

JOURNAL OF LUTHERAN
Mission

February 2015 | Vol. 2 | No. 1

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Editorial office:
1333 S. Kirkwood Road,
St. Louis, MO 63122-7294,
314-996-1202

Published by The Lutheran Church—
Missouri Synod.

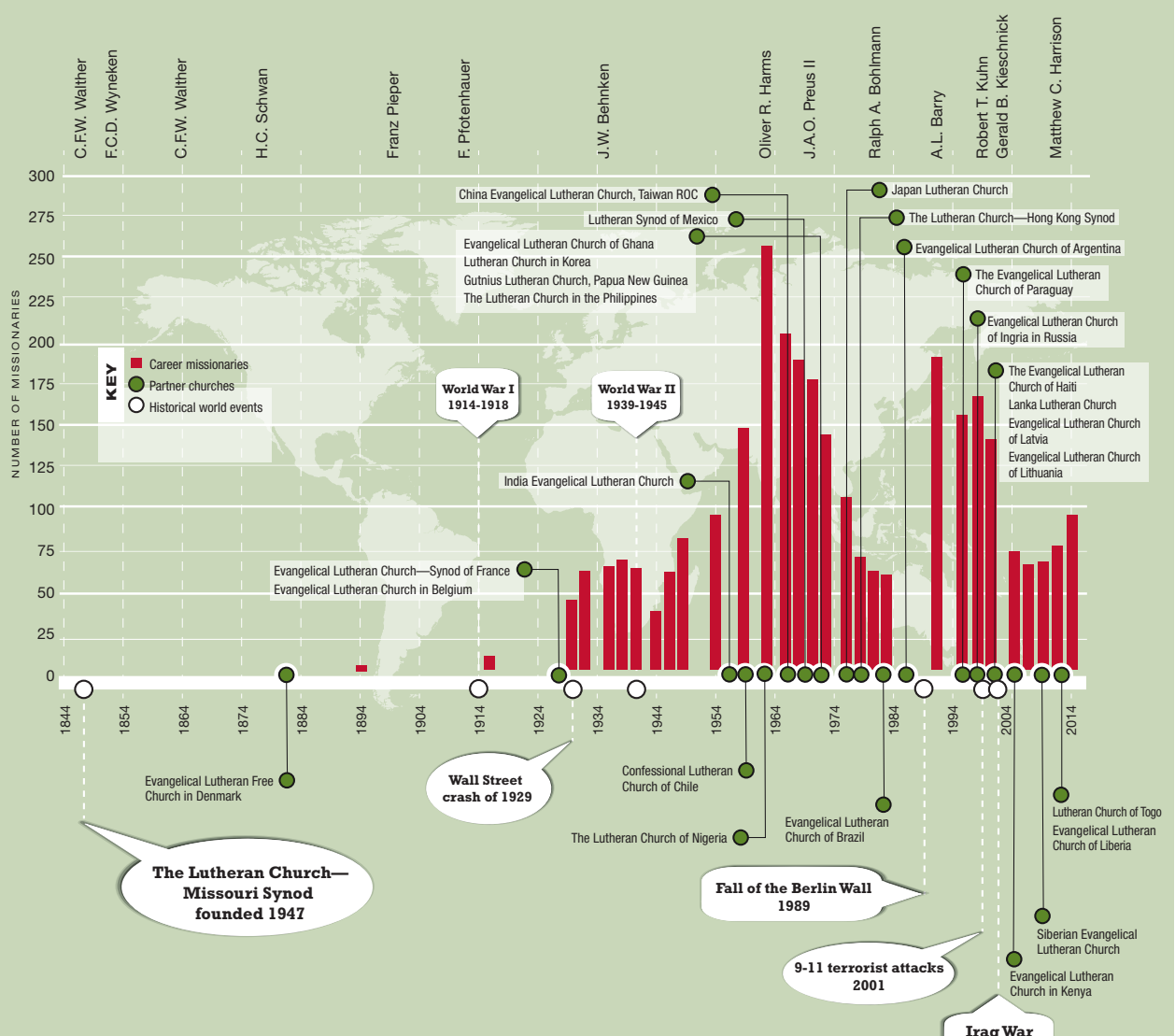
Please direct queries to
journaloflutheranmission@lcms.org.

This journal may also be found at www.lcms.org/journaloflutheranmission.

Member: Associated Church Press Evangelical Press Association (ISSN 2334-1998)
A periodical of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod’s Offices of National and International Mission.



Survey of LCMS International Career Missionaries 1894–2014



Notes on Career Missionary Numbers

The career missionary numbers are primarily taken from the *Proceedings of the Synodical Convention* from the Board for Foreign Missions (other Synod Mission Boards were not counted). In 1965, the Synod in convention voted to merge the various mission boards into a unified mission board. Despite this change, the number of career missionaries was not significantly affected by this change — in fact, the number declined by 49. Not every Synod convention reported career missionary numbers. Between 1969–1981, when J.A.O. Preus II was president; between 1981–1992, when Ralph Bohlmann was president; and between 2001–2010, when Gerald Kieschnick was president, the Synod in convention did not report career missionary numbers. The most significant decline in career missionaries occurred after Seminex when the “majority of missionaries walked off the field” (1974–1981). In 1981, the Synod adopted a resolution to increase the number of career missionaries to 600 by 1990. The second-largest drop in career missionaries occurred between 2001–2009. Career missionary numbers from 2001–2014 were obtained from the records of the Board for Missionary Services (BFMS) and the Office of International Mission (OIM). These numbers do not include people who served in “Home Missions in Foreign Lands” — which would include pastors and professors who served primarily German-speaking people in Europe and South America. The numbers only include people counted as missionaries to “Foreign Lands.” The Synod did not begin utilizing the category “volunteer” or “GEO” until the 1990s. These are not career missionaries and are not included in the tabulation.

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OVERVIEW OF LCMS INTERNATIONAL CAREER MISSIONARIES: WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?

by Albert B. Collver III

Since the end of the 19th century, the Missouri Synod has been actively engaged in international mission, but a variety of factors have affected the increase and decline of the number of missionaries.

THE ACCOMPANYING CHART showing the history of LCMS career missionaries was first published in the November 2014 *The Lutheran Witness* “State of the Synod” issue. To see LCMS international career missionaries begin with only two individuals in 1894, climb to a height of 254 in 1962 and then hover under a 100 missionaries for more than a decade is a testament to the Lord’s work in sending laborers into the field. It also prompted the question by some “*Was ist das?*” (What does this mean?).

In terms of the number of LCMS international career missionaries, 1954 and 2014 are parallel years at 90 career missionaries. For 47 years, the LCMS had zero international career missionaries (1847–1894). For 60 years, the Synod had fewer than 90 career missionaries (1894–1954). For 46 years, she had 90 or more career missionaries (1954–2000), and for 14 years, 90 or fewer career missionaries (2000–2014).

Again, perhaps these are interesting numbers or trends, but “*Was ist das?*” The history of LCMS missionary numbers helps tell a story that is ecclesiastical, missional, geopolitical, theological, sociological and perhaps a few other ____ologicals. Apart from human factors (both strengths and weaknesses), it is a testament to the Lord’s promise to send laborers into the harvest to hear the saving Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Despite the fact that the LCMS did not have foreign

missionaries for her first 47 years, one could hardly describe the Missouri Synod as not being interested in mission work. The Synod itself was founded in part to gather congregations together so that the “diversities of gifts should be for the common profit.”¹ In the first 47 years, the Missouri Synod grew from about 4,000 people

(12 pastors and 16 congregations) to over 600,000 people by 1894.² During this same period of time, approximately 4.5 million Germans immigrated to the United States. No doubt immigration affected the growth of the Missouri Synod. It should be kept in mind that only a tiny fraction of these 4.5 million German immigrants would find a natural home in the Missouri Synod; the rest were reached through intentional mission work. By 1940, the Missouri Synod grew to 1.2 million members, and by 1965, the Synod reached 2.6 million members according to official convention reports. During this time, the Synod more than

doubled in membership. This growth was fueled both by mission efforts and an increase in birthrate.

In 1956, the Synod in convention noted the Missouri Synod grew more than most other Christian denominations in the United States over the past 100 years, yet it also noted Missouri Synod members only

The story of Missouri Synod career missionaries is complex with no single factor or explanation. It also shows the Lord’s grace to His Church despite our foibles and weaknesses. The Lord indeed sends laborers to the harvest, and our prayer ascends praying that He sends more laborers so that the Gospel of Christ is proclaimed to all the world.

¹ “Preamble to the Constitution of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod,” *Handbook* 2013, 13.

² The Missouri Synod had 685,000 members by 1897.

constituted 1.2 percent of the population in the United States. H. Mayer, the Mission secretary, noted a strange paradox in his report: “And what shall we say when we look at the heathen world? During the past 40 years, some 14 million heathen were baptized. But during that same span of time, the heathen population increased by more than 20 times that number. Each year there are more Christians, but each year there are still more heathen. We face the strange paradox: The church grows, and yet it becomes relatively smaller.”³ In terms of this, no matter how much the Church grows, it remains a remnant in the world. Even by the best (and most generous) estimates today, slightly less than a third of the world’s population is Christian, despite rapid growth of the Church in the global South. This is the life of the Church under the cross.

Part of the explanation of the increase in the number of Missouri Synod international career missionaries between 1894–1954, which was chosen because it represents a point where the Synod had the same number of career missionaries as 2014, is the overall growth of the Synod. Another significant factor regarding the rise of Missouri Synod international career missionaries is the increased geopolitical influence of the United States of America as a world power. The countries where the Missouri Synod began new mission work largely followed opportunities created by the geopolitical influence of the United States of America. This is one reason the largest increase, both in terms of missionary numbers and countries where missionaries were sent, occurred after World War II, which opened opportunities in Asia that did not exist at least for 50 years.⁴ In fact, mission work by the Missouri Synod in Japan, the Philippines, South Korea, Papua New Guinea, Hong Kong and Taiwan all began after World War II — geographic areas generally unavailable or difficult for Synod to work in prior to the end of the war. Just as the *pax romana* provided opportunity for the Church to expand with the Roman Empire, so, too, did the Missouri Synod expand its mission work around the world with the foreign policy doctrine of the United States (Truman Doctrine, Reagan Doctrine, et al.)

The high point in terms of Missouri Synod international career missionaries occurred in the early

1960s. The Cold War with the Soviet Union was in full swing. The United States was the greatest economic and arguably the greatest military power on earth. The Missouri Synod also had the highest number of communicant members. A pivotal moment in this period was the 1965 Synod convention in Detroit, Mich., which was chosen because Detroit was seen as the future of the United States and leading the trend toward the urbanization of America. The Missouri Synod was on a high from the postwar boom. Expectations for the future were optimistic (overly so). In 1965, the Missouri Synod was increasing in membership by approximately 60,000 people per year. The members of the Missouri Synod gave \$70⁵ million to international missions between 1962–1965 (adjusted for inflation in 2014 dollars is the equivalent of nearly \$529 million).⁶

In 1965, approximately four million babies were born in the United States. It was predicted that in a decade this would increase by 25 percent to approximately five million babies being born.⁷ This optimistic prediction was before the infamous *Roe v. Wade* case in 1973 and the legalization of abortion in the United States, the malaise of the Vietnam War and the economic stagflation of the 1970s. The actual birth rate of 1975 declined from the 1965 levels by more than half a million people.⁸ The 1965 birth rate would not be reached again in the United States until the early to mid-1980s. Yet on the basis of projected demographics in 1965, Dr. Wolbrecht predicted that the Missouri Synod would have 8.25 million members by 1990.⁹

The 1965 Synod convention in Detroit was a watershed moment in the history of the Missouri Synod. In many ways, it was “the” mission convention. The Synod adopted

⁵ Oliver Harms, “President’s Address,” *Convention Proceedings* 1965, 7. “Since we met last, God has moved our members to give \$70,000,000 for the world mission of the church carried on by the Synod.”

⁶ Inflation rate of U.S. dollars calculated from <http://www.usinflationcalculator.com>.

⁷ Walter F. Wolbrecht, “Planning For The Church’s Mission,” *Convention Proceedings* 1965, 21. “We meet in 1965. Ten years from now, on June 16, 1975, there will be 25% more babies born than are being born today.”

⁸ Or using numbers provided by the Synod in convention, a decline of one million in the birth rate.

⁹ Wolbrecht, 23. “The outer limit of this projection in 1990 raises these totals respectively to 8,250,000 baptized members and 5,300,000 communicants by 1990.” The actual membership of the Missouri Synod in 1990 was about 2.6 million members. Ralph Bohlmann, “Report of the President,” *Convention Proceedings* 1989, 70. “Whether a church body’s membership is 2.6 million, as ours is, or 650, or 1,920, all churches should be engaged in mission activity as a primary focus.”

³ *Proceedings of the Forty-Third Regular Convention of the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod* 1956, 369.

⁴ In the early 1890s, the Missouri Synod considered sending missionaries to Japan. This plan fell through in part due to the changing geo-political situation in Asia. As a result, the Missouri Synod began her international mission work in India.

in convention that the Church is the mission of God and that “The church’s ministries of worship, service, fellowship, and nurture all have a missionary dimension.”¹⁰ This was the first of the so-called “Mission Affirmations.” Compatible with the tone of the resolutions of the 1965 convention, Concordia Publishing House published *The Mission of God: An Introduction to a Theology of Mission* by Georg F. Vicedom, edited by William Danker.¹¹ The book included a “Foreword” by Leslie Newbigin. This work brought the *missio Dei* theology expounded at the Willingen Conference in 1952 by Vicedom, which holds “the missionary movement of which we are a part of has its source in the Triune God Himself.”¹² The South African missiologist David Bosch takes *missio Dei* even further and says, “Mission is not primarily an activity of the church, but an attribute of God. God is a missionary God.”¹³ Other Mission Affirmation resolutions from the 1965 included “The Church Is Christ’s Mission to the Whole World” (Res. 1-01B), “The Church Is Christ’s Mission to the Church” (Res. 1-01C), “The Church Is Christ’s Mission to the Whole Society” (Res. 1-01D), “The Church Is Christ’s Mission to the Whole Man” (Res. 1-01E) and “The Whole Church Is Christ’s Mission” (Res. 1-01F). These convention resolutions provided the theological and philosophical framework for the next significant mission resolution from the 1965 convention, Res. 1-02, “To Effect a Single Board for Missions.” The Synod in convention merged all the various mission boards into one mission board,¹⁴ eventually to become known as the “Board for Mission Services.” This was a major “restructuring” of the Synod. After the merging

of all the mission boards into one mission board, there was a slight decline in the number of international career missionaries. Forty-five years later in 2010, the Synod in convention voted to dissolve a single board for missions to create two boards and two offices: The Board for International Mission (BIM) — The Office of International Mission (OIM) and The Board for National Mission (BNM) — The Office of National Mission.

Prior to the 1965 convention (for the previous 60–70 years), the Synod created boards to address various aspects of mission and human care for various locations and people groups. For instance, the 1926 Synod convention heard reports from the following mission boards: Home Missions in North America; Home Missions in South America; Foreign Missions; Jewish Missions; Indian Missions; Immigrant and Seaman’s Missions; Deaf-mute Missions; Foreign Tongue Missions and Missions in Europe. Although the Synod had a variety of “mission boards,” international career missionaries throughout the Synod were only counted from the Board of “Foreign Missions.” The chart accompanying this article only counts “career missionaries” from the Board for Foreign Missions and its subsequent and successor boards. It should be noted that international career missionaries from the Board for Foreign Missions and its successor boards comprise the only consistent tracking of Missouri Synod international missionaries. Quite simply, “home mission” (mission to South America and Europe) was not viewed by the Synod as “foreign mission” because this work primarily focused initially on German speaking people located in Europe or South America.

The next significant synod event to affect the number of international career missionaries was Seminex, an event that created significant division and strife within the Synod. A significant number of career missionaries “walked off” the mission field in solidarity with the faculty of the Saint Louis seminary who walked off campus. Reflecting back on 1974 in the 1979 Synod Convention, President J.A.O. Preus said, “These matters have been productive of some misunderstanding, particularly back in 1974, and at the time the majority of the mission staff of the Synod walked out.”¹⁵ The events of Seminex had great effect on the Synod, the Synod’s career missionaries and the partner churches of the Missouri Synod.

In some measure, the partner churches suffered most directly by the loss of the career missionaries. President

¹⁰ “The Church is God’s Mission,” Resolution 1-01A, *Convention Proceedings* 1965, 79.

¹¹ Georg F. Vicedom. William Danker, ed. Glibert A. Thiele and Dennis Hilgendorf, trans. *The Mission of God: An Introduction to a Theology of Mission*. (Saint Louis, Missouri: Concordia Publishing House, 1965).

¹² *Ibid.*, vii.

¹³ David J. Bosch. *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*. American Society of Missiology Series 16. (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1991), 389–390. However else *missio Dei* theology has impacted the Church, the assertion that “mission,” which is “sending” is an attribute of God has far reaching implications. “Sending” has not historically been listed in dogmatic texts as an attribute of God. Traditional attributes of God include things like eternal, omniscient, omnipresent, et al.

¹⁴ The resolution reads, “The Board for Missions in North and South America, the Board for World Missions, the Board for Missions to the Blind, the Board for Missions to the Deaf, the Board for European Affairs, and the Commission on College and University Work be united into a single Board for Missions to which the Medical Mission Council and the Church Extension Board shall be attached in their established service capacities.”

¹⁵ J.A.O. Preus. *Convention Proceedings* 1979, “President’s Report,” 58.

J.A.O. Preus in 1975 addressed the convention:

The traumatic experiences of 1974 are behind us. But special mention should be made of the steadfastness of missionaries who not only remained at their posts but also exerted a pastoral and loving role, together with the national leaders of the sister churches, and for this we certainly should thank Almighty God. The wisdom and churchmanship shown by presidents of sister churches is an inspiration to all who have been closely associated with them. I am happy to report that not only have the sister churches remained with us but in many instances experienced significant and important growth.¹⁶

Both due to the push to abandon “colonialism,” to decry the “imperialism” of the United States and other European powers in the world and the departure of the “majority” of the Missouri Synod’s missionaries from the international field, there was a desire to establish sister or partner churches to the Missouri Synod.

Approximately one-third of the current sister or partner churches were established in the decade between 1965 and 1975. As Dr. Preus noted:

I also am very frank to state to you that I believe that in the creation of the concept of sister or partner churches during the 1960s, the administration of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod was to some degree remiss. In working with young churches, many of them only about 25 years old, we did not do sufficient consulting together relative to financial controls, to constitutional questions and to matters of general church administration. There were certain theological questions left unanswered, and some of these have been productive of controversies which produced more heat than light. We did not agree sufficiently on guidelines for the carrying out of church fellowship. We talked at great length about autonomy of partner churches, but we did not draw up sufficiently carefully prepared documents to answer the kinds of questions that continue to arise as to the exercise of responsible autonomy.¹⁷

Many of the challenges that the Missouri Synod partner churches experienced and, in some cases still experience today, are attributable to the aftermath of the mass departure of Missouri Synod career missionaries due to the events of Seminex.

In one sense, the period of the 1980s until early 2000 was an attempt by the Synod to rebuild her mission efforts that existed in the late 1950s and early 1960s. In 1979, the Synod Convention adopted Resolution 1-20, “To Expand the Kingdom Through Larger Number of Missionaries,” which called for the sending of 600 career missionaries.¹⁸ By the mid-1980s, the Synod was having difficulty obtaining the goal of 600. To address some concern that arose over the decline in the number of career missionaries, President Ralph Bohlmann wrote:

Some mistaken information gets out once in a while, implying that we are declining in mission outreach. I don’t know whether a lot of people understand that during the last 10–15 years there’s been a dramatic change in mission strategy in The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, and in many other churches of the world as well. We no longer count the activity of mission outreach in terms of missionaries sent out each year, because the philosophy has been that the missionary goes in order to train missionaries who are natives in the church in which they work. Today, we have many evangelists, catechists, and pastors and lay leaders in churches that were once served as mission fields of the Synod. Such workers today number over 4,000 missionary personnel, compared with about 2,000 in the year 1980, and 2,600 in the year 1970, and 1,000 in the year 1950. It is true that the number of U.S. missionaries is lower than it once was.¹⁹

A significant point that Dr. Bohlmann made was that missionary outreach is not solely or limited to the number of Missouri Synod career missionaries. In addition to the role that Missouri Synod career missionaries played, the activities of our partner churches and their workers who in some cases are directly or indirectly supported by the Missouri Synod should be taken into account. This, indeed, is a valid point. However, it is more difficult to count or measure the work of partner churches as the work of the Missouri Synod even if such work is being funded or supported by the Missouri Synod. And as Dr. Bohlmann admitted, the number of Missouri Synod

¹⁶ J.A.O. Preus. *Convention Proceedings* 1975, “President’s Report,” 60.

¹⁷ Preus 1979, 58.

¹⁸ Res. 1-20, *Convention Proceedings* 1979, 129. “WHEREAS, At least 600 new missionaries are needed to double our present mission personnel by 1990; therefore be it Resolved, That The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod adopt the mission challenge for the ‘80s of 600 new missionaries from The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod serving partner churches/mission fields and new outreach areas.”

¹⁹ Ralph Bohlmann. *Convention Proceedings* 1992, “Report of the President,” 70.

career missionaries in the 1980s was lower than it had been in the past.

With the election of Dr. Alvin Barry, the Missouri Synod experienced an increase in the number of career missionaries. Again, as in all the previous cases, a number of factors were involved. One factor that greatly contributed to the increase was the improving economy of the United States. Funding for missions increased through donations from members of Synod and from foundations. In addition, there were geo-political factors such as the fall of the Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union. This opened up new opportunities for mission work that had not been available in the preceding 50 years. This situation was not unlike the opportunities opened up for mission work after World War II. In the 1998 Synod convention, it was reported that there were 423 missionaries, divided into the following categories: 163 career missionaries (reflected in the accompanying chart), 130 long-term volunteers and 130 short-term volunteers.²⁰ This is one of the few times Synod in convention reported not only career missionaries but also other categories. 1998 marked the high point of Synod missions in terms of career missionary numbers since the time of Seminex (1974).

The decade of the 2000s brought several challenges for the number of career missionaries. Perhaps the most significant factor involved the events of Sept. 11, 2001, when the United States suffered terrorist attacks on her home soil. These events affected travel, immigration, economics, politics and the national mood and brought theological ramifications. After 9/11, the United States entered an economic recession/depression that it has not entirely recovered from in 2014. The national mourning after the terrorist attacks on the United States led to a number of pan-Christian joint worship events that raised questions of unionism and syncretism. The Missouri Synod did not escape controversy over whether or not it was acceptable for its pastors to participate. Contention over these joint worship services affected the Synod and thereby had an effect on missionary support. Due primarily to financial challenges, the Missouri Synod had a decline of 73 missionaries during this decade. Since 2010, the Synod slowly is recovering from the decline of the mid-2000s. At the time of the writing of this piece, the Missouri Synod has 90 career missionaries, the same as the Synod had in 1954.

Conclusion

Since the end of the 19th century, the Missouri Synod has been actively engaged in international mission by the sending of career missionaries. A variety of factors have affected the increase and decline of the number of missionaries, including economic, political, theological and other related factors. Philosophical and theological approaches have influenced the increase or decline in the number of career missionaries, as well as strife and challenges within the Synod. Nearly every Synod convention since 1974 has included resolutions to increase the number of missionaries. The Missouri Synod has consistently desired to increase the number of career missionaries. The actual increase has not always been as successful as desired — at times due to human factors and perhaps at times due to the Church's prayer that the Lord of the harvest send laborers, delaying that according to His purposes. Another general statement since 1974 that could be made is that the Synod is doing more with less funding each year. When one considers the \$70 million (\$529 million adjusted for 2014 inflation) the Synod spent on missions between 1962–1965 with a high point of 254 career missionaries, the Synod today has 90 career missionaries with a total budget of approximately \$30 million (about \$4 million in 1962 dollars). In the 2013, the Synod convention adopted Resolution 1-11, "To Recruit and Place More Career Missionaries," which called for the doubling of career missionaries. Presently, all indicators show that the Synod should be able to double the number of career missionaries from the 2013 number of 68 to an anticipated 2016 career missionary number of 136.

The story of Missouri Synod career missionaries is complex with no single factor or explanation. It also shows the Lord's grace to His Church despite our foibles and weaknesses. The Lord indeed sends laborers to the harvest, and our prayer ascends praying that He sends more laborers so that the Gospel of Christ is proclaimed to all the world.

The Rev. Dr. Albert Collver III is the LCMS director of Church Relations, LCMS director of Regional Operations for the Office of International Mission and executive secretary of the International Lutheran Council.

²⁰ *Convention Proceedings* 1998, "Committee 1 Missions," 56.