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The Total Ministry of the Church*

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OUR topic is an imposing one. Entire books and whole sections of libraries have been devoted to it. It forced an early decision in the development of this paper. Should we be talking and thinking about all of the ways in which the ministry of the church expresses itself or should we be looking at the total reality of the ministry of the church and then be dealing with essence rather than expression?

Time limitations helped in reaching a decision. We will be looking at the essence, the fundamental nature, of the ministry. As we do, it should also become clear that it is this fundamental nature of the ministry which makes, or ought to make, the expressions of the ministry what they are. In other words, we are here concerned more about what our ministry is than the manner and methods by which it is carried out.

I have stated before and repeat here publicly my conviction that our greatest deterrent to blessed service in the building of the kingdom of Christ involves this matter of the meaning and purpose of our ministry. We too often lack the clear purpose that we need. We too often confuse secondary expressions with primary purposes. We put doing ahead of being. We permit programs to become masters instead of servants. In my observation, this is demonstrably true both at home and over-

seas, but, for our part, it starts with us here at home.

This will not be a report or commentary on what the ministry of the church is today. It will rather be a review of what it ought to be. But what is the church?

What did the program committee have in mind in its concern for a total ministry? The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod? The Lutheran Medical Mission Association as an auxiliary agency? The Christian church as we know it today in the physical institutions of denominations and confederations of denominations? All of these suggest legitimate concerns but basic to them and all too often overlooked or forgotten is a concern for the total ministry of the church of Jesus Christ. What is the church?

We need to be very clear in our answer of this question. Our answer here shapes and outlines the ministry of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod and the LMMA and every congregation and organization and program within Christendom. If our answer is wrong here, our answers will be wrong all down the line.

One of the great and essential needs today is that we permit and encourage the church to be the church. There is a strong tendency today to identify the church with the things that may be seen, the physical institutions of Christendom, the programs which are undertaken and the public pronouncements which are made. We tend to equate what the church is with organizational activity and with the result of some kind of structured effort.

* This is an address delivered by Rev. C. Thomas Spitz, Jr., chairman of the Board for Missions in North and South America and director of Lutheran Hour Operations, at the Lutheran Medical Mission Association convention, St. Louis, Mo., Feb. 3, 1961.

Organizations are important and may be useful, and this includes the LMMA. I hope that my conviction in this will become evident as we refer to it a little later on in this presentation. But this kind of misidentification of the church, an identification which equates the church with organization and its activity, places upon every congregation an undue burden and pressure, puts its real purpose out of focus, and overlooks and, therefore, deters the real being and life of the church.

The church is not institutions and programs and activity as such. The church is people. We say this every time we confess the Apostles' Creed. The church is a particular kind of people. The church is the communion of saints. It is the whole number of all of those who believe in Jesus Christ as their Savior, in whom the power of the Holy Spirit dwells, who have been brought back in the mercy of God to be at one with a forgiving Father through Christ. What is the church? The question is better stated: Who is the church? The church is the people of God, the *laos*, if you use the original Greek word, the people whom God has called by His Holy Spirit to be His own through Jesus Christ, His Son.

This is the church that really counts. Over against our membership in it, the fact that you and I are Lutherans or members of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod or the LMMA or a specific local congregation is not of primary significance.

You and I don't become members of the church by outwardly becoming Lutherans or by joining a congregation or organization. We don't even become members of that church because we are faithful attendants at divine worship or because

we have been chosen as organizational officers and leaders. If a person is a member of the church, you may properly expect to see some of these activities and associations evident in his life, but they are evidences of the fact that he is in the church and they are not the way by which he gets in.

There is only one way in which a person becomes a member of the church. The church consists only of those who truly believe the Gospel: faith in Christ is the only way. The church is people who, by the power of the Spirit through the Gospel, have been claimed both for God and by the Gospel.

Let me try to make this clear by an illustration. With reference to the kingdom of God and entry into the same, Christ once declared: "I am the door . . . through Me if any man enter in he shall be saved." Christ is the door through which we must walk to enter. He is not just the door frame, that is, the outline of the opening through which we must walk. He is the opening itself. He is the door.

Entry into the church is gained by going through Christ. This means more than simply getting credit for His suffering, death, and resurrection. It also means that which happens when, by faith, we claim this suffering, death, and resurrection. It means becoming Christ-like. As Luther said, it means becoming little Christs.

And Christ did not only preach the fact of the Gospel, He didn't only talk about it; Christ was the Gospel. The church today is made up of people who, like Christ, not only talk about the Gospel but who reveal the Gospel in what they are. They are not

only Gospel spokesmen; they are Gospel impersonators. They have put on Christ.

Claimed by the power of the Spirit, the church is people with a mission. You know what Christ said: "Ye shall receive power after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you and ye shall be witnesses unto Me." Those who become members of the church, immediately upon their becoming, are given the mandate to win others in a ministry *with* the Gospel. Every member of the church is a missionary with a message, and the message is Christ. This has been said before and repeatedly emphasized. It needs constant repetition.

But I would like to emphasize another aspect of this relationship of the Gospel to the Christian which comes into effect when a person becomes a member of the church. Not only is the church composed of people who are ministers with the Gospel, but it is also composed of people, the selfsame people, who are ministers, i. e., servants, *of* the Gospel and *to* the Gospel. And this, too, is the mission.

The Gospel is not restricted to the narrow limitations which we frequently impose upon it by defining it strictly or merely as a doctrine. The Gospel is more than a doctrine, more than a statement of the historical fact of God's gift of His Son, the death of that Son on Calvary, the glorious resurrection of that Son, and God the Father's declaration that all who believe in the Son may now be forgiven. The Gospel is more than a set of words. The Gospel is more than the fact of John 3:16; it is the truth and ongoing activity of John 3:16.

The Gospel is indeed the good news of God in Christ, but it is also the evidence of this Good News. The Gospel is the record of the activity of God in Christ

redeeming the world, the revelation of that activity by God in His Word, the witness of that activity in the life and on the lips of sanctified Christians, and the Spirit-powered result of that activity upon unregenerate man. The Gospel is God at work in the act of saving man. The church is people who are revealers of that Gospel.

The church is made up of people who are at all times the church. The church is people not just when they are worshiping in formal services or when they are engaged in organizational activity or when they have been chosen for some kind of full-time church work or when they are specifically speaking to someone about Christ. The church is people always, all the people who accept Christ as their Savior, wherever they are, whatever they are, whoever they are. The church never ceases to exist, never takes a vacation, never limits itself to one place, never limits itself to one expression, doesn't have an on-and-off switch. You and I, praise God, are the church, at home, at work, at play, in our community, with our neighbors, among our friends and our enemies, in our triumphs and our defeats, our anger and our joy, our strength and our weakness. In all of our imperfections, we are revealers of the Gospel. We reveal God at work in the act of redeeming the world through Christ.

This is a high privilege, but it is an equally tremendous responsibility. Parenthetically, we might ask whether this isn't a major reason for the lack of interest which many people have in the church, the fact that we have done such a poor job of revealing the Gospel, the fact that we have accepted the promise of the Gospel but have not sufficiently shown the power and influence of it.

Be that as it may, the church is people who have been claimed by God through the Gospel and whose lives, in the process, have been claimed by the Gospel. This is the church active where it should be and in the way it should be. Here we find society brought into a confrontation with the Gospel on every front, in every area of activity, rather than simply being invited to receive the Gospel in some kind of a separate churchy setting. The church is made up of people who have been redeemed, not apart from but in their life in this world, and it is in their life in this world that the church lives out her life.

The church is people who not only have a message to share far and wide but who are the message of the love of God in Christ. Christ's church is not only a church with words; it is the church of the Word. Christ is not only its verbal testimony; Christ is its life. Christ has not only set for it an example; He lives in it as He lives in every member of it.

Now, then, you who are a member of the healing profession are interested in the relation of the concerns of that profession to the life of the church. There is a relationship and it is an immediate one. God is not a spectator to human needs.

Christ did not perform His many miracles of healing just to show His authority; several selected cases would have been enough to do that. Nor did He perform them by way of bringing all of these people into the church, by way of "buying" followers. There is good reason to believe that relatively few of them accepted Christ as the Savior.

As the church, we the people of God don't have to look for reasons to justify the healing profession. Christ did not. We who are Christ's need not.

There is also a relationship between the message which we speak and the concern for physical need which we enact. Our ultimate concern is indeed the eternal rescue of our fellows from sin and hell to forgiveness and life with God through Christ. But, the question has properly been asked: Can we justify an evangelistic endeavor that would seek to lead men into a kingdom of lovelessness here in order that they may have heaven in the hereafter? Can we justify a concern for souls which does not also have a concern for bodies and for minds?

The Bible certainly does not leave us in doubt about the relationship of the words and works of faith. In the Matthew 25 judgment scene our Lord is concerned about the cup of cool water, the loaf of bread, a visit to the sick. Galatians is the great justification-by-faith letter and yet it draws to a close by saying: "As we have therefore opportunity, let us do good unto all men."

What is the total ministry of the church? It is a total ministry to the total man. It is not just words. It is not just acts. It is the love of God in Christ, verbalized and articulated, enacted and applied.

Who is the church? The church is the people of God in whatever professional discipline they may be engaged.

And still there is for us here a legitimate concern about the ministry of the institution, of the congregation and the Synod and the LMMA. We haven't said anything about these and yet everything that we've said applies to them.

Basic to all of the institutions and organizations of the physical church is that of the local congregation. It sets the pattern. It is the one established on good

Biblical ground, both through precept and example.

What are congregations and what part do they play? They are assemblies of believers, of the people who are the church, gathered together for the purpose of hearing and sharing God's Word and administering the sacraments. In addition, they are avenues of mutual instruction and admonition, of the practice of Christian fellowship and love, and of discipline.

But what about the many things outside of these areas of concern that are now programmed and run by the congregation or its organizations, the evangelism efforts and social welfare efforts and educational efforts and public relations efforts and mission projects? These may properly be one of two things or a combination of both. They may be a training effort, and this would be wholesome and would serve the congregation's purpose for mutual edification. Or they may be an extension of the prior personal interest and activity of the congregation's members, and this would be laudable as a means of doing jointly more than can be done and in addition to what can be done individually.

Yet constant care must be taken lest these organizational efforts become a substitute for the efforts of the individual Christians. Scripture gives these assignments to the individual Christians who are the church. The congregation was established to encourage the life of the church in individual Christians, but it was not told to take it over.

This sets the pattern and it is a proper pattern to follow. The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod is a federation of congregations and its expression of the ministry of the church is certainly nothing more

extensive or inclusive than that of the congregations of which it is composed. The LMMA is an auxiliary organization whose expression of the ministry of the church is certainly nothing more than that of the federated body to which it is related. This kind of assembling together of the believers who are the church, may properly and should provide training experiences for their constituency and, if possible, may also provide avenues for the corporate extension of the ministry practiced by their Christian membership.

As Paul describes it in Ephesians four, the church is people who are there for the work of the ministry, the ministry of the Gospel and, whatever or wherever the people may be, this is a full-time ministry. It is a personal ministry. This is not to say, however, that it stops with the individual person. Christian people have the privilege of banding together and are encouraged to express together and more extensively the ministry which each bears individually, also through the LMMA.

Moreover, the ministry of such an assembled group may properly be just as full-orbed as the ministry committed to each Christian member. Thus the LMMA may quite properly be constituted to cultivate and express a concern for medical missions. It may even legitimately establish and maintain such missions as an expression of the ministry of its members or by way of sharing with other assemblies of God's people in other places a concern for the physical well-being of men.

The form of such missions and the method or system or structure by which such missions are best administered is another subject for another paper. Suffice it to say here that we cannot make the Gospel

pluralistic. It is not at one time and place this and at another that. Nor is there a ministry which is strictly for now and another which is strictly for hereafter. The total ministry of the church is a total ministry to the total man and it ought, as much as possible, to be programmed to realize and to convey that concept.

I doubt whether I need to encourage you to promote and push medical missions, but I do encourage you — wholeheartedly; one can hardly travel in either the United States or overseas without doing so. At the same time, I share with you a concern which Dr. Eugene L. Smith, mission executive of The Methodist Church, has expressed much better than I could:

The contribution of missionary institutions — and it's a great contribution — has been described many times. The very effectiveness of these institutions today makes them increasingly serious problems. They have been as arteries pouring lifeblood into the church. Today they show increasing signs of a kind of cerebral arteriosclerosis — a hardening of the arteries of the brain. Their very size and success constitutes a potential threat to the church. More and more missionaries and national church leaders are required to keep the institutions going. Financial needs mount to astronomical size. Meanwhile, the distinctively Christian aspect of their institutional life is weakened by various and subtle pressures. Thus, a growing part of the church's strength is siphoned off to maintain institutions which contribute less and less to the life of the church. To this picture there are some blessed and happy exceptions. Institutional ministries will not be needed any less in the years ahead than in years past. The ultimate justification for any church-related institution can only be the aid it gives the church in confronting the

world with the glory that is in Christ. This confrontation may be for the purpose of evangelism. It may be for the purpose of meeting human need, out of the love that was in Christ, without the intention of evangelism. Either purpose is valid in its place. Neither purpose, however, is sound except as it is an expression of Christian concern. The retaining of the Christian character of institutions which live under increasingly insidious and insistent secular pressures will require both a holy boldness and a radical creativity on the part of churches and boards, and one might add, all sending institutions alike.*

Paul says in Ephesians that the church is people who are there for the work of the ministry, and the extensions of that ministry through national or international organizations are entirely proper. That they should be extensions of a ministry locally and individually practiced ought to be self-evident. In a manner of speaking they are justified only if they are that. Each LMMA project ought to be matched by an effort at least double in intensity designed to get each member actively involved in a personal, daily expression of the same concern embodied in the project.

Paul also says in Ephesians that believers in an assembly not only have the function of stimulation and providing for the work of the ministry but also that of edifying the body of Christ. The one should not and really cannot be undertaken without the other.

To edify the body of Christ is to edify the people who are the church. Edifying the body of Christ is a stated intent in the purposes of the LMMA. The second purpose of this organization reads: "To arouse

* *Occasional Bulletin*, Missionary Research Library, New York, Vol. XI, 2, p. 3.

consciousness of mission opportunities and obligations peculiar to their profession among Lutheran doctors, graduate nurses, and other professional workers." I was delighted to find that statement, although, in view of our definition of the church, it might have been better stated to include the more basic and broader concept. I do not believe, however, that the LMMA has either pursued or realized this purpose to the same degree that it has others. Forgive me if I am wrong. On the other hand, if I am right, believe me when I say that I can understand that there may be an explanation.

At any rate, this is the challenge I would issue: edify the body of Christ. As the LMMA, you will accomplish your other purposes in direct proportion to your implementation of this one. The church is not and cannot be only the joint projects and efforts. The joint projects and efforts which are subject to real blessing are those which are a reflection of what the people who support them and participate in them are in their everyday life.

Hans Ruedi Weber, a noted lay leader, has said—and I want to submit that this is probably the worst group within the church to which to submit this kind of illustration because it deals with a science in which I am a layman and you are professionals—but at any rate he has said that the function of any organization of the people who are the church over against those people is analogous to the function of the heart to the blood supply of the human being. The heart, he says, is constantly drawing the blood in from the extremities of the human body where it has used up its energy, where it has become sluggish, where it has collected impurities,

and brings it back to a central point where the process of purifying and energizing may be more directly applied. But, he says, the heart brings the blood back to a central point not to use it up there but to send it out again to the extremities, to the frontiers, to the festering sores, to the places where action is taking place. The heart brings the blood back in order to give it power and not in order to use up its power at that central place. The life of a Christian organization, Hans Weber says, is always this surging back and forth, this drawing together in order to push out again anew and afresh.

Now, let's admit that when the heart calls for the blood to come in, the blood isn't in a very good position to say no. The blood wouldn't be active without the heart. At the same time, however, the heart doesn't argue that the blood should come back in for the welfare of the heart to conduct a project there; it argues only that the blood should come in and be purified in order that it may go back out again, for unless it goes back out purified to do its job an organ may cease to function or gangrene may set in and an entire member be amputated. So, too, our institutions and programs must be made to serve rather than be conducted to be served.

But the picture is still not complete. As the blood is recalled to the heart, it actually does something for the heart. This is not essential to its recall, but it is a byproduct of it. It is from this point of view that my physician brother, who has also had some theological training, insists that Hans Weber's analogy is excellent. As the heart recalls the blood and purifies it and energizes it and provides it with oxygen or air—one might call this the breath of the

Spirit—the blood circulates within the heart and brings to the heart all of the benefits and purposes which it otherwise has in circulation through the body. As the physical institutions of the church call Christian people together to apply more directly the purifying of the Gospel and the breath of the Spirit, Christians in circulation at that central point provide to the organization and each other all of the benefits and purposes which they have in the reality of their being the church. The LMMA has some excellent projects which justify our assembly and discussion here, but the major business of this convention is not the projects we will discuss here. It is rather the role which each of us will serve as an edifier of each other person here.

We who are the church have the job of being Gospel bearers, not only to those who are outside, but also to those who are inside the church to the end that they may more fully realize their life as the church.

What is the function of the Christian organization? It is there for the “perfecting of the saints,” to provide for their growth, to assist them in becoming more Christ-like day by day so that, both when they are in the central place of that organization and when they are out in the extremities, they may truly be the church. The LMMA must be in the business of helping each of its members realize his total commitment in total life to Christ. On this basis LMMA projects will take on new purpose.

If and as this is an assembly of the believers who are the church, such activity in edifying is a Scriptural mandate. From a practical point of view this is also the foundation for all internal programming,

of which there has been a minimum, of project development, and of meeting the recruiting needs which confront you.

If all of this is true, and I firmly believe that it is, then our responsibilities and those of the LMMA take on an entirely new dimension and a tremendously greater challenge. We are not so much administrators or assistant administrators of programs or participants in the same with a responsibility to the programs. We are not so much interested in pushing people in a certain direction. We are, if anything, assistant saints, assisting the saints to realize in their commitment and in their life the reality of their being the church. We might well de-emphasize doing in favor of being. What the people of the church are is much more important than what they undertake in joint projects.

This is the crux of the matter. It is not so important that the LMMA be an expression of the ministry of the church in order that you may have a church-related association. It is much more important that you be the church in order that the LMMA and its program may be the church.

What is the total ministry of the church? It is the total ministry of the Gospel to the total man. It is a ministry of people for whom all institutions and programs and organizations are avenues of service.

Who is the church? You who by the power of the Spirit and through the Gospel of Jesus Christ have been claimed both for God and by the Gospel, you are. You are, here and today, at another place tomorrow, at all times in your life and your practice. By God's grace you are what you are. By God's grace alone what you are you will be in living witness.

St. Louis, Mo.