

THE MISSION OF THE EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH IN AMERICA,
SERVING EASTERN WASHINGTON, IDAHO, AND WESTERN WYOMING.

For the last two years the leadership of our synod has been at work to recall ourselves to the great mission of the Christian faith. In our study we have rediscovered the power given by God in both the Great Commandment to love (Matthew 22:37-39) and in the Great Commission to share (Matthew 28:19-20) what we have come to trust.

We have set “Guiding Principles” to lead us in this work. By this study, and the poster your congregation has received, we want to share these Guiding Principles and invite your congregation into our conversation.

We hope that through this conversation you will set Guiding Principles to guide your own local mission. We believe such intentionality has the power to renew our call and revitalize our ministry in those places where we have lapsed into “business as usual” or succumbed to uncertainty and terror ourselves. Where this mission is already being pursued with vitality and hope we’d like to borrow and share your ideas with other congregations!

A caveat: In the world of politics they say that “patriotism is the last bastion of the scoundrel.” The pursuit of “mission” can function the same way in the church and paper-over our deep resistance. In very real ways our pursuit of mission must begin with a revitalization of and recommitment to our own faith amidst all the terrors of the world. New commitment to worship, prayer, bible study, Christian service, and to personal sharing must accompany our efforts. We hope that this study may aid you in this call. This is holy work.

--Pr. Martin Wells

A MODEL FOR THE SESSIONS:

Gather in a comfortable environment where restroom facilities, amenities like coffee or tea, nametags for each person, bibles, a hymnal, and copies of the study are available.

Agree among yourselves how leadership for the sessions will be handled. Uncertainty about expectations for time can be addressed by setting a firm time to gather and a time to close. At each session choose someone to act as the host and someone to act as the convener of the conversation. Assign someone to open and close the session with patient prayer. Invite participants to “clear the air” by describing the circumstances of their day so that stresses and strains can be accounted for. You might also them to share where they have encountered God that day. At the end of each session it will be appropriate to ask for “thanksgivings,” those ways in which God is moving in participants to breathe new life.

As the sessions progress each is invited to share how they are being affected by the conversation, especially if fear has been aroused. Common signs of fear include anger

and a desire to quit the study. This is dangerous study! God is calling us into life-changing ways of being in the world!

Confidence is built when people understand what's expected of them. Though we hope everyone will speak, some are more comfortable with that than others. Be patient and kind to one another.

We hope this study might be used by Sunday morning classes, by cottage groups, by choirs or other gatherings of members, by men's groups and women's circles. Resources for use with children and youth groups are included, prepared by Pastor Helga Jansons. The rest of the material is the work of Bishop Wells, writing as chief missionary of the synod.

The sole desire of these studies is a deepening and revitalization of personal faith and corporate mission as the Body of Christ. God be with you!

A Word about Guiding Principles:

Two books have influenced the choice of this method for identifying and encouraging revitalized mission. Kelly Fryer's book, "Reclaiming the "L" Word," and Dave Daubert's book, "Living Lutheran: Renewing *Your* Congregation," both address the strategy of guiding principles. Both books are available from Augsburg/Fortress or The Lutheran Book Parlor in Spokane. Leaders of the congregation should read one or the other of these books so that the overall purpose of this form of study and mission-setting is understood.

As the enclosed poster depicts, the Guiding Principles for the Eastern Washington and Idaho Synod are:

Jesus, First, Last, and Always
Gratitude, Gratitude!
No Fear! Transformation!
Miracles of Hope
Yes, Everybody Come!
Come, Lord Jesus.

One session will be devoted to each of these principles. We hope that you will hang the poster in a prominent place in the church building, accompanied by the brief explanation of these principles. Thanks again to Sandy Stone for the beautiful artwork on the poster.

Other resources will be mentioned in an appendix. Of all these resources none has been more important than "The Evangelizing Church: A Lutheran Contribution," edited by Richard Bliese and Craig Van Gelder, (Augsburg Fortress, 2005). Leaders will benefit from reading chapters 1-4 and the Epilogue. This book would make a fine follow-on study to these materials.

SESSION 1: Jesus: First, Last, and Always

INTRODUCTION

God is on a mission.

God has been on a mission from the beginning.

“In the beginning” God’s mission was Creation and the creation of companions, friends for the journey of life.

That didn’t go so well.

So God went on a mission.

God created a people that from the beginning God intended would bear God’s own image in the world.

God enlisted helpers in Abraham and Sarah and made a promise to the people.

God delivered the people for an Exodus journey.

God trained the people on the Exodus journey with a way of life.

And then God turned the people free again, free to inhabit the Promised Land.

That didn’t go so well.

So God went on another mission.

This time God took his people back to school in Babylon. It was a hard place, but the people had only one thing to do: Remember God and God’s mission.

When they had been through catechism again, God sent the people back to Jerusalem to be a light to the nations.

That didn’t go so well.

So God adopted a new strategy, leaving in place the covenant with Israel while issuing a new covenant, a new promise. This time God would risk it all, risking God’s own flesh, his Son.

Jesus was God’s mission, God’s Word sent forth for the final healing of the nations.

From God’s perspective everything was set right in Jesus, though the cost was high, Jesus’ life.

God’s mission would not be lost this time; God saw to that.

In resurrection God declared Peace and granted Peace to all who sought it.

Jesus brought this Peace to the disciples despite their fear.

Jesus told them to wait until the right time for the fullness of this Life and their own mission.

At the right time, God shared the mission.

At Pentecost God breathed the mission of reconciliation on the Disciples.

Jesus sent them out, just as he still sends us out, accompanied by his Spirit.

The mission of God is Peace and reconciliation with Life.

It means new companionship with God.

In Jesus God gave us this Way, this Truth, this Life.

It's always about Jesus, isn't it? He is first, the last, the always of God.

Jesus is first:

- the first born of all creation (Colossians 1:15)
- Jesus is the heir of God (Luke 9:35)
- Jesus is Lord and "Lord of the Nations," See Evangelical Lutheran Worship (ELW) 838 vs. 4
- Jesus is teacher, friend, Good Shepherd

Jesus is last:

- Jesus is the "Way," meaning Jesus is identified as the final path
- Jesus' death is the final satisfaction for human sin
- Jesus is the Daystar, the everlasting brightness of God
Here is ELW 826, vs. 5
"Thine the glory in the night, no more dying only light
Thine the river thine the tree then the Lamb eternally
Then the holy holy holy celebration jubilee
Thine the splendor thine the brightness only thee only thee"

Jesus is always:

- Jesus is the encompassing One, the fullness of God, Colossians 1:19
- Jesus is always present through the Holy Spirit (John 14:25-26)
- Jesus is ever-present: "Lo I am with you always" (Matthew 28:20)
- Jesus is the most fascinating and attractive figure in human history.
"Now thank we all our God...for thus it was, is now, and shall be evermore."
ELW 839, vs. 3.

Our mission as the ancestors of the disciples is the same mission God gave to Jesus. "Make it right," God said. "You have the power to restore Life by the gift of Jesus, for my people and for all people."

God's mission has become our mission: The reconciliation of defiant and lost people with God, by way of Jesus. This is for All people, for All of life. "God's passion is for the gospel to go *everywhere* so that *everyone* might be invited to receive redemption that relates to *everything*." (Italics are the author's, Craig Van Gelder, in "The Evangelizing Church," p. 52.)

God hopes it makes our hearts glad to have such powerful love to share.

God hopes it makes our lives purposeful, that we know ourselves as "called!"

God hopes our lives are thanksgiving, praise, and mission.

God's mission has become our mission. As the Body of Christ, we ARE God's mission!

OUR MISSION TODAY

What is the situation—the context—in which we are called to be God’s mission?

Maybe it has always been this way, but today it seems particularly true:

We live in a terrified world.

Maybe it is the fact that we have news 24/7 from around the world, but our day seems unique in its capacity to terrorize. **So many people live in fear!**

--Terrorists/terrorism: The whole point is to exhaust us with fear, uncertainty.

--Through new research vistas in science are opening leaving us with confusing new choices about life and death. We are terrorized by our lack of wisdom.

--Breakthroughs in medicine answer prayers for new healing but the costs of these advances are breaking our health care budget. Do we bust the household budget with new insurance policies today or risk the cost of throwing ourselves on the mercy of a disintegrating health care system?

--No one likes to be taxed, but closing our eyes to real costs has left us without adequate savings to cover Social Security obligations of the future. Fewer than 30% have any kind of pension to assist with retirement. Baby-boomers are moving into a time of deep uncertainty and the succeeding generations are paralyzed by the funding requirements they are expected to meet, let alone their own “social” security.

--Without the heart or discipline to tax ourselves at realistic levels, we have run up huge budget deficits that the world is starting to balk at ignoring. Some of us are terrified that the dollar may finally be devalued because of our debt.

--Enjoying our low cost oil has led us to a society utterly dependent on oil and we are halfway through the world’s known supply. China and India are just entering the competition for the remaining oil. Are we in the last generation of internal combustion engines? But our cities are built for cars!

--Enjoying our consumer goods, we have left a “carbon footprint” that is unsustainable and taxing the environment beyond its replenishing capacity. What are the implications of global warming?

--Even Jesus’ words seem terrifying: “Woe to you who are rich now, for you have received your consolation.” (Luke 6:24). What if this is as good as it gets?

--Religion itself is contributing to the terror. 20 major wars are currently underway, most of them bearing the mark of religious intolerance. Not a few of us are terrorized by the prospect of a “clash of civilizations” that may pit Islam and Christianity against one another. Do the great faiths of the world bear the wisdom to avoid this? How do we attract the young who see religion tied up in every conflict?

--The steady pursuit of individual freedom and the temptation to go it alone has left our "common-wealth" in tatters. Will there be a community of the human family or will we be forced to go "every person for herself/himself?"

--This list of terrors doesn't even begin to address the concerns of most of the world: diseases borne by unclean water, including malaria; drought; famine; HIV/Aids; lack of basic health care; war and ethnic cleansing.

We live in a terrified and terrorized world!

Human self-centeredness is at the heart of the problem, the human willfulness that insists on its own way. What is left that is trustworthy? What is left of truth? Where is safe ground? Who cares for those who are left behind in these apocalyptic days?

Now we know why God has been on a mission since the beginning of time! God's mission has been to address the hardness of the human heart. God, in Jesus Christ, has offered a worthy place for our trust, a true place that makes possible human flourishing.

God's mission has been to turn us from our self-serving ways and gather us up in God's own enormous heart.

Do we have a mission? Yes! It is God's mission.

We who have received the body and blood of Jesus have become the Body of Christ. God's mission has become our own. We "announce" God's victory over sin and death; We pursue God's mission with those who do not know what to trust; We serve those who have no place else to turn. Like our God, we are called to be healers of this world. We have been clothed with power from on high just as the disciples received such power at Pentecost. God's "new covenant" celebrated in the cup of salvation, is to be extended to "all people."

Do we have a mission? **DO WE HAVE A MISSION???** We have before us the most important work in all the world! We are called, as a church, to address both the terror in our own hearts and the free-floating terror in the world!

Discussion:

- 1) Martin Luther said that to have a god was to know where your "heart inclined and entrusted itself." (Intro. to the Large Catechism) As a way to introduce yourself to others and share your history in the faith, please share with one another how you came to trust Jesus as your Lord and Savior. For some of you this may mean telling a family story about your baptism. Others may have a story of a powerful moment when your trust was made more clear or concrete.

- 2) What does it mean to know whom to trust in a terrified world? How does your trust express itself when others feel driven by fear?
- 3) Our faith says God has been on a mission to save and reconcile the world (2 Corinthians 5) and that we have now been given this ministry of reconciliation. What does this mean for you and how do you hope this mission is expressed by your congregation? Where are the terrors in your community that call for reconciliation?
- 4) There are many signs that the Christian faith has lost its preferred place in our society. Soren Kierkegaard called this dominance Christendom. What will it mean for us as church if we are not part of a dominant religious presence? Do you recognize signs that Christendom is over? Some say this is the best thing that could happen to our church because our alliance with the culture cost us our distinctiveness. What does the future of Christian faith look like in your community? What do you fear and what do you hope for in this future?

For help with Session 1, you may want to revisit Dan Erlander's little book, "Manna and Mercy" to get the full sweep of God's mission in the world.

SESSION 2: Gratitude, Gratitude

Karl Barth has said that “gratitude follows grace like thunder the lightning.”

We all know that gratitude is the “engine” of mission, don’t we? Is it as simple as that? How does gratitude function in our lives? Certainly gratitude doesn’t seem automatic. Using the quote above, I suppose some of us manage to “smother the thunder” quite well!

Is this another instance of the persistent of sin, the “turned in on self” that manages to make everything about me? Worse yet, is it possible that we have taken the gift so for granted that we twist God’s gift into an entitlement? Might a church so smother its gratitude that it falls completely silent and inert?

We SING our gratitude well, don’t we! Look at the verses of “Now thank we all our God,” ELW 839, and “Joyful, joyful, we adore thee,” ELW 836.

Look at the text of Colossians 3:15b-17: “And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.”

“In whatever you do.” It begins to sound like Jesus is calling us to lives of perpetual thanksgiving, “in everything we do!” I don’t know about you, but I’d like a little room to be grumpy once in a while! Why is that?

How does your gratitude for life itself go public? How does it show up in the world as you live your life? Here is a key to everything: If our lives are a gift, gratitude turns that thanks into a call! Kelly Fryer says, in “The Evangelizing Church,” “the gift is a call!”

But we know it isn’t automatic. The chief text we remember is the healing of the Ten Lepers in Luke 17:11-17, where only one in 10 returns to thank Jesus for his healing. One in ten, a tithe returned. Think for a minute about the physical movement of thanksgiving. In this story it involves “returning” to give praise to God. Is this where we get the language of “returning thanks” that was common for our grandparents?

Think about a time in your life when you received a gift of some kind and, in the process of walking away or going about your life, you realized you needed to turn—return!--to give thanks. Tell one another your story.

One of the names we use for our Holy Communion celebration is Eucharist, a word that means “thanksgiving.” In bringing forward the bread and wine (with the offering plates) we return a portion of our “harvest” as thanks, in gratitude. I see in this movement a kind of perpetual motion machine whereby a tithe of what we receive from God is “returned,” and then used again by God as the bread and wine of his living presence in our lives. It

just keeps going doesn't it, in a wonderful symmetry of giving and receiving, receiving and giving!

Questions for conversation:

- 1) How does saying "thank you" change who you are?
- 2) Are we people who are grateful or are we, as some fear, becoming people who are always "entitled" and so little thanks is necessary? Do you remember a time that a gift was given and created an expectation that another gift was coming? What happened when that next gift didn't come? Did you feel resentment? Was this because the gift had become an entitlement? What happened to gratitude?
- 3) Are there different ways to express gratitude? What's the difference between your ecstatic "thank you!" for making your flight on time and the "thank you" that one lover says to another in tender vulnerability?
- 4) How DOES gratitude morph (metamorphosis) into a new life, a changed life? People who have gone through a near-death experience claim it changes their life? How might it change your life?
- 5) How might our church "practice" gratitude in a way that changes who we are? Look at the hymns in the "praise, thanksgiving section of ELW (pgs 819-886) and compare them to the songs in the "commitment/discipleship section," ELW pgs 796-818). What's the "move" from thanksgiving to answering a call?

"The Evangelizing Church," p. 61: "The sacrament of the Lord's Supper invites persons to receive the body and blood of the risen Christ, the very presence of Jesus. As they do, they acknowledge and celebrate the eschatological future that has already begun. The future heavenly feast that will one day take place in the presence of the living God is already in view in our partaking of the Eucharistic meal. ... The Eucharist is inherently evangelistic."

- 6) Do you agree or is something interfering between your receipt of the gift and your offering thanks? If a sense of gratitude is missing, how should we go about restoring it?

SESSION 3: No Fear! Transformation!

No Fear

Have you seen items from the clothing line called “No Fear”? These clothes are made to appeal to those participating in Extreme Sports: Motocross, skateboarding, sail-boarding, and big-wave surfing. Behind the slogan is a sense of adventure and exuberance about life that I find very attractive. It is this same spirit I pray we might encourage in the church, not just as a way to stretch ourselves in new mission but to attract those young folks who are still waiting for something interesting to happen in church!

I remember sitting in a restaurant in Twin Falls watching, on a video screen, the exploits of a group of young “base-jumpers,” both men and women. They had filmed themselves jumping off the Perrine Bridge and floating by parachute the 486 feet to the river’s edge. How does the church appeal to such a “no fear” generation?

If we have Jesus as Lord of our lives “first, last, and always” by his promise, and if gratitude leaps from our hearts because in baptism we have already died the only death that matters, why wouldn’t we regard this life as a stunning gift and adventure to be given away in free service to all those in need? Why wouldn’t we enter this terrified world with a declaration of highest hope, “No Fear!”?

Is it because we’re afraid? Talk with one another about your fears. This may be hard because it is so intimate. On the other hand, it will be comforting to know that you share many of the same fears with one another. Don’t we all want the church to be that place where we share our fears and then accompany one another in facing and overcoming those same fears?

This biblical text (Romans 8:37-39) is familiar, but one we hear most often at funerals after the opportunities of life are gone: “No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor ANYTHING ELSE IN ALL OF CREATION (emphasis mine) will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

We, who have been created in the image of God, follow a missionary God set on being reconciled to the whole world and finally gathering up that world into intimate embrace! This IS our life! This IS our calling and our purpose for being! This life is an awesome adventure for those who can get past—or press through--their own fears.

Scripture addresses our fear repeatedly. 438 references in scripture address the words “afraid, feared, fearful, fearfully, fearfulness, fearing, fears, fearsome, God-fearing.” Jesus says, “Do not be afraid” (Mark 6:50; Matthew 10:31; Luke 5:10; 12:32; John 6:20; Revelation 1:17); angels sent with good news repeatedly encourage us to “be not afraid,” (Luke 1:13, 1:30, 2:10, Matthew 28:10)

In some ways our fear makes good sense. Fear was Adam's reaction in the Garden when God came strolling in the evening (Genesis 3:10), but this fear was related to Adam's sense of guilt for trespassing the boundary with God. This fear is the Old Adam's fear and it is forever countered by Jesus, the new Adam, when he faces human sin and overcomes it on the fearful cross. God intends that we benefit from Jesus' courage and trust it, the world having been set right, once for all!

What do you think? Is our church part of the terrified world in spite of Jesus' promises? Have we been duped into being afraid by books like the "Left Behind" series despite a plea and promise from Jesus, "Do not be terrified?" (Luke 21:9)? Do we fear that because the culture is less hospitable (post-Christendom), the church might end? Have we closed up our church buildings as fortifications against a scary world? Have we let secondary fears rule our lives? Is it possible we are afraid, even of God, because we know we have not been faithful?

One of my favorite stories from scripture is the story of Jesus napping in the boat while crossing the stormy Sea of Galilee with the disciples (Mark 4:35-41). The sea is one of the most ancient images of chaos. The Sea of Galilee separated God's people from those of the pagan world. Doesn't it make perfect sense that the sea between these two worlds would be rough? One congregation decided it could handle rough water because Jesus was in the boat to receive and transform their fear. (Quoting Rick Bliese, President of Luther Seminary and Editor of "The Evangelizing Church.")

Later, Jesus encounters the disciples on another stormy day and encourages them with these words: "Take heart, it is I," (Mark 6:50). This is Jesus addressing all of us who find it hard to trust him completely. Jesus knows our fear and offers himself in the midst of it, even chaos. Jesus is in the boat! Can we trust that?

Saints like Dietrich Bonhoeffer teach us about facing our fear. In his great poem "Who Am I," Bonhoeffer reflects on his life in prison where he knows himself as "restless and longing and sick, like a bird in a cage..." In a moment of deep courage and trust Bonhoeffer concludes his poem this way: "Whoever I am, thou knowest, O God, I am thine." (Letters and Papers from Prison, p 347-348). Reading the whole poem aloud would be a fine way to conclude this section of the study. (The poem is available by putting "Who Am I" in your computer's search engine.)

Transformation

"You gain strength, courage, and confidence by every experience in which you really stop to look fear in the face. You must do the thing which you think you cannot do."
--Eleanor Roosevelt

Popular saying and book title: "That which doesn't kill you makes you stronger!"

This “transformation” section will build off the Greek word that means “transformed,” *metamorphosthy*, in Romans 12:2. Read the passage together:

“Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.”

If you sounded out the Greek word above, you recognized its similarity to our word, metamorphosis. Metamorphosis is a process of transformation that we usually associate with insects or amphibians. Do you remember how fascinating it was to watch a butterfly emerge from the cocoon of a caterpillar or to watch your tadpole grow legs, lose its tail, and leap away as a frog?

I love the image that the fullness of life is achieved in stages of growth that are a change from the past, but wholly consistent with the past, just as a butterfly still bears the DNA of the caterpillar. What do you need in order to become the transformed minister of Christ that is your baptismal calling and God’s desire for your life? What kind of “encouragement” will you need? What keeps you from seeking to become what God calls you to be? Share together how you experience the difficulty in keeping yourselves free from the “fashioning of this age,” that is, “conformed” instead of transformed.

Here’s how Eugene Peterson translates Romans 12:2. Listen for God’s call!

“Don’t become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. You’ll be changed from the inside out. Readily recognize what he wants from you, and quickly respond to it. Unlike the culture around you, always dragging you down to its level of immaturity, God brings the best out of you, develops well-formed maturity in you.”

Quotations for consideration and conversation:

“Walking makes the way.” --unknown

Question: Is it possible to “act” your way into a new way of “believing?” Don’t we usually assume believing comes before action? Could your congregation “act” its way into new forms of hospitality?

“How you get to where you don’t know you’re going determines where you end up.”—peace activist, Shelley Douglass.

“Because the gospel is a person named Jesus Christ, whenever we receive the gifts of the gospel, at the same time we receive the call from Christ: “Come, follow me!”—Craig Nesson in “The Evangelizing Church.”

SESSION 4: Miracles of Hope:

In this section I want to extend the conversation about fear to “depth of faith” and Jesus’ encouragement to the disciples that they are capable of far more than they know or can grasp. (Luke 10:17ff, John 14:12).

In Matthew 17 Jesus both chides and encourages the disciples when he tells them “...if you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you.” Marianne Williamson has said, “Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure.” While Williamson comes from a spiritualist/new-age perspective and wouldn’t share our understanding of each person as saint and sinner, there is something challenging about her critique of our native timidity. Please discuss how this may be true for you and deepen your conversation, if possible, by sharing what you would need for support in order to move more confidently—act your way—into deeper trust in Jesus.

This isn’t an easy conversation for most of us—our faith has become so private and individual—but it is critical to our goal of becoming a missionary people revitalized in life and mission. Perhaps your conversation group is the beginning of a small group that could support one another as new mission is pursued. The point is, you are not alone! The miracle is that others care about you! What wild dreams do you have for the mission of your congregation? Let your imaginations run!

Other congregations have sought revitalization and their stories are told in the book, “Christianity for the Rest of Us,” by Diana Butler Bass. One of the congregations she studied is a Lutheran congregation in Seattle that was transformed through a change in the way they welcomed new members. These stories are all “Miracles of Hope,” tangible answers to prayers for revitalization. If someone from the group wanted to purchase this book it could be passed around among you to report on ways other congregations have found renewal.

A favorite story of mine has to do with a congregation in Ft Lauderdale, Florida, that shrank to seven elderly women as members. Their tipping point didn’t come until one of them died and the rest had to agree that they had lost the capacity to keep their church the same. This was their moment of metamorphosis, the point where they turned from prayers for preservation to prayers for transformation. It was then that they took a chance on the pastor’s idea that they look to their neighborhood and its needs. Within two years they had 50 in church, men from the local prison and Korean Christian women from the neighborhood. When I visited the elderly women were beaming with pride and new life even as they faced the emotional hurdle that their church smelled more like kim chee than lutefisk! This congregation is a miracle of loss and rebirth: Transformation!

It is a miracle of hope that you are gathered today, searching for new life in your ministry. Just two years ago we didn’t think we had this passion in our synod. Through the leadership of the Synod Council we are now calling our members to passionate

engagement with the needs of God's people around us. As Kelly Fryer says in her book, "Reclaiming the 'L' Word," "the world needs what we have!" What we have are members thirsty for purposeful lives and lives of deeper trust in God. We have people who understand themselves as the "called out ones," called to individual vocations and called as members to a joint ministry through the congregation. If you are finding satisfaction in this study now is the time to encourage others to form another group and begin this study themselves! What keeps you from doing that?

Here is your power source: "Evangelizing reveals to the world, through words that can be comprehended, the power of God and God's redemptive purpose in Christ. This is Paul's point when he summarizes his understanding of the Gospel in Romans 1:16: "I am not ashamed of the gospel. It is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek."

"The Gospel, conveyed by words that are announced as good news, both contains and reveals God's power. All the power that God brought to bear in the incarnation, life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ is now embedded in the story about Jesus. Evangelization releases the power of this story into the world. Through the work of the Spirit, this story becomes redemptive in character as it is heard and received through faith by the recipient." "The Evangelizing Church," p. 52.

Questions for discussion:

1) We don't know much about miracles do we? We're not very comfortable talking about them unless it is the miracle we have witnessed! Tell others in your group about a miracle you remember. Remembering the miracle sparks wonder and gratitude, doesn't it? God is present in ways we never imagined!

2) This session is about Miracles of Hope but we haven't talked much about hope. What is the difference between a positive attitude/optimism and hope? See Romans 5:1-5.

End this session together with prayer for hope and with prayer for those things hoped for. Martin Luther is reputed to have said as his last words, "We are beggars, that is sure." We pray and hope because Jesus promised to hear us and answer our prayers. God invites our hope!

SESSION 5: Yes! Everybody Come!

Everybody?

“Isn’t that what they call “universalism?” I’m against it!”

The confusion is genuine, but mistaken. This guiding principle doesn’t argue that everyone is saved regardless of their relationship with Jesus. What we do argue here is well stated by Professor Craig Van Gelder, one of the authors of “The Evangelizing Church:” “God’s passion is for the gospel to go *everywhere* so that *everyone* might be invited to receive redemption that relates to *everything*.”

Years ago the author J.B. Phillips published a paraphrase version of scripture entitled, “Your God Is Too Small.” I’ve been thinking about that title and realizing that in my life—and I wonder about the life of our church—my/our God is too small. That is, if we really mean “Everybody Come!”

I don’t quite know how to trace this problem, but it occurs to me that it may have something to do with our American legal notion of “separation of church and state.” I suspect it has to do with our Lutheran notion of “Two Kingdoms,” a so-called Kingdom of the left that has to do with earthly matters and the Kingdom on the right that has to do with redemption of souls. We are urged to be careful not to confuse the kingdoms in our theology.

But then it gets tricky because I think these notions have led to a “marginalization” of God—we’ve put a fence around God—and that leads to one of our most pressing problems, the privatization of faith. By that I mean that we have informally relegated God to the sidelines where his impact is only on individual lives. Individuals make the decision about God and most of our culture hopes it will stay private or at least confined to our buildings. That hasn’t been too hard for traditions like ours that are famously reticent in talking about God!

What do you think? Is it easy for you to talk about God and your relationship with God or have you gotten the message that it’s a private matter? Isn’t that odd, especially in a campaign season where the candidate’s faith is so much on display? What are we to make of this? Does it have to do with the loss of cultural “place” (Christendom) for the Christian faith in a multi-cultural, multi-faith world? Did our faith have an easier time years ago when it could be assumed that everyone was Christian? Did our church get a kind of free-ride on the coattails of the culture? If that free-ride is over and the number of people who self-identify as Christian falls, what happens to the church? It would be easy to be caught in a kind of defensive mentality, wouldn’t it? But doesn’t that lock our doors even more tightly? How is our faith a “public” faith if it is confined to our buildings or our private lives?

One of the pleasures of getting older is a deepening of appreciation for the complexity of each human life. In younger years I was so self-absorbed that I hardly ever took time to wonder about other lives. Isn’t it a wonder how each person is so different? Isn’t it a

profound thought that each person we meet is trying to understand what they ultimately trust? Will we or won't we find the voice to say, "I have been wooed by God into trust in His Son Jesus. In Him rests all my hope. To him I entrust my whole life and even this trust is God's gift to me." This is "bearing witness" and for some reason it has become very difficult for us. But this God is too small if He is related to everything, to everyone, in all places and all time.

Listen to the witness of Peter in the book of Acts, Chapter 10, beginning at verse 34: "[Jesus] commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as Judge of the living and the dead. All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name."

What does it mean for us when we raise the cup at Holy Communion and declare that it is God's new covenant for ALL people? Jesus' invitation to new life comes to every person—every person who has a chance to hear the message, that is.

Who are we not willing to speak the message to?

Who do we exclude from the church?

Who do we mean by Everybody?

Do we mean people who are deeply different from us?

How in the world are the congregations of our synod going to open their doors to Hispanic neighbors?

Kelly Fryer has a good chapter on this idea in "Reclaiming the "L" Word," page 47: "Jesus came for those who needed him most. And he welcomed them with open arms. It didn't matter what you did for a living, or what country you were born in, or even whether you were a man or a woman. It didn't matter how messed up you had let your life become. In fact, the worse off you were, the bigger the welcome."

Kelly goes on to talk about how each of us is sinful and broken and undeserving, and then this from page 51: "Look up for a minute, and into the eyes of the One you see on the cross. I dare you to see what he sees when he looks at you (emphasis mine). You know this, don't you? We are saved by God's grace, as a gift, through our *faith* in the One who came down here to set us free and not because of a single thing that we have ever done or said or thought to earn it. We are here because of God's unconditional love in Jesus Christ.

Just who in the world do we think we are, anyway, thinking that it's our job to keep somebody else out?"

Jonah the prophet resisted God's call to bear witness to the hated Ninevites. Most commentators believe the book of Jonah is actually about Israel and its steadfast refusal to be a light to nations they didn't believe were deserving. The Ninevites were ugly and horrid people! But God wanted to warn them to turn from their ways and so he sent Jonah (twice) to share this word and warning. And miracle of miracles the Ninevites confessed their evil and called on God for help. The only one left out was Jonah who preferred to be mad at God for God's generosity. Jonah closed himself off in anger

against God and for all we know is still stewing in his own juices over God's desire to save.

Who wouldn't you go to? How long shall we be captive to our own anger at God for God's mercy? Nineveh was a capital city in the biblical world. Most scholars think Nineveh is the contemporary city of Baghdad. Holy smokes! What if we are called there?!

The authors of "The Evangelizing Church" argue that the church is inherently missionary (P. 52). What are the costs of bearing this call and refusing to go? For the Ninevites the cost was Exile to Babylon. God took the people under his care in a strange land so that they would relearn their trust in God. There are many and complex reasons why our church isn't growing these days, but some of us wonder whether it is time for us to go back to catechism and relearn the faith so that we can represent and reissue the call of God in the world.

Yes. Everybody come. Come and find life in Jesus' name.

Questions for discussion:

- 1) Bishop Mark Hanson has issued a question that helps to get at the challenge of opening our church: "How much uniformity is necessary for our unity and how much diversity is necessary for our mission?" What is the balance of uniformity and diversity in your congregation?
- 2) How does the image of the Body of Christ with its variety of gifts (1 Corinthians 12:4ff) help us get at this balance of unity and diversity? How does it give us courage that we have all the gifts necessary for outreach?
- 3) Who are the neighbors that you have difficulty inviting into your congregation?
- 4) If your congregation is pretty homogeneous and closed down, how is mission being carried out? Is sending money in support of a cause a kind of evangelism? Certainly it is part of a congregation's mission to care for God's people and creation through contributions.
- 5) Would you welcome a visit by your pastor at the place where you work or volunteer? Have you talked with your pastor or others about how you understand your "calling" in the world? Would such a visit help open conversation with co-workers about your faith?

Michael Bennethum was the speaker at our 2006 Synod Assembly in Pasco. He issued a stunning call for each of us to accept the vocation—the calling—that God has set before us. A group of you might want to read Listen: God is Calling: Luther Speaks of Vocation, Faith, and Work, Augsburg Fortress, 2003, by Bennethum in order to get a better handle on this notion of vocation.

Our understanding of vocation is critical to the revitalization and expansion of our mission because it enlists all of us as “ministers” rather than leaving that to pastors and other rostered leaders.

SESSION 6: Come, Lord Jesus

This is the great prayer of Advent: Maranatha! Come Lord Jesus, Come quickly!

Here's good news: Ushering in the Kingdom of God is not our work or mission. We are part of God's mission in the world, redeemed ones who are sent bearing a word of love and truth. We are apostles, meaning "send ones." As Luke 10:1-11 describes, we are to bear the kingdom into those places where we are welcomed. We bear Christ and his desire for the fullness of the Kingdom of God. Where we go "the Kingdom of God has come near." But we are not responsible for bringing in the Kingdom. That is God's work.

Our chief asset and advantage is that we have been given the eyes of faith to see that the Kingdom is not some far-off reality, but is present now as Jesus, moving through us, encounters the world. What a comfort it is to know that God is on a mission through us and that we have a missionary God who is not content until everyone has been invited by the Good News!

"From the beginning of the Christian era, 'apocalyptic' eschatology has existed alongside 'realized' eschatology, a view that the kingdom of God is not a future event but a new spiritual reality that is present in the heart of ordinary history. This view is central to the Gospel of John...in which the disciples ask Jesus when the kingdom will come. Jesus replies: 'It will not come by watching for it...Rather, the Father's kingdom is spread out upon the earth, and people do not see it.'" Sam Keen, as reprinted in Context, Part A, November 2007.

These things are not easy to talk about because we think we know so little. Take whatever time you need to unpack words like eschatology and apocalyptic. Start with a dictionary and then use your church library's copy of a dictionary/encyclopedia of the bible.

Here's good news: When the compromised human heart finally can't do any more, God is still at work to bring time to a close. Do you welcome or fear the end of time? Is it far off or closer than we think? What does seem clear is that humans who die without having heard of Jesus have missed a great opportunity. Do we have some responsibility here? Is it urgent to us that each person know of God's love? It becomes urgent when we think of the alternative, that of dying in confusion or fear. Talk about terror! Some are terrorized by the thought that they simply die into nothing. Our faith says that is not true. Our faith says that at the center of reality and the center of all life is a compassionate God eager to receive all people seeking peace and the joy of companionship with God.

Part of God's dream is a great gathering up, in the fullness of time. Look at Ephesians 1:3-23. Read this text in several versions. Here is a section from Eugene Peterson's translation, The Message, vs. 15-23:

“That’s why, when I heard of the solid trust you have in the Master Jesus and your outpouring of love to all the Christians, I couldn’t stop thanking God for you—every time I prayed, I’d think of you and give thanks. But I do more than thank. I ask—ask the God of our Master, Jesus Christ, the God of glory—to make you intelligent and discerning in knowing him personally, your eyes focused and clear, so that you can see exactly what it is he is calling you to do, grasp the immensity of his glorious way of life he has for Christians, oh, the utter extravagance of his work in us who trust him—endless energy, boundless strength!

All this energy issues from Christ: God raised him from death and set him on a throne in deep heaven, in charge of running the universe, everything from galaxies to governments, no name and no power exempt from his rule. And not just for the time being, but *forever*. He is in charge of it all, has the final word on everything. At the center of all this, Christ rules the church. The church, you see, is not peripheral to the world; the world is peripheral to the church. The church is Christ’s body, in which he speaks and acts, by which he fills everything with his presence.”

The plan of God is described in 1:10 (Peterson again): “He set it all out before us in Christ, a long-range plan in which everything would be brought together and summed up in him, everything in deepest heaven, everything on planet earth.”

I hope you hear the tremendous energy and confidence and urgency of this writer! I hope you hear the astounding breadth of God’s desire and the role set forth for the church. We are the “sent ones” bearing this promise of God for all of life. This promise bears so much hope for the world when the world is terrified! This love is waiting, a yearned for place of safety and wholeness in an unsafe and fragmented world.

Some thoughts for discussion:

- 1) Is it a comfort to know that God is a missionary God and is at work through us to invite the whole world? Do you feel a hesitation in your heart? Is that the part we’ve learned so well, that these are private matters and that each person has to decide for themselves?
- 2) Is your heart filled to overflowing with this good news, the overflow spilling out of your life? Or are we so under threat that we are hunkered down, protecting a private joy that we hope others will find but have to do it on their own? Does it matter, do we really, finally, care whether others hear this Good News? Is there any urgency left? If not, I think that God will take us under his wing for a time of new catechism.

If some kind of direct sharing isn’t possible, is there another way? I for one am glad Jesus gave us two commands, beginning with loving God and loving one another. Perhaps it is a time to let our hands do the work instead of our tongues. Perhaps the day calls for building Habitat homes or some other form of direct service as our witness to God’s care for others. After all, until people know we love them they won’t be able to hear of our God. Love has to precede our witness.

Resources

Reclaiming the Great Commission: A Practical Model for Transforming Denominations and Congregations, Bishop Claude E Payne and Hamilton Beazley, Jossey-Bass, 2000.

This is the book that first excited our Synod Council. We have consulted with Hamilton Beazley and Claude Payne addressed the Synod Assembly in 2007. The heart of the book is a comparison between “maintenance” and “missionary” models of ministry.

The Evangelizing Church: A Lutheran Contribution, Ed. by Richard Bliese and Craig Van Gelder, Augsburg Fortress, 2005.

This is one of the finest resources available to Lutherans. In this volume the authors work from the Lutheran Confessions to establish our missionary mandate. It is set up for congregational use with a study guide included and an excellent bibliography. The heart of the book is aimed at moving us from evangelism programs to an evangelizing church. This is an excellent resource for text study groups or cluster gatherings.

Manna and Mercy: A Brief History of God’s Unfolding Promise to Mend the Entire Universe, Daniel Erlander, 1992. See www.danielerlander.com.

If you have forgotten the gospel or if you need a reminder of the scope of the biblical narrative this simple resource is as good as you’ll find. Use this resource for new members or others who never quite figured out how the whole story works together.

Christianity For The Rest Of Us: How the Neighborhood Church is Transforming the Faith, Diana Butler Bass, HarperSanFrancisco, 2006.

Stories of real congregations that have found new vitality in mission.

Leadership Can Be Taught: A Bold Approach for a Complex World, Sharon Daloz Parks, Harvard Business School Press, 2006.

Parks is an expert on “faith development theory” and uses her insights about leadership—by way of Ronald Heifetz’ books—to suggest what the leadership task looks like today. A very encouraging book!

Inside Out: Worship in an Age of Mission, Thomas Schattauer, ed., Fortress Press, 1999.

This is a conversation among our liturgical scholars about the relationship between worship and mission.

The Missional Leader: Equipping Your Church To Reach A Changing World, Alan Roxburgh and Fred Romanuk, The Leadership Network, 2006

This is an excellent book for outlining the realities of our day and the confusing post-modern notion of “discontinuous change.” Roxburgh is working with Luther Seminary to revamp its teaching around mission. This is an excellent book for clergy study groups.

Living Lutheran: Renewing Your Congregation, Dave Daubert, Augsburg Fortress, 2007.

Dave Daubert is the expert on the whole use of “guiding principles” to drive revitalization in congregations. Each chapter includes resources and questions for discussion. This is a great book for congregational study.

Reclaiming the ‘L’ Word: Renewing the Church From Its Lutheran Core, Kelly A Fryer, Augsburg Fortress, 2003.

Here is a book that describes how one congregation used the notion of ‘guiding principles’ to establish new mission in their congregation.

Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America, Darrell Gruder, ed., Eerdmans, 1998.

This volume is part of the publishing of The Gospel In Our Culture Network (GOCN) formed around the theological insights of Lesslie Newbigin. This is bridge-building work between dissatisfied evangelicals and historic mainline denominations on the subject of mission. A new partnership between clergy and members is encouraged.

The Ministry of the Missional Church: A Community Led By the Spirit, Craig Van Gelder, BakerBooks, 2007.

Van Gelder, along with Roxburgh and Gruder, is one of the most prolific writers on missional revitalization. He is a professor of congregational mission at Luther Seminary.

The Missional Church in Context: Helping Congregations Develop Contextual Ministry, Craig Van Gelder, ed., Eerdmans, 2007.

This book is a report of the presentations on missional church developments held at Luther Seminary in 2005.

Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission, David J Bosch, Orbis, 2005.

This has been called “a truly magisterial book” describing and analyzing mission theology in the last century. This is the study that most new missiologists must respond to. It contains a serious critique of Lutheran orthodoxy as an impediment to mission.

Congregational Leadership in Anxious Times: Being Calm and Courageous No Matter What, Peter L Steinke, The Alban Institute, 2006

This is the book congregational leaders will want to own and read while leading change in congregations. Leading change like this is not for the faint of heart!

Listen: God is Calling—Luther Speaks of Vocation, Faith, and Work, Michael Bennethum, Augsburg Fortress, 2003.

Bennethum gave excellent presentations at our 2006 Synod Assembly.