

What Is The Church For?

The assigned topic is wonderfully ambiguous, is it not? One could ask, are we clear about the subject? Are we speaking of the church catholic? Are we asking the question of that part of the church catholic called the Lutheran church? Or, are we asking the question concerning that part of the Lutheran church called the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America? Or, are we asking the question concerning the local manifestation of the church called the congregation?

To add a bit more ambiguity to the topic, it ends with a preposition that may point in several directions. Are we asking, what is the church for as opposed to what is it against? In other words, are we asking, for what is the church an advocate? Or, the question may be understood as asking about the ultimate purpose of the church.

The modest goal of this paper will be to speak in a manner in which have implications for all of the above. Obviously, this will not be an exhaustive treatment of the subject. I hope that it will stimulate some fresh thinking that God might use to impact our service in Christ's church for the sake of the world in this time and place.

I will seek to address the subject in a manner which reflects an appreciation for the current context of the church (in all its ambiguity!) and which draws from Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions, resources which ought to shape the response from one who seeks to bear the best of "the tradition." I will speak as one who was nurtured in the educational system of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, shaped by the debates which led to the formation of Christ Seminary-Seminex and the creation of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, and who has served as a parish pastor for over twenty years and a bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America for over eight years. Finally, I bring to this presentation a painful awareness of the "fallenness" of the church and the conviction that it is still "the bride of Christ."

I. WHY THE TOPIC?

I cannot read the minds of those who put together this conference. But I can speculate on the attractiveness of the topic within the context of a conference, which is addressing the continued usefulness of the Law/Gospel distinction for shaping the church's life and witness.

Most of the participants of this conference live and work in a context of the church catholic that is increasingly referred to as moving to the "sideline" as opposed to the "mainline." In a recent year the losses in membership from ELCA congregations are the equivalent of what could be a synod in this church. In light of the fact that the ELCA is made up of 65 synods, that speaks to significant losses. Those figures certainly reflect the reality of the Northwestern Ohio Synod in which I served. Annual reports reflect an aging and declining church body. My understanding is that membership patterns in the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod are not all that different. Figures also indicate that the Lutheran church in the United States in failing to reflect the increasingly diverse population of this country. Rather, we still largely reflect a heritage, which was shaped by a European immigrant population of previous generations.

Within the cultural context, what seems to count is that people feel their religion and believe that what they are doing is making a difference. The matter of the personality of the pastor and the pastor's overall winsomeness is regarded as being increasingly important to growing congregations. For aging congregations in decline it becomes tempting to hope that "just the right pastor will turn us around" or to fall prey to the latest church marketing strategy which offers such promise. Our culture is not one which has a predisposition to honoring institutions. People increasingly view with suspicion anything that cannot be seen beyond the immediate horizon. This suspicion is reflected in the observation that while overall congregational giving appears to be consistent or growing, mission support for denominational ministries are in a long term pattern of reduction. In a culture where people are not automatically "big" on maintaining institutional structure, the preference is for that which is spiritual, purposeful, and immediate.

People of our congregations often look with a measure of envy upon largely non-denominational and evangelical congregations which appear to be more effective at connecting with the culture. Pastors and leaders reason that "what

we are doing is not working so we need to look at what the congregations that are growing are doing and follow that pattern.” “Praise bands” multiply, much of Scripture gets jettisoned, and theology generally appears to be less and less important. In many of these contexts, baptism and the Lord’s Supper are de-emphasized. Recently, one pastor commented, “These are not good days to be regarded as a theologian.” What is important is what works.

If one approach is to grab on to whatever seems to be working in a consumer driven church marketplace, then another equally and perhaps more common approach is to “batten down the hatches”, grieve the loss of the “good ole days,” maintain the particular tradition of a given context and fight to keep the doors of the church open until the last member is buried. Such congregations often are grim places, vulnerable to fights about personality and what constitutes faithfulness to the (local) tradition. In these contexts there is often little sense that the church is called to be in ministry for the sake of the world. The overarching concern is to maintain the ever-dwindling club.

We face no small challenges in the present context. The temptations are several. One would argue, “We need to do what works, what connects with the culture, if we are to continue to exist.” Another may respond, “If we do that, we sell out our Lutheran heritage. We need to maintain our traditions and, if necessary, simply do the best we can” (one might add, “...grimly trudging on”).

For those who believe that God is not quite finished with our denominations and related structures and institutions, the temptation is to do whatever is necessary to maintain them.

The reality is that the denomination and its related structures and institution will be healthy to the degree that the congregations reflect health and vitality (terms that, in themselves need to be defined). Whether we speak of the local congregation, mid-level judicatories (e.g. synods or districts, or denominational structures, the risk is that we make them ends in themselves. The biblical word for that is idolatry. And, we know, God is not pleased with idols-even when they go under the name of “church”!

So, the question, in all its ambiguity, is important. What is the church for?

II. A Brief Biblical Survey Related to the Church and its Purpose

The bulk of what follows will draw from New Testament writings. However, one can make a strong argument from the Hebrew writings which do speak to the purpose of the people of God and from which the New Testament writers frequently will draw. The people of God are those whom God has reached in mercy who respond by trusting in God’s promise, and who are called to extend that promise to others. Classic texts involve the promise given to Abraham (Genesis 12), the Exodus Story and the resulting call to the obedience of faith, and the call of David (II Samuel 7). Yet the track record illustrates the inclination for the people of God to use God’s promise for one’s own advantage, the ease with which trust in God’s promise gets subverted by one’s vulnerability to the surrounding culture (check out the prophets), and the resulting experience of the judgment of God.

The story continues, with God’s faithfulness to God’s promises, which offers the hope to which Mary, and Zechariah refer in their songs of praise (Luke 1). In his life, death and resurrection, Jesus embodies the vocation of the people of God. Peter’s witness (Acts 2) and that of Stephen (Acts 7) are just two examples which illustrate God’s faithfulness to God’s promise in the story of the crucified and risen Christ, whose benefits, chiefly, forgiveness of sins, are offered to the hearer, with the resulting implications that the story will be shared “to all nations” (Luke 24:47)

To put it succinctly, the New Testament witness speaks to the church and its purpose of linking it to the telling and embodying of the “Jesus story”. Typically when we speak of the church we think most readily of the institution of which we are a part. Yet within the New Testament, the church is most often spoken of with respect to what is taking place within the assembly. The first purpose of the church is to know and experience the gracious visitation of God in Jesus Christ. For example, in conversation related to what is taking place “where two or three are gathered in my name,” Jesus promises, “I am there among them.” (Matthew 18:20) What is the purpose of such a gathering? Most immediately, in that text, it has to do with “binding and loosing”-which surely points to the central role of forgiveness.

The fuller context suggests that it also has to do with “attending to the little ones” (children or those “little in faith” or both?).

In Matthew 28, the God-authorized crucified and risen Lord grants the gathered disciples (both worshipping and doubting!) his authorizing word, “...to 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 that I have commanded you.” Best of all, with that authorizing word comes the promise, “I am with you always, to the end of the age.” (Matthew 28:16-20)

Yet that purpose is not limited to the telling of the story of Jesus and that which he wills for his own. Jesus’ earlier words indicate those who know his presence will also discern and embody his presence even as he meets them “in the least of these.” In fact, failure to attend to the hungry, the imprisoned, etc., makes one vulnerable to being removed from his presence. That his disciples bailed out on Jesus in his (and their!) moment of crisis when he was numbered “among the least” and that Jesus yet reclaims them as his own is good news, particularly in the face of the church’s frequent failure to attend “to the least.”

In both Luke and John, the crucified and risen Lord embraces the community, the gathered assembly, which has failed him. Though forewarned, their response to Jesus had been betrayal. So, for good reasons, they “were startled and terrified and thought they were seeing a ghost.” (Luke 24:37) They may have considered that to be the best of possibilities in view of their denial! But Jesus greets them with peace, displays the marks of his crucifixion, feeds them, and then declares in words that speak volumes about the church’s purpose:

Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things.

Such witnesses will not be without resources. In reference to the coming Holy Spirit, Jesus continues, “See, I am sending you what my Father promised.” (Luke 24:44-49)

In Acts, Luke will record the story of the empowered community taking Jesus at his word and then embodying that word in their life together. It is a community in which members tell the story and then celebrate that story in their life together. (e.g. Acts 2; 4:32-34 et al.) This community is characterized by “wonders and signs”, generosity, the praise of God, and “having the good will of all the people.” It will be a community that needs to learn about the new things that God is going in Christ Jesus through the Holy Spirit. The early community will be astonished that the good news is extended and received by such folk as a former persecutor of the church (Acts 9), an Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8), and the Gentiles (Acts 10). In the face of conflict it will need to discern what God is doing and chart the course of its life and mission, confident in the leadership of the Holy Spirit (Acts 15).

From the very beginning, the character of the church has been far from untarnished. In such moments it is at risk of betraying its purpose. Paul offers a refresher course to the church in Corinth that is in danger of losing sight of both its identity and its purpose:

“So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation; everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us.”

Consequently, Paul implores his readers in words that are most familiar to those who are a part of the Crossings Community, “...be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might

become the righteousness of God.” (II Corinthians 5:17-21) The renewed conversion of the participants within the church will be a requirement for a church that is clear with respect to what God would do through it.

One can deduce from the text that the purpose of the church is to create the space for the gathered to hear the story of God’s action on their behalf in Christ and for that word, by the power of the Holy Spirit, to be appropriated, embodied (see I Corinthians 12), and shared.

The writer to the Hebrews speaks to a community that is at risk on account of various afflictions:

Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful. And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

Such a word of encouragement comes out of the previous affirmation:

Therefore, my friends, since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain (that is, through his flesh), and since we have a great high priest over the house of God, let us approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. (Hebrews 10:19-22)

Many other texts could be cited which relate to the identity and purpose of the church. But in these texts some things become very clear. First, the church is called together and into existence by the Word of God in Christ Jesus, empowered by the Holy Spirit. Second, within the gathering, the Word is shared and celebrated within the context also of baptism and the Lord’s Supper for the sake of mutual encouragement in faith. Third, the purpose of the gathering is to be formed into the Body of Christ for the sake of the world. The gathered community is never an end in itself. The ministry of the church is finally bent towards the world. Fourth, until the Day of our Lord, the church is flawed. In Christ, God is always about the work of new creation.

On the face of it, there is little that should be new to those gathered in this place. But what is offered is central to the church’s identity and purpose. It cannot be taken for granted less the church forfeit its character as the church of Christ. In words that draw from the Hebrew Scriptures, a final quote from I Peter serves to underscore that which is at the heart of the church’s identity and its purpose:

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.

In the midst of all that the church faces in these days, these texts suggest critical questions: How well are we attending to the telling of the story of the God who in the crucified and risen Christ and by the empowering Spirit would still draw us to God and to one another? To what degree do our gathered communities and the church catholic need to re-appropriate this story? What are the implications of this story for the lives of the baptized as they live out their vocations within the church and the world?

III. WHAT IS THE CHURCH FOR?

A. Some Input From Luther

For the sake of the conversation, one could do worse than to quote Luther’s comments from the Large Catechism in their entirety. While resisting that impulse, I will quote liberally. The quotes come from The Book of Concord

(Augsburg Fortress, 2000) edited by Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert. For the purpose of this paper I will simply indicate the page of the quote.

Luther writes: “To this article... I cannot give a better title than ‘Being Made Holy.’ In it are expressed and portrayed the Holy Spirit and his office, which is that he makes us holy.” Luther asks, “How does such sanctifying take place?” He goes on to answer the question:

Just as the Son obtains dominion by purchasing us through his birth, death, and resurrection, etc. so the holy Spirit effects our being made holy through the following, the community of saints or Christian church, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting. (p. 435)

In a remarkable sentence Luther adds, “That is, he (the Holy Spirit, ed.) first leads us into his holy communion, placing us in the church’s lap, where he preaches to us and brings us to Christ.” How is that for a concise statement about the church’s purpose? Luther continues:

Neither you nor I could ever know anything about Christ or believe in him and receive him as Lord, unless these were offered to us and bestowed upon our hearts through the preaching of the gospel by the Holy Spirit. The work is finished and completed; Christ has acquired and won the treasure for us by his sufferings, death and resurrection, etc. But if the work remained hidden so that no one knew of it, it would have all been in vain, all lost. (p. 436)

Luther speaks of the church as he addresses “the ways and means” through which the Holy Spirit works:

...he has a unique community in the world, which is the mother that begets and bears every Christian through the Word of God, which the Holy Spirit reveals and proclaims, through which he illuminates and inflames hearts so that they grasp and accept it, cling to it, and persevere in it. (p. 436)

What is at the heart of Word of God? One cannot read Luther without catching the substance of that Word. It has everything to do with Christ. “For where Christ is not preached, there is no Holy Spirit to create, call, and gather the Christian church, apart from which no one can come to the Lord Jesus Christ.” (p.436) The church is both the community that is called into existence through the preaching of Christ and the community which offers that Word which “begets and bears every Christian.” Such “begetting and bearing” happens “...through the Holy Sacraments as well as through the comforting words of the entire gospel.” Luther explains, “This encompasses everything that is to be preached about the sacraments and, in short, the entire gospel and all the official responsibilities of the Christian community.” (p. 438) One might speculate about those things in which the church may “minor” but there is no question about that in which it must “major.” The work of the Holy Spirit through the church is ongoing: “...for this purpose he (the Holy Spirit) has appointed a community on earth, through which he speaks and does all his work. For he has not yet gathered together all this community, nor has he completed the granting of forgiveness.” (p. 439)

Luther’s words suggest that a litmus test for the presence of the church is, “Is Christ preached?” If the answer is “No”, despite the name on the door one might well question if the church is, in fact, present. Similarly, such a gathering will have also forgotten its purpose.

B. Some Input From The Augsburg Confession And The Apology Of The Augsburg Confession

Certainly one of the major issues the reformers had to address was the matter of the nature of the church. In the Augsburg Confession, the Articles, which relate to the church are not broached until the matter of justification has been raised (and then greatly expanded in the Apology in response to the Confutators’ critique). It is interesting to note that Article V is titled “Concerning the Office of Preaching” in the Latin translation and “Concerning Ministry in the Church” in the German translation. Echoing Luther’s perspective in the Large Catechism, Melancthon’s words will indicate that it is the gospel that calls forth the response of faith and which brings the church into being:

So that we may obtain this faith, the ministry of teaching the gospel and administering the sacraments was instituted. For through the Word and the sacraments as through instruments the Holy Spirit is given, who effects faith where and when it pleases God, not on account of our own merits but on account of Christ, justifies those who believe that they are received into grace on account of Christ. (p. 41)

Such faith "...is bound to yield good fruits... and good works commanded by God on account of God's will and not so that we may trust in these works to merit justification before God." (Article VI, p.41)

The description of the church follows in Article VII. We have memorized it:

The church is the assembly of saints in which the gospel is purely taught and the sacraments are administered rightly. And, it is enough for the true unity of the church to agree concerning the teaching of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments."

The previous Articles make it patently clear that honoring and making use of Christ is that which is central to the "teaching of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments." In making the case for keeping central that which needs to be central and demonstrating flexibility in other matters, Melancthon continues, "...it is not necessary that human traditions, rites, or ceremonies instituted by human beings be alike everywhere." (Article VII, p. 43)

In his response to the Confutators, Melancthon writes in a manner, which shapes how Lutheran Christians understand the church:

...although hypocrites and wicked people are indeed associated with the true church according to external rites, nevertheless when the church is defined, it must be defined as that which is the living body of Christ and as that which is the church in fact as well as in name. (p. 175)

He explains,

If we define the church only in terms of an external government consisting of both the good and the wicked people, people will not understand that the kingdom of Christ is the righteousness of the heart and the gift of the Holy Spirit. Instead they will think that it is only the external observance of certain religious rites and rituals. (p. 175)

It is clear that Melancthon desires his auditors consistently to think first of the church as that which is constituted by Word and Sacrament through the power of the Holy Spirit. It is that which is the Body of Christ and which initiates one into the kingdom of Christ. To those who charge that the Reformers are "...dreaming about some platonic republic," Melancthon responds, "...this church truly exists, consisting of true believing people scattered throughout the world. And we add its marks: the pure teaching of the gospel and the sacraments." For the sake of those of us who have added more than our share of "stubble", he graciously adds:

Even though there are among these people many weak ones who build upon the foundation structures of stubble that will perish (that is to say, certain useless opinions), nevertheless because they do not overthrow the foundation, these things are to be both forgiven and correction. (p. 177)

By and large, it seems clear that when the people of that period spoke of the church they had in mind the church that was identified with Rome under the leadership of the papacy. How could it be otherwise? The stinging critique of that church by Luther and Melancthon led to the accusation that the reformers were guilty of schism. In Article XIV of the Apology, Melancthon responds:

Thus the cruelty of the bishops is the reason for abolition of the canonical order in some places despite our earnest desire to retain it. Let the bishops ask themselves how they will give an answer to God for breaking up the church. (p. 222)

Melanchthon does not deny the church's need to maintain certain traditions and rites. However, he is insistent that they not obscure "...the work of Christ and the righteousness of faith." He cites the holy Fathers who "...did not institute a single tradition for the purpose of maintaining the forgiveness of sins or righteousness; they instituted them for the sake of good order in the church and for the sake of tranquility (Apology, Article XV, p. 224)

IV. WHAT IS THE CHURCH FOR? SOME IMPLICATIONS FROM THIS SCRIPTURAL AND CONFESSIONAL SURVEY

1. At the heart of the gospel is the story of what God has done through the birth, life, death, resurrection of our Lord Jesus through whom, by the power of the Holy Spirit, we have forgiveness of sins, life and salvation. The story invites repentance, faith, and renewal of life in the hearers.
2. The church, the Body of Christ, the kingdom of Christ, is called into existence by the power of the Holy Spirit as the Word of God in Christ is proclaimed, taught and shared and sins are forgiven in Christ's name. Baptism and the Lord's Supper, "rightly delivered" give the benefits of Christ to those who receive those benefits in faith. To be "in Christ" is to be gathered into Christ's church that exists throughout time and space. You cannot have one without the other. The church is not "ours." It belongs to Christ.
3. The church's chief calling, from which all its work ought to proceed, is to proclaim what God has done for us and for the world in Christ. Within the church, in all its expressions, priority needs to be given to the preaching of Christ as that which is central to both the identity and the purpose of the church. The church is for the gospel!
4. Rites and traditions, including those of denominational structures, need to serve the gospel as a matter of priority lest they become "stubble" to be forgiven and corrected at best or vulnerable to the judgment of God at worse.
5. An ongoing task of all the baptized, including church leadership, is to insure that the gospel is being proclaimed, taught, and, by the power of the Holy Spirit, embodied in each gathered community and in the lives of each of the baptized.
6. The church is God's mission in Christ to the church. But it is also God's mission to the world, sent to embody Christ to and to recognize Christ in "the least of these". The church is for the other. The failure of the church to "own" this calling, signals the need to hear the gospel afresh, lest we be numbered among the "wicked and the evil" who fail to recognize Christ in our midst.

V. GIVEN THESE IMPLICATIONS, SOME OBSERVATIONS AND QUESTIONS

1. Given the centrality of the gospel in Lutheran Christian theology, within this tradition why is there such timidity among the baptized (including many lay and rostered leadership) in speaking it and in sharing it? How might the Holy Spirit still use us (all the baptized people of God) and release our tongues and use our lives to tell the story of what God has done for us and for this world?
2. Lutheran confessional theology posits a profound understanding of the church, which locates it where the gospel is preached and the sacraments rightly administered. Such a definition also signals our deep unity with the church catholic, namely, those who have been gathered into Christ across space and time. Why is it that

many congregations have little sense of what it means to be linked with others who confess Christ beyond the local community?

3. The church is the community created by the Holy Spirit that is made up of those who are hearing and experiencing what it means to be justified by God's grace through faith in Jesus Christ. The Lutheran confessors do not fully realize the scope of that debate until they receive the critique of the Confutators. They then explode this notion in the Apology, Articles IV and V, and speak about the inevitability of good works in the lives of those who hear the gospel. Have we fully mined this theology in helping the baptized to use the gospel "to bear God's creative and redeeming word to all the world?"
4. "Where two or three are gathered in my name," says Jesus, "there am I in the midst of them." Where two or three are gathered there is also an institution that will always have an inclination to idolatry. At great risk the reformers raised questions that relate to the heart of the gospel and the life of the church? What are those questions which we need to ask of ourselves, of each other, and our "rites and traditions", for the sake of the gospel. What needs to die (or be put to death) in us and in the church in order that the life of Christ might be more clearly manifest in our lives and in Christ's church (feel free to check out my article, "Is the Church Dying" which can be found on our synod web site or in the Crossings published Schroeder Festschrift, Gospel Blazes in the Dark).
5. Sadly, many non-Christians have experienced the Christian church as being judgmental, hypocritical, materialistic, and indifferent to the needs of others. Lutherans are not exempt from such criticism. Is there validity to this critique? Might this word be God's judgment that invites our repentance and renewed life in the Spirit? What might that look like?
6. Having heard the gospel, as we speak to the matter of good works and the fruit of faith, how might the church (as the individual baptized people of God and as institution) speak to matters related to the "care of creation," where the stakes are increasingly high?
7. Acknowledging the increasingly global and pluralistic context in which we live, how might we better attend to "the other" and yet give voice to the hope that we have in Christ?

VI. ONE MODEL THAT SEEKS TO BE PURPOSEFUL

Part I "Why the Topic?" introduced some of the challenges that face the church in its various manifestations. Participants in this seminar surely could add others. The scriptural and confessional survey sought to identify some of the "basics" that relate to the church's identity and purpose if it is to be the church of Christ. The previous section seeks to raise questions as we get at the work of living out our calling to be the church of Christ in this time and place.

Here it is tempting to establish a template for what the church ought to look like in all its various manifestations. The "basics" are clear. The specifics are not nearly so. The challenge for every manifestation of the church in every place and time is for the baptized people of God and its lay and pastoral leadership to be the church in a way that addresses the specific context and which draws upon the resources God has given us in our Lord Jesus Christ. As it does so, it does that within the context of the whole of Christ's church, which gets to "weigh in" with respect to what is happening in the local context and vice versa.

The context within which I serve is the Northwestern Ohio Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Like every judicatory the issues we face are numerous. They have local, state, national, international, and ecumenical dimensions-to name only a few. In my early years in the office of bishop, synodical leadership, the staff and I frequently found ourselves asking, What is it that gives shape to our work together? In the context of this presentation the question could be asked, What does it mean for the synod to be church and to give direction to those congregations,

ministries and agencies with whom we are related? What is our purpose? Such questions and much hard work and prayer led to the development of the following Mission Statement and Guiding Principles:

Marked with the cross of Christ forever, we who belong to the congregations, agencies and ministries of the Northwestern Ohio Synod, will witness together to God's creative and redeeming Word to all the world.

Northwestern Ohio Synod Guiding Principles (Core Values):

1. Christ Jesus is Lord. Christ crucified and risen for all remains at the center of who we are and what we do.
2. The cross is at the heart of the Lutheran understanding of the Gospel and will be the center of our life and work together as a synod. It is in the cross of Christ that we know God's grace and understand the Trinity. The cross is at the heart of word and sacrament. The Lutheran Church is a 'cross shaped' church.
3. All those who are baptized into Christ have a part in God's mission to the world.
4. Mission requires effective, faithful and Christ-centered clergy and lay leadership.
5. Blessed by the Holy Spirit, God has given us the gifts we need to be the Church in mission. Equipped and empowered disciples live out God's mission in daily life. Blessed by the Holy Spirit, we have what we need to be a church in mission.
6. We best embody Christ when we work together.

The Mission Statement and Guiding Principles are posted in our Conference Meeting Room in the Synod office and frequently referenced. They have been formative in shaping decisions and the direction for our life together in the synod. Several examples may serve to illustrate this. We asked ourselves, How do we lift up the centrality of what it means to be "Marked with the cross of Christ forever" and the Guiding Principles? We made the decision to invite six to ten rostered leaders in for a monthly Eucharist. One of the pastors is asked to preach and preside for a service, which includes all the synod staff. Following the worship service, the support staff is excused and we continue conversation with respect to the sermon and the text, how it connects with the participants, where the gospel was heard and so forth. Conversation continues related to how we develop sermons, "necessitate Christ", and seek to connect law/gospel with the lives of those who gather in worship. Participants have found these conversations most edifying.

Most recently a Task Force has been doing hard work related to developing an Ethnic Mission Strategy. As the Task Force examined the realities of life in the Northwestern Ohio Synod and our failure to connect with ethnic minorities (and many others!) it utilized the Mission Strategy and Guiding Principles to shape the recommendations, which will be considered, and, I pray, "owned" by the Synod Assembly which meets in May. If you are interested in checking out the report, visit the synod web site: www.nwos-elca.org. Of course, the challenge will be to move beyond a report to implementation!

Thus far we have found the Mission Statement and the Guiding Principles to be most helpful in shaping our leadership and life together in the synod. Our hope and prayer is that Mission Statement and Guiding Principles faithfully reflect our identity and purpose as those who are called to be the church of Christ in this place and time.

VII. JESUS CHRIST IS LORD

After a particularly difficult day in the world and in the synod office, I found myself most discouraged and feeling quite hopeless. At that moment, Pastor Ray Gottschling, one of the Assistants to the Bishop, walked into my office. I could not help myself. I asked, "Ray, do you have much hope for the world and for the church." Without a moment's hesitation, Ray responded with a grin, "If Jesus is Lord I do!" A grim moment yielded to laughter and renewed hope.

The church in all its manifestations is facing many challenges. It has never been otherwise. The issues facing our nation and world are daunting. The stakes have never been higher. In view of those realities, our consolation and hope is that Jesus is Lord. Because we have been “marked with the cross of Christ forever”, this study has shown that both our identity and our purpose are quite clear. The invitation is to trust Christ’s promises and, guided by the Holy Spirit, work out the specifics for the time and places in which God has called us to serve.

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