

THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS FOR THE WORK OF EVANGELICAL OUTREACH

Introduction

On Saturday, May 17, 2003 the Synod Assembly of the Metropolitan New York Synod adopted a resolution entitled “*Reclaiming the Great Commission.*”

The resolution had two parts. First, the Synod Assembly publicly re-affirmed its commitment to carrying out the Great Commission of our Lord in every missionary outpost of the synod..

Secondly, the Synod Assembly established a “Commission for Evangelical Outreach” that would provide leadership in bringing together the vast treasure of resources of the Synod to carry out the Great Commission more intentionally and effectively.

The resolution directed the synod to carry out several important tasks:

- A. Creating a Metropolitan New York Synod strategy for reclaiming the Great Commission.
- B. Encouraging every pastor, rostered leader, and baptized member of the synod to renew their commitment to carrying out the Great Commission.
- C. Studying and developing models of ministry within this synod which identify, encourage, develop, and support the ministries of all baptized persons.
- D. Identifying resources for education and ministry formation to support the carrying out of the Great Commission, taking into account the unique needs of our synod.
- E. Networking with others including ecumenical partners who are committed to the Great Commission to collaborate on developing ministries within our synod and elsewhere.
- F. Encouraging communication between and among congregations about ways to carry out the Great Commission.
- G. Building connections between congregations in order to share gifts for ministry.
- H. Presenting recommendations to future Synod Assemblies about ways we can develop and re-direct resources to carry out this vision more effectively in this synod.
- I. In the first year’s activities of the commission including the formation of a budget and spending plan for the commission.

The Resolution came about in response to a growing awareness of the state of decline in the congregations of the Synod. At the previous year's Synod Assembly, the Synod adopted a resolution that led to a formal study of the relative healthiness of smaller congregations in the Synod, often referred to as "Congregations at Risk." Such congregations are characterized by rapidly declining membership and giving by members.

The study determined that at least one-third of the Metropolitan New York Synod's churches could be considered "Congregations At Risk" using the criteria established by the ELCA: average worship attendance less than 50 and member giving of less than \$50,000 per year.

Ironically, although many of the churches in the Metropolitan New York Synod clearly fit this criteria, we discovered a much more significant problem that might have gone unnoticed. We learned that many more churches were in a more serious condition than these smaller churches because, although they still had more people and more money available than smaller churches, the rate at which they were losing members and income was much steeper. In other words, several congregations that on the surface appeared to be large and healthy are actually experiencing much greater losses of membership and giving than the so-called "Congregations At Risk." In a sense, they are even greater at risk than smaller, marginal but stable churches that have adapted to their situation by adopting creative survival strategies because they cannot see what lies ahead.

That makes sense. Smaller congregations that have already adapted to their situations, are "survivors." Larger churches that are in decline often continue to operate as though they were still large and growing, when the truth is just the opposite, so the risk they face is even greater because they may not recognize the difficulties that loom just ahead of them until it is too late to do anything about them.

A renewed effort to reclaim the Great Commission is necessary because we are facing a potentially much larger crisis than we imagined at the outset. Virtually every congregation of the Metropolitan New York Synod is "at risk" in one way or another, depending on their particular set of circumstances if they are not consciously committed to fulfilling the Great Commission.

This danger is compounded by the fact that what is going on in the Metropolitan New York Synod is not unique to the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. In our post-modern society every congregation of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America faces the challenge of making the Word of God present to the larger community that surrounds it.

Added to that is the fact that in recent years many denominations have lost their vision and lack a clear sense of mission as a denomination by ignoring, minimizing, or even consciously abandoning the theological principles that give birth to and sustain a vital sense of mission in our contemporary setting. As a result, many of them are gradually approaching the criteria by which a

denomination is classified as a “sect.”

Seeking to fulfill the Great Commission by engaging in evangelical outreach is, therefore, not an option for the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Present-day circumstances are making the church aware that we have to renew our vision and commitment so we can begin taking strides toward proclaiming the gospel to all of our society. Given the enormous influx of immigrants into the Metropolitan New York Synod area, this “necessity” also presents itself as an opportunity if we are willing to take the steps needed to move into a new way of being the church.

To regain a clear vision of what that mission is, let us examine the theological principles that undergird that mission. What does it mean to say that we need to discover a “new way of being Church?” Is it really new? Or is it in fact an ancient vision we simply need to recover?

1. The Community of Mutual Love

In recent years there has been a renewed exploration of the implications of the doctrine of the Holy Trinity as the basis for understanding the nature of God and God’s relationship with the created order and with the human race. For centuries Christians have confessed their faith in “one God in three persons,” the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and this faith has been expressed in preaching and the sacraments, in the liturgy, the creeds, and the hymnody of the Church.

This triune understanding of the divine nature is a distinctive element of the Christian witness to the world. Christians teach that God is one, but God is not monolithic. The three persons of God dwell together in a dynamic, interactive, synergistic communion of mutual love, a relationship that is echoed in nature and in the life of the Church as a community of believers.

This dynamic God, Father-Son-Spirit, who created, redeemed, and sanctified the world has not abandoned the world. Rather, He continues to act in relation to our world even today, reaching out to the world with a gospel of reconciliation. We call this the *missio dei*, the mission of God.

2. The Ongoing Mission of God

Contemporary theologians use the expression “*missio dei*” to describe the relationship between the Triune God and the created order. The God who brings all things into being, loves His creation and is at work in the world to reconcile and redeem his creation to Himself. The Triune God reaches out to the world with a reconciling love, aiming to restore wholeness to all creation and bring peace and justice for all God’s creatures.

He began His Mission by gathering a holy nation for Himself, a people chosen to bear witness in work and deed to the grace, mercy and compassion of God toward all people. He established a covenant with them, and He promised salvation to and through them.

He protected His people by providing them His law and sending His prophets to summon them back into fellowship with Him whenever they strayed off into idolatry and unfaithfulness.

Finally, He sent His Son to His chosen people to call them to repentance, to proclaim the coming of His Kingdom, and ultimately give up His life for them as an atoning sacrifice for their sin and the sins of the whole world.

But His reconciling work did not end at the cross. God raised His Son from the dead and made His victory over death known to His chosen followers. Then, as He had promised them, He anointed them with the power of His Holy Spirit to equip and empower them for their ongoing mission of making disciples of all nations by baptizing and teaching. The Church, the community of believers called, gathered, enlightened, and sanctified by the Holy Spirit, emerges as God's chosen instrument, set apart to fulfill the Great Commission. God has commissioned and empowered His Church for this mission, and faithfulness to God requires the Church to embrace this mission with enthusiasm and persistence.

3. The Empowered Community of the Baptized

In the apostolic era, the empowered followers of Jesus went forward into the world, baptizing and teaching all who believed in the good news they proclaimed. Through them the Holy Spirit called, gathered, enlightened and sanctified those who believed their proclamation and commissioned them to join in the task of extending their apostolic mission to more and more people.

The life of the Christian community continues to follow the pattern of gathering and scattering. The community gathers to hear God's Word, to pray for those in need, to receive offerings to help others, and to make Eucharist together. As the Body gathers to share the Lord's Supper it becomes a holy communion that links each believer to each other and to the whole Church of Jesus Christ. Then, empowered by the Word and the Meal, the Body moves into the world, to bear witness through word and deed to the transforming power of God to all people.

The ministry of the community is shared equally by all the baptized, with each person sharing in that ministry according to the gifts they have received from God. Each of the baptized is called and empowered by the Holy Spirit for ministry as part of the Church. Distinctions based on age, gender, educational background and social status have no bearing in the context of the community of believers. The members of the Body may have different gifts and they may express them in a variety of settings, but they share equally in the work of God.

Although all the members of the Body have an equal status, the community still needs to have people serving in positions of leadership. Leaders are chosen and recognized to carry out certain functions on behalf of the entire community and for the sake of community. They work alongside one another collaboratively, drawing upon the strengths and resources available within the community of believers.

But the ministry of the community is not limited to serving just the members of the community of believers. They have been given a Great Commission to “Go, make disciples of all nations, baptizing . . . and teaching . . .” In other words, God’s mission is not simply to them. It also extends through them toward the whole world, to the ends of the earth.

As they scatter into the world to pursue their daily activities in society, the members of the community of believers draw upon the strength they receive from their participation in the Word and sacraments as members of the gathered community of believers.

Put simply, as Canon Robin Greenwood taught us, it is not that the Church of God has a mission, but that the God of Mission has a Church, through whom He bears witness to the world, convicting the world of sin, righteousness, and judgment and calling the world to repentance, faith, and newness of life in the power of the Risen Lord, Jesus Christ.

4. The Four Marks of the Church

In the Nicene Creed Christians have confessed that they believe in “one holy, catholic, and apostolic Church.” These four marks of the Church have enabled Christians to see most clearly the evidence of God’s mission in their life as a community of believers.

The *unity* of the Church is not based on a monochrome allegiance to a set formula or pattern of theological argument. Rather, it is based on the principle of the unity of the Divine Nature. As we have been baptized into the name of the Triune God, we share in the life of God in our world and we derive our identity and mission as people of God from the relationship we have as a result of our baptism into Christ’s Body. We are one because we are one in *Him*.

In a practical sense, that means that diversity, rather than uniformity, is valued most in the life of the Body of Christ. The Spirit endows each believer with the gifts of the Spirit, according to God’s will, and those gifts are manifested for the common good in the life of the Christian community and in the world as well. Because we are all one in fellowship with God, our gifts can be used to advance *His* cause and not our own personal or political agendas.

Baptism, then, rather than ordination, is the means by which every believer is commissioned for ministry in the world. Ministry is not the reserved work of a special cadre of believers who exercise their gifts in place of the whole Body. Instead, it is the work of all the people of God, each of whom has been called, gathered, enlightened, and sanctified by the Holy Spirit for mission and ministry in God’s kingdom.

This manifestation of the Spirit is the source of the *holiness* of the people of God. We are holy not in that we can achieve a sense of individual righteousness or wholeness, but rather in the

sense that we share an identity as a community of faith that has been called, gathered, enlightened and commissioned by the Triune God to carry out God's mission in the world. That "set-apartness" of the Church is not intended to create a "righteous remnant" that will survive the Last Days. We have been set apart by God for a mission to the world, to become a "Light to the Nations," as promised by the prophets of old. The Church is the "herald of good tidings" that carries the message of the dawning of God's new creation into a world filled with darkness.

The *catholicity* of the local Christian community is evident in its humility and openness to God and to people. No individual community can claim to represent the whole of the Christian community. Rather each one recognizes that its fullest sense of identity comes from its relationship with the rest of the Christian community in time and space, and at the same time, it always remains open to the leading of the Spirit into "all the truth." A catholic community receives the gifts and the insights of other believers through dialogue with the rest of the Christian community and strives to express its continuity with the proclamation of the saints of every time and place.

Apostolicity is the fourth mark of the Trinitarian expression of the life of the Christian community. As mentioned above, the witness of the community of believers is connected to the faith of those who precede and those who follow the witness of the current generation. The Church is linked therefore both with the past and the future in its testimony to the presence and power of God who is at work in our world. Faithfulness to the witness of the past and a commitment to preserve and extend the Word of salvation is the measure of the apostolicity of the Christian community in any generation. The community of believers must constantly be on guard against those who would "tamper with God's word" by adjusting the Church's teaching to conform more closely the social agendas of contemporary, non-Christian society, or it will lose its power to be truly apostolic and forfeit its right to carry out their Lord's mandate.

A Church turned inward on itself, divorced from the witness, wisdom, and sacrifice of those who went before them is neither evangelical nor apostolic. Neither is a Church apostolic that focuses only on its own immediate survival and takes no responsibility for passing on the treasure of the Gospel to the larger community or to future generations. Such a Church will inevitably dwindle in strength and die, but its death will be well-deserved.

5. Shared Leadership in the Community

In order to carry out His mission in the world, the Triune God equips His people with a variety of gifts and other resources. One of those gifts is the gift of leadership, without which any Christian community would flounder rather than flourish.

As I stated earlier, the gift of leadership is exercised in the context of the life of the Christian community, and it is given in various ways to various people. As such, the "leader" of any Christian community is never one solitary individual, but a collection of gifted persons who work collaboratively as a team to provide the infrastructure that keeps the community united,

committed, and faithful to its Lord and to His mission in the world. It is through the exercise of such shared leadership that the community of believers remains “one, holy, catholic, and apostolic” and fulfills its mission to the rest of God’s created order.

Such a view, therefore, places priesthood, hierarchical leadership, and the exercise of power and authority into a different context. It rejects the distortions of clericalism and authoritarianism. It also rejects the despotism that often asserts control over others in the church and perpetuates imaginary distinctions between leaders and followers within the church. The understanding of the necessity of sharing leadership in the Church undercuts the long-standing “working arrangement” that sees “ministry” as reserved to and carried out only by those who are ordained and is only “received” and “supported” by the laity. It is this very distortion of the Church’s teaching that accounts for much of the decline and lack of vision that plagues many churches today.

As long as leaders and followers accept this distorted, unbalanced, co-dependent arrangement between clergy and laity, we will continue to create multitudes of burned-out and demoralized clergy and discouraged, helpless lay people in our churches. The system we have is “perfectly designed to achieve the results it is getting.” To expect our current system to produce anything else is sheer fantasy. The system itself needs to be changed.

Yet changing the system is never easy. It is a well-known fact that people usually prefer to take a path that leads to decline and death rather than the more difficult and costly path that leads to growth and renewal. That may not make any sense to us, but that is the way people really are.

To bring about transformation in a congregation or an entire synod requires all the gifts and fruit of the Spirit as well as a lot of prayer and hard work. It demands from both clergy and laity a willingness to let go of long-treasured patterns and systems of ministering that have outlived their usefulness and to accept greater responsibility for sharing collaboratively in the work God has given to all of His people.

That means that a lot of re-learning will have to take place. Clergy will have to learn how to share power and responsibility with other gifted members of the Body of Christ, and lay people will need to have the courage to learn new skills and accept new roles in the life of the Body as well as in the community beyond the Church. To refuse to do so, or to simply allow the status quo to remain unchallenged and unchanged is perilous and ultimately unfaithful to the Great Commission.

6. A New Way of Being Synod

The goal of transforming the witness of our congregations and our synod has other implications as well. It also means that synodical leaders will have to re-define their role in relation to the clergy and the churches of the synod. Hierarchical structures that were once designed to manage the flow of power and authority through the synod will have to be discarded

and new structures will have to be designed.

Churches will continue to need leadership resources from beyond their walls, but these resources cannot expect to give the churches direction “from above.” Indeed, the extent of decline of so many of our churches makes it overwhelmingly apparent that it is impossible to provide such oversight and direction “from above.” It is not a matter of someone being “asleep at the switch.” Rather, the assumption itself that a hierarchy with very limited resources could adequately monitor the health of over 200 churches and over 400 clergy just doesn’t make any sense.

Synodical staff and other synodical resources need to be offered as part of a collaborative partnership with churches and groups of churches so new patterns of ministry can emerge.

What role should the synod play in assisting churches in the work of fulfilling the Great Commission?

Obviously there is no pre-defined answer to such a question. Some direction is already provided in the wording of the resolution itself. Eight areas are listed there. Ultimately, however, the answer will result from the ongoing interaction between the synod and a “coalition of the willing” that is ready to explore a new future for the Church.

Several areas in which the resources of the synod will be extremely helpful are:

- ***Consciousness-raising***– One task of the synod is to articulate the mission of fulfilling the Great Commission at every opportunity. “How does this assist us in fulfilling the Great Commission?” is a question that must be asked of every aspect of the synod’s work and of every congregation’s ministry. Keeping in mind that fulfilling the Great Commission is still only a means to a greater end, leaders need to articulate the promises of God’s future for the world and then encourage everyone to use their resources toward that outcome.
- ***Developing financial resources to support ministry***– Although the Metropolitan New York Synod is currently dealing with financial strains, in the long run it is the synod that has the opportunity to summon the financial resources we will need to support and expand our mission as a Great Commission Synod. How those funds are disseminated can be determined collaboratively with input from conferences so that priorities can be set and projects can be developed that meet mutually acceptable criteria.
- ***Inviting clergy into the Synod***-- One of the roles of synod leaders is to manage the flow of ordained clergy within the synod and between synods. Priority in arranging calls should be determined by the willingness of candidates to commit themselves to the mission of fulfilling the Great Commission.

Coordinating the type of students who are brought into the synod for internships and providing financial assistance for creating internship opportunities can also help the synod to discover candidates who would serve most effectively within the synod.

- ***Fostering collaborative relationships between churches***– Although the synod cannot force congregations to enter into collaborative relationships with one another, much can be done to assist churches in considering possible re-alignments that can lead to collaborative ministries. Total ministry teams comprised of paid and unpaid clergy and laity can be created to provide leadership to churches that are currently being served on a part-time “supply” basis, giving churches a new opportunity to re-develop their ministries.

The isolation of churches and their clergy takes a serious toll on the health of both. If clergy are unwilling to explore such options, they should be moved and new leadership should be brought in. Likewise, churches that are willing to explore such possibilities should be subsidized by synod resources to encourage them to do so.

- ***Providing training for clergy and other church leaders***– It is senseless to expect clergy and lay persons to function in new ways without making additional training available for them. The synod is able to provide resources that are simply not available to individuals under normal circumstances, and by offering these resources in a variety of ways, the synod can “upgrade” the effectiveness of leaders and empower them to carry out the work of evangelical outreach more effectively. Many models already exist for supplying continuing education for clergy and lay leaders, and the Commission can assist by determining the types of training needed and coordinating how it is provided.
- ***Creating systems for monitoring and evaluating ministry***– It is not exaggerating to say that in our present system once clergy are called and ordained they cease to be accountable to anyone other than the Lord Himself. Unlike other professionals, clergy are not required or expected to continue updating and expanding their skills. They are not required to file annual reports of any type to the synod or national office, and their effectiveness in carrying out their responsibilities is not reviewed by anyone unless the individual pastor requests it.

The same standards apply to congregations as well. There is no “requirement” that congregations relate to or report to any body outside of itself. There is no annual “inspection” or review by the dean or the bishop’s office. A congregation can operate in complete isolation from the outside world if it so chooses. No wonder churches can decline to a point where they cannot be rehabilitated before anyone even recognizes what is going on.

The synod can help churches and clergy to set appropriate goals for themselves so their

evaluation is based upon inwardly valued outcomes rather than external standards or expectations. By doing so the synod can make accountability possible without becoming controlling. But until some effort is made to improve accountability and provide some system for monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness of clergy and congregations, no changes will take place.

Some concluding thoughts

This paper was written to provide a common language and framework for discussion within the Commission for Evangelical Outreach of the Metropolitan New York Synod. The issues faced by the Commission did not come about overnight and the solutions cannot be developed overnight either. This paper seeks to provide a clear rationale for thinking about and forming decisions that will improve our effectiveness as a synod in pursuing the challenging goal of fulfilling the Great Commission within our synod and beyond.

As such, the implications of the issues discussed here extend far beyond the Metropolitan New York Synod. We must remember that in this mission we are not alone. We have much to offer other Christians, and, as we have already seen, there is much we can learn from others including from our ecumenical partners across the globe, and thanks to the advanced means of communication and transportation available to us, we should continually be reaching out to others to discover and to share resources that will improve our effectiveness in fulfilling God's mission.

As we face the enormous challenge given to us by our Lord, we need to move ahead with patience, persistence, creativity, and hope. Although we will inevitably face some failures and disappointments, if we can remember that it is His mission and not ours that we strive to carry out, there will be a harvest for generations to come.

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January 12, 2005