The Future of Lutheran Missiology

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"It will now be seen how it is impossible to separate works from faith, as impossible as it is to separate burning and shining from fire." Martin Luther, WABII.98. 18ff.

It is important that the Lutheran Society for Missiology celebrates its twentieth year by devoting the fall issue of *Missio Apostolica* to the future of Lutheran missiology. The journal itself is living this "future" by publishing the first all-digital issue.

I have always understood the LSFM as "crossing the gap" between scholars and those involved in living out the mission of God daily, that is, bringing together the burning and the shining of the fire of the Gospel. Theologians and practitioners can learn from each other. Both have much to share; both have much to discover. This dialogue between theologians and practitioners via the LSFM has been going on now for twenty years. Just think how much the world has changed since 1991—cell phones were a novelty; flat screen TVs cost $20,000; the Internet was just being born; houses held their value. I could go on.

Now we are being challenged to be prophets, see-ers into the future of Lutheran missiology. Who could have believed twenty years ago that there would be more Lutherans in Africa than in North America? Or that the day would come when the journal of the LSFM would be distributed digitally? For twenty years the primary way the dialogue between theologians and practitioners was carried on was via the paper page. Needless to say, even though the conversation in itself was an innovation it was limited in scope. We printed and distributed six hundred copies of the paper journal. Now, the dialogue will expand exponentially. The journal will still be accessed in forty seminaries around the world, but the audience will be dramatically larger. What other blessings does God have in store? Wikipedia (where were *you* twenty years ago?) tells us that one-third of the world, over two billion people, have Internet access.

The first thing we can say about the future is that the basis of our work will remain the same—we are grounded in the Scriptures and the Confessions. Our missiology reflects the Lutheran affirmations of faith alone, grace alone, Scripture alone, Christ alone.

It should also be noted that the LSFM has had a particular missiological emphasis almost since the beginning of its history. Paul Heerboth suggested the name *Missio Apostolica* for our journal because it emphasized the apostolicity of mission work—bringing together the Latin "missio" and the Greek "apostolica," both of which mean "sent." My book *Apostolic Church: One, Holy, Catholic and Missionary* was

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published before the first journal, and Heerboth picked up on the theme of the book: that to be apostolic meant both continuing to confess the faith of the apostles and to "be sent" as were the apostles to communicate that faith. In other words, to say the church is "apostolic" is to say that the church itself is "missionary." It only made sense, etymologically and biblically. The earliest Christian missionaries were called "apostles" (Acts 14:14) and were distinguished from "The Twelve" who had been directly authorized by Jesus to be his authoritative apostles. The office of the "apostle" in Jesus' time was used to designate someone who had been commissioned to legally represent someone else (viz. Talmud, Beracoth 5).

The LSFM wanted to emphasize that the "apostolicity" of the church meant not just preserving the witness of the apostles, but also the authorized "sentness" of the church of Christ to bear their truth to the whole world. In other words, to confess in the Third Article of the Creed of Nicea that the church was "one, holy, catholic and *apostolic*" meant to confess a belief that the church was by its nature "missionary."

Carl Braaten in his book, *The Apostolic Imperative*, says, "Apostolicity means doing the apostolic thing. There is simply no way for Christianity to remain Christian in the apostolic sense without establishing its identity through preaching; the gospel of the kingdom in the crucified and risen Messiah Jesus and spreading that witness wherever there are ears to hear."[1]

The second thing to say is that it is taking a risk to predict the future, as many have found out. "So we went to Atari and said, 'Hey, we've got this amazing thing, even built with some of your parts, and what do you think about funding us? Or we'll give it to you. We just want to do it. Pay our salary, we'll come work for you.' And they said, 'No.' So then we went to Hewlett-Packard, and they said, 'Hey, we don't need you. You haven't got through college yet,'" said Apple Computer Inc. founder Steve Jobs on attempts to get Atari and HP interested in his and Steve Wozniak's personal computer. We understand that the future is not going to be a simple continuum of the present. Some amazing, unforeseen advances are going to occur, God willing. While it is a bold move to try and predict what Lutheran missiology will be like in the future, we proceed with the knowledge that we live by our baptisms in the forgiveness of sins. So, what might we expect?

The first is easy—increasingly Lutheran missiology (the study of Christian mission from a Lutheran theological perspective) and mission work itself will make increasing use of digital technology. This technology is a gift from God—one that can be used in productive or misused in devilish ways. Christians should capture the technological advantage through their prayers and their imagination and find new ways to get out the good news of God's love for the world. As has been said many times before, the Lutheran Reformation was immeasurably advanced by the innovation in printing brought to the world by Johannes Gutenberg. Used for a little over thirty years before Luther's birth, it allowed him to "throw a lot more ink at the devil."

But new technologies are not immediately accepted. I have heard tales of pastors who refused to use a microphone in the pulpit because "it would not be the Word of God." Today we laugh at that—but what is it we today find crazy, ridiculous, and totally

unacceptable in studying and communicating the message of God's love shown most clearly in Jesus? How about planting churches in Second Life? No—not the heavenly realm.

Second Life is a virtual Internet world, and it is a frontier waiting to be evangelized. According to *Wikipedia*, the online encyclopedia,

> Second Life is an online virtual world developed by Linden Lab. It was launched on June 23, 2003. A number of free client programs, or Viewers, enable Second Life users, called Residents, to interact with each other through avatars. Residents can explore the world (known as the grid), meet other residents, socialize, participate in individual and group activities, and create and trade virtual property and services with one another. Second Life is intended for people aged 16 and over, and as of 2011 has about one million active users.

If Second Life were a continent, we would have already sent missionaries to bring the love of Christ to the Residents.

Could we imagine that churches might be set up on this new "continent," which now is inhabited mostly by young adults (the Mormon religion already has a large presence there)? Could our colleges and seminaries build scholarly communities of people in this Second Life world? In fact, some secular organizations already hold annual meetings, even college classes, in Second Life in "buildings" they have constructed there. It is cheaper than adding on more brick and mortar in the physical world. I know, I know—it's crazy. However, I would be surprised if one or more of our Concordias is not already in this foreign land.

Well then, let's go on to a second potential future for Lutheran Missiology. If I may be so bold—let me suggest there will be less and less distinction between foreign and domestic missions. In fact, this has been the case for some time. Dr. Ed Westcott had a vision for mission work that was two pronged: he called the two prongs the centrifugal and centripetal. In other words, the church would in a centrifugal way send out missionaries to places where the Gospel had not been heard; at the same time, God would be sending immigrants to the shores of the United States who never could have heard the Gospel in their home countries, for instance, Pakistan.

In the late twentieth century, Dr. August Mennicke came to my office at the International Center to ask what I thought of a letter he had received from an engineer in Saudi Arabia. The man, a Pakistani working for the Arab American Oil Company, wanted to know how he could come from Saudi Arabia to the United States to attend seminary—he wanted to become a missionary to Muslims. Of course, I told Dr. Mennicke to forget it—we did not know anyone in Saudi Arabia who could vouch for this person. Besides, he was not Lutheran—and at that time, a candidate for the public ministry had to have been a Lutheran for ten years before applying for entrance (sounds a bit quaint today). Dr. Mennicke, being a better see-er than I, ignored me. As a result, Mr. Farukh Khan and his brothers paid their own ways to move to Canada to work as lay missionaries among Muslims. Eventually, sixteen men were ordained by our seminary in Fort Wayne to become Lutheran missionaries among Muslims in the United States. The

preparation for ordination of these sixteen required the seminary to make innovations to its curriculum. But the Fort Wayne seminary was not alone.

Our St. Louis seminary had some years before begun a Hispanic Institute to prepare Spanish speaking men for mission work in the U.S. This became so popular that the program has crossed borders at times—bringing theological education to men in Mexico.

Out of these innovations, the Ethnic Institute of Theology was born—to prepare immigrants in the U.S. for the Ministry of the Word.

Out of EIIT came the Specific Ministry Pastors program (SMP), which allowed all residents of the U.S. to be formed as missionaries to the United States. These distance education programs challenged the idea that seminary education had to be done in a residential setting—something unthinkable twenty years ago. But these innovations have cleared a large path for the Word of Christ to enter the hearts of many who would not have heard the Word. But why rehearse the past, even if it is the recent past, in an article about the future? To suggest a next step in mission training.

The line between home and foreign missions has blurred. The heart of our international mission work is the formation of local people for the ordained ministry in specific local settings. The greatest gift we bring to other lands is the establishment of seminaries to prepare local workers, in their language, to work in their culture. This is a "God thing." God sent his Son to earth, the Son who "did not count equality with God something to be held onto, but emptied Himself and took on the form of a servant" (Phil 2:6). Jesus is the original "missionary." He comes to earth in our likeness, speaking a human language, dressing like one of the persons of that time—for what purpose? To be the love of God to a broken world.

When the great majority of people in the United States spoke English and were of northern European background, we could afford to bring these like cultured people together in one place for several years to prepare them to go anywhere in the United States—to use the one hymnal in order to conduct the one worship service. In the next two to three decades, we expect that northern Europeans will be only one of a number of cultural minorities, we should rethink how we prepare the public ministers of the Word.

Professor W.G. Polack in his book *Into All the World* tells the story of Missionary Johann Ludwig Krapp.[2] Missionary Krapp was the first Lutheran missionary prepared by a German mission society. He was sent out in 1842 under the auspices of the English Mission society to Mombasa, today's Kenya. Lutherans pooled money to send Krapp and his wife and infant daughter by a sailing ship around the Horn of Africa. But soon after arriving all came down with "fever." Krapp survived, but his wife and child did not. They were buried there together. The missionary wrote back to his mission society, "Tell the committee that in East Africa there is a lonely grave of the first members of the mission connected with your society. This is proof you have begun the conflict with evil in this part of the world—and the conquests of the church are won over the graves of many of its members. You may be sure the time has come when you are called to work for the conversion of Africa." As was already noted, today there are more Christians in Africa than in North America. Who in 1847 could have seen this?

Being bold in the twenty-first century, I would suggest that seminaries see themselves less and less as physical places where most of their student body will gather. There is a much greater opportunity to bring theological resources to mission work in the United States, and elsewhere. In a way, we can return, should return, to the way most seventeenth-, eighteenth-, and even nineteenth-century pastors and missionaries were prepared for their work in the United States—through a local congregation with an ordained pastor as a mentor.

What if today local congregations would become seminaries and local pastors would become adjunct professors? Classes could be taught via Skype (or a Skype-like successor). Seminary libraries would be accessed online. Tests would be centralized for basic doctrine, history, languages—but the local context would determine the rest of the curriculum. The broader church would continue to provide recognition of the preparedness of a candidate for ordination. In the future, we might decide to sell both residential seminary properties and construct a high-tech seminary education center where there would be few residential students but thousands of distance education students preparing for Lutheran pastoral-missionary work. Call me a dreamer.

"I have traveled the length and breadth of this country and talked with the best people, and I can assure you that data processing is a fad that won't last out the year," said the editor in charge of business books for Prentice Hall, 1957.

A third direction for the future of Lutheran missiology would involve more competition and cooperation with other religions. New technologies have made it possible for people of other cultures to live in closer proximity. Advances in communication allow them to stay connected to their homes even as far away as the other side of the world. Rapidly fading is the time when a Muslim or Hindu might move to the United States from an Asian or African county and lose contact with family and friends "back home." As these connections continue, it is more difficult for that person to leave behind the religion with which they came to the United States.

To bring someone from one of the other major religions of the world will be more difficult. We need to engage people of other faiths more than we have. When I was a parish pastor in East Brunswick, New Jersey, I became friends with the rabbi of the Reformed synagogue. At one point, the rabbi hosted students from the Reformed seminary in New York City—and the rabbi invited me to make a presentation to the students on the teachings of Christianity. Today, we should become friends not only with the rabbi, but with the leaders of the local mosque and Hindu temple. They should come to know the love of Christ through the lives of Christian pastors and congregations.

Julie Das is an evangelist to Muslim women in Southwest Florida. The best estimate is that there are more than two hundred Pakistani and Indian families in the Naples-Ft. Myers area, and only the families of Julie and her sister are Christian. Julie came to the U.S. as a Christian because her grandfather had converted from Islam. The way Julie tells it, her grandfather was the recipient of kindness from a British army officer. He invited grandfather Das to his home for meals, something unheard of for the social class of the Das family. The Christian British officer was seen as patient and kind, and confident in the eternal life that had been won for him by Jesus. It was the Holy

Spirit that eventually drew him and his family to Christ—but the Spirit of Christ had opened the door through an expression of the love and kindness of a Christian.

The church in the United States will recognize more than it does today that it no longer has the "home field advantage." The church cannot wait for members of the other major religions to come knocking on its doors, but will engage with other religions in a way that will demonstrate the love of God. If we fail to do this, the Christian church, let alone the Lutheran church, will become one of the minorities of religious choice in America.

A fourth direction for the future of missions and the teaching of missions will be dealing with decreasing secularization. Yes, *decreasing* secularization. Most of you reading this article probably know that the fastest growing religious contingent in the United States has been the non-religious. The American Religious Identification Survey gave Non-Religious groups the largest gain in terms of absolute numbers—14,300,000 (8.4% of the population) to 29,400,000 (14.1% of the population) for the period 1990 to 2001 in the USA. In the 2010 census, the non-religious represented 16% of the U.S. population. So, how could I look at the future and write that this trend will change?

In November 2002, Grigori Perelman, a little known Russian mathematician, posted a solution to the Poincare conjecture on the Internet. Without going into great detail, this "conjecture" was about the shape of the universe. For over one hundred years, scientists were trying to prove this scientific idea using theoretical mathematics. As in 1492, when the shape of the earth was still debated, in the twentieth, and so far in the twenty-first century, the shape of the universe has been a hot topic in the scientific community. Is the universe flat or curved? Specifically the Poincare conjecture was that it was curved—more specifically, a dodecahedron, a twelve-sided curved shape—a soccer ball.

So what does this have to do with being non-religious?

The mathematics and the science behind the conjecture depend a lot on Einstein's theory of relativity. Einstein's theories challenged Newton. In effect, the physical universe was not as we had assumed: time was relative, space could be curved. Time does not go at the same rate everywhere. Later physical theorists said that if you go far enough out into space, since it is round, you will end up back where you started; there is no such thing as a straight line.

To delve into this new thinking meant theoretical mathematicians had to assume dimensions greater than the three dimensions everyone had believed were the only reality: height, width, and depth. (Einstein added a fourth: time.) To make sense of a "relative" universe, theoretical physicists had to assume five dimensions (or maybe seven, or even eleven). There is still no agreement on this. Furthermore, these dimensions were the stuff of different universes, which human beings cannot sense because we are limited to height, width, depth, and time. These conjectures are introducing into human experience new assumptions about reality.

In case I have lost any of you, let me suggest that the next time you watch a new movie on television or in the theater notice how in some pictures the protagonist is able to move from dimension to dimension, from one space to a different far away space, by just

walking through a door, or climbing through a hatch, or . . . . The reality of other universes is becoming a part of the American psyche, fueled not by theologians but by scientists, mathematicians, and movie directors. I can see that this will make space in our culture for more acceptance of religious concepts like heaven and hell, angels, demons (already a fixture in the popular culture), and miracles. These will again become acceptable to think about seriously in the twenty-first century in a way that could not be seriously contemplated in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The way I see it, the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were aberrations. Those centuries were a time when a full-blown belief in secularism took hold. Before this, the existence of other "dimensions," unseen worlds, was taken for granted. The nineteenth and twentieth centuries were anomalies. Before the rationalist mind-set of these centuries, human beings assumed there were other worlds which affected ours but which we could not see. All of that is changing in the present century; the belief in unseen worlds will become accepted again as a matter of course.

The challenge for Lutheran missiologists is to become more familiar with the thinking behind these ideas and to become brave in telling the story of a Creator who loves his creation so much that he entered time and space to be that love for the world.

Looking into the future is easy. Living into the future is the hard part. Commenting on John 3:7 (Jesus' words, "Don't be surprised when I tell you that all of you must be born again."), Martin Luther wrote,

> In order to become new, you must crawl into the gospel with your whole self. You must shed off the old skin, as a snake does. When its skin becomes old, a snake looks for a narrow hole in the rock. It crawls through it and sheds its skin, leaving it outside in front of the hole. Similarly you must go into the gospel and God's Word. You must confidently believe its promise that God does not lie. So you shed off your old skin, leaving behind your old light, arrogance, will, love, desires, and what you say and do. You become a new and different person, who views everything differently than before.[3]

What rocks will Lutheran missiology have to crawl through? What skin will be required to be shed? The "skins" of culture, of lack of imagination, of being in love with the past, or of commitment to the way things are now, of material and property possession? It will be difficult to grow into the future while wearing those old skins.

Thankfully, our Savior climbed out of a hole in the ground, shedding his old body to take on the new one of eternal life. Partly he did it for Lutheran missiologists who try to see into the future. "People do not earn God's approval or receive life and salvation because of anything they have done. Rather, the only reason they receive life and salvation is because of God's kindness in Christ. There is no other way."[4]

Thankfully, that way has been opened for us.

Endnotes

[1] Carl Braaten, *The Apostolic Imperative* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1985), 55.
[2] WG Polack, *Into All the World* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1930), 90.
[3] Martin Luther, *By Faith Alone*, March 17 (Iowa Falls: World Publishing, 1998).
[4] Ibid., April 19.