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The Ministry and Mission of the Lutheran Church in the Nineties

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Introduction

The mission of the Lutheran Church in the nineties and looking towards the 21st century is very clear and, I think, quite unambiguous. It is set forth for us in Matthew 28:18–20: “Go to the people of all nations and make them my disciples. Baptize them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit and *teach* them to do everything I have told you...”¹ It is further emphasized in Acts 1:8 where Jesus says to his disciples: “The Holy Spirit will come upon you and give you power. Then you will tell everyone about me in Jerusalem, in all Judea, and Samaria and everywhere in the world.” This emphasis on the spreading outward of the message of salvation incarnated in Jesus Christ is picked up in the Augsburg Confession, our primary Lutheran Confession, in Articles 4 and 5. Article 4 on Justification lifts up the good news that we are accepted by God, i.e., “justified”, “received into favor”, “sins are forgiven”, for Christ’s sake.² So that is the fundamental message to get out, the message of the Gospel. “*In order*” that this message can be proclaimed, Article 5 of the Augsburg Confession on ministry says, “the ministry of teaching the Gospel and administering the sacraments was instituted.” This *ministry* serves the *mission* which is the message of the Gospel incarnated in Jesus Christ.

The constitution of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada in Article IV, Section 1 encapsulates this mission and under Section 2 with thirteen subpoints explains how this church will strive to carry out the mission.³ The mission is identified as being “to bring the Gospel of Jesus Christ to people in

Canada and around the world through the proclamation of the Word and the administration of the Sacraments and through Service in Christ's name" (IV.1). The thirteen subpoints range over a variety of specific responsibilities which are intended to service this larger expression of the church's mission.

It is essential in my view that we keep lifting up the clearly focussed and fundamental mission of the church in order that we shall retain the stress on what is needed and not somehow assume that the activities intended to enable mission become themselves elevated to a status beyond what they deserve. For example, the establishing of seminaries, schools, agencies is not an end in itself; it is a means to serve the end which is the church's mission. Even establishing and maintaining congregations is not an end in itself but is a means of sustaining and enlarging the mission of the Gospel. At different times different forms and configurations may be both possible and needed.

Having reminded ourselves what the fundamental mission of the church is, I want to take up what this means in the context of our particular situation in the church and in our Canadian society. I propose to address three subjects:

1. The current situation of the church.
2. The changing generational and social context.
3. Revisioning the mission of the church.

I. The Current Situation of the Church

A. Some encouraging realities

In many ways there is much more reason to be encouraged than discouraged in the church, in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada, in this decade of the nineties. It is true that we are static in terms of statistical growth; that we have a lot of stress in congregations and among pastors; that there is often dissension within congregations or between pastors, congregations and church officials. But these are not unique or new; St. Paul addresses almost identical issues in his first letter to the Corinthians and these kinds of issues will always be present.

The reality is we have come a long, long way as a church. In 1986 we completed a merger, the culmination of about twenty

years of dialogue, negotiation and achieving consensus in a coming together which was one in a long train of such mergers since the 1850s. This church combines at least ten (probably more) distinct ethnic traditions with a variety of cultural, liturgical, spiritual and even theological perspectives in a relatively harmonious communion. We are still making transitional adjustments and still experience some of the dislocations which accompany any merger. When different traditions come together there is always a certain amount of discomfort as accommodations are made over polity, worship style, traditions of piety, theological emphases and so on. But I think we have done pretty well. One of the realities for which we can be grateful is that Lutherans are united world wide confessionally, liturgically, and by an "ethos" which emerges from our theology of grace. This carries us through difficulties in a way not experienced by the non-confessional traditions.

These transitional adjustments require certain institutional adjustments as well. And we need to be open to these. The structures of how we are constituted for the purpose of service need constantly to be monitored and evaluated. Experience prompts questions. Do we need five synods? Is the national office representative of and sensitive to the church at large? What is the role of a bishop? What is the best flow of funds? How many divisions and executives do we need? These transitional questions while sometimes discomfiting are natural and important and even necessary for the church to be raising. They are, however, not of fundamental importance, they are secondary and the resolution of such secondary issues must relate to mission.

A further encouraging reality has to do with our growing realization of Lutheran unity in Canada. There are now only two autonomous Lutheran church bodies in Canada (while there are still eighteen in the U.S.). That is a significant development and a mark of basic health in our Lutheran constituency. The progress towards further Lutheran unity in Canada is, I think, stalled for the time being, nonetheless we have in the past thirty-two years come from about ten Lutheran groupings down to two. That is a remarkable achievement.

Another significant reality has been the extent to which cordial and substantive relationships with other denominations have progressed since the early 1960s. Formal dialogues and

other relationships with Anglican, Reformed, Roman Catholic and even Pentecostal churches have done much to allay the suspicion, hostility and even the competitiveness of previous decades. We now work *with* rather than *against* one another. Having noted these recent positive developments it is apparent there yet remain important challenges facing us as Lutherans.

B. Institutional, Congregational and Personal Self-Absorption

One of the largest challenges facing us, in my view, is the need to break open our various forms of institutional, congregational and personal self-absorption.

Our merger has been, I think, necessary and it has accomplished much for the health of the church. It made little sense for the small number of Lutherans in Canada to be divided into so many competing constituencies. However, bringing about mergers and effecting new structure consumes enormous time and energy and money. While we must periodically proceed with restructuring it needs to be done with a view to serving the mission of the church. While we must periodically develop new worship materials and educational materials, and provide helpful guidance to congregations on issues of the day, this is all peripheral to our central calling.

In our church since the merger a good deal of our energy has been directed to somewhat introspective concerns. These have been, I think, simply a natural part of how we structure ourselves to function as a church. Thus, we have developed a set of guidelines for sacramental practices, offered help to pastors and congregations on such disputed ethical questions as abortion, developed a program for self-growth, and are currently addressing issues of ministry and the relationship of non-ordained and ordained ministries. These are all important matters but they are all secondary to and in service of the mission of the church. We need structure and order; we need to develop our worship; we need educational materials; we need an ordered ministry; we need also an unordered ministry—but all of this is “that we may obtain this faith” (Augsburg Confession, Article 5), namely, that we “cannot be justified before God by our own strength, merits or works, but are freely justified for Christ’s sake through faith...” (Augsburg Confession, Article 4). Clearly ministry exists to *serve the Gospel*. That is the

one overriding focus of our mission. The call to proclaim the Gospel, to preach Christ, is so emphasized in the Gospels and in the Epistles that at one point Paul says to the Philippians, "All that matters is that people are telling about Christ, whether they are sincere or not, that is what makes me glad" (1:18). This is an astonishing statement but in its boldness can help to break us out of our self absorption and recall us to what we are called to do. We are not here to build empires or power groups, but to proclaim Christ.

Our congregations also face the challenge of self absorption and self-interest overriding the mission. According to our Constitution the members of the church "are called by the Spirit of God to lead godly lives, to promote the unity and welfare of the church in the bond of peace, to proclaim the Gospel and to renounce the evil one" (V.3). But something has happened in some places. The Office of Resource Development of our national church indicates that more money than ever in history is being raised in our congregations but more is also staying there to be spent on local initiatives. This has become a serious problem inasmuch as the programs of the church at large become underfunded. There are also congregations which divide themselves into warring camps disputing over property, budgets, worship styles, differing theological perspectives, and so on. Some congregations are traumatized by internal struggles over power; some are preoccupied with personal agendas of one sort or another. Some congregations have even left the church because of dissatisfaction with this or that emphasis or lack of it in the church. Lest anyone think this is a new development I invite you to read 1 Corinthians 1-16 and you will discover there older versions of precisely the same introspections troubling some of our congregations today. Divisiveness in the church is not a new problem. It was such a major reality in Corinth (cf. 1:10-4:21 and 5:1-6:20) that Paul asks, "Has Christ been divided up?" (1:13). But what was central to Paul's response was his consistent attempt to refocus the congregation on Christ and the implications of their being Christ's disciples. Thus the future of the church does not lie in solving every problem and resolving every dispute but in recalling persons and congregations to the Christological centre and to the mission of extending the message of God's love to all (1 Corinthians 13). So there are challenges facing us—challenges we ought to take up in light of our fundamental mission.

II. The Changing Generations

Another of the realities with which we need to come to terms is the generational change which has taken place since those of us who were involved in the initial negotiations towards merger began taking on those responsibilities back in the sixties and seventies. We are entering a new era. A generational change is taking place and the church is, as usual, only with some reluctance facing this reality.

Back in the sixties and seventies much of our energy and creativity was directed to furthering the church's mission by *uniting* ourselves in that common endeavor in a *new* church. This was an exciting, very important and necessary task. We achieved that goal in 1986.

But now we are in a different situation. Our world is changing, our society is changing. Demographic studies indicate how significantly the makeup of urban congregations has changed since 1960. A recent newspaper story, as an example, indicated that less than half of the population of Saskatoon has English or French as a mother tongue (*Saskatoon StarPhoenix*, February 24, 1993).

I have just recently read two fascinating pieces of literature reflecting on social changes. The December 1992 issue of *Atlantic Monthly* has as its feature article an essay titled "The New Generation Gap".⁴ The thesis of the article is that the old hippie generation, the so-called Baby Boomers born between 1943–1960, the "forty-something" group, are now the new establishment wanting to set the political, religious and moral agenda for contemporary society. They, as the article says, see themselves as "the embodiment of moral wisdom".⁵ They are the "grumpies", i.e., grown up mature professionals. They are characterized as smug, narcissistic, self-righteous, intolerant and puritanical. These characteristics exhibit themselves on the right as evangelical fundamentalists, on the left as new agers, but in any event as America's most "God-absorbed" living generation.

This boomer generation is now being challenged, according to the essay, by what are called the Thirteeners (America's 13th generation) born from 1961–1981. The so-called 20-something group. This generation is much less optimistic than its parents. It faces bleaker prospects, does not anticipate as good a

life style as its parents, and tends to be pessimistic about the future. Members of this generation are also more cynical, less idealistic and have something in common with the so-called Lost Generation which followed World War I.

While in some respects this analysis sounds like clever sociological sloganeering, there are realities here of which we need to take account—realities which impinge upon how we conceptualize our mission, shape our programs as a church, and elect our leadership for the future.

A second book I have just recently been reading is called *Teen Trends: A Nation in Motion*. Its authors are Reginald Bibby and Donald C. Posterski.⁶ This is in some respects more relevant to our Canadian situation, but it too suggests significant generational change has indeed taken place. We are, say the authors, "a nation in motion".⁷ Changes have been and are taking place in values, religion, relationships, marriage and sexuality. The authors document older patterns that are changing and suggest there are five new patterns which are emerging.

The changing *older patterns* are:

- a. Relationships still very important but for fewer people.
- b. Values much the same but more interpersonal.
- c. Marriage and parenthood are important but there are many options rising from family breakup and new families.
- d. Sexuality the revolution is over but sexual attitudes have changed.
- e. Religious involvement is declining—spiritual interest is rising.⁸

The *emergent patterns* are:

- a. Youth are very well informed and very American in perspective. American television is a primary source of information.
- b. Young people see problems everywhere and experience social unrest, violence and many other personal problems.
- c. Young people have a bewildering assortment of options to consider: a supermarket of options in life.
- d. Adolescents have adopted values of social justice, racial equality, religious tolerance.
- e. Youth have very high expectations based on their own generally comfortable lifestyle.⁹

There are, of course, other patterns of change which are in some respects of more immediate concern and of which we

need to take account as we reflect on the nature of our church and our mission. For example:

- a. The rural-urban shift. How will we address viable ministry in the country? Will we need circuit riders? ecumenical ministries? lay ministries?
- b. The changing demographics respecting traditional nuclear families. Divorce rate is now at nearly 50%.
- c. Projections of continuing high unemployment arising from structural changes in manufacturing and industry requiring fewer workers.
- d. The search for spirituality unattached to the restrictions of traditional religious affiliations.
- e. Radical ethnic and racial diversifications.

The church participates in these changes because the church is not an invisible society but a sociological reality. The church is at once a community of faith and a faith-commitment rooted in the community in which it exists. In order to reflect on mission, in order to shape ourselves structurally, in order to pull ourselves forward and outward, we must take account of the world in which we live.

Our mission is here and now in this world, in the nineties and the 21st century with our new religious realities, our new social realities, our television culture, our 24-hour shopping, our gambling casinos. This is our new mission field. We cannot go back to the fifties or forties or twenties or the sixteenth century or the first century. Our mission is 1993 and beyond.

III. Revisioning the Mission of the Church

We are facing one of those transitional times in the life of the church in which we have an opportunity to revision our mission. Not only is there an opportunity, there is a great need to do so if we are going to be viable as a church with a genuine sense of mission rather than simply a mentality of maintenance. We cannot at this juncture in our history be simply or primarily in a posture of trying to hold on to the best in the past. We must be addressing ourselves to the future. Let our perspective be that of Philippians 3:12-16: "But Christ has taken hold of me. So I keep on running and struggling to take hold of the prize...." But we must keep going in the direction that we are now headed.

A. *We need to remain founded on what is essential, namely, our theology of justification with its focus on Jesus Christ as the incarnation of God's love for us and on our emphasis on grace.* This remains the theological undergirding and indeed the motivation for our endeavors as a church. Not strangely for Lutherans, our theology of justification is primary in our understanding of mission. Out of this central doctrine like the centre of a wheel into which the spokes are fitted all other theological perceptions fit. Justification is God's action of giving our sins to Jesus Christ and giving Christ's righteousness to us and accepting us who are fundamentally unacceptable as totally acceptable. The greatest explanation of this understanding is found in Luther's exposition of Galatians 3 in his commentary—a wonderfully liberating treatment. The second greatest exposition is Luther's treatise on *The Freedom of a Christian*, one of the finest explications of Christian theology ever written.

Justification is the ultimate expression of God's graciousness, the single attribute of God with which we have the greatest problem. We put our relationships on a kind of cause and effect or fair interchange basis which says in effect, "If you treat me this way, I'll treat you that way." God instead treats us with total graciousness, undeserved, overflowing, overwhelming, transforming, uncalculating, non-manipulative, pure unadulterated love. We are capable of this only to the extent we let ourselves be transformed by that love (cf. Romans 5). Our relationship to God is, therefore, based not on some calculus of our life and action but on pure grace. It is not a "quid pro quo". God doesn't say to us "Do this and I'll accept you", "Do that and I'll reward you". That is *our* calculus. God is overflowingly gracious to us (Romans 5:17). This gets at the basic question of motivation for mission. One who is justified is in a sense freed from self-interest, is able then to have toward others a measure of the kind of unselfish love God has for us. Since I am justified (i.e., accepted by God for no reason other than that God loves me), I am free from the need to impress God, to impress others, or to impress myself. This lets me be free to be concerned for the neighbor because of that person's need (remember the story of the Good Samaritan). Before God I do not need to prove anything; I have no reputation to establish or maintain. This is the whole basis of Luther's treatise on

The Freedom of a Christian and is summed up in the famous paradox with which he summarizes the treatise:

A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none;

A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.¹⁰

This implies as well that we are a community, made so by our union in Jesus Christ. Since we have no righteousness, no gifts, no work, no wealth to offer God, we are united in a community of saints wholly dependent on God and wholly committed to one another and to others. The inextricable character of human community is part of a theology of Christian mission. We are linked together with all of humanity by creation but also by our theology of justification.¹¹

Justification makes *servants* of all of us, persons who serve others not as *obligation* but as *an expression of one's faith*. This is *being Christ* to others.

The motivation of Christian mission, therefore, is not guilt, is not duty, is not law, but is the Gospel of the incarnation. This motivation seeks not to appease God, not to please God, nor to impress others, but is an expression of a relationship which flows from the graciousness of God.

This leads directly into a renewal or re-creation of our mission, Christ's mission, God's intention for humanity.

B. *Revisioning our mission is our ongoing responsibility as a church*. It means, to use Paul's phrases in Philippians, that Christ has so taken hold of us that we "keep on running and struggling...", we "struggle for what is ahead...", we "run toward the goal...", we "keep on going in the direction that we are now headed". What does this mean? I am not sure that I know what it means; I am not even sure Paul knew what it meant for him but he did see the necessity of moving forward with determination, gladness (4:4) and gentleness (4:5).

We simply must get past the anger, the infighting, the jealousies, the personal agendas, the self righteousness, the fears and mistrust, to permit the light of the Gospel of God's love in Christ to illumine all our mission efforts as a church. Jesus Christ is himself our model for mission. Let me suggest what this might mean for us. The motivation of mission is not guilt, it is the Gospel; we engage in mission not to appease God but because we are moved by Christ. Justification makes

servants of all of us. Justification enables us to *be Christ* to others. Over the years I have often visited patients in St. Paul's Hospital in Saskatoon. St. Paul's has at the front entrance an enormous statue of Christ with arms extended as though inviting everyone into a welcoming and caring place. Similar busts are located on the walls in the entrance hallways. It gives me a warm feeling to walk into that hospital. It suggests that the institution wants, like Christ, to wrap a sick and hurting world in its arms. That is the vision for the church. That is the expression of the Gospel. This means a commitment to persons rather than to programs or ideas or theoretical abstractions. It means treating pastors as servants of Christ worthy of respect and as co-workers in mission. It means all of us at every level in the church thanking God and one another for our mutual partnership in the Gospel.

Revisioning of mission will also mean for us a respect for, tolerance of and welcoming of, perspectives different from our own on a great variety of issues. It means consciously and deliberately developing our congregations as open, warm, embracing communities, not suspicious of the stranger. The inclusiveness of Christ needs to be embodied in our constitutions, structures and associations. In fact *inclusiveness* rather than *exclusiveness* ought to be a hallmark of the church. Can we learn to be open to and comfortable with the assortment of persons to whom Jesus was welcoming? Jesus never excluded anyone that I can think of. He showed anger only against those who abused religious privilege for personal gain (the money changers) and those religious exclusivists who wanted to assure the purity of their associations, and the disciples on those occasions they wanted to exclude children or were uneasy about his relations with women. Just think of the assortment of people Jesus went to and welcomed: the mentally ill and demon possessed, physically disabled, a tax collector, an army officer's son, a widow's son, a Pharisee, a prostitute, an adulteress, a dying girl, a sick woman, Mary and Martha, lepers, the blind, divorced, beggars. Matthew 11:28-29 is a wonderful expression of the openness of Jesus to the world, to human society: "If you are tired from carrying heavy burdens come to me and I will give you rest. Take the yoke I give you. Put it on your shoulders and learn from me. I am gentle and humble, and you will find rest."

Conclusion

Revisioning our mission for the nineties has many implications many of which I have surely not anticipated in these comments. Nonetheless, it seems to me certain conclusions can be drawn. The mission and ministry of our church in the nineties and going into the next century will:

- ¹ Be inspired by and be an expression of the *Gospel* with its liberating, creative, and uplifting power.
- ² Be open to human society and the world not with fear and loathing but embracing the ethnic, cultural and racial diversity that is our world. We need increasingly to realize we are part of a worldwide community of faith.
- ³ Embrace the future with hope and optimism in spite of the apprehensions and worries that so often preoccupy us.
- ⁴ Call forth a new generation of leadership unencumbered by the perspectives of the immediate past and looking toward the range of options and possibilities which lie ahead.
- ⁵ Give full place to the diversity of our society in our being and in our outreach. Instead of our past resolute commitment to unilingualism, our church will need to be open to and reflect the multilingual, multiethnic, multicultural and multiracial character of our society.
- ⁶ Will finally and resolutely give full place to women in our structures, leadership and programs.
- ⁷ Will be focussed on mission not simply preoccupied with problems; will look forward and outward not inward and backward.

Notes

- ¹ The translation used in this article is *Bible for Today's Family: New Testament with Psalms and Proverbs*, Contemporary English Version (New York: American Bible Society, 1992).
- ² Augsburg Confession, *Concordia Triglotta* (Minneapolis: Mott Press, 1955).
- ³ *Constitution and By-Laws, Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada*, July 1989 (separate edition).
- ⁴ N. Howe and W. Strauss, "The New Generation Gap," *Atlantic Monthly* 270/6 (December 1992) 67-89.
- ⁵ Ibid. 72.
- ⁶ R. Bibby and D. Posterski, *Teen Trends: A Nation in Motion* (Toronto: Stoddart Publishing Co., 1992).

- 7 Ibid. 2.
- 8 Ibid. 9-59.
- 9 Ibid. 60-114.
- 10 *Luther's Works* 31 (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1957) 344.
- 11 Ibid. 365.