

4-1-1982

World mission opportunities for Lutherans today

Risto R. Lehtonen

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus>

Recommended Citation

Lehtonen, Risto R. (1982) "World mission opportunities for Lutherans today," *Consensus*: Vol. 8 : Iss. 2 , Article 1.
Available at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus/vol8/iss2/1>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Scholars Commons @ Laurier. It has been accepted for inclusion in Consensus by an authorized editor of Scholars Commons @ Laurier. For more information, please contact scholarscommons@wlu.ca.

WORLD MISSION OPPORTUNITIES FOR LUTHERANS TODAY

Risto Lehtonen

Only recently did I become aware of the wealth of possibilities as well as the problems hidden behind the one single word "merger." I was part of a team of five from different churches and continents which met in December 1981 in New York to evaluate the policies and practices of the LCA Division for World Mission and Ecumenism. There we found an almost eschatological perspective in the words frequently repeated by our hosts: "In the new church." One point became clear — in a merger much more can be at stake than in completing a piece of complex church organizational architecture.

Coming to a decision of merger seems in itself already to be a bit of a miracle in view of the church political forces. In the opportunities which it provides one can sense an element of 'Kairos.' A merger is a God-given time for renewal, rebirth. The completion of a merger that leads to the birth of a new church is first and foremost a venture of faith. To me personally, coming from a church for which the thought of a merger means very little, the opening of these perspectives dawned quite overwhelmingly.

The significance of merger discussions in Canada is that they provide a unique opportunity to ask afresh what the mission is to which God calls Canadian Lutherans in this decade. To be faithful to the unique God-given opportunity means to utilize as fully as possible the chance to start almost from scratch and to consider the mission responsibilities and functions of the new church for decades ahead. In concentrating on the future, the question of how to honour inherited commitments in the new church may be solved more easily than by focussing on their status from the past.

A merger, and specifically the reorientation which it may bring about, can have an effect not only on the merging churches but also on those who do not have this opportunity. Both in the theory of mission and in the new living practice, merger

can also be a challenge and a help for churches which remain bound by their traditions. They, too, are looking for new opportunities and an example is more effective than admonition or theoretical studies. A church which emerges from a merger can show the way for others; what accumulated excess baggage they should want to leave behind and where in actual practice to place the main emphasis. In this sense what is planned in the Canadian churches in these years may stimulate renewal in other churches in North America and in other parts of the world.

WHAT IS MISSION?

We are all aware of the transitional character in the understanding of Christian mission in the last decade or two all over the world. Today there is not the overarching clarity about mission, even among Protestants, which was characteristic for the missionary movement of the last century and the early decades of this. Nor are today's churches able to come together around such cohesive themes which ecumenical mission conferences, e.g., Edinburgh, Jerusalem, Tambaram, Willingen, Mexico City, etc., brought up prior to the early '60s. In fact, the ecumenical and evangelical movements seem to have parted ways.

Lutheran churches have not been outsiders in this phenomenon. Among them there is also a great deal of diversity in the understanding of mission and indeed much confusion and uncertainty, especially when one listens to members and pastors in local congregations. Some suggest that the era of mission is over. Some claim that work for social change is the only legitimate form of mission today. Some others want to revive the evangelical, person-based, non-institutional missionary movement. Some again see the regular work of organized churches as the main avenue of mission.

The lack of cohesion must not mislead us to assume that there is no commitment to mission. Nor should the lack of cohesion overshadow the present undercurrents which may shape the future direction of the mainstream of ecumenical mission efforts as well as the joint efforts of Lutheran churches. The history of mission shows that those who, in their time, gained the greatest visibility and broadest recognition in the world and in churches were seldom the most important instruments in the mission of the church.

There has been in recent years extensive soul searching about mission among Lutheran churches. In the LWF we have tried to follow it and participate in it. The following points sum up the convictions which seem to stand out, on which remarkable convergence has begun to emerge.

1. Mission is inherent in the Gospel. The theme of sending goes through the Old and New Testaments. To be sent, to be on the move, is a mark of the church. All of the main functions of the Christian community involve an element of sending. It should be evident in baptism, confirmation, eucharist and also in all the programs of the church.

2. Evangelism is the inseparable centre of mission. It means proclamation of the crucified and risen Christ. It implies from the church confident trust in the Holy Spirit who is the primary evangelist, who transforms human words into God's own speaking, and who alone is able to convert, lead to repentance and arouse faith. It implies at the same time responsibility and care for the people addressed, for their

whole lives, body and soul and community, including their response to the Gospel.

3. Mission means witness by words and deeds. Evangelism is inseparable from service and development and from prophetic witness for justice. In mission God addressed himself to the whole human person revealing his purposes for his own creation.

4. Mission continues until the end of time when God's Kingdom is revealed in its fullness, when sin and all powers of destruction, the root-causes of poverty, injustice and suffering, have been finally overcome and when no nation, no community is any longer ignorant of the salvation in Christ.

5. In mission the church is sent to frontiers, to cross boundaries between peoples, cultures, social systems, nations. The frontiers of mission are found where faith and unbelief confront one another, where obstacles arise for God's purposes of salvation, justice, healing, and wholeness in Christ. On mission frontiers the church is face to face with social, cultural and ideological forces which destroy humanity and create division and enmity.

6. Mission frontiers cut through every country. Therefore there is no fundamental reason to distinguish between world mission and mission at home.

7. Mission is a common responsibility of the whole church. Therefore it is the responsibility of every church. Each church has its specific gifts and experiences to bring into the common task. None can carry out its mission alone in isolation from other churches.

8. In mission every church is at the same time a giving church and a receiving church. The thrust for self-reliance aims at releasing the mission potential of each church for participation in the total mission of the church. It aims at making it possible for every church to share its gifts without dominating or being dominated, without paternalism or humiliation.

9. For fulfilling its mission obligation the church needs persons who have a special missionary vocation. Such persons are essential in order that the Gospel can be brought to areas where there is no Christian community. Without them churches are unable to cross boundaries between different cultures and different nations. Persons with a special mission vocation are needed for challenging and encouraging other churches to take their mission responsibility seriously and for identifying mission frontiers. They are also essential for knitting the church universal together across continents. There is a practical link between mission and unity.

10. There is no place in the mission for triumphalist attitudes, i.e., attitudes which reflect that Christians should conquer the world, that Christians know what is best for the peoples, that Christians can produce justice, that Christians can eliminate corruption. There is no place in the mission for any form of Christian imperialism or paternalism.

11. Lutheran theological heritage includes a wealth of resources for mission, not enough of which has been used or even recognized. These resources need to be put to work both in the inter-Lutheran and the wider ecumenical context in mission. Such resources include the insight of salvation as a gift of God; justification of a sinner by grace, with its personal and social implications; the distinction between law and gospel; the understanding of human beings, institutions and structures, with their inherent ambiguity, at best as *simul iusti et peccatores*; the understanding of

church structures in light of the Augsburg Confession, Article VII, etc. All of these have a profound meaning in mission.

12. The mission of the church is more than the sum total of organized mission activities of churches. A Christian community which lives out its gathering to worship and its affirmation of faith, daily repentance, forgiveness of sins, renewal of hope and love, is a sign of God's love. Its influence can exceed far beyond the scope of its organized activities. Moreover, God's own mission is more than the mission of the church with all its dimensions. The church is only an instrument in his mission.

Most of these points have been affirmed at recent LWF consultations on mission or by various LWF member churches in their policy statements. They reflect positions that have been taken in recent ecumenical debates and also in churches in their crisis situations. If one was to spell out the conflicts out of which they have emerged, the significance of the convergence of these points would be more marked.

FRONTIERS OF MISSION — CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

In the past we were accustomed to think of the frontiers of mission mainly in geographic terms. The old terminology which used expressions like "sending" churches and "mission" fields reflected this. Today there are those who would like to abandon entirely this kind of notion of mission frontiers. Yet, it is evident that even today there are areas in the world where there is no Christian church or where no Christian witness is carried out. One need only think of much of North Africa, the Middle East and vast territories in Asia. One need only think of areas where churches have become fossilized or have ended up in ghetto situations. There still is a need for men and women who are sent from their churches to areas where Christ is not proclaimed.

If it were only a question of going from one area to another, mission in today's world would not be so terribly complicated. There are many other kinds of boundaries which pose a challenge to the mission of the church.

We can speak of *economic and sociological frontiers* which need to be crossed in order for the message of Christ's love to be conveyed to all people. The existence of class churches is a sign that the church has not been able to cross this frontier. How can a church encourage and equip its members, pastors and missionaries to cross such boundaries, both nearby and in distant lands? In the LWF this issue has surfaced recently with a real urgency in connection with the efforts to develop a coordinated, up-to-date approach to theological education in Africa. Is a theological seminary such as Makumira Theological College producing pastors for a much wealthier church than exists in the country? Does it feed middle class aspirations and alienate future pastors from their own people?

In this connection we could also speak of the phenomenon of urbanization and consequent transformation of rural areas. This seems to be a universal phenomenon. In spite of much talk and some experimenting on urban industrial mission this frontier on the whole has not yet been taken with the seriousness it deserves. Would it be legitimate to think of cities of the world as a special challenge and opportunity?

Another type of mission frontier is represented by the *ideological and political*

frontiers. There are many facets to this. As Lutherans we affirm that the church and its mission is not tied to any particular political or ideological system. We therefore have no basic difficulty about the mission of the church within, say, a socialist society or in a country of military dictatorship. Yet there may be a temptation involved in this that is characteristic for Lutheran churches: to adjust to the prevailing ideologies uncritically. A frontier is thereby not crossed. We should ask once again: What is the witness of the church to those who are in charge of an unjust society or ideology and who are carriers of an oppressive system? At the very same time the church has to pursue the ministry to those who are affected by the same unjust society or oppressive ideology.

In every corner of the earth we are face to face with these ideological and political frontiers. Unemployed youth; the marginalized minorities; the recent developments in Ethiopia between Mekane Yesus Church and the authorities; the events in Poland; the liberation struggle in southern Africa; the fate of the poor under Reagan; are all reminders of these frontiers. To develop and articulate a theologically and politically sound mission approach in view of ideological and political frontiers remains a major challenge for Lutheran churches. Otherwise, these frontiers, too, not only prevent the witness but also divide the church. Serious efforts to cope with this challenge are frequently becoming sources of division with the church.

We could go on and speak of frontiers of mission emerging out of *new scientific developments* which mold the values and world views of vast segments of populations. How is the life-giving Gospel presented to these people? Can these developments be penetrated by the Christian message? Are these developments to follow laws of their own or are they to be consciously brought under the judgment of the Word of God and under the redemptive power of Christ?

Last but not least, we have before us on every continent *religious frontiers*. The influence of traditional religions is not declining. In addition, new religions or pseudo-religions have made astounding headway again in most continents. There are experts also in Lutheran churches, and much serious theological work has been carried out. Yet, we may ask, is the church as a whole — the pastors, congregations, youth programs, Christian education — up to a real encounter with this phenomenon? Moreover, it may well be that there is not enough consensus even among theologians and leaders of the church about Christian approach, the missionary approach, to people of other religions. Migration, political changes and the changing spiritual climate may open new possibilities and perspectives in facing these religious frontiers of mission.

Each phenomenon alluded to above deserves serious treatment. If for no other reason, this listing is justified as an illustration that world mission is not a one-dimensional affair. Many mission agencies have had a hard time coping with the limitations imposed on them by their past when the world was less interwoven and people were not so instantly exposed to so many influences. This is why a merger provides a unique chance for reflecting in the new structure and new programs right from the beginning the diversity of frontiers that the church cannot ignore.

HOW TO DECIDE WHERE TO GO

The scope of the mission of the church universal and the multitude of frontiers to

be crossed can have a suffocating impact. It is evident that a church cannot be involved on every crucial frontier and on every continent with the same intensity. It would be foolish not to reckon with the limits of the resources available. Indeed the word about the power of God being revealed in human weakness applies also here. Recognition of the human limitations is no obstacle for serving to spread the Gospel. On the contrary. So how to decide?

Inherited commitments. Both churches have inherited at least some commitments which need to be honoured by the new church and which make much sense also in the years to come. But the merger may justify a more thorough evaluation of these commitments in the light of the overall directions that will be approved for the world mission responsibility of the new church.

Accumulated experience. Both churches have in the course of the years accumulated considerable experience which shows approaches from which the new church better shy away. For example, rushing to build new church colleges or large hospitals, or assuming heavy financial responsibility for a church which has no stewardship plans, etc. The accumulated experience also points to programs which have shown considerable promise. Theological education, leadership development are examples. Other churches also have their own experience which may or may not coincide with that of the merging partners. It may be valuable to consult with some of them. It would be interesting to find out what criteria not only German and Scandinavian churches, but the French CEVAA or the Brazilian Lutheran Church, have developed. CEVAA has no ample funding available. A study tour by a small team from Canada could be helpful.

Canadian identity. What special opportunities are open to a church whose identity is Canadian and not, for example, American or German or Scandinavian? What are the specific experiences of Canadian Lutherans which would enable them to make a distinct contribution which no other Lutheran church could make in the same way? In Canada Lutherans have had a history of being ethnic minorities which differs from that of Lutheran churches in the United States. Would this provide possibilities to work together with churches in minority situations in a way that is not possible for "large" churches? Latin American Lutheran churches which largely represent ethnic minorities have taken significant steps in moving from defensive positions to become missionary churches. Could a Canadian contribution together with some such church bring a new dimension to the mission on that continent? To what extent would doors be more open to Canadians than Americans in some situations because of the political profile of Canada? Could the Canadian sensitivities about the economic power and cultural influence of the U.S. be an asset in mission, both among those who share the sensitivity and in assisting U.S. churches to be alert to these issues? Relationships between Canada and China and between Canada and Cuba give a hint in this direction. One must avoid the danger of pushing this point too far; there certainly is no need for Canadian messianism in the mission of the church. Furthermore, most Africans, Asians and Latin Americans are not aware of much difference between Americans and Canadians anyway.

Global perspective. The next suggestion has to do with the global perspective. Some mission agencies which emphasize a world-wide, global approach and also more two-way traffic in mission still operate as if some continents or regions do not exist. It is true that a world mission agency cannot function everywhere and that the

places where it has an operational role is even much more limited. Yet, in this age one key function of a world mission agency is to be an active channel for the church at home to become globally aware so that it can fulfil its mission responsibility through advocacy at home or through support of churches at critical frontiers with intercession, communicating with them, and sending or receiving visitors. For example, the globe of American world mission activity does not really include eastern Europe. Yet, the churches in eastern Europe struggle to be in mission in their own territory and to share their mission with others. The mission potential of some of them is really significant. But many of them are very much handicapped because of their relative isolation. This isolation is only partially caused by the political system. Another factor is that churches in other areas forget them.

It seems essential that a world mission unity of the new church ought to have some handles on each continent; links are possible even when there is no major operational or funding project involved. A church that is active in world mission can help other churches to share their experience and spiritual resources for the benefit of the mission of the universal church.

Two-way character. The last suggestion concerning the choice of involvement is related to two-way character of world mission. The evangelism and the witness of the church in Canada is part of the mission, the world mission of the church universal. Consequently churches in other parts of the world are co-responsible for this mission. A world mission unit ought to be a link to facilitate other churches' participation in the mission to Canadian people and society. The search for viable models of such participation has been under way already for some time. But much more work is needed on this very issue. It is of little help if the efforts stop at tokenism. It is not enough to have an African pastor serve in a Canadian congregation for a couple of years or for a group of Asian Christians to tour Canadian synods. These activities can be very significant to some congregations and individuals but they seldom make any real difference, e.g., to challenge the very pattern of evangelism or witness of the church in Canada. How can other churches help in crossing frontiers in Canada, identifying opportunities for mission here, and stimulating and equipping congregations for new tasks? Should a reverse flow dimension be built into each overseas involvement?

PATTERNS OF ENGAGEMENT

1. Sending missionaries
 - a. Long-term, "traditional" life time, language, different frontiers, more diverse specialization.
 - b. New types of missionaries: stimulate mission, serve in liaison, work within a non-Lutheran church, specialize in inter-Lutheran cooperation. Short-term or long-term.
2. Receiving missionaries to Canada:
 - Recruitment
 - Orientation
 - Negotiate

Evaluate experience, receive evaluations

3. Strengthen the mission of the church overseas through other means than sending missionaries:

Projects

Visits

Consultation

Scholarships

Link with development and relief agencies

4. Advocacy

5. Participate in joint efforts:

Poor church/rich church/self-reliance partnership

Islam/M. East/Holy Land

Theological education

Mission strategies - planning

Students/youth

At the same time that energies are concentrated on a planning task, it is all the more important to remember that the responsibility of planners is limited in God's mission. There is much in mission that is beyond that responsibility. The Spirit blows where he chooses to do so. Again and again the church and all its planners are taken by surprise by God's activity. God's mission is greater than the mission of the church. And should the church fail, as it often does, God is able to call witnesses outside our plans and structures. Recognition of the limited responsibility and the frailty of all human efforts makes us open to God's surprises. God's strength manifests itself in weakness. What else is needed than an instrument which God himself can use.