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Editorial office:
1333 S. Kirkwood Road,
St. Louis, MO 63122-7294,
314-996-1202

Published by The Lutheran Church—
Missouri Synod.

Please direct queries to
journaloflutheranmission@lcms.org.

This journal may also
be found at
www.lcms.org/journaloflutheranmission.

Member: Associated Church Press Evangelical Press Association (ISSN 2334-1998)
A periodical of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod's Offices of National and International Mission.



LUTHERAN WITNESS IN TURKEY

by Ville Typpö

How are we supposed to rejoice, if the churches in Asia and many other places are in ruins? How are we going to celebrate the Reformation if the message spreading everywhere is anti-Christian?

I WANT TO BEGIN WITH THE WORDS that St. Paul has included in his first epistle to the Corinthians: “The churches in Asia greet you” (1 Cor. 16:19). The churches in Asia St. Paul was talking about were located in today’s Turkey. The same churches were addressed and also admonished in the Book of Revelation by the Lord, Jesus Christ. Some of you may have visited the places of those churches and found nothing but ruins. It seems that the Lord really removed the lamp stand of unrepentant churches.

In our days, the same region is 99 percent Muslim. Once the great center of the Christendom, the marvelous Hagia Sophia Church of Constantinople, has served for centuries as a mosque, and nowadays it’s a museum. History teaches us that the glorious heritage of the past or the great ministry of today may lose its value if we don’t have the blessing of our Lord for tomorrow, if we cease to hear how the

Word of God calls us to repentance and faith on a daily basis. That’s why it is good to come together under the theme of “Celebrating the Reformation Rightly: Remembrance, Repentance and Rejoicing.”

Today, we are focusing on “rejoicing.” But how are we supposed to rejoice if the churches in Asia and many other places are in ruins? How are we going to celebrate the Reformation if the message spreading everywhere is anti-Christian? At least in the Western countries and media, Islam is presented to us, for the most part, in two ways. We see videos about violent warriors in black outfits, ready to torture and murder anyone they meet. We hear the news about Islamic armies rolling over villages and towns, spreading terror and death. That’s the horrifying reality for some of our African and Middle Eastern

brothers and sisters, the pain shared by the whole Body of Christ.

On the other hand, we are presented with a very different picture — the modern civilized Islam, a religion of peace and prosperity, high ethical values, tight family bonds and a society with networks of mutual support and help. How should we place ourselves in this scenario as Lutherans and as churchmen? Should we stay and live in peace with the peaceful version of Islam? The majority of individual Muslims really do want to live in peace with their neighbors regardless of their religion. Or should we fight against those who are willing to go to war?

We are saints in Christ, but we know that we are constantly sinners in ourselves, and we are not going to be anything else in this world.

During the Reformation, same questions were on the agenda. Germany was under the threat of a Turkish invasion. Ottoman armies were twice at the gates of Vienna. The war was there. While Luther was clearly against Crusades motivated as religious campaigns by the Roman Catholic hierarchy, he encouraged the emperor to carry out his responsibility of defending the country militarily.

But how would Luther advice the churchmen? Speaking about the pope, Luther states: “The pope curses those who supply Turks and Saracens with iron and wood so that one would think that he honestly desires to do good for Christendom. If he, however, were Christ’s vicar, then he would get moving, go there, and preach the Gospel to the Turks, being committed to it with body and soul. That would be a Christian way to challenge the Turks and to increase and defend Christendom.”¹

¹ WA 8:708.27–209.8. Volker Stolle, *The Church Comes from All Nations: Luther Texts on Mission* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2003), 67. While speaking about Turks, Luther is usually referring to them as

The Christian way would be to get moving, to go there and preach the Gospel, being committed to it with body and soul. Preaching the Gospel is also the only way of bringing true peace for the people, who since the Fall are in a hopeless war against their Creator and against each other. Preaching the forgiveness of sins in Jesus Christ and praying the same also for the hostile enemies has always been the way of Christian witness.

History of the Lutheran witness

What, then, have the Lutherans done? Despite the teachings of Luther and the eager attempts of some of his followers at the sixteenth century, not very much success has been reported.² The first Lutheran pastor that I am aware of was sent to Turkey from Sweden at 1709. He and subsequent pastors were serving mostly the Scandinavian community in Constantinople up until the last quarter of the nineteenth century.³

During the nineteenth century, the majority of the Protestants in Turkey were involved in the so-called "Great Experiment." This mission strategy aimed to reach the Muslim majority through vitalizing the Christian minorities, the Greek and Armenian Orthodox Churches, which were existing in the Ottoman Empire. This was a ministry on a large scale, consisting, for example, of 465 schools in 1905. The Great Experiment managed to empower Christian minorities and form some Protestant Churches consisting of Orthodox converts, but generally the Muslims were not reached with Gospel. Rather ironically, the Muslim majority was insulted and humiliated through the support directed to the Christian minorities.⁴

Peter Pikkert, a long-term Baptist missionary to the region, criticizes this approach: "When the missionary community sought to exercise a Christian influence on society by establishing educational and medical facilities,

it lost sight of the fact that missions had to emerge directly from the church itself. They forgot that missions is a task which God gave to the church and for which He uniquely equipped it. It is the church, and not various and sundry para-church ministries, which is the God-ordained means through which the Great Commission was expected to be fulfilled."⁵ One rare exception of that era was the Lutheran Orient Mission Society, which reached the local majority people with their own language and focused on establishing Lutheran congregations among them. Unfortunately this ministry lasted only five years and was wiped away by World War I. While the years of war and years between the wars reshaped the world, the Christian witness was almost non-existent in Turkey.

The situation today

Luther, in his own time, complained that the Turkish government "does not allow Christians to come together

in public, and no one can openly confess Christ or preach or teach against Mohammed."⁶ This was the case for a long time, and remains so in many Muslim countries. In Turkey, however, at least for the time being, it is possible for Christians to come together in public; it is possible to openly confess Christ and preach the Gospel.

This is a considerably new development. The modern Turkish State was founded by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk in 1923. Since that time the state has been basically secular. Muslim people were governed by a secular state, which defined the limits and controlled the religion. During last 12 years, however, Turkey has changed a lot. Under the current regime, secularism has been torn down step-by-step and religion has gained more space in the society. This means, of course, that Islam is doing better.

Even if we may not welcome all of these developments with joy, the increasing freedom of religion has actually meant more freedom for Christians too. Turkey has become increasingly tolerant towards other religions. Two recent examples: a couple of months ago the Syrian community in Istanbul was given permission to build a new church. Such a thing has not happened in the era of the modern Turkey. In the beginning of this year a Christian TV-channel started to broadcast 24/7 through a government-controlled satellite. This means that any citizen

We all are sinners.
We all need Jesus.
Not just once but
constantly.

a religious entity, not so much as an ethnic group of people. For our discussion, it would be appropriate to read "Turks and Saracens" to mean Islam.

² Ingemar Öberg, *Luther and World Mission: A Historical and Systematical Study* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2007), 498–499.

³ Sture Theolin, *The Swedish Palace in Istanbul* (Istanbul: Yapi Kredi Yayinlari, 2000), 156.

⁴ P. Pikkert, *Protestant Missionaries to the Middle East: Ambassadors of Christ or Culture?* (Hamilton, Ontario: WEC Canada, 2008), 54. *The Journal of Lutheran Mission* 2 (2014) has published a concise review on Pikkert's book by Rev. Dr. Albert B. Collver.

⁵ Pikkert, 264.

⁶ *AE* 46:175; Stolle, 68.

surfing channels on his receiver may end up to a Christian channel by change. (She does not need to go turn her antenna and tune her receiver for a different satellite.) Most people are also open and willing to engage in openly confessional discussions about religion. In a barber shop, in a taxi, in a café — any place — you don't need to search for an opportunity to share the Gospel. When meeting new people, the first or second question I face is usually about my occupation. "I'm a pastor." And that's enough. "I have never met a pastor before." "Can you tell me about your faith?" "Finally I have an opportunity to ask someone how really knows about Christianity!" "Where is your church?" "May I come to church even if I'm a Muslim?"

For me, these questions tell about the huge need for witness. We know that "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. How, then, can people call on someone they have not believed? And how can they believe in someone they have not heard about? And how can they hear without someone preaching? And how can they preach unless they are sent?" (Rom. 10:13–15).

The percentage of the Christians in Turkey is about 0.2 percent. Among the population of 75 million, there are about 150,000 Christians. Around 95 percent of these Christians consist of ethnic minorities speaking and worshipping in the Greek, Armenian and Syrian languages, which makes the Church and the Gospel practically inaccessible for the Turkish-speaking majority. There is only a handful of Christians worshipping in Turkish language, a variety of Protestants and some Roman Catholics (around 0.007 percent percent of total population). Turkey has been correctly described as the largest unreached nation in the world.⁷

Since 2002 there has been a Turkish speaking Lutheran congregation in Istanbul. Istanbul Lutheran Church was officially founded in 2004. Today the church body consists of four Turkish-speaking congregations located in Turkey and in Bulgaria. This church body follows a locally adapted three-year lectionary and Turkish liturgy, produces and translates Lutheran literature and hymns and aims to witness to Christ through each member of the

church according to their various vocations.

What can we do as Lutherans? One may ask, why should Lutherans should engage Islam? If so many others have tried and often failed, and we are so few, why should we waste time and resources for such a fruitless endeavor?

I think that as confessional Lutherans, we have been given so much to rejoice about, we have been given so much that we, too, certainly have something to offer. Most importantly, we have the inspired Word of God. We have the firm ground that never fails. We have the clear confession that correctly expresses the teaching of the Bible. And we don't just have it. We know it, we trust it, we live with it. We don't need to invent it. It's there already.

As Lutherans, we have Jesus Christ, who is present in the Word and the Sacraments, in the very center of our faith and congregational life. That's why we don't need to depend on ourselves, on our own strength or lack of it,

on our own faith or lack of it, on our own love or lack of it. As Lutherans, we have the distinction between Law and Gospel as a key rule for proclaiming the Word of God. This is really something that we should not underestimate. A number of Muslims have left their religion just to become followers of another law carrying some name of Christianity. A number of Turkish-speaking Christians today live in congregations where they are not nurtured with Gospel but burdened with their own works or lack of them. Why wouldn't we share the clear preaching of Gospel with them?

As Lutherans, we also have the rich traditional liturgy. Liturgy is

something that everyone in a Muslim country is able to understand. If you have been to a mosque, you know that prayer and worship is very physical act comprising the whole body. Each and every movement has a specific meaning, even to the point that an outward act becomes more important than inward faith. In Turkey, the people are also aware of the old traditional churches, all of which have rich liturgy.

It's not one or two people who have come and stayed in the Church because of the liturgy. Liturgy extensively uses the Word of God in prayers and hymns. Liturgy expresses God's holiness, and in front of Him we confess our sins and sing our praises. Liturgy conveys His overwhelming

We are saved by Christ and given all these treasures in Christ, so that we can freely use them, rejoice about them and also in order that we may generously share them, both with our next door neighbors and with those who are far away.

⁷ Pikkert, 243.

grace, personally delivered to us in Absolution and Holy Communion. Liturgy teaches and guards the faith from generation to generation and binds us together with the saints across time and place.

Even if some may not feel the following as an advantage, I want to list that as Lutherans, we are sinners. We may never impress a pious Muslim with our highly ethical life, by expressing love or hospitality. Rather, he may exceed our expectations with his highly appreciable conduct of life. We are saints in Christ, but we know that we are constantly sinners in ourselves, and we are not going to be anything else in this world. That's the position we share deeply with every Muslim.

We all are sinners. We all need Jesus. Not just once but constantly. The opportunity to confess my sins and shortcomings and be forgiven by God makes the difference.

We are saved by Christ and given all these treasures in Christ, so that we can freely use them, rejoice about them

and also in order that we may generously share them, both with our next door neighbors and with those who are far away. We are not going to run out of Gospel by sharing it.

Now that we are celebrating the Reformation rightly through remembrance, repentance and rejoicing, I want to conclude with a quote from Luther: "Everyone must truly rejoice if someone could lead people from the Turkish faith and from the devil to God, from sin to righteousness. It would truly be the highest and most costly work."⁸ We are looking forward to the day when we will be rejoicing with our Lord, Jesus Christ and all the saints from every nation, tribe, people and

language — including Turkish.

We are not going to
run out of Gospel by
sharing it.

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⁸ Öberg, 485.