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Ablaze!: Strategy and Structure

NO LUTHERAN CONGREGATION is opposed to evangelism. It is commonly heard, "Our doors are open. Visitors are always welcome. When people come, we always try to make them feel at home, and we invite them to become a part of the life of the congregation." The problem is that this strategy does not work very well in the 21st century.

There was a time when church membership was important—politicians even put their church membership in their resumes and on their posters—but those days are largely over. You do not need to be a church member in the modern world; in fact it might be more advantageous not to be—in order to be regarded as a good citizen in the community. If we wait for people to come, we need to recognize that they are not coming.

No, today mission work, sharing the Good News of Jesus, must be a good deal more intentional. That is what the *Ablaze!* movement

is all about. Jesus says to us as he said to his first disciples, "Follow me and I will make you fishers of men" (Matthew 4:19). It is not enough for us to sit in our spiritual houses waiting for the fish to jump into the boat, but we must follow Jesus into the unbelieving world and be about the task of sharing the Good News he has given us.

From time to time there are disparaging comments about planning to do evangelism as though this were a human attempt to take over God's work. Lutherans do not accept this faith worldview. Lutherans are not Pentecostals, believing that it is God's work only when he bypasses all human means in order to perform some miracle. It is not that God could not act in such a way, but Lutherans believe that God uses means to accomplish his will. He has given his church the Means of Grace: the Word and the sacraments to get his work done in the world. Through water and the Word given in human language, through bread and wine and the Word, through the divinely inspired words of the Scriptures, God gets his work done in the world. Just as God uses the plans and words and works of farmers to feed the people of the world, so, Lutherans believe, he will use the plans and words and works of his people to share the Good News of Jesus.

In nearly every respect, the *Ablaze!* initiative is not new, not something that the LCMS never thought of before. Already in November

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of 1991, The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod’s Commission on Theology and Church Relations (CTCR) placed before the congregations of the Synod, “A Theological Statement of Mission.” That statement was written in response to a 1986 convention resolution, a resolution that is now nearly 20 years old, that asked the CTCR to “initiate, facilitate, and develop a theological Statement of Mission” which will “reflect the urgency, vitality, and joy of our historic confession of Christ’s forgiveness by grace alone through faith alone as taught in Scripture alone.” The time has come, said the Synod, “to support more fervently the biblical mandate to proclaim the scriptural Gospel of Jesus Christ for the life and salvation of people everywhere” (1986 Resolution 3–02; cf. Ephesians 5:16).¹ The recognition that the LCMS needs to be more active in sharing the Good News of Jesus is not something new.

At the same time, the “Statement” gently urged congregations and other entities of the Synod to formulate and make use of mission statements, recognizing the value of such statements for keeping organizations focused on their task. It did this in a context that recognized that the “Synod’s request for a ‘Theological Statement of Mission’ manifests its desire to move forward resolutely and fervently in proclaiming the Gospel so that the lost may be found and God’s people may be empowered for their witness and service.”²

Mindful of the value of mission statements and at the same time aware of the self-aggrandizing dangers of such statements, LCMS World Mission attempted to carefully craft a mission statement to guide and direct its own activities until 2017, the 500th anniversary of the Reformation. This statement said,

Praying to the Lord of the harvest, LCMS World Mission, in collaboration with its North American and worldwide partners will share the Good News of Jesus with 100 million unreached and uncommitted people by 2017, the 500th anniversary of the Reformation.

Needless to say, an organization’s purpose statement focuses on what the organization does and needs to do. It does not say everything that could be said, and it is certainly not a one-

sentence-long theological treatise. Such statements are written in a context of theology and practice and should be read within and as supportive of that theology and practice.

As a shorthand way of talking about this immense task which the leadership of LCMS World Mission believed that God had led them to, staff members began to look for a term that could wrap up these ideas, and at the same time, encourage the congregations and their members to grow in their commitment to the evangelistic task. After much discussion and prayer, LCMS World Mission chose the term “ablaze,” and further deliberations and prayer led to the graphic design for *Ablaze!*, so well received in LCMS circles.

These ideas grew in popularity and were presented to the Missouri Synod’s convention in 2004 and were overwhelmingly embraced. If one looks at the memorials submitted to the convention, the memorial which appears to have influenced the convention floor committee most was that submitted by historic Trinity Lutheran Church in St. Louis, Dr. C.F.W. Walther’s congregation (1994 Convention Overture 1–04). That is entirely fitting, for Dr. Walther, the first president of the LCMS and himself an immigrant from Germany, loved the United States and rejoiced in the unprecedented opportunities that were available in this country to share the Good News of Jesus in all its truth and purity. At the same time, he recognized the enormous spiritual needs in this country, especially among new immigrants, and he constantly urged all Lutherans, laypeople and pastors, to be about the missionary task. In important ways, the *Ablaze!* initiative is merely an attempt to regain the missionary zeal of that first LCMS generation.

Not only did the 2004 convention accept the goal of attempting to touch the lives of 100 million people with the Good News of Jesus, but it took upon itself additional goals of establishing 2,000 new LCMS congregations by 2017 (2004 Resolution 1–05A), to expand cross-cultural work at home and abroad (2004 Resolution 1–01A), and to raise \$100 million to enable the LCMS to carry out the mission work it needed to do (2004 Resolution 1–04). Perhaps the most significant goal of all was the convention’s resolution that every LCMS

congregation and institution should grow in its understanding of itself as a mission outpost, as a community of believers in the midst of a wilderness of unbelief, prepared to go out into that wilderness to share the life-giving Good News of Jesus. (2004 Resolution 1-02).

With these resolutions, the *Ablaze!* initiative changed from a vision held by LCMS World Mission into an idea that belongs to the entire LCMS. While the convention resolutions made it clear that the Synod holds LCMS World Mission accountable for assisting the Synod to reach some of the Synod's *Ablaze!* goals, the same resolutions made it clear that LCMS World Mission is but one of the players in the *Ablaze!* movement with the congregations and their members playing the major roles.

What is perhaps most significantly different about the *Ablaze!* initiative is the recognition that the passing of fine, well-meaning, theologically correct statements about mission is not enough. Attention must be paid to the implementation of those statements. The Synod convention asked LCMS World Mission to serve as the custodian of the *Ablaze!* vision, providing direction in some cases and always keeping the Synod focused on the task.

What is LCMS World Mission's role in bringing about this change?

SINCE I AM WRITING this article close to the celebration of D-Day, June 6, please allow me to use a military analogy.

If General Eisenhower had planned the Normandy invasion and sent his forces into battle with only the insight that Germany was northeast of France, it is unlikely that Allied forces would have prevailed, no matter how great their numbers, and there is no doubt that the waste of soldiers' lives would have been horrific.

Eisenhower was a military genius, and his genius lay in his ability to keep a huge organization focused on a single objective, the defeat of Nazi Germany, and in his ability to keep a very diverse organization—separate branches of service, various nationalities and radically diverse ideologies—glued together, talking to one another and making plans for the benefit of the entire effort. General Eisenhower, certainly, and even the members of his staff did not take part in all of the planning conversations nor

did they even know all of the conversations and their outcomes. Battles would be fought in a whole range of settings using an enormous array of weaponry, and tactical decisions beyond counting would need to be made by people in the field. Nevertheless, because of clearly articulated and widely accepted goals, countless people, whose names no one knows, made the right decisions that led to victory in Europe.

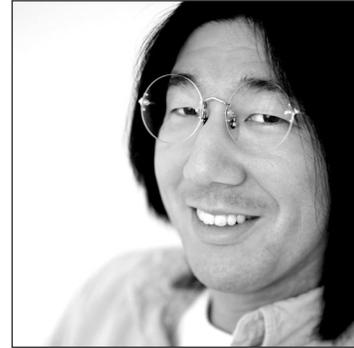
LCMS World Mission faces a similar leadership challenge. In some ways, its challenges are more daunting than those that faced Eisenhower. Eisenhower had the legal authority that went with his appointment as supreme commander, and he had complete access to the resources of the America war machine. Since the LCMS is not a hierarchically organized church body, and since most of the resources contributed by the members of the church are expended at the congregational and district levels, LCMS World Mission does not have levers of power to constrain pastors or congregations and their members to do anything that they do not want to do. The *Ablaze!* effort in the LCMS will be accomplished by a coalition of the willing.

LCMS World Mission would have it no other way. It would be entirely inappropriate to use secular power with its fear of punishment or hope of reward to accomplish what is a spiritual task. As the LCMS goes about its work, we can be confident that the Holy Spirit will be at work shaping people's hearts and minds so that they are prepared to take part in the missionary task.

When the *Ablaze!* initiative reaches its goals, what will the LCMS world look like?

IF WE THINK ABOUT THE GOALS set by the 2004 Synod convention in a systematic way, they might look like the following.

The overarching goal: Lutheran Christians both in the United States and around the world, as a result of the Spirit working in their hearts and minds, have attached such importance to the treasure they have in the Good News of Jesus, and are so dedicated in the use of the resources that God has given them to address the needs of the world, that the result is they are actively involved in sharing the Good News of Jesus with 100 million people by 2017, the 500th anniversary of the Reformation.



In order to accomplish a goal of this size, the Synod anticipated that the following steps would need to be taken.

Expand cross-cultural work at home and abroad

- By raising the consciousness of congregations to their mission responsibilities through prayer and the study of the Scriptures
- By involving congregations and other entities in encouraging individuals to learn the languages and cultures of the immigrant people around them

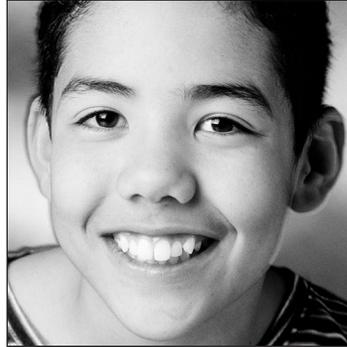
When this resolution is fully implemented, what might the LCMS look like in 2017?

Recognizing that lack of concern for the lost is essentially a spiritual problem, the church recognizes that change will be brought about through spiritual means. Through Word and sacraments the people of God grow in their understanding of their relationship with God and their responsibilities toward their neighbor. People in LCMS congregations become involved in prayer and Bible study leading to the conclusion that they need to do something about the lost people around them and throughout the world. A significant number of people reach the conclusion that we Christians cannot wait until immigrants become like us. Instead, as people charged to share the Good

News of Jesus, we must learn how to address immigrant communities on their own terms. The Synod's institutions, as well as the pastors and congregations who make up the Synod, work together to find ways to involve everyone in sharing the Good News of Jesus and to equip people to carry out these tasks.

The most important insight of this resolution is recognizing that LCMS laypeople play a role that is key to the success of the *Ablaze!* movement. To the extent that the people of God recognize the need of the world and are passionately and creatively involved in sharing the Good News of Jesus, the *Ablaze!* initiative will make its contribution to the life of the Church.

In the same way, it is immediately apparent that the *Ablaze!* movement provides opportunity for involvement from a broad range of people and institutions. Congregations that are blessed with schools and teachers will be seeking ways to involve students and their parents in sharing the Good News of Jesus. Those who are involved in Lutheran higher education will intentionally prepare teachers who will be involved in the task of sharing the Good News of Jesus with those who do not know him and taking part in congregational efforts to accomplish that task. Just as significantly, Lutheran university professors will be heavily involved



in supplying the guidance that the church needs to address intelligently the needs of the modern world.

Encourage every LCMS congregation and institution to see itself as a mission outpost, understanding itself as a community of believers who have the task of entering the wilderness of unbelief and sharing the Good News of Jesus.

- By encouraging pastors, teachers, and other professional workers to encourage and equip the laity to see themselves as missionaries sent out by that mission outpost
- By preparing resources to help congregations carry out their equipping tasks
- By encouraging every congregation to adopt at least one new mission goal concentrating on the unreached of its own community

By 2017, LCMS congregations are to be served by professional church workers who feel completely comfortable leading the congregation's involvement in evangelism. Through personal involvement, they are involved in the evangelistic work of the church, modeling intentional interaction with the unbelieving world for the purpose of sharing the Good News of Jesus. At the same time, their purpose is not to do the work of sharing the Good News of Jesus for the congregation but to *model* the behavior

that the Lord of the Church expects of every member of the congregation and to multiply the number of people involved in the missionary task. In response, the congregation and its leadership, guided by the Spirit, have thought about how to be involved in sharing the Good News of Jesus in its local setting (what are the needs of the local unbelieving community and what resources does the congregation have to meet those needs?) and has developed a targeted and innovative plan of its own to get involved in that task. The congregation feels such strong ownership of that task that it has set evangelism goals and is working toward accomplishing those goals.

A system in which a congregation calls a pastor so that he can do the congregation's work for them, calls a Director of Christian Education (DCE) so that the educational work of the church can be done for them, or calls a Director of Christian Outreach (DCO) so that a professional can share the Good News of Jesus cannot work. Training of professional church workers at all levels—pastors, DCEs, DCOs, deaconesses, family life ministry leaders, music ministry leaders, and lay ministers—will emphasize the tremendous reservoir of talent that exists in the people of every Lutheran congregation and the importance of mobilizing that talent in support of the congregation's

missionary task. Particularly important will be training that prepares church professionals to assist in analyzing the need for change and identifying and working through the changes that need to be made.

Very likely, some congregations will find that their present structures do not serve them well as they respond to present and future challenges. They may have been able to function perfectly well when they were a part of Judea, serving people of a culture similar to their own, but now they find themselves living in Samaria where the people are a bit different or among people from the ends of the earth. All kinds of changes in the church's life will need to take place—some of them painful—as traditional ways of life are modified or discarded in order that the unchanging Good News of Jesus might be proclaimed in all of its truth and purity in a changed setting.

In such contexts, sharing the Good News of Jesus, very likely, will not be limited to words about Jesus but will include deeds of loving service performed in Jesus' name. Creative responses will be required, such as immigration assistance programs and English-as-Second-Language classes. The people of God are amazingly creative once they recognize the extent of human need.

Share the Good News of Jesus with 50 million unreached and uncommitted people in the United States (and by implication with 50 million people around the world) and establish 2,000 new congregations in the United States by 2017.

- LCMS partner churches around the world and LCMS World Mission establish and work toward a goal of an additional 3,000 congregations worldwide.

It is the work of Lutheran Christians (and all Christians, for that matter) to share the Good News of Jesus. It is the work of the Holy Spirit to use the Word that is shared to create faith in the hearts and minds of people. If the Good News of Jesus is shared, there will be new converts to faith in Jesus. New converts, called and gathered by the Spirit, will seek fellowship with other believers; they will want to grow through Word and sacrament. As a result, existing congregations will grow, and new

congregations—lots of them—will be formed. When longtime Lutherans are exposed to new believers, when they hear the stories that illustrate that faith in Jesus makes a difference in people's lives and gives hope in a hopeless world, their joyful and confident participation in the mission task will increase.

If the entire \$100 million the Synod has committed itself to raise were spent on beginning 2,000 new congregations in the United States, the money (about \$50,000 per congregation) would not be sufficient using traditional methods. However, since LCMS members annually contribute more than \$1 billion to their congregations, the congregations and their members will find a way to get the job done. The Lutheran Church Extension Fund will play a critical role in helping the church with the resources it needs to grow.

The adoption of this goal implies, however, that the Synod at all levels is prepared to reconsider its spending priorities and particularly the way it does mission work at home and abroad. It is not only a matter of money, but serious attention will need to be given to the question of how pastoral leadership is trained and provided to so many congregations arising in a relatively short time. When one considers that the major growth in population in the United States is taking place outside of the Midwestern Lutheran heartland, serious soul-searching will need to take place as the church decides where the need to share the Good News of Jesus is greatest and where new congregations need to be planted and grow.

Worldwide, no one knows precisely what the future will bring, but if present trends continue, LCMS World Mission's efforts will be concentrated in Africa and Asia. These are the areas of the world where there are enormous numbers of people who have never heard the Good News of Jesus, but are willing—even anxious—to hear that Good News. Because of growing anti-Western sentiment around the world, it is unlikely that a missionary family will be able to spend a lifetime of service planting the church among a particular people group. LCMS World Mission's evangelistic efforts will be concentrated among those people who will have no opportunity to hear the Good News of Jesus unless someone comes from the outside

to share that message. The church that grows up will depend on local leadership from the beginning, and the role of LCMS missionaries will concentrate on providing training for that local leadership. LCMS mission work for the most part will be done in cooperation with the partner churches around the world who identify the areas where mission work needs to be done and are also able to deploy their resources in support of the work.

At the same time, opportunities for congregations to be involved in international mission work will surely increase. American congregations will be involved in sending short- and long-term volunteers to provide the expertise needed on foreign fields and to grow in their own understanding of the cross-cultural missionary task.

Raise \$100 million beyond the Synod's current level of giving to finance new mission work around the world.

- About 50 percent of the funds available will be used to support work in North America and 50 percent to support work in the rest of the world.

By 2017, through the power of the Spirit, the congregations and their members have grown in their joy in sharing the Good News of Jesus. As a result, they are heavily involved, directly and indirectly, in the efforts of their own congregation to share the Good News of Jesus. They have recognized the importance of the work their church is doing in other parts of the United States and around the world and are supportive of that work. They work as volunteers where needed, and they support those who are working in their place.

The congregations and their members recognize that although \$100 million sounds like a great deal of money, when stretched over a period of at least a decade, and when directed at the needs of the whole world, it will not be enough to make much of a dent in everything that must be done. It is not a simple matter that the Synod and its members will be able to do everything that they are doing now and the \$100 million will enable the church to do a whole lot more. The needs of our world are infinite; the people and financial resources available to the church at any given time are

always finite. Choices will need to be made. Priorities will need to be set.

What, then, is LCMS World Mission's role in the Ablaze! initiative?

IN MATTERS AS IMPORTANT as addressing the unbelieving world with the Good News of Jesus, the support of the leadership of the church is critically important. If President Roosevelt had announced one agenda while General Eisenhower had announced another, victory in Europe would have been an impossibility.

Especially significant here is President Gerald Kieschnick's involvement in the *Ablaze!* movement. In his inaugural address, before he (or anyone else) was even aware that LCMS World Mission was beginning to consider the challenge of reaching 100 million uncommitted and unbelieving people, he urged the LCMS to make the evangelization of the world its first priority. Since that time he has been a tireless, unwavering proponent of the *Ablaze!* initiative, speaking with passion to district conventions and in countless other settings of the need for Lutheran Christians to be intentionally involved in what he describes as the "Critical Event": the sharing of the Good News of Jesus with an unreached or uncommitted person to the extent that it provokes a response from the person addressed.

Particularly significant was his recognition that some congregations and their members were already involved in meeting *Ablaze!* goals before the *Ablaze!* movement came along to give a name to their efforts. They had already analyzed the problems and made their plans for sharing the Good News of Jesus. The President's Office called together congregations that were willing to teach and congregations that were willing to learn in what were called "Igniting Congregations," events designed to help congregations and their members get started on sharing the Good News of Jesus.

Subsequently, LCMS World Mission and the President's Office—sometimes together and sometimes separately—have held meetings with district officials, with Lutheran Hour Ministries and the Lutheran Women's Missionary League, with Recognized Service Organizations, with mission societies, and with countless others interested in missions and in the future of the LCMS, to discuss involvement in the *Ablaze!*



movement. As one might expect at this stage of the introduction of a new idea, there are lots of questions, and many are asking, "How can we be appropriately involved?" Answers are being found, and the coalition of the willing is growing.

As can be seen from the above descriptions of the future, this is only the beginning. LCMS World Mission does not have the answer to all of the challenges recognized above—let alone to the countless others that are certain to arise—but we can be confident there are people in the LCMS whom God has guided to the needed answers. People will come together as individuals and as representatives of entities to foster the vision of an LCMS active at all levels in sharing the Good News of Jesus. It is LCMS World Mission's privilege to serve as the glue that holds people together and helps them to focus on the task that needs to be done.

Above all, those involved in the *Ablaze!* initiative need to remember that the church is dealing with a spiritual problem. On the one hand, there is a loss of confidence in many places that the Good News of Jesus is something worth sharing. The pervasive anti-Christian propaganda that says that Christians are divisive and that their sharing of the Good News infringes the rights of others has had its effect on Lutheran Christians. On the other hand, all too many Lutherans are convinced that they cannot accurately explain what they believe, and so they are mentally and emotionally prepared to say nothing.

This is not a problem that can be addressed through political means or through changes in structure (although structures can promote or hinder the sharing of the Good News of Jesus). Form always follows function. We need to be clear what the Church is about, and the *Ablaze!* initiative can help us to gain the clarity. Spiritual problems must be addressed through spiritual means.

Challenging times are ahead for the LCMS, but these will be exciting times as well. What makes this a time of special joy is that no one can question that this is the work that Jesus wants his people to be about. At the same time, this is the work that he specifically promised that he would accompany. "Then Jesus came to them and said, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age'" (Matthew 28:18-20). We may be confident that our Lord will bless us on the journey.

Notes

- 1 Commission on Theology and Church Relations, *A Theological Statement of Mission*. St. Louis: Commission on Theology and Church Relations, 1991, p. 3.
- 2 *A Theological Statement of Mission*, p. 4.

