

To Whom Shall We Go?

An Examination of our Mission and Ministry

It is ancient history but it doesn't seem that way to me. I had been assigned to do exploratory work on behalf of the WELS in a two county area in Middle Tennessee. The Saturn automobile plant had ramped up production and people were coming in from all over the country to work at the "car factory." Someone in the world of WELS Home Missions had determined that there was a potential field for Gospel outreach. Through the visible church known as WELS I had been called to do some exploration.

I had to determine a few things as I began the work that I was called to do. What was my objective? That might seem obvious but I am not so sure that it was. In my mind, there were a couple of options. There were five nucleus families in our core group. They were all WELS Lutherans. They wanted to be served. There were not many options for conservative Lutherans in the area. The closest WELS church was over 50 miles away. But my objective, my mission was not really to serve 5 Lutheran families. My calling body made that clear to me.

In my young and idealistic perspective, I was there to reach the lost. That is why we start new missions, right? Finally, that is our mission, right? Go and find those who don't know Jesus and share clear law and gospel. Do it over and over and over again. Take the living Gospel to a dying world. That was my mission and my objective.

But I quickly realized what that meant. It meant that I would be ignoring many people who were right in front of me. There were many displaced families. Some had some church affiliation before they moved to our area and some did not. Some knew and trusted in Jesus as their Savior from sin and some did not. Some of them were actively looking for a church and many were not. If my objective (mission) was to reach the lost, I would pass by those who knew Jesus and spend all my time and plan all my activities to reach those who did not believe.

Or... was it simply my mission to plant a church? I am a pragmatist at heart. I had a job to do. The South Atlantic District Mission Board had expectations. There were giving me 3 years to figure out if there was a field to support a WELS congregation in the area. After those 3 years, we had a maximum of 5 years to get to self- support. They told me that there was no pressure. I was to live in the comfort and security of the Gospel but I also had enough brains to know that we needed people to plant a church. If my objective was simply to plant a congregation, that might have a very dramatic impact on my mission strategy. It would dictate the way that I would use my time and the way that we would use our ministry dollars.

Many things have changed over the years. I don't have the District Mission Board pouring over my monthly reports any longer. We have not received any subsidy for over 18 years. We don't even have a loan with the Church Extension Fund. No one tells me how many calls I should be

making. I have asked our church council to hold me accountable but they don't really do it. Many things have changed but some of those same questions remain. What is my objective (or my mission) in our congregation's ministry? Who am I really trying to reach? How am I trying to reach them? I will seek to address each of those questions in this paper.

Our Mission

I would like to think that we could find agreement on our mission. That mission finds its focal point in the Christ. The promises and prophecies of the O.T. all pointed clearly. In the fullness of time God fulfilled those prophecies and kept his promise. God took on human flesh and the mission to save sinners was underway. The mission was made possible by his death and sealed in his resurrection. Jesus himself launched the proclamation with his "commission" passages. Our Savior Jesus has promised to bring that mission to completion.

We do find "mission" in the commission passages. I have appreciated a summary of those passages found in a paper written in response to a request from the synod in convention in 2005. "Exegesis duly notes the distinctive emphases and implications of the various commission passages. For example, Matthew 28:16-20 focuses on the commissioning of the whole church, and Acts 1:1-8 focuses on the special role of the apostles, and Luke 24:46-49 looks first at the general mission of the church and then the special role of the original disciples. But attention to distinctive details should not obscure for us some important similarities. When we put the similarities together and compile the key points, we can formulate a summary statement on the basis of the five commission passages we have been considering. One way of putting it is this: *God our Savior sends his people to all the world with his message of law and gospel, and through their work he creates faith and directs believers toward fruits of faith.*"¹

I have also appreciated Professor Joel Fredrich's statement that we must be careful that we don't reduce the Christian life of faith to outreach and witness. I feel safe in saying that our "mission" is to proclaim Christ. I have clearly stated that this "mission" is not restricted to outreach ministry alone. We proclaim Christ and his work (law and gospel) in almost every aspect of the work that we do in ministry. We do that in our worship services and in our Bible classes. We do that in hospital calls and with our shut-ins. We do it as the choir rehearses and as they proclaim in song in our worship. We carry out the mission when we proclaim Christ to those who know him as well as to those who do not. But for the purposes of this paper, we focus primarily on our outreach efforts. That fits the assignment that I have been given. It also makes sense to me. I believe that, for various reasons, it is much easier to let our work of proclaiming Christ to the world outside of our respective churches slip through the cracks of our demanding ministry duties. So we focus on our mission ministry. What is our mission? To whom shall we go?

¹ Matthew 28:19 and the Mission of the WELS. Report of committee appointed by the Conference of Presidents of the WELS in response to Resolution No. 3 in the report of Floor committee No. 2 of the 2005 Synod Convention. April 2007. P. 47

It seems worthwhile in considering our mission to look a bit more closely at Matthew 28:19. While this is a practical paper and not an exegetical paper, permit me a little exegesis. πορευθέντες οὖν μαθητεύσατε πάντα τὰ ἔθνη, βαπτίζοντες αὐτοὺς εἰς τὸ ὄνομα τοῦ πατρὸς καὶ τοῦ υἱοῦ καὶ τοῦ ἁγίου πνεύματος, “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”

We are to “go.” πορευθέντες finds a position of emphasis in the word order of this verse. It is grammatically subordinate to the imperative μαθητεύσατε. Usually, a participle of preliminary action or attendant circumstance picks up the flavor of the main verb it is associated with. If the main verb is an imperative (as here), its imperative force rubs off on the participle. The common technique of translating a participle of that type by making it a coordinate verb and supplying “and” (“go and make disciples..”) brings that out nicely.² We find urgency and purpose in the simple statement from our Savior’s lips.

We do well to focus in on μαθητεύσατε. I think that it offers some important perspectives to our consideration.

It can be helpful when considering a word and its usage to examine the way that the word is used elsewhere in the N.T. The verb μαθητεύω is used only 3 times in the N.T. other than in Matthew 28:19. In Matthew 13:52 the aorist passive participle is used attributively to describe a “teacher of the law.” The NIV translates “who is instructed about the kingdom of heaven.” Other translations do something similar: “trained” (RSV, GWN) or “taught”. Numerous other translations don’t reflect the passive. They translate “become a disciple” (TEV, Jerusalem, NEB, Phillips, GW, CEV) or “become a learner” (REB).

In Matthew 27:57, the aorist indicative, passive form is translated “be or become a disciple” by most versions. The verse is speaking about Joseph of Arimathea coming to ask Pilate for permission to take Jesus’ body down from the cross. The NIV translates “who had himself become a disciple of Jesus.” In both of the last two examples, arguments have been made for translating as either “instruct” or “be a disciple.”³

In Acts 14:21, Luke uses the aorist participle transitively with an object to describe what Paul and Barnabas did in Derbe before returning to Lystra. What is especially noteworthy is that μαθητεύσαντες is used coordinately with the participle Εὐαγγελισμένοι. This would suggest

² Ibid.

³ Kuske, David “Exegetical Brief: The Meaning of μαθητεύσατε In Matthew 28:19

that μαθητεύω does mean something more than just preaching the gospel in this passage. The NIV translates, “They preached the good news... and won a large number of disciples.”⁴

The first two passages allow an understanding of the verb to be a simple “teaching” or “proclaiming”. The Acts passage would suggest that there is more than just preaching the gospel, since it is an action that Paul and Barnabas are doing in addition to “preaching the gospel.”

The immediate context of the use of μαθητεύσατε must be considered. There are two points to consider. It is used transitively. There are two circumstantial participles used to modify it. The context would suggest that those two participles express manner. They explain how the action of this command is to be accomplished.⁵ Jesus uses an aorist imperative with an object (τὰ ἔθνη). The aorist imperative calls for action. The imperative calls for action and the object indicates the recipient of the action. This is to be done to everyone. The first modifying participle (βαπτίζοντες) would establish that there is more to this imperative than a simple preaching of the gospel. The goal of this imperative involves more than just “proclamation”. We are sent out to the world to “make disciples.” We understand and realize that we could easily misunderstand and fall into false teaching here. This could lead us away from a clear understanding of our role in this process.

What is our mission? I believe that I am being faithful to the commission passages when I say that our Savior sends us to the world to make disciples. In that mission I am seeking opportunities to take the gospel to as many as possible. I am looking for opportunities to proclaim law and gospel wherever and whenever I can get those opportunities. But I do think that there is more to the mission than simple contacts. As I look at “mission” I see more than standing on the street corner and screaming the gospel. There is a deeper implication. I am seeking to “make disciples”. I do so by baptizing. I do so by teaching. In this way God makes disciples. He turns hearts from stone to faith. God carries out his “mission” in our activity.

This is a missionary conference. We have all been involved in this mission in a very direct and personal way. This is a deep and profound privilege. We have seen God’s mission in action in an up close and personal way. In John chapter 1, Jesus told Nathanael that he would see heaven opened. In the gospel of Luke, we have description of Jesus sending out the seventy-two disciples to bless, heal and announce that his kingdom is near. Upon hearing of their victories, Jesus remarked that he “watched Satan fall from heaven like a “lightning from heaven” (Luke 10:18). Those words have echoed through my mind on numerous occasions in my ministry.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

There was the man who had been invited to a festival service. He stood reluctantly outside the doors. When I engaged him in conversation he explained that God could never love him and he didn't really have any right to enter his house. In fact, in subsequent conversations, he explained that his counselors had told him to stay away from church. It would only make his depression and struggle with guilt worse. I may not be the most astute but I realized that regular doses of the gospel were needed. This man was swimming in guilt and needed to see his Savior. He was thrilled to hear the message of forgiveness. He treasured that message. The devil was in free fall.

I met a rather surly man in his front yard. I was following up on a worship visit by his wife. I tried to chat him up a bit. He quickly informed that women, children and all preacher types were inside the house (I felt like the priest in the movie "Gran Torino"). A few months later he actually invited me to his house to talk to him. As the gospel turned his heart I realized that the devil was taking another tumble.

I am in a room full of pastors. I fully realize that we all have our own experiences. We have seen the gospel at work as we labor in the mission set before us.

What is our mission? I saw a blog recently titled, "Jesus did not call us to fill church buildings." I will confess to you that I did not read the blog but I have a pretty good idea what was said. We are to preach the gospel. We are not to worry about the numbers. Let the numbers take care of themselves. Don't bow down at the idol of "growth". I can probably admit that there were times in the history of our church that I became obsessed with the graphs on the Excel spread sheets. Our mission is not a positive growth trend.

Jesus did not call us to be subway preachers either. I would contend that there is more involved in the Scriptural commission to make disciples than to set up shop for a quick contact that never gives me opportunity to follow up again.

Ultimately, our mission is to proclaim Christ. It is our mission as the Church. It is our mission as visible churches. In the next two sections of this paper we are examining "to whom" and "how" we are carrying out that mission.

Perhaps this helps us to transition nicely into the next section of this paper. Who is it that we are trying to reach as we seek to carry out our Savior's mission?

Our Target

Who am I trying to reach? An initial answer is easy. The object is clear in Matthew 28:19. The accusative "τὰ ἔθνη" spells it out for us. We are to reach all nations. We are to reach everyone.

As you and I look at our parish areas and beyond, we see everyone. Well, there are some limiting characteristics, I suppose.

Those of you who are as old as I am were told in PT classes that we should avoid proselytizing. That always confused me a bit. I was never completely sure who was “in bounds” and who was “out of bounds.” In my opinion, the lines are even more blurry today than they were in 1990 when I began parish ministry. I do believe that there are still some lines. Professor Carl Lawrenz dealt extensively with the subject in a paper written in 1975. He writes: “The term ‘proselytizing’ as it is used in our present study falls under the general definition: to convert someone from one religious faith to another.”⁶ We generally restrict that term even further in our usage. We speak of converting someone from a heterodox Christian faith to orthodox Christian faith. In his paper, Lawrenz sought to draw the lines. What is improper for us in our mission outreach and why? He points out that our direction from Scripture comes in an indirect fashion.

This is not a new issue. Lawrenz points to a set of theses presented at the first convention of the Synodical Conference in 1872. The second thesis speaks directly to the issue of proselytizing as defined before us. Some interesting statements were made in the discussion of that thesis. For example: “The Lutheran Church is the church of the pure Word and therefore not only has the obligation to bring the Word of God to the heathen, but also to those who in the sects indeed have some portions of the pure doctrine, but have it mixed with strong and dangerous errors, whereby they are in danger of being lost. In addition to this the sects also cling less and less, as time goes on, to those portions of the truth, which are still to be found here and there in their confession. Concerning Christ, and the way to salvation through him alone they are almost silent altogether. They say: A different time has set in now, the time of confessions and catechisms is over. **The result is that heathen are growing up all around us under a Christian name** (emphasis mine). But even if the outlook would not be so terrible among the sects, the obligation would still remain for us, if at all possible, to bring the whole truth near to them. For we know that no sectarian is saved through his doctrine, but only through that which apart from his doctrine is still preached to him of the pure truth of God’s Word and believed by him. Since those, however, who adhere to false doctrine are led into perdition through it, how can we doubt that it is our duty to labor with all earnestness against the soul destroying poison of human doctrine.”⁷ Lawrenz points out that the conditions in 1975 were much the same. They were likely worse. What about today? We could probably spend an hour or two discussing the religious conditions that we find today. We would all have to agree that mainline denominations are growing more and more lax in their adherence to true doctrine. The true Gospel seems to drift farther and farther into the background.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

I can offer examples of the inconsistencies that I have found in my ministry. About 15 years ago a member family of our congregation informed me that they were going to expand their horizons. They had been WELS all their lives. They felt that there had to be more out there. They went to one of the very large non-denominational churches in their community. They said that they found diversity in sermons. Ours were all the same. Our sermons (at least the vicars) always pointed out sin and they always pointed to the cross. They knew the message of the cross and they were looking for something that was more helpful for daily living and a better life. I decided to point them to the sacraments. I told them to ask their new pastor what they were receiving in the Lord's Supper. He informed them that he was not really into splitting hairs. He told them that they received whatever they wanted to receive in the Supper. Interesting... They gave me a devotional book from their new church. I pointed out that in 39 devotions there was no mention of sin or of a solution for that sin.

About a month ago I was having a conversation with a good friend who attends a heterodox church in our community. I would definitely call him a Christian. As we talked, however, he surprised me. We talk Bible and theology on a regular basis. We find our disagreements in the sacraments and in end time theology. But I have always felt that he was confident and secure in his knowledge of righteousness found in Christ. We were sitting in his car when he surprised me with his statement. He informed me that he is very anxious and even frightened when he thinks of Matthew 24. How could he possibly pass muster when Jesus returns? He couldn't have any real confidence when he knew that he had not always helped others as much as he could have helped. He lived in wealth and luxury while many in the world live without. I had the privilege to share simple law and gospel but I must admit that I was surprised that my friend who has been a Christian for his entire life would misunderstand something that I take for granted. Of course, I am not so naïve as to think that we could not find the same fear and same confusion in our own churches.

The conversation did present a dilemma. At the end of the conversation my friend thanked me for taking time. He even told me that he loved talking to me. I suppose that presented an opportunity. I could have said, "You can talk to me on a much more regular basis. At least you can listen to me on Sunday mornings. Why would you continue in a church that doesn't preach clearly enough to give you the confidence that is rightly yours in Christ? Why don't you come to the WELS? Why don't you come to the light?"

On the other hand, I am sure that we could all find great examples of strong statements of faith from those in different denominations. I received an email recently from a contemporary of mine who attended Maranatha Baptist Bible College. I had not heard from him since I graduated from Northwestern. He talked a bit about the "glory days" and the fun of playing in the Northwestern gym. But the conversation turned to more important matters. He had found

some sermons on line. He was thankful for the work that God was doing through the men who had competed against him a long time ago. He spoke of our commonality in the Gospel and our faith in the justification through our faith in Christ's work on the cross and in his resurrection. I found myself thanking God for his work through the Gospel. I found myself mouthing the words, "I believe in the Holy Christian Church."

We could come to quick agreement. We will find believers in heterodox churches. We will find confusion in heterodox churches. The question remains. Who is our target? Are those in other churches off limits? In my opinion, things get very blurry. We will have great difficulty sorting out how much false teaching in any church is dangerous to an extent that we must mount an evangelistic offensive against their doors.

The Augsburg Confession defines the "church" as the congregation of saints, in which the Gospel is rightly taught and the Sacraments are rightly administered.⁸ The understanding, of course, is based on the doctrine of the efficacy of the Word: that anywhere God's Word is proclaimed the Holy Spirit is active and is gathering believers into the invisible body of Christ.⁹ We don't want to deny the Holy Christian Church and we don't want to deny the efficacy of the Word and so we proceed with caution.

But... this all seems a bit confusing to me. If "right" means "right" (Professor Ken Cherney speaks this way in previously cited work), there are very few churches that have the true Gospel and rightly administer the sacraments. That would open the floodgates for us in our evangelism efforts.

There may be a more compelling argument. We find it in the doctrine of the call. God has given the Gospel in Word and Sacraments to his entire church, and every believer has the right to make use of it. However, for the sake of good order, believers generally delegate some measure of this right to a man they call to be their pastor, to preach the Gospel to them, to administer the Sacraments, and to care for their souls. When this occurs, the call has come from God and, though mediate, must be recognized as divine. The universal priesthood makes it presumptuous in the extreme for someone to act as pastor over another without his consent, which the call guarantees; it also establishes the relationship between pastor and parishioner as a sacred one no one may lightly violate.¹⁰

The doctrine of the call, however, does not provide an answer without exception either. Is there an inviolable pastoral relationship between an appointed Roman parish priest and the people who had only the most indirect say in his appointment? More to the point, doesn't the

⁸ Art. VII, Trigl. P. 47.

⁹ Cherney, "Saving Souls Or Stealing Sheep? An Inquiry"

¹⁰ Ibid.

validity of a call and the existence of a pastoral relationship require that at least some members of the Una Sancta were the ones doing the calling? And doesn't that put us right back where we were previously, in the unenviable position of having to distinguish how much error can be mixed with the truth of God's Word before it loses its ability to draw men into the body of Christ?¹¹

In his paper, Professor Cherney develops a set of theses. He points out that the doctrines of the Church and of the Call would be improperly applied whenever they would be applied to muzzle Christian testimony (1 Corinthians 9:16). We are free (and called) to explain the truths of the Christian faith to any person. We should grasp every opportunity to explain God's truths when opportunities arise. I quickly share clear law and gospel with my friend who expresses doubt in facing judgment. I have found that our mass mailings have provided that opportunity on a regular basis. People will communicate with us when they have received an invitation from us. That communication may come in the form of a worship visit. It has often come in the form of email correspondence or phone calls looking for clarification on our "message."

I have had people walk in off the street looking for help (financial or otherwise). I do not concern myself with their church affiliation at that point. Our preschool brings in a regular flow of children and parents. We work hard to target those who don't have a church that they attend (we ask on our forms) but we proclaim our message throughout the year to gathered students and parents. I have worked with couples in pre-marriage counseling in which one of the two has another church. I am free and open with sharing and teaching what God speaks in his Word. I do not target those from other Christian congregations in our canvassing efforts, but I am quick to share what makes us distinctive or unique if asked.

I suppose that I might summarize that I might not target any of our outreach efforts directly at those who have another Christian church. I will seek to recognize the call of one who is rightly called to serve those who have called him (although the whole conversation raises questions without definitive answers in my mind), but I will not be anything less than aggressive in sharing the truth of the Gospel with all who might give me opportunity.

There is another reality in our religious context and culture that seems worthy of mention. It is hard to tell exactly who really has a church and who does not. Author David Olson offers an interesting perspective in his book: *The American Church in Crisis*. Keep in mind that these statistics not completely up to date. I would think that things have not improved. If anything, things would be worse today. He points out that the Gallup organization reports that more than 40% of Americans say that in the last week they attended a house of worship. The Barna

¹¹ Ibid.

Group in a study released in 2007 reports an even higher number (43%).¹² Olson points out that those numbers just don't stand up to scrutiny. There is no way that people have been honest in their survey replies. He points out: "In reality the church in America is not booming. It is in crisis. On any given Sunday, the vast majority of Americans are absent from church. Even more troublesome, as the American population continues to grow, the church falls further and further behind. If trends continue, by 2050 the percentage of Americans attending church will be half of the 1990 number."¹³ He points out later that in recent studies of selected counties in the U.S. and Canada, individuals were counted as they went into houses of worship (how did they do this before drones???). The researchers later interviewed a random sampling of adults in these counties. They found the results of those who claimed to be attending church inflated by 100%. Although 40% of the American adults said that they attended church, around 20% actually attended. He puts forth data that suggests that in 2005, 17.5% of the total population attended church on any given weekend."¹⁴

What does this mean? I suppose that it depends a little bit on the culture and context in which you live and do ministry. I think that those numbers would be low in the area in which I serve. We would have more people that worship on a weekend. We have a culture that offers a bit more of a background in Bible background and knowledge. But even where I serve, there are many more people that are not attending a church than those that are. It also tells us something about how we approach those that claim to have a church. Statistics would tell us that many of those that claim to have some church affiliation really don't have any church affiliation. That truth is illustrated in a vivid way for me each year. We run a soccer camp each year. On the soccer camp form, we ask the participant parents if they have a church in the area that they call their own. Each year there will be several families (non-members) that will put "Christ Our Savior" (our church) down as their church. While that obviously opens an door and gives me an opening to approach them boldly, it also illustrates that people will claim a church affiliation without much of an affiliation.

I come to a conclusion. There is a wide open mission field out there. I am willing to cast a broad net in my efforts to make contacts and my efforts to evangelize. I have come to the conclusion that if I have made mistakes in my life and ministry in reaching out with the gospel, I have been too timid and not too aggressive.

That still doesn't answer a burning question. Am I really targeting those that are completely lost in my personal and congregational efforts or am I seeking to reach out to anyone who is willing to listen? It sounds crass but some might say: Am I trying to build a church or am I trying

¹² Olson, David T. *The American Church in Crisis*. Zondervan. 2008 p.16

¹³ *Ibid.* p.16

¹⁴ *Ibid.* p.28-29

to grow God's kingdom? I am glad that I am in the company of many mission pastors as I introduce this discussion. I am very curious for your input. I won't be shy in sharing my perspective after 25 years of parish ministry at a congregation in various levels of mission development.

I hope that it is obvious that it is not **just** a "church" numbers game. If I have shaped my ministry to simply attract seekers in my area, I probably want to check my motives. But there is a certain practicality to mission ministry. I felt that even more in the early days of mission development. I stated it in the introduction of this paper. As I looked at the task before me, I knew that we existed to "make disciples." We existed to reach the lost. In our context of ministry, there were many "floaters" in our parish area. I suppose that I could call them unchurched or I could call them dechurched. The Saturn automobile plant brought in 6,000 workers from GM plants all over the country. That meant that there were many people who left a church and would be looking for a church. There were even more people who had experienced some contact with a church in the past and were not really looking for a church. There were many who were completely unchurched and really were not looking for a church. Who was our target? I would answer by saying "all of them." I didn't deliberately bypass those who were Christians and looking for a church so that I could more quickly get to those who had not heard the Gospel. It was very much a "both/and" situation.

I met a local cardiologist through a mutual friend. He was a member of an Episcopalian Church in town. A mutual friend introduced us. He quickly inquired about our new church. He was frustrated by the "liberal" theology of his church. He was intrigued by "Lutheran" and wanted to know more. We met for 16 weeks on Friday mornings at 6:00 o'clock. I suppose that I could have told him that he was not my target. I asked myself several times if I was doing it all because he was a person of influence in our community and a man of considerable means (I admit to you that I wondered more than once if he would be a tither). Finally, I simply stood ready to witness. I was more than ready to spend ministry time to share the truth. He was in a church that had all but lost the truth (at least that was the impression that I had on the basis of our conversations). I was confident that it was better for him and his family to hear clear law and gospel and to be a part of a church that by God's grace still held to the truth. While they were not converts, we were making disciples by teaching.

As we gathered people who were looking for a church we also gathered resources to continue to reach out with the Gospel. That enabled us to reach out also to those who didn't know Jesus at all. Those two tasks were carried out simultaneously. I could fill pages with examples of opportunities that God gave us to reach those who were completely without the Gospel and any knowledge of it. We could all share our experiences. We rejoice in them. We thank God

for them. But I believe that we can also rejoice in the opportunity to teach those who come to us with faith already in their hearts.

Our Strategy

We have a mission. We have a target. We are looking to proclaim clear law and gospel to as many as possible. We will take our God given resources and apply them to our God given mission. But how does that look? Do we have priorities? Do we have plans? How are we going to take the gospel to the world in an effort to make disciples?

Jesus gave some strategic direction to his disciples. They were to be his witnesses. They would proclaim Gospel starting in Jerusalem. They would broaden their circle of proclamation to Judea and then on to Samaria and ultimately to the ends of the earth. They had a clearly defined mission plan. Proclaim law and gospel. Baptize and teach to make disciples. Do it throughout the world.

The parameters of that plan become a bit clearer as the apostle Paul was commissioned and sent by the church. The mission teams traveled and they planted. Groups of Christians gathered around the gospel and those Christian churches became gospel outposts where the means of grace were applied to more and more. Through those means God made disciples. The exact approach in making contacts and proclaiming may not have always been the same. Peter in his Pentecost sermon got right to the point. "You know Jesus of Nazareth. He was handed over to you by God's set purpose (Acts 2:23). And you, with the help of wicked men, handed him over and put him to death. This one burst forth from the grave. He showed himself to be the Lord and the Christ." The people were cut to the heart and asked what they should do. The gospel was proclaimed. The Gospel was proclaimed to the crowds and God made disciples.

The apostle Paul took a different approach in Athens. There would not have been the same familiarity with Jesus. The goal of gospel proclamation was the same but the approach was a bit different. Paul started with their natural knowledge. They were in every way very "spiritual" or religious people. They had covered all their bases including an altar to the unknown God. The apostle Paul proclaimed to them the one who was as yet unknown. God made disciples through the proclamation of the Gospel.

The way that we carry out our mission might look different depending on the culture and the context in which we serve. But there are some constants upon which we will all quickly agree. We put our focus and emphasis upon the means of grace. That makes us very different from so many around us. I thought that Professor David Valleskey stated it clearly. "Do we appreciate the means of grace as we should? Do we use them boldly and confidently? We in the

evangelical Lutheran Church have a rare treasure in our scriptural doctrine of the means of grace that others do not have. Roman Catholic theology sees the means of grace as doing no more than infusing some power into the individual who is still largely responsible for carrying out his own salvation.

Calvinistic, Reformed theology separates regeneration from the means of grace. It speaks of an immediate, direct operation of the Holy Spirit apart from means, a working that 'precedes all mediate work of God in us...(consisting) of an infusing, implanting of new life'.

Arminianism assigns the responsibility of conversion, at least to a degree, to man himself who, upon hearing the message, must choose to become a believer. The gospel is reduced to an offer the person must decide either to accept or reject. The real power thus resides in the person who makes the decision rather than the gospel. In effect, man's will, rather than the gospel becomes the means of grace. Those who bring the gospel are thus no more than providers of information rather than dispensers of the one message that has the power to convert and save.

Lutheran Christians, on the other hand, in keeping with the Scriptures, will, as Paul Eickmann put it, 'make their confession to the means of grace as God's own objective promises of peace and life. They will point to the sacraments as God's work, not ours. They will urge adults to be baptized and to bring their children to baptism. They will invite the lost to find the comfort in the liturgy, with its words of absolution, and in sermons which proclaim Christ crucified and risen.'

The means of grace, the gospel in Word and Sacrament, is the great treasure the Lord has entrusted to his church. Justification and faith to accept justification- that is entirely in God's hands. But the means of grace- that the Lord has placed into our hands, to use with confidence. A biblical, Lutheran theology of missions dare not in any way minimize the importance of the means of grace.¹⁵

That makes us very unique, doesn't it? I read numerous books in preparation for this paper. I wanted to read a sampling of the material out there in the Evangelical world that might speak to mission methodology or strategy. I won't go into an evaluation of that which I read. I believe that falls into the assignment that you have given to Professor Leyrer. But I did find some interesting points that proved helpful to me. One of those books was Church Unique written by Will Mancini. As the title suggests, he seeks to lead church leaders to evaluate their ministry and move forward in an aggressive way with the Gospel. His encouragement is to carefully evaluate your ministry to determine what makes your church unique. What defines it? What is the driving force in your ministry to your members and to your community. I will

¹⁵ Valleskey, David. "A Biblical, Lutheran Theology of Missions

admit that I first passed over the question without much thought. I assumed that the author was driving at some tangential point that would have little value to me as a WELS pastor. But at some point I found some value in the question and in the mental exercise. What makes our congregation unique? I might apply it beyond our congregation and to all your congregations. What makes us unique?

After some thought, I came to this conclusion. We are a “means of grace” church. I cannot speak for your community. You know your setting. But I find that we are unique in our “means of grace” approach to ministry. That does shape the way that we go about ministry. It influences the way that we structure and plan our program of gospel outreach into our community.

I did come to another conclusion. There is something else that is unique about our congregation. I feel safe in saying that it applies to your congregation as well. It may have a definite influence upon our outreach efforts. The ministries of congregations around me spend a great deal of time and energy speaking to their members about this life and how they live this life (I am not speaking against sanctification preaching. I want to take Professor Gurgel’s class that speaks directly to our sanctification preaching). But I see a very heavy emphasis in preaching and ministry programming in area churches that focuses on what we are doing in this life and how our faith meets the needs of our neighbors. Once again, I am not saying that there is not a place for this. I am just answering the question. What makes our church unique? I don’t think that we rival the churches around us in community service (although we have a very active food pantry and a member assistance fund with thousands of dollars that flow through it each year). Our community service plans do not make us unique.

A Baptist pastor stopped to see me a few years ago. He asked me about our canvassing program. His congregation also did a lot of canvassing. After sharing some plans and strategies, he made a comment that has stuck with me. He shared that in his canvassing efforts, he always knew the members of Christ Our Savior when he encountered them. A comment like that makes a pastor nervous. I was afraid that he was going to tell me that they were flaunting their Christian liberty with a beer or a little sipping whiskey. But that was not it. He told me that the members of COS always answered his questions the same way. He would ask them if they would be in heaven if they were to die tonight. In his experience, they all answered with certainty. He asked the follow up question. Why do you say that? Why would God let you in? Once again, his experience was that all the members spoke of certainty in Christ. It was all Jesus. It was all Gospel.

Two months ago one of our members said that a Baptist pastor (I think that it was a different one than the one that I had spoken with) canvassed their home. He asked the same questions. He got the same answers. He said, “You must be from Christ Our Savior.” There is a theme

there. What makes us unique? Our focus and our message places a very heavy emphasis upon Christ crucified and risen. While so many are working very hard to make peoples' lives more meaningful, we are acknowledging that life for sinful people in a sinful world will have its share of struggles that we cannot fix. But we know the biggest problem and we know the ultimate solution. That focus and that emphasis make us unique. It seems to me that this "unique" focus should play a part not only in our preaching and teaching but also in our mission outreach methodology and planning.

Please do not misunderstand me. I am not saying that there is a "one size fits all" WELS program for outreach into our communities with the gospel. But, in my opinion, there are some principles that we can agree upon as we seek ways to take the means of grace to our communities. We would agree that we are seeking through the gospel to instill confidence for eternity. Only the Gospel can do that. It is our focus.

There is probably a first step that I have not mentioned. I would suggest that we must work to understand the culture in which we work and live. Once again I appreciate Professor David Vallesky's perspective. He writes: "Understanding the culture is not evangelism, but it is an important prerequisite to evangelism. It is first and, for that matter, an ongoing step in building bridges. We are differentiating cultural understanding from bridge-building in this way: understanding the culture has to do with study, observation, etc., while building bridges is the activity of reaching out to the people in that culture. Logically, one comes before the other. One first seeks to get a handle on the culture, to try to understand it, and then one seeks to penetrate it. In actual practice, however, both will be going on at the same time. One constantly is, or at least should be, growing in his understanding of the culture all the while he is seeking to penetrate it. One will have difficulty penetrating a society whose culture he isn't seeking to understand."¹⁶

We could all tell fun stories about discovering cultural realities in the places that we are privileged to serve. My experience is very narrow. I will not pretend to understand the "culture" of your area of ministry. I do know that there was a learning curve for me as I began mission ministry in Middle Tennessee. It was one of my first days in my new surroundings that I saw the bumper sticker that read, "We Don't Give a ___ How You Did It Up North!" It did not take me long to realize that there were some tensions in the air. If we were going to take the gospel to everyone in this community, we were going to have to work hard to overcome some obstacles. We didn't want to be perceived as a "Northern" church. At the same time we didn't really want to alienate all those who missed their "home" and were looking for a place to plug in. We spent a lot of time listening and trying to understand our area. We realized that we wanted to build bridges to our community to share the gospel. We wanted to do more than

¹⁶ Vallesky, David. "Between Two Worlds- Techniques and Practices Of A Soul Winning Ministry."

just gather seekers (not that serving seekers is wrong). We do well to remind ourselves that while we seek to understand our culture and build bridges to those in our culture, we do not compromise our message. We are still “means of grace” Christians. We seek to understand the culture and build bridges with one goal in mind. We seek to proclaim clear law and gospel.

In varying degrees, we all face one cultural reality. The United States has transitioned from a Christian to a post-Christian environment. That means that the fields often offer a hostile environment. That means that people might not be open to invitations. It has an impact on our outreach planning.

When we understand who we are and we begin to get a handle on the culture into which we have been placed, we begin to develop a plan or strategies to take the gospel to our context and culture. I would say that over the years I have developed a bit of a “shotgun” approach to mission ministry. Many lines in the water are better than few lines in the water. After 25 years we still place a heavy emphasis on our canvassing work. I realize that it is hard. I know that I get more negative reactions now than I did in years past. But it seems to me that it is one aspect of our outreach plan for ministry that takes us to those who are not seeking in any way. We canvass with a series of steps in mind. We canvass to identify the unchurched. We follow up with a brief survey that seeks to establish some lines of communication in a way that is not threatening. We seek a third visit in which we present law and Gospel. The ultimate goal is to get them into Bible information class. We want an extended opportunity to lead them into the word. We are seeking to “teach them everything... commanded you.” We are seeking to apply the means of grace to make disciples.

We do many of the same things that you probably do. We have VBS each summer. We host a soccer camp that puts 100 kids in touch with our church and with the Gospel. We send out mailings (12,000 to 20,000) three times each year. We have an active program of follow up to those who visit our worship services or our outreach events.

Like many of you, I have noted that most “unchurched” people don’t ever cross our threshold unless there is a bridge for them. That bridge may be formed in the canvass and follow up process. It is more likely that it comes through a personal relationship. It makes sense to me that we would work hard to train our members to share their faith and encourage them in that activity. It has always made sense to me to train members in a law/ Gospel presentation. We also hold annual canvass training seminars. In my experience, people who canvass become witnesses in many areas of their lives. I have heard it said, “If I can witness to a complete stranger, I can certainly do it at work or with my friends.” I wonder if training is not one area that we often neglect in our ministry planning and activity.

The preschool/ child care world offers another opportunity to cross paths with those who don't know Christ. This, too, is a part of knowing your community. It was not hard for us to figure out 20 years ago. The city of Spring Hill, TN had an incredibly high percentage of preschool age kids per capita. The preschools in our area were full with waiting lists. It only made sense that we would enter the market place. I would estimate that over 30% of the families of our congregation had their first point of contact with us through our preschool. The preschool offers natural opportunities to share law and gospel. We meet with the parents. I am not trying to pull a bait and switch with anyone but it seems very natural that we would sit down with parents and explain what their children are hearing and learning when they are under our care. Parents love their children and want to know what is going on at their school. Almost without exception, they give us opportunity to share. Regular activities in which the pastors and members of our congregation can interact with our preschool families are also scheduled. Generally, we do not target the families of our preschool who are members of other churches. I will say that over the years, there have been a fair number of families who have inquired about our ministry. Our membership rolls would have several families who were members of other churches before their children attended our preschool. I salve my "sheep stealing" conscience by telling myself that they inquired first.

The Bible Information Class would be another great topic for a mission conference. My course has changed over the years but the basic elements have not changed all that much. I would say that I am aware that people have much less Bible knowledge or awareness than they once had. Even in the Bible belt I cannot assume that people have any real knowledge of Bible stories. I am still comfortable starting with the natural knowledge of God. The "Paul in Athens" model still seems appropriate in a culture and society that is very much into the "spiritual" but not so much into religion. I never tire of following that up with a lesson on law and gospel in week two. The natural knowledge of God and sin and grace offer both a great lead in and launching pad for weeks of study together.

Permit me one final tangent as I close. It might be a shameless plug for the work of the Board for Home Missions and the Kingdom work that we do together. I read a quote recently from Rick Warren. As soon as I read it the bells and warning sirens began to go off in my head. It came in the forward of a book by the title of Viral Churches. I am not holding out the statement as absolute truth. It does provoke some thought. He said, "The single most effective method for fulfilling the Great Commission that Jesus gave us is to plant new churches." Hmmm... that is an interesting statement. I don't know that one can say it is the most effective way for us to carry out the commission of our Savior. The commission of our Savior is carried out when God's people preserve and proclaim the clear gospel in our world. But I would say that new church plants have a clear outreach focus in their planning for ministry. I can use myself as a case study. In the first years of our mission development I had four or five nights each week to do

outreach work. Now, I have to work very hard to save one or two nights each week for outreach work. I am privileged to read mission reports from the various mission outposts of our WELS. I often find myself offering a prayer of thanks for the work that is being done in St. George, Utah; Castle Rock, Colorado; Carbon Valley, CO; Laramie, WY; Minot, ND and other fields. I see focused ministry plans with intensive efforts to take the Gospel to their communities. Obviously, I am not saying that we are not all missionaries. I am not saying that we should not constantly strive to turn our congregations into mission focused outposts for the gospel. I am simply saying that the work of starting new missions is important work that we do together. It is work that seeks to “make disciples” of all nations. It is a very concerted effort to proclaim Christ in our world with the goal of making disciples for eternity.

I thank God for the opportunity to address you in this mission conference setting. I thank God for our partnership in the Gospel. I pray God’s blessings on our work together.

Chuck Westra

January 27, 2015 – Salt Lake City, Utah

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