden sows seeds of religious harmony,” *The Houston Chronicle*, October 20, 2011, accessed August 7, 2014, <http://www.chron.com/life/houston-belief/article/Interfaith-Peace-Garden-sows-seeds-of-religious-2228709.php>.

<sup>5</sup> Advanced by scholars such as Peter Berger, Harvey Cox, Bryan Wilson, Thomas Luckmann, and Rodney Stark.

<sup>6</sup> Pew Research, “The Global Religious Landscape,” Pew Research Religion and Public Life Project. December 18, 2012, accessed August 12, 2014, <http://www.pewforum.org/2012/12/18/global-religious-landscape-exec/>.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> Gallup, “Religion Trends,” accessed August 12, 2014, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/1690/religion.aspx>.

<sup>9</sup> Association of Statisticians of American Religious Bodies, “2010 U.S. Religion Census: Religious Congregations & Membership Study,” image (map), 2012.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*



- <sup>11</sup> Michael O. Emerson, Jenifer Bratter, Junia Howell, P. Wilner Jeanty, and Mike Cline, *Houston Region Grows More Racially/Ethnically Diverse, With Small Declines in Segregation: A Joint Report Analyzing Census Data from 1990, 2000, and 2010* (Houston, TX: Rice University's Kinder Institute for Urban Research, 2011), 3.
- <sup>12</sup> Kate Shellnutt, "Mormon, Muslim faiths surge across Houston," *The Houston Chronicle*, May 3, 2012, accessed August 12, 2014, <http://blog.chron.com/believeitornot/2012/05/mormon-muslim-faiths-surge-across-houston/>.
- <sup>13</sup> Diana L. Eck, *A New Religious America* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 2001).
- <sup>14</sup> Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010), 91–133.
- <sup>15</sup> See Pew Research Center, "'Nones' on the Rise," Pew Research Religion & Public Life Project, <http://www.pewforum.org/2012/10/09/nones-on-the-rise/>.
- <sup>16</sup> See Paul W. Robinson, "Pluralism and Mix-and-Match Religion," in *The American Mind Meets the Mind of Christ*, ed. Robert Kolb (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Seminary Press, 2010), 68–77; Peter L. Berger, *A Rumor of Angels: Modern Society and the Rediscovery of the Supernatural* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1970); and Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1967).
- <sup>17</sup> See Elizabeth J. Dias, "The Rise of the Evangélicos," *TIME Magazine*, April 4, 2013: <http://nation.time.com/2013/04/04/the-rise-of-evangelicos/>; Daniel A. Rodriguez, *A Future for the Latino Church: Models for Multilingual, Multigenerational Hispanic Congregations* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2011); Philip Jenkins, "Coming Home," in *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002); Ken Chitwood, "Islam en Español: the narratives, demographics, conversion causeways, and conditions for community cohesion of Latina/o Muslims in the U.S." Thesis, Concordia University Irvine, CA, July 2014; Chitwood, "Latino Religious Trends," RNA Conference, Austin, TX, September 19, 2013.
- <sup>18</sup> Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralistic Society* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1989), 1.
- <sup>19</sup> Andy Wrasman, *Contradict: They Can't All Be True* (Bloomington, IN: WestBow Press, 2014), 4–5.
- <sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>21</sup> Stuart Murray, *Post-Christendom: Church and Mission in a Strange New World* (Crown Hill, UK: Paternoster Press, 2004), 25.
- <sup>22</sup> Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralistic Society*, 8.
- <sup>23</sup> Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism* (New York: Riverhead Publishing, 2009), 3.
- <sup>24</sup> To use David Stoll's terminology from his book of the same name.
- <sup>25</sup> While the imperialistic forces involved in Christian mission advancement are often overstated, they cannot be ignored. We must combine our apologetic with an apology. For more nuanced views on imperialism, power, and the global spread of Christianity from the West, see Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*; Paul Borthwick, *Western Christians in Global Mission: What's the Role of the North American Church?*; and Mark A. Noll, *The New Shape of World Christianity: How American Experience Reflects Global Faith*.
- <sup>26</sup> John Beverley, *Subalternity and Representation: Arguments in Cultural Theory* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999).
- <sup>27</sup> Antonio Gramsci coined the term "subaltern," but his work and theory was grounded in Marxism proper. Since then, Gramsci's subaltern theory has been nuanced by postcolonial and postmodern writers, cultural theorists, and social scientists.
- <sup>28</sup> Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralistic Society*, 194.

<sup>29</sup> Brian McLaren, *Why Did Jesus, Moses, the Buddha, and Mohammed Cross the Road? Christian Identity in a Multi-faith World* (New York: Jericho Books, 2012), 10ff.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 57ff.

<sup>31</sup> Mandivamba Rukuni, *Being Afrikan* (Johannesburg: Penguin Books, 2007), 83.

<sup>32</sup> Newbiggin, *The Gospel in a Pluralistic Society*, 167.

<sup>33</sup> Keller, *The Reason for God*, 19.

<sup>34</sup> McLaren, *Christian Identity*, 57.

<sup>35</sup> Keller, *The Reason for God*, 19.

<sup>36</sup> This is poignant only if you have, or are familiar with, the “red-letter” versions of Scripture texts in which all of Jesus’ dialogue is printed in red, all others in black.

<sup>37</sup> Newbiggin, *The Gospel in a Pluralistic Society*, 186.

<sup>38</sup> This is typified in the approach of Carl Medearis in his two seminal works: *Speaking of Jesus: The Art of Not Evangelism* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 2011) and *Muslims, Christians, and Jesus: Gaining Understanding and Building Relationships* (Bloomington, MN: Bethany House Publishers, 2008).

<sup>39</sup> Before moving into that text, I suggest you spend some time reading and reflecting on it, specifically verses 16–34.

<sup>40</sup> The best, most lively, and engaging discussions I have enjoyed with others on religion and pluralism occurred when we studied religion together at a local brewery, via my blog on the topic of religion, via news articles on the topic, or in the collegial conversations with students and faculty at U.S. universities.

<sup>41</sup> Gregory Seltz, “Urban Multi-Cultural Ministry,” (lecture, Concordia University Irvine, CA, June 10, 2011).

<sup>42</sup> The word *παροξύνω* translates as “to be urged on, stimulated, provoked, or irritated.”

<sup>43</sup> Paul opened his eyes to the religious plurality of Athenian faith and ritual and was able to “behold” or “see” (*θεωρῶ*) what made them tick.

<sup>44</sup> Jack Schultz, “Elements of the Anthropological Study of Religion,” (lecture, Concordia University Irvine, CA, June 8, 2010).

<sup>45</sup> Connecting back to the earlier discussion about the importance of the *imago Dei* and the commonality of all humanity found in the Genesis 1 account.

<sup>46</sup> This translation is based on the sense of verses 26–27 and the word *ψηλαφῆσαι*, which means “to feel or grope about; as if in the dark.”

<sup>47</sup> There is also the possibility here that Paul’s respect and revelation were even more deeply entrenched in the culture of the Athenians. In *Eternity in their Hearts*, (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House, 1981), Don Richardson claims that Paul’s reference to the altar to the “Unknown God” (*Ἄγνωστος Θεός*) and his quotation of the poet Epimenides in Titus 1:12 reveal Paul’s historical knowledge of the Cretan poets’ prophecy concerning a “high God” in the midst of a plague that struck the city of Athens. While the historical validity of this claim cannot be sufficiently substantiated, it suggests some stimulating possibilities.

<sup>48</sup> Timothy Beal, *Religion in America: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 12.

<sup>49</sup> Mark Labberton, “Some Implications for Global Theology, Ministry, and Mission,” in *Global Theology in Evangelical Perspective: Exploring the Contextual Nature of Theology and Mission*, Jeffrey P. Greenman and Gene L. Green eds. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press Academic, 2012), 228.

<sup>50</sup> RJ Grunewald, “Ordinary Radicals,” accessed September 6, 2014, <http://www.rjgrune.com/ordinary-radicals/>.

<sup>51</sup> Pew Research Center, “Public Remains Conflicted Over Islam,” Religion Polling and Analysis, accessed August 10, 2014, <http://www.pewforum.org/2010/08/24/public-remains-conflicted-over-islam/>.

<sup>52</sup> Putnam and Campbell, *American Grace*, 526ff.

<sup>53</sup> Eboo Patel, *Sacred Ground: Pluralism, Prejudice, and the Promise of America* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2013), 141.

<sup>54</sup> Mike Breen, “Understanding Jesus and Persons of Peace,” accessed September 10, 2014, <http://mikebreen.wordpress.com/2010/11/24/understanding-jesus-and-persons-of-peace/>.

<sup>55</sup> Stephen Prothero, *Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know—And Doesn’t* (New York: Harper Collins, 2008), 13.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>58</sup> The survey, and its subsequent results, can be found and taken here:

<http://www.pewforum.org/quiz/u-s-religious-knowledge/> (accessed July 2010).

<sup>59</sup> David Smock, “Teaching the Religious Other,” *United States Institute of Peace: Special Report 143* (July 2005), 2.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>61</sup> I use the terminology religious “other” tentatively. I am reticent, due to the theology of Genesis 1 I share, to classify anyone as “other.” However, from the viewpoint of respecting the various truth claims of religions grounded in religious literacy, and the sentiments of Christian orthodoxy, it is impossible to demarcate those with different worldviews and contrasting spiritual practice as anything but “the religious other.” While wanting to avoid the forced binary of “us” and “them,” it is helpful as a pedagogic tool to refer to the religious “other” for the sake of contrast and the concept of contextualizing the Gospel for “them.” Thus, the choice to use the term “other” is pragmatic, not philosophical.

<sup>62</sup> M. K. Gandhi, “Crime of Reading Bible,” *Young India*, Vol. VIII, No. 35 (September 2, 1926), 308. For a discussion of Gandhi’s “friendly study” of world religions, see Diana L. Eck, “Gandhian Guidelines for a World of Religious Difference,” in Robert Ellsberg (ed.), *Gandhi on Christianity* (Maryknoll: New York, 1991), 84–85.

<sup>63</sup> Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralistic Society*, 128.

<sup>64</sup> George D. Chryssides and Ron Geaves, *The Study of Religion: An Introduction to Key Ideas and Methods*, 2nd ed. (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 85–86.

<sup>65</sup> Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralistic Society*, 185.

<sup>66</sup> At one congregation I was part of, we hosted an event entitled, “Interview with An Atheist.” It featured two local, renowned atheists who were invited to come and speak about their experience of the Christian Church and reflect on why they adhere to, and advance the cause of, atheism. They spoke first and then I shared my own perspective. Following these three addresses, we moved to a question and answer session with questions for one another and the audience. It went over well in the Christian community and among atheists/agnostics in the area. A synopsis from the atheist perspective is available here: <http://emilyhasbooks.com/why-would-a-christian-love-atheists/> (accessed May 15, 2013).

<sup>67</sup> See Genesis 18; Isaiah 25:6–9; Matthew 22:2–4; Hebrews 13:32.

<sup>68</sup> McLaren, *Christian Identity*, 231.

<sup>69</sup> Patel, 65ff.

<sup>70</sup> Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralistic Society*, 161.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 138.

<sup>72</sup> John Howard Yoder, *Theology of Mission: A Believer’s Church Perspective* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2013), 216.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>74</sup> Lammin Sanneh, “The Significance of the Translation Principle,” in *Global Theology in Evangelical Perspective: Exploring the Contextual Nature of Theology and Mission*, ed. Jeffrey P. Greenman and Gene L. Green (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2012), 37.

<sup>75</sup> Lammin Sanneh, *Mission as Translation: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1989).

<sup>76</sup> Included would be the concept of Gospel handles, learning and reshaping, and/or other methodologies and concepts revealed in the likes of Gerald R. McDermott's *Can Evangelicals Learn from World Religions? Jesus, Revelation, and Religious Traditions* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press Academic, 2000); Don Richardson's *Eternity in their Hearts: Startling Evidence of Belief in the One True God in Hundreds of Cultures Throughout the World* (New York: Regal, 2006); and, for an overview of various contextualization methods, A. Scott Moreau's *Contextualization in World Missions: Mapping and Assessing Evangelical Models* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2012). While I do not have experience with, advocate, or fully support all of these models and methodologies, they are worth exploration.

<sup>77</sup> Alan Hirsch, "The Gospel and Culture," (lecture, Detroit, MI: Lutheran Hour Ministries SENT Conference, July 24, 2014).

<sup>78</sup> Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralistic Society*, 177.

# Reaching Out to the Non-Baptized Believers: Missiological Implications from a Lutheran Perspective

**Sam Thompson**

**Abstract:** It is estimated that there are millions of non-baptized believers in India. This essay, drawing insights from Luther's understanding of sacraments, argues that sacraments as means of grace cannot be relegated to a secondary place. However, this zeal should also be matched by our efforts to take seriously the sociological and cultural struggles that these believers face because of their new faith. While challenging readers to explore theologically sound and missionally sensitive ways to reach out to the spiritual needs of these believers, this essay points out that the mission of the church should always be to go and serve people where they are.

The presence of millions of non-baptized believers in India raises several missional and pastoral concerns for us. Why are they known as “non-baptized believers”? Does their non-baptized status throw doubts on the genuineness of their faith and their commitment towards Christ? What keeps them away from waters of Baptism? What challenges do they bring to our traditional approaches to mission? What should guide our theological and missional approach in meeting and ministering to their needs? My interaction with the unbaptized believers comes from working as a pastor among first-generation Christians converted from Hinduism in India and also among Hindu/Buddhist Nepali immigrants in the St. Louis area. My concern in this paper is threefold: First, to point to the existence of non-baptized believers in our midst. Second, to throw some light upon some of the sociological and cultural struggles which lead a person to remain unbaptized. Finally, to trigger our theological and missiological thinking to minister sensitively towards the spiritual needs of these believers.

---

*Sam Thompson is an ordained pastor from the India Evangelical Lutheran Church. He is experienced in cross-cultural Christian missions working among people from different cultural and religious backgrounds. He has a Masters in Christian Social Ethics and is currently finishing his PhD in Systematic Theology from the Concordia Seminary, St. Louis. He is married to Shana and they have two children, Sasha and Shaan.*

## The Non-Baptized Believers: Who Are They Anyway?

When I use the term “non-baptized believer,” I wish to exclude the following two categories of people. First are those people who are attracted towards Christ and have genuine respect for Him but do not accept Him as God. These are people who are intellectually drawn towards certain ideals, teachings, or principles that they find attractive in Christ. They, without any hesitation, would acknowledge Jesus to be among the greatest teachers or reformers that the world has ever seen. One notable example could be Mahatma Gandhi, who found Jesus to be a great moral teacher. The second category of people is those who accept Jesus as one among a pantheon of gods. They worship Him as their “favorite god” but do not feel the need to receive Baptism or to convert to Christianity from their religion, because to them all religions are valid paths towards the ultimate reality and all gods are manifestations of the same reality.

However the “non-baptized believers” we are concerned with in this discussion are those who are genuine in their faith affirmation and do not necessarily reject or despise Baptism. They are convinced that Jesus is the only God, the Way and the Truth, and that His life and work on the cross is sufficient for the forgiveness of their sin and for their salvation.<sup>1</sup> However, due to various socio-cultural and political reasons and/or because of the failure of the church to effectively minister to them, they still remain as unbaptized believers.<sup>2</sup> These believers could be the fruits of missionary efforts of some institutionalized churches or para-church organizations. However, they distance themselves from any institutionalized church or from Baptism, and so they are not considered as Christians by any official understanding.

Herbert E. Hoefler, a long-time LCMS missionary in India, who has done some extensive empirical study among the non-baptized believers in South India, in his book, *Churchless Christianity*, notes several characteristics of the spirituality of the unbaptized whom he encountered. His observations are helpful for us to understand the genuineness of the faith of the unbaptized believers in our midst. First, he notes that they have “a *reflectiveness and spirituality* which are at a considerable level above the ordinary, whether in church or in general society.”<sup>3</sup> Secondly, they display a profound sense of *gratitude and faithfulness* towards Jesus Christ for what He means to them spiritually and existentially. Thirdly, these are the people who testify to having experienced the *love and power of Christ* in their lives and during crises in their lives.<sup>4</sup> Hoefler thus concludes, “They had their own ‘Red Sea’ experience of deliverance and revelation, so they were ready to stand humbly and trustingly beneath Mt. Sinai to make their covenant of obedience with their Lord.”<sup>5</sup>

If empirical data constrain us not to cast doubts on the genuineness of the unbaptized person’s faith, then what keeps them away from Baptism? Is it theological illiteracy or more of a practical impediment? A closer investigation into the lives of a majority of these believers supports a case for the latter. Although

many of these people are genuine in their faith, they distance themselves from Baptism for a shorter or longer period of time due to several socio-cultural and political constraints. T. M. Philip, a well-known Indian theologian, rightly notes that the practice of Baptism carries several socio-cultural underpinnings in India.<sup>6</sup> M. M. Thomas, another prominent Indian Christian theologian, clarifies this phenomenon as follows:

I have no doubt that baptism in the New Testament sense is incorporation into Christ and his congregational life. But the meaning of baptism has been distorted for long in India as a mark of transference of sociological, cultural-judicial loyalties from one community to another. The real question, therefore, is how to regain the meaning of baptism.<sup>7</sup>

In an Indian context, Baptism means much more than recognition and faith in the truth claims of Christ about Himself. It is a self-removal from social, family, and cultural ties to which one belongs. Herbert Hoefler rightly elaborates on this: “the average convert in India must find a new family, a new community, a new social and economic life along with the new spiritual life he has adopted. His own people force him to this by completely ostracizing him.”<sup>8</sup> The change of faith through Baptism means practically the change of one’s whole social identity. Here “one identifies with a new history and a new group of people. One must learn new habits and new customs. One is even expected generally to take a new name.”<sup>9</sup>

The transition a new convert in India must make is challenging for several reasons. From a sociological point of view, the Indian culture is interwoven by deep communitarian and familial ties. The expectation is that individuals place their commitment to family and community first, over their individual preferences. This expectation makes it difficult for the individuals to leave the faith of their fathers to transition towards a new faith.<sup>10</sup> A convert who joins the institutionalized church through Baptism is seen as betraying his own family, renouncing his loyalty to them, and/or bringing shame to them. In this process, he may lose all or most of the emotional, social, and material support on which he is dependent from his family and community.

The second challenge a non-baptized believer faces regarding Baptism relates to the political implication attached to Baptism in the Indian context. With an increasing Hinduization of the Indian society, Baptism and conversion are portrayed as anti-national and anti-cultural political activity by the Hindutva<sup>11</sup> proponents. To Madhav Sadashiv Golwalkar (1906–1973), one of the chief architects of Hindutva ideology, “Conversion of Hindus into other religions is nothing but making them succumb to divided loyalty in place of having undivided and absolute loyalty to the nation. It is dangerous to the security of the nation and the country.”<sup>12</sup> He goes on to call non-Hindus foreign races in India and notes:

The foreign races in Hindusthan must either adopt the Hindu culture and language, must learn to respect and hold in reverence Hindu religion, must entertain no ideas but those of glorification of the Hindu race and culture ... or may stay in the country, wholly subordinated to the Hindu nation, claiming nothing, deserving no privileges, far less any preferential treatment—not even citizen's right.<sup>13</sup>

J. R. Chandran, a prominent Indian Christian theologian, after rightly assessing the implication of Baptism in a Hinduised Indian context notes, "Baptism is the symbol of membership in a church and as the numerical strength of any community has social and political implications, it cannot be regarded as a religious rite. It is a religious rite with sociological consequence in so far as it can alter the communal structure of the society. Those who regard this as harmful vigorously oppose conversion to Christianity through baptism."<sup>14</sup> The political implication attached to joining an institutionalized church through Baptism makes a new believer an easy target of various Hindutva forces. These believers will soon meet with persecution and/or forceful re-conversion, loss of governmental incentives, privileges, jobs, and the like.<sup>15</sup>

The third challenge to the non-baptized believers is from the institutionalized church itself. Many times non-baptized believers find the church to be indifferent to, insensitive to, and/or inept in understanding the psycho-socio and material problems that they are going through.<sup>16</sup> This insensitivity slows down the process of incorporating new believers in church fellowship and nurture. Moreover, a judgmental and impatient attitude of the church towards new believers who delay their decision to join the institutionalized church through Baptism creates further mistrust between both parties.

## **Inculturational and Liberational Approaches to Baptism and Conversion**

Several Indian Christian theologians have tried to address the socio-cultural challenges faced by the non-baptized believers. The theologians from high caste background tend to follow an inculturation approach. The concern of inculturation theologians has always been to relate Christian faith to the Hindu culture. In the course of their efforts, most of them either downplayed or thought sacraments as unnecessary. Pandippedi Chenchiah (1886–1959) was a Hindu Brahmin convert who became a Christian theologian. He thought that "a Christian movement within Hinduism without its umbilical cord being cut is a decided advantage to the Hindu and the Christian."<sup>17</sup> He was critical about the institutional church because he saw it as a human institution tainted with an alien Western pattern and colonial legacy. So Chenchiah was attracted to the ancient Hindu idea of the *ashram*, where a small community of people lived with greatest simplicity as disciples of a *guru*. He also



thought that *ashram* system would effectively cater to spiritual needs of Christian community instead of institutionalized church.<sup>18</sup>

Chenchiah found Baptism, which has largely assumed the function of a social rite of joining a community, to be problematic. He argued that “the thought of having to undergo baptism has kept many a Hindu from open confession of his sincere faith in Christ.”<sup>19</sup> And so he propagated a view of “religionless Christianity” where “there will be no baptisms, no confession of faith, no creedal profession... [The Hindu] will slowly and in different degrees come under the influence of the Spirit of Christ, without the change of labels or nomenclature. The change will be in the realm of spirit – not in the *nama* (name) and *rupna* (form).”<sup>20</sup>

If inculturation theologians, in general, seem to downplay the role of Baptism in conversion, the liberation theologians, in particular the Dalit theologians,<sup>21</sup> affirmed it as a means of social protest. As Jeyakiran Sebastian quotes Joseph Mattam:

When we welcome people to baptism, in the context of the poor and dalits in India, it is a call to a counter culture (not a separate Christian culture) which will empower the poor and will help them change their self-image and transform their world view into a new cooperative pattern. It is in view of this mission that baptism becomes meaningful, not in terms of the salvation of few individuals.<sup>22</sup>

Although Dalit theologians, in general, affirm Baptism and conversion as a means of social liberation; in reality, Baptism does not always save a Dalit convert from the socio-cultural and economic hardship. In fact, a Dalit convert becomes twice discriminated with his formal embrace of Baptism. For example, a Dalit, who is already socio-economically backward, with the acceptance of Baptism will forfeit all the constitutional safeguards and privileges guaranteed to him/her for socio-economic up-lift. This is because a Dalit once converted to Christianity is no longer considered an “outcaste” who is eligible for government benefits. But, at the same time, a Dalit who is converted to other religions like Buddhism or Sikhism will continue to enjoy the constitutional rights.<sup>23</sup>

The limitation present in the inculturation and liberation approach is obvious. One major criticism leveled against inculturation approach is that it creates an identity crisis for the converts. Converts from Hinduism who continue to follow the Hindu culture and its norms will find themselves belonging fully to neither the Christian nor the Hindu community. This will make the convert a rootless individual, losing support from both the Hindu and the Christian community during his time of need. Moreover, the inculturation approach tends to see Baptism as secondary to Christian faith and practice. The liberation approach also fails to capture the full significance and meaning of Baptism as it is interpreted within socio-political limits.<sup>24</sup>

## Engaging Non-Baptized Believers from a Lutheran Perspective

Approaching non-baptized believers from a Lutheran perspective calls our attention to address several questions: Why do we think Baptism should not be relegated to secondary place? Why not regard conversion by the means of the preached Word be sufficient and not to seek Baptism? How can we better serve, pastorally and sensitively, the spiritual needs of the non-baptized believers? In my attempt to answer these questions, I will interact briefly with Luther's understanding of Baptism and the Lord's Supper and their significance in our present discussion.

To Luther, the Word and Sacraments (namely Lord's Supper and Baptism) play a significant role in creating, sustaining, and preserving one's faith. According to him, although salvation comes through faith alone and it is not depended on human works, still sacraments are necessary because they are visible and tangible signs of the gracious divine favor and they form the means by which faith is created. Although it is true that a person can be justified through the preached Word, it should be briefly noted here that the preached Word normally leads a person to God's visible Word, the Sacraments. So any missiological approach which seeks to take Luther's thoughts on sacraments cannot assign the same to a secondary place. The following are some of Luther's emphases on sacraments which might provide some insights to our present discussion.

**Baptism:** There are at least four emphases in Luther's understanding of Baptism which are worth mentioning. First, he understands *Baptism as a means of grace*. Baptism is a means of grace through which God gives to the baptized person forgiveness of sin, rescue from death and devil, and eternal salvation. As Luther explains, "It (*Baptism*) is not simply common water, but water comprehended in God's Word and commandment and sanctified by them. It is nothing else than a divine water, not that the water in itself is nobler than other water but that God's Word and commandment are added to it."<sup>25</sup> Secondly, he understands Baptism as a divine *promise and a gift*. Luther notes, "Now, the *first* thing to be considered about baptism is the divine promise, which says: 'He who believes and is baptized will be saved'" (Mark 16:16).<sup>26</sup> Since Luther understands Baptism as a promise and gift, there is nothing one is "required to do to" to earn a Baptism or to bring efficacy to the Baptism. Thus one can only receive Baptism and its blessings through faith and not earn it. Thirdly, Luther understands Baptism to *be a sign which carries active significance and implication for one's entire life*. To him, Baptism (*die Taufe*), according to its Greek (*baptismos*) and Latin (*mersio*) terms, means to plunge something completely into the water, so that the water covers it. So the "sign must thus have its parts, the putting in and the drawing out."<sup>27</sup> The imagery of death and resurrection and re-birth is central to Luther's baptismal thoughts. The significance of Baptism lies in "a blessed dying unto sin and a resurrection in the grace of God, so

that the old man, conceived and born in sin, is there drowned, and a new man, born in grace, comes forth and rises” (Cf. Eph. 4:22–24; Col. 3:9–10, Titus 3:5).<sup>28</sup> Although the baptismal act is a one-time event, still its significance, the dying to sin and rising to life, lasts throughout one’s life. Thus the Baptism has a past and present, as well as a future, meaning and significance attached to it. Through Baptism,

he has the sign of God; that is to say, he has the baptism by which it is shown that his sins are all to be dead, and that he too is to die in grace and at the Last Day is to rise again to everlasting life, pure, sinless, and guiltless. . . . Finally through Baptism God allies and becomes one with the baptized person in a gracious covenant of comfort. God pours upon us his grace and Holy Spirit, who begins to slay nature and sin and to prepare us for death and the resurrection at the Last Day.<sup>29</sup>

**Lord’s Supper:** Martin Luther explains the Lord’s Supper as the true body and blood of the Lord Jesus Christ in and under the bread and wine which we Christians are commanded by Christ’s word to eat and drink. To him the incarnation and the Eucharist are parallels. Just as the flesh of Jesus Christ is the *figura* or form under which the body and the blood are hidden, so too are the bread and the wine *figurae* or forms under which the body and the blood are hidden. Thus, the bread and wine are not signs of the body and blood of Christ, but the form under and through which the body is offered to the communicant.<sup>30</sup> As with Baptism, the theme of the *Sacraments as a means of grace and as a promise and gift* dominate Luther’s understanding of Lord’s Supper. According to him, the Lord’s Supper is *a means of grace* through which one receives continual forgiveness of sin, life, and salvation, as well as victory over sin and hell and power for the new life. The Lord’s Supper is instituted by Christ as a daily food for sustenance so that faith may be refreshed, strengthened, and grow continually. Baptism leads us into a new life on earth; the bread guides us through death into eternal life.<sup>31</sup> Luther’s understanding of the Lord’s Supper has important pastoral implications too. He understands that the Lord’s Supper is a sure sign of fellowship and incorporation with Christ and all saints (1 Cor 10:17). Through the Lord’s Supper, the believer shares in all the spiritual possessions of Christ and His saints (both blessings and sufferings). The believer is comforted and strengthened through this mutual sharing and is motivated to take seriously sharing in the sufferings and misfortunes of fellow believers in the community (Gal 6:2). Luther uses the imagery of the bread, made out of many grains ground and mixed together, and the wine, as the drops lose their own form, becoming the body of one common wine and drink to further explain his point. For Luther, through the interchange of blessings and misfortunes, we become one loaf, one bread, one body, one drink, and have all things in common. These actions foster a true fellowship and help us to celebrate the true significance of the Sacrament.<sup>32</sup>

If sacraments carry such theological significance in the life of a believer, it is clear that Baptism and the Lord's Supper cannot assume a secondary place in our missiological deliberations. But an important question requires our serious attention: How can we enhance and sharpen our mission methods in those situations where Baptism and conversion entail serious socio-cultural and political ramifications? I think that answering this question should be an ongoing theological activity that requires complete humility, trust in God, theological sharpness, and pastoral sensitivity, as each new situation brings in fresh challenges. However, in light of our present discussion, I would like to reflect on several thoughts which might be of help.

### **Empathetic Understanding and Pastoral Sensitivity**

We have already noted in this paper the socio-cultural, political, and economic challenges that a convert must face due to his new faith. These situations require great amounts of patience and understanding on the part of the church towards the non-baptized believers. In my pastoral ministry, I have witnessed several incidents in which a new believer delays his Baptism out of respect toward parents or other elders in the family. Often times, in a context where family and community ties are strong, I have found that to be a responsible and sensible act, because such a gesture conveys a message that the new believer is mindful of and respects the sentiments of family and community. On several occasions, this attitude has helped the new believer in his witness to get a listening ear from his non-believing family or community members toward the Gospel. Over time, long though it may be, it is no surprise to discover that the bridge that the new believer built with his family or community was indeed the work of the Holy Spirit. The results it brings might vary. Occasionally, over the course of time, the whole family is won over to the waters of Baptism. Other times, it might be a few members who are baptized, or just the new believer with the silent blessing of his family. But what needs to be noted in all those instances is that, the conversation is kept alive with the non-believing family members, and the mutual respect is not broken. Of course, there will also be other instances when the new believer needs to come out of his silent waiting period to heed to the voice of Jesus that "If anyone comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters—yes, even his own life—such a person cannot be my disciple" (Lk 14:26). However, in those situations, the role of the local church and the faith community becomes more significant and critical.

The communitarian responsibility and concern that undergirds Luther's understanding of the Lord's Supper should challenge the church to have empathy for and to provide both material and spiritual support for the non-baptized believer as he encounters various needs and struggles. Hoefler rightly points out that "the local church or the Christian community must not only make a place in its spiritual

fellowship to include the new believer but, if it is to see him survive, must open homes, intimate associations, channels of communication, and means of livelihood to him.”<sup>33</sup>

### **Mission Sensitive Ecclesial Structures: Building Faith Communities— not Institutions**

The nuanced socio-cultural and political situation of the predominantly non-Christian mission fields should guide our ecclesial structural decisions. Our commitment should be to build faith communities, not institutional empires. It is true that a faith community cannot escape an institutional dimension to its existence. However our structural ordering should be mission- context sensitive. I think a fresh appropriation of Luther’s understanding of power and ordering of the Church is very helpful in this regard. Because in Luther’s thought, one could find a great flexibility in ordering the sociological dimension of the Church.

To Luther, the Church is primarily a communion of saints—the gathering where the Gospel is preached and the Sacraments are administered. The Church is a spiritual reality in which the Holy Spirit calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the believers and keeps them with Jesus Christ. The Church is contingent upon faith. To become a member of this communion and also for the subsequent sanctification, what matters most is the faith.<sup>34</sup> What is central to Luther’s understanding of the Church is its two-dimensional nature. The Church, *coram Deo*, lives in the presence of God as an assembly of true believers. Although the Church, *coram Deo*, is invisible to human eyes, yet it is not a platonic republic. It has real existence. The church, *coram hominibus*, which is visible to human eyes is defined by human activity and action.<sup>35</sup> Here we can recognize “two important but unequal kinds of activities.”<sup>36</sup> The first is the ministry of the Word and Sacraments, which is commanded by God; without these, the Church, *coram Deo*, cannot exist. Second are those activities devised by human beings to carry out the ministry of the Word and Sacraments, which are often referred to as human traditions, human orders, and adiaphora. As Arand puts it “We can distinguish between these two activities in that the former deals with the ‘what’ we are given to do by God; whereas, the latter deals with ‘how’ we carry them out.”<sup>37</sup> The church polity, structure, and policies come under the latter category. The Confessions make it explicit that God has not mandated any particular form of church polity or ecclesiastical structure. The main concern regarding power and order in the Church is a matter of getting things done in their proper place. The congregations, according to their need, have freedom to arrange the polity deemed to be fitting according to the circumstances. However, the Confessions do offer certain cautions and guidelines to keep things in the right perspective. The Confessions emphasize that the office of the ministry alone has divine right and authority. It is the Gospel that comes through this office that creates

peace and harmony among people. The Gospel alone has the power of God that moves people to live and work together; it is not the rules and regulations. The church polity and its ordering fall below this office but their primary function is to aid not to obstruct the office of the ministry.<sup>38</sup>

If the discussion above is taken seriously, then congregations do have their freedom to arrange the polity to meet the needs that arise from a mission context. The overarching concern should be to find a best way to administer Word and Sacraments to the people. I believe that the mission of the church should be to go, reach, and serve people where they are, not to insist and expect people to come to where we are, inside our Constantinian structures, to receive the ministry of Word and Sacraments. Our concern for catechizing process and providing spiritual, emotional, and social support to the non-baptized should be our prime delight.

I believe that one of the best ways to bring the ministry of Word and Sacraments to the non-baptized believers could be to take the model of house churches seriously.<sup>39</sup> House churches do not carry any institutional structures or official form in public eyes. The outsiders view it as a small prayer gathering or fellowship of a few like-minded people who meet in a particular house or in different houses each week. This safety and security could well provide a non-threatening atmosphere and space for the non-baptized believers to interact with one another, receive further catechizing, support, prayers, encouragement from the mature believers. This place could well become a place where the non-baptized journey themselves to the waters of Baptism and receive God's Word and the Lord's Supper regularly. Reaching people where they are is nothing but emulating the great mission model of our Master, who came to us to save us and who keeps coming to us through His Word and Sacraments to nourish and strengthen our lives.

## Conclusion

We have seen that it is not the lack of desire or theological illiteracy on the part the non-baptized believer that keeps them away from Baptism. The non-baptized believers in our discussion neither reject nor consider Baptism as unnecessary. But the socio-cultural and political challenges make it difficult for them to come to the waters of Baptism. This then calls forth for an empathetic understanding and pastoral sensitivity in our missiological deliberations. Our call is "not to stand in judgment against the non-baptized believers,"<sup>40</sup> but to reach them where they are, taking the ministry of Word and Sacraments to them.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> For more discussion on this topic, see J. Paul Rajashekar, "The Question of Unbaptized Believers in the History of Mission in India," in *Debate on Mission: Issues from the Indian*

*Context*, ed. Herbert E. Hofer (Madras: Gurukul Lutheran Theological College and Research Institute, 1979), 323–335.

<sup>2</sup> I am using the term “believers” for the unbaptized people in our discussion with a contention that they are justified through the preached Word.

<sup>3</sup> Herbert E. Hofer, *Churchless Christianity* (California: William Carey Library, 2001), 59.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 58–63.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>6</sup> T. M. Philip, “A Historical Survey of Baptismal Practices And Theologies,” in *Debate on Mission: Issues from the Indian Context*, ed. Herbert E. Hofer (Madras: Gurukul Lutheran Theological College and Research Institute, 1979), 307–308.

<sup>7</sup> M. M. Thomas “Baptism, the Church and Koinonia,” *Religion and Society* 19, no. 1 (1972), 89.

<sup>8</sup> Hofer, *Churchless Christianity*, 153.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> Unlike Western cultures, Indian culture is not marked with individualism. Here one is socialized to think about his/her family and community first before thinking about the self. More discussion on Indian cultural mindset, see Jai B. P. Sinha, *The Cultural Context of Leadership and Power* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1995).

<sup>11</sup> Hindutva—literally translated as “Hinduness”—is an ideology that drives Hindu nationalism, which seeks to establish a Hindu state in India. The main goal of this majoritarian nationalism is to establish the political, cultural, and religious supremacy of Brahmanical Hinduism and to create a single, collective identity for Indians under Hindutva. Equating India with Hindu society, the political project of Hindutva is to create a Hindu nation. For more discussion, see Dibyesh Anand, *Hindu Nationalism in India and the Politics of Fear* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 1–5.

<sup>12</sup> M. S. Golwalkar, *Bunch of Thoughts* (Bangalore: Sahitya Sindhu Prakashana, 1966), 142.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 106.

<sup>14</sup> J. R. Chandran, “Baptism,” *Religion and Society* 19, no. 1 (1972), 51.

<sup>15</sup> See Sebastian C. H. Kim, *In Search of Identity: Debates on Religious Conversion in India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003), 38–42.

<sup>16</sup> For example, see T. M. Kareem, “My Experience as Non-Baptized Believer in Christ” in *Debate on Mission: Issues from the Indian Context*, ed. Herbert E. Hofer (Madras: Gurukul Lutheran Theological College and Research Institute, 1979), 366–370.

<sup>17</sup> Robin Boyd, *An Introduction to Indian Christian Theology* (Madras: Christian Literature Service, 1969), 164.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 159–160.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 161.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> Dalit Theology is a strand of liberation theology which had its beginning in the 1980s in India. The term *Dalit* comes from the Sanskrit *dal*. It means burst, split, broken or torn asunder, downtrodden, scattered, crushed and destroyed. In its usage, “Dalit” refers to the “untouchable” population of India, who constitute almost 20% of the total population (200 million). They were considered as impure according to Hindu understanding of “ritual pollution and purity.” Dalits are not included in the fourfold varna categories. Brahmins, who considered themselves as the most ritually pure occupied the top caste, and the Dalits, the “outcastes” who were considered as extremely polluted, were assigned occupations such as

removal of dead animals, scavenging and cleaning of the village, etc. The goal of Dalit theology is to act in solidarity and to act for liberation of Dalits from the historically oppressive religio-cultural and socio-economic structures. See George Oommen, "The Emerging Dalit Theology: A Historical Appraisal," *Indian History Review* 34, no. 1 (June 2000), 19–37.

<sup>22</sup> J. Jayakiran Sebastian, "A Fresh Look at the Issues of Conversion and Baptism in Relation to Mission," accessed August 9, 2014, <http://www.religion-online.org>.

<sup>23</sup> For more discussion, see Brojendra Nath Banerjee, *Struggle for Justice to Dalit Christians* (New Delhi: New Age International (P) Ltd, 1997).

<sup>24</sup> For more discussion on issues relating to Baptism and Conversion, see Kim, *In Search of Identity*.

<sup>25</sup> Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, Vol. 36: Word and Sacrament II, ed. Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald and Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1999), 58–59.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, Vol. 35: Word and Sacrament I, ed. Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald and Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1999), 30.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 32–33.

<sup>30</sup> David C. Steinmetz, *Luther in Context* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 75.

<sup>31</sup> Luther, *Luther's Works*, Vol. 35: Word and Sacrament I, 67.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 57–62 and Martin Luther, *Luther's Small Catechism* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1991), 30–32.

<sup>33</sup> Hofer, *Churchless Christianity*, 153.

<sup>34</sup> Edward W. A. Koehler, *A Summary of Christian Doctrine*, 2nd ed. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1952), 237–238.

<sup>35</sup> Charles P. Arand, "A Two-Dimensional Understanding of the Church for the Twenty-First Century," *Concordia Journal* 33, no. 2 (April 2007): 147–152.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 149.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> For more discussion, see Paul L. Schrieber, "Power and Order in the Church 'According to the Gospel': In Search of the Lutheran Ethos," *Concordia Journal* 26, no. 1 (2000). P. E. Kretzmann, "Apostolate, Preaching Ministry, Pastorate, Synodical Office," *Concordia Journal* 15, no. 3 (1989).

<sup>39</sup> My proposal for house churches for the mission fields is not something new. This is a model which is being practiced for more than a century and is still in practice with much success, in the mission fields of India. Two examples from my personal experience would suffice this point. My home congregation in Trivandrum, India, was started and remained as a house church in the 1960s for over a decade, before it became a "formal" church. Same is true with the first congregation I served from 2001–2006. This church for more two decades met in different houses before it transitioned itself to become a "formal" church. For a brief discussion on House Churches, see Victor Raj, "The Book of Generations," *Missio Apostolica* 22, no. 1 (May 2014), 143–144.

<sup>40</sup> Hofer, *Churchless Christianity*, 167.



# Contextualizing the Faith in Amerindian Culture

John Babbitts

**Abstract:** Amerindian accounts of creation vary in their detail. Yet, a survey of the accounts reveals interesting similarities and possible opportunities to bridge between tribal traditions and biblical accounts. This article will survey the traditional stories of several Amerindian tribes in regard to creation accounts in order to identify insights and possible opportunities to communicate the Gospel using these accounts as a starting point.

## Similarities of Creation Accounts

The Hopi Indians<sup>1</sup> call him Tawa. In the beginning there was nothing but Tawa and endless space. Tawa gathered the elements from endless space and infused some of himself in order to create the first world.<sup>2</sup>

The Great Medicine of the Cheyenne<sup>3</sup> created a place described like a Garden of Eden. In this place the Great Medicine placed animals, birds, and fish along with his other creatures and man. All were in harmony there, speaking one language. They lived on honey and wild fruits. Man and woman were naked.<sup>4</sup>

According to the Seminoles,<sup>5</sup> it was the “Great Wind” that breathed life into creation.<sup>6</sup>

Kitchi-Manitou, the creator god, gave man his freedom according to the Ojibwe.<sup>7</sup> This was an act of generosity and trust. The people could give nothing back to Kitchi-Manitou except to follow his example of selfless generosity. The Ojibwe claim that mankind, began from one family, which included four brothers. One of the brothers would cause the death of another brother and would find himself shunned.<sup>8</sup>

The Seminoles have a story of brothers who taught their families under the guidance of the Great Spirit. Some found favor in the Great Spirit’s eyes. The brothers split up going to their own villages with their families. When it came time for a man to choose a wife, he was required to leave his village to select a woman from one of the other villages.<sup>9</sup>

The Sioux<sup>10</sup> believe that it was a trickster who convinced man that he should leave his home. Old man and old woman scheme with the trickster, Ite, to improve

---

*John Babbitts serves as a licensed deacon at Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Milford, Pennsylvania. He holds a Master of Arts in Christian Outreach from Concordia University, St. Paul, Minnesota; a Graduate Certificate in Jewish-Christian Relations, Seton Hall University, South Orange, New Jersey, and a Bachelorate in Theology from Concordia University, Seward, Nebraska.*

the status of their daughter.<sup>11</sup> These samplings communicate distinct parallels with the biblical account.

The Bible describes how God created the heavens and the earth (Gn 1:1).<sup>12</sup> The earth was without form and void, and so God begins to shape and fill it. God makes the earth and places all creatures on it (Gn 1:20–2:7). In the midst of the land, He puts a garden (Gn 2:8). God creates Adam and Eve and gives them dominion (Gn 1:28) over the earth. In the union of Adam and Eve, God establishes that a “man should leave his mother and father and be joined to his wife and they shall become one flesh” (Gn 2:24). They were to tend and keep the garden. All lived in harmony and spoke one language. There was no death in the garden.

However, a snake tempted the woman, tricking Eve, who gives the forbidden fruit to Adam. The consequence of their disobedience is that sin and death enter the world, and Adam and Eve are forced to leave the garden (Gn 3:24).

A review of the tribal and biblical accounts shows us many similarities. The Creator is in the void. He creates a garden in which all God’s creatures live in harmony. One language is spoken. All creatures live on what the garden produces and so there is no violence or death. The Creator breathes life into creation. God gives man freedom and people are to follow his example of trust and generosity. A trickster causes man to have to leave his home. Mankind begins with one family. One of the original sons is the cause of death of his brother.

We might marvel at the similarities; yet if we truly believe the Genesis account of Creation, then all mankind would have started with the same truth from the same original source. Therefore, we should expect similarities.

### **Divergences from the Biblical Account**

In the Ojibwe account, it is spider woman who breathes the first breath of life into the world. By doing this, she gives the earth the attributes of motherhood.<sup>13</sup>

Yet, even in this divergence, there is a parallel to natural religion which will be noted later. Spider woman was to point others to Kitchi-Manitou, god of creation. She was to do this by showing the timing and order of the seasons and to show that every creature has a place and purpose.<sup>14</sup>

The Hopi account tells of four different worlds, all created by Tawa. The first was inhabited by insects.<sup>15</sup> These insects made their way to the second world to be transformed into mammals. The second world is inhabited by dogs, coyotes, and bears; however, they do not understand the meaning of life, and so Tawa created a third world. The third world is inhabited by people who live in harmony.<sup>16</sup> However, sorcerers enter the third world with the people and create conflict.<sup>17</sup> In this account, it is the medicine men who are taught to form birds to carry out missions.<sup>18</sup>

The medicine men first form a sparrow out of clay. The mission of the sparrow

given by the chief is to fly into the fourth world created by Tawa and determine who lives there. However, the sparrows wings are too weak. Next the medicine men send a dove followed by a hawk. Both enter the fourth world but see no one. Finally, the Catbird finds Masauwau, the Spirit of Death in the fourth world. Masauwau tells the people they can enter the fourth world to escape evil.<sup>19</sup>

The Seminoles have men emerging from a cave after an earthquake. They are propelled forward into the new world like a child from the birth canal. There is harmony among the people until they choose a leader, who falls in love with the movements of the sky. The consequence of the leader's love is an imbalance in worship that slowly leads his people in the direction of pain and misery.<sup>20</sup>

### **Distributed Powers**

In surveying the origin accounts of the Amerindians, we find that the powers are distributed among all the species, not centralized in a few or one. Human beings are held up as being particularly gifted, but still have a lot to learn from nature. In order to obtain the gifts of other creatures, the human being either must receive the gift from the animal or build a relationship with the animal. Other creatures are seen as part of a community, just as human beings are, and therefore those communities deserve the same type of respect.<sup>21</sup>

An important aspect of the theme of the distributed power, in other words is that various entities of the natural universe, among which the powers of the universe have been distributed, have the prerogative to demand care and respectful treatment from the humans if they are to reciprocate with service to humans.<sup>22</sup>

Animals in stories can take on the role of transformers, tricksters, or cultural heroes.<sup>23</sup> Often they appear in stories not unlike Aesop's fables and should not be confused with a religious belief.

With these stories in mind, human beings learn from non-human creatures how to live. In some of the stories, the intermarriage with non-human beings appears to demonstrate one's interdependence upon another. Other cases tell of transformations during which the animal becomes human and lives among the tribe or the human being becomes an animal.<sup>24</sup> This concept will be revisited as we consider an Amerindian worldview and the bridges and barriers to sharing the Gospel.

In communicating the Gospel, we must exercise caution not too quickly to identify the one true God with a character from Amerindian folklore or beliefs. A primary example of mistakenly drawing such a connection can be found in the efforts to bring faith to the Tlingit.<sup>25</sup> In 1904, a Tlingit storyteller named Katishon, declared that Raven was one and the same with the Christian God and Jesus Christ. "Listen to the stories. Christ was born here. Christ was what we called Raven and

Raven was God, because the stories tell us that God is a Holy Trinity.”<sup>26</sup>

Though Katishon had the best of intentions, in comparing the Triune God of the Bible and Raven, few similarities can be found; in fact, the divergences are noteworthy. Raven creates very little. He is a transformer in some sense that redistributes things that are already in existence, things that are being hoarded: the sun, the moon, the stars, and salmon. Raven is a trickster often motivated by greed, ego, and hunger. He has sexual exploits. Though his redistributions of these objects benefit man, the effects always provide some benefit to Raven himself as well. Raven is seen by some as a demonic character, as encounters with him are rarely good for man. He tends to be an example of man’s worst traits and an example of how not to behave.<sup>27</sup>

Clearly, Raven is not the loving gracious Creator God who gives all things to rescue His wayward children from sin, death, and Satan, even paying the price for our freedom with the life of His own dear only-begotten Son.

There may be times when it will be appropriate to make a direct connection without being syncretistic. We may have an example of this in the meeting between Abraham and Melchizedek (Gn 14:18–20). The biblical account does not tell us how Melchizedek came to know the one true God. We only know of Abraham’s specific revelations and yet Christ is a high priest in the order of Melchizedek (Heb 7:1–17) who is not of the seed of Abraham nor of the Levitical priesthood.

The Amerindian worldview is that the Amerindian was not created to “Lord” over creation, but to work and live in harmony with the rest of creation. According to this view, the connection between man and other creatures and the earth is a sacred relationship. This relationship demands respect from man of the created world around him. This worldview may appear to be in conflict with God’s decree to have “dominion” over the earth. How that “dominion” is perceived and explained may become the crux of the matter on whether it becomes a bridge or a barrier.

In the Amerindian worldview, man’s entitlement to his fellow creatures is not unlimited.<sup>28</sup> There is an “appropriateness” to one’s behavior in interacting with our fellow creatures. This concept of what is appropriate is more than just not harming nature because we are part of it.<sup>29</sup> There is a moral obligation that acts as the entrance to religious ideas.<sup>30</sup> Those religious ideas point us to God as He has revealed Himself in nature that all men should know Him.

There are no biblical doctrines that would directly challenge the core values of the Amerindian worldview. As with people of all cultures, Scripture challenges us to adopt a worldview founded and formed from Scripture itself. The general manifestation of God in nature and knowledge of Him can be derived from nature and will dovetail nicely with many of the traditions of the Amerindians.

Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions assert that there is a natural knowledge of God. In the book of Acts, Paul declares, “Nevertheless He did not leave Himself

without witness, in that He did good, gave us rain from heaven and fruitful seasons, filling our hearts with food and gladness” (Acts 14:17). In another instance, the crew of the ship that Jonah attempts to take to Nineveh do not know his God. Yet God reveals Himself to them in the storm and shows them that Jonah’s disobedience is the reason for the storm (Jon 1:5–10).

The Formula of Concord also attests, in the second article on Free will, of man’s having a basic knowledge of God; “man’s reason or natural intellect still has a dim spark of knowledge that there is a God, as well as the teaching of the law (Rom. 1:19–21, 28, 32).”<sup>31</sup> This is a remnant of the image of God that was almost completely lost when man fell into sin.

Luther states “the forms of worship and the religion that have been and remained among all nations are abundant evidence that at some time all men had a general knowledge of God.”<sup>32</sup> Since the Fall into sin, mankind has lost the specific knowledge of who God is and whether or not God is willing to help.

## **Christ as Creator**

The importance of establishing Jesus as co-Creator with the Father and Holy Spirit should not be underestimated. If Christ is to be seen as the God of the Amerindian peoples, He must be seen as part of their story of who they are. As we see in the words of Alphonso Ortiz: “A Tewa is interested in our own story of our own origin for it holds all that we need to know about our people and how we should live as a human.”<sup>33</sup>

How does one identify Jesus as Creator God? In the Gospel of John, the Apostle writes, “All things were made through Him, and without Him was nothing made that was made” (Jn 1:3).

The Gospels record many instances when Christ commands nature. One familiar instance is the account of Jesus’ calming of the wind and the waves on the Sea of Galilee (Mk 4:35–41). Others include the story of the fish who brings a coin for tax money (Mt 17:24–27). There are the fish that fill the nets of the disciples after they have fished all night and caught nothing (Jn 21:3–6). Jesus curses a fig tree, which then withers (Mk 11:12–13; 20–21). The star of Bethlehem is placed in the heavens to guide Wise Men to the place where the infant Jesus is to be found (Mt 2:1–2). An earthquake occurs at Jesus’ death (Mt 27:51). These are only several examples of Jesus’ command over nature.

Jesus also utilizes examples in nature to teach faith lessons about life in His kingdom. There are parables with seeds (Mt 13:1–18; 31–32), weeds and wheat (Mt 13:24–29), the lilies of the field (Mt 6:28–29), and the sheep and goats (Mt 25:31–46). Parallels to the flood accounts are seen in the Mark 1 account of Christ’s baptism.

## Ultimate Allegiance

The ultimate allegiance of the Amerindian is based upon his/her relationship to the earth. There are conflicting aspects of this relationship that become manifest as the worldview impacts beliefs, values, feeling behaviors, and artifacts. Each individual's identity is integrated with a corporate identity that sees all of life as intertwined with the community.

In this worldview, the relationship between mother earth and creator becomes very complex. Individuals in the twenty-first century assume a right to use modern conveniences, such as the automobile. In recent years, however, we have effectively taught people that to drive a car is to pollute the air. Similarly, when an Amerindian drives a car that consumes fossil fuels, his behavior acts contrary to his ultimate allegiance.<sup>34</sup>

With the Amerindian's ultimate allegiance being to the earth, there is a relationship that views the earth as semi-divine,<sup>35</sup> and at other times as a victim to be saved,<sup>36</sup> and sometimes as a disowned family member.

In the Amerindian worldview,<sup>37</sup> the earth may also be seen in a motherly role,<sup>37</sup> and so the Amerindian sees the current imbalance of nature as one from which they need to rescue the earth if the earth is to heal herself.<sup>38</sup> Many of them believe that the imbalance that exists in the world today is due to the lack of power rituals being performed.<sup>39</sup>

One of the more prominent power rituals is the sun dance practiced by nineteen tribes.<sup>40</sup> The ceremony includes fasting, dancing, prayer, singing, and, for some tribes, self-torture. The ritual is performed as a thank offering to the creator for his blessings, for protection of the tribe and healing of the sick.<sup>41</sup> This power ritual embodies a belief that focuses on day-to-day life, a present and active god in the lives of the tribe and in creation. It is the one true God creator and still intimately active personal God that we must make known to the tribes who seek to worship the creator in a way that is pleasing to Him.

The Lord Jesus Christ will not take his place fully at the center of the native worldview until he is perceived as the only free source of power, able to save completely, not just some time in the future but now—meaningful, powerful, and effective for the living of life moment to moment and not merely saved from sin to escape hell after this life.<sup>42</sup>

Christianity's greatest challenge may be the perception of differences between cultures. If the Amerindians believe their purpose is to help mankind restore nature's balance, it may be difficult to convince them that anything associated with another culture should be retained and accepted if balance is to be found.

Many missionaries have arrived with the perception that to allow native expressions of faith is to be syncretistic. They believed that "conversion" had to

manifest itself not only by confession of faith in Christ, but also by accepting the cultural practices of the missionaries' home country. If an Amerindian was to be Christian, his or her dress, hair style, music and dance had to conform to the missionaries' concept of "Christian" [i.e., often Western] cultural norms.<sup>43</sup>

+++++

### **Avoiding Syncretism**

Confessional Lutheran Christians abhor syncretism. Our Lutheran Confessions and Church fathers all warn against syncretistic practices and beliefs. These warnings were necessary because syncretistic practices can be very alluring and so easily fallen into in the name of Gospel proclamation.

Walther defined syncretism as "every kind of mixing of religion."<sup>44</sup> It is necessary to distinguish syncretism as a mixing of religion, not a mixing of cultural expression. To allow Amerindian culture, dress, and music to form a uniquely tribal expression of the Amerindian's love for Christ is not syncretism.

Examples of syncretism, as opposed to contextualizing, include the following:

Alfonso Ortiz, a member of the Tewa tribe, notes that the Tewa name given to a child, which invokes nature, contains power. He relates how he was baptized and then brought by his mother and grandmother to be dedicated to the sun. He also speaks of a fellow member of his tribe who would pray to the sun and return some of the energy the sun had given to him. At funerals the priest would conduct the funeral. After the Christian rites were completed and the priest left, the Tewa people would conduct their own tribal rituals.<sup>45</sup> Other tribes would conduct Black Magic alongside Roman Catholic rituals. This is illustrated in one instance when a simple substitution was made claiming the Volcano god as the Holy Spirit and the sun god as the Father. The hallucinogen, Peyote, was used to bring one closer to god as animal sacrifices and fetishes were combined with Catholic sacraments.<sup>46</sup>

It is also important to note that conversion is not the end goal of the mission effort. By focusing merely on conversion as the end, we neglect the necessity of fully contextualizing the message in a process of continuing discipleship.<sup>47</sup> Conversion without discipleship allows for that mixing of religions about which Walther warns. Christ becomes "a" power source rather than "the" source.

To force a tribe to divest itself of its cultural identity, worrying only about the initial conversion, while not attending to the discipleship that needs to follow causes syncretistic accommodations in religious practice. The most effective way of reducing such temptation is to allow Amerindian tribes to establish a worship style that is consistent with their cultural heritage along with being faithful to the Christian

Gospel.

This is not a new concern. In Acts the first church council grappled with the question of whether or not to require circumcision of the Greek converts. The church determined that circumcision would not be required for non-Jewish converts. Circumcision was a unique sign of Israel's calling as God's chosen people. It was deemed enough for the Greeks to follow minimal Jewish dietary laws and to abstain from sexual immorality (Acts 15:23–29). “For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit, and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things; that you abstain from things offered to idols, from blood, from things strangled, and from sexual immorality. If you keep yourselves from these you will do well” (Acts 15:28–29).

Franciscan Friars who entered the mission field of Southern Texas worked to create a self-sufficient community governed by the native population while they communicated the faith.<sup>48</sup> As churches were built they reflected the European style, but these churches were contextualized, by being painted in the startling bold colors chosen by the native inhabitants who built the churches and worshiped there. At the same time, however, the language of the church, which the Indians learned, was Latin. Using a foreign language allowed the faith to be compartmentalized. The message was never fully contextualized. The result was that sometimes the Amerindians would participate in dances that the Friars thought superstitious and demonic.<sup>49</sup> These dances became syncretistic in the sense that Christ became a power source rather than *the only* source from which blessings flowed.

Lutheran missionaries in New Sweden (modern day southern New Jersey, east-southern Pennsylvania and Delaware) would translate the catechism and the Bible into the native language of the tribes in their area, demonstrating an understanding of the need to communicate the Gospel to people in ways that they can understand

The Amerindian communities need to have the opportunity to find expression to God using their own instruments, musical style, and other culturally significant expressions. In this way Christ will not seem a distant and foreign God.<sup>50</sup>

If we don't allow Amerindians to be who they are, we establish the foundation for a compartmentalized faith.<sup>51</sup> Church members may become outcasts perceived as having rejected the native culture, forcing newborn Christians to make a decision on acting one way in church and another way outside of church and compartmentalizing their faith. Foreign styles of dress and behavior may create a defensive atmosphere in which the native culture feels threatened and finds the need to defend its traditions against the intrusion.<sup>52</sup>

Parallels between the biblical and Amerindian creation accounts can be a means of connecting us with the common Truth that all people received from the ancestors whom we share, as well as with the Savior, who, by His perfect life, death, resurrection, and ascension has paid the price and fulfilled all righteousness for us



all, the One for whom we wait in expectation.

The Hopi tradition of burying their departed brings such a parallel into focus. When buried a Hopi body is to face to the east. "It is said that in some distant time a certain Bahana<sup>53</sup> will arrive among us from the direction of the rising sun, bringing friendship, harmony, and good fortune to our people. When the time comes he will appear. Let us watch for him. Let the dead be buried with their faces to the east so that we will meet him when he approaches."<sup>54</sup>

Just as Paul shared the name of the unknown God with the Athenians (Acts:17:22–17), now it is time to share the name of that unknown Bahana with those who await the knowledge of the specific revelations of Christ that we have to share. On that occasion, Paul showed a knowledge, not only of the Athenian's history but also of their poetry (Acts 17:28). In like manner, we need to study the stories, traditions, and poetry of the Amerindian tribes so that through those studies we may bring to them, by the power of the Holy Spirit, Jesus Christ, our brother through the miracle of the incarnation.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> The Hopi Tribe resides on a reservation in eastern Arizona.

<sup>2</sup> Harold Courlander, *The Fourth World of the Hopis: The Epic Story of the Hopi Indians as Preserved in Their Legends and Traditions* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico, 1987), 17.

<sup>3</sup> The Northern Cheyenne tribe resides on a reservation in southeastern Montana. The Southern Cheyenne nation is located in Oklahoma and with the Arapaho.

<sup>4</sup> Richard Erdoes and Alfonso Ortiz, *American Indian Myths and Legends* (New York: Pantheon, 1984), 112.

<sup>5</sup> The Seminole Tribe is located in the state of Florida.

<sup>6</sup> Adonaset, "Hitchi-Mikasuki Creation Story as Told by Family Elder Jayabutu McClellan," *Indigenous People's Literature*, compiled by Glenn Welker, last updated June 8, 2004, accessed April 10, 2013, [www.indigenoupeople.net/hitchiti.htm](http://www.indigenoupeople.net/hitchiti.htm).

<sup>7</sup> The Ojibwe tribe is located in Michigan, Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Canada.

<sup>8</sup> Basil Johnston, *The Manitous: The Spiritual World of the Ojibway* (New York: HarperCollins, 1995), 87.

<sup>9</sup> Adonaset, "Hitchi-Mikasuki Creation Story."

<sup>10</sup> The Sioux tribe is located in the states of Montana, North and South Dakota, Nebraska, and Wyoming.

<sup>11</sup> "Lakota Sioux Creation Myth." *Webpanda.com*. N.p., n.d. accessed April 10, 2013. [www.webpanda.com/There/uot\\_lakota\\_sioux\\_creation\\_myth.htm](http://www.webpanda.com/There/uot_lakota_sioux_creation_myth.htm).

<sup>12</sup> The Scripture references in this article are from the New King James Version.

<sup>13</sup> Johnston, *The Manitous*, xv.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>15</sup> Courlander, *The Fourth World of the Hopis*, 17.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 21–23.

<sup>20</sup> Adonaset, “Hitchi-Mikasuki Creation Story.”

<sup>21</sup> Marsha Bol, *Stars Above, Earth Below: American Indians and Nature* (Niwot, CO: Roberts Rinehart for Carnegie Museum of Natural History, 1998), 16.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 16, 18.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>25</sup> A tribe of approximately 26,000 members located in Alaska.

<sup>26</sup> Bol, *Stars Above, Earth Below*, 32.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>31</sup> Theodore G. Tappert, “FC SD 2.9,” *The Book of Concord*, 17th ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), 521.

<sup>32</sup> Martin Luther, “Galatians 4:8–9,” *Luther’s Works, Vol. 26: Lectures on Galatians 1535: Chapters 1–4*, ed. J. J. Pelikan and Daniel E. Poellot (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1963), 399.

<sup>33</sup> Bol, *Stars Above, Earth Below*, 256.

<sup>34</sup> Mary Magoulick, “Native American Worldview Emerges,” *Native American Worldview Emerges* (Georgia College & State University, n.d.), 6–7, accessed April 12, 2013.

[www.faculty.de.gcsu.edu/~mmagouli/worldview.htm](http://www.faculty.de.gcsu.edu/~mmagouli/worldview.htm).

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>37</sup> Johnston, *The Manitous*, xv.

<sup>38</sup> Magoulick, “Native American Worldview Emerges,” 11.

<sup>39</sup> Richard Twiss, *One Church, Many Tribes* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 2000), 102.

<sup>40</sup> The nineteen tribes known to practice this ritual are Lakota, Arapaho, Arikara, Asbinboine, Cheyenne, Crow, Gros, Ventre, Hidutsa, Sioux, Plains Cree, Plains Ojibway, Sarasi, Omaha, Ponca, Ute, Shoshone, Kiowa and Blackfoot tribes. (Amy, “Sun Dance Ceremony,” *Native American Encyclopedia*, Dec. 6, 2011, accessed March 8, 2014, <http://nativeamericanencyclopedia.com/sun-dance-ceremony/>.)

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Twiss, *One Church, Many Tribes*, 103.

<sup>43</sup> Luther writes in his commentary on Psalm 117 in “St. Paul himself affirms in Eph. 3:5 that it came as a revelation even to the apostles that the heathen could be God’s people without the law of Moses, yes, without and beyond the law. Thus we read that St. Peter himself did not know until it was revealed to him in a vision from heaven when he was to go to Cornelius, the heathen. . . . So difficult it is for our reason and nature to comprehend that the secular and the ecclesiastical estate are nothing when compared with the Christian Estate! Our reason wants to mix the two, making out of the Christian estate a worldly or ecclesiastical structure, framed and governed by laws and works. In the process it forgets and no longer knows what truly belongs to Christ and the Christian calling, as, unfortunately, we have seen demonstrated under the papacy” (Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works, Vol. 14*, ed. J.J. Pelikan and Daniel E. Poellot [St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1958], 23).

<sup>44</sup> Gerhard Bode, “Historical Background and Interpretation of Article VI.2 of the Constitution of The Lutheran—Church (sic) Missouri Synod.” Draft, 36. Lutheran Church Missouri Synod, January 2012, accessed January 2014, <http://www.lcms.org/Document.fdoc?src=lcm&id=1710>.

<sup>45</sup> Bol, *Stars Above, Earth Below*, 255–261.

<sup>46</sup> Twiss, *One Church, Many Tribes*, 127.

<sup>47</sup> Rick Brown, “Contextualization without Syncretism,” *International Journal of Frontier Missions* Fall 23.3 (2006): 128.

<sup>48</sup> *Gente De Razon*, directed by John Gralsowska (1997), DVD. This film, which won the George Sidney Independent Film Competition, is shown by the National Park Service at the San Antonio Missions National Historic Park in San Antonio, Texas.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Twiss, *One Church, Many Tribes*, 72.

<sup>51</sup> Brown, “Contextualization without Syncretism,” 129.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Bahana means Brother whose name is not known (Courlander, *The Fourth World of the Hopis*, 31).

<sup>54</sup> Courlander, *The Fourth World of the Hopis*, 31.

# The Korean Lutherans' Perspective of Lutheranism and Lutheran Identity

Jin-Seop Eom

**Abstract:** This paper is a revision of the paper originally delivered at the Lutheran World Federation's conference on Asian Lutheranism and Identity, Nov. 5–8, 2013, Kuala Lumpur, West Malaysia. It gives an account of how Lutherans in Korea understand their Reformation heritage and think of their Lutheran identity in an environment surrounded by other branches of Protestantism and Roman Catholicism as well as traditional religions. In so doing, it deals with some of the characteristic Lutheran teachings which the young Lutheran church can re-appropriate and with which it can contribute to the Korean Protestantism.

## I. Introduction

The Lutheran Church in Korea (LCK), the only Lutheran body in the country, is young and small compared to other Protestant churches. Maynard W. Dorow, one of the first expatriate missionaries sent by the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS) to Korea, once reminisced about the early years of his time in the country: “The Lutheran Church was a small fish in a large Calvinist ocean.”<sup>1</sup> This situation is as true today as it was a half century ago. In terms of numerical size, it is not in a position to be influential over other churches, but rather to be influenced by others. However, Lutherans have marked themselves with their distinctive Lutheran presence in many ways.

Below, I will first describe the religious landscape of Korea before progressing to the main subject and dealing, one by one, with some of the characteristic Lutheran themes. In so doing, I will try to illuminate the themes in light of Korean ways of thinking that can be witnessed in mission history and in the context of the common language that people unconsciously employ.

## II. Religious Landscape in Korea

Roman Catholicism was introduced into Korea in 1785. One hundred years later, Protestantism was introduced when the first missionaries of the Presbyterian and Methodist churches came from the USA. Protestant churches enjoyed rapid growth, especially in the 1970s and 1980s. According to the national census of 2005<sup>2</sup>, the Buddhists are the largest religious group with 22.83 percent of the national

---

*Jin-Seop Eom is Associate Professor of Church History at the Luther University/Seminary, Korea.*

population of around 47 million. The Protestants make up 18.3 percent, while the Roman Catholics 10.9 percent. There are 19 mega-churches (over 10,000 members) in South Korea, out of which twelve are in Seoul. The Full Gospel Central Church in Seoul has over 700,000 members, earning it a place in the *Guinness World Records* as the world's largest single congregation. Presbyterians comprise over 60 percent of the Protestants. There are almost twice as many Presbyterians in South Korea as in the United States, the country that sent the missionaries to Korea 129 years ago.

It was 73 years after the appearance of the first Protestant mission in Korea that Lutheran mission began. Kurt E. Voss, L. Paul Bartling, and Maynard W. Dorow, sent by the LCMS, arrived in Korea on January 13, 1958. Won Yong Ji, a Korean native, joined the team in September of that year. The four formed the Korea Lutheran Mission (KLM), which was phased out when the national Lutheran Church in Korea was organized in 1971.

According to the reports of its 43<sup>rd</sup> General Assembly held on Oct. 11–12, 2013, it has 5,022 members. Its 49 congregations are spread all over the peninsula, even on Jeju Island to the south, but mostly in the capital and the surrounding satellite cities. It is not a big number compared to other denominations that came in the same period. There are distinct reasons for that. The first missionaries worked on the basis of a mission strategy that envisioned their work as supplementing efforts of already existing churches rather than adding another denomination to compete with them. They wanted a “clean start” in the turbulent period after the end of the Korean War (1950–1953). Thus, the KLM started a mass media mission, which was later called “A-approach.” They did not ignore, however, traditional church planting, which was called “B-approach.”<sup>3</sup> Today, 56 years after its beginning, a big challenge for the Lutheran church is to teach Lutheran identity, not only to the newcomers but also the quite sizable number of members who converted from other denominations (“horizontal migration”) and who carry their theological bags with them.

It would be helpful to mention some characteristics of Korean Protestantism, of which the Lutheran church is a part. Most of the Protestant Churches in Korea were established as results of the mission work by American Churches in the end of the nineteenth century and beyond. Most of the early American missionaries were evangelical and pietistic: they could be labeled as revivalists. Kyoung Bae Min, a well-known scholar in Korean church history, maintains that the undercurrent of this evangelical and pietistic faith has been long and persistently flowing throughout the entire history of Korean Protestant churches. He connects these characteristics with conspicuous aspects such as “vulnerability of theology, weakness of the ecclesiology, individual salvation with little regard to social redemption, quietism so much as to disregard politics, contempt of intellectualism and dualistic world view.”<sup>4</sup>

### III. Lutheran Publications and Education

#### *Lutheran Books and Other Materials*

I deem it appropriate to explain what kind of Lutheran materials are accessible by Lutherans and what they are taught in the church before dealing with their perspectives of Lutheranism and Lutheran identity. Concordia-Sa, the publishing arm of the LCK (started in 1959), has published over 500 books, pamphlets, and parish education materials, including Luther's Small and Large Catechisms, the Book of Concord, books on the Reformation and Luther's theology, and *Luther's Works—Korean Edition* (LW-KE, 1981–1989) in twelve volumes (two volumes were added later). It has also published books for children, such as the *Arch Series* in 75 volumes. Other Christian publishers also have published books on Luther, Luther's theology, and the Reformation.<sup>5</sup>

#### *Teaching and Learning*

Members of the Oksudong Lutheran Church in Seoul read through the entire Book of Concord during a retreat of the whole congregation and at training of lay leaders. But this practice is not common to the other Lutheran churches. The Small Catechism is used only as an instruction for candidates for Baptism. It is seldom referred to in the sermon or used in Sunday School. One of the reasons for its desuetude may be that it is packed with Bible verses as proof texts, which gives the impression that it is a dogmatics treatise. It is too long and difficult for beginners. So pastors sometimes make adaptations by themselves. It was interesting to learn that Lutherans in North America smile when they hear, "What does this mean?"<sup>6</sup> This is the effect of lifelong learning, which I wish we also had in the LCK.

The Augsburg Confession, the "Lutheran Magna Carta," so to speak, needs also to be a subject of teaching and preaching. Paul Gerhardt reveals his lifelong commitment to it:

I am a Christian, profoundly committed to the Confession of Augsburg in which my parents reared me. And I am also committed to it as a result of my constantly renewed and considered reflections, and of a daily struggle against every sort of temptation.<sup>7</sup>

To have lay people become interested in confessional writings, however, practical books on them need to be written for lay people. George Forell wrote a popular book on the Augsburg Confession along practical lines.<sup>8</sup> He took the articles of AC and showed how modern issues can be related to them. Written almost half a century ago, however, it needs to be revised because of the new challenges of postmodernity. Some years ago, Timothy Wengert explicated the Formula of Concord, a much less well-known portion of the Book of Concord, bringing life to the doctrinal articles by reviving the grassroots' experiences from which those articles of *FC* had originated.<sup>9</sup>

*Bethel Bible Series* needs to be mentioned, because most of the Lutheran churches completed more than once the two-year Bible study curriculum of the *Bethel Bible Series*. Started at *Bethel Lutheran Church* in Madison, Wisconsin, it was adapted into the Korean situation in 1974 under the auspices of the LCK. Some churches, including Lutheran, also used the additional Life Dimension course (an adaptation of Luther's Small Catechism), Salvation course, Faith course, and Worship course. For the past forty years, some 470,000 individuals have taken the *Bethel* course in their respective congregations and other places.

Before becoming Lutherans, some members took the *Christian Correspondence Course*, which the LCK started in 1960 and drew 750,000 people. Also, many listened to the *Korea Lutheran Hour* which started in 1959.

#### **IV. Korean Lutherans' Perspective of Lutheranism**

With the background mentioned above, I will focus on Korean Lutherans' view of the Lutheran heritage, beginning with the three *solas* (*sola fide*, *sola gratia*, *sola scriptura*) including *solus Christus*.<sup>10</sup> Lutherans, as well as other Protestants, quite often hear of them. On special occasions, such as Reformation Day worship, Lutherans see flags with the three *solas* being carried in the procession. However, they often only hear them as slogans and are not well educated in them in preaching or teaching. Further, the small word, *sola*, is a stumbling block for many, as was the case with the medieval church.

##### **1. Faith Alone (*sola fide*)**

For nearly five hundred years, Lutheran identity has been indelibly linked to the doctrine of justification. This is the teaching by which the church stands and falls.<sup>11</sup> Luther's Reformation breakthrough occurred when he realized that with the phrase, "The just shall live by faith" (Rom 1:17), the Gospel reveals a righteousness that is not demanded from us by God, but a righteousness that God bestows on us. Luther reminisces one year before his death:

There I began to understand that the righteousness of God is that by which the righteous lives by a gift of God, namely by faith. And this is the meaning: the righteousness of God is revealed by the Gospel, namely, the passive righteousness with which merciful God justifies us by faith, as it is written, "He who through faith is righteous shall live." Here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates.<sup>12</sup>

According to Gritsch and Jenson, the meta-linguistic character of "justification by faith" dogma should affect the way we think of ecclesiology, ministry, etc.

The church is the gathering that occurs when it is speaking the Gospel that brings the persons together. A community constituted by some other

communication is not the church at all—though it may well be a useful community of some other sort. And where the discourse is not the Gospel-kind of discourse, and the gathering is not the church-kind of gathering, then the other dogmas of Christianity have no application; it is in this sense that “justification by faith,” if a right dogma, is the chief dogma.<sup>13</sup>

Even though this doctrine has many facets, only a couple of related themes are selected here.

1) “Wonderful” or “joyous” exchange (*fröhlicher Wechsel*)

Luther says in *The Freedom of a Christian* that faith “binds the soul with Christ, just as the bride with the bridegroom. By means of this secret (as the apostle teaches in Eph. 5:32) Christ and the soul become one flesh.”<sup>14</sup> The Christian is joined to Christ by a faith that clings to the Word and accepts that Christ is totally responsible for us. This means “our sins are now not ours but Christ’s and Christ’s righteousness is not Christ’s but ours.”<sup>15</sup>

Korean Protestants tend to understand faith in terms of intellectual consent rather than trust of the whole person in what God has done for us in Christ. Instead, everything depends on how strongly one believes; thus, the gifts Christ brings to us are not fully received, which then results in turning to works for assurance of salvation. Faith is itself a work, as Gritsch and Jenson observe: “the ‘believing’ that can be one of a list of desirable deeds or characteristics is just what the Reformers called a ‘work’; moreover, it is the kind of special religious work against which they mostly directed their polemic.”<sup>16</sup>

This concept of faith has affinity with the medieval Catholic notion of it. According to Thomas Aquinas, faith is an act of intellect, “in which the intellect, moved by God, acknowledges the dogmas of the church as revealed truth.” This faith (*fides informis*) is a dead faith; only *fides formata* justifies. For Luther, however, *fides caritate formata*, is a denial of God’s mercy to sinners, because *fides caritate formata* seeks to reach its goal by fulfilling the law and thus is an expression of contempt for Christ.<sup>17</sup>

For Luther, faith is synonymous with Christ as is emphasized by Mannermaa. Luther says, “Christ is the object of faith, or rather not the object but, so to speak, the One who is present in the faith itself.”<sup>18</sup> In faith, the believer mutually shares everything with Christ.

2) Living in freedom

Martin Ludder or Martin Lutter changed his name to Martin Luther, based on the Greek word for freedom, *elutherius*. This change had to do with his discovery of the freeing Gospel. James Nestingen mentions Ebeling’s observation that Luther’s best writing is all devoted to the theme of freedom.<sup>19</sup>

The passive righteousness of faith gives us the gift of self-forgetfulness. In that



God does what is decisive in us, we may live outside ourselves and solely in God, which means that “we are hidden from ourselves, and removed from the judgment of others or the judgment of ourselves about ourselves as a final judgment.”<sup>20</sup> Oswald Bayer elucidates it by interpreting Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s poem, “Who am I?”: “Am I what I know myself to be? Or am I who others determine me to be? These questions do not disappear from our lives. Nevertheless, Bonhoeffer concludes the poem with the affirmation, ‘Whoever I am’—this question can be left open—‘thou knowest, O God, I am thine.’”<sup>21</sup>

This message needs to be heard by many people struggling with difficulties in their lives in a highly competitive society like Korea. The “bare face” of such a competitive society includes the highest suicide rate among the OECD countries and third highest worldwide, the highest number of plastic surgery per capita, ostracism at schools and jobs, cyber-bullying, etc.<sup>22</sup> According to the *Better Life Index 2014*, Korea took the 25th place among the 34 OECD countries, including Russia and Brazil regarding life satisfaction level.

It is interesting to note that the first work of Luther ever to be published in Korean was *The Freedom of a Christian* in 1949. That year was the fourth year of South Korea’s being placed under an American trusteeship and the North under a Russian one, after the nation’s liberation from Japan in 1945. One year later, the Korean War broke out. The treatise was repeatedly published in the 1970s as a part of a volume in a complete series by secular publishers. The decade of the 1970s was a period of rapid economic development under a tough military regime. These two cases may be used as an indication that Luther’s idea of freedom has power to appeal to people living in various situations of bondage. The time is ripe for another publication, explication, and popularization of the treatise.

## **2. Christ Alone (*solus Christus*)**

God’s self-giving is not an easy thing to swallow for human beings who are tuned to works righteousness. I will illustrate this with a mission history in Korea. Malcolm C. Fenwick (1863–1935), an independent lay missionary from Canada, arrived in Korea in 1889, four years after the first Protestant missionaries from the USA. After ten months in Seoul, he went to Sorai, where the first Korean Protestant church had been established in 1884 by indigenous Koreans who became Christians while helping with Bible translation in China. He met with difficulty when he was translating the hymn, “Look and Live,” by Ogden. The sentence in the hymn, “Life is offered unto you,” caused a problem: There was no appropriate word in Korean for “offer” except when a servant offers something to his master or a subject makes an offering of something to the king. Another complicating factor, it seems, was that Korean translation was done using the honorific expression (*ba-chi-si-ne*). His Korean friends said with one voice: “That will never do!” “Why not?” he responded.

“Why, it humbles the great and holy God to the position of a menial servant, and exalts worms of the dust like us to a high place.” Fenwick explained to them that in lowering Himself to a servant, God has taken the place of a servant to bring us to eternal life. But they resisted adamantly, saying, “It will never do to say that God takes the position of a servant. Quite impossible to believe.” So he opened the Chinese Bible and let them read Philippians 2:5b–11. He explained that God offers them eternal salvation as a free gift for acceptance with both hands stretched to them as servants do to their masters. This was persuasive to them.

Fenwick experienced the same when he later came to Seoul and met the first Christian Korean and asked about his opinion of the translation of the hymn, “Life for a Look.” When the man came to the word “offer” in the hymn, he stopped and said that it would never do—it was awful, it was putting God in the humiliating position of a servant. After the same prolonged discussion as had taken place in Sorai, Fenwick reminded him of Philippians 2:6–11. The man read it and said quietly, “Thank you, shepherd.”<sup>23</sup>

As it was difficult for the first Korean Protestants to understand God’s self-giving in Christ, so is it, still, for contemporary Koreans. To challenge their inherent legalistic leanings, they need to be taught to let God be God and, also, to be assured that even though faith saves, God’s promise comes first and man’s response second.

One more example as regards the language: Worship in Korean is *ye-bae* (*ye* stands for courtesy and *bae* for bow), that is, something human beings offer to God. Moreover, it is most frequently used with the verb, “offer.” Even if in the worship service people give thanks to God in terms of hymn, prayer, offerings, etc., the aspect of God’s coming to and serving His people, as is expressed in the German *Gottesdienst*, is lost.

It is symptomatic that certain theologians confuse the doctrine of justification by translating “justification” in terms of *i-shin-deug-ui* (by-faith-acquire-righteousness), not in terms of the common usage, *i-shin-ching-ui* (by-faith-be-called-righteous). The forensic aspect of the doctrine (“You are declared righteous by faith in Jesus Christ”) is set aside. Instead, you are expected to acquire or achieve righteousness with your faith.<sup>24</sup>

### 3. Grace Alone (*sola gratia*)

1) *Sola gratia* is often thought to be only a synonym for *sola fide*. However, the understanding of *gratia* is easily caught in the legal scheme. The medieval theologians defined grace something like “a booster shot or a form of steroids”: “As such, grace helped the Christian pilgrim to follow God’s will more easily and more readily and thus attain righteousness before God.”<sup>25</sup> Gerhard Forde hits the mark when he says, “The assertion of ‘justification *by faith*’ in the sixteenth-century Reformation can be understood only if it is clearly seen as a complete break with

'justification by grace.'"<sup>26</sup> Nonetheless, Christians in Korea tend to understand *gratia* as a kind of medicine infused into the human being that, in a synergistic sense, assists him in achieving salvation.

2) In modern times, grace is "disgraced" because it is treated as cheap. It can be exemplified in Koreans' use of the word "grace." The Korean word for "grace" is *eun-hye*, or *eun-chong*, a more archaic term but used as often as the former. "Grace" is often used to express that one overlooks (turns a blind eye to) another person's mistake, or winks at an offense. This is one of the characteristics of cheap grace that Dietrich Bonhoeffer observes: "Cheap grace is the grace we bestow on ourselves," "not the kind of forgiveness of sin which frees us from the toils of sin."<sup>27</sup> When one uses the term this way, one eventually becomes confused about the profundity of his sins and the abundance of God's grace. For language both reveals what one thinks and imprints what one should think.

Also problematic is that the word "grace" is used in everyday life together with verbs like "repay" or "return" and in expressions like "return somebody's favor," "repay somebody's kindness," "repay good [kindness] with evil," "I shall never forget this favor," "I am very much indebted to her," etc. These expressions do not coincide with the meaning of the mid-sixteenth century *gratia*, which meant "for nothing, freely, without recompense, free of charge." The radical character of the grace of God, that it cannot be repaid, can be lost.

This confusion of the language is bound to affect the thinking of Christians, just as *agape* was confused with *eros* as the Gospel was proclaimed to the Hellenistic world, as demonstrated by Anders Nygren in *Agape and Eros*.<sup>28</sup>

Wrong linguistic uses of "grace," however, only seem to be symptoms of the human depravity, as is pointedly spelled out by Forde: "The problem with grace is not that it is cheap or expensive. The old creature does not like to hear of grace because it is free."<sup>29</sup>

Lutherans often seem no better than other Christians with regard to understanding of grace. Bonhoeffer's critique of cheap grace regrettably applies not only to Lutheran churches in Germany and other Western countries but also to young Lutheran mission churches, including the Korean Lutheran church: "To be 'Lutheran' must mean that we leave the following of Christ to legalists, Calvinists and enthusiasts—and all this for the sake of grace. . . Cheap grace had won the day." We cannot but consent to his assessment that this fatal misunderstanding of grace is worse than works-righteousness. "The word of cheap grace has been the ruin of more Christians than any commandment of works."<sup>30</sup>

#### 4. Scripture Alone (*sola scriptura*)

##### 1) Love of the Bible

Korean Christians are Bible-loving people. However, Korean Christians' approach to the Bible is influenced by the Presbyterians. For them, the formal authority of the Scriptures is much more emphasized. The Old Testament has a different status than it has in the Lutheran Church.<sup>31</sup> A theology student from a Presbyterian background revealed this by raising a question in the classroom regarding why chapel attendees should stand up during the service to listen to the Gospel reading, while they remain sitting in the pew when they listen to Old Testament text or other New Testament texts. For Calvin, the Bible was an authority one has to bow to without any presupposed meaning of what its central message should be, while Luther judged each biblical book's value and authority using the doctrine of justification as criterion. With its Biblicism, Reformed/Presbyterian churches have somewhat legalistic characteristics.

##### 2) Law and Gospel dialectic

Knowing how to distinguish Law and Gospel is a prerequisite to understanding the doctrine of justification. This is the most important matter, though also most difficult, as Luther admits: “[W]hoever knows well how to distinguish the Gospel from the Law should give thanks to God and know that he is a real theologian.”<sup>32</sup>

A former expatriate missionary from the USA, jokingly, praised Korean people for understanding Law-Gospel distinctions on the ground that there are many *LG* (his abbreviations of Law and Gospel) signs in the country (*LG* is the 4th largest *chaebol* or conglomerate in Korea). But Korean Lutherans, lay and ordained, have difficulty in fully understanding the Law and Gospel dialectic, even though its importance in Lutheran theology is frequently emphasized. One reason is that they are influenced by the Presbyterians, who follow Karl Barth's order: *Gospel and Law* instead of *Law and Gospel*. It also seems to have something to do with the fact that Koreans are more attuned to harmony than dialectic. In harmony, both elements make the whole in tranquil balance, as can be seen in the harmonious *yin-yang* (*eum-yang* in Korean, as seen in the center of the Korean flag), whereas in dialectic both elements stand to each other in dynamic relationship. In the Law-Gospel dialectic, the Law accuses the sinner so that he runs to Christ (the second use of the Law). Then the Law fulfills its function and ends as St. Paul says in Romans 10:4: “Christ is the end of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes.” Only in this way can the Gospel be clearly heard as the eschatological word that breaks through into this world as an unheard of message (“No ear has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived . . .,” 1 Corinthians 2:9).<sup>33</sup>

## 5. Simultaneously Righteous and Sinful (*simul justus et peccator*)

Luther opposed both the view of salvation by psychological transformation and the view of salvation by ontological transformation, both of which, according to Kolb, make sense only in a Platonic, spiritualizing frame of reference. Luther held that the verdict of justification does not come at the beginning or end of a movement (toward becoming increasingly righteous); instead, it establishes an entirely new situation.<sup>34</sup> The Christian enters in a new relation with God through the righteousness by faith. Luther maintained, thus, that the Christian is a person who is simultaneously righteous and sinful: "Though I am a sinner in myself, I am not a sinner in Christ."<sup>35</sup> This relational category opposes the Augustinian notion of *partim partim*. (Augustine said that we are "*ex parte justificati*.") For Luther, however, imputed righteousness "as a divine judgment brings with it the *simul justus et peccator* as *total* states."<sup>36</sup> This biblical paradox cannot be reconciled with the Roman Catholic understanding of man. *Simul* was one of the main differences the Lutheran side emphasized over against the Roman Church in the *Joint Declaration of the Doctrine of Justification* (1999) between the Vatican and the LWF. Members of the *World Methodist Council*, meeting in Seoul on July 18, 2006, voted unanimously to adopt the *JDDJ*. It is a question, however, whether this distinctive Lutheran anthropology is accepted by the Methodists, who opt for an understanding of sanctification in terms of gradual progress.

## 6. Sanctification

In Korea, Presbyterians give honor to Luther for having rediscovered the doctrine of justification but add that Calvin went further than Luther in emphasizing sanctification, kindly explaining the different *Sitz im Leben* of the two Reformers. Drawing the line further, Methodists proudly say that it was Wesley who completed the doctrine of sanctification. This attitude is characteristically reflected in the title of an article by Carter Lindberg, "Do Lutherans Shout Justification but Whisper Sanctification?"<sup>37</sup> This reflects, however, the influence from Pietism and the Enlightenment: Sanctification is a matter of personal and individual development and orientation.

For Luther, justification and sanctification are not two separate acts that we can distinguish, as though sanctification follows justification.<sup>38</sup> Forde succinctly explains Luther's concept of sanctification as follows:

Sanctification, if it is to be spoken of as something other than justification, is perhaps best defined as the art of getting used to the unconditional justification wrought by the grace of God for Jesus' sake. It is what happens when we are grasped by the fact that God alone justifies. It is being made holy, and as such, it is not our work. It is the work of the Spirit who is called Holy. The fact that it is not our work puts the old Adam/Eve (our old self) to

death and calls forth a new being in Christ. It is being saved from the sickness unto death and being called to new life.<sup>39</sup>

This dimension of the death-and-life dynamic of Christian life opposes the notion of sanctification as progress. In the mind of Korean Christians, a person with the help of grace progressively gains more and more righteousness and thus sins less and less. One strives toward perfection until, theoretically, one would need less and less grace or perhaps finally no more grace at all. But as Luther puts it, "To progress is always to begin anew."<sup>40</sup> Or as Oswald Bayer says, "living by faith is already the new life."<sup>41</sup>

## 7. Vocation

Earthly vocation is a corollary of justification by faith alone. Lutheran teaching maintains that active righteousness is practiced in vocation. The place of the doctrine of sanctification is here. Justified by faith through grace, one is free to serve neighbors without worrying about salvation. Works done in faith are God-pleasing and good. Works done for the well-being of neighbors are holy, while works one chooses for oneself are not, because they are self-serving. Sanctification must be viewed as a descent of the entire person into the world. Thus, Luther's approach to sanctification is unlike any other, *sui generis*.<sup>42</sup>

Marc Kolden explains that Luther's point with regard to vocation was to emphasize familiar earthly roles and activities: "Luther's ideas made service to God exceedingly concrete and readily available to believers of all sorts." He also says, "one of the most far-reaching results of the Protestant (in both its Lutheran and Reformed or Calvinistic aspects) was this raising up of earthly roles and duties as having great value in God's eyes. . . ."<sup>43</sup> This assessment is shared by Emil Brunner, Swiss Reformed theologian:

This expresses one of the most profound truths of ethics, indeed one of the most profound truths which have ever been conceived by the mind of man, namely the idea of "the Calling," which is so characteristic of the thought and teaching both of Paul and of Luther. When Luther drew forth this forgotten truth from beneath the rubbish heap of ecclesiastical ethic which had been corrupted by Aristotelian and ascetic ideas it was an act of significance for the whole of world history, an act of overwhelming importance.<sup>44</sup>

The value of earthly vocation is not shared, however, by Korean Protestants, who think of the reality in a dualistic fashion, divided between the sacred and the secular. Therefore, their *Stand* or places in the secular realm, such as mother, father, teacher, citizen, etc., are not valued as highly as are their churchly activities, such as evangelization, attending worship, early dawn prayer meetings and vigil, tithe-offering, and diaconal service. Moreover, vocation is understood narrowly as a job,

and job is the means by which one makes money to support oneself and give tithes and other offerings to the church. Christians do not act differently from non-Christians outside of the church walls. They are success-oriented as much as other people at the cost of ethical integrity. They are criticized by non-Christians for their egoistic and exclusivist attitudes. Korean Lutherans do not seem to be different from other Protestants in this respect.

## **8. Two Kinds of Righteousness**

According to Luther, the righteousness of faith does not draw us out of the world or render life in the world as an inferior order of existence. Luther emphasized that the passive righteousness of faith does not remain in heaven; it descends to earth and contributes to the active righteousness in the world. On earth we actively pursue a life of works and virtues in accordance with God's will for creation and his reclamation of creation in Christ.<sup>45</sup>

Christians in Korea tend to regard questions related to salvation as the only really important matter that deserves their attention. They are taught that the evangelization is the only Great Commission. Neighbors are regarded as objects of evangelization, instead of service.<sup>46</sup> As noted above, Korean Protestant churches enjoyed remarkable growth in the 1970s and 1980s. Now, the church growth has stalled. Protestant churches are criticized both from inside and outside for their exclusivism relative to non-Christians, dualism between the sacred and the secular, privatization of religion, individualism, neglecting community, worshiping at the altar Mammon, undue emphasis on the multiplication of church members, church building projects, expansion of finances, clericalism, nepotism, etc.<sup>47</sup> Dissatisfied with their own church bodies, many Protestants become inactive or convert to the Roman Catholic Church, which, according to the mind of many, is seen as a "religion of justice" that opposes dictatorial governments and a "religion of conscience" that does not require as much in the way of monetary offerings as Protestant churches and is less corrupted than them, etc.<sup>48</sup>

It is a good sign that theologians are beginning to talk about public theology, while philosophers focus on public philosophy. Lutheran teaching on the First Article is *raison d'être* for the discussion of public matters, given its positive value of the First Use of the Law. Lutherans can work together with people from other religious or ideological convictions in common endeavors for diaconal works as well as social issues.

## **9. Two Kingdoms Theory**

Even though religion and politics are separated according to the Korean Constitution, it is not the case in reality. The former president, Myeong-Bak Lee, is

an elder in a Presbyterian mega-church in Seoul. As mayor of Seoul, he was criticized for alleged religious bias against other religious groups. At a rally of the Holy City March, he dedicated Seoul to God, which made people ask in fury whether he was mayor only of the Christians and not of the non-Christians. During his early presidency, the Ministry of Education aroused the anger of the Buddhists when they discovered that many famous Buddhist shrines in the country were missing on its internet map, while churches were not.

Such actions can be explained by the influence of the Reformed ideas to establish theocracy on earth, still alive in that tradition, i.e., “ideas that the commandments of God should be applied for all the situations of human, economic, social, and political life.”<sup>49</sup> Another factor is that from the time when it was a small minority in Korea, Protestantism has been taking a leading role in various fields of the society, for example, in the opposition against the Japanese occupation (1910–1945). Many Protestants were recipients of the modern Western education at mission schools run by American missionaries and became political leaders. Other political leaders, one of whom is Dr. Syng-Man Rhee, the first president of the country, were converted to Protestantism because they saw in Christendom the solution for liberation and rebuilding of the nation during Japanese occupation and after the Korean War (1950–1953). These factors help to explain the high number of Protestants in leading positions of society, then and now. According to an investigation by the Christian Council of Korea in 2012, out of the total 299 members of the National Assembly 119 were Protestants, which is almost 40 percent of the total and twice as high as the average population.

In this context, politics and religion often are mixed. Conservative Protestant Church leaders have been criticized for giving sanction to dictatorial governments by holding a breakfast prayer meeting for the presidents. This mixture of politics and religion happens also on the local level. Especially during election campaigns, politicians visit churches, as well as Buddhist temples, begging for votes. Pastors introduce the visitors to the congregation during the service, in anticipation for a favor of whatever kind. In this way, God’s left hand and right hand rules are confused and the Gospel is contaminated.

## **10. Universal Priesthood of All the Baptized**

There is a strong tendency in Korean Churches to regard the relationship between ordained and lay offices in the church in terms of hierarchical rank, which is influenced by the hierarchical consciousness of Confucianism. Strong emphasis on families also contributes to regarding social relationships as extensions of familial relationship. Thus, the church, too, is looked upon as a structure of vertical hierarchy, with the senior pastor as patriarch, rather than as a body of diverse gifts. The importance of face-saving in Korean culture makes people eager to have important



titles. Thus, in the church people are always called with their titles and second names and never with only first names.<sup>50</sup> In church polity, the LCK is influenced by the Presbyterian Church with its elder system. The latter turned out to be more adaptable to the Korean situation than the church council system and replaced it in the LCK in the mid-1970s. Otherwise, the LCK polity combines congregational and synodical elements.<sup>51</sup>

Karlfried Froehlich asserts, "Luther did not eliminate priests or do away with the priesthood. Instead he eliminated the laity!"<sup>52</sup> But in Korea, lay people are called *pyeong-shin-do* (common or ordinary believers), while those engaged in the full-time religious work, such as pastors and Buddhist priests, are called *seong-jig-za* (holy office holders). This connotes that only the religious jobs are sacred. In the same vein, this claim is used as a justification for *seong-jig-za*'s continued exemption from taxation for their income.

The universal priesthood is sometimes thought of in terms of "right." Lay people think, "I can have a direct contact with God without any middle man such as the Pope." Several years ago there arose heated debates in the Presbyterian Church whether or not elders, too, have the "right" to preach and give blessings at the end of the worship service. Even though this debate is inherent to a Presbyterian concept of order, still, it distorts Luther's idea of serving the neighbors as little "Christs," as Christ the High Priest Himself served human beings.

## **11. Sacraments**

As observed above, Korean Protestantism is largely evangelical and pietistic. Young-Jae Kim, church historian at a Presbyterian seminary, connects the influence of evangelicalism in Korean Protestantism with poor treatment of the sacraments. The pulpit stands out at the center of the forefront of the church building, while table (not altar) and Baptismal font are not seen. According to Kim, this arrangement is incongruent with the teaching of the Reformers, who taught that the Word and the sacraments are marks of the church.<sup>53</sup> Lutheran church buildings are different from other Protestant churches in that altar, baptismal font, and pulpit are placed side by side in the front.

Scott H. Hendrix hits the mark when he says, "At its religious core, the conflict we call the Reformation was a controversy over the following statement from Luther's Small Catechism that appears in his explanation of the third article of the Apostles' Creed: 'Daily in this Christian church the Holy Spirit abundantly forgives all sins—mine and those of all believers.'" He continues, "To explain theologically how forgiveness happened required a redefinition of justification, but to explain how it happened in the actual lives of believers led Luther to redefine both the church and the sacraments."<sup>54</sup>

### 1) Baptism

Luther replaced penance with Baptism as the most important sacrament in Christendom. This shift was based on two meanings of Baptism: Paul's image of dying and rising and God's indelible covenant with the baptized person. The significance of Baptism was "a blessed dying unto sin and a resurrection in the grace of God, so that the old person, conceived and born in sin, is there drowned, and a new person, born in grace, come forth and rises."<sup>55</sup> Luther called the life of a Christian from Baptism to the grave nothing other than the beginning of a blessed death.<sup>56</sup> The baptismal death and resurrection continues each day as "the old creature in us with all sins and evil desires is . . . drowned and dies through daily contrition and repentance, and on the other hand a new person . . . comes forth and rises up to live before God in righteousness and purity forever."<sup>57</sup> Thus, Luther intended for Baptism to cover past, present, and future with God's promised mercy, while in the medieval church Baptism dealt with what had happened in the past.<sup>58</sup> The sacraments were "tall guideposts along life's highway."<sup>59</sup>

Korean Protestants often lack this high view of Baptism. It has partly to do with the low esteem of Baptism in Presbyterian theology, which emphasizes that God is not bound to the sacraments. God is free from external means of grace, even though the sacraments established by Him belong to the ordinary life of church.<sup>60</sup> It has also to do with the subjectivist orientation on faith influenced by the evangelical and Pentecostal movements. Baptism is only an initiation ceremony to be left behind. It is characteristic that people prefer revealing that they have *mo-tae-shin-ang* (having faith in their mother's womb or being born of a Christian mother) to telling that they were baptized as an infant. In the old hymnals (*Tong-il Chan-song-ga*, Unity Hymnal, 1988) adopted by most Protestant denominations, there was no hymn on Baptism, while in the new hymnal (*Sae Chan-song-ga*, New Hymnal, 2007) three hymns on Baptism are included.<sup>61</sup> Lutherans need to heed to their own rich tradition, as is exemplified by the words of a longtime Lutheran missionary to Korea: "I think of my Baptism every time I wash my face."

### 2) Lord's Supper

The Lord's Supper is a *beneficium*, not a *sacrificium*. What happens in the Supper is the Gospel, a testament, a last will, a sheer gift to the sinners. Forde emphasizes, "What our Lord did at supper 'on the night in which he was betrayed,' must therefore be conceptualized, taught, and claimed as pure Gospel if we are to approach what might be a 'Lutheran' understanding of that supper."<sup>62</sup>

On the other hand, Heinrich Bornkamm senses that therein lies Luther's concern for his greatest treasure, i.e., the forgiveness of sins, in his emphases on the real presence of Christ's body and blood in the sacrament as well as unbelievers' receiving Christ's body and blood and recipients' eating them with the mouth, etc.:

God was as palpably close to him as his own sins were. Luther yearned for

a reality of grace no less than his sins. His doctrine of Holy Communion is an expression of his faith in this reality of God amid the world's reality and the reality of man's *Anfechtungen*; it is the ultimate deduction of his belief in the reality of forgiveness.<sup>63</sup>

Most Korean Lutheran churches celebrate the Lord's Supper every week, some less frequently, but still more frequently than other Protestant churches. There arose a small discussion in the Lutheran church about the ideal frequency of the Supper. Some argued that we should celebrate it as often as possible, since it is a treasure. Others used the same logic only to conclude the opposite: we should not use it very often since it is a treasure. The latter position seems to be taken partly out of concern for right preparations of the recipients rather than faith in God's action in the Supper.

Moreover, it is important to remember that for Luther, the sacraments are nothing other than a separate instance of the proclamation of the Gospel, as in the expression, Word and sacrament. There is a close relationship between the Word and the sacraments. This gives perspective to proclamation as sacrament and to sacraments as proclamation. On the former aspect: "The preacher has to have the audacity to exercise the office of ministry, the audacity to believe that the very moment of the preaching is itself the sacrament, the audacity to claim that from all eternity God has been preparing for just this very moment and thus to say, 'Here it is, it is for you!'" Regarding the latter, we should not merely talk about the sacraments, but preach them: "The task is to preach the sacraments as a Gospel Word for us, a Word which cuts into our lives, puts the old to death and raises up the new."<sup>64</sup>

## **12. Theology of the Cross**

The theology of glory is dominant in contemporary Protestantism in Korea. Church growth went hand in hand with economic growth in modern Korea. Naturally, economic or material success has been regarded as a blessing from God. This combination of faith and material well-being or success in life, however, has deep roots in the Korean people's religious consciousness, especially Shamanism, which has ruled the Koreans' consciousness for a long time. Traditional religions such as Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism are also said to be influenced by it.<sup>65</sup> Basic tenets of Shamanism are focus on the blessings in this world, ill-defined ethical standards, controlling or appeasing gods/devils by means of *gut* or exorcism by shamans, etc.

Christianity is not exempted from its influence. It is easily associated with health and wealth Gospel or *kibok-shinang*. The superficial phrase in evangelism, "Believe in Jesus, and You will get blessing," reveals this association. Faith is regarded as a kind of power that makes possible the impossible. One prefers experiencing resurrection without the cross to experiencing the resurrection through the cross. The idea of a reality under the opposite sign, e.g., a life of poverty, is rejected by a

triumphalism that equates seeing with believing. This makes church members blind to those underprivileged or the so-called “losers” in society. As Forde pointedly says, however, the victory of Christ is the victory of a loser in a world of would-be-winners: “In a world of destructive, compulsive ‘winners,’ how else could he (Christ) be victorious except by losing? How else could he get to us?”<sup>66</sup> Luther’s theology of the cross is one of the hardest things among his teachings to swallow. That an expatriate missionary from Germany said that Lutheranism is a high class teaching, especially applies here. In this sense, Korean Lutherans can address and give perspectives to the problems many people in the country are struggling with these days, mentioned elsewhere in this paper.

## **V. Lutheran Identity**

Because of the LCK’s small size, both ordained pastors and lay members are the more eager to keep their identity strong. Major factors binding them together have been the liturgy, vestments, the lectionary, the Christian church year calendar, etc. The importance of doctrine has been of second rank, even though the three *sola* principles are frequently preached from the pulpit.

### **1. Subordination of Doctrine to Liturgy**

Worship in other Protestant churches is simple and vastly different from Lutheran worship that keeps most of the traditional ingredients: Confession and Absolution, the Kyrie and Gloria, candles, banners, procession, lectionary, Lord’s Supper, pastor’s alb, stole, cross, sign of the cross, etc. If Lutherans are not well versed in distinct Lutheran doctrines and therefore cannot explain them to other people, they can nevertheless point to their liturgy. So they tend to regard the liturgy as the most characteristic Lutheran thing. On the flip-side, the Lutheran liturgy is one of the biggest obstacles to newcomers to the church on Sunday morning, because of its apparent similarity with Roman liturgy.

It is true that liturgy lays out basic Lutheran theology. However, what is essential (*satis est*) for Lutherans is doctrine as is expressed in AC 7.

Likewise, they teach that one holy church will remain forever. The church is the assembly of saints in which the Gospel is taught purely and the sacraments are administered rightly. And it is enough for the true unity of the church to agree concerning the teaching of the Gospel and the administration of the sacraments. It is not necessary that human traditions, rites, or ceremonies instituted by human beings be alike everywhere. As Paul says [Eph. 4:5, 6]: “One faith, one Baptism, one God and Father of all . . .”<sup>67</sup>

## **2. Attitudes toward the Lutheran Confessions**

Lutheranism started as a confessing movement. The LCK subscribes to the three ecumenical creeds (Apostles' Creed, Nicene Creed, Athanasian Creed), the Augsburg Confession, and Luther's Small Catechism as "representative creeds of Christendom and a true interpretation of the Scriptures."<sup>68</sup> It refers to Luther's Large Catechism, the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope, the Smalcald Articles, and the Formula of Concord as a "faithful exposition of the evangelical theology of the Lutheran Reformation."<sup>69</sup> This differentiation in importance of the individual confessional writings matches the different publication times of their Korean translation. The entire Book of Concord was not translated into Korean until 1988, even though individual components like the Small Catechism and the Augsburg Confession were translated much earlier.

M. Div. students take a course in Lutheran confessions. At ordination, the pastoral candidate is asked whether he subscribes to and will hold fast to the Confessions. However, the line looks disconnected between the classroom and the "ministerial field," as it is commonly called by pastors. Once stationed in the "field," they feel that they have to sow seeds of whatever kind in order to reap the fast visible harvest. For them, the Lutheran Confessions do not appear ready for parish use. Consequently, the knowledge of the Confessions among the lay people is minimal.<sup>70</sup> It is, however, encouraging that Lutherans, lay and ordained, feel the growing need to strengthen their Lutheran identity, especially as the 500th anniversary of the Reformation is approaching. It is up to church leaders to provide them with good study material.

## **3. Ecumenical Attitude**

Faithful to its original intention to be a "plus" to the "total" Church, the LCK has been actively involved in ecumenical enterprises. Thus, it is a member of the Christian Council of Korea and since 2011 also of the National Council of Churches in Korea. The former is more conservative and has more member churches than the latter. The LCK also plays active roles in various Christian organizations: Korea Education Association, Christian Broadcasting System, Christian TV/CTS, Korea Bible Society, Korea Christian Service, and the Joint Hymnal Committee. Korea Lutheran Women United has been active in Korea Church Women United since 1973. It needs to be added that one of the motives for its active involvement in ecumenical enterprises is its urgent need to be seen as an authentic Christian church despite of its small number and its somewhat, for most people, unfamiliar church name.

On the international level, the LCK became a member church of the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) in July 1972, one year after its formation succeeding the KLM. Members of the LCK, male and female, have actively participated in LWF

agencies and activities, both on the international and regional levels. The LCK is also a member of the International Lutheran Council (ILC) ever since it was constituted in 1993. The LCK presidents have served in the Executive Committee, and a scholar from LCK has served on the ILC's Seminary Relations Committee. The LCK hosted the ILC conferences in 1989 and 2009.

Lutherans in Korea like to call themselves the eldest son of Protestantism. It often means no more than its chronological sense, however, even though the word has special meaning in Korean culture, because it is the eldest son who is to carry on his family line. It should be stressed, however, that neither age nor antiquity is a criterion for a true church. Lutherans should remember that a true church is where the Gospel is preached harmoniously according to a pure understanding of it and the sacraments are administered in conformity with the divine Word (AC 7). Lutherans, lay and ordained, need to endeavor to promote these essential activities of the church in whatever capacities they have. For, in Korea, the Gospel is often confused with the Law, and Protestants live with only half of the Word, i.e., sermon.

## **VI. Perspectives in Conclusion: Lutheran Contribution to the Universal Church**

Mark Noll sees in American Lutheranism hope for the redemption of the deficiency he finds in the American Protestantism: "Protestantism has been one of the truly formative influences in American history, but in the process much of the original Protestant vision has been modified, distorted, or lost. Lutherans are the major denominational family in the best position to redeem the deficiency."<sup>71</sup> Even though the American situation cannot be directly applied to the Korean context, Noll's statement has some relevance to Korean Protestantism.

The Korean Protestant Church has deeply shared the destiny of Korean people ever since its formative years in the end of the nineteenth century. It was a spiritual force to fill the vacuum of the Korean mind after the forced opening of the last *Yi* dynasty, when the old religions and ideologies no longer seemed tenable for the new situation. It shared the lot of the suffering people during the Japanese occupation from 1910 to 1945. It has been an undeniable force in rebuilding the country after the Korean War (1950–1953); it shaped the ethical minds of people; it worked for the welfare of the poor and underprivileged in society; it worked for promoting democracy in the country and for easing the tension between North and South Korea by humanitarian aid to the North and prayers, etc. In short, it contributed to the modernization of the country. Now it has become an object for criticism for reasons mentioned elsewhere in this paper. It has become a punching bag for people inside and outside. Its high morale has declined. Its enthusiasm has cooled down. Its self-understanding as a new Israel, though unbiblical, in the former days has weakened as it is registering a drop in membership.

On the other hand, the Roman Catholic Church is enjoying increasing popularity among the people, especially in the wake of Pope Francis' recent visit to Korea. His every movement and speech was covered by mass media. Many Protestants are expected to convert to Roman Catholicism, as happened after the visits of Pope John Paul II in 1984 and 1989.

The Protestant church needs to be reformed, as the Reformers stressed (*ecclesia semper reformanda*). It cannot be reformed, however, by imitating the glittering facade of the Roman Church. It needs to think where it has gone wrong by re-thinking, re-evaluating, and re-appropriating its own tradition. The Lutheran church would best contribute to the Korean Protestant Church by adhering to its own tradition and making it a living tradition for its life and practice. As Robert Benne emphasizes, Lutheranism is such a tradition in the sense of Alasdair MacIntyre's definition: a living tradition is "an historically extended, socially embodied argument about the goods which constitute that tradition."<sup>72</sup>

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Maynard W. Dorow, "Lutheran Church in Korea: Its Background and Confessional Stance," in Won-Yong Ji, *A History of Lutheranism in Korea—A Personal Account* (Seoul: Concordiasa, 1989), 335.

<sup>2</sup> Census results were printed in *Donga*, a daily newspaper. They can be viewed in Korean at <http://news.donga.com/3/all/20060615/8318472/1>.

<sup>3</sup> Jin-Seop Eom, "History of Lutheranism in Korea," *Missio Apostolica* 20, no. 2 (Nov. 2012): 239f.

<sup>4</sup> Kyung-Bae Min, *A History of Christian Churches in Korea* (Seoul: Yonsei University Press, 2005), 109–110.

<sup>5</sup> Jin-Seop Eom, "Luther Reception in Korea," *Luther Jahrbuch* 70 (2003) (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht): 149–174.

<sup>6</sup> Timothy Wengert points out, however, that it should be translated "What is this?" He says also that he himself was educated in the Small Catechism "packed with Bible verses and organized with an eye toward Melanchthon's theological loci, so that it was a full ten times longer than Luther's catechism itself," which he found in 1990 with great astonishment and joy. Timothy J. Wengert, *Martin Luther's Small Catechism—Forming the Faith* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009), 1ff.

<sup>7</sup> Cited by Justo L. González, *The Story of Christianity*, Vol. 2: *The Reformation to the Present Day* (San Francisco: Harper, 1985), 172.

<sup>8</sup> George Forell, *The Augsburg Confession: A Contemporary Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1968).

<sup>9</sup> Timothy J. Wengert, *A Formula for Parish Practice: Using the Formula of Concord in Congregation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006). See especially introduction.

<sup>10</sup> Günther Gassmann lists a long catalogue of Luther's theological insights that are rediscovered, reinterpreted, and reaffirmed again and again because they seem to assume fresh light and relevance in ever-changing situations and times, and now also in other Christian traditions than his own. Günther Gassmann, "Luther in the Worldwide Church Today," in *The*

*Cambridge Companion to Martin Luther*, ed. Donald K. McKim (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 302.

<sup>11</sup> Robert Kolb and Charles P. Arand, *The Genius of Luther's Theology: A Wittenberg Way of Thinking for the Contemporary Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 22.

<sup>12</sup> Martin Luther, *Luther's Works, Vol. 34: Career of the Reformer IV*, ed. J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald and H. T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1960), 337.

<sup>13</sup> Eric W. Gritsch and Robert W. Jenson, *Lutheranism: The Theological Movement and Its Confessional Writings* (Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1976), 43.

<sup>14</sup> Quoted by Oswald Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology: A Contemporary Interpretation*, tr. Thomas H. Trapp (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 226.

<sup>15</sup> Martin Luther, *Luther's Works, Vol. 31: Career of the Reformer I*, ed. J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald and H. T. Lehmann (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1957), 189–191.

<sup>16</sup> Eric W. Gritsch and Robert W. Jenson, *Lutheranism*, 36–37.

<sup>17</sup> Leif Grane, *The Augsburg Confession: A Commentary*, tr. John H. Rasmussen (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1987), 85–86.

<sup>18</sup> "Sic ut Christus sit obiectum fidei, imo non obiectum, sed, ut ita dicam, in ipsa fide Christus adest." WA 40/1:228, 33–229, 15; LW 26:129. Cited by Tuomo Mannermaa, *Christ Present in Faith: Luther's View of Justification*, ed. Kirsi Stjerna (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 86.

<sup>19</sup> James A. Nestingen, *Martin Luther: A Life* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 2003), 37.

<sup>20</sup> Oswald Bayer, *Living by Faith: Justification and Sanctification* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 25.

<sup>21</sup> Oswald Bayer, "Justification: Basis and Boundary of Theology," in *By Faith Alone: Essays on Justification in Honor of Gerhard O. Forde*, ed. Joseph A. Burgess and Marc Kolden (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 84–85.

<sup>22</sup> Jin-Seop Eom, "Lutheran Education and Formation for: Re-appropriation of the Lutheran Heritage," *Theology and Faith*, 24 (Korea: Luther University, 2013): 68f.

<sup>23</sup> Malcolm C. Fenwick, *The Church of Christ in Corea* (New York: Hodder and Stoughton, 1911), 16–27. See also the interesting paper by Saarinen on the similar theme on the giving and the gift delivered at the annual "Luther Lecture" in Seoul, Korea, on Oct. 27, 2011. Risto Saarinen, "Luther's Theology of the Giving and the Gift," *Luther Study* 24 (Korea: Luther University, 2011), 35–61.

<sup>24</sup> Pilgrim W. K. Lo, on his side, mentions the inaccuracy of the translation of the phrase, justification by faith, into Chinese in the Union Version Chinese Bible, the most authoritative Chinese Bible. Pilgrim W. K. Lo, "Luther and Asia," in *The Oxford Handbook of Martin Luther's Theology*, ed. Robert Kolb, Irene Dingel, and L'ubomír Batka (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 616.

<sup>25</sup> Robert Kolb and Charles P. Arand, *The Genius of Luther's Theology*, 84.

<sup>26</sup> Gerhard O. Forde, "Christian Life," *Christian Dogmatics*, ed. Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson, Vol. 2 (Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1984), 407. (emphasis in original)

<sup>27</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, 6th (complete) ed. (London: SCM Press, 1959), 36.

<sup>28</sup> Anders Nygren, *Agape and Eros: The Christian Idea of Love*, tr. Philip S Watson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).

<sup>29</sup> Cited by Timothy Wengert, "The Future of Theological Education: Building on the Firm Foundation," 17. (Lecture presented to the students of The Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia on Sept. 17, 2005.)

<sup>30</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, 45–46.



<sup>31</sup> Einar Molland, *Kristenhetens Kirker og Trossamfunn* (Oslo: Gyldendal Norsk Forlag, 1976), 233.

<sup>32</sup> Martin Luther, *Luther's Works, Vol. 26: Lectures on Galatians, 1535, Chapters 1–4*, ed. J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald and H. T. Lehmann (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1963), 115.

<sup>33</sup> Won-Yong Ji maintains that the Eastern way of asserting reality has considerable affinity with Luther in "My Pilgrimage to Luther," *Concordia Journal* 31, no. 1 (Jan. 2005): 37–47. Under the heading, "Luther from an Eastern Perspective," he writes: "The distinctly paradoxical way of thinking under the umbrella of *theologia crucis*, Luther's insight on *iusus/peccator*, free-person/complete-servant, the *absconditus*/the *revelatus*, *Gesetz/Evangelium*, the 'right hand'/the 'left hand,' human bondage/divine grace, etc., appears to have some attractive aspects for the Eastern traditions. Are they not, in fact, speaking about the same reality of paradox from two contrasting perspectives? The both/and paradigm of the East, the *Li/Ch'i* contrast (*logos/neshama*), the classical *Tai-Chi* principle, and the idea of harmony without deviating from 'the Center,' may say something complementarily to Luther's *simul ... cum* polarity. If Luther's thought is closer to the Hebraic holistic mode of thinking than the dichotomic Hellenistic thought-pattern, the Eastern way of asserting reality (*Tien*, Tao) looks like it has considerable affinity with Luther." *Ibid.*, 44. (emphasis in original)

<sup>34</sup> Robert Kolb and Charles P. Arand, *The Genius of Luther's Theology*, 48–49.

<sup>35</sup> Martin Luther, *Luther's Works, Vol. 12: Selected Psalms I*, ed. J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald and H. T. Lehmann (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1955), 311.

<sup>36</sup> Gerhard O. Forde, "Forensic Justification and the Christian Life: Triumph or Tragedy?" in *A More Radical Gospel: Essays on Eschatology, Authority, Atonement, and Ecumenism*, ed. Mark C. Mattes and Steven D. Paulson (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2004), 119. [emphasis in original] See also Jin-Seop Eom, "Luther's Understanding of the Christian Identity: simul justus et peccator" (in Korean) *Luther Study* 16 (Korea: Luther University, 2002): 49–91.

<sup>37</sup> Carter Lindberg, "Do Lutherans Shout Justification but Whisper Sanctification?" *Lutheran Quarterly* 13 (1999): 1–20.

<sup>38</sup> Oswald Bayer, *Living by Faith*, 58.

<sup>39</sup> Gerhard Forde, "The Lutheran View of Sanctification," in *The Preached God: Proclamation in Word and Sacrament*, ed. Mark C. Mattes and Steven D. Paulson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 226. *LW* 25:333; *WA* 56, 344, 31–345, 2: "Et ita secum ipse pugnat, Sed quia spiritus et caro coniunctissime sunt vnum, licet diuerse sentiant, ideo vtriusque opus sibi toti tribuit, quasi simul sit totus caro et totus spiritus." (my emphasis) See also Jin-Seop Eom, "Lutheran Education and Formation for: Re-appropriation of the Lutheran Heritage," 83–84.

<sup>40</sup> Cited by Forde. *Ibid.*, 240.

<sup>41</sup> Oswald Bayer, *Living by Faith*, 58.

<sup>42</sup> Robert Kolb and Charles P. Arand, *The Genius of Luther's Theology*, 125.

<sup>43</sup> Marc Kolden, "Earthly Vocation as a Corollary of Justification by Faith," in *By Faith Alone*, 278–279.

<sup>44</sup> Emil Brunner, *The Divine Imperative* (New York: Macmillan, 1937), 199. From the Lutheran hold, see Gustaf Wingren's classical book on the subject: *Luther on Vocation*, tr. Carl C. Rasmussen (Philadelphia, Muhlenberg Press, 1957). See also Jin-Seop Eom, "Lutheran Education and Formation for: Re-appropriation of the Lutheran Heritage," 81.

<sup>45</sup> Robert Kolb and Charles P. Arand, *The Genius of Luther's Theology*, 30–31.

<sup>46</sup> Jae-Young Jeong, *Religious-Sociological Understanding of Korean Church* (in Korean) (Seoul: Yeollin Publishing House, 2012), 336. In an article I wrote: “Korean Protestant churches stressed evangelizing or witnessing to Christ as an obligation of all Christians (this is one of the reasons for rapid church growth), but did not teach the value of vocation (this is one of the reasons that Protestants are accused for their unethical and egoistic attitudes in the public life). These two, I think, are what Protestants can learn from Luther as regards the Christian life in the public domain.” Jin-Seop Eom, “Lutheran Education and Formation for: Re-appropriation of the Lutheran Heritage,” 61.

<sup>47</sup> Jin-Seop Eom, “Lutheran Education and Formation for: Re-appropriation of the Lutheran Heritage,” 61–62.

<sup>48</sup> Jong-Seo Kim, “Pope Requested Korean Catholics for Qualitative Maturity” (in Korean), *Chosun Ilbo* (Daily Newspaper), August 20, 2014, A29.

<sup>49</sup> Einar Molland, *Kristenhetens Kirker og Trossamfunn*, 234.

<sup>50</sup> Jae-Young Jeong, *Religious-Sociological Understanding of Korean Church*, 128–129.

<sup>51</sup> E. Theodore Bachmann and Mercia Brenne Bachmann, *A Handbook of Lutheran Churches in the World* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1989), 188. See more details in Jin-Seop Eom, “History of Lutheranism in Korea,” *Missio Apostolica* 20, no. 2 (Nov. 2012): 246f.

<sup>52</sup> Karlfried Froehlich, “Luther on Vocation,” *Harvesting Martin Luther's Reflections on Theology, Ethics, and the Church*, ed. Timothy J. Wengert (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 127.

<sup>53</sup> Young-Jae Kim, *Korean Church History* (in Korean) (Seoul: Irehseowon, 2004), 312.

<sup>54</sup> Scott H. Hendrix, *Luther* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2009), 46.

<sup>55</sup> Martin Luther, *Luther's Works, Vol. 35: Word and Sacrament I*, ed. J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald and H. T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1960), 50.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>57</sup> *The Book of Concord*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 360. *Small Catechism*. Cf. Robert Kolb and Charles P. Arand, *The Genius of Luther's Theology*, 218.

<sup>58</sup> Hendrix, *Luther*, 48.

<sup>59</sup> Heinrich Bornkamm, *Luther's World of Thought*, tr. Martin H. Bertram (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1958), 84.

<sup>60</sup> Einar Molland, *Kristenhetens Kirker og Trossamfunn*, 240. Molland especially cites Ch. 21 of *Confessio Helvetica Posterior* (1562).

<sup>61</sup> Jin-Seop Eom, “Lutheran Education and Formation for: Re-appropriation of the Lutheran Heritage,” 79.

<sup>62</sup> Gerhard Forde, “The Lord's Supper as the Testament of Jesus,” in *The Preached God*, 146.

<sup>63</sup> Heinrich Bornkamm, *Luther's World of Thought*, 95.

<sup>64</sup> Gerhard Forde, “The Lord's Supper as the Testament of Jesus,” in *The Preached God*, 97, 100.

<sup>65</sup> Dong-Shik Yoo maintains, too, though from another angle, that Shamanism forms the Korean base culture and has exerted influence on Confucianism, Buddhism, Taoism, and Christianity. Dong-Shik Yoo, *Korean Religions and Christianity* (in Korean) (Seoul: The Christian Literature Society of Korea, 1965).

<sup>66</sup> Gerhard O. Forde, “Loser Takes All: The Victory of Christ,” in *A More Radical Gospel*, 100.

<sup>67</sup> *The Book of Concord*, 43.

<sup>68</sup> Art. 2 (Fundamentals of the Faith) of the Constitution of the Lutheran Church in Korea.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>70</sup> See Jin-Seop Eom, "The Lutheran Confessions in Korea," *Dialog* 45, no. 2 (Summer 2006): 138–142. I maintain in the article that out of the five types Carl E. Braaten categorizes concerning Lutherans' attitudes to the Lutheran confessional writings, the attitude of reprobation and of hypothetical confessional Lutheranism would apply to most Korean Lutherans. As for the former attitude, Korean Lutherans would accept the Confessions only "insofar as" (*quatenus*) they conform to Scripture and commit themselves to the confessions only "insofar as" (*quatenus*) they are relevant to modern times. As for the latter attitude, they, conscious of their Lutheran identity, would subscribe to the confessions "because" (*quia*) they are Lutheran. See also Carl E. Braaten, *Principles of Lutheran Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), 29–31.

<sup>71</sup> Mark Noll, "American Lutherans Yesterday and Today," in *Lutherans Today: American Lutheran Identity in the 21st Century*, ed. Richard Cimino (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 20.

<sup>72</sup> Cited by Robert Benne, "Integrity and Fragmentation: Can the Lutheran Center Hold?" in *Lutherans Today: American Lutheran Identity in the 21st Century*, ed. Richard Cimino (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 207.

# LCMS Missionaries and an Alien Indian Culture: A Gospel-Culture Engagement at the Margins of Indian Society

Stanish Stanley

**Abstract:** Does the Gospel message have within it the inherent potential to engage and transform a culture that seems to be alien and at odds with its worldview? A look into the early twentieth century history of the evangelizing efforts of LCMS missionaries in South India provides a glimpse into how the missionaries as the “bearers of the Gospel” encountered a native culture at odds with the Biblical message and vision. Through this mission story, the essay argues that Gospel-Culture engagement entails negotiations of varying concerns and aspirations of both the missionary and the “converting” people, with the Gospel enabling the native people to challenge and transform their culture by contextualizing its Biblical promise and hope.

## Introduction

There is no doubt that the culture promoted by our scientific- and technology-driven society of the twenty-first century poses enormous challenges for Christian life and witness. Rapid industrialization, urbanization, globalization, and technology have made life easier and faster; and with increase in comfort, organized religion seems to be shedding adherents by the millions. That the church seems to be talking to a culture that is completely at odds with it poses an important question: Can the Christian message (Gospel) engage a culture that seems to be alien to its worldview<sup>1</sup>? Surely, this is not the first time that the Church has faced the challenge of encountering an opposing worldview or system at odds with its biblical vision and promise. A critical look into the past will suffice to answer any lingering doubts about the clash of perspectives in Gospel-Culture interaction and also reveal the inherent potential of the Gospel to transform people and culture. Accordingly, this essay looks to history to find whether Lutheran Christians have encountered such a situation of opposing values before and, if so, then investigate how Lutherans shared

---

*Stanish Stanley, an ordained pastor of the India Evangelical Lutheran Church is pursuing his PhD in Historical Theology at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis. His dissertation investigates the mission work of his, “mother” and presently “partner,” Church—the LCMS—in Trivandrum, South India. He is married to Beena Stanish and has three daughters. He has his Bachelor’s from United Theological College, India (2006) and Master’s in Cross-Cultural Theology from the Protestant Theological University of the Netherlands (2007).*

the Gospel in a cultural context much different from their own and determine the outcome of such an interaction that teaches important lessons for us today.

### **Picturing the Historical Context: Twentieth-Century Subaltern<sup>2</sup> Culture in Travancore<sup>3</sup>**

In the year 1911, the LCMS<sup>4</sup> missionaries moved into Trivandrum to proclaim the Gospel at their initial mission sites among the Sambavar (also called pariahs, paraiyans, parayas, or Adi-dravidar) community.<sup>5</sup> The chief initiators of this move were the Sambavar leader, Arulanandan Upadeshi, and his colleague, Kanjanam Upadeshi, who belonged to a mixed caste.<sup>6</sup> They came to know of the Missouri Lutheran India Mission (MELIM, the organizational name of the LCMS work in India) working among their Sambavar kinsmen in Nagercoil, the Tamil-speaking area of Travancore. Through the missionary's native assistant, G. Jesudason, they invited the Lutheran missionary,<sup>7</sup> Rev. Henry Nau, to work among the Malayalam-speaking population of Travancore. This move on the part of the LCMS missionaries to enter Trivandrum and work among the Sambavars meant that they were entering a culture that, much like cultures in other parts of India, promoted and maintained a '*non-egalitarian social vision*' of caste stratification and prejudice that was severely manifested in its day-to-day life practice.<sup>8</sup> The social vision of Travancore society was played out through the Hindu social structure that was designed to provide the Brahmins<sup>9</sup> various socio-economic and religio-cultural benefits at the apex of the system. Following the Brahmins in influence were the land-owning Nairs<sup>10</sup> and Syrian Christians,<sup>11</sup> along with the Muslims. By this time, the lower castes, such as the Nadars and Ezhavas, were also seeking their own power and influence in this system through socio-political emancipatory struggle. Below these caste groups were the slave castes of Travancore (who today categorize themselves under the name 'dalits'<sup>12</sup>), like the 'Sambavars' and 'Cheramars,' who until 1855 could be bought and sold as slaves and were living under severe social and economic constraints.<sup>13</sup> Inherent in such a society was the imagined and lived-out reality that not all people were the same, even that the lower castes and the slave castes were lacking in their humanity to be seen on par with those belonging to the higher castes.

Apart from the 'superior/inferior' dichotomy that was played out in the cultural life of Travancore, the LCMS missionaries also had to engage a culture of exclusion, control, and mutual suspicion. From the eighth century, with ever-increasing Brahmanical influence and power in Kerala, the slave castes—the Sambavars, Cheramars,<sup>14</sup> Vedas, Kuravas, Nayyadis, etc.—came to be seen as ritually polluting people. In order to maintain systemic exclusion of people, certain castes like the Sambavars and Cheramars served as hereditary slaves for whom it was impossible to release themselves from their wretched condition even if they so desired.<sup>15</sup> In fact, the owners had power to flog them, enchain them, and in some cases maim them and

deprive them of their lives. Not only were they denied human comforts, but they were systematically tortured both mentally and physically; if they tried to escape, they were hunted down, brought back, and punished to serve as a terror for others likely to seek escape.<sup>16</sup> Alongside, daily life transactions in Travancore were defined by the maintaining of a prescribed distance between the lower and slave castes while interacting with members of the higher castes. According to rules, they were supposed to stand sixty-four paces away from the Nair landlord while conversing and also had to make sure that they would not pollute the high castes with their 'contaminating approach.' This meant that slave castes like the Sambavars were not permitted to enter villages or towns of higher castes; and, in certain places, if any untouchable person was seen in public, he would be immediately killed or physically injured for not moving out of sight quickly enough or far away enough.<sup>17</sup> Such rules of 'untouchability and unapproachability' had to be observed when approaching the courts for redress of grievances, which meant that their concerns would in most cases not be heard at all. As a part of the all-encompassing control system, the slaves could not speak the language of the ordinary people and were supposed to refer to their masters and their family members with respect, while referring to himself as 'adiyen' (servant/slave) and his own children as 'monkeys' and 'calves.'<sup>18</sup>

The slaves were also sold and transferred like cattle from one owner to another, or were bonded laborers for the Sirkar (government) or for temples and churches. Often husband, wife, and children were separated by sale or mortgage, and their prices were determined in terms of money or domestic animals.<sup>19</sup> All of these restrictions, coupled with a ban on holding land and no access to education, assured that the slave castes of Travancore fell farther down into the abyss of ignominy and despair.<sup>20</sup> Also, the slave castes could not enter higher caste temples and worship their Hindu gods. Sadly, the low-castes who were victims of such an oppressive system had internalized it to such an extent that among the various lower castes competing for elevation and dominance in the social hierarchy, there was intense caste-feeling; and they observed untouchability among each other as a normal and necessary social rule.<sup>21</sup> Naturally, with opportunities and resources being scarce, there was intense competition among the different lower caste communities that was driven by caste prejudice and mutual suspicion of each other.

The cultural context of Travancore in the twentieth century also manifested a perspective of slave mentality, exploitation, and caste oppression. The slave castes had once been a free people, but by the twelfth century, with the entrenchment of the Brahmanical caste system in Kerala, the slave castes had become a degraded and oppressed community that had no option but to work in the field of the 'Jemmies' (mostly Nair village landlords) or 'Routers' (Muslim landlords) and do all kinds of dirty menial jobs. The exploitation of the slave castes could be gauged from the fact that even after serving as the backbone of agriculture and working from morning to night in the rice fields, the slaves themselves went starving because all the rice went

to fill the barns of the high caste masters. Living in crowded 'paracheries' beyond the village limits in unhygienic conditions with houses made of sticks, reeds, and mud, the slave castes were also prescribed a particular dimension which made them bend double to enter their own house. To make ends meet, the Sambavars also worked with bamboo, making baskets and mats that they would sell in the markets by placing their articles in view and then retiring to a specific distance from where they would shout the price to the passerby and take whatever money was placed for the articles taken by people.<sup>22</sup> Overall, the cultural environment of the slave castes was defined by a severe 'slave mentality,' such that even though slavery was abolished in 1855, the idea of freedom bereft of their master's guidance and control was a strange phenomenon to which the slave castes could not acclimatize themselves; thus, sadly, these communities and individuals could not unshackle themselves from the all-encompassing effects of the system.<sup>23</sup> The social exploitation was so bad that in 1910 the Dewan (Prime Minister) of Travancore had to issue a circular to address the issue of caste people trying to keep the lower castes away from judicial institutions where apparently they had the opportunity to seek redress for injustice committed upon them.<sup>24</sup>

The impact of systemic caste oppression also included its corresponding influence upon the religio-cultural world of the lower and slave castes in Travancore. A significant challenge for the LCMS missionaries was that they were entering a subaltern religio-cultural world of fear and ritual appeasement. Religio-culturally, the slave castes had their own gods and deities. They indulged in appeasement of demons to keep themselves and their family members safe from trouble. They lived in constant dread of demons and evil spirits, which they believed would harm people, and had to be propitiated by animal sacrifices and libations of blood.<sup>25</sup> Fear of 'pey,' the roaming evil spirits of departed individuals who had met with violent and tragic deaths, was a serious affliction; and the community diviner/exorcist who was consulted for help served as an important leader and comforter of the subaltern communities.

The comforting and uplifting presence of the Gospel met another important challenge in the Hindu-imposed worldview that the slave castes were a 'cursed' people. Without doubt, the behavior of the Hindus had its own impact upon the consciousness of the Dalits such that they had accepted their degradation as being normal.<sup>26</sup> According to Hindu belief, the Dalit was impure because of sins committed in a previous life and so their occupations were dirty in themselves. Consequently, the Hindus believed that all pollution was transferable by physical contact between a defiled person or object to another, meaning that the psycho-social perception of the slave castes included the understanding that they were an impure people by birth who were consigned to such fate by God for their previous sins.<sup>27</sup> Even though this was probably not personally acceptable to many in the slave caste communities, still

these perceptions and images were reinforced in real life daily practice and socio-cultural symbols of society.<sup>28</sup>

Thus for the slave castes of Travancore, as in many subaltern communities in India, the dominant Hindu vision of collective living and religion presided over a host of disabilities in various spheres of life that contravened the fundamental rights of the Dalits to construct their identity in freedom and dignity.<sup>29</sup> It was into such an environment—radically opposed to the Biblical understanding of God and its values of humanity—that the LCMS missionaries were called to proclaim the Gospel and change lives.

### **LCMS Missionaries and Their Gospel Emphasis**

A close look into the history of MELIM reveals the fact that the LCMS missionaries were representatives and products of their times. Its initial missionaries in India, Theodore Naether and Franz Mohn, had earlier left the service of the Leipzig mission in India because of irreconcilable differences on the doctrine of the verbal inspiration of Scriptures. Undoubtedly, the Lutheran missionaries were convinced of their Confessional Lutheran faith and placed a strong emphasis on ‘proper Lutheran doctrine,’ and preaching of the ‘pure Gospel.’<sup>30</sup> They believed in the three *solas*: grace alone, Scripture alone, and faith alone; and the two Sacraments, Baptism and the Lord’s Supper, were affirmed as channels through which God bestows forgiving and empowering grace upon humankind.<sup>31</sup> Accordingly, the focus of the LCMS missionaries when entering the Malayalam-speaking area of Travancore was to proclaim the Gospel among the Sambavars and many other castes and to establish the Church.<sup>32</sup> As such, this community of faith that the missionaries worked to gather, teach, and grow in Travancore was not envisioned as prioritizing any particular caste community or group. Rather, the desire was to establish the Church as a community where people of all castes would coexist without any caste feelings and prejudice. In this, the focus on the spiritual side of believers and the need for salvation from sin were central to the missionary effort.<sup>33</sup>

It also seems that the LCMS missionaries, like other Western missionaries during this time, were modern men who conformed to a modern worldview and culture. As Paul Hiebert points out, most missionaries accepted the superiority of Western civilization and saw it as their task to ‘Civilize, Commercialize as well as Christianize’ the people they served.<sup>34</sup> In Travancore, the LCMS missionaries saw themselves as civilizing and ‘saving the souls’ of individuals who were damned because of their idolatrous practices and unethical living.<sup>35</sup> According to Rev. M. M. Jacob, who grew up in the environment of MELIM and later became a pastor in the church, the missionaries dismissed any talk of ‘pey’ and ‘spirit worship’ as devilish Hindu practices that had to be overcome by proper teaching of doctrine and by living a proper Christian life.<sup>36</sup> At the same time, even though adhering to a modern bias,



the missionaries' Lutheran faith also convinced them that all cultures and people were overwhelmed by sin and were in need of redemption and saving through the Gospel of Christ. For this reason, the Law-Gospel contrast was central to the way they saw the world and the native culture to which they were called to proclaim the Gospel. Quite probably they saw themselves as 'enlightened' Christians who were able to grasp the cognitive propositional truths of Christianity that had to be disseminated to the pre-modern natives through proper catechetical instruction.<sup>37</sup>

Furthermore, the proclamation of the Gospel and the establishment of the Church in Travancore meant breaking down cultural prejudices and boundaries and providing a new vision of community and hope. The period of the early twentieth century was a time of social upheaval and change, with the slave castes especially seeking alliances with the missionaries for emancipation and modernization. In such an environment of competing communities—all seeking entrance into the Church, but combined with personal and communitarian interests—the missionaries seemingly believed that it was up to them to provide the leadership and administration to teach the native converts that the Church was a place where people from all castes could come together and worship their true Lord and Savior.<sup>38</sup> This meant that various communities had to learn to accept each other and be ready to accommodate the concerns and aspirations of the other within the Church. Even though this was not easy task, the presence of the missionary provided the authority and influence to assure that all were welcome into the Body of Christ.<sup>39</sup>

### **Gospel-Culture Interaction in Travancore—Strategies, Engagement, Disillusionment, and the New Community**

The LCMS missionaries started work in Trivandrum around the adjoining areas of Kuttichel and Kattaicode in the year 1911. They very soon realized that proclaiming the Gospel meant reaching the people embedded in the midst of despair and various socio-cultural disabilities. In establishing the Church, the missionaries were heavily outnumbered in catering to the needs of the locals. They realized from their experiences in the other mission stations of Ambur and Nagercoil<sup>40</sup> that they needed the help of native co-workers to carry forward the Gospel message.<sup>41</sup> Accordingly, at the very outset, they focused on catechetical instruction of potential native leaders. They met weekly on Saturdays for catechetical instruction of native workers at a training school in Kattakada in Trivandrum, and

The study was in Malayalam. Studying the Word of God, focus on proper doctrinal truths through a study of the Small Catechism, learning of Christian songs, sharing and learning through Bible stories form part of the curriculum. Particular sins and events required a particular admonition and instruction. . . . The workers consist of a mix of both men and women, but walking long distances to reach Kattakada for study is a rather difficult task

for the women. . . . this study was to offer the Catechists and teachers that which can be taught to catechumens and school children week to week.<sup>42</sup>

Naturally, the LCMS missionaries in Travancore were serious about engaging the local culture with the Gospel. In many ways, they were seeking a complete change in the individual and wanted to see tangible changes in the lives of their converts. They were convinced that the best way to materialize this objective was through the agency of schools and boarding homes.<sup>43</sup> Entering into the subaltern Travancore culture, they soon found that the greatest impediment to a better future for the new converts was their practices drenched in age-old traditions and lifestyle that had to be questioned and changed. Thus, they started boarding schools with the belief that the next generation of Sambavar converts would learn scriptural truths alongside other school subjects, change long-established bad behavior patterns, and be an example to others of the new being promised in Christ.<sup>44</sup> In addition, nursery schools, middle schools, high schools, English education, teacher training schools, seminary for theological education, etc. helped alleviate the despair of the slave castes and also in the creation of a new Sambavar Lutheran community.<sup>45</sup> In due course, in keeping with their vision of a Church that included all communities of India, the missionaries moved from working only among Sambavar converts to engage other slave communities like the Cheramars and also other low-caste communities like the Nadars and Ezhavas. They also moved out of Trivandrum into other Malayalam areas in Malabar, Alapuzha, Shertalley, etc. Even in these moves, the native workers belonging to different communities played an important role in working side by side the missionary to carry the Gospel message to the people.

Given the enormity of the challenge of proclaiming the Gospel to a subaltern culture, mission engagement of the LCMS missionaries entailed constant appraisal and adjustments to the demands of context. For instance, the LCMS missionary was different in the sense that he was ready to 'mingle and even literally embrace' the 'polluted slave' people.<sup>46</sup> Presumably, this act of the missionary immediately projected him as the manifestation of a benevolent God, who was ready to embrace all, in contrast to the dominant caste Hindus, who practiced 'untouchability and maintained distance rules' in personal dealings and whose god could not be approached by the slaves. One could argue that the missionary through his interaction with the slave castes was embodying a symbolic Christian world vision of a different community dynamic that could be now lived out in the Church and larger society. However, at the same time that the missionaries were committed to improving the lot of the slave castes in the Lutheran Mission, they were also very conscious of the fact that they would be stuck with a caste group that would entrap and curtail their desire to share the Gospel with other communities in Travancore. Missionary F. R. Zucker, (served 1910–1930), in his quarterly report from Trivandrum in 1916 about the boys included in the boarding school at Trivandrum, notes:

There are three reasons for not limiting our classes to the number of boarding scholars, but admitting day scholars also, boys not as yet belonging to our Mission. First, our general principle of not restricting our missionary work to a specially favored class of people, whatever class that may be, but to preach the Gospel to every creature; secondly, our mission here in Travancore has already gone far on the road toward being definitely known as an exclusively Pariah mission, and every measure that we can take to correct this decidedly mistaken idea of our principles is of distinct value; third the number of boys that we shall be able to get from our own village churches for a number of years to come will not be sufficient to bring the classes up to the minimum strength necessary for obtaining Government grant and recognition. . . . By this plan adopted we can . . . extend our good influence to others besides Pariahs. Moreover, the presence of Shudra boys in the classes may be expected to raise the standards of cleanliness and intelligence.<sup>47</sup>

The above observations of Missionary Zucker provide a window into the mind of the LCMS missionary who is moved by the Gospel to care for the needy but at the same time is conscious of cultural codes and their resultant effects on the future of the mission. Undoubtedly, the missionaries wanted to help the Sambavar (pariah) converts and establish the Church among them, but at the same time they were conscious of the fact that the Lutheran Church in Travancore risked the prospect of being derided and dismissed as a 'Pariah church.'

Furthermore, the missionary interaction in Travancore can be from the perspective of a 'disillusionment and hope' juxtaposition. These were challenging times for the missionaries as they were entering into a subaltern culture and a new language group. The missionaries had to pursue their own language study alongside their own Gospel work among the people, and the last thing they wanted was a disinterested, non-appreciative, and resistant audience. Missionary F. R. Zucker, in his quarterly report to the Mission Board in St. Louis, reports in Nov.–Dec. 1914, just three years after the work started in Travancore:

no one ought to think that the hundreds of souls that we count have all been won and brought in securely, certainly not even half, perhaps not even a fourth, and none of them is secure in the faith. When we daily hear it and see with our own eyes how these people are bound and chained in certain unchaste customs and grave sins against the sixth commandment, how they stand in service as slaves to the father of lies, how so many among them are mentally dull and spiritually dead, so I hope that it will not be falsely interpreted or that someone would be taken amiss when I say we do not always do our work with courage and joy, but rather that there are times when hope completely disappears and we want to give up the work. When God then comforts us again and strengthens us, he gives us fresh courage

and his blessing for renewed labor. But He must do it. Thus we pressingly need the supplication of our brothers at home, not only customary prayer, but prayer that is in earnest.<sup>48</sup>

Imbedded in the above observations of Missionary Zucker is the fact that the Lutheran missionaries in Travancore had entered into a subaltern culture and people who were badly in need of help. Clearly, the missionaries had their own approach to addressing the concerns of their slave caste converts; and, even though many times the results were depressing, they held out hope. In the course of time, the missionaries—through financial schemes to eradicate poverty, personal help to pay off landlord debts, protecting the right to worship at church on Sundays, safeguarding converts from high caste goons, and instilling in them a sense of social dignity by helping them dress neatly and speak good language like the caste people—enabled and strengthened the establishing of the Lutheran Church in Travancore.<sup>49</sup>

### **Gospel and Culture in Dialogue: The Native Converts Respond**

In spite of the challenges that the missionaries faced in Travancore, they gathered the most converts for the LCMS mission in India. The mission phase of the Lutheran work in Trivandrum ended in November 1956 with the formation of the Trivandrum District. Later, on January 8, 1958, all the mission churches of MELIM from the Districts of Ambur, Nagercoil, and Trivandrum came together to form the India Evangelical Lutheran Church.<sup>50</sup> It needs to be noted that even when the LCMS missionaries were heavily outnumbered in the mission field of India, especially during World Wars I and II, the Lutheran Mission grew at a rapid pace.<sup>51</sup> Thus, even as the LCMS missionaries were registering their unhappiness at the converts and native helpers not reaching up to the standards that they expected of them, the believers were gradually entering the new Christian community of promise with hope and great expectations.

In all probability, the ‘called community’ of Christ in Travancore were using their Lutheran heritage to address issues that concerned their life and culture. Undoubtedly, the Gospel shared by the Lutheran missionaries in Travancore focused heavily on the sinfulness of people and cultures and proclaimed the forgiveness in Jesus Christ that spoke directly to the life situation of the slave castes who were overburdened with systemic disabilities in a culture that had denigrated them as sinful people. Caught in a culture of shame from which they had no escape, the Gospel provided them with the necessary tools and symbols of hope to envision a new life of promise. The Lutheran pastor-poet, Rev. M. Paulose, who worked alongside the Lutheran missionaries from 1911 in Travancore, captures this new found picture of hope in his Baptism song, found in the Malayalam Lutheran Liturgy Book:

Chorus: Lord, Son of God, give us your blessing!

Stanza 1: Ocean of blessing give us your blessings, Answer the prayers of sinners / and slaves who suffer in this world with burdens of sin

Stanza 3: Jesus, let them drink your Word every day, and / protect these born again babies through the way of eternal life.

Stanza 5: Come near us and give us victory when the sins that fell humankind, / ropes of Satan (worldly desires and enjoyment of the flesh) create struggles in our life<sup>52</sup>

The above verses from the baptismal song of Rev. Paulose prioritizes 'blessing' for the new convert in Baptism. For a community that was challenging an imposed dominant caste perception of their being a 'cursed' community, the entry into the community of Christian faith was seen as an initiation into a new socio-religious reality of blessing, protection, and hope. In Christ, the new identity of the Sambavar converts was that of a 'blessed' people chosen by God and nurtured into His community, the Church. Moreover, the song does not end with total deliverance, but with a plea of God's presence to be near the convert, making victory possible as they engaged in a continuous fight against worldly suffering unleashed by the forces of evil. Also, the Sambavar understanding of God undergoes a radical change from envisioning of 'evil spirits' as the supreme power that can be worshiped and appeased to get back at enemies to the Christian God being seen as an 'Ocean of blessing' who blesses and answers the prayers of sinners and suffering slaves. This change in perception about God and themselves as sinful human beings can also be seen in yet another song by Rev. M. Paulose:

Stanza 1: God's dear Son sent to earth for sinners as a gift / sinners rejected gift of God, went through many ways and joined with evil spirits (pey)

Stanza 2: to destroy the power of evil spirits (pey) and to turn and sanctify the sinner / the curse of sin and punishment of sinners was foisted on the head of holy Son.

Stanza 3: Holy God hates sin, (but) loves sinner with mercy / nobody knows the scale to measure the depth and height of God's love

Stanza 4: (God) quickly lifts the falling children and leads (them) through holy path, / (He) adopts the sinking sinner as own son and supports and embraces

Stanza 5: joining near (with) him is wonderful love, attracts towards the Calvary hill / the God who picks up and embraces is love, (He) died and resurrected on the cross and gave liberation

Stanza 6: the power of god's loving Word gave birth again to me a sinner / I have abundance of fortune that I am God's child, for ever and ever Jesus is my manager<sup>53</sup>

The above song provides glimpses of the creative ways in which the slave caste converts used the conceptual tools provided to them by the Lutheran sharing of the

Gospel to address their own socio-cultural challenges and look forward to the future. This song on Christian warfare captures the psycho-social world of the slave castes and especially the Sambavar converts. That evil spirits (pey), an important religio-cultural belief, still had to be addressed by the Christian Gospel may be seen in the song as the spirits of those sinners who rejected the gift of God's dear Son. Very much like the slave castes themselves, Jesus Christ is pictured as being burdened with the curse of sin and punishment of sinners. This burden is, however, for a divine purpose, namely, to destroy the power of 'pey' (evil spirit) and to sanctify the sinner who is loved by God. Here, too, we see that, in contrast to their earlier religiosity of fear and appeasement, their 'God understanding' now changes to one of 'love and acceptance.' Now they proclaim allegiance to a God who readily 'lifts' them out of their fallen situation, adopts them as His own, and supports them with a warm embrace. God is here understood through Jesus Christ as one who 'picks up and embraces,' showing 'love,' and giving 'liberation' to the much-oppressed slave community.

From these songs articulated by Rev. Paulose, one can argue that the work of the Lutheran Mission in Travancore provided the local native converts with the conceptual tools to understand God in completely different terms as compared to their previous religiosity. Slowly but surely, the religio-cultural worldview and lifestyle of the new Christian community of slave caste converts was changing from a context of 'fear' to one of 'promise and hope.'

## **Conclusion**

This essay has provided several significant insights for our consideration. First, the LCMS mission in Travancore affirms the assessment put forward by Cyril Firth in studying the conversion movement in India, that "it has often been the converts who sought out the missionaries rather than the missionaries who sought out the converts."<sup>54</sup> Second, the desire of the Dalit community in Travancore to enter into the Lutheran mission was an effort by the oppressed community to reject and overcome a non-egalitarian, exploitative, and despair-instilling symbolic worldview that was manifested in the socio-economic and religio-cultural way of life in Travancore. For this purpose, they sought an alliance with the Lutheran missionary and, through the active involvement of their kinsmen, the subaltern Sambavars sought to enter into the Christian world vision of human living that proclaimed a counter-cultural egalitarian, accepting and hope-instilling worldview. In this new religious meaning system, the missionaries provided a helping hand to the Dalit and other low-caste communities through economic and social capital.<sup>55</sup> Third, even though the Dalit community's entrance into the new symbolic vision of Christianity was heavily managed and controlled by the Lutheran missionaries who were convinced of their action-plan and solutions, there were no doubt theological resources in the newly-embraced religion that helped the converts to resourcefully

construct an alternate worldview that spoke directly to their concerns, aspirations, and hopes.<sup>56</sup> The entire understanding of a 'loving and grace providing' God manifested in the socio-religious approach of the benevolent missionary, who was ready to engage the 'polluting slave' people, had a far-reaching impact in the minds and perception of the Dalit converts. The Christian faith and perceived faith community stood in symbolic contrast to that of their previous religiosity of fear and a community impacted by socio-economic exploitation and degradation.

In summing up, this short essay argues that the LCMS mission to India from the late nineteenth century through the middle of the twentieth century involved the clashing of divergent worldviews and beliefs represented by the Western Christian missionary and the subaltern people of India. In addition, it also entailed the dialogue between different perceptions, concerns, and aspirations of both the missionaries and subaltern converts. In and through this interaction has developed the Lutheran Church in Kerala, India.<sup>57</sup> This body of Christ is not perfect, and it has its own problems and internal challenges that need to be addressed by its believers. Nevertheless, the Gospel has penetrated the culture and its people and has provided the tools to address the challenges of the present and the future.

It has to be noted that even today the Church is placed in a context of divergent worldviews, especially promoted by a post-Christian West steeped in different philosophies, ideologies, and progress driven by science and technology. There is no doubt that even in such a culture there are those who feel left out, marginalized, out of place, and in need of purpose and hope. Through identifying their concerns, through contextualizing the Gospel to answer and challenge the aspirations, perceptions, and worldview of today's culture, and through providing an alternative vision of a community that lives Christ's love, forgiveness, and grace, the mission of the Lutheran Church will continue to be relevant and life-giving in a highly individualistic and materialistic world.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Worldview can be understood as the 'fundamental cognitive, affective, and evaluative presuppositions a group of people make about the nature of things and which they use to order their lives. Further, worldviews are the maps that people in a community have of realities that they use for living. See, Paul G. Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews. An Anthropological Understanding of How People Change* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 15.

<sup>2</sup> In this essay, the term 'subaltern,' 'dalit,' 'slave caste,' and 'Sambavar' will be used interchangeably to articulate the marginalized people in Indian society. The term 'subaltern' used by the Italian Marxist theoretician Antonio Gramsci means a position of 'inferior rank.' The term was popularized in India through the Subaltern studies group headed by historian Ranajit Guha looking into the subordination of South Asian society under colonial British rule, and the common man's resistance to such rule. In India, the dalits, the tribals, the Adivasis, the backward classes, women, the varieties of workers involved in cheap and bonded labor, and

children can all belong to the classification of 'Subaltern.' See Gnana Patrick, "Subaltern Hermeneutics" in E. P. Mathew (ed.), *Hermeneutics—Multicultural Perspectives*, (Chennai: Satya Nilayam Publications, 2009), 247–250. Also see, David Forgacs, ed., *A Gramsci Reader: Selected Writings 1916–1925*, (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1988), 333–335.

<sup>3</sup> Travancore State in the southern part of India was one of the larger of India's many princely states ruled by a Hindu Maharaja but indirectly ruled by the British. He legitimized his rule by defining himself as ruling on behalf of the deity Sri Padmanabha (Lord Vishnu) who was the real ruler of the State. The Travancore State was made up of Malayalam-speaking and Tamil-speaking people, and in 1956, the Malayalam-speaking part was included to form the state of Kerala in free India while the Tamil-speaking area of Travancore remained in the State of Tamil Nadu. See Koji Kawashima, *Missionaries and a Hindu State. Travancore 1858–1936* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), 4–5.

<sup>4</sup> LCMS stands for the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, a Confessional Lutheran Church Body in the United States of America. When the LCMS mission to India began in Tamil Nadu on the South Eastern tip of India, the LCMS went by the name 'The Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Missouri, Ohio and other States' organized in Chicago in 1847. Further, the LCMS work in India during its mission phase went by its organization name—Missouri Evangelical Lutheran India Mission (MELIM). See Earl H. Miller, "The Missouri Evangelical Lutheran India Mission" in C. H. Swavelly (ed.), *The Lutheran Enterprise in India* (Madras: Federation of Evangelical Lutheran Churches in India, 1952), 184.

<sup>5</sup> H. M. Zorn, *Much Cause for Joy and Some for Learning. A Report on 75 years of Mission in India* (Malappuram, Kerala: MELIM, 1970), 19–20. Also see Swavelly, *The Lutheran Enterprise*, 188.

<sup>6</sup> See G. Jesudason, *Early History of the Missouri Evangelical Lutheran Mission in Nagercoil District*, Unpublished manuscript written for Missionaries (Madras: Aug. 24, 1948), 27–28.

<sup>7</sup> Similar requests were made to the LCMS missionaries many times during their work in Trivandrum and elsewhere in South India. One such request made to missionary F. R. Zucker and the approach taken by the missionary to decide in favor of the work can be found in his Quarterly Report of 1914 to the Mission Board in St. Louis. See translated letters of LCMS Missionary F. R. Zucker by Shawn Barnett, "Malayalam Field in India" in *Historical Footnotes*, Vol. 59, Issue 1 (St. Louis: Concordia Historical Institute, Spring 2014), 5.

<sup>8</sup> See A. Selvaraj, *Christianity and Social Transformation. The Kerala Story* (Trivandrum: ICRO, 2002), 15–16.

<sup>9</sup> The Indian social caste structure consists of Brahmins (the priestly class), the Kshatriyas (the warrior class), the Vaishyas (the trading class) and the Shudras (the servile class). However, within this fourfold division are various 'jati' or communities. Also, outside of this fourfold division are various backward castes, the Dalits (previously called the slave castes or untouchables) and the Adivasis (forest dwellers or tribals).

<sup>10</sup> In Kerala society, Nairs belonged to the Shudra class but for all practical purposes were warriors for the local kings (Rajah). By the twentieth century, they had become the village landlords called 'Jemmies.' See Selvaraj, *Christianity and Social*, 5.

<sup>11</sup> The Syrian Christians of Kerala, claim ancestry with those converted by the Apostle St. Thomas in AD 52. Historical evidence points to the Syrian Christians as a community arising out of the immigration of Nestorian Christians in AD 345 under the leadership of Thomas of Cana, who settled and adapted to life along the Malabar coast in Kerala. The Syrian Christians (also called St. Thomas Christians) adapted to their socio-cultural environment as one of the high castes in Kerala on par with the Nair landlords. See Joy Gnanadason, *A Forgotten History. The Story of Missionary Movement and the liberation of people in South Travancore* (Madras: Gurukul Lutheran Theological College and Research Institute, 1994), 33. Also see Selvaraj, *Christianity and Social*, 5.



<sup>12</sup> ‘Dalit’ means burst, split, scattered, dispersed, broken, torn asunder, destroyed, or crushed. The previously untouchable (slave) castes of India have taken the name ‘Dalit’ for themselves to express their collective experience as an oppressed and marginalized community and also to collectively fight for their rights. Hence, the Sambavars are a Dalit caste that is part of the subalterns of Indian society. See Selvaraj, *Christianity and Social*, 10.

<sup>13</sup> K. K. Kusuman, *Slavery in Travancore* (Trivandrum: Kerala Historical Society, 1973), 28–41.

<sup>14</sup> Cheramars were also called Pulayas. See Kusuman, *Slavery*, 31.

<sup>15</sup> Kusuman, *Slavery*, 24.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 43, 59.

<sup>17</sup> See A. Selvaraj, *Christianity and Social*, 7, 14–16, 22.

<sup>18</sup> Gnanadason, *A Forgotten History*, 30–32.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 18–29.

<sup>21</sup> Selvaraj, *Christianity and Social*, 19. Also see Kusuman, *Slavery*, 34, 37–38.

<sup>22</sup> Gnanadason, *A Forgotten History*, 30–32.

<sup>23</sup> Kusuman, *Slavery*, 55–58.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

<sup>25</sup> Gnanadason, *A Forgotten History*, 32.

<sup>26</sup> Selvaraj, *Christianity and Social*, 49.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 17–19.

<sup>28</sup> Interview with Rev. M. M. Jacob on June 7, 2012. Rev. Jacob, at the time of the interview, was around 90 years old and is the oldest living pastor who studied and worked with LCMS missionaries during the MELIM period.

<sup>29</sup> Rowena Robinson and Sathianathan Clark eds., *Religious Conversion in India. Modes, Motivations and Meanings* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003), 331.

<sup>30</sup> Swavely, *The Lutheran Enterprise*, 185.

<sup>31</sup> D. Christudas, *Tranquebar to Travancore*, (Delhi: ISPCK, 2008), 13.

<sup>32</sup> Zorn, *Much Cause for Joy and Some for Learning*, 20.

<sup>33</sup> See Missionary Conference response to memorandum of Depressed classes (untouchable castes) prepared by A. Johnson in the 131st *Trivandrum District Conference*, (MELIM: 1954), 30–31. Also see Missionary Conference Response to petition by Rev. G. Jesudason the Sambavar pastor who invited the MELIM missionaries to work among the Sambavars of Nagercoil—the Tamil language-speaking areas of Travancore, in the 72nd *Nagercoil District Conference Minutes*, (MELIM: April 1942), 14–15. Also see F. R. Zucker, *Quarterly Report from Station Trivandrum II, Missouri Lutheran Mission Travancore*, July 1, 1916, 3–4.

<sup>34</sup> Paul G. Hiebert, *The Gospel in Human Contexts. Anthropological Explorations for Contemporary Missions* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academics, 2009), 83.

<sup>35</sup> See F. R. Zucker, *Quarterly Report from Station Trivandrum II, Missouri Lutheran Mission Travancore*, July 1, 1916, 1–2.

<sup>36</sup> Interview with Rev. M. M. Jacob on June 7, 2012 in Trivandrum.

<sup>37</sup> See the essay of M. L. Kretzmann, “The Missionary and His Theology” read at the 1962 General Conference of the Missouri Evangelical Lutheran India Mission, 2. Cited in Luther W. Meinzen, *A Church in Mission: Identity and Purpose in India* (Vaniyambadi: IELC Concordia Press and Training Institute, 1981), 76, 77–85.

<sup>38</sup> 72nd *Nagercoil District Conference Minutes* (MELIM: April 1942), 13–18.

<sup>39</sup> Swavely, *The Lutheran Enterprise*, 196. Also see Meinzen, *A Church in Mission*, 92.

<sup>40</sup> The LCMS mission first started in 1895 around the northern Tamil-speaking area of Krishnagiri and Ambur on the South eastern tip of India. It later moved southward in 1907 to Nagercoil—the Tamil-speaking area of Travancore State. Later in 1911, it entered the Malayalam language-speaking area of Trivandrum in the Travancore State.

<sup>41</sup> Elmer Edward Griesse, *Lutheran India Missions, Unpublished Master's Thesis* (St. Louis: Washington University Department of History, 1945), 40.

<sup>42</sup> F. R. Zucker, *Quarterly Report to the Mission Board from Trivandrum*, Oct–Dec. 1914.

<sup>43</sup> Herbert M. Zorn, *The Background and the First Twenty-Five Years of the Missouri Evangelical Lutheran India Mission 1894–1919*. Unpublished Master's Thesis (St. Louis: Concordia Seminary, 1969), 117.

<sup>44</sup> F. R. Zucker, *Quarterly Report from Station Trivandrum II, Missouri Lutheran Mission Travancore*, July 1, 1916.

<sup>45</sup> D. Christudas, *Tranquebar to Travancore*, 75.

<sup>46</sup> Interview with Rev. M. M. Jacob on June 7, 2012. The observation is also a summation of the common nostalgia among the elderly Dalit Christian converts in Trivandrum irrespective of denominational affiliation.

<sup>47</sup> F. R. Zucker, *Quarterly Report from Station Trivandrum II, Missouri Lutheran Mission Travancore*, July 1, 1916.

<sup>48</sup> F. R. Zucker, *Quarterly Report to the Mission Board from Trivandrum*, Oct–Dec. 1914, 7.

<sup>49</sup> Christudas, *Tranquebar to Travancore*, 74–77.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 70–71.

<sup>51</sup> Griesse, *Lutheran India*, 22–23. Also see Zorn, *The Background and the First Twenty-Five Years*, 117.

<sup>52</sup> Song No. 204, *IELC Malayalam Hymn book*—Baptism section (Trivandrum, 2011), 127.

<sup>53</sup> Song No. 355, *IELC Malayalam Hymn book*—Warfare section (Trivandrum, 2011), 185.

<sup>54</sup> Cited in Robinson & Clarke, *Religious Conversion*, 338.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 341.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 346.

<sup>57</sup> Kerala is the State on the South West tip of India that consists of all the Malayalam-speaking areas. The erstwhile Malayalam-speaking part of the Travancore State was included in the Kerala State when it was formed.

# HMong Mission in LCMS

**Kou Seying**

**Abstract:** “HMong Mission in LCMS” was a paper written in 1998 for a course in the PhD in Missiology program. It is the first comprehensive analysis and well-documented studies of the first two decades of LCMS ministry among the HMong people in America. The paper captures both the ecclesiastical and theological developments of the initial decades. Concordia Historical Institute’s subcommittee for ministry to minority groups in the U.S. comments in a November 1998 letter requesting to archive it, “The paper is an original and it is a necessary piece to fit into the total picture of the LCMS World Mission today.”

## Introduction

HMong mission in The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS) has over two decades of history. Two questions are often asked: Who are the HMong people? And why are they here [in America]? It is surprising. Yet, at the same time, it is not surprising that after two decades of HMong presence in America, many still ask these questions. The most widely accepted meaning by HMong scholars for the word “HMong” is free or free people. There are approximately 300,000 living in the United States of America (U.S.). Nearly half (125,000) entered the U.S. from the refugee camps in Thailand.<sup>1</sup>

The HMong people live throughout the world. They are a nation of people without an original country of their own but who have a distinct culture and language. The earliest possible documentation of the HMong people dates to 2679 BC in Chinese annals.<sup>2</sup> Several million still live in the southern provinces of China today. In the mid-nineteenth century, some of them migrated to Southeast Asia, where they settled in Vietnam, Thailand, Mnyanarn (Burma), and Laos.

During the Vietnam War, HMong men were recruited by the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to fight the Other Theater of the war.<sup>3</sup> This part of the war was fought in the country of Laos. It was very much a secret war and a civil war. HMong were on both sides of the war, along with the Lao and other groups. The secret army of the CIA primarily consisted of HMong soldiers. One of its top priority missions was to contain the Ho Chi Minh Trail.<sup>4</sup> General Vang Pao estimated that

---

*Kou Seying is Executive Director/Mission Strategist for Joy of Harvest Ministries, Associate Pastor of St. Paul Lutheran Church in Merced, CA. He taught religion, theology, and HMong language at Concordia University St. Paul (1992–2004). Currently, he is completing the PhD degree in missiology from Concordia Theological Seminary, Ft. Wayne, Indiana.*

35,000 HMong men were killed in the war, an astounding number when one compares it to the 58,000 American soldiers who died in Vietnam.<sup>5</sup> When the war ended in 1975, many HMong fled to neighboring Thailand. Because of the involvement with the U.S. government, they were the prime target for the communist regime to destroy. Many eventually resettled in the U.S. and other parts of the world, including Australia, Europe, and South America.

Today, there are several large HMong communities throughout the U.S. The largest concentrated community is the Minneapolis–St. Paul metropolitan area, with an estimated HMong population of over 60,000.<sup>6</sup> In the St. Paul Public Schools District, nearly 25% of the students are HMong.<sup>7</sup> Other large communities are in Wisconsin, California, Colorado, and Georgia.

There are two primary dialects, Blue and White, spoken among the HMong people in the U.S. The traditional religion of the HMong is animism, with a strong emphasis on henotheism.<sup>8</sup> The following is a brief description of HMong beliefs and worldview:

...The concept of time is vastly different from that of the western linear view. Various ages repeat themselves cyclically with no final goal. In this way, there is really no purpose to history at least not the usual understanding of the term “history.” It is interesting to compare and contrast a village a century ago with another village today, often, one will see that there is virtually no difference.

The powers of nature, of the spirits, are terrifying and mysterious. There is very little distinction between the physical and spiritual realm. Spiritual power may reign over a family, clan, village, or certain localities such as a river or a mountain or any physical representation. It is the duty of human to make peace with the spirits, the terrifying and mysterious powers of nature. There is no divine guidance in the human appeasement act. It relies solely upon the ability of human especially through the shaman to manipulate the spiritual realm.

The HMong people believe that there are many spirits, but it is important to have a close adherence to a certain spirit usually connected in some ways with the dead ancestors (*ib tug dlaab ib tug qhua*). This belief has been referred to as *henotheism*. It has tremendous social implication. The closeness of relation is determined by the adherence to a certain spirit. When this has been determined by any two individuals then the emphatic phrase *koj tuag tau huv kuv tsev kuv tuag tau huv koj tsev* could be exclaimed which says, “I may died in your house and you may died in my house.” This is to show the ultimate relationship of families. Otherwise, it would be of great offense to the spirits to die in the house that adheres to a different spirit.

By tradition, the HMong people structure around the concept of clan and community. The communal aspect of society dictates that the survival of the group is of paramount importance. The existence of an individual is defined through the relationship to the community. An individual who lives outside of the communal structure traditionally cannot survive because there is no identity. All actions have to be for the common good of the group to ensure its survival.<sup>9</sup>

Most often the object of worship has been characterized by power rather than justice, love, or mercy. This carries out usually through the shaman who would perform rituals to communicate with the world of spirits. Sometimes, the shaman would enter a state of trance to participate in the life of the spirits for a short period of time. Often, power is believed to be attained through this practice of shamanism.

The HMong worldview does see that there is no escape of the human problems. Whether it is illness, social, political, or spiritual problem, the state of grace cannot be reached in any final way. There will always be new problems. Blood sacrifices of animals are the usual means of atonement in the sense that it appeases the anger of the spirits or to gain some kind of material favors from them.<sup>10</sup> Much of the resource is used for these various rituals and sacrifices throughout the year. Animistic rituals and sacrifices are offered in many occasions from birth to death, from marriage to New Year celebration, and so on. More often than not, it drains the family resources.

It may be concluded that there is no aspect of a traditional HMong life that can be separated from the spiritual realm. It is this bondage of the terrifying and mysterious spirits that finally led to the overwhelming success of the mission in Laos. Christianity came not as the product of European American missionaries but as it embraced the HMong in such a salvific way. The freedom from the spirits to the freedom in Christ met with great resounding. This is something that many of us who were born into Christian families may not be able to appreciate to the fullest in terms of human experience.

“Cast away the spirits” becomes the central theological theme for HMong Christians. It is at this point that becomes the crossroads for further theological development. Faith in Christ means that the spirits are cast away; the old tradition has been replaced by the new.<sup>11</sup>

## **The First HMong Congregation in LCMS**

Many families that came to the U.S. were sponsored by many Lutheran congregations and individuals beginning in 1976 through the Lutheran Immigration

and Refugee Service (LIRS) agency in New York. They resettled all across the country from coast to coast and north to south. Truman, Minnesota, was one of those places where Lutheran congregations assisted in bringing families into the U.S. Two congregations from Truman and South Branch sponsored Chia Ky Vang's<sup>12</sup> family. The family arrived on June 10, 1976. It was through this resettlement effort that the Vang family became Christians. Pastor Arthur Drevlow at South Branch baptized the Vang family. After two years, in 1978, they moved to St. Paul to join other Vang clan members.

St. John in Truman recommended the family to Pastor Edward F. Lutz at Bethel Lutheran Church in St. Paul. Through the ministry of Bethel, a HMong ministry began to reach out to the HMong community. As membership grew, Bethel conducted two worship services with one in English and the other in English but translated into HMong by Yia Vang, the second son of Chia Ky Vang, and other young leaders. The Vang children also attended Lutheran schools in St. Paul, both at Eastside and Central.

In 1982, HMong ministry in Minneapolis began under the leadership of Pastor Steve Kosberg, former missionary to Papua New Guinea. After six months of intensive language learning through a HMong man, he led the first HMong worship service in January of 1983. Five people came to that first service.<sup>13</sup> They held their services at Mt. Olive. Financial support for this ministry came from Mt. Zion Lutheran Church and other area congregations. Mt. Zion had also sponsored HMong families.

In this first decade, lay ministers and lay leaders (Yia Vang, Va Tou Her, Wang Kao Her, and Chang Tao Vang) served these ministries under the supervision of Pastor Kosberg. In 1986, the two ministries in St. Paul and Minneapolis decided to join together to form one congregation. On the first Sunday of June 1986, the two ministries merged and held their first worship service together as one congregation at Jehovah Lutheran Church in the Midway area of St. Paul.

Centrally located Jehovah Lutheran Church graciously opened its door, sharing the facilities with this new congregation. On September 18, 1988, the congregation was officially received into membership of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod Minnesota South District with the name HMong Evangelical Lutheran Church. Thus, the first HMong LCMS congregation was born.

Due to internal conflicts in 1989, all the members from the Her clan left the congregation to form a new congregation, HMong Community Lutheran Church of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA).<sup>14</sup> The issue was not theological but a social one that led to the exodus of the Her clan. It was difficult for Pastor Kosberg and Pastor Jeff Miller, Minnesota South District Mission, to help in resolving the conflicts. Confronted with two different worldviews, they were not exactly sure how to approach the problem. They were handicapped by the fact that

neither of them knew the HMong language enough to detect the dynamics of what the members were not verbalizing. What they thought they understood was different from what the members were saying. The other challenge was that, out of respect for their being from outside of the HMong community and for their roles in the ministry, the members simply chose to not explicitly share every detail. Thus, it was not possible for the supervising pastor nor the mission executive to prevent the group from leaving the LCMS.

Less than two years after this break, Laokouxiang Seying (Thao)<sup>15</sup> was ordained and installed as the first HMong pastor in the LCMS on July 7, 1991, at HMong Lutheran Church. He is known simply as “Pastor Kou or *Xibfwb [Nyaj] Kub*” who served the congregation for a total of seven years.<sup>16</sup> During the time of Pastor Kou’s ministry, the congregation grew to serve about 300 members. Today, its total membership is 282 with an average worship attendance over 100 under the leadership of Deacon Chang Tao Vang, who was commissioned by the Minnesota South District President, Rev. Dr. Lane R. Seitz, on December 1, 1996. This congregation continues to be the largest HMong congregation in LCMS today, with the majority under the age of 18.

### **Lansing, Michigan, and the Michigan District**

The HMong ministry in Lansing, MI, began in 1978 at Our Savior Lutheran Church. Several families arrived in the greater Lansing area through the sponsorship of Ascension, Our Savior, and other congregations. Zong Houa Yang and his wife, after initially resettling in Philadelphia in 1976, moved to Lansing and were confirmed at Our Savior in 1978. Zong Houa served as a Bible study leader and translator for these families.

After completing the Lay Minister training at Concordia College Milwaukee (Concordia University Wisconsin) in December of 1981, he began serving in the following month as a full-time certified lay minister to the greater Lansing area and other areas of Michigan. Over the years, the primary focus was in Lansing and, to a certain degree, in Saginaw. His ministry was supervised by the pastors at Our Savior and Ascension and by a joint HMong Ministry Committee.

In 1989, Zong Houa began his pastoral studies through Concordia Theological Seminary in Ft. Wayne, Indiana, in a special colloquy non-degree program. He was mentored extensively by Pastor Roy P. Schroeder and Eldor F. Bickel. While studying for the pastoral ministry, he continued to serve the ministry as lay minister.

As Zong Houa drew near to his ordination into the pastoral office, several meetings of the joint committee were held to discuss and clarify the direction of the HMong ministry in Michigan. The committee affirmed that he would continue his ministry with Our Savior, Ascension, and other LCMS congregations in the Lansing

area, Saginaw, and possibly Detroit. The committee also placed emphasis on integrating the HMong into the Anglo [English] worship services. This would require additional English language skills on the part of Zong Houa. Another point was the intensification and continuation of his theological studies. The committee recognized the need to help the transition from lay minister to student to ordained pastor. It was a concern that the proper balance be reached in the social service functions performed for the HMong along with the other pastoral duties.

As with most new ministries, financial support for HMong ministry is always a concern. The committee also cited this as a concern with the direction of HMong ministry in Michigan. Much of the support was and continues to be from outside the HMong members, posing a tremendous challenge in the long run.

In November of 1993, Zong Houa was issued a one-year, non-tenured call to serve the HMong people in Lansing and other parts of Michigan. This call was in conjunction with the Mission Board of the Michigan District. Zong Houa would be supervised by the administrative pastor and elders of Our Savior Lutheran Church. The senior pastors of Our Savior and Ascension would assign his tasks. The Mission Executive and the Board of Mission Development of the Michigan District would evaluate his ministry "at large" annually. His work would be 60% in Lansing and 40% in other areas of Michigan.

Again, a part of this call was to strive for mainstreaming the HMong people into existing Lutheran congregations and seeking advanced training in cross-cultural mission work. Finally, Zong Houa was ordained on December 19, 1994, at Our Savior Lutheran Church. His ordination was a welcomed event, for the HMong are almost non-existent on the clergy roster of LCMS. It strengthened the rest of HMong mission work.

In 1995, while continuing with the ministry in Lansing and Saginaw, Pastor Zong Houa started serving some HMong in East Detroit on a once-a-month basis through Mt. Zion Lutheran Church, an ELCA inner-city culturally diverse congregation. This was a new opportunity to serve the HMong in Detroit, where a large community exists. Strategically, Detroit was an important site for reaching a large number of HMong in a concentrated area.

A controversy arose in 1994 over the question of where the HMong should conduct worship services at Our Savior Lutheran Church. They were worshipping in their own HMong service in the gym or music room. Many of the HMong members did not approve of this arrangement. Some withheld their presence at worship because they were offended by not being able to worship in the sanctuary. In April of 1994, it was decided that the HMong would worship at the English service on the first and third Sundays of each month and would hold their own HMong service in the sanctuary the second and fourth Sundays after the English 10:45 a.m. service.



This was also an attempt to assimilate the HMong into the mainstream worship life of Our Savior Lutheran Church.

It is noteworthy that worship services in the HMong language drew anywhere from 50 to 120 people. The number of HMong in the English services was usually no more than 30. By 1995, HMong membership numbered 187 in the Our Savior congregation, consisting of about 100 children, 10 to 20 high school age, and about 60 adults. As of October 16, 1996, the HMong members at Our Savior began worshipping regularly every Sunday in the HMong language. As the result, attendance has increased.

Pastor Zong Houa is the only ordained HMong pastor in Michigan. He covers a wide area of ministry and networks with other HMong pastors in Minnesota and Wisconsin regularly through meetings and conferences. Much of his time in Lansing has been in a “social work” function rather than in a traditional pastoral role. With the help of Pastors Bickel and Schroeder, doctrinal and worship materials were translated into HMong by Pastor Zong Houa. One of the desires is to eventually reach out to the HMong in Asia.<sup>17</sup>

### **The Wisconsin Districts: North and South**

The HMong ministries in Wisconsin, as with HMong ministries in other districts, began with the sponsorship of many HMong families throughout the state by congregations and individuals of the LCMS. HMong ministries in Wisconsin emerged as the result of these efforts. The families that were sponsored provided the nucleus group to the outreach effort to the HMong community. Often, individuals in these families became the leaders for the ministry.

In the summer of 1987, James Henning, the principal of Trinity Lutheran School in Oshkosh, approached Yia Vang<sup>18</sup> asking him to teach the Word of God to the HMong families attending Trinity Lutheran Church. During this time, Yia was enrolled at Concordia College Milwaukee (Concordia University Wisconsin) to continue his studies toward the pastoral ministry.

At that same period of time, Trinity Lutheran Church in Sheboygan and Redeemer Lutheran Church in Manitowoc also approached Yia to assist the HMong families in their congregations. While completing his college education, Yia worked with these congregations to explore the possibilities of developing ministry to the HMong people in these communities.

These ministries were not able to be developed until after Yia completed his seminary training in St. Louis. He was ordained on March 21, 1993, and called as missionary-at-large to the HMong people by the South Wisconsin District. Pastor Yia traveled to various ministry sites in both North and South Wisconsin Districts

each month. This was the beginning of many HMong ministries throughout Wisconsin.

In 1995, HMong Lutheran Outreach was received into membership as the second HMong LCMS congregation. They currently worship at Trinity in Oshkosh with nearly 100 members. Also, four additional mission congregations have been established in Wisconsin within the last three years. Fox Cities HMong Lutheran Church, with 25 members, is led by Pastor Yia as well. HMong Hope Lutheran Church in Milwaukee, led by Deacon Faiv Neng Her, who was commissioned on September 22, 1996, has a total membership of 125. Nou Toua Yang was commissioned on January 25, 1998, to serve HMong Redeemer Lutheran Church in Manitowoc, now with 67 members. HMong Pilgrim Lutheran Church has 75 members and is led by Deacon Kue Ly, who was commissioned in 1998 as well.

### **California-Nevada-Hawaii District (CNH)**

The CNH District came into contact with the HMong people through its congregations sponsoring HMong families to resettle in the U.S. St. Paul in Merced is one of those congregations that sponsored HMong families. Not only sponsoring families, the congregation opened its door to HMong Christians from other denominations to use its facilities for their services. In 1989–1990, Pastor Kou served his vicarage in Merced. As he fulfilled the seminary requirement for vicarage, it was also a time to explore HMong ministry and to expose the HMong community to the LCMS.

Although the congregations in California had been in contact with the HMong community and had some peripheral ministries, there was no Word and Sacrament ministry serving the HMong anywhere in California.<sup>19</sup> It was not until 1998 that LCMS HMong ministry was established at St. Paul in Merced. Conversations and meetings between Rev. Clarence Eisberg and Nou Vang Thao, pastor of the Lao Evangelical Church, which rents St. Paul's facilities, led to a new HMong ministry in the LCMS.

A meeting was held in Merced on April 4, 1998; among the representatives were leaders from St. Paul's congregation, Rev. Yia Vang (HMong Field Counselor from LCMS World Mission), Rev. Ed Krueger (CNH Mission Executive), Nou Vang Thao, and Rev. Clarence Eisberg. As the result of this meeting, the official process for developing this ministry moved forward quickly. Already in April, Pastor Eisberg began to instruct Nou Vang in Lutheran doctrine for adult confirmation. In order to maintain the momentum, it meant that Nou Vang had to be both student and teacher at the same time. He taught what he learned each week to the HMong families.

After sufficient preparation had been reached, it was time to recognize this new ministry publicly. The many years of establishing relationship with the HMong

community culminated in a wonderful event in the summer of 1998. This statement was proclaimed:

The exploding power of Almighty God within His Church is something awesome to behold. And on Sunday morning, June 7<sup>th</sup>, 1998 that is exactly what happened at St. Paul Lutheran Church in Merced, Calif.<sup>20</sup>

On this day, 95 were baptized and confirmed 20. Along with Baptisms and confirmations was the commissioning of Nou Vang Thao and Philip Koua Thao as commissioned deacons of Word and Sacrament ministry by President Walter Tietjen of the CNH District. Today, there are 125 HMong members at St. Paul. Other areas are being developed in California through the missionary-at-large effort of Deacon Nou Vang.

### **Minnesota South District (MNS)**

Faith Lutheran Church in Minneapolis opened its door to a new HMong ministry in the Minnesota South District. This new mission congregation began worshiping in April of 1998 and is in the process of being recognized officially in the District. Deacon Dang Thao is working with this ministry under the supervision of Pastor Rodney E. Ketcher, serving 83 people. Saint Stephanus, another site in St. Paul being developed at this time, is in the midst of a highly concentrated HMong neighborhood, Frogtown. Deacon Chang Tao Vang from HMong Lutheran Church is working under the supervision of Pastor James W. Bender.

### **Synodical Efforts At Large**

The first HMong Lutheran Hymnal was published by Concordia Publishing House in 1991, the result of an effort over ten years by HMong leaders and pastors serving HMong ministry. With a \$10,000 grant from LCMS Foundation, it was possible to publish this hymnal. It contains 235 hymns, 109 children's songs, and liturgical materials. This hymnal was uniquely constructed to contain both dialects, placing them in an inverted back to back order into one book. In other words, there is no back cover in this hymnal. By rotating the hymnal around its horizontal axis, one goes from the cover page of one dialect to the other.

Since 1993, there have been numerous meetings and gatherings among the HMong members and leaders. Leadership conferences and ministry convocations have been held throughout the Midwest on an annual basis. These events were created to support and encourage these new ministries, drawing anywhere between 200 to 400 participants of all ages.

Several important meetings took place in late 1994 and early 1995 to discuss the future of HMong ministry. One important meeting was held at Concordia College in

St. Paul at the invitation of the Rev. Dr. Robert A. Holst, President of Concordia College (Concordia University—St. Paul), on October 27, 1994. At this meeting, a HMong Mission Project was proposed. Subsequent meetings were held to discuss the mission project to include the dialogue with Concordia Theological Seminary for possible theological training for HMong leaders and the development of the HMong Institute.

In April of 1995, Minnesota South District called Pastor Kou to serve as missionary-at-large with the specific task of developing leadership training and a mission institute. After several meetings with Dr. Holst, it was decided that the HMong Institute be located on the campus of Concordia University. Pastor Kou was appointed as the director in 1997.

Several important meetings took place beginning in August of 1995 at which all the mission executives of the various districts with HMong ministries and the HMong pastors came together to find ways to work together in expanding HMong ministry in LCMS. The first meeting was a “skunkworks”<sup>21</sup> held at the South Wisconsin District office on August 15–16, 1995. Present at the meeting were four district mission executives: Rev. Earl Bleke, (South WI), Rev. Dwayne Lueck (North WI), Rev. Jeff Miller (MN South), Rev. Mike Ruhl (MI); three missionaries-at-large: Rev. Kou Seying (MN South), Rev. Yia Vang (South WI), and Rev. Zong Houa Yang (MI); and the Rev. Ron Meyer (President, South WI).

The goal of this meeting was “to create a learning team that will provide support, ideas, and accountability for the implementation of the HMong Mission Initiative.”<sup>22</sup> It was the first time leaders of HMong ministry in the LCMS came together to discuss one common task: how to spread the good news of Jesus Christ to the HMong people in North America. Several issues were identified. The top three issues were the plan/vision, raising leaders, and funding.

It was necessary to begin the process of expanding and training workers to connect with a seminary or college. Another important part of this plan/vision was to provide a forum or national gathering for bringing together HMong leaders. There was also a need for a ministry center to process information about HMong ministry. Perhaps, a mission society could play that role. In adopting the plan/vision of HMong Mission Initiative, it was important to go beyond the immediate existing HMong ministries.

The issues of raising leaders had to do with both the long-term and immediate needs. The greatest challenge was and is that there are only three ordained HMong pastors in LCMS. It was critical to begin the identification process of potential leaders for the seminary. Leadership training by HMong and European Americans was discussed. The matter of credentialing and certifying was an important part of the discussion, along with other aspects of leadership, such as use of volunteers or worker priests, age and type of service to the missions.

The funding issue was always a difficult one. It was clear that the HMong themselves would not be able to support their ministries. It was necessary to seek external funding as well as internal. Possible granting agencies were identified: Lutheran Brotherhood (LB), Aid Association for Lutherans (AAL), Lutheran Women's Missionary League (LWML), Districts, foundations, and mission societies recognized by the LCMS.

Another milestone meeting was held in Milwaukee on February 2–3, 1996. A vision statement included the following focus: "An expanding network of credentialed HMong leaders, mentoring and mobilizing HMong lay leaders, empowering them for indigenous, contextualized, congregation based mission work among HMong populations in America and North America."<sup>23</sup> This meeting continued the discussion of leadership and funding issues.

An important step was taken at this meeting for HMong ministry in LCMS. President Ron Meyer updated the lay ministry certification discussion at the Council of Presidents as the result of the request of the last HMong Mission meeting. This step led to the certification of Commissioned Deacon by districts for Word and Sacrament ministries under the supervision of ordained pastors. This approach became the process for district presidents to place workers into situations where calling ordained pastors are not possible. While these commissioned deacons serve their congregations, they were to engage in pastoral studies through the then DELTO program or other approved alternatives that lead to ordination.

One other very significant matter at this meeting was addressed: the recognition of HMong ministry in LCMS. The Rev. Dr. Robert J. Scudieri, North America Area Secretary for LCMS World Mission, participated in this meeting. The next meeting took place in St. Paul, MN, at Concordia University on May 29–30, 1996. At this meeting, the representatives selected Pastor Kou to chair the HMong Ministry Conference, which is intended to support the existing HMong ministries throughout LCMS. With the recommendation from the representatives, Pastor Yia was appointed by Dr. Scudieri as the HMong Field Counselor to work with LCMS North American Missions. A task force was also created to support the work of the field counselor. Cher Tou Vang (a lay leader from St. Paul, MN), Pastor Zong Houa, and Pastor Jeff Miller were appointed to this task force. The field counselor is to assist districts in planting HMong ministries. These were the significant actions at this meeting.

The various meetings with officials from LCMS International Center, districts, Concordia University, and HMong leaders, ultimately led to the formation of the Upper Midwest DELTO (Distance Education Leading to Ordination) program which consists of seven districts (IW, MN North, MN South, ND, SD, South WI, North WI). Originally, it began as a HMong project. Because of the tremendous pastoral need of the church, it expanded into other groups besides the HMong, including European Americans in unique settings. The first class was held on March 5–7,

1998, at Camp Omega in Waterville, MN, with four HMong deacons at this initial class. The fifth HMong deacon joined at the second class held in St. Paul, MN. The Upper Midwest DELTO was assigned to Concordia Seminary in St. Louis, Missouri.

Another very significant event for HMong mission during this period was the announcement of Dr. Holst on February 15, 1997, that Concordia University—St. Paul pledged to partner with the church in reaching out to the HMong community.<sup>24</sup> Specifically, in its future plans, Concordia pledged to raise endowment scholarship for HMong students, to include a HMong emphasis in its new library building project, and to provide a special Southeast Asian Teacher program (SEAT). CSP has the largest enrollment of HMong students in the synodical colleges and universities: between 40 and 50 students yearly. CSP has been supporting HMong students since 1984 with its Southeast Asian Students Program. On July 1, 1998, Pastor Kou accepted the call from CSP to be a full-time faculty member directing the HMong Institute, teaching, and networking with the church and the HMong community.

At the HMong Leadership Conference in St. Paul, MN, on August 28–29, 1998, the HMong Ministry Conference entered into a new partnership with the LCMS Board for Congregational Services. The Multicultural Department, led by Rev. Jerry M. Kosberg, will work with the ministry conference to enhance the ability to support existing HMong ministries throughout LCMS. Also, at this conference, the plan to move forward in establishing a HMong mission society was approved.

## **An Analysis of the Two Decades**

The total HMong membership in LCMS today is approximately 1,300. It has taken over two decades to reach this point. It is important to note that the HMong people did not leave their homeland by choice. It was the result of the Vietnam War that many were forced to leave Laos. For this reason, the HMong people in America are not immigrants. Physically they are here in America, but their hearts and minds are in Asia for many that came as adults. This is in contrast to immigrants whose immigrating to the U.S. was for economic and/or religious reasons. This difference has had an impact on the work of the church to a certain degree.

The question of why it took so long for HMong ministry to expand in the LCMS may have several answers. First of all, the goal of these many congregations who sponsored families was to assimilate or integrate them into the mainstream congregations, as indicated clearly in the Lansing ministry. This goal was especially difficult to achieve for the HMong families coming from a communal society. Many congregations did not understand why after such a short period of times the HMong families moved away. The congregations felt they had done everything possible to support these families, from food to housing to employment. Yet, many families still chose to leave.

The most significant reason was that these families needed a HMong community to survive. They were cut off from their relatives. For a traditional HMong person, the relationship to the community (family, extended families, clan) defines his or her existence. Even though many families were cared for very well, they were extremely lonely. As soon as other relatives arrived, the natural thing to do was to join them. The language and cultural barriers were contributing factors as well. Thus, assimilation or integration into the mainstream life of the congregation was for the most part not possible. Once they were joined with relatives, the clan usually determined the new congregation<sup>25</sup> where they would join or they would simply return to animistic practice.

Secondly, the lack of HMong pastors in LCMS played an enormous part in the slow growth of HMong members in LCMS. There are good candidates among the HMong leaders for the pastoral office, but they do not meet the academic prerequisites for LCMS pastoral education. The following discussion is an example of theological education issues in LCMS today:

For the most part, theological education in LCMS has been very traditional in the classic western sense. It requires that there is only one appropriate level, time, place, and language. Therefore, everything else must fit into this one category for theological education. If it does not fit, then, theological education cannot take place. This is the greatest challenge for today's situation. Many leaders from the ethnic/immigrant ministries do not meet the requirements for traditional theological education. Yet, at the same time, the need to reach out with the gospel is not met by the church.

The first and foremost issue has to do with language. There is no biblical mandate that English must be the requirement in order for theological education to take place. This is a steep and rocky mountain to climb for members of LCMS whose first language is not English. The moment English is the requirement to prepare leaders for service in the church in a specific context, the pool of qualified candidates reduces to an unworkable number. This English requirement was reaffirmed in late 1997 by the DELTO Policy Board in a resolution that was passed:

Because of the value of communicating in English in The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod as well as in American society as a whole, the DELTO Policy Board recommends that those who enter the program make every effort to become proficient in English before entering the program or by the end of the course of study (December 6, 1997 Memorandum from Dr. Alan W. Borcharding, Board For Higher Education).

These leaders who are chosen by the congregations who do not meet the English efficiency requirement become more or less denigrated. Their

abilities to lead seem unimportant. LCMS has missed some wonderful opportunities to equip leaders from various language groups due to this prerequisite. Until this is resolved, recognition of theological education in all situations is nearly impossible.<sup>26</sup>

This has been an issue all along in HMong ministry. It is not surprising, then, that after two decades there are only three ordained HMong pastors in the entire LCMS. This situation will continue to be an issue until LCMS addresses this policy adequately. Whether these current deacons will successfully complete the program leading to ordination remains to be seen. There are indications that some will not be able to continue this program because of this precise academic issue.

Another major factor today has to do with the transition in the HMong community. Many people are much more concerned with maintaining an “American lifestyle” that requires a great deal of time in the work place for both husband and wife. As the result, spiritual life is not a priority, as in many parts of the rest of America today. Many individuals are holding two different jobs. For those who own their own businesses, often, it requires many hours per day and seven days per week on site.

## **Two Theological Emphases**

Christ as the deliverer and Christ as the healer have become important theological emphases for HMong ministry. Given the animistic background, Christ the deliverer takes precedence, since it deals with the nature of crisis in the HMong situation of spiritual bondage. To become Christian means that Christ has cast away the spirits, a bridge for Christianity to make an inroad. This action is very concrete in the HMong worldview. It leaves very little room for abstraction.

Christ the healer is also important because of the traditional role that the shaman has played in determining the causes of illness or a problem. Christ the healer must somehow replace the shaman. It is very difficult to separate this kind of healing from the traditional understanding of healing. Therefore, the risk of misunderstanding and the abuse of faith in Christ exist much more in this area. Christianity has the tendency to be a religion of efficacy for the HMong people. Often, the result is that one looks to the miracles and not the One who performed the true miracle, Jesus Christ. “Miraculous signs are important for the initial entrance to Christianity. This allows Christianity to be rooted in such an understandable way if it does not go beyond the biblical notion of miracles.”<sup>27</sup>

The deliverer and healer aspect of Christology are explicit in HMong ministry. All other aspects are implicit, because at the surface they seem irrelevant to the HMong cosmic reality, which cannot be defined with great certainty in the first place.



## The Future of HMong Mission in LCMS

What will be the future of HMong mission in LCMS can only be speculated. There are social, political, and ecclesiastical issues facing this ministry. Filial piety is so strong in the HMong community that it can become a hindrance to the mission work of the church. It is not easily discernible what is acceptable and not acceptable culturally. This notion of honor is so deeply embedded for so many generations. To simply walk away and join a church without the consensus of the elders is shameful and must be avoided at all costs, especially for many HMong men.

Closely related to this problem is the clan issue. If the latter can be approached constructively, it may ultimately shape HMong mission in LCMS. The allegiance to the clan traditionally defines the identity and status of the individual. The clan provides support and security that no insurance policy can replace. When the whole clan embraces Christianity, it is not an issue. It becomes an issue, however, when only certain individuals become Christians. Often, when this happens, relationships suffer greatly and a tremendous struggle ensues.

Economically, the HMong people are considered to be one of the poorest and less educated groups among the Asian communities. Given this fact, the HMong mission in LCMS needs innovation. The traditional American church model may not be realistic for the HMong. Financial issues will continue to be some of the concerns for the foreseeable future.

At this point in the HMong history, there is a tension between the traditional leaders and the new leaders who are educated in the U.S. Many feel that the educated people are not relating well to the community. The fear is that their learning might alienate them from the people and tradition. At the same time, the young people feel that the older generation is not paying attention to them. This has become an important issue in many HMong congregations across the denominations.

Identity is another issue for many young HMong in America. Many are trapped between two cultures. The church has a tremendous opportunity to reach out, providing a place where they can be HMong without shame. At the same time, they can live a life under the Gospel that frees them from the guilt of abandoning their HMong heritage.

Many are asking and seeking the LCMS because there is something different about this church. *Sola scriptura*, *sola fide*, *sola gratia*, and the *missio dei* are foundational in the LCMS. With this strong and sound theological background, the HMong will find a unique place in this church. The HMong Christian population shows no sign of declining worldwide. In a HMong American Partnership survey, only 24% claim to prefer Christianity. Traditional animist practice is still a preference for the rest of this community in St. Paul.<sup>28</sup>

Why might the LCMS be unique among the HMong Christians and community? For one reason, there are indications that the popular religion phase of Christianity is coming to an end,<sup>29</sup> which is how the Reformed churches tend to draw their members. Their legalistic theology has begun to have a negative effect on their younger members. They are in a crisis at this juncture, especially C&MA.

Secondly, the Roman Catholics, with their strong expression of Christian faith through animistic categories, seem to have a limited influence on mission development. However, their contribution of transcribing animistic rituals and ceremonies into the HMong written language is important academically for the studies of HMong people and their traditional beliefs, but it has not produced the mission results for which they had hope.

Thirdly, and most importantly, the confessional/biblical stance of the LCMS has begun to become an “attractive thing” for the young HMong Christian leaders. Both the church and educational institutions are working together to reach out to this community. In the long run, our unique Lutheran theological and missiological perspective with a HMong flavor will lead the way in HMong Christian mission developments.

The questions and issues for HMong mission in LCMS might be such as follow: What is a unique HMong identity in the LCMS in the future? As we grow in number, how will the church be structured? How will theological education be integrated into the HMong context? How will the HMong mission in LCMS deal with the issues of polygamy, foods offered in animistic settings, including blood, and other animistic matters? These are the kinds of questions and issues that will require an ongoing discussion. In light of God’s blessings in the last few years, HMong mission in LCMS has the potential for a worldwide explosion. To that end,

**May God Be Praised and Glorified!**

## Endnotes

1 Ben Barber, “U.S. HMong: unsettled, unaccepted, uncertain,” and “HMong People Overlooked, Forgotten,” *The Washington Times*, December 1–5, 1997.

2 Robert Cooper, ed., *The HMong* (Bangkok: Artasia Press Co. Ltd., 1995), 5.

3 Christopher Robbins, *The Ravens* (New York: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1995), 1.

4 The Ho Chi Minh Trail was the main supply line for the North Vietnamese into South Vietnam, with a portion inside Laos. Much of the effort was poured into cutting off this supply line.

5 General Vang Pao was a HMong General in the Military Region Two (MR II) who led the HMong army to a world renowned fighting force under the CIA operation in Laos. In his speech on May 8, 1997, at a seminar sponsored by Liberty State Bank in St. Paul, he stated these figures. Today, he continues to play a leadership role among many of the HMong in America.

6 Barber, *The Washington Times*.

7 Saint Paul Public Schools Annual Report 1995–1996, 3.

<sup>8</sup> Henotheism is a religious practice that has close adherence to a certain god (spirit) while recognizing the existence of others. *The Spirit of Truth and The Spirit of Error*, Compiled by Steven Cory (Chicago: Moody Press, 1986).

<sup>9</sup> This notion of placing the emphasis on the group or family rather than the autonomous individual has caused a great deal of pain among the HMong communities in America.

<sup>10</sup> Cory, *The Spirit of Truth and The Spirit of Error*.

<sup>11</sup> Kou Seying, "The HMong Incipient Theology" (A paper written for "Christian Theologies in Asia," G991, at Luther Seminary: St. Paul, Minnesota 1996), 10–13.

<sup>12</sup> Chia Ky Vang rescued one of the very first downed U.S. fighter pilots inside Laos during the Vietnam War.

<sup>13</sup> Steve Kosberg, "First Hmong pastor in LCMS ordained..." *The Harvesters*, Special Ethnic Ministries Edition 8, no. 4 (December 1991), 9.

<sup>14</sup> The "Her" clan members were approximately one half of the total membership at HMong Lutheran Church. The others consisted primarily of members from the "Vang" clan.

<sup>15</sup> Thao is Pastor Kou's clan name, the first HMong clan to become Christian in Laos (See *Tso Dlaab Tseg Lug ntseeg Yexus* by Koua T. Thao [Brighton, CO: C&MA HMong District, 1988]). St. Peter Lutheran Church in Indianapolis, Indiana, sponsored his family who arrived in the U.S. on September 14, 1976.

The usual customary addressing of a HMong individual's name is by the given elder name and the first (youth) name. For example, "Pastor Nyaj Kub" would have these designations besides the professional title: "Nyaj" is an elder name given after a man is married and has children. This name would then be attached in front of the youth name, "Kou." HMong often do not use the last name in addressing one another. These last names are usually clan names. In this writing, the HMong names follow the HMong tradition.

<sup>16</sup> The ministry at HMong Lutheran Church: 1991–1995 full-time pastor, 1995–1996 vacancy pastor, and 1996–1998 supervising pastor.

<sup>17</sup> HMong Ministry Report 1996, Our Savior Lutheran Church, Lansing, Michigan.

<sup>18</sup> The complete name is Zong Yia Vang (*Ntxoov Yag Vaaj*).

<sup>19</sup> California had the largest HMong population in the U.S. for most of the 1980s, with the largest concentration in the Fresno area.

<sup>20</sup> "MERCED, Calif.—June 7<sup>th</sup>..." *CNH Lutheran* (Summer 1998), 1, 12.

<sup>21</sup> Skunkworks is a term for the concept of bringing the best together to think and plan, "An often secret experimental division, laboratory, project or the like for producing innovative designs or products, as in the computer or the aerospace field," (HMong Missions Skunkworks, meeting minutes, August 15–16, 1995, Milwaukee, Wisconsin).

<sup>22</sup> HMong Missions Skunkworks Agenda, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, August 15–16, 1995.

<sup>23</sup> HMong Mission Meeting Agenda, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, February 2–3, 1996.

<sup>24</sup> Robert A. Holst, in a speech on HMong initiative at Concordia University—St. Paul. February 15, 1997, outlined various goals and objectives to serve the HMong community and its students.

<sup>25</sup> The Christian and Missionary Alliance (C&MA) denomination has the largest HMong Christian membership at 23,313 in 1994 (HMong District, The Christian and Missionary Alliance, 1994 statistical report, Brighton, CO). Those who came to the U.S. as Christians, the majority were C&MA members. C&MA has 50 years of history with the HMong people. Many families returned to this denomination in the U.S.

<sup>26</sup> Kou Seying, "Theological Education Across Cultures: Today's Issues in LC-MS," (A paper written for "Theological Education Across Cultures," DMSL 910, at Concordia Theological Seminary, Ft. Wayne, IN, 1998), 2.

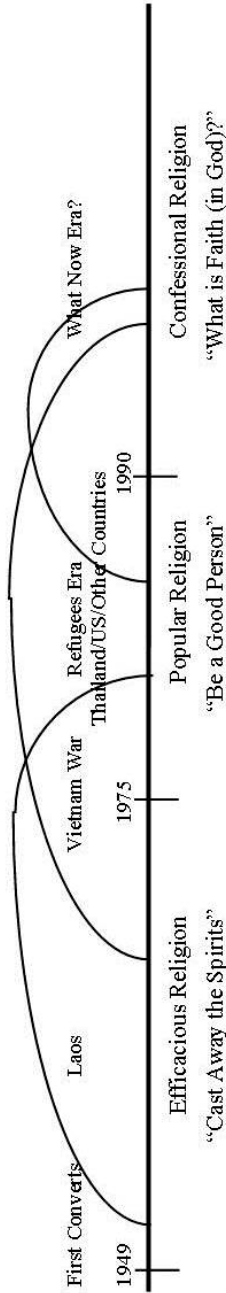
<sup>27</sup> Seying, "The HMong Incipient Theology," 15.

<sup>28</sup> Britt K. Anderson, *Frogtown/Summit-University HMong Community Assessment* (St. Paul: HMong American Partnership, 1996), 4.

<sup>29</sup> See "An Overview of HMong Christian Eras" on the following page of this journal.

### An Overview of HMong Christian Eras

HMong Christianity can be identified in three overlapping eras:



The word(s) for "Christian" had shifted from "cast away the spirits" to "the new custom (way)" and "The believers".

*lawb dlaab*      *kevcai ishob*      *cov niseeg*

When speaking with animists, the phrase "the new custom" is preferred.

Among Christians, "the believers" is preferred.

Today, the phrase "cast away the spirits" refers mostly to the time of conversion (exorcism). Therefore, "cast away the spirits" may not necessarily mean "Christian".

- Two popular theological themes are God the Deliverer and God the Healer!
- The longer HMMong live in the U.S., the higher the divorce rate (abortion rate increased proportionately too).
- HMMong students (90%) in elementary level scored above the national standard despite parents being uneducated and poor.
- More formal western education means less likely to practice traditional religion.
- Filial piety is being challenged more and more.
- Total HMMong population in the U.S.: 300,000
- MN: Over 60,000 (*Washington Times* December 1-5, 1997)
- 25% of the students in the St. Paul, MN Public Schools are HMMong.

# Transformational Mission Work—A Definition<sup>1</sup>

Paul Mueller

**Abstract:** Navigating collaborative relationships involved in effective and successful international church partnerships requires knowledge gained through study as well as experience learned through years of practice. This article attempts to define an appropriate approach to international partnerships and then identify some of the difficulties encountered as those partnerships are developed and maintained.

On August 29, 2006 in Wichita, Kansas, the International Management Team (IMT)<sup>2</sup>, met to discuss vision and mission for each of the four regions in which they were working around the world—Africa, Asia, Eurasia, and Latin America. Members were responsible for managing the partnerships and relationships that the LCMS held, were maintaining, or were developing with other national Lutheran church bodies around the globe. Though there were many other items to discuss and work through in those few short days, understanding and developing appropriate partnerships were key to robust and sustainable relationships that not only supported the partners, but also allowed and expected formation of the LCMS.

A speech given by Condoleezza Rice, at that time, the United States Secretary of State, formed the basis for a discussion at that meeting. She had found that, in working with international partners around the globe, there were certain postures, expectations, methods, and strategies that she wanted to develop with those partners. In that speech—given at Georgetown University in Washington, DC, on January 18, 2006 addressing transformational diplomacy—she said,

I would define the objective of transformational diplomacy this way: to work with our many partners around the world, to build and sustain democratic, well-governed states that will respond to the needs of their people and conduct themselves responsibly in the international system. Let me be clear, transformational diplomacy is rooted in partnership; not in paternalism. In doing things with people, not for them; we seek to use America's diplomatic power to help foreign citizens better their own lives and to build their own nations and to transform their own futures. . . . Now, today, to advance transformational diplomacy all around the world, we in the State Department must again answer a new calling of our time. We must

---

*Paul Mueller is presently Executive Director of the Center for Applied Lutheran Leadership at Concordia University, Portland, Oregon, and former Exec. Dir.—LSFM; Regional Director—Africa and Missionary to Liberia, LCMS World Mission; Exec. Dir. Hoffmann Institute; Professor of Mission, Concordia University, St. Paul; Assoc. Exec. Dir. LINC-Twin Cities; and parish pastor.*

begin to lay the diplomatic foundations to secure a future of freedom for all people. Like the great changes of the past, the new efforts we undertake today will not be completed quickly. Transforming our diplomacy and transforming the State Department is the work of a generation, but it is urgent work that must begin.<sup>3</sup>

Though it might be argued that the United States, like most other states, ultimately is self-serving and self-interested, i.e., in its own welfare, and will always determine whether the welfare of another will benefit itself, the words spoken by the Secretary of State sparked a great conversation which led the IMT to rethink its posture and approach to LCMS partnerships around the globe. The conversation was dynamic and robust. The IMT was intently interested in understanding how partnerships were not only understood by us, but in how they were interpreted by the other partners around the table. So, with prayer and determination, the IMT took on the task of rewriting Condoleezza Rice's statement. It took significant word-smithing and a substantially different starting point and end goal than those of the United States. It required from the very beginning that meaning for any partnership begins and ends with the grace shared by God the Creator through Jesus Christ, moves into the world through the sending of His Holy Spirit, and continues to be sent through the church, His ecclesia. It develops so that not only Christians, but all people, hear the Good News found in the Savior of the world. It means that partnerships are about God's mission and not a foreign power interested in its own welfare.

What developed was a paragraph that tried to succinctly describe a partnership built on Christian respect and mutual admiration in Christ. At the end of the two days, the IMT expressed its understanding of transformational mission as follows:

We would define the objective of transformational mission work this way: To work with our many Lutheran friends around the world in a posture of partnership, in order to build and sustain missional, well-developed, and well-managed national churches<sup>4</sup> (including our own LCMS, for the conversation goes both ways) that will respond to the needs of people (spiritual and physical), while being held accountable for efforts in the international Lutheran movement. Succinctly said, 'Shared Risk + Shared Responsibility = Shared Rewards.' Transformational mission work is rooted in partnership, not paternalism, in doing things with other people, not for them, and often being directed rather than directing. For that goal, we offer, when requested, LCMS resources and power to help our national partner churches around the world increase their own capacity and transform their own future and anxiously and humbly covet the same for ourselves from our partners. To advance transformational mission work all around the world, we in the LCMS, must rise to answer a new historic calling and be transformed as well. We must begin to lay new foundations to secure a strong and viable and vital future for world-wide Lutheranism. Like the



great changes made to accomplish LCMS efforts in the past, new efforts we undertake today will not be completed tomorrow. Transforming the LCMS is a work of a generation. But it is urgent work that cannot be deferred. (Paraphrased from Secretary Condoleezza Rice’s speech previously noted).

Though the definition developed may not capture all that is needed or required, it does establish a solid foundation to begin the conversation and practice of partnership. Based on this definition, the IMT then considered the partnerships that had developed and were being developed around the globe. Though numerous items related to partnerships were identified, the following more significant issues emerged that affect excellent and robust partnerships.

### **“Passing the Baton” Phenomenon**

Many have used the phrase, “passing the baton”<sup>5</sup> to describe next steps in the partnership process with national churches. In the case of the historic missionary activity of the LCMS, missionaries worked long and hard to help establish national churches. They served in positions of authority and power. They planted local congregations and trained the local leaders. They helped build hospitals, clinics, schools, church buildings, and leadership training centers. They wrote grants to fund projects to reach the local community. They supplied funds for micro-enterprises, for erecting latrines, for purchasing school books and materials, for sending leaders to schools, Bible colleges, and seminaries. LCMS missionaries have given their hearts and lives to help build the capacities of the emerging national churches.

As the national church bodies grew in numbers and leadership capacity, the hope and prayer was that someday, the national churches and their leaderships would assume the responsibility of managing their own church. Missionaries would eventually fade into the woodwork leaving behind a solid foundation on which national churches would continue to build and grow. There would be some overlap—leaving behind some missionaries to serve as consultants or supporters, continuing conversations how each might continue to work together to advance God’s mission in that place. The intent was never to abandon the partners. But the goal was to pass the baton of leadership and ownership to the national churches and their own leadership.

What has in fact happened in many places returned a different outcome—a dependent national church unable to carry that baton. Passing the baton to the national church is less easy when the baton built developed Western models and structures with assumed definitions and expectations. Unintentionally, a Western church model resulted, requiring the same types of resources to manage it as it needed before it was handed off rather than the baton imagined by the national church.

And, those resources with the same definitions and expectations were often not available. Seminaries needing significant amounts of income for the daily running and management of the plant, along with staff and professors, no longer had that full support, or if they did, support was diminished on a sliding scale over a set number of years. Buildings that required repair and upkeep simply outpaced the capacity of the national church's resources. Equipment repair and management skills, which had been the responsibility of the missionaries, now fell to the national leaders. Those leaders who were trained in Western colleges and seminaries with a worldview very different from the local context and who were now considered the obvious recipients of the roles missionaries held, brought back Western ideas of leadership and authority that often clashed with the local understanding of leadership. Seminarians who had learned a Western, systematic approach to the Scriptures now began to apply that approach in ways which made sense to the missionary or seminary professor and student, but missed the mark when local people tried to connect the scriptural insight with local questions and lifestyles.

The baton, which once looked so right and effective and successful, became a burden placed on the national leadership.

This is not to say that the baton of the past has been unsuccessful. There are many national churches that are now carrying the baton, moving forward, and have the capacity to carry on a robust ministry. But there are also those struggling to run with the baton handed them.

If a church continues to insist on a colonialist approach, it is imperative they understand the difficult situation being created when it is handed to the national church. Continuing a flow of resources from the West to the rest is simply not possible. Resources are not endless. Professionals trained in and by institutions in the West may return as marginalized leaders. Transplanted institutions and governance structures are at odds with local contextual structures. Buildings and land acquisition may hinder the original purpose of the missionaries. Though unintended, this colonial posture, which demands and commands a Western defined level of capacity from the national church in order to carry the baton forward successfully, creates less than equal partners and keeps them in a lap dog posture at the mercy of the original owner.

### **The “Money Police” Problem**

Finances have been and will continue to be a significant issue when developing appropriate partnerships. In the past, support for the partner church came in various ways. Initially, dollars flowed into a country and often into the hands of a local Christian who had made contact in some way with generous and caring people in the West. An honest relationship developed between a person of God in a country who deeply desired people to meet Jesus Christ in his village, town, community, or

country. Individuals, a local congregation, or a church group raised funds, shared those funds with the local individual and/or ministry, and intended and tried to visit the ministry on site. At times, this relationship developed into an opportunity by the Western church to send missionaries – short term and longer term, as well as career people. And so, support arrived in the form of missionaries who served – church planters, teachers, and support staff. Goods were then purchased by the missionaries – planks, tin roofs, cement, books, school supplies, brick and mortar. And of course money followed – dollars for projects or tuition or rent or salaries.

There are still individuals in various parts of the world who somehow connect directly with a congregation or group or even an individual, and who then receive support. And of course, missionaries are still being sent. That has not changed. Most national churches around the globe, if asked, would readily receive people to support the ministry of the national church, and goods are still being purchased by missionaries for projects they consider valuable and helpful.

Noticing a need in a particular ministry, missionaries on the ground (either on their own or in consultation with national congregations or the national church) developed these projects, sent the request to the church, and received the funds to move the project forward. The dollars generally flowed to the missionary who managed the project, while using local skilled people and resources.

But as the national church matured, more and more responsibility was given to them. They were expected to imagine projects, develop the proposals, and, if funded, find local people and resources to complete the project. As the project moved forward, the missionary or church would release funds to them. The release of funds was always tied to good project reports or receipts that had been accumulated and submitted. Very infrequently would funds in total be released to the local congregations or the national church before the project began or before receipts or invoices were submitted. In this way, missionaries maintained their control over the funds even though the project was approved by the church, the project was part of the national church's ministry vision, and the local church was more than capable of managing the project and funds. The national church was not trusted, or its capacity to ably manage the project and its funding were questioned. Missionaries began to be seen as the money police.

This practice continues today and fuels the perception by national churches that their leadership is not trusted or lacks capacity.

## **Funds, Power, and Partnerships**

Though the practice has been disparaged and criticized for decades, the model still continues: tying resources and decision making power to partnerships. The old model looks something like this: A conversation begins between an established

national church and a partner church. There is a request for support—either funds or people—for the local ministry to move forward. Once the request is clearly understood, the church develops a proposal for implementation. It might look something like this:

The Mission Office of the American Church prayerfully wishes to establish a formal strategic partnership with the Seminary of the African Church in order to mutually share the responsibility to strengthen the mission identity of the African Church.

In order to accomplish this partnership, the following goals have been drafted:

- 1) To facilitate close cooperation between the partner seminaries to strengthen the mission of the Church in Africa with a sound Scriptural identity.
- 2) To strengthen the theological voice mutually between the partner seminaries.
- 3) To strengthen the academic educational standard making the African Seminary a premier seminary in Africa.
- 4) To develop a more efficient and accountable system for managing and reporting on all American Church support and the handling of American visitors to Africa.
- 5) To support the African Seminary's operational budget to the extent feasible until it becomes self-sufficient.

#### TERMS AND CONDITIONS

##### American Church Responsibilities:

- 1) To facilitate a closer partnership between the two church's seminaries.
- 2) To help support theological educators as visiting faculty to the African Seminary.
- 3) To build the capacity of the African Seminary faculty through ongoing theological education.
- 4) To provide an operational subsidy of \$60,000 US or above as needed and available per fiscal year for the African Seminary until it becomes self-sufficient.

##### African Church Responsibilities:

- 1) To provide satisfactory and timely reports to the American Church's mission board and accept directions for improvement.

- 2) To consult the American Church's mission director on matters concerning any visiting faculty, lecturers, teachers, presenters, or professors coming from the American Church.
- 3) Courses pertaining to the Scriptural teaching related to worship and doctrine to be developed in consultation with the American Church's theological scholars under the guidance of the mission board.

#### PARTNERSHIP RELATIONS

- 1) The African Seminary President shall share with the Mission Board Director issues regarding non-theological matters.
- 2) The African Seminary President shall share with the Mission Board Director of Theological Education issues regarding theological matters.
- 3) The aforementioned Directors shall consult with and report to the African Church President and the American Church's Director of Church Relations as appropriate.
- 4) Regarding visiting instructors, the African Seminary President shall consult either of the aforementioned Directors before allowing an instructor to visit.

**DURATION AND IMPLEMENTATION:** This agreement covers a period of three years, after which it may be extended by written agreement.

As one reads this partnership agreement with a set of lenses formed by the IMT's definition of partnership, glaring contradictions are evident. The most obvious is tying significant funds to the activity of the national church. In addition, it is also evident that the partnership with the seminary is tied to an American expectation of proper and appropriate reports and authority channels, appropriate oversight of the development of courses, and appropriate individuals approved by the American Church regarding who would be allowed to teach at the seminary.

Returning once again to the IMT's definition of partnership and the approach taken to develop those partnerships, it is noticeable that it does not try to define the prospective national church's capacity by a list of metrics developed by the church. It does not attempt to assess a national church with a SWOT analysis and subsequently assign the national church a percentage number from 1-100% indicating their capacity to partner effectively.

And though this example may seem to be "over the top," it is shared in this article from a real-life example taken from a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) sent to a partner church in the last two years. Appropriate partnerships do not require adherence to rules and regulations developed by another partner. That is not a

partnership. It is a contractual relationship built on cultural expectations and power by one party over another.

### **Asking for Support without Fear**

Let one more issue suffice for this paper. National churches often don't voice their real needs or vision in partnership conversations because they are afraid that if they voice their vision, other partners around the table may have another vision and, therefore, not support the partner's vision with resources and funds.

This statement deserves an explanation. Though this may not be a worldwide phenomenon, when wealthy partners—partners with resources, people, money—come to the table with other less wealthy partners, the collaborative conversation is already weighted toward the wealthy partners and is often experienced in the following way:

- 1) A visiting mission team interested in investing significant time and energy in a partnership with a national church visits and meets with the leadership of the national church.
- 2) The visiting mission team asks the right questions: How can we help? What do you need? What do you desire? They are searching for answers to questions that will move forward the vision of the national church.
- 3) The response from the national church is often couched in the following language: What gifts (people, resources, money, skills, ideas, expertise) do you bring to bear on this place? What are you able to do?
- 4) The visiting mission team then lists a number of skills, resources, ideas, suggestions, and ministries that they could support or carry out.
- 5) The national church suggests and points out that one or two of the many things on the list are exactly what would move their mission and vision forward.
- 6) The visiting mission team is excited that they will be able to support that important vision of the national church.

A quick read of this process does not seem to raise any red flags. The visiting team asked for suggestions. The national church responded with ministries that matched the resources available. But if read more closely, notice that the national church did not indicate its vision. It simply defined the vision by identifying items on the resource list of the visiting mission team which they would appreciate. Those items may, of course, be exactly what is needed by the national church. But rather than the national church's sharing its vision and finding the visiting mission team unable or unwilling to fulfill its request, it would rather receive whatever help a visiting mission team might offer and take advantage of any investment in its ministry in whatever fashion the visiting mission team is able to supply it.

It seems to the visiting mission team as if the conversation between the two partners is real and collaborative, both sharing their vision and passion and finding a

way to connect each to one another. But in reality, it is the weaker partner's simply trying to find a way to keep the visiting mission team interested in supporting the local ministry. Many national churches are afraid that their real vision may not connect with the resources standing right in front of them, or that the visiting mission team finds the national church vision uninspiring and then does not feel compelled to invest in that vision.

Some national churches would rather have visiting mission teams invest in whatever manner they choose rather than lose the investment opportunity. This has sometimes resulted in buildings erected but never used, ministries started but never completed, land purchased but the vision for that land never accomplished. Yet, the building and land become additional assets of the national church. National church leadership is trained, but that training is now being used in non-ministry work.

This scenario is not just related to visiting mission teams from congregations or judicatories. While I served as Regional Director—Africa, LCMS WM, project proposals from national churches and emerging partner churches arrived on my desk each year. Often, a national church would send in six, seven, and even more proposals requesting project funding from \$500 to hundreds of thousands of dollars. And then, by virtue of past experience and protocol, those multiple requests not only forced us to decide which projects from among all the national churches LCMS WM might support (after all—resources are limited), but also forced us to determine which projects were priorities for each individual national church, as evaluated by LCMS WM.

In further conversations with each of them, LCMS WM clearly indicated that the funds available were limited, and subsequently asked for project proposals ranging between certain dollar amounts (depending upon the funds available any given fiscal year). Secondly, LCMS WM communicated to the national churches that, although LCMS WM funded a variety of ministry projects, there were certain projects it would not consider (no different than other funding organizations). Finally, and probably the most important, it was communicated that each national church was to prioritize its project proposals. LCMS WM would begin its deliberations with the highest prioritized proposal submitted from each national church. And it was made clear that, regardless of LCMS WM's perspective on any proposal, it would still fund the national church's vision and priorities as it was able.

Very few national churches believed that LCMS WM would approach the assessment of project proposals with that posture. They felt that unless their vision matched LCMS WM's vision for them, they would receive no project funding. Thus, the partners worked hard to determine which projects on the list that LCMS WM would fund found better reception in deliberations, and then would submit those particular types of projects. It took several iterations of budget years before national churches believed the rhetoric: LCMS WM funds the priorities of national churches. It began to break down dependency postures and system manipulation.

Partnerships need to be built on trust and mutual admiration for one another, with each partner bringing to the table the resources, gifts, skills, and wisdom that they are honestly able to supply, and that whatever those assets are, they are enough. When partnership conversations begin, both sides need to be willing to share their vision—the visiting mission team (or judicatories or even, as with LCMS WM, large national churches) and the national church and its skills and resources and true vision and hopes and desires.

## **Conclusion**

As stated at the beginning of this paper, the insights shared come from being in the mix, with “boots on the ground,” and instigating those courageous conversations so necessary to develop the important partnerships church bodies need to move God’s kingdom forward. So please allow me to conclude with one more story that highlights the learning curve still evident as partnerships begin to grow and mature.

As I began my work as Regional Director—Africa LCMS WM in 2005, one of the items laid on my desk was a partnership agreement being developed entitled, “Guiding Principles for the Working Agreement between the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS) World Mission and the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus (EECMY).” Since it was less than three pages long and in process since 1996, the goal was to complete the agreement as soon as possible.

One of my first African meetings was with the President of the EECMY in March 2006 to discuss the document. We spent several hours working through the document, word-smithing, changing phrases, and trying to develop appropriate language satisfactory to both sides. At the end of the day, we still had work to do and we both indicated that we would plan another meeting to address the formal partnership. Over the next two years, we met a number of times, with little if any progress.

One day, I received an email inviting LCMS WM to the EECMY’s annual partnership gathering scheduled for January 2008. I returned to Ethiopia for the 29th annual partners meeting, the “Committee of Mutual Christian Responsibility.” The partners were from all over the globe—mostly Europe and North America. They included LWF, PCUSA, RCA, NLM, and many others—a total of 40–45 partners with whom the EECMY had a formal relationship/partnership. Each of them had signed a partnership agreement MOU that had been written by the EECMY.

It was an unexpected discovery. The EECMY had developed its own agreements. I took copies and asked LCMS WM in St. Louis to look at them and determine if they could serve as the platform for partnership with the EECMY, rather than have the LCMS WM and the EECMY try to draft and write a separate



document. Except for a few items, LCMS WM responded that the documents could be the platform for a signed, official partnership.

Another partnership meeting took place in April 2008, four months after the annual meeting. I indicated that I had discovered and read the EECMY partnership agreements already developed. The president informed me that the “Standard Partnership Agreement” was for all partners, and the EECMY even allowed room for discussion if there was any article that was not clear or needed some modification. With that understanding as the backdrop to the meeting, and with the president at the table with both the LCMS WM MOU that had been in draft form for years, and with the EECMY’s own partnership documents in front of him, he asked me, “Which one should we use—the MOU being drafted between WM and the EECMY or the EECMY’s own document?” I told him to rip up the LCMS WM MOU and to work with the EECMY’s document.

Within one hour, the agreement was signed. After another two hours, a more concise partnership agreement of the EECMY, the “Specific Agreement,” was being discussed. Once LCMS WM agreed to allow the EECMY to determine what agreements were appropriate to use for official partnership with their church, the meeting moved along quickly. After 10-plus years of conversation and at least 4–5 years of working with a 3-page draft document that LCMS WM initiated with a posture clearly indicating to the EECMY who was in authority, it took only four months (from the discovery of the EECMY documents in January until the April meeting) to agree to move forward to sign a working agreement between the EECMY and LCMS WM. The simple equation shared earlier in the IMT’s partnership definition captures this well: Shared Risk + Shared Responsibility = Shared Rewards. Each partner brings the capacity it has and the wisdom it can offer, and it is enough. Partnerships.Are.Not.One.Direction.

### **Some Personal Reflections as a Postscript**

Though it has been several years since I have served in an international position, I have not been absent from the conversation nor from observing the present practices as international partnerships move forward. Though it is only my humble opinion, I believe that the present direction being forged in partnership development and management has been to return to older practices, models, approaches, and postures rather than moving in the direction as described in the definition shared in this paper.

I have observed a dependency model being used as an approach to strengthening partnerships or beginning them. In some instances, money has been closely tied to partnerships agreements. Explicit and implicit control has been connected to instructors and professors who teach in institutions and seminaries. National churches have been instructed to consult the LCMS on matters concerning any

visiting faculty, lecturers, teachers, presenters, or professors coming from the West. Outside influence has been applied to national churches as they choose their own leaders to instruct at their own institutions. Partners are rated according to their abilities and capacities to be effective partners based on criteria defined and delineated by the Western church. The three-self formula that allows for many and varied ways for national churches to define their own capacity as sustainable, governing, and propagating bodies has been replaced with Western-defined criteria with little input from the national churches themselves.

I have noticed that rather than partnering and advocating for and coming alongside of our international friends, involvement in litigation and court cases has become more common. The present trend seems to be directive rather than partnership, and that done even with litigation. That partnerships include support, advice, conversation, and dialogue, even when it needs to be courageous, should be expected. But outside partners should not choose which side to support in a national church's struggles and conversations. An organization may choose not to partner with another organization, but litigation brought or supported by an outside voice intending to influence the decisions of a national church should never be used. In my opinion, those decisions are strictly and only the responsibility of the national church in that place.

I have also observed people being removed from missional leadership roles. Since 2010, nearly fifty international missionaries and twenty individuals from the home office with proven abilities, cross-cultural competencies, and hundreds of years of service have resigned, been removed, or been repositioned. Though the reasons for these remarkable changes are not all known, the reality is that these changes have occurred in the recent past and a significant number of years of experience in mission have been lost in the international missionary movement. Since WWII, LCMS missionary efforts have intentionally built upon the work of previous generations to establish indigenous churches that themselves produce missionaries, resulting in a powerful global network of Lutheran church bodies and new mission efforts. That continuity of mission, a distinguishing hallmark of LCMS missionary efforts for nearly seven decades, is now being severed, and the chain of cumulative mission knowledge and experience broken.

In addition, in numerous instances these missionaries have been replaced with others who do not always bring those same gifts and experiences. In my opinion, individuals have been placed into significant leadership positions in international contexts or in roles explicitly connected to international partnerships who bring little significant missional theory or practice or proven ability to competently navigate the difficult waters of cross-cultural ministry. Missional theory accompanied by extended experience is important, for without them, one is doomed to repeat what appears to be a good idea, when, in reality, experience indicates that it is not.

Without good theory coupled with extended experience, one is reduced to one's own wisdom and worldview yet untested by reality.

Finally, limitations have been placed upon those who are sent into international contexts where church planting or theological education is the main focus, namely, ordination and an M.Div. degree, effectively eliminating many who could serve faithfully and successfully. These changes affect the capacity of the Western church to partner appropriately and finally, successfully.

These are simply my thoughts, reflections, and perspectives. Though some might agree, others will disagree, which makes for a wonderful, robust, and transparent conversation as the church, the people of God, moves together into the world to reach those who still live without Him and the gift of grace so freely offered. May that always be the goal. To His glory alone.

## **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> Though this paper aims to share an appropriate approach to developing partnerships with national churches throughout the world, it does so from an experiential perspective. The issues raised in this paper have been seen throughout the world. They are not centered in one place or with any particular type of national church. And though the few issues noted in this paper are important, it is surely not an exhaustive list. The intent is to raise awareness of what might begin to constitute an appropriate approach to developing those partnerships and, subsequently, what to watch for as those partnerships move forward. Finally, though this paper reports the issues from a “boots on the ground” perspective, the issues have not been processed in a vacuum. Years of study and research have helped to shape this response.

<sup>2</sup> Today known as the IMT, its make-up included the four Regional Directors for Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod World Mission (LCMS WM) along with the Associate Executive Director for International Mission.

<sup>3</sup> From a speech given by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice at Georgetown University, Washington, DC, on January 18, 2006. The entire speech may be found at <http://2001-2009.state.gov/secretary/rm/2006/59306.htm>.

<sup>4</sup> In this document, the word “church” refers to a sending church, a church normally from the west. The words “national church” refer to the local church in a different place, in another country, often referred to as a receiving church.

<sup>5</sup> This phrase used in mission circles was popularized in a book entitled, *Passing the Baton*, by Tom A. Steffen (La Habra, CA: Center for Organization & Ministry, 1997).

## Book Reviews

EMOTIONALLY HEALTHY SPIRITUALITY: *It's Impossible to Be Spiritually Mature, While Remaining Emotionally Immature*. By Peter Scazzero. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014. 240 pages. Paper. \$15.99.

Peter Scazzero is a pastor in a multi-racial and multi-ethnic New York City community. He is also the author of *The Emotionally Healthy Church* (Zondervan, 2010). Scazzero had several reasons for writing this second book. The first is to make the life-changing materials available to the average churchgoer and not just to church leaders. Another reason was “to make the ancient treasures of the church accessible as well. The contemplative tradition has brought a fullness, a richness, and a sense of wholeness to our disciple making and spiritual formation” (1–2) at his church.

Scazzero, as a pastor, noticed that he had trouble facing conflicts. He also found that he ignored his own feelings and had little time for his family. He shared his journey through pain and growth to be more effective in ministry. One particularly striking story is when his wife challenged him that she was finished living with his “excuses, delays, or avoidant behavior” (17). There was such a difference between his church behavior and his home behavior that she truthfully said that his leadership was not worth following.

“How healthy am I emotionally?” “How does my emotional condition affect my spiritual condition?” Pastor Scazzero helps the reader to explore these questions. He encourages each of us to look at our own emotional baggage, to learn and grow into a more emotionally healthy and, hence, also a more spiritually healthy individual. Sharing God’s love with others, across the street or across cultures, can then be a much fuller, complete person-to-person sharing.

If we look at emotional health closely, we can see close connections between emotional and spiritual conditions. If I, as a child, was expected to behave and learned to keep all mistakes and wrong-doings inside, I would have little experience with repentance and receiving forgiveness. I would have trouble acknowledging that I need to repent. A person with such a background could easily be carrying emotional baggage—and that baggage would directly affect spiritual health and discipleship as well. In fact, since no family is perfect; everyone grows up with some baggage, which affects how we walk with the Lord and/or participate in the church community.

The first three chapters of this book deal with recognizing and understanding how emotionally unhealthy many of us are. The rest of the book shares guidance for becoming more healthy emotionally and, thus, also more healthy spiritually. While

the book is intended for church leaders, it should also be helpful for lay people. What would mission look like in your life if you were more emotionally healthy? I would think that being emotionally healthy would enable me to be more fully into the Lord's work. I would be able to trust God with all aspects of my life and be fully His, whether at home, in the community, or at work. In other words, the more I set down my emotional baggage in God's grace, the better I can listen to another person and choose the words that fit for sharing the faith.

Two other books by Scazzero invite and encourage the use of *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality*. One is a workbook, *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality Workbook*. The other is *Begin the Journey with the Daily Office*, in which Scazzero supplies helps for spending more time with God every day. Amazon has all of these. The book and the daily devotional book are both on Kindle.

Miriam Carter

PERPETUATED IN RIGHTEOUSNESS: The Journey of the Hawaiian People from Eden to the Present Time. By Daniel I. Kikawa. 4<sup>th</sup> ed. Kea'au, Hawaii: Aloha Ke Akua Publishing, 1994. 223 pages. Paperback. NP

Daniel Kikawa is probably the best-known missiologist among the native Christian Hawaiians. He is the founder and director of the Aloha Ke Akua ("God Is Love") mission organization. *Perpetuated in Righteousness* is the seminal work of this organization, based on the conviction that the original religion of the Polynesian Islands was the worship of the true God Jehovah.

According to this account, the "aloha" religion of God was corrupted when the Tahitian priest Pa'ao conquered the land around AD 1300, introducing the social stratification and rules of the "kapu" system, including cruel punishments and human sacrifice to the volcano goddess Pele. The oppressive system was finally overthrown after five hundred years by the successors of the great warrior king Kamamehameha, providentially anticipating the arrival of the first Christian missionaries six months later in 1819. In addition, a number of ancient prophecies were fulfilled in the details of the missionaries' way of arrival (158–64). The Christian Gospel resonated with the Hawaiian soul, and fully 96% of the population had become Christian by 1863 (168).

Kikawa draws on the research of the well-respected anthropologist Wilhelm Schmidt in his 12-volume *The Origin and Growth of Religion* (1931) to document how the Polynesians, as well as many other ancient cultures around the world, had monotheistic beliefs (52). Kikawa identifies this true God with the name "Io," used in ancient Polynesian worship (54–66) and even as far away as among the Maoris in New Zealand (127).

Kikawa also documents how many of the stories of the pre-history chapters of the Bible, Genesis 1–11, are to be found in the mythologies of these societies. “Although many accounts . . . have been distorted, they still point toward a common beginning” (82). And again: “The similarities in all of these stories are amazing . . . and are recounted by people on the opposite sides of the earth” (111).

Certainly it is evident that the concept of “aloha” (“agape,” love, peace, harmony) did not arise from the religion of Pa’au and worship of Pele. Kikawa identifies the concept with the biblical concept of “shalom,” further strengthening his argument that the original religion of the Hawaiians was rooted in the revelations to the Hebrews (134).

Kikawa recognizes that the arrival of Western influence also had many negative consequences for the population. “For instance, in their zeal to condemn the worship of idols and other false gods, they also condemned some of the art forms such as the hula” (177). In addition, mercantile successors to the original missionaries, including some of their own children, took advantage of the ignorance and trust of the Hawaiians. They confiscated the land and oppressed the people, even to the extent that the U.S. marines illegally overthrew the royal government on Jan. 17, 1893 (191).

Kikawa recognizes that there has been some reversion to the religion of Pa’au among native Hawaiians as a result of their disillusionment with Western Christianity (186). However, he appeals that they should not judge Christianity on the basis of the injustice and hypocrisy they have experienced. Instead, they should see the Christian Gospel as a return to their original identity as “aloha” people (209).

Dr. Kikawa has pursued similar research into and argumentation on the early religion of Japan, the country of his own family’s ancestry. This material is presented in the international award-winning two-part video entitled “God’s Fingerprints in Japan” (Aloha Ke Akua Ministries, 2005) with the tagline: “Is there evidence of the Creator God in Japanese history and culture?”

From the standpoint of missiological strategy, Kikawa’s approach certainly is appealing. It overcomes the faults and cultural insensitivities of past mission efforts. It embraces the dignity and spirituality of the mother culture, providing a rootedness along with a critique. Evangelistic appeals based on such respectful research can anticipate sympathetic understanding and receptivity.

Herbert Hofer



## **Save the Date!**

### **Lutheran Society for Missiology's Annual Banquet**

**January 28, 2015**

**Theme: Lutheran Mission Matters.**

**Doors open at 6:00 p.m.**

**Banquet Speaker Rev. Mike Newman,  
The Real LCMS: Mission Principles From the Movement  
Called "Missouri"**

**Concordia Seminary  
Koburg Dining Hall, St. Louis, MO 63105**

Tickets are \$30 and will be available to purchase soon.  
E-mail [lsfmissiology@gmail.com](mailto:lsfmissiology@gmail.com) for more details.

Don't want to miss out on LSFM news  
and upcoming issues  
of *Missio Apostolica*?



Like our Facebook page.

<https://www.facebook.com/LutheranSocietyforMissiology>

Check out the Lutheran Society for Missiology Web site too!

[www.lsfmissiology.org](http://www.lsfmissiology.org)

The Web site will be moving to <http://LSFM.Global> in 2015.

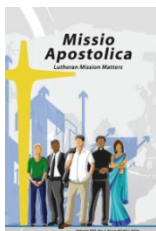
---

Want a Print Copy?

E-mail [lsfmissiology@gmail.com](mailto:lsfmissiology@gmail.com) to order  
a print copy of *Missio Apostolica*.

Individual Print Copies

Price: \$15 plus shipping



---

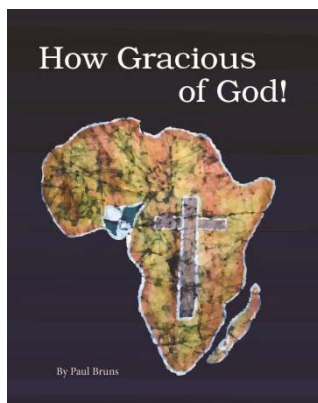
## How Gracious of God!

by Pastor Paul Bruns

"I titled my memoir *How Gracious of God!* because I was the most surprised person in the world at what God's grace did through me and my family for 32 years in Nigeria, West Africa. It was he who sent us, equipped us and enabled us to serve him. Therefore, my prayer is that my story will motivate others to depend on his grace to do the same."

—Pastor Paul Bruns

Buy a copy now for \$20 (includes shipping) on the LSFM website [http://lsfmissiology.org/?page\\_id=8](http://lsfmissiology.org/?page_id=8).



For 3 or more copies to the same address or for international shipping options,  
e-mail [lsfmissiology@gmail.com](mailto:lsfmissiology@gmail.com).



## *Missio Apostolica* Call for Papers

For the Lutheran Society for Missiology and its journal, *Missio Apostolica*, Lutheran mission matters. This journal has been for more than two decades serving as an international forum for the exchange of ideas and discussion of issues related to proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus Christ globally.

For its May 2015 issue, the editors of *Missio Apostolica* invite essays, review essays, mission observers, and book reviews on three topics that overlap linguistically and, to a significant extent, substantively for its May 2015 issue: Spiritism, Spiritualism, and Spirituality. Each of the following web sites provides a helpful overview for each religious principle:

Spiritism <http://www.explorespiritism.com/>

Spiritualism <https://www.nsac.org/>

Spirituality [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spiritual\\_but\\_not\\_religious](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spiritual_but_not_religious)

Much more information on each can be found by using standard search engines. As you read about each, you will observe their often common characteristics and beliefs.

**Spiritism** has become a fast-growing sensation, specifically in the “Christian West” as a post-institutional and post-Christian worldview. Traditional Christian households and neighborhoods are not spared, if for even a moment Christians may have presumed that they are immune to this popular religious viewpoint. It skillfully posits for the religious consumer an ingenious blending of science, philosophy, and spirituality all rolled into one. It has an intricate set of beliefs about God, the universe, and the spirits. Many Spiritists claim Jesus Christ as their model, and the Bible for them is a resource for their own spirits to find perfection. Spiritism’s popular manifestations are discernible in a variety of shapes and forms such as séances and mediums, demonic possessions and exorcisms, and a new movement called “Trinitarian Wicca.” The alarming rise of the Wiccans in the U.S., for example, is evident in the following quote:

*Between 2001 and 2008, the number of Pagans over all (Wiccans included) doubled, so that’s a growth rate of 200%. That’s an increase greater than almost anything seen among the other religions! The number of Christians overall, in comparison, only experienced an 8% growth rate between 2001 and 2008, which is actually a decrease when you account for population growth.* (accessed at: <http://metal-gaia.com/2013/05/21/is-paganism-the-fastest-growing-religion-in-the-united-states/>)

Our colleague Herb Hofer—veteran missionary, university professor, and Christian apologist—has remarked that Spiritism is a fast-growing spirituality, fascinating and enticing even the traditional and elitist households in the West. It is no longer only another primitive, animistic religion in faraway lands, but it is spreading in our backyard, and its fascination spares no one. This journal’s mission

statement compels us to address this challenge biblically and theologically, with Lutheran eyes. We take Hoefer's note seriously under advisement.

**Spiritualism**, often too narrowly understood as fostering communication with the dead and similar practices (cf. Spiritism), and **generic spirituality**, i.e., a religious feeling not connected with the Christian God or even any god, are easily confused, even by their practitioners. Beliefs and practices relate, for example, to personal morality, psychological states, and free-floating religiosity. In general, practitioners of all the "spirit religions" reject or ignore specific, e.g., scriptural, beliefs about God and His work in Christ.

Compare these trends with, for example, "God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth" (Jn 4:24), and "I am the Lord . . . who frustrates the signs of liars and makes fools of diviners, who turns wise men back and makes their knowledge foolish"(Is 44: 25). The Lord has placed us in this generation to speak His Word of grace and truth to all people whom God desires to come to the knowledge of the truth.

Should you have had opportunity to study these matters and/or work with people who espouse these beliefs, we invite you to serve as witnesses of the Gospel of God, to join us in this worthy endeavor that we may together give the world the reason for the hope we have within us in Christ Jesus (1 Pt 3:15), a world that is seeking constantly to lead astray from the truth of Jesus Christ, if possible, even the elect (Mt 24:24).

If you wish to submit an article, or would like to discuss the possibility of publishing in *Missio Apostolica*, please contact Dr. Victor Raj, Editor, 801 Seminary Place, St. Louis, MO 63105 at [rajv@csl.edu](mailto:rajv@csl.edu). Please take this first step as early as possible. The submission date for the completed manuscript for the May 2015 issue is February 15, 2015. We value your wisdom on this topic to share with the church and the world through these pages.

In the Spirit of the Lord Jesus and His Mission,

The Editorial Committee, *Missio Apostolica*  
The Lutheran Society for Missiology