

THE RESPONSIBILITY OF SYNOD AND DISTRICT COMMISSIONS ON EVANGELISM IN THE "MISSIO DEI"

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To the degree that the Synod and District Commissions on Evangelism bring our pastors and congregations to the awareness that they are the "Missio Dei", the Mission of God, to that degree they will have discharged their responsibility to God and to the Synod. This statement implies that the prime responsibility of the commissions on evangelism is to "evangelize" the Synod's constituency with the news that mission and church are in a sense synonymous terms, that they as Christians are God's mission. His work and in turn that their lives continue to be God's mission to the world. In this perspective many of the questions you have raised regarding objectives, policies, and procedures, as well as goals and functions, of evangelism groups at all levels can more readily be answered.

To fully understand the place of evangelism committees in the life of the church, it is essential to understand that Mission is the work of God. Dr. Paul Peters in the October 1968 issue of the Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly directs us to the proper starting point in our consideration of our theme. He says, "Missio Dei is the work of the Triune God. Both the mission and the church is God's very own work. Now it is worthy of note that the word for 'mission', or 'missions', as we use and understand the term today, does not at all occur in the New Testament. The concept of 'mission', i.e., 'the sending', is, of course, derived from the New Testament words for 'sending'... But there was no specific reason for the use of the word for 'mission' as a separate work of the church, since the matter for which the word stands is identical with what is understood by church. To speak of a 'missionary church' is really a tautology. The church as such is a mission and would lose its identity if it did not carry on mission work. But what this mission work really is can only be ascertained when we begin to speak of Missio Dei as the work of the Triune God on the basis of Scripture." - Vol 65, No. 4, page 235.

The church is the 'work' of God from eternity to eternity. God's plan for the church antedates the world as Paul reveals in Ephesians 1. From eternity God chose, predestined, elected, so that in the fullness of time He might gather in one all things in Christ and might put all things under his feet, giving Him as the head over all things to the Church which is His body. Therefore God sent His only-begotten Son to accomplish redemption for the world, to cleanse the church to present it to Himself spotless and clean. The Son promised to and did send the Spirit to lead the church in truth and in

the proclaiming of the truth. In all the 'sending' activity of the Triune God the goal is clear - not the establishing of a church, but the salvation of souls. The Church is God's continuing mission, in a sense both the object of His mission and the means for His mission.

The "Even So" passages of St. John's Gospel joins the Missio Dei with that of God's people. "As my Father hath sent me, even so send I you." (John 20:21) is the continuation of the Missio Dei. There is no separation between the goal of God's mission and that of His people. Our Savior in His sacerdotal prayer links the saving purpose of the 'sending' of John 3:16 with the lives of His people, "As Thou hast sent me into the world, even so have I also sent them into the world." (John 17:18)

What a tremendous force this identification of the church with God's mission brings into the life of the Christian and the church. We are involved in God's great Plan, we are elements of His plan and purpose, in fact we together are His plan for the world, His mission to the world. Once we perceive that the church is essentially God in action, God working, we get a sense of mission, a feeling of power, of confidence as we live our part of this mission of God. Here is the "dynamis", the dynamite of evangelism: God is working.

To the degree that we can enable our people to connect their concept of the church with the Missio Dei, to that degree will we have infused our earthly organization of the church with the power of God.

This identification of God's mission with the church is evident in all of the Scriptural expressions used by the Holy Spirit to identify Christians. Here, as always, Scripture presents a richness of expression to reveal a reality beyond our comprehension. The Holy Spirit uses many pictures to reveal the relationship between God and man, the regenerate child of God. It is in this very variety of expressions and pictures that the Old Adam finds opportunity to obscure the true dynamism of God's mission. The human mind is very quick to impose its own concepts even on Scripture words and expressions. It can also focus attention and emphasis on one of a series of Scriptural expressions or figures with the result that the full truth is obscured.

Taking just a few of the expressions the Holy Spirit uses to define the people of God we can see that they are identified with the Missio Dei, but that nevertheless they also can be screened even by us Christians to partially obscure the idea of mission:

- "holy priesthood" emphasizes an activity of reconciliation in which the Christians can exercise the keys of the kingdom, God's mission of forgiveness. And yet a certain aura of professionalism slips into our understanding of the phase, formalizing our activity through the organized church.
- "ambassador of Christ" has a very active ring about it, definitely tying us all to the Missio Dei, as God's spokesmen and representatives. Any yet even here a subconscious identification of this term with foreign lands permits the idea of missionaries acting on our behalf to creep in.
- "child of God" presents the picture of a family, and of one's place in it. And thus, although the injunctions of Scripture to children of God are all active ones, joining us to God's purpose, a comfortable passivity is a common reaction to the term.
- "kingdom of God" is a beautiful expression to reveal both the power and grace of God in action, ruling in love and might to accomplish His saving mission. But how often the term in human minds refers to a place, to a group of people, ruled mightily by God.
- "Church of Christ" is identified as Christ's own body, members and Head inseparably connected, functionalizing with separate gifts to accomplish the profitable mission of God. And yet here above all the screen of human reason injects the thought of an organization.

These examples are cited to indicate that despite the use of the clear and powerful pictures of Scripture the true meaning can be obscured. The power of these expressions to move our people to a necessary awareness of their role in the Missio Dei is lost. Our Synod has a special problem in this respect because of the "strain" we have been under corporately in the defense of our confessional position in late years.

It is quite normal that in times of doctrinal stress the confessionally concerned Christian will emphasize certain aspects of God's revelation. It is somewhat difficult at such times not to overemphasize one revealed aspect at the expense of another. In these times of doctrinal stress for instance the emphasis in the minds of our people can be on "belonging" to the right group of Christians. That this has been the emphasis in conservative Lutheran circles is borne out by the emphasis in catechisms and adult manuals on the importance of "belonging" to the Holy Christian Church and "belonging" to the true visible church. One desires the security of knowing he is on the right side.

However, the fact that the Church is the mission of God, His activity of which we are a part, indicates another emphasis which is essential to a balanced Christian life.

We need not only answer the question, To what do we belong?, but above all the question, What are we? To overemphasize "belonging" can easily lead to a static idea of Christian life, rather than that of mission in motion.

The obstacle of imbalanced emphasis regarding our status as Christians in relation to God's mission can be overcome only by the Holy Spirit's enlightenment. This comes through a lively study of God's Word. And we need not be pessimistic about the practical results of such study in the lives of our people. The figures and expressions of Scripture revealing our roles in the Missio Dei have spiritual power to move Christians mightily. One cannot help but feel that the reason our people took so well to the name of our recent capital funds drive was not only an awe at being able to use this Latin phrase, Missio Dei. This phrase in a brief, punchy way got across a Scriptural concept regarding their involvement in something much more vast and moving than a mere fund-raising campaign. It said, We are God's mission, we are involved in His Missio Dei. We share in this activity as well as being products of it.

As indicated in our opening lines, we feel that here lies the chief responsibility of the Synod and District Commission on Evangelism. Awakening the awareness of our Christians that they are both the products and the agents of God's mission is a heavy responsibility. How can this responsibility best be discharged?

Although there can be little argument with the absolute necessity of the involvement of all Christians in the work of witnessing for our Lord, there has been question regarding the need for a synodical or district commissions to make the promotion of this work its special concern. It is passing strange, however, to hear such objections in a Synod which deems it wise to have both synodical and district boards with a large full-time staff for the promotion of Christian education, to have a commission to promote the publication of Christian literature, to have a commission to give advice and assistance in the area of hymnology and worship, to have a board to assist in stewardship training. It sounds strange to hear objections or questions regarding a commission to give us assistance in the area of evangelism, the very heart and soul of the Missio Dei.

How can we say on the one hand that we need and welcome assistance in terms of material, methods, programs and the like in the area of Christian education and on the other hand react as though all Christians and especially pastors were such experts in the area of evangelism that we need no assistance and especially not as to methods and programs?

A quick look at the objectives and other sections of the Handbook of the Home Mission Division of our Synod should quickly dispel any doubts you may have that evangelism is one of the key areas needing our attention as a church body. The particular position in which our Synod finds itself now only heightens our sense of need of assistance. We face a time when in our Home Missions we need well-trained and especially Spirit-driven lay evangelists in all of our churches to enable us to knock on all the doors in the fields opening to us. We quote:

"The continuing purpose of the General Board for Home Missions is to share the Gospel of Jesus Christ with all people within the limits of the domestic mission fields of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod."

"It is our policy 4. To place prime responsibility for mission work and its equitable support on the members of a mission congregation."

"PRIME RESPONSIBILITY FOR ALL MISSION WORK is placed on the members of a mission congregation. This is in keeping with our trust in the Spirit-born faith-life in the souls of all the priests of God in our congregations. Thus the work of evangelizing, of planning, of supporting is placed first on the members of mission congregations."

"Evangelism is indeed the heart and soul of Home Mission work. Responsibility for being 'witnesses' to the Lord rests on every member of a mission congregation, not only the pastor. An awareness of this evangelization responsibility can best be kept alive by a conscious and organized effort on the part of the congregational administration.

Evangelism reports should be a regular agenda item at all Church Council and Voters' Assembly meetings. Use of the materials and programs produced by our Synod's Commission on Evangelism is a natural procedure for a mission congregation."

Are evangelism commissions on the Synod and district level justified and needed? I believe they are as long as our Synod holds to the Scriptural doctrine as to what the role of every Christian is in the Missio Dei and as long as the present form of the church continues. The wisdom of Christians in the past has made use of the varied talents of the various members of Christ's body by giving special assignments to groups of members so that others might profit thereby. Today we call such groups boards and committees. In the judgment of our Synod it was deemed wise to set up both a Synod and District Commissions on Evangelism. It was left to the Synod Commission to a great degree to define the duties and functions of its respective members. Some of the questions relative to the necessity of either Synod or District Commissions raised by those active in evangelism work at these levels both now and in the past could arise from frustrations due to unclarity regarding the respective functions and duties of these commissions. Frankly, I feel the present arrangement has much to say for it in terms of getting the job done.

The present provision for membership on the Synod Commission seems logical. The close liaison necessary with the district commissions is provided for in the membership of the District chairman. It appears wise that the Synod exercise some directive force through the appointment of three members, including the officers, by the Synod's President. Because of the productive rather than administrative nature of the work of the Commission, it would seem that its Executive Committee need not have any authority or function apart from that assigned to all members of the Commission. The Executive Committee can serve well as a sub-committee for the implementation of many Commission decisions and as planning and steering committee since it normally is a closely geographically selected group.

The functions assigned to the Synod Commission are rightly quite broad. They include production of materials as well as promotion of methods and programs. They also include contact down to every level of synodical structure, including the congregations.

Nevertheless, it is essential in the attaining of the primary objective of the Commission to have district commissions. If the primary objective is to ~~make~~ our people more conscious of their role in the Missio Dei, to enable them to function as witnesses of Christ, this means communication to the local level. This cannot be accomplished by a synodical commission of clergymen. Therefore, in our synodical structure, district commissions are essential. And by the same reasoning the district commissions do include laymen, and might we add, preferably half of the membership.

This might lead to the conclusion that the role of the district commission is that of a relay station for synodically produced materials and programs. Such an approach would be unique in our Synod. For instance, the district mission boards administer the work of missions by adapting the policies and procedures of the General Board for Home Missions to the needs of their respective districts. Programs are often developed at the district level to meet specific needs. These ideas are shared in the GBHM meetings and at times adopted as General Board policy.

It is not a question of either/or, but both/and when the answer is given to the question, are district commissions to be "relay stations" or "think centers"? It is stifling not to permit district commissions to exercise imagination in meeting local needs with material. No other censorship of such material is necessary other than the general doctrinal supervision of the District President's office. Adaptation of synodically produced materials and programs is also an important area of work of district

commissions. They, better than anyone else, should be aware of the particular needs and problems of their district.

No district commission, however, discharges its duty, if it does not take seriously its charge "to aid the congregations of the District in establishing and maintaining active evangelism programs." To give in to a defeatist attitude among pastors and congregations regarding the involvement of the members of the church in the Missio Dei is to deny the very nature and work of the church.

The "call" to both Synod and District Commissions includes a continuing concern for the evangelism activity in every congregation in the districts. I cannot imagine a district commission not striving to have every congregation assign evangelism responsibility to a specific group in the congregation. There is no hesitation on the part of brethren and officials to urge that a specific group in the congregation be given responsibility for money, for Christian education, for care of property, and the like. Should we shrink from encouraging the pinpointing of concern for the primary work of the church, of all Christians - all witnessing to Christ?

A district commission can serve exceptionally well in developing pilot programs in the field of evangelism. These may be tailored to a local situation and still may have general usage later. The district commission may also act as the agent for the synodical commission for a trial run of a program developed by the Synod's commission. In other words, restrictions placed on the activity of the district commissions working in their own districts would appear short-sighted and unwise.

We have been talking of the respective structures and functions of the synod and district commissions. May we return a moment to the objectives in the area of evangelism to give us direction as we turn to some specifics in terms of activity of the commissions.

It is becoming increasingly apparent in this era of our Synod's history and in view of the changed social milieu within which we work, that we must give more than lip service to the old saying that we must start with a study of what Scripture has to say about evangelism. Is it not true that despite this emphasis in the Synod's programs to date, those who have been most "cooperative" in using the materials have at times tended to be more activist and have perhaps emphasized program and method above the scriptural study? Is it not also true that others who have been less "cooperative" and enthusiastic have not made serious use of the study as a necessary prelude to action?

If I may venture an opinion - I believe that, as good as the Synod's Evangelism Manuals are, and who am I to downgrade something in which I had a hand in its embryonic stages, they lack implementation in terms of wide usage and they may also reflect an attempt to meet the needs of a slightly different situation. They had their roots in attitudes and reaction to attitudes of almost a decade ago. Indication of the attitude and reaction to attitude of that time is found in the fact that the first manual published by the Synod's Commission two-thirds of a four page definition of "evangelism" was spent in stating what evangelism is not!

To place evangelism in proper perspective in what we hope is a mission-awakened Synod, a bold answer must be given to the question, What are we? Such an answer is given in the essay, "The Church in Mission" written by your own Pastor Darvin Raddatz, delivered at the Central Conference of the Western Wisconsin District in Fall, 1967. You have received a copy of the essay. A breath of new and fresh air breezed into my mind as I read this essay, it lifted evangelism from the status of another church program to that of the essence of the church, of God's mission to and with man.

The revision of this essay as a study pamphlet with appropriate study guides is the type of material needed right now. It or something similar should be prepared as a basic teaching tool to reach the broadest possible base. Along with this tool should go practical suggestions for its widest use. We need to connect our doctrinal concerns with the dynamism of the Missio Dei. It would appear that a renewed look at our role in God's mission, via well prepared study material, packaged in a practical format could serve to awaken more pastors and congregations to a true evangelism consciousness. The present manuals need not be discarded, but would serve well as guides for the planning and training for evangelism after the fire was fanned.

In a Synod which stresses the universal priesthood of believers it would be difficult to deny the role of the pastor and church in equipping the saints for the work of witnessing. Here is another open field for the evangelism commission in preparing materials for the assistance of our pastors and congregations. The above-mentioned materials, the extent and the proposed fit this category. One neglected area that needs special and speedy consideration is that of training our youth. We live in a country where presently 50% of the population is 25 years and younger. Can we neglect this one-half of our membership, not to mention that fact that they will be with us a bit longer in the church than those presently in their 40's or 50's?



Methods to enable our people to function more readily in the Missio Dei on a continuing basis are obviously needed. Any method proposed must enable our people not only to reach people, but to touch them with the Gospel love of the Word and of the living epistle of Christian lives. This then must include above all the opportunity to teach people both directly and through the pastor's class. Could it perhaps be time to put together a formal program which would emphasize these activities of reaching, touching and teaching the unchurched of our communities?

In any approach a heavy emphasis on the teaching aspect of evangelism is a crucial point for a church body hopefully on the brink of more rapid growth. It is essential that we do not lose our policy of adequate instruction in the Word for those reached and touched by an evangelism effort. Commitment to Christ and the church includes commitment to His revelation in Scripture, which of necessity includes commitment to adequate instruction in this Word. Such instruction is adequate not only when a certain course of instruction is finished, but, I believe, also when sufficient time has been spent at such study so that the "atmosphere" of the Word and the fellowship of the church has been absorbed by a sort of spiritual "osmosis".

Adequate instruction not only helps us keep the faith through the accession of a well-grounded laity, but also helps us spread the faith by enabling the Holy Spirit to create in our new members a fuller awareness of their role in God's Mission.

To bring this message of the Missio Dei to our church leaders, clergy and lay, to train them to train others, and even to become involved in the educating and training of congregation members - in all of this, a most effective tool open to our synod and district commissions is the Workshop approach. We as a Synod have workshops for singing and organ-playing, for Sunday School teaching, for holding church office, for raising synodical funds. Why not in the area of our primary work as individual Christians and as a church?

We need not reach everyone in a congregation to assure an evangelism spirit in a congregation. We need to create "cells", no matter how small, of truly enlightened evangelists in each congregation. We need only a few people who can identify themselves with the Missio Dei, knowing they are God's Mission and thus in turn are a mission sent by God to other souls lived by God. Such "cells" will transmit the vision of the Missio Dei to fellow-members. Others will be infected by the spirit of missions, God's Mission to an eternally restless world.

Materials, methods, and programs of study and training in evangelism all find their objective and power in the fact that the church is God's mission. Working with this knowledge and belief you can attain your objective of making our people aware of themselves as God's Mission in and to the world. Working with this knowledge and belief you cannot shrug off the charge given you by the Synod.

We of the Home Mission Division pray for the success of your work, for our future work depends on "cells" of dedicated evangelists throughout the country helping us gather in souls in areas previously untouched by us but where out-posts of confessional Lutheranism need to be established. Such distinct missionary "cells" exist in those "new-area" missions which are showing growth. The Lord gives the increase, but only where the Word is sown in good measure. Help us train sowers!