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MISSION: MODEL FOR A CHURCH

Marvin P. Janz

Much work is being done these days to determine the shape of any future Canadian Lutheran Church. The committee on "Function and Form" is aptly named; for the function of the Church ought to give it the form that it takes. This article seeks to provide some input for this task; hopefully the start of much more input from other Christians in Canada.

ITS PURPOSE IS MISSION

The idea of a mission-model as a model for a church-structure is not new to most of us. In recent issues of *Consensus*, Herbert Zorn and Adrian Leske have made much of this for any future organization that is formed in Canada.¹ Leske points out that "the New Testament gives no clear cut indication of one particular model which must be followed" and then goes on to state, "Two characteristics stand out in Jesus' ministry and in the ministry to which he calls his followers. One is represented by the word "to send" (*apostellein*) and the other by the word "to serve" (*diakonein*)".²

It would seem that right here we have as fine a model as we need. It is the model of God's gathered people, living out their life together by the dynamic of gathering and scattering. Call it what you wish -- intake, output, worship, witness, education, evangelism -- these are the twin heart-beats of Christ's Church. You can take anything and everything else away from the life of the Church, but not

1. Herbert M. Zorn, "The Mission of the Church and Its Unity", *Consensus* (Vol. 1, No. 3, July, 1975), 17-22. Adrian M. Leske, "New Testament Directions For Future Ministry", *Consensus* (Vol. 1, No. 1, Jan., 1975), 3-8.

2. *Ibid.*, pp. 3,4.

these two functions. Indeed, perhaps we ought to take everything else away! This mission-model needs to be taken seriously in any shaping of a Canadian Lutheran Church.

It has been said that much of what is wrong in the Church these days is that it is trying to be everything and ends up being nothing, serving everyone and serving no one.³ Indeed there seems to be a plethora of things that the Church is doing, nationally and locally. The question is how much of its activity reflects what it is supposed to do.

The question really is one of responsibility: what does God have in mind for His Church? God's unfinished task is to win the world (Cf. II Corinthians 5:11-21). He does not need a way to redeem it. That task has been done in His Son, Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is the way. But God still needs to win people. The Gospel is God out winning and wooing (Cf. Luke 15; Romans 1:16, 17). It is the good news that God did not do what He had a right to do; that God loves sinners and wants to have fellowship with them. It is the tender message which invites the wandering prodigal to come back home where he belongs -- with His Father and with his brothers.

Those who have become God's friends again, who have been reconciled to God, immediately become the carriers and agents of that reconciliation. What makes the Church so unique and necessary is not that its people are forgiven. All human beings have been (Cf. II Corinthians 5:19, 15). The Church is made up of people who have accepted this forgiveness. God intends to use them to bring His acceptance to others. This is the reason for the Church. Thus the Church is mission because it exists for the sake of the world! It does not exist for itself!

That is why it should neither separate itself from the world so it cannot speak to it nor so identify itself with the world that it cannot challenge it. It is to penetrate, to rub itself in the stuff of life (salt), to permeate it (yeast), to illumine and enlighten (light). That is mission. And that is why it is as mission that the Church must be evaluated.

Having a "mission board" or an "evangelism committee" is not the answer. In fact, it may be part of the problem. Mission is not just one aspect of the Church or an "emphasis" in its program. Mission is its basic structure and design. If there is something that does not contribute to mission it has no place there. If there is something that ought to be done in mission, its business is to do so. The model is mission. The Church exists only because there are unredeemed, unreconciled people in the world -- people for whom Christ died and rose again and for whom He will come again.

ITS STRATEGY IS MISSION

What this means is that we need to develop a strategy for any future church form where the emphasis is not so much Canadian as it is mission. The strategy

3. Gibson Winter, *"The Suburban Captivity of the Churches"*. (New York: The Macmillan Company, C. 1962), pp. 153ff.

for mission has to do with people; specifically, the people gathered together in what we know as the local congregation.

Contrary to what we have been hearing for over a decade, the local congregation is not dead and done with, outmoded and irrelevant. Although much about the present form of the congregation is in drastic need of change, the local congregation (warts and all) is still the strategy for mission. This means more than new programmes. Mission is about people -- God's people, people who are gathered together, congregated at a particular place. And more people are ministered to in the local congregation than in any other setting. It is still the only sociological group that is able to be consistently brought together. Moreover, it is already staffed with pastor and people, persons and place, faith and life. More important: the people who live around it expect it to be God's service (though they may wonder if it has anything to do with them). One simply cannot write-off the local congregation.

If there is a problem with the local congregation it is not that it lacks potential. Rather, it has lost its sense of mission. In many cases it has become an island unto itself, devoted and dedicated to satisfying its own "religious" needs, a "religious ghetto" living for its own survival in a nasty, hostile world. This self-serving tendency is satanically anti-mission. Jesus' warning needs no commentary at this point: ". . . whoever would save his life will lose it, whoever loses his life for my sake will find it" (Matthew 16:25).

To say that mission is the strategy of the Church means something much more than just getting people to come to Church or to join the Church. Behind this concept of "mission" is the assumption, of course, that this will take care of all problems. Nor is it a matter of a lot of hard work and everyone pitching in to build a big, influential Church-of-what's-happening-now! The strategy is mission: To witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ so that persons will believe in Jesus Christ and be in on God's mission to the world, too! Much of what we call "mission work" or "evangelism" is really not witnessing to unbelievers. It is getting church-ed-people to stop being unchurched-people. This is not to say that the conversion of church members is not a part of mission. It is saying that mission is more than that.

Realistically a mission strategy must be a lay strategy -- a people-to-people thing. For laymen (as distinct from clergy but not as inferior persons with inferior positions) are still the bridge over which the Gospel of Jesus Christ must pass from sanctuary to society. The reason is simple. The laity live at the cutting edge of the world -- far more than the clergy. This is not said to bring the pastor down a peg. The pastor has a function that God has assigned to him and that is to be an equipper of God's people "for the work of the ministry" (Cf. Ephesians 4:12-16). Ministry involves pastor and people; but it is the laymen who is the cutting edge! "It is through its lay membership that the Church enters into real and daily contact with the workaday world and shares in its problems and aspirations. It is in the life and work of the lay membership that the church must manifest in the world its regenerative and redemptive power."⁴

The strategy of mission is one in which the people of God gather to scatter. It is

4. Theodore Matson, "Edge of the Edge". (New York: Friendship Press, C. 1962), p. 139.

the *diakonein-apostellein*, the serving-sending ministry of Jesus about which Leske speaks.⁵

The cutting-edge is out there in the world. That is where the church ought to be. But so often the church is formed in a way that makes it a sacred island in the bad, evil, secular world. The danger is that a national and local "church" creates a world apart from the world. The church ought to be a bee-hive in reverse with a lot of going in and coming out; but the going in is to be strengthened to go out into the world and be the cutting-edge. It often seems that the local church is running a commuter service, shuttling people back and forth all right -- but to get them out of the world rather than equip them for mission life in it. If mission is the strategy of a new Canadian Lutheran Church it must be organized so that lay-people are allowed and trained to be very much in the world in mission for Christ their Lord. We all know what Martin Luther had to say on that subject.

Any approach that really gets down to the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry -- mission -- in the world will bring terrific (and sometimes terrifying) challenges. It will immediately demand that we lead God's people to a point of commitment in which Jesus Christ becomes not just their own personal possession but a possession they will share in their life, their love and their speech! The challenge to the pastors and the leaders of any new Canadian Lutheran entity will be to create new methods of instruction, equipping and training and also new levels of Christian commitment, support and fellowship. That will involve no little agony and holy tension. For it will often mean a complete upheaval in the conventional life-style and structure of the local congregation. With the blessings of the Lord of the Church, perhaps more and more lay-people will be allowed to be missionaries rather than clients or members (members -- as in "club").

ITS STRUCTURE IS MISSION

It should be made clear that there is nothing wrong with "institution", "establishment" or "the system" *per se*, as many assert. After all, structures make possible the constructive organization of our activities. Rather than focus on system, establishment or institution, the concern should be how to create *community*.

Some say that modern demands and pressures on people and the very rapid change in our life-style make community all but impossible -- even in the local congregation. This may be so. But it does not explain why many see their "membership" in the local congregation as little more than coming *when* they feel they have needs to be taken care of and doing something for others only *if* they feel like it? In response, some have tried to create community by trying to "be all things to all men" with a full programme of social life, sports, entertainment, Bible hour, recreation, and things to do for all ages! But in this

5. Leske, p. 4.

kind of "traditional churchianity", the local pastor spends much of his time leading parochial organizations in non-religious local interests.

Attempts have been made to get back into the New Testament form of community: Some have been successful; some not.⁶ But the New Testament does not speak of community in institutional terms. It uses human analogies (Cf. I Corinthians 12). Paul calls the church "the Body of Christ!" Community ends up being mission, too, for in its very life together the church witnessed to its mission. The "church" was not an ornament. The character and life that marked it made a clear distinction between Christians and non-Christians. It made each person a missionary of Christ in a secular world.

Perhaps one of the finest descriptions of community that is structured for mission is given by George Webber.⁷ He looks to Philippians 3:20 ("Conversation" in the KJV is a bad attempt to translate *to politeuma*: citizenship) and pictures the Church in terms of a colony. The point of reference is the Roman colony which, he says, had three dimensions to it. The first dimension was the vertical one -- to Rome, to the fatherland, for supplies, guidance, resources, and colonists. The second dimension was circular -- each colonist very much aware that he needed the other person for support, encouragement, love, help. The third dimension was the real reason they were a colony. This was the horizontal one: they were in this foreign land to win the people for the king, the emperor.

It is not hard to make the application to the church, the "colony of heaven" which St. Paul analogizes. The vertical dimension is our connection with our King: Word and Sacrament, the "Means of Grace" as we Lutherans call them. The circular dimension is our service (*dialonia*) to each other, our edification of each other in the faith and life of Christ. The horizontal dimension is witness (*apostellein*), the going-out to the world to win the world for the King of Kings. All three of these dimensions make up the mission community or structure in which members actually are kept alive by Word and Sacrament and interact on each other to strengthen the faith and go into the world for Christ, claiming what is His already, what has been purchased by His blood.

This is not idle dreaming. It is really the crux of the matter. If neither national or local "church" is structured for mission we should not be surprised if God's "colony of heaven" becomes nothing more than another "club" which people join but which has little or nothing to do with God's purpose or strategy for the world. How very sad it would be if we just repeat the same old forms based on the same functions, transferring a *bone fide* copy of the "Made in USA" Church to the

6. For information see: Abbe Michonneau, "Revolution in a City Parish"; Ernest Southcott, "The Parish Comes Alive"; and Wallace E. Fisher, "From Tradition To Mission". There are many more but these could well serve as an introduction.

7. George Webber, "God's Colony in Man's World". (New York: Abingdon Press, 1960), pp. 43ff.

Canadian scene without asking some questions anew. We have a chance to be a part of something new -- not perfect -- New! Let's take it!⁸

"... and 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, these skins burst, and the wine is spilled, and the skins destroyed; but new wine is put into fresh wineskins and so both are preserved."
(Matthew 9:16, 17)

We need new wineskins!

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8. Be sure to re-read the "Theses on The Mission of the Church", Consensus (Vol. 1, No. 1, Jan., 1975), 24. They are well done and need to be studied along with the "Mission Affirmations" which came out of the Detroit Convention of The Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod in 1965.



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