

## Reflection Questions

### *Reclaiming the Great Commission*

Bishop Claude E. Payne & Hamilton Beazley

#### **Chapter 1: Spiritual Hunger in America**

1. *"We're still grieving!" What losses have we experienced in our congregational life over the last generation that fill our hearts with grief?*
2. *Has your congregation experienced growth or decline over the last two or three decades?*
3. *Does your congregation believe its best days are in the past or still to come?*
4. *How do you understand the spiritual hunger in America?*
5. *How has the Church/your congregation failed to address this hunger?*
6. *Demographical information for your community is available through the ELCA at <http://www.elca.org/research/zipnet.html> . [You need your synod code "1D" and your congregation's number to access this] Does the specific demographical data for your community support what the authors state regarding the declining membership in our churches and the growing spiritual hunger in America?*
7. *Within your communities which churches are growing? Declining?*
8. *Have alternative spiritual movements found a place in your community?*
9. *Do you believe that your congregation is currently effective in reaching out to the unchurched in your community?*
10. *Are your congregations members currently being challenged to grow as disciples?*

#### **Chapter 2: The Great Commission**

1. *A recent study by the Barna Group <http://www.barna.org/FlexPage.aspx?Page=BarnaUpdate&BarnaUpdateID=240> explored the question of whether faith has a transformative effect on people's lives. 16% of Lutherans responded that their faith has made no difference in their life. In Chapter 2 it is stated that the reason for evangelism is the*

*experience of the living Lord, and his power to transform the lives of those who believe. Has your faith in Christ made a difference in your life? How has it formed you?*

- 2. How has the Great Commission and the Great Commandment been an intentional part of your congregation's plan for mission and service?*
- 3. Are our efforts focused on 'making disciples' or 'recruiting new members'? What is the difference?*
- 4. The Great Commission indicates that we are sent to make disciples of all nations. Within your communities, what is the particular 'target group' that your congregation is reaching out to? Are there significant ethnic, social, or economic groups that your congregation has not been effective in attracting? Why?*
- 5. The vision being put forward in this church is of a "missionary church" built on the foundation of the Great Commission and Great Commandment. There are other Biblical images that inform our 'vision' of the Church. What is your "vision" of the Church, and how does it compare both in theory and reality to a "missionary church"?*

### **Chapter 3: The New Apostolic Age**

- 1. The first centuries of Christianity have been described as the First Apostolic Age, a time when Christianity spread throughout the ancient world due to the witness of the believers. What was happening then that is lacking now?*
- 2. The authors identify the early years of the American experience as an apostolic age, as well. What defined the mission of the Church during this time of the pioneers?*
- 3. As Christianity experienced great successes it entered into the age of Christendom, a time when the Church and the Culture were one and the same. During this time evangelism takes the shape of Christian nurture, and is focused on growing new generations of believers, not converting people to the Christian faith. To what extent do your congregation's programs and activities reflect an emphasis on "nurture", that is, growing disciples from within the congregation?*
- 4. What percentage of your congregation's efforts focus on outreach, that is, conversion or the invitation of those outside the church to become disciples?*
- 5. Has your personal experience been that of conversion to the Christian faith or being nurtured in the faith since childhood?*

6. *If your experience is that of conversion through the outreach efforts of the Church, what might you share about that experience to help the Church better understand the importance of reaching out to others?*

#### **Chapter 4: Denominational Crisis, Denominational Opportunity**

1. *What factors do you see that have contributed to the mainline denominations losing their common vision of being a missionary Church?*
2. *In recent decades mainline churches have become less inclined to make exclusive claims about Jesus Christ as only name by which people may be saved. Talk about evangelism in mainline churches today rarely uses language about faith in Christ Jesus as necessary for salvation. Can we reclaim the Great Commission without also reaffirming the centrality of Christ for salvation? What makes us uncomfortable about such exclusive claims?*
3. *The authors suggest three possibilities for the mainline churches: die, continue doing what they are doing and hope that our fortunes change, or transform into missional churches. Do you see other options? Are we prepared to face these choices honestly and directly?*
4. *What are the assets that we have as congregations, synods, and denominations that empower us to effectively respond to the challenges of this new apostolic age?*
5. *What are the liabilities that would hamper us from reclaiming this vision for our congregations and the Church?*
6. *It is not sufficient for the mainline Churches to recognize that they are dying; they must also reclaim the reason for living. What is our reason for living on as a Church?*
7. *Denominations have often been burdened with divisive issues that detract us from the common vision of the Great Commission and Great Commandment, and yet supporters of these various causes would argue that their positions are in specific response to the Great Commission & Great Commandment. How might we embrace the unifying vision of a missionary Church, while living with the diverse and sometimes divisive ways that vision plays out in real life?*
8. *There is a great commitment to maintaining our identity, and great risk to being transformed into something different. Can we embrace the vision of becoming a missionary Church and let go of our desires to preserve things as they are?*

## **Chapter 5: The New Apostolic Denomination**

1. *The Diocese of Texas has a vision of being “One Church under the leadership of Jesus Christ as a ‘Community of Miraculous Expectation’”. In the Nicene Creed we confess that “We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church.” Do our actions and ministries reflect this concept of “one Church”? If not, why not?*
2. *The vision includes two powerful concepts: Glorious Transformation and Miraculous Expectation. These themes have not traditionally been part of our Lutheran theological emphases. Do they excite you or make you nervous?*
3. *Can you cite examples of people who have experienced a “glorious transformation” in their lives because of Jesus Christ?*
4. *In contrast to “miraculous expectation” we often operate on the basis of “seasoned realism”, e.g., “the poor you will have with you always”. We are tempted to believe that the way things are, is the way they shall always be. Can you remember situations where by God’s grace and the Spirit’s leading people experienced miraculous results that exceeded all expectations?*
5. *Central to the vision is the concept that congregations are missionary outposts of the ‘one church’. To “congregate” is to gather, while a “missionary outpost” has a clear sense of being sent. Together this gathering/sending represents the dynamics of day to day life in our communities of faith. Have we emphasized the ‘sending’ of our people into the world? How can we better equip God’s people for the ministry that is theirs in the world and beyond our Church buildings?*
6. *Birds of a feather flock together. Some leaders such as Kennon Callahan put forth the principle of homogeneity, namely that it is difficult to grow a diverse community, and effective church growth is only possible by identifying a particular homogenous target group. How can we be inclusive and one church given the ethnic, social, and economic barriers that are very real and not easily overcome?*

## **Chapter 6: Implementing the Vision**

1. *What does it mean to say that the process of implementing a missionary model is organic rather than mechanistic? How can we ‘grow into the vision’?*
2. *How might we best gather the data from congregations and across our synod to shape the vision by identifying the mission fields in which we operate and the hopes and dreams of our members?*

3. *The Diocese of Texas held the “Gathering” as a way to kick start the new vision that brought a couple thousand together to renew the church, introduce the vision, and get people to believe in it. What options might be available to us to accomplish this? An expanded Assembly devoid of other ‘maintenance issues’? A special gathering? A number of cluster based events?*
4. *The gathering was at one and the same time planned and orchestrated, yet open to address whatever came forward. As such it modeled a trust in the Spirit to lead the Church. What issues of trust must be addressed to follow this vision and to open ourselves to the transformation that comes when we cease to operate the way we’ve always operated?*
5. *Shifting from a maintenance orientation to a missionary focus will bring change throughout the church, yet because missionary model is so central to the Gospel these changes will feel familiar. Are we prepared to embrace a ‘new normal’?*

## **Chapter 7: Changing Organizational Structures and Culture**

1. *The structure and culture of an organization is designed to provide stability and in essence, preserve the status quo. In the case of mainline churches our structures were conceived of and established when we were clearly operating in a maintenance mode. The authors suggest that any transition to a missionary Church will necessitate a transformation of the very structures and culture that define us. At this very fundamental level, can we shape our structures in a new way to serve the vision? Or must the vision be molded in such a way as to fit within the current structures?*
2. *Central to the experience of the Diocese of Texas was the abandonment of any top down pyramid structure of authority, and the embracing of a grass roots process and servant leadership. This may be more in harmony with Lutheran practice than it was with Episcopal practice. How might we function as one Church, with Bishop, clergy, and congregations all equal partners in the fulfilling the Great Commandment/Great Commission?*
3. *The maintenance model holds clergy accountable to constitutional mandated principles. The missionary model holds clergy accountable to the Vision. How might that accountability be achieved within our Church? How would clergy respond to being held accountable?*
4. *Funding for missions was radically changed in the Diocese of Texas with the shifting of the decision making to congregations who individually chose to support particular mission endeavors advertised in a catalogue of mission opportunities. This direct funding resulted in an increase of giving and a greater connection between the partners. What fears would prevent us from letting go of the management and control of mission funding? What*

*possibilities would compel us to try a new thing? How could this work within our current structures and culture? How might the structures and culture need to change?*

- 5. A major change in the institutional culture (our self perception of who we are) must occur for changes to endure. How can we begin to shift from an institutional orientation, an internal focus, congregational individualism, hoarding resources, and hateful attitudes to a spiritual orientation, a focus on others, congregational collaboration, sharing of resources, and loving attitudes?*
- 6. This vision requires mutual trust, and fosters trust. How do you perceive the current level of trust/distrust within your congregation and within our synod? What undermines trust? What builds trust?*

### **Chapter 8: Managing Change**

- 1. Maintenance churches strive to avoid conflict. Change inevitably brings conflict with it. How can conflict be managed positively, as a means to bring about appropriate changes?*
- 2. The authors identify “Force field analysis” and “Stages of Change” as two ways to work through change while managing the conflicts that emerge. What are the most significant issues that these processes deal with?*
- 3. There will be some “fall out” to any major organizational change. Are we committed enough to the need to be transformed into a missionary Church that we will be willing to accept the loss of some members whose resistance to change will not allow them to embrace the new reality?*
- 4. The authors identify five entrenched attitudes in denominations that are impediments to change: elitism, prejudice against evangelism, fatal differences, financial resources, and clergy & lay resistance. Can we be embraced by the vision in a sufficiently powerful way to see beyond the hurdles in the road to the possibilities that the Spirit offers?*

### **Chapter 9: Making Disciples**

- 1. What is the difference between ‘becoming a member of a congregation’ and ‘becoming a disciple of Jesus Christ’?*
- 2. The Great Commission sees discipleship as rooted in baptism and teaching. What programs and opportunities exist within your congregation that are focused on discipleship?*

3. *“The Hour Glass” model of making disciples understands this ministry to be shared between clergy and laity, with the laity primarily responsible for attracting people, the clergy for worship, discovery classes, and initiation, and the laity being taking the lead again with assimilation and discipleship. How does this work in your congregation? What are the expectations of lay and clergy? What is the reality?*
4. *What do you need from the Church to be better equipped for offering invitations to your unchurched acquaintances and neighbors?*
5. *What changes are necessary within your congregation to be more intentional about making disciples? In worship? Through Discovery Classes? Through initiation into the community? In assimilation? And in the way people live out their discipleship in daily life?*

### **Chapter 10: Developing Congregations**

1. *The decline of mainline denominations has paralleled the decline in emphasis in mainline denominations on the development of congregations through new mission starts and the redevelopment of existing ministries. Which came first, the chicken or the egg?*
2. *Prior to WWII the dominant model of congregational development was through local expansion and missions. Congregations ‘birthed’ new congregations or groups of individuals gathered together to form congregations. During the golden age of mission development and church expansion during the post war years of the 50s, 60s, & 70s the primary responsibility for new congregational starts shifted to the Churchwide organization. For a variety of reasons we are now seeing this responsibility shift back to the synods and congregations. How might synods, clusters, and congregations become more actively engaged in new mission starts? What are the advantages? What are the obstacles?*
3. *The Diocese of Texas brought together congregations of similar size and situation to focus resources appropriate to the particular settings in which people served. How might the synod better respond to the particular needs of the variety of congregations across our synod?*
4. *In allocating resources for mission development congregations were assessed as to the effectiveness of their ministries and their potential for growth. As a management tool this seems to be both effective stewardship and yet, at the same time, an abandoning of declining congregations in declining communities. Can we make these hard decisions? Should some congregations simply be allowed to die, so that resources can be focused on those congregations that have a real potential for life and growth?*

5. *“Mega Churches” or “Resource Churches”, with an average Sunday attendance of over 400 are seen by the Diocese of Texas as the goal of mission starts, and new plants are initiated where there is the potential of achieving this in a short while. Within our synod very few congregations have achieved this level. Do you think that this because we have not committed ourselves to mission outreach, or because of the difficulties of mission outreach in our context?*
6. *We are striving to become more multicultural with significant efforts being made in some communities where there exists a large Hispanic population. What other opportunities for multicultural ministries are in our midst? How can we as one Church support and encourage these ministries? What will be required of us to be effective in reaching populations that are not traditionally inclined toward Lutheranism?*

## **Leaders in the New Apostolic Age**

### **Chapter 11: Missionary Congregations**

1. *“Evangelism is not a program. It is an ethos. It infuses all the activities of the church and represents a redirection of mind and spirit.” (page 166)  
What does this mean for you and for your congregation?*
2. *How well situated is your congregation with respect to internal factors related to growth?*
3. *What are the external factors in your context that impact the potential for your congregation growing?*
4. *Does your congregation want to grow?*
5. *Is the message communicated through worship and education clear and meaningful to the unchurched, and is it relevant to daily life?*
6. *What place does prayer play in the communal life of the congregation?*
7. *Do you have an emphasis on disciple making?*
8. *Do the members of your congregation feel comfortable actively sharing their beliefs? Can they also admit their doubts?*
9. *How welcoming is your congregation to first time visitors? What will happen when they turn into the parking lot and walk through the doors of your church the first time?*



## **Chapter 12: Apostolate of the Laity**

1. *Do you believe that the laity are the primary evangelists of your congregation? Or do you rely on the clergy to take care of this?*
2. *How are the laity equipped to be witnesses?*
3. *Does a passion for the Gospel drive lay involvement in congregational ministries? Or a sense of duty and commitment as congregational members?*
4. *How does your congregation seek to identify the gifts of the laity and manage them?*
5. *Do lay people generate new ministries within the congregation, or simply respond to invitations to volunteer.*
6. *Who is responsible for encouraging and initiating lay ministry opportunities within the congregation?*

## **Chapter 13: Apostolate of the Clergy**

1. *How is a commitment to the Great Commission and Great Commandment evident in the life and work of the clergy?*
2. *Does the pastor share a vision of the Church can be? Or serve as the guardian of what the Church is?*
3. *How much of the pastor's time is consumed with maintenance issues? How much is dedicated to missionary work?*
4. *What is the relationship between the pastor, his/her work, and the various lay ministries within the congregation?*
5. *The missionary church is primarily relational, and yet the church is not a personality cult. How does the pastor lead in creating community, yet not become the center and focus of that community?*
6. *What are the particular gifts of the pastor and how can they most effectively be used for the sake of mission?*
7. *How can the laity partner with the pastor in service?*
8. *Does the pastor model a personal faith and life that is a witness to the Great Commission and Great Commandment?*

## **Chapter 14: Judicatory Leaders in the Missionary Church**

1. *When the bishop or his assistant visits your congregation what is the focus of the visit?*
2. *Is the bishop perceived as the pastor's pastor? Or does he have a clear pastoral role within the congregation?*
3. *How can the bishop transition from 'chief pastor of the clergy' to 'chief missionary of the synod'?*
4. *How can the bishop be freed from maintenance and administrative functions to dedicate his time and ministry to articulating the vision of a missionary church and encouraging and equipping congregations in the fulfillment of that mission?*
5. *What type of synodical structure and staffing best suits the missionary model? Prior to the formation of the ELCA many districts/synods of the former church bodies were much larger and had the capacity for significantly more programmatic staff. This enabled districts/synods to focus resources in many areas like youth & family, outreach, congregational development, etc. In the Diocese of Texas they have built a staff around the needs of the missionary vision and included such positions as resource development, Christian education, youth, outreach, etc. With the formation of the ELCA the decision was made to have smaller synods in which the bishops could have more of a direct relationship with the congregations. A new level of church structure was created in the Regional Offices that was intended to provide programmatic support across the region. Regions have generally not been effective nor adequately supported to sustain significant ministries across the synods they serve. Often they have been primarily an administrative services provider offering such things as accounting services and coordination of candidacy and mobility, etc.*

*What transformations of our current structures would best further the mission of the Church as envisioned in Reclaiming the Great Commission? Would our mission be furthered by a revitalization of regional offices in order to provide the specialized support needed by a missionary Church? Or should greater focus be placed on staffing within the Synod and the use of deployed staff from Churchwide?*

6. *What would a time study reveal about the synodical staffs current work load, and the issues that are consuming the most amount of time. Are the resources of time and talent of our synod staff being used in a manner that most effectively advances the mission of the Church?*
7. *How can clergy and congregations more effectively partner with synodical leadership in the task of being one Church in mission?*

## **Part Four: Outreach**

### **Chapter 15: Communication and Technology**

- 1. How does your congregation utilize the latest and best of the communications technology available? Why is it in the maintenance church of today we are so hesitant to use the best and latest of technology to spread the word to those outside?*
- 2. If our primary mission and reason for being is to reach the unchurched, what percentage of our budgets would be devoted to communications that effectively reach out beyond our walls to the unchurched in our communities?*
- 3. Some denominations such as the Methodist Church, have initiated national advertising campaigns. How could we, as One Church, either nationally or synodically use our combined resources to reach people in this manner?*
- 4. Many of the fastest growing congregations have fully embraced a multimedia technology in all worship, program, and communications. This involves a major commitment of resources and personnel to achieve. Can this be effective for us? Is it the direction we choose to go?*
- 5. The internet is the communications tool of this century. Interactive communication across a broad spectrum of our communities of faith is instantaneously accessible to the vast majority of households with the desire. Blogs, internet meeting such as Ecunet, e-mail, instant messaging, etc., etc., etc. The possibilities of using this technology expand every day. Recognizing the potential, might it be a good investment in mission for the Church to exploit these possibilities, setting up a synod wide network/servers, hiring those with the skills to develop and maintain a web-based ministry throughout the Church? Other organizations such as universities and corporations have unified systems and devote considerable resources to them. What do they know that we don't? What are the potential benefits of seeing this form of communication as a possibility for the Synod? The National Church? The Mormon Church has made extensive use of this new communications technology. One of my members has a satellite communications business that has installed the satellite communications equipment for Mormon churches around the globe. What does the Mormon Church know that we don't? The possibilities out there surrounding communication and information technology are almost limitless. What would serve our mission?*

### **Chapter 16: Outreach, Christian Education, and Youth Ministry**

- 1. What are the current Outreach Programs that operate within our synod and on our behalf?*

2. *How can we as “one Church” form better partnerships across the synod between congregations, the synod, and all the outreach organizations?*
3. *How can these various outreach organizations become essential partners in the fulfillment of the vision?*
4. *How might we partner to provide better resources to equip congregations for a discipleship making educational ministry?*
5. *What emphasis does Christian Education, for both youth and adults, receive in our congregations? To what degree do these programs serve to attract new comers into a life of discipleship?*
6. *How are the youth of our synod engaged meaningfully in the mission of our congregations and synods as the Church of Today?*
7. *Do we provide adequate support for Youth and Education workers, both paid and volunteer, within our synod?*
8. *Do our youth and educational ministries produce disciples or drop outs?*
9. *To what extent will we allow the next generation (either our youth or new disciples) transform our Church as they make it theirs?*
  
10. *A final set of questions: What is the Spirit saying to the Church? Where are we being called? How will we answer?*