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For the Life of the World

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Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture verses are from the English Standard Version (ESV).

FEATURES

4 “A Strong Constitution”

Lawrence R. Rast Jr.

When 12 pastors and 14 congregations representing some 3,500 to 4,000 members came together in Chicago, Illinois, and signed a constitution establishing *Die Deutsche Evangelisch-Lutherische Synode von Missouri, Ohio und anderen Staaten* (“The German Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Missouri, Ohio, and Other States”), they were men individually of strong constitutions. And the constitution that they approved was robust as well.

7 The Clear Confession of the LCMS

Roland F. Ziegler

All confession is an unfolding of the basic confession: Jesus is Lord (1 Cor. 12:3). The preaching of the Gospel, of man’s redemption through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, creates faith in Christ. The believers answer to that Gospel by confessing Jesus as their Savior and Lord. There is only one Lord, and thus there is only one confession.

10 Is the LCMS Still Zealous for Missions?

Robert Zagore

After two years of COVID, many congregations in the LCMS face a challenging future. Before the pandemic, membership was down, and attendance declined. Half of our congregations experienced worship attendance of 100 or less. No one can even try to guess what attendance will be post COVID. Why the losses?

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Is the LCMS Still Zealous



Genuine mission zeal can't be separated from pure doctrine since only the Lord's Word (which is always true and pure) makes us His church or creates that zeal. We are a Synod founded by Sendlinge, Chippewa missionaries, and itinerant church planters. We are also those who crossed the Atlantic to preserve their doctrinal identity. Who can add to what the Lord has done (Ecc. 3:14)?

Is the LCMS still zealous for missions and, if so, what form does that zeal take?

After two years of COVID, many congregations in the LCMS face a challenging future. Before the pandemic, membership was down, and attendance declined. Half of our congregations experienced worship attendance of 100 or less. No one can even try to guess what attendance will be post COVID. Why the losses? Some of it is demographics. People moved to places where the LCMS does not have many churches. The baby boomers are dying off, and the next generations are smaller. Culture has turned against us.

The immigrant experience forged the LCMS. We are no longer an

immigrant church. The crucible of world wars against Germans insulated and necessitated Lutheran communities to stay together. That's no longer true.

Using gallows humor, we can point out that we are doing better than most denominations, but that somehow increases sadness. Above all of these, the accuser's voice rises: the LCMS is not missional. She puts doctrine above people, hasn't embraced cultural changes, and is becoming irrelevant to the younger generation.

Now, 175 years after our Synod's founding, it's an excellent time to evaluate the mission spirit of the

for Missions?

Robert Zagore

LCMS. How do we do that? Do the numbers demonstrate failure? Is tracking attendance a biblically proper way to judge mission zeal?

When the Lord called the prophet Isaiah into His heavenly courts, He asked, “Whom shall I send?” The prophet immediately declared his availability and missionary zeal. Who would expect that the Lord would tell Isaiah, “go and preach the truth, but no one will pay attention”? The prophet asked how long he had to do this. The Lord’s answer to him is, in effect, “until there is no one left to preach to.” In the Book of Acts, we find that, after three years of mission, Jesus went from having thousands of followers to 120. Indeed, membership numbers don’t tell the whole story.

In Revelation, the church of Philadelphia was tired, beaten down by circumstances and culture. But the Lord tells them, “I know your deeds. See, I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut. I know that you have little strength, yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name” (3:8).

Faithfulness that endures, even in times of diminishing numbers, is not mission failure, but that’s also not an excuse. There is plenty of evidence that we can do better at reaching out to our neighbors. Too often, we fail to do our duty. So, when voices within and without the Synod call us to repent, we should be thankful, faithful, and amend our sinful ways. We need to get to work.

However, there is the potential for a horrific error if we point to our efforts as the means of conversion and membership growth (1 Cor. 12:1). We can add to the error if we believe that the LCMS is responsible for whether hearers believe the Gospel or not (1 Cor. 2:14).

In the end, mission zeal is only valuable when it is a response to the Lord’s gifts (1 John 4). We must always guard against the error of the Pharisees, who traversed land and sea to make a single proselyte and then make them twice the child of hell as themselves (Matt. 23:15). The mission is only godly when the teaching is biblical.

We will always find shortcomings and sin in our efforts (Isaiah 64:6). It is also easy to make the opposite error. We can believe that our church, our successes,



our congregations, and our Synod is the work of our hands.

That is corruption so great that only the cross can save us from it. The cross forgives. It then is laid on us in the form of our suffering or loss. This may be the very reason the church always lives under the cross. Under the cross, we refocus our eyes on the Lord. We are declared righteous and learn to rely on the more excellent gifts and be wary of pride’s dangers. Such glorification is a

bequest, not a conquest. It took someone else’s blood to win it.

Genuine mission zeal can’t be separated from pure doctrine since only the Lord’s Word (which is always true and pure) makes us His church or creates that zeal. We are a Synod founded by *Sendlinge*, Chippewa missionaries, and itinerant church planters. We are also those who crossed the Atlantic to preserve their doctrinal identity. Who can add to what the Lord has done (Ecc. 3:14)?

But are we the same church? Our 175th anniversary as Synod is a good time to evaluate the question. A longitudinal look at our history will reveal more than a snapshot of membership numbers or mission programs at any point in time.

In a (pre-COVID) 2019 series of focus groups, the LCMS Office of National Mission (ONM) asked people about their most significant concerns that the church must address. Understood correctly, the answers were passionately missional. Will my children go to heaven? Will the church be around to minister to my friends, family, and me in my old age? Will LCMS schools survive? Will cultural changes or persecution change our commitment to God’s Word?

The concerns go beyond the self-interest of secular groups. They demonstrate a heart for the lost and a desire for the Gospel to reach them. Interestingly enough, a reading of *The Lutheran Witness*, synodical surveys, and convention resolutions indicate that these were identified concerns every decade in the past 50 years.

The ONM has recently finished a study of church planting by the LCMS in the U.S. since 1917. It included surveys

of convention actions, the 35 LCMS districts, and over 120 church planters. One can see how the Word has prompted worship and response with remarkable unplanned uniformity. The same study conducted in many other church bodies reveals a narrative of culture change and mission creep. But, in the LCMS mission work, we see incredible uniformity. In convention after convention over the past 105 years, these concerns are present: domestic mission work must reach out to the marginalized (e.g., immigrants, foreign language groups, the deaf and blind, Native Americans, and Black Americans, Hmong, Hispanics, etc.). Local congregations and local altars must be the rallying point for evangelism. Laypeople exercising their vocations are missionaries. We must navigate the tension between reaching the lost and nurturing the found. Mission and catechesis go hand in hand and must be lifelong. Missions must couple stewardship and strategy and not be bound to historical places but must be continually refreshed in new and fruitful fields. New technologies can serve our mission (e.g., radio, television, film, VBS, mission tracks, the World Wide Web, apps, and social media). We cannot lose sight of the mission to our neighbor. A Word and Sacrament ministry is the goal of every church plant.

The mission is symmetrical and the obvious outcome of God’s Word at work. The mission is drawn not from our personal or cultural passions but from God’s Word.

Seeing it within that historical context, one may safely say that the mission zeal continues into the present and even expands. As seen in the convention resolutions, there is a desire to carry out international missions but never neglect domestic missions. Internationally, the LCMS now has more missionaries in the field (100+ families) than at any other time in her

history. We have 30 alliance missionaries (members of sister synods serving in LCMS contexts) and work in more than 70 countries. All of our international missionaries have 100% of their funding in place by the zeal of our congregations and donors who (through the network support program) participate in the work and know the missionaries.

Domestically, the mission continues from every altar and pulpit. There has been a significant expansion of programs, training, and collaboration with synodical offices and those who work among ethnic groups, new immigrants, and mission work in areas with only a small LCMS presence. Our 2016 and 2019 LCMS Conventions passed seven mission priorities demonstrably formed from God’s Word that keeps our mission integrity and zeal.

Even so, there is yet another place for our zeal to find a mission outlet. That is in proclaiming the Gospel within the church. A 2018 ONM study of 1,000 church workers identified nine issues that most impacted their ability to carry out the mission. The first among those was to change the culture of the LCMS. The participants used phrases like “be more supportive,” “see each other as allies rather than competition,” and “be forgiving.” They spoke of isolation and desiring that someone would help reinforce their identity in Christ. Erring church workers and every other sinner need the same treatment: faithfully and lovingly proclaim the Word of God. We win nothing when the Law condemns until the Gospel heals. As we navigate all questions of our mission zeal and integrity, let’s not neglect our mission to our coworkers in the kingdom. 🏡

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Photo: Erik M. Lunsford/The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod

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