

# Mission of the ELCA in the First Decade of the Third Millennium

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As we consider the mission of the ELCA in the first decade of the third millennium, we need to be clear about our theological centre--the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It needs to be articulated in a Trinitarian way. Moreover, it needs to be articulated in a way that provides critical criteria for evaluating what we say is our mission, vision, and consequent goals, strategies, and programmes for implementation. In other words, we should be able to ask about how God is portrayed in those various facets, and what images of the church are explicit and implicit in what we say the Gospel is. For example, we need to have some critical theological criteria to determine how to assess what we find when we ask questions such as:

- Are we presenting God alone as the source of life, wholeness, healing, justice, peace and reconciliation?
- Or, have we presented a synergistic way?
- Is Jesus Christ--his incarnation, life, death and resurrection--necessary to what we say about God, or is he dispensable?
- Is the Holy Spirit presented as being more like the human spirit, or is the Holy Spirit "the Lord, the giver of life...".?
- Is the Church superior to the reign or rule of God, or is it the instrument of the reign or rule of God?
- Is there an indispensable place humbly to invite others to faith in Jesus Christ, knowing that faith comes through the Spirit in the hearing of the Word?
- How might we respect our neighbours of other faiths and work together to ensure that there is a level playing field for all?
- Do we have we a comprehensive a view of 'justice' as God's gift and doing, and, consequently and necessarily, of the responsibilities and tasks placed upon us as coming from God godself?
- Have we lifted up and celebrated what people can do--the best they can in their circumstances--with all the vulnerability and suffering that it costs?
- Or, is there a dehumanising stratification which 'blesses' some and withholds the 'blessing' of others?
- Is our mission grounded in Scripture as the norm? This means more than simply sprinkling what we say with some verses from the Bible.

With these and similar questions in mind, let me call our attention to some crucial theological non-negotiables.

## **A. Justification by grace alone, through faith alone, on account of Christ alone!**

The ELCA should be characterised by and known as a church, which, in its congregational life and through its various expressions as a church, is centred in God's unconditional act of

justifying sinners through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. As a church of the Reformation, its heritage should be known unmistakably, in word and deed. This would mean that the Gospel it proclaims is in radical contrast to the message of the contemporary US culture. Before God, no one ultimately can make herself/himself right. Justification by grace alone, through faith alone, on account of Jesus Christ alone is what this church is about. But it is not simply because of our Reformation heritage that we should have such a centre and accent. Above all, it is on account of our conviction that the message of God's unconditional act of justifying sinners through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is the Gospel.

### **B. The Context of the Globalisation of US Culture**

We need to be cognizant of the fact that the ELCA exists in a cultural milieu that is increasingly becoming the globalized culture in which everything can be and is becoming a commodity. There is no 'free lunch'. When we juxtapose the dominant message of the culture that there is no free lunch to the Gospel of justification by grace through faith in Christ, there is an unmistakable dissonance. The two do not fit together. In a real sense, this is "Christ against culture," to use H. Richard Niebuhr's schematisation (Christ and Culture). The ELCA (with all Christians) is called to announce the living message of the Gospel that doesn't fit the culture of commodification and consumerism. In terms of commodification, everything can be and is becoming commodified. This includes religion and religious goods. In a paradoxical way, we may ask ourselves, what sort of religious 'product' are we sharing, and for and by which we wish to be known? Of course, this may not be the way we would like to be described--as offering a 'product', even a 'religious' product or commodity--but there is the perception that what we stand for, what we represent, what we wish to share... can be described in 'commodity' language. This perception is inevitable, given the context in which we live. In a commodified world, purchasing power is power. Who is the Lord? The crucified and risen One or the market or modern 'Caesars'?

Here, let me add that Lutheran Christians in the USA are caught up in the dilemma of wanting to be local and national in our Christian faith and life, while we live in the definitive culture that is shaping the global cultural arena. In a way, that is to cherish and uphold a Christian faith that is irrelevant to the global US American tapestry that is a decisive bearer of the Christian faith, both within and beyond the USA. There is no 'culture-free' Christianity! In a curious way, the globalisation of US American capitalism may be a larva Dei (mask of God) that both hides and reveals, even as it propels us towards the essential catholicity of the Christian faith and the church. We cannot be the church and not keep central the universality of the church on account of the one Lord, one Gospel....

### **C. The Gospel is Proclaimed, Lived, and Confessed in the face of Religious and Non-Religious Alternatives**

When we articulate, when we confess, when we live, when we point to this Gospel of justification, we have to be very cognizant that we are doing so in a world of religious and non-religious alternatives. We are not operating in a vacuum. There are religious worlds. In the intra-Christian context, there are variations in the images of the religious world. In the inter-religious context, there are different religious worlds and anticipated futures. There are as well non-religious alternatives in the form of secularism. Secularism, too, must be taken into account. I

have become increasingly convinced that in so many ways 'perception is reality'. I don't agree with this, but the fact is that is the case. How and what people are 'made' to perceive is what constitutes reality for them.

Of crucial importance, we need to ask: Over the next 10 years (and beyond) what kind of symbolic world do we wish to present as the 'living, experientiable reality of the ELCA? Of course, it is a symbolic world of justification by grace alone, through faith alone, on account of Christ alone. It is a symbolic world in which we know that the church and its message can easily become a commodity.

Now, the ELCA is also called to be a church that really believes and practices the truth that every Christian is called to be a witness to Jesus Christ. We can witness, and are called to witness, in a variety of ways. At all levels, the matter of being a witness to Jesus Christ in the pew, out of the pew, in secular life, in religious life, however we may describe it, is a non-negotiable. This should be an unmistakable hallmark of who we are.

#### **D. Augsburg Confession, Article VII--Word and Sacrament**

By heritage--a church born in the 16th century--we are a church of Word and Sacrament. In our preaching and in our sacramental life, in which the Word, Jesus Christ, is mediated and made present and real, in a variety of ways, both in worship and outside of worship, it should be made clear that we are a church of Word and Sacrament.

#### **E. To Whom Are We Sent? To Whom Should We Go? Whom Should We Invite?**

The Gospel of Jesus Christ calls us to be committed, in word and deed, in a fundamental way to 'mixed' congregations, wherever that might be possible--that is, wherever the communities in which our congregations exist are 'mixed'. The early church in the very first century, C.E., faced the question of whether being a church made up of essentially Jewish people is what the Christian church is all about. The crucial question was: If one was not Jewish, then does one have to become like a Jew in order to be an authentic follower of Jesus Christ? In different ways this question continues to be our question today and will continue to be our question in the future. We are to think about the ways we go about our outreach in evangelism, the ways we go about ordering our life as worshipping communities..., and be very intentional in declaring in word and life that, because of the very nature of the Gospel, we place ourselves among and humbly call people from the four corners of the earth. This is a crucial biblical image which needs to be lifted up again and again. We are a people who recognise that you don't have to be special in terms of any 'natural' or human-made characteristic in order to announce the forgiving love of God in Jesus Christ. This applies equally to the calling of people to faith in and witness to Jesus Christ. This kind of symbolic world should become more and more not just a commitment of our church but a reality in our congregations and other expressions of the ELCA.

We know that no structure is ontological. The Gospel alone, and not any other structure, is to constitute the essence of our being. We are constituted by who we are called to be in Jesus Christ. All other structures do not constitute the essence of our identity, which we are given in

our Baptism. Of course, penultimate structures are means through which the Living Word is mediated through the Holy Spirit.

When we think about ourselves as a community named after Jesus Christ, the crucified and risen One, we should say that there is something peculiar about every Lutheran congregation: there is a family resemblance that points to our identity in the crucified and risen Jesus Christ in us and in our midst. That resemblance would have to do with the One to whom we belong and the nature of the hospitality we extend and practice in his Name to whomever.... We would want to invite and challenge our congregations and the other expressions of the ELCA to make such a commitment. This would mean, as I think about it, that we would risk being so welcoming in the name of Jesus Christ that our congregations may not simply look like what they use to look like. The hope is that some more will become more like the people of the communities in which they exist. Now that is practising a kind of basic but radical hospitality in the name of Jesus Christ.

Of course, it is God the Holy Spirit who calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian church, even as the Spirit calls people to faith in Jesus Christ and empowers them for mission. We must therefore live in expectation to see what God is doing in us, through us and among us and beyond. People may in fact believe there is good news for all and therefore for them as well. Isn't it humbling and thrilling to hear people say to us and to others, "If this is the good news I want to be part of the community that is identified with that good news." This may mean that our congregations can't remain ethnically homogenous. The impetus of the Gospel is transform who we are.

Finally, since "justification and justice stand at the heart of the Gospel" (Wartburg Seminary Mission Statement), then the pursuit of justice in a variety of ways and expressions of the ELCA is not a 'maybe' but is inherent in our life and message. We seem so ill-prepared for this new globalised world in which there is one 'hyper' power. How do we navigate the choppy waters of divisiveness and demonisation in which the affirmation of an ethical position based on a valid biblical, theological, and pastoral basis is a rejection of an opposite position, which, also, is based on a different but valid biblical, theological, and pastoral basis? What happens when a de facto mutual excommunication of members by one another means that there is no good news of Jesus Christ to be shared or heard? How do we use the hurts and pains, suffering and brokenness in evangelical ways? What a privilege and gift it is to be part of this mission. Thanks so very much!