

GOD'S MISSION: THE MEANS AND THE METHODS

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Introduction

Some years ago a brother in the ministry cornered me at a social gathering and told me that the fact that the church that I serve was growing had nothing to do with me. God grows his Church when and where it pleases him. God does this through (and only through) his means. I thanked him for his theological insight, his mastery of the confessions (AC, V,2) and asked him if I had ever given him any other impression.

A few years later. I was sitting in a brainstorming session intended to examine our mission outreach in the WELS. We were trying to determine our objective and mission as a group and also as a church. Someone made the statement that it is our mission to reach the lost by whatever means necessary. I took issue with that statement. The brother quickly acknowledged that he had overstated his intended meaning. But he was trying to move a church body (WELS) that had seemingly lost its desire to be active and aggressive with the gospel. He wanted to restore a focus among us that would drive us to be aggressive in sharing the gospel with as many as possible so that more souls might be won for Christ. He stated that we need to be willing to examine the way that we do things.

The WELS in convention in 2007 recommended the formation of an Ad Hoc Commission to study the form and structure of our church body and to offer a report making recommendations for future operations. As a part of their report they offered specific issues for study among us. The first suggested area of study was: "Trusting the Means of Grace." Their preliminary report states, "Concerns have been raised about a growing lack of confidence in the Means of Grace in our midst that is seen in an increasing interest in techniques and methodology as a means toward ministry ends. Considerable concern has been raised about adoption of styles and methodologies from other church bodies and dabbling in "church growth" methods, without a full understanding of the connection between the outward style and the false theology that underpins it. On the other hand, concern has also been raised about a spirit of contentment with mediocrity, using the pretext of 'trusting the Means of Grace' as a smokescreen for poor preparation, fear of change, and lack of creativity and innovation. Both ends of the spectrum need to be studied and properly articulated."¹

Is there a conflict among us? In his book, Professor David Valleskey quotes John H.C. Fritz from his work "Pastoral Theology." I think that the quote could start a debate among us.

As long as there are any unchurched people living in the territory of a Christian congregation, that congregation should seek to win them for Christ (Luke 14:21-23). For this purpose a Christian congregation should seek to grow in

¹ Preliminary Report and Recommendations, Ad Hoc Commission. June 2008

membership (Acts 2:41; 4:4). If a congregation which is located in a territory of many unchurched people does not grow in membership, this does not speak well for it nor for its pastor; much less so, of course, if it even loses in membership.²

It is my objective in this paper to examine the tension between an appropriate view of the means of grace and a proper perspective on the methodologies that we use in proclaiming the gospel in our ministries.

Our Mission

It seems wise to speak first to our mission together as Christians. We must be careful to speak clearly. Over the years of my ministry I have heard the mission of our church (WELS) spoken of in varying terms. The WELS Constitution contains a purpose statement in Article IV.

It is the object and purpose of the synod to “extend and conserve the true doctrine and practice of the Evangelical Lutheran Church” through appropriate help and guidance for its pastors, teachers and congregations, through educational institutions, through home and world missions and charitable institutions and through publications.³

I cannot argue with the accuracy of this statement. It states the purpose of our WELS. Others have tried to state our mission or purpose in words that place a greater emphasis on the “extending” aspect of the constitutionally stated purpose. More recently the WELS has adopted a mission statement that found its way into print in numerous places.

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.⁴

This statement caused considerable debate, so much so that it led to the formulation of a committee by the Conference of Presidents following the 2005 convention. That committee presented a report that can be found in its entirety in the essay file of our Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary. In summary the report stated that there was no theological error in the mission statement. The necessity of the report confirms for me that there are some differing opinions among us as we discuss our mission together.

These tensions are not new to us. Darvin Raddatz spoke of the struggle in the understanding of our mission in his essay delivered to the 40th Biennial Convention of our WELS in 1969. “The Lord Jesus has sent his Church on a mission to serve the lost world.

² David J. Valleskey *We Believe- Therefore We Speak* (Northwestern Publishing House), 125

³ The Constitution and Bylaws of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, adopted July, 1997, amended July 1999, and printed May, 2000. Issued by the WELS Committee on Constitutional Matters.

⁴ The mission statement of the WELS is printed on page ii of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod Yearbook 2007.

Among the Lord's crew are the members of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod. We have just recently come out of a great doctrinal struggle.

The winds of false doctrine were threatening to divert the mission, to throw it off course, and to water down the Bread of Life. Storm clouds still hover threateningly on the horizon. Mindful of our recent exertions and fearful of further confessional tumult, we might be tempted to say, 'Our goal, as a church, is to preserve the Truth of God.' In this way we would be tempted to interpret our mission in terms of our most recent crisis. Or in a moment of forgetfulness and self-satisfaction we might be tempted to say, 'Our mission is to build a bigger and better synod and church;' that is to say, we might be tempted to define our mission in terms of ourselves."⁵ Raddatz suggested that the continuing purpose of the WELS, as a gathering of Christians, is to serve all people in God's world with the Gospel of Jesus Christ on the basis of the Holy Scriptures.⁶

What is our mission? I am expressing my opinion when I say that I believe that there are brothers among us who are concerned about the practices of some in our WELS circles. Is it possible that in the name of aggressive outreach with the gospel that some have become less than careful with the truth? I have heard that statement made more than once. I know that there are brothers among us who are concerned that our church body is so focused on holding the truth that we have not been aggressive in our attempts to share that truth. Pastor Paul Kelm writes, "And I believe that the creation of the evangelism chair at the seminary and a synodical office of evangelism signal an awareness on the part of our church body that we have not responded to the Lord's mission call in a way consistent with the opportunities, capabilities and preservation of Gospel truth he has given us."⁷ There will always be some tension involved here. We will not hesitate to say that we must preserve the truth. We do not shy away from saying that we desire to proclaim that truth to the lost. Some tension may actually be healthy. I consider it helpful to carefully define our mission.

That mission comes to us from God himself. I thought that Pastor Jonathan Schroeder did a fine job of defining that mission in his essay delivered to our synod convention last summer.

Our calling as the Church is to be the mouth of God to this world. Grace upon grace, God took a mission the angels wish they had and gave it to us. Christ has invited us to participate in his rescue mission for the world. God made a promise to Jeremiah. "Then the LORD reached out his hand and touched my mouth and said to me, 'Now, I have put my words in your mouth (Jeremiah 1:9).'" When Jeremiah later doubted the reliability of God and his promises, God made the promise to his messenger even greater. In the fifteenth chapter, God tells Jeremiah literally, "You will be my mouth (Jeremiah 15:19)."

As the Church, our calling is to be the Mouth of God speaking his Word to the world. Jesus outlined the purpose and mission of the Church at the end of Luke's gospel, "Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. He told them, 'This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead

⁵ Darvin H. Raddatz Our Call to Serve Delivered at the 40th Biennial Convention, WELS, DMLC, New Ulm, Minnesota, August 6-13, 1969 p.1

⁶ Ibid. p.2

⁷ Paul E. Kelm The Church Growth Movement: An Explanation and Evaluation p.1

on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations beginning at Jerusalem.”⁸

God has entrusted that mission to us. Our mission focuses on the heart of a God who so dearly loved the world that he touched the world in the person of his Son. God reconciled the world to himself not counting men’s sins against them (2 Corinthians 5:21). Into our mouths he has placed the message of law and gospel. He has called us to preach repentance and the forgiveness of sins.

The reality is that this is really God’s mission. We know that but, we do well to remind ourselves. God’s mission to save the lost was contemplated and its execution planned before humanity existed. God reminds us in Ephesians 1:4, “God has chosen us in Christ before the foundation of the world.”

The ongoing gathering of the elect is also his mission. Pastor Raddatz stated in his essay, “Our God is very earnest about sending his Gospel into the world. He elects and calls men, the Church, and sends them out into the world with his gospel. Thus those who have experienced God’s mission and have been won to faith become the special agents of God’s continuing mission to the world. They are his mission to the world.”⁹ LCMS pastor Robert D. Newton offers a similar perspective. We have hope and confidence in this mission because it is God’s mission. God will carry that mission out. “Hope that does not and cannot disappoint because we know that Christ’s church and his mission belong ultimately to him. He is the personal guarantee that we will be faithful in our participation in it. We echo St. Paul’s conclusion, ‘I am persuaded that he is able to keep that which he has entrusted to me.’” (2 Timothy)¹⁰

We are safe in defining our mission as proclaiming God’s message of sin and grace to the world. We might say that our mission is to proclaim the Christ, crucified and risen. I don’t sense any argument or tension among us when we say that this mission is carried out in the day to day activities of our congregations in the WELS. The pastor faithfully visits his shut-ins sharing that precious message of repentance and forgiveness. He is carrying out our mission. If he didn’t do it, a brother in the ministry might well have a word with him about his faithfulness to his pastoral duties. The pastor prepares and teaches clear Bible class lessons. Again, the mission of the church (and Church) is carried out. The faithful Sunday School teacher presents clear law and gospel to the lambs of the congregation and the mission is carried out. If those areas of ministry were neglected, it is likely that a church council or a brother in the ministry might have a talk with the pastor whose congregation is not faithfully teaching God’s precious truths. It is our mission to proclaim and in many cases we are willing to be held accountable to that mission.

It is when we speak of that mission beyond our church walls and beyond our membership that we sometimes get uncomfortable. I am not sure that I understand why that is the case. I don’t sense that anyone would deny that a part of our mission is to be the mouthpiece of God to the lost. We would all agree that it is our mission to proclaim repentance and forgiveness of sins to those who know Christ and those who don’t. We cannot deny the clarity of the commission passages. The repetition and position of the “commission” of our Savior demands our attention. Matthew 28:18-20, Mark 16:15-18; Luke 24:46-49; John 20:19-23; and Acts 1:1-8 are prominent by their position. Shortly before his ascension our Savior offered the invitation to his followers to proclaim him to the world. He made us his partners with him in his mission. We are called to be

⁸ Jonathan Schroeder *Our Calling* An essay for the 60th biennial convention of the Wisconsin Ev. Lutheran Synod pp. 15-16

⁹ Raddatz p.3

¹⁰ Robert D. Newton *Accountability and Faithfulness in Reaching the Lost* p.2

God's witnesses. We are called to proclaim Christ. These passages don't limit that proclamation to the lost but we cannot deny an emphasis on that activity among the lost. In Matthew 28:19 Jesus speaks of our (his) work as "making disciples." That indicates that we will be reaching people with the gospel who were not disciples. I will not get into an exegetical treatment of that phrase "making disciples" in this paper but I would direct you to the report that I referenced earlier.¹¹

I don't have the impression that there are any among us who would contend the fact that Scripture places a strong focus on reaching the lost. The focus of the apostle Paul's ministry is to proclaim Christ among those who do not believe. "For everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. But how are they to call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, 'How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news.'"¹² We would agree that in Matthew 28 and John 20 our Savior is placing an emphasis on the world outside the Church.

Perhaps we cringe because we have been beaten with the commission passages a time or two. A well meaning pastor (perhaps you or I) proclaims to his congregation that our Savior gave us the command to reach all nations with the gospel. This was the last command to the disciples before he ascended into heaven. This is the church's mission. We NEED to get after it. We should get after it. If we really love Jesus we will get our wallets and checkbooks out so that we can send more missionaries. We should all be signing up for the summer canvassing teams. Those churches that don't do any canvassing should be doing some canvassing. What, after all, are you doing to reach the lost? Don't you understand the mission of the church?

It might be helpful to us to take great care in our use of the commission passages in our preaching and teaching. Robert Newton makes some interesting statements concerning those passages.

I am equally saddened by the confusion of Law and Gospel as it pertains to our exhorting and encouraging one another to participate in his mission. There exists much confusion as to how and why we participate in his mission and what empowers us to do so. Well meaning pastors and people diligently seek to persuade all of us to take seriously the business of the Master. They earnestly seek to inspire and motivate us to be in mission. I sympathize with these brothers and sisters. My entire life and ministry is devoted to this one thing: that the heart of the Father that moved him to give his Son for his world would beat loudly in the breast of every believer. I am also aware, however, that in our zeal for that to happen or in our attempts to make that happen, we can resort to concepts and words that miss the Gospel mark. Much of our mission minded motivation, then, results in placing the burden of Christ's Commission upon our shoulders (the spirit and effect of the Law) rather than on Christ's shoulders (the message of the Gospel).¹³

¹¹ Matthew 28:19 and the Mission of the WELS can be found in the WLS essay file under "Commission"

¹² Romans 10:13-15

¹³ Newton pp. 2-3

I do believe that the commission our Savior has given to the Church is primarily a gospel invitation to participate in the gathering of the elect. It is God's gracious invitation to join him and participate with him in his mission. Again, I think that Newton states it well.

God's choosing to have us join him in his work of reconciliation is the greatest statement that he might possibly make of his love and forgiveness. Choosing us to be partners with him in his mission is an essential component of his holy absolution. So he absolved Simon Peter that day on the Sea of Tiberias. As he asked Peter three times if he loved him, he absolved Peter three times with the words, "Feed my lambs or feed my sheep." It was not enough for our God to restore Peter to a relationship with himself as brother. Our Lord wanted Peter to experience the fullness of his grace which included participation with him in his Kingdom coming to the world. You can see why someone might become agitated over the accusation that obedience to the Great Commission, or if you will, participation with Christ in his mission, is Law and not Gospel. Such accusations indicate little or no understanding of the grace centered economy of God.¹⁴

I have debated this at times with brothers who insisted that the commission passages are "do" passages and therefore must be seen as law. I do understand that they can be law to us in regard to our sin and our neglect of the mission.

While, our call to priesthood in Christ (obedient participation with him in the Commission his Father gave him) is purest Gospel¹⁵, there is an aspect of law that comes into play. That naturally comes when we choose to drift away, forget, or ignore our priestly vocation with and in Christ. We Lutherans are very uncomfortable at this moment in the conversation. We do not want to be told that we have not been about our big Brother's business; that we have chosen not to join with him in what the Father sent him to do. Being uncomfortable comes from the conviction of the Law. That's what the Law is supposed to do. It makes us uncomfortable and leads us to repentance and faith in the Gospel. Even more than make us uncomfortable, the preaching of the Law if done properly slays us so that Christ might raise us with himself from the deadness of our sin and enable us in him to walk in the newness of his resurrected life, thus, the sign of Jonah. It leads us rightly to true repentance and trust in the atoning sacrifice of the Lord who is the great high priest for us and for the whole world. And it raises us again to be his treasured people, a holy nation, a divine priesthood for the world. You and I will continue to be in the middle of this great tension between saint and sinner; priest and parasite; resurrected and dead until the day he completes the mission that his Father entrusted to him and in him to us. This reality leads us to daily repentance and keeps us in everlasting hope.¹⁶

¹⁴ Ibid. p. 6

¹⁵ I delivered a preliminary copy of this paper to our Cottonbelt conference of the South Atlantic District. In that presentation we debated whether this call to priesthood could be applied to our whole life of faith or is better limited to the narrower context of the commission passages. We came to the conclusion that we would limit our understanding to the narrower context.

¹⁶ Ibid. p. 10

This seems to fit comfortably with Jonathan Schroeder's essay as he speaks of our calling. "Our calling to be masks of God is primarily a gift, and secondarily a duty. It is a call that contains both law and gospel. God has called us to be his mask; that is a gift of grace and love. However, our role as masks of God come with duties that God wants us to fulfill."¹⁷

I have never heard disagreement with the fact that God has continuously and abundantly poured his grace and mercy out among us. That grace comes to us in the person and work of Jesus. That message has created life in us through water and the word. That life has been sustained and nourished in the word and the Supper. And God continues to pour that grace into our lives as he calls us to participate in his mission. In that mission we have a strong emphasis on outreach to the world around us. There is nothing in that emphasis that is not distinctly Scriptural and completely Lutheran. The Augsburg Confession states, "So that we may obtain this faith, the ministry of teaching the gospel and administering the sacraments was instituted."¹⁸ Luther spoke clearly about our participation in this mission. "God permits us to live here on earth in order that we may bring others to faith, just as he has brought us. You must, says Peter, exercise the chief function of a priest, to proclaim the wonderful deed God has performed for you to bring you out of darkness into the light. Let it be your chief work to proclaim this publically and to call everyone into the light as you have been called."¹⁹

I will confess to you a personal struggle with our work together in the WELS as we labor together in our mission. I hinted at it earlier. It may be a product of my context in ministry. I have served my entire parish ministry in one congregation. That congregation started as an exploratory outreach effort. In the last seven years I have served in various capacities on the South Atlantic District Mission Board and the Board for Home Missions. At times I have struggled with the lack of accountability among us in regard to our efforts to reach out with the gospel to the dying world around us. I mentioned earlier that we are willing to be held accountable in other areas. I am convinced that my church council and board of elders would sit me down and have a talk with me if I was not visiting our members when they are in the hospital or when they are homebound. If I was preaching falsely, I would soon accept accountability whether I liked it or not. Why is it that we are so hesitant to accept accountability in terms of our gospel proclamation to the world outside of the Church? I found Newton's comments on this topic interesting.

Now regarding the second question – accountability structures that measure, evaluate, or determine whether or not we're being faithful to Christ's commission to seek and to save the lost. From the outset, I find it a bit strange that we would consider the idea of accountability structures regarding seeking and saving the lost as Law. It's really neither Law nor Gospel in that it neither condemns, nor saves, nor motivates. Accountability structures, or if you will, accounting, are simply a God given component in our faithful stewardship of the Gospel. Accounting indicates what we value and serves as an essential means to keep what God has entrusted to his Son, and in his Son, to us (teaching them to obey all things whatsoever I have commanded you). Accounting, including giving an account is basic to the stewardship of the Gospel. Jesus referred to accounting often in the stories of the kingdom: or Matthew 24, the wise servant; or Matthew 25, the stories of the talents. St. Paul made accountability of our stewardship of the Gospel an essential of the "all things" he taught to the churches. Accounting for us

¹⁷ Schroeder p.12

¹⁸ AC V, 1 Concordia

¹⁹ LW 30:11

reaching the lost with the Gospel becomes legalistic only when we use it to promote ourselves as deserving God's favor or to condemn ourselves, believing that God's favor is not for us, or when we account for the wrong things. We cannot account for how many come to faith in Jesus Christ. That belongs only to the Holy Spirit who works faith when and where it pleases him through the preaching of the Gospel. In farming terms we cannot account for how many bushels of wheat that we will produce in the harvest. That number is ultimately an act of God. However, we can account for where and to whom we preach the Gospel. In farming terms, we can account for how many acres we plant in wheat.²⁰

It seems in this writer's opinion that we have been hesitant to allow accountability among us. I can understand that. As I write this paper I see a stack of visitor card's from our Easter service. I know that those visits are urgent. God has given me an opportunity to participate in his mission. I have had the glorious opportunity to proclaim his message of salvation to people outside of our church. I have more opportunities to do that in the follow up process. I also have an imposing deadline for this paper. A woman in the congregation is in the hospital and I want to spend time sharing the comfort of that gospel message with her. I have a sermon and Bible class to prepare. Don't look at the stack of Easter visitor cards on my desk and tell me that I am not faithful.

I do hope, however, that God would grant me the wisdom and humility to accept accountability. God has granted me the privilege in serving him in full time public ministry. God has entrusted to my pastoral leadership a group of his people. There is a stewardship of his gifts involved in this. A part of my call is to lead and equip his people in reaching out with his precious gospel to the world.

Our mission is to serve as the mouthpiece of God. He speaks to us and He speaks through us. We have a mission to carry out together. That mission is to proclaim the wonders of God as revealed in the person of his Son. That mission is to proclaim the Christ to those who know him and those who don't. The message comes from God. The motivation comes from him. The mission is ultimately his. We have been given the privilege to participate. We participate in that mission as we faithfully proclaim God's grace in Christ to the gathered. We participate as we aggressively reach out with that message to those in the world around us who are still lost in sin.

The Means

God's grace is for the world. God's mission is to take his grace revealed and sealed in Christ to the world. God has called us to participate in that mission. How do we do it? We know and confess that there is one conduit by which God works in the hearts of people. That is the means of grace.

In Matthew 28 our Savior clearly invites us to participate in his mission. We can rightly say that he has given us our marching orders. We are to take the gospel to the world. But our Savior Jesus has just as clearly directed us in the manner in which we are to carry out this mission. We have been given the means of grace. Those means are the only tools that we need for the mission. They are the only tools available for the mission. We can rightly say that the means that our God provides in his word and sacraments are the *sine qua non* of true evangelism.

We don't have to remind ourselves that the power is God's and it is unleashed upon our world through his word. Then again, we do have to remind ourselves.

²⁰ Newton p. 11

NIV 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.

NIV 1 Corinthians 1:18 For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

NIV 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, 5 so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power.

NIV 2 Corinthians 4:7 But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.

The word power occurs 118 times in the New Testament. Never are the people of God called dynamic or powerful, except when they are weak. God never calls his church successful. God's people are referred to as humble, lowly children who depend on the power of another. We depend on the power of the Gospel. The Gospel does not depend on our power.²¹ The word of God is always powerful. Luther speaks clearly. "For the word of God is the true holy object above all holy objects... At whatever time God's Word is taught, preached, heard, read, or pondered, there the person, the day, and the work is hallowed... on account of the Word that makes us all saints."²² He also wrote in "The Private Mass and the Consecration of Priests", "There remains nothing for the office of the ministry or the office of preaching other than this single work, namely, to bestow or to present the gospel which Christ commanded to be preached."²³ The tongue of the preacher or Christian is aspergillum. He dips it into the rosy-red blood of Christ and sprinkles the people with it, that is, he preaches to them the gospel, which declares that Christ has purchased the forgiveness of sins with his precious blood, that he has poured out his blood on the cross for the whole world, and that he who believes this has been sprinkled with this blood.²⁴

That word is always effective. There are no exceptions. The preached or even the read word is never, never dead and ineffective; the Holy Spirit always and in all circumstances works through that Word on all who hear the Word for repentance, for knowledge of sins, for faith, for comfort, for sanctification, for perfection. That is already the case with the law of God. The law is no empty talk, but as Jeremiah says, "Is not my Word like fire, declares the Lord, and like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces?" (Jeremiah 23:29)²⁵ The confessions speak clearly to this point. They emphasize the absolute necessity of the word. It is all that we have. It is all that we need. One cannot deal with God or grasp him except through the word.²⁶

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.²⁷

²¹ Klemet I. Preus *The Fire and the Staff* Lutheran Theology in Practice p. 284

²² Large Catechism 91-92

²³ LW 38, 198

²⁴ LW 51:326

²⁵ August Pieper *The Despising of Grace is the Death of the Church* p.5

²⁶ *Apology of the Augsburg Confession*, Article XIII, 5

²⁷ *Formula of Concord*, Solid Declaration, Article II, 54

We must firmly hold to the conviction that God gives no one his Spirit or grace except through or with the external Word which comes before. Thus we shall be protected from the enthusiasts- that is, from the spiritualists who boast that they possess the Spirit without and before the Word... We should and must constantly maintain that God will not deal with us except through his external Word and sacrament. Whatever is attributed to the Spirit apart from such Word and sacrament is of the devil.²⁸

We acknowledge this same power and authority in the Sacraments. The Word and the rite (sacrament) have the same effect, as Augustine said so well when he called the sacrament “the visible Word,” for the rite is received by the eyes and is a sort of picture of the Word, signifying the same thing as the Word. Therefore, both have the same effect.²⁹

It is God’s will to call men to eternal salvation, to draw them to himself, convert them, beget them anew, and sanctify them through this means and in no other way- namely, through the holy Word (when one hears it preached or reads it) and the sacraments (when they are used according to his Word)... All who would be saved must hear this preaching.³⁰

As confessional Lutherans I am confident that we can all agree to an absolute reliance upon the means of grace in approaching the mission that God has set before us. We confess that the sacraments are God’s work and not our own work. Without exception we proclaim and trust the word of God to be the very power of God for salvation. That is a tremendous comfort for the pastor. When I started in ministry I did not have to rely upon some cleverly crafted message to take to my community. I knew that God had entrusted to me his means. That was all that I needed. I was not adequate for the task but God’s means were more than adequate for the task.

Does any of this depend on man (me)? Man cannot add to the power of God’s means. He does not make them more or less powerful. Professor John Brenner stated this well in his essay delivered to our Synod in convention this past summer. “The power of the gospel does not lie in the person proclaiming it. It is always powerful because it has God’s power. The person administering the sacraments does not add anything to them. The sacraments are efficacious because of Christ’s institution and the promises he attached to them. The efficacy of the means of grace is not dependent on us or our planning. The means of grace are always efficacious because the Holy Spirit always works through the means of grace to accomplish his purpose. We cannot make them more effective by anything that we do.”³¹ In his essay he quotes Luther’s understanding of the distinction between the role that God has given us and the role that he has reserved for himself. “It is not my power or hand to fashion the heart of men as the potter molds the clay and fashion them to my pleasure. I can get no farther than their ears; their hearts I cannot reach. And since I cannot pour faith into their hearts, I cannot, nor should I, force anyone to have faith. That is God’s work alone, who causes faith to live in the heart... We should preach the Word, but the results must be left solely to God’s good pleasure.”³²

It is God’s mission and it all depends upon his means. We must adhere to the centrality of the means. No amount of charisma and no amount of personality can offer anything to the conversion of a single soul. Humans cannot build bridges that connect a person to Christ. The means of grace connect a person to God in faith. It is the only way.

²⁸ Smalcald Articles, Part III Article VIII, 3 and 10.

²⁹ Apology, Article XIII, 5

³⁰ Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, Art. II 50,52

³¹ John M. Brenner Christ’s Love Demonstrated in the Efficacy of the Means of Grace 60th Biennial Convention of the WELS

³² LW 51:76-77

The application of those means leads to differing results according to God's will and purpose. A consideration of those results sometimes leads to debate among us. I have heard on several occasions in recent years that we are dying church body. I have heard it said that our decline in numbers is a telltale sign that we have lost our focus on the mission of the church. Professor John Brenner answers in his essay. "At least one person seeing the declining numbers in our Wisconsin Synod has lamented that we are a dying church. That statement cannot be further from the truth. We draw our life from the means of grace. So long as the gospel is rightly proclaimed in our midst and the sacraments are rightly administered the Holy Spirit is sustaining our life and extending it. A church dies when it no longer proclaims the gospel and administers the sacraments. A synod is in trouble only when it no longer treasures the means of grace or doubts the efficacy of Word and sacraments. American ideas of progress and success center on visible results. God's definition of success is faithfulness to his Word and the work that he has given us to do (Revelation 2:8-11; 1 Corinthians 4:1-4)."³³

I don't contend with Professor Brenner's statement. He rightly points out that "Sometimes we cannot see any results from our proclamation of the gospel. At times the church may seem to disappear. The prophet Elijah thought that he was the only believer left in the entire Northern Kingdom of Israel. God had to reveal to him 'Yet I reserve seven thousand in Israel- all whose knees have not bowed down to Baal and all whose mouths have not kissed him.'" (I Kings 19:18) Sometimes the faithful proclamation of God's Word may lead to a visible decline in numbers. After Jesus' great Bread of Life discourse we read, 'On hearing it many of the disciples said, This is a hard teaching. Who can accept it?... From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him.'" (John 6:60, 66)³⁴ A point of clarification may be in order. We can rightly say that the Church will not die. The Church is fed by God's powerful means and God has promised that the Church will continue through eternity. A church, on the other hand, or even a church body could cease to exist even if they are faithful in their use of the means of grace. An individual congregation could for a variety of reasons cease to exist. That could happen even though they were faithful in their application of the means. We have no real guarantee that the WELS will exist until the return of our Savior. God could carry out his mission in our world without the WELS. I want to differentiate between the Church which will never cease to exist and any church which may cease to exist.

We wander into dangerous waters when we look at the results of our preaching, teaching and outreach ministries. It would be very easy to wander from our clear confession that the power lies only in the means which God has given to his Church. But I do wonder if we have become so sensitive that we don't allow an examination of the ways that we carry those means to the world around us? We could examine and even question our work and our priorities as a church without militating against the confession that all results are in God's hands as he chooses to bless.

I appreciated Pastor Jonathan Hein's essay prepared for last fall's symposium at our Seminary. He distinguished between what God sees and what man sees.

God has said that when I preach, the Spirit works through the Word. To conclude then that all God cares about when I preach is that what I say is drawn from his Word is neither sound logic nor good theology. The doctrine of stewardship applies to preaching as much as the doctrine of the efficacy of the Word.

³³ Brenner p.7

³⁴ Brenner p. 6

Therefore, when I preach, while my primary concern is that I rightly divide Law and Gospel, that is not my only concern. Far from it! I am concerned with all that can be perceived. I am concerned that I am both logical and well-spoken. I am concerned that my delivery is fluid, that I don't look at my manuscript twenty times. I am concerned about whether or not visual aids might enhance my presentation, or might detract from it. Why am I concerned about more than simply proclaiming Law and Gospel? Because I don't believe the Word works? No. I know it does. But it works in a way that I cannot see. "The wind blows where it pleases." And so, I trust that the Word works, but I also concern myself with all that I can see.³⁵

He also applied that same principle to other areas of our ministry.

This applies to all areas of ministry. Take outreach. If you had zero adult confirmations last year, you might want to give a phone call to the one who had thirty. "What are you doing that I'm not?" It could very well be that the reason you had no adult confirmations is that was a part of God's hidden will. But it is not sound pastoral practice to hide behind Deus Absconditus. It could also be that you have no adult confirmations because, while you know how to present Law and Gospel, you aren't skilled at seeing opportunities to do so. This is not good! It is God's will that what you can see, you do see.³⁶

This eases a potential tension for me. I can declare without reservation that our mission is Christ's mission. I can declare boldly that it all depends on him including my partnership in that mission. But I can also look at what I can see. I can evaluate my involvement in that mission. I can look at numbers and make decisions about the ways that I use the resources that God has put at my disposal. In the congregation that I serve (Christ Our Savior Lutheran Church in Columbia, TN) we have had occasion to do some evaluation of our programs of outreach to our community. In the last few years our BIC classes have been smaller than they had been in previous years. Why is that? Well, we can say that God grows his Church when and where it pleases him. That is most certainly true but there is a stewardship issue at play here. An astute church council member noticed that the number of outreach calls that I am making on a monthly basis has gone down. Those calls that once ran in the 15-25 calls/ month range now have fallen to 8-12 calls/ month. Some natural questions might arise from our council. *Pastor, how many basketball leagues are you playing in these days? Pastor, how many bow hunting trips have you taken this fall? Are we adequately staffed to seize the opportunities that God has placed before us? Have we adequately funded our evangelism plan for ministry? Are we doing the right things to reach out to the community around us? That discussion tends to lead us into a consideration of our methodology. I will speak more to that later. For now, suffice it to say that such questions do not detract from our complete reliance upon the means.*

Before we leave our discussion of the means of grace, it seems proper for us to consider man's role in the part of our mission that our Savior defines as "making disciples." There is no contention among us (I pray) when I say that we all believe that only God converts. He creates spiritual life where there was only spiritual death. The Scriptures speak clearly.

³⁵ Jonathan R. Hein *The Church and Her Members: That Which God Sees and That Which Man Sees* Delivered at the Symposium on the Church at WLS- Mequon, WI p.21

³⁶ *Ibid.* p. 21

NIV Ephesians 2:4 But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, 5 made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions-- it is by grace you have been saved. 6 And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, 7 in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. 8 For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith-- and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God-- 9 not by works, so that no one can boast. 10 For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

NIV Ezekiel 36:26 I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.

As confessional Lutherans we confess clearly that it is God alone who converts. We confess that our God works through his means to do that work. We rely completely upon those means as the very power of God working in his world to carry out his purpose. We understand that we have no power for conversion. Our confessions state it clearly.

In this Word the Holy Spirit is present and opens hearts that they may like Lydia in Acts 16:14, listen to it and thus be converted, solely through the grace and power of the Holy Spirit, who alone accomplishes the conversion of the human being. For apart from his grace our "willing and exerting," our planting, sowing and watering amount to nothing "if he does not give the growth" (Romans 9:16; 1 Corinthians 3:7). As Christ says, "Apart from me, you can do nothing" (1 John 15:5). With these brief words he denies the free will and its powers and ascribes everything to God's grace, so that no one has grounds for boasting before God (1 Cor. 9:16).³⁷

The Formula of Concord also states that there are only two effecting causes of conversion: "The Holy Spirit and God's Word as the instrument of the Holy Spirit, through which he effects conversion."³⁸ But the fact that we have no power for conversion does not mean that we have no part to play in God's mission. God has a positive point to make about our role. People who share God's gospel are genuinely involved in conversion in an instrumental way.³⁹ That involvement is so real and important that God says conversion takes place not just through the gospel but also through the ministers. That may seem odd. As we have noted, the power is in the gospel, not in the ministers. The gospel goes into an unbeliever's heart; the ministers themselves don't. Nevertheless, God wants us to take our instrumental role in converting others very seriously, and so he brings it out unmistakably in the Bible.⁴⁰

The farming picture in 1 Corinthians 3 that showed the inability of Paul and Apollos to give spiritual life and growth in the proper sense is part of a larger discussion that also brings out the positive side of their role. "What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants

³⁷ Formula of Concord, Epitome, Article II, 5,6

³⁸ Ibid. Article II, 19

³⁹ We might also use the dogmatic term "ministerial" cause as we speak of the human role. As Lutherans we confess that God is the efficient cause, but we also need to remember he has ordained a ministerial cause. Addressing the ministerial cause does not mean that we deny the reality of the efficient cause.

⁴⁰ Matthew 28:19 and the Mission of the WELS, p.10

through whom you came to believe- as the Lord has assigned to each his task. I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow. That man who plants and the man who waters have one purpose, and each will be rewarded according to his own labor. For we are God's fellow workers; you are God's field, God's building (1 Corinthians 3:5-9).⁴¹

Other expressions in the Bible show the same tendency of ascribing saving actions and effects to the people through whom God works. Obadiah prophesies God's gift of gospel ministers to the church by announcing, "Deliverers will go up on Mount Zion..."(Verse 21). The angel Gabriel tells Zechariah about the ministry of his son John the Baptist in these words: "Many of the people of Israel will he bring back to the Lord their God. And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous- to make ready a people prepared for the Lord" (Luke 1:16-17). Jesus tells his disciples, "I will make you fishers of men" (Matthew 4:20). Let's not suppose that Jesus means that they will do a lot of fishing for men but never catch any converts. In Luke's parallel account Jesus says, "From now on you will catch men" (5:10). Paul says that he became the Corinthians father through the gospel (1 Co 4:15). None of these speakers or writers seems concerned that expressions like these will diminish God's glory or confuse people about how they are saved.⁴²

The Confessions do not militate against a language that speaks of our role in God's mission as instrumental. Our confessions say that in Baptism, "God, through a minister who functions in his place, baptizes us, and offers and presents the forgiveness of sins."⁴³ The confessions take note that God established gospel ministry and encouraged Christians to share the message. They note the Bible's encouragement to the Church to preach, speak, testify and witness.

Professor Fredrich points out that the next generation of Lutherans spoke in similar fashion. Johann Gerhard notes that divine effects (such as opening eyes, illuminating, begetting children for God, and saving) are ascribed to ministers of the Word, and he concludes that ministers of the gospel are instrumental causes of those effects.⁴⁴ Abraham Calov speaks of three causes of faith: the Holy Spirit is the highest, the word of God is the middle level cause, and the ministers of the Word are the lowest level cause.⁴⁵

It all seems so simple. God works through his means and only through his means. While we have an instrumental role in conversion, that role is limited. The power is God's and the work is his. We can say with confidence that we have been called to proclaim. The success or, humanly speaking, failure is in God's almighty hand. We should be careful in making statements such as "the WELS is dying." On the other hand (as I have stated), it is good stewardship to examine our activity. Some have stated that we (WELS) exist to preserve the truth and share the truth. It is not wrong for us to say that we need to examine our commitment to and our activity in the second half of that mission. I mentioned that our church council found it necessary to do an evaluation of our work and staffing when they realized that my calling activity was shrinking. It

⁴¹ Professor Joel Fredrich uses the terms proper and extended usage to describe this saving activity. He quotes Salomon Glassius (Johann Gerhard's successor at Jena) in *Philologia sacra*, analyzing Scriptural ways of speaking and deriving from them canons of interpretation.

⁴² Matthew 28:19 and the Mission of the WELS p.11

⁴³ Apology XXIV, 18

⁴⁴ Matthew 28:19 and the Mission of the WELS p.14

⁴⁵ Ibid.

is not wrong nor is it improper (in my opinion) for us to look at declining numbers among us as an opportunity to examine our focus and the use of God's resources. In my view, it has been a good thing for our congregation to look carefully at the reasons for the declining numbers in the realm of outreach activity. We are not questioning that God works through his means. We are not arguing against the simple truth that God will grow his Church when and where it pleases him. But we also believe that God has extended to us the gracious privilege to partner with him in the gathering of his elect. It is a part of our mission. It is a part of our mission that receives emphasis in his Word. It makes sense to us to make every effort to see that we are faithful with the resources that he has provided in participating in that mission.

I have hinted at one other area of tension among us. We become uncomfortable in discussing the human (instrumental) role in our participation in God's mission. I have chaired call meetings as former chairman of the South Atlantic District Mission Board. We have heard statements like this among us. "We need the right guy driving this mission effort." That could be a statement that raises some concerns among us. We could counter that statement by saying that it doesn't matter. "We just need someone to be faithful in preaching the word. The power is God's, not ours. God will grow the Church when and where it pleases him." As I have stated often enough, those statements are true. That does not alter the fact that God does use humans in an instrumental way. We point to Romans 12 and 1 Corinthians 12 and confess that God gives different spiritual gifts to different people in varying degrees. While we want to speak carefully, we don't have to deny that God has gifted us all differently. There was a recent call extended from our Seminary to teach in the O.T. department. I never saw the list but I feel very confident in saying that I was not on the list. The Seminary faculty and the Board of Control worked very hard to work through the list of nominees. In prayer they sought God's guidance. They wanted to find the "right sort of guy" for the position. That doesn't seem to make us uneasy but if we use the same terminology in the realm of mission calls, it can make some uneasy. I am not sure why. God has gifted each of us differently. It seems that some have greater gifts in the realm of evangelism. Some have an easier time writing sermons that flow smoothly and in a logical fashion. An acknowledgement of the various gifts among us does nothing to deny our absolute dependence on the means of grace.

The Methods

As confessional Lutherans, we desire to take God's means of grace to the world. Motivated by the gospel, we desire to participate in God's mission to reach the lost. How will we do that? That leads to a discussion of our methodologies. This discussion requires great care.

In November 2008 our church body hosted an event called the WELS Leadership Forum. The attendees were the 30 churches in the WELS who added at least 10 people to worship attendance for ten straight years. The purpose of the conference (as I understand it) was to study the characteristics of those congregations that are being blessed with growth. I am sure that a conference like this raised some red flags in our midst. There will be those who will cry out that such a conference is putting an undue emphasis on numbers. Others might say that it leads us to shift our focus from means to methodology. Still others might claim that it tends to a theology of glory. We are obsessed with success so we are looking at those congregations that are "successful" so that we might duplicate their characteristics in other places. We do well to be cautious here. Is it a theology of glory to examine the methods that I use in ministry with the

hope that I might proclaim the gospel to more? It is if I find dissatisfaction with the results that God provides. Thesis 20 of Luther's Heidelberg disputation reminds us.

That person deserves to be called a theologian, however, who comprehends the visible and manifest things of God through suffering and the cross.

Gerhard Forde in his reflections on Luther's work reminds us that there are no abstract solutions to understanding the divine majesty. The only solution is the cross itself and the subsequent proclamation of the word of the cross as a divine deed.⁴⁶

I do believe, however, that our view through the cross and our theology does not prohibit us from examining our methodologies. I am not abandoning my theological perspective when I examine the ways that I do ministry in an attempt to reach as many as possible with that proclamation of the cross as a divine deed. I could even go another step. I cannot allow my theology rooted in the cross to become an excuse for shoddy and lax efforts in ministry. I do not want to avoid analysis and planning in my ministry because they are inherently opposed to my theology. They are not.

We are walking a fine line here and we must walk carefully. The debate is not hard to stir. Some time ago a brother in the ministry stated, "There can hardly be any argument against the statement that God wants his church to grow." That is a statement that we can defend. "God wants all men to be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth."⁴⁷ God has chosen us to join in the mission of proclaiming the very message that God has chosen to use to accomplish his will. That same brother in the ministry also stated that brothers who object to the use of numbers are rationalizing ineffective ministry. I would urge great caution in making such sweeping statements.

The tension here is not new and in some ways, it may not be completely unhealthy. Professor Richard Balge spoke of this tension in a 1979 WLQ article.

Our Commission (on Evangelism) and our synodical constituency are not the only 20th century Christians who have struggled with the problem of developing methods that are theologically sound... The German evangelist Paul Scharpff wrote: "It was ... inevitable that as the church made an effort to communicate the Gospel to ever enlarging groups, methods would be developed. The development was natural and often uncritical. The church members who were occupied with methods in their business simply transferred these to their church. Much of this has been valid and helpful. However, there have been cases where individuals tried to find too close a parallel between giving a witness for Jesus Christ and selling some piece of merchandise. As a result, the person was made secondary to the sale and the response of faith which the Gospel of Christ calls for has been oversimplified. (At the other extreme there have been those who have so deplored the use of any method of doing anything in the church that the impression is given that there is inherent evil in techniques)... Among teachers of evangelism, pastors and denominational leaders there is the feeling that biblical theology and the

⁴⁶ Gerhard O. Forde On Being A Theologian Of The Cross Reflections on Luther's Heidelberg Disputation, 1518. p. 75

⁴⁷ 1 Timothy 2:4

*techniques by which the church proclaims her message should be brought together.*⁴⁸

One can hardly discuss methods without some mention of Church Growth tendencies. In my 23 years of ministry I have heard accusations of “Church Growth” tossed about frequently in WELS circles. I do not intend to offer a detailed analysis of the Church Growth Movement. There is much that has been written on that topic. It is enough to say that the Church Growth Movement, begun on the world mission field by Donald McGavran and then introduced to the home front by such as C. Peter Wagner and Win Arn, has made tremendous inroads. Phrases such as ‘homogeneous units’, ‘felt needs,’ ‘receptive people,’ ‘people groups,’ ‘church planting,’ ‘discipling, not perfecting,’ and ‘the harvest principle’ – all drawn from the Church Growth Movement literature- have become almost household words and have found their way into many a denominational mission handbook.⁴⁹

None of us would disagree that there are theological flaws in the CG movement. Robert Koester offers an apt evaluation in his book.

*The conclusion I have come to after reading a good chunk of the Church Growth library is that Donald McGavran’s basic principles lead to a ministry that to a greater or lesser extent revolves around the social Gospel. While the “homogenous units” and “people movements” might appear to be “neutral” ideas, the underlying nature of those principles cannot be separated from a way of doing evangelism that uses the subject’s human needs, and avoids creating a need through the Law, and solving that need with Christ’s forgiveness. While we might observe the validity of “homogenous units” and “people movements” in our mission work, a missiology that wraps itself up in these principles will tend toward advocating the use of the social sciences as its means at the expense of the means of grace.*⁵⁰

That doesn’t mean, however, that we who depend completely upon the means of grace to accomplish God’s mission in the hearts of his people cannot learn from the social sciences. Professor David Valleskey states:

The social sciences, which make observations about people and societies in God’s creation, may assist Christians in carrying out Christ’s commission, especially by alerting them to possible external barriers which may keep people from being willing to listen to a Christian’s testimony and by apprising them of possible points of contact with the unchurched. Thus the social sciences can help the Christian in his quest to become all things to all people so that by all possible means he might win some.

Through their observation of people, the social and behavioral sciences might help Christians become aware of such things as

- How unbelievers think
- What draws an unbeliever to a church in the first place
- What people are looking for in a church

⁴⁸ R.D. Balge “A Brief History of Evangelism in the Christian Church,” WLQ, vol. 76, no. 3 (July 1979, p. 258-59.

⁴⁹ David J. Valleskey “A Biblical, Lutheran Theology of Missions” p.1

⁵⁰ R. Koester, “Law and Gospel in the Church Growth Movement,” p. 27.

- What things about churches tend to turn people off
- What people consider to be their primary needs
- When people will tend to be most willing to listen⁵¹

All of this is in the realm, not of evangelism, but pre-evangelism. We should not, however, underestimate the importance of pre-evangelism. Understanding how people think and feel may provide an opening, a way in, so we can bring God's saving message to them. The Scriptures make it amply clear that no one will come to faith apart from the gospel. For that to happen, Christians, who have the gospel, need to come into contact with non-Christians, who do not have the gospel. However, the Scriptures do not prescribe how this contact should be made. That is left up to the believer's sanctified judgment.⁵²

We do well to walk a "careful middle road" here. Not all methodologies are neutral. We are well served when we speak carefully. I have heard pastors described as having the ability to "close the deal." My initial reaction is that I don't really like that terminology. In fact, I don't like it at all. I cannot close any deals and I cannot learn how to close deals from other pastors. We are not Fuller brush salesmen. Techniques and strategies are not going to make the gospel more palatable to the sinner. We have the means. We have only the means. Only God closes the deal through those means.

On the other hand, I could understand that statement in a different light. If my neighbor in ministry consistently has high numbers of people in his BIC, I might investigate his outreach program. It may be that he is in an entirely different situation and his situation has nothing to say to me in my ministry situation. It also might be that I could learn some things. Perhaps he is one who is able to close the deal in this sense. With persistence and determination he follows up on the unchurched people that God brings into his path. He structures his visits in such a way that he is leading the "prospect" to consider the need for Bible study. He "markets" that class as one that will help people to answer the questions that they have always had about God. He makes personal contacts to invite to that class. While he can't do anything to change hearts, his activity and effort might bring people to participate in his class. We would all agree that the clear law and gospel teaching in our BIC's unleashes God's power for salvation.

Upon close examination many of us might find times that we have been less than careful in the way that we have spoken. When we started our congregation 20+ years ago, we used an introductory brochure to introduce us to the community. The outer panel of the brochure had "BECAUSE" in large letters. Inside, the brochure explained to people that I was introducing myself to the community because I didn't know them. That part was good and proper. The brochure also went on to say something about establishing a church that would meet the needs of the community. I don't think that I would say it that way today. I can probably understand that in the proper sense. I know their greatest need. It is to see the answer for their sin in a crucified and risen Savior. Our church was being established to address that need in our community. But I would word it differently today.

I am sure that I am not the only one who has struggled with the terminology that we use. Can I say that I need to "sell" the congregation to the prospect? Can I tell the community that our congregation offers a family atmosphere? I can probably err on both sides of these questions. First, I understand that I cannot sell anything to anyone. I can be diligent in my use of God's

⁵¹ Not to the gospel, of course, since all unbelievers, born dead in sin and enemies of God are equally unreceptive to the Gospel, but there may be times when they are more receptive to a conversation about spiritual matters than others.

⁵² David J. Valleskey, A Biblical, Lutheran Theology of Missions p.12

means and I can be persistent in the application of those means among the unchurched in my community. Secondly, I understand that the church that I serve has something that no other church in my community offers. We proclaim a distinct message of law and gospel. In the area that I serve I continually see people who are bound by the chains of legalism. The liberating gospel is sweet to their minds and hearts. I stand by and watch other denominations continue down the road of a “filtered” message and I thank God for what he has preserved among us. I don’t think that I need to sell our church to the community but I definitely think that our church needs to be aggressive to get the message of the gospel to our community. We have every reason and motivation to be aggressive in the proclamation of law and gospel to those around us.

That also holds true for us as a church body. Since that is true, it seems wise for us to consider the methods that we use in proclaiming Christ beyond our own churches. We have every reason to be aggressive. We are motivated in the gospel. We have been entrusted with the pure gospel. The mission to reach out to the lost with that gospel has been offered to us.

The same article V of the Augsburg confession that declares that God will work faith when and where it pleases him also reminds us that this happens through the teaching of the gospel and administering the Sacraments. It was for that very reason that they were instituted. That being the case, I don’t believe that we can say that we are wrong to plan in the realm of our methodology. We are very careful in planning the results of our activity but it seems less than faithful to not plan our activity.

We do not hesitate to speak about methods in our inreach ministries. I would assume that outside of some variety in worship, most of us have a similar methodology in the nurture of our congregations. We plan those methods carefully. We plan to have worship services each Sunday morning, on Wednesday evening during Advent and Lent and on festivals. We do not hesitate to plan those services. I am sure that there are some among us who plan their worship months in advance. The themes, hymns and special music are all planned. Our worship deserves such planning. None of us would question its importance. Many of us will plan our program of adult education carefully. The teaching of God’s truth deserves it. Some of us might plan a curriculum for adults a year at a time. We are aware that leading our people into a study of God’s life giving word is a very important part of our mission. It deserves our attention. It deserves careful planning. We plan our system of children’s education. I have never encountered a church that had children in its membership that didn’t have a planned program of Bible study for those children. All these programs are methods. They are methods that we use in bringing God’s means to the people that God has gathered.

Most of us have an elders program. We want a plan in place to reach those who are straying. In our congregation, we have a subcommittee of the elders that will call any member of our congregation after three weeks of absence in worship. We want to bring God’s means to bear on the situation in a timely manner. We have a planned and methodical plan for follow up on those who are absent for more than three weeks. We cannot predict the result of our proclamation but we know that those souls are precious to our God. We understand the importance of reaching out to them and we desire to do so.

In many of our churches we even plan our fellowship. We have monthly activities to bring our people together in a social setting. That plan may be intended to help in the assimilation of new members or it may simply exist to provide an opportunity for God’s people to be together and to encourage one another. It may not be the most important thing that a church does but it could be beneficial to spend some time in planning.

I am not sure that I have ever heard of any conflict among us over the validity of planning in the realm of worship. I don't think that I have ever heard a pastor criticized because he had too many Bible studies. I have never heard one pastor say to another, "You realize that you have nothing to do with the fact that you have so many of your members in Bible study. You know that the fact that your congregation's stewardship is exemplary has nothing to do with you.

But in the realm of outreach and the numerical growth of our churches we are very sensitive. It seems natural to me that we would be careful in our planning in this important area of our ministries. Just as we employ methodology and planning to our inreach ministries, it seems important that we do so in our outreach ministries. I remember my former mission counselor Jim Radloff telling me that I needed to make outreach intentional. We are trained to do inreach. We consider ourselves unfaithful if we don't do it (others will as well). But if we don't make outreach intentional, it could well get replaced by the tasks at hand (and there are many in parish ministry).

Our Savior has graciously called us to be his own. In that incomprehensible grace he has also called us to participate in the gathering of the elect. What planning model and what methods will we use as we joyfully join in this mission? There is no "one size fits all" plan for outreach in our congregations. We serve in very different contexts and our plans might look very different. I have been encouraged to consider a somewhat diversified approach to planning outreach ministry. I have found myself encouraging others to do the same.

Depending on our context we might want to consider a balance of "come" and "go" strategies in our respective ministries. The "come" strategies invite people to our congregation and the "go" strategies seek to take our message of the gospel to the people.

Canvassing may be one of the more common strategies employed among us. I know that this is not possible in a metropolitan area filled with gated communities that don't allow access. I realize that a community canvass is not the answer for every parish area but I would not abandon the thought without an attempt. There is abundant congregational assistance available in this area. The Kingdom Workers assist many of our WELS congregations with canvass teams and resources. Our ministerial education schools, our area Lutheran high schools, and Wisconsin Lutheran College have encouraged their students to be involved in outreach ministry activities. I have found that there is an internal benefit to the canvassing effort as well. It helps to build a mindset in the congregation that sharing the gospel message outside of our own church is a vital part of our mission.

The people of our congregations serve as a ready team of witnesses who go out from our churches with the gospel. That happens not only in formal, planned ways such as canvassing but in the activities of their daily lives. The motivation for such a life of witness comes only through the gospel. I see value in spending time in a planned Bible class curriculum to raise awareness to the opportunities in friendship evangelism. I also see value in training our members in a simple law gospel witness. We have all heard statistics and reports that tell us that friendship evangelism seems to be the best way to take the gospel from our churches to our communities. It makes sense that we would spend some time encouraging and training our members for the task.

Congregational budgets will have an impact on our outreach programs. I will not say much here but I would urge our congregations to evaluate their ministries carefully. If reaching out to the lost is an important part of our work in God's mission, we will plan and budget accordingly. Some of the outreach work that we do costs little but some requires considerable resources. Mass mailings are a component of many of the outreach plans of the congregations in the district where I serve. There are great resources available inside of and outside our church

body to assist in mass mailings. I have heard the brothers of our district comment that a mass mailing of 10,000 or more in their direct parish area has provided many opportunities for gospel proclamation with people outside of their church membership.

Some congregations (ours included) receive a monthly list of the residents moving in to the parish area. I feel that this list provides an immediate list of people to contact. That might be done with a letter, a personal visit, or both. These are people who are in transition and who might be open to information from our congregation.

Preschool programs are becoming more and more common among the congregations of our synod. A preschool might be a great component to an outreach plan of a congregation if the demographics of the area support it. A preschool program might be seen as an educational arm that provides a service to the community. I am not against serving my neighbor but we didn't start a preschool program in our congregation simply to serve the educational needs of our community. A preschool program could generate revenue for a congregation. It has not really worked that way for us. We consider ourselves very blessed if we manage to break even each year in our financial accounting. We started our preschool program so that we might have opportunities to proclaim Christ to more people. We have a revolving student body. In our enrollment we have a captive audience for the gospel year after year. With a changing student body we have new parents to work with each year as well. A planned strategy to communicate law and gospel to students and to their parents (especially if they are without a church) offers an opportunity to participate in our God's mission to reach more with the gospel.

There are traditional outreach events that can still provide opportunities for proclamation to the unchurched. Vacation Bible School often attracts "outsiders" to our churches. I am not sure that parents are always bringing their children to our doorsteps because they want them to hear the gospel but I cannot expect them to have the right motives. They have given us another opportunity.

Sports camps are growing in popularity. Kingdom Workers seem most willing to partner with congregations to hold camps aimed at outreach opportunities. We can debate the value of such a camp. I have heard some say that they consider it to be too much work for the results produced. A camp that produces a list of contacts to be visited by callers from a congregation is hard for me to criticize. I feel that such a camp can have a place in a balanced plan for gospel outreach.

I have seen new missions and long established congregations seek to reach out into their communities with children's carnivals and community festivals. If done well, I see these as another opportunity to seek opportunities to proclaim Christ.

A key element in any plan would be thorough and persistent follow through on the people that God brings into our path. Whether they come to us as worship visitors, through a canvass, the preschool, or through any other method, we want to seize the opportunity and follow up in a timely manner. Pastors often have the privilege of doing much of that follow up work. We are trained for that work. But our plans for outreach ministry might also include training our people to participate. There will be too much work for the pastor to do. There is no reason that God's people should not be included in the privilege. The efforts will be multiplied. We might consider training callers on different levels. Each year I do a canvass training session at our church. Once people have been involved in canvassing, we also train them in doing a follow up survey. They become a level 2 calling team. We also train people in law/ gospel calls. That would be a third level of calling activity in our outreach plan. In the training, it is my prayer that we are equipping

God's people for works of service. We are also giving God's people an opportunity to participate in God's mission.⁵³

Our outreach plans will all look different. We serve in very different contexts. My encouragement is that you examine your context and consider the opportunities that lie before your congregation to proclaim Christ inside and outside of your churches.

We offer brotherly encouragement to one another all the time. We encourage each other in the study of God's word. Continuing education on the pastoral level is receiving more and more emphasis in our church body. This is a good thing. We get more and more help in the realm of worship planning in our congregations. Most pastors need no reminder that their sermons are among the most important things that they do on a weekly basis. It seems to me that we should be just as aggressive in encouraging one another to see the lost in our parish areas. We need to be just as aggressive in encouraging one another to employ methods that enable us to deliver the means of grace to those who need it. We are not tampering with God's results when we employ methods that bring the gospel to the world. It seems to be an area of our ministries that so easily takes a back seat to our many responsibilities. I find no scriptural reason for anything but a greater emphasis on our work in reaching out with the gospel.

I treasure our WELS for our commitment to the truth of God's word. I treasure this church for the blessings that God has brought to me through this church. I received an outstanding elementary education in one of our Lutheran elementary schools. While the education was great, it was secondary to the simple truth that faithful teachers patiently and faithfully applied God's means to my life day after day. God continued that gracious work at the Prep school level. More of the same was received at the college level. In my college and seminary training I received a first rate education in preparation for full time service in ministry. Through all those years I was nurtured in my faith in churches that faithfully proclaimed God's pure word and administered the sacraments rightly. I pray that God keep us faithful to do the same in the years to come.

I treasure our WELS for our awareness of God's gracious invitation to be about his mission. I pray that he strengthen us in our commitment to that mission. In circuits, conferences and districts, we can encourage one another to keep our eyes focused on that mission both inside of and outside our church walls. Every congregation needs encouragement to see the people in their area who are harassed and lost. Each and every congregation can put a plan in place to reach out to those who are lost. We have the means. They need the means. It is God's mission. He invites us to carry it out.

I ran across a quote in preparing for this paper that I have shared widely in recent months. I keep it close to my desk. "The humble preaching of the gospel and the administration of the simple sacraments are the greatest things that happen in this world. For in them the hidden reign of Christ is consummated."⁵⁴ It is my prayer that God keep our church body faithful to that humble preaching and those precious sacraments. I pray that he leads us to do so faithfully in our churches and that he also leads us to share that simple gospel message aggressively with our world.

⁵³ I am in no way suggesting that they cannot be about that mission in their personal lives without this training and formal program of outreach.

⁵⁴ Herman Sasse, *The Lutheran Doctrine of the Office of the Ministry in the Lonely Way*: 11, St Louis: CPH, 1992, pg. 139

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