



C13

Outreach Discussion

Our Mission Together: The Means & the Methods

Our Mission

There has been much talk in the last few years about the mission of our church (both the WELS and our individual congregations). I have heard it said that our mission together is to preach the gospel and rightly administer the sacraments. It would be hard to argue with that statement. We can all agree that proclamation of Christ and administering his sacraments is a key part of our mission. I have heard it said that our mission is to reach the lost. It would be hard to argue with that statement. Jesus himself sent his followers to “make disciples” of all nations.

In the past, the WELS has defined its mission in the following way. *“As men, women, and children united in faith and worship by the Word of God, the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod exists to make disciples throughout the world for time and for eternity, using the gospel in Word and sacrament to win the lost for Christ and to nurture believers for lives of Christian service, all to the glory of God.”*

As the Church (all Christians everywhere), our mission is to proclaim Christ. It is true that we do that on Sunday mornings. I am confident that all WELS churches proclaim Christ crucified and risen from their pulpits.

As we do so, we participate in the mission given to the Church. I trust that every WELS church rightly celebrates the Lord’s Supper on a regular basis. I trust also that they baptize the members of the congregation according to Christ’s institution. As we do this, we participate in the mission of the Church.

It is also our mission (given by Christ himself) to serve as God’s mouthpiece to the world.

We have been sent into the world so that the world might hear the gospel. The repetition and position of the “commission” passages demand our attention. Matthew 28:18-20, Mark 16:15-16, Luke 24:46-49, John 20:19-23 and Acts 1:1-8 are prominent by their position. Shortly before his ascension, our Savior instructed his followers to proclaim him to the world. We are called to proclaim Christ.

The opportunity to participate in God’s mission is a privilege of divine grace. God gathers his elect as his word is proclaimed in the world. He invites us to participate

in that activity. Just think about that for a moment. It is by grace that God has called us out of the darkness of unbelief. By the Holy Spirit’s work, we see Jesus as the solution to our otherwise insurmountable problem of sin. God has made us his children and has given

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us confidence for this life and for the next. More than that, God allows us to be a part of his mission. We are invited to take his saving message to the world. That gracious privilege is at the heart of our C13 plans.

If your congregation does not have a mission statement, developing one might be a good activity for your church leadership. A congregational mission statement which parallels the mission of the Church offers focus and direction for our ministry together. (WELS Commission on Congregational Counseling has resources to assist you in producing a mission statement.)

The Means

Twenty-three years ago, I was involved in the starting of a new mission church. The task seemed overwhelming to me. There were five families gathered for a nucleus. The District Mission Board advised me to look at a two-county area and plant a church somewhere in that area. The task seemed to be too much for a rookie pastor and a handful of families. Where should we go? How should we start? I met with a veteran pastor. He must have sensed my apprehension and partial paralysis. He handed me a Bible and pointed to the house next door to mine and said, "Why don't you start right there?"

Our Savior has instructed us to go into all the world and make disciples of all nations. That is a bit overwhelming. I don't think that I am up to the task. I am not really sure where I should start. I think back to the words and actions of that veteran pastor. He pointed to the Bible, then to my neighbor and asked, "Why don't you start right over there?"

The key was the Bible. God has given us the tools that we need to accomplish his mission. We have everything we need in the word and sacraments (connected to that word). We do not have to rely upon our quick wit or sense of humor. The accomplishment of God's mission does not depend on our eloquence or our intelligence. God inspired the apostle

Paul to declare that truth in Romans 1:16. *"I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile."* He also wrote in 1 Corinthians 2:4: *"My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power."*

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We might approach the mission before us with fear and trepidation if not for the simple fact that God has provided the tools that we need for this mission. In the word of God, we have what we need. In the word of God, we have all that we need. Our Lutheran Confessions support this Biblical truth. *"Through the preaching of and meditation upon the holy Gospel of the gracious forgiveness of sin in Christ there is kindled a spark of faith which accepts the forgiveness of sins for Christ's sake and comforts itself with the promise of the Gospel. And in this way the Holy Spirit, who works all of this, is introduced into the heart."* (FC, SD, Article 11, 54.) As Lutherans, we rely completely on the means of grace in approaching the mission that God has entrusted to us. We know that the mission is God's. We know that the results are in his hands.

That does not mean, of course, that we do not examine the way that we do things. God calls us to partake in his mission. We do well to examine our own activity. It is a matter of stewardship of the gifts that God has given. A pastor knows that the power to convert is in God's word. That does not mean that he will throw a sermon together at the last minute and read it on Sunday morning. We know that the word works but that does not mean

that we do not examine our activity in proclaiming that word to our neighbors.

I offer a thought for you as you manage God's gifts in the ministry of your congregation — that is to install some method of accountability in the realm of your outreach ministry. To do so is not to say that you do not completely trust the means of grace to do the work. It is not saying that you think that your expertise will convert anyone. It is simply a matter of stewardship.

You are managing God-given resources. We do so in other areas of our ministry. We expect that we will have worship services on Sunday morning and we expect that our pastor (one of our pastors) will preach a sermon. We expect that a pastor or an elder will make a visit to someone who is hospitalized. A pastor or elder will reach out to someone who has become inactive in his or her worship life. If those things do not happen, there should be some measures taken to increase our activity in and with the word. We can also plan our activity in our outreach ministries with some lines of accountability structure. That does not cease to trust the means of grace to do all the work. It is simply striving to take the means of grace to as many as possible.

The Methods

Lutherans tend to get a bit nervous when we talk about methods. There are some good reasons for this. Recent church history has shown that there have been many churches that have put their confidence in their methodology instead of placing their confidence (and focus) on the means of grace. That, however, does not make all methods bad. Understood properly, our methods are simply our plan to take the word of God to our community.

I offer another thought — that is, if your congregation does not have a written plan for outreach ministry, then it is something that you might consider. Do not try to do

everything at once or try to do more than you can do well. Start small, but put that plan on paper and hold yourselves accountable to your plan. (WELS Commission on Evangelism has resources to help you produce a written plan for outreach.)

There are some basic elements of a plan for outreach ministry that you should consider. First, these suggestions tie in well with our C13 materials. If we are going to invite our community to our worship service, we want to be ready for them when they arrive. Consider printing your entire order of service in a professional, user-friendly format. Years of experience with visitors to our worship services have convinced me that this is very important to the visitor.

We also want to work as hard as we can to make visitors feel welcome. A system of official or unofficial greeters is important. A team of people who see it as their responsibility to make people feel welcome seems wise. Most visitors feel some apprehension. Follow-up interviews with new members have shown the importance of making people feel welcome when they visit us.

It is also important to have a way to get a record of the visit. There are different ways to do this. Many mission churches today find that friendship registers passed through the pews during the offering are the most effective way to get an accurate record of visitor information.

A plan to follow up with those visitors is also critical. We have lay members who visit our first time visitors. Their visit is brief and done on the door step. It is merely an opportunity to thank the visitor for worshipping with us. Later in the week, a staff person or trained caller follows up on that visit. Our goal is to have opportunity to share a law/gospel message with them.

At some point, a planned method to locate those who are without a church in your community is an important part of a plan for

gospel outreach. That could happen through a community canvass or through invitations to services or activities on your campus. At the same time, it is important to have a plan in place to nurture those whom you have found.

C13 offers us assistance in our outreach

planning. It is an exciting opportunity. It is our great privilege to participate in God's mission to gather his elect. God has entrusted to us his powerful means of grace. It is our privilege to take those means to our neighborhoods and beyond. I pray for God's blessings on your labors in God's mission.

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