

JOURNAL OF LUTHERAN  
**Mission**

September 2014 | Vol. 1 | No. 2

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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](mailto:journaloflutheranmission@lcms.org).

This journal may also be found at [www.lcms.org/journaloflutheranmission](http://www.lcms.org/journaloflutheranmission).



# WHY SYNOD MISSIONS?

by Albert B. Collver III

The Synod has a rich history of foreign mission work and its future warrants a coordinated effort.

## Introduction

WHEN THE MISSOURI SYNOD was formed in 1847, it was following the example of the Apostolic Church as described in Acts 15. Naturally, therefore, it included among its other goals, “mission.”<sup>1</sup> Using Acts 15:3’s “great joy” at the report of the conversion of the Gentiles to the Faith as its basis, Article III of the Synod Constitution states among its objectives is to “extend that Gospel witness into all the world.” This is “mission.” During the earliest days of the Synod, mission was primarily pursued in North America (the United States and Canada). Later, this work extended outside the boundaries of North America. Ironically, the extension of Missouri Synod mission into South America was not seen as foreign mission, as that work led to the creation of a district of the Missouri Synod.

The foreign mission work of the Missouri Synod began in earnest in 1872, when the Synodical Conference was formed with a goal of helping the founding Synods engage in this key expression of mission. Initially, the Synodical Conference did not send missionaries but supported the activities of Lutheran missionaries who separated from various mission societies due to doctrinal reasons, including some missionaries who had been with the Leipzig Mission Society in India. In 1880, pastors were sent to Australia. In 1884, at the Synodical Conference convention, an appeal was made to send a missionary to

Japan.<sup>2</sup> The 1887 Synod Convention resolved “that the Synod empower the Board of Foreign Missions to take the introductory steps toward the opening of heathen missions also beyond our own country on behalf of Synod.”<sup>3</sup> Discussion about where to begin foreign missions focused on Ceylon (the Tamil speakers in present day India and Sri Lanka). Soon, the Synod turned its eyes toward beginning mission work in Japan. But this was short lived. “Up to 1892 everything had been surging forward, but then a reversal set in. The Sino-Japanese War also hampered mission work. Only six months after Synod’s resolution was passed, *Lehre und Wehre* issued a ten-page article on church conditions in Japan and indicated how work was becoming ever more difficult.”<sup>4</sup> The Synod would not return to the idea of mission in Japan until after World War II. In 1894 (47 years after the founding of the Synod),<sup>5</sup> the Synod officially began foreign mission work in India. Since that beginning in 1894, the Synod’s work (as defined by sending funds or

When a congregation or district engages in short-term or overseas mission work, keep in mind the whole of the church and coordinate with the Synod’s official mission efforts. In the long run, this will help create an enduring and long-term Gospel presence in the foreign mission field.

<sup>1</sup> “Constitution of the Missouri Synod,” Preamble. *Handbook 2013*, 9.

<sup>2</sup> Koppelman, Herman H. “Missouri Synod Undertakes Foreign Missions.” *Concordia Theological Monthly* 22, no. 8 (1951): 552–566.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 565.

<sup>5</sup> It has been noted that it seems to take a church body about 50 years to begin engaging in foreign missions. This was true not only for the Missouri Synod, but also for a number of our partner churches as well. As the article, “Ecclesiology, Mission and Partner Relations: What it Means that Lutheran Mission Plants Lutheran Churches,” in the previous issue of the *Journal of Lutheran Missions*, March 2014, noted, there is a life cycle moving toward a responsible Lutheran church. Some time is needed to develop the structures of a church body before it can seriously engage in foreign missions (seminaries, structures of governance, capacity to address theological issues, et al.).

personnel) has extended into more than 90 countries.

Rather than employ existing mission societies in either Europe or America, the Synod from its inception intended to integrate foreign mission work into its life together, so that “the diversities of gifts should be for the common profit.” The Synod also was concerned about planting Lutheran congregations and maintaining doctrinal purity (Synod Constitution, Article VI, which says members of Synod will not participate “in heterodox tract and missionary activities”), which the history of 19th century mission societies demonstrates was difficult to do apart from a church body. The expansion of the Missouri Synod in the late-19th and early-20th centuries poised the Synod for a large expansion into foreign missions after World War II, when much of the world was opened due to the economic and military influence of the United States. To maximize the Synod’s mission efforts, the 1965 Synod Convention created the Board for Foreign Missions. The intention was for the Synod’s mission board to be the primary organ for the Synod’s mission efforts overseas. Congregations and districts conducted foreign missions through the Synod’s mission board. Prior to the jet age in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the only practical way to engage in foreign mission work was through an entity like a synod or a mission board. With the advent of relatively inexpensive jet travel to foreign lands, it became possible for individual districts and congregations — even relatively small mission societies — to engage in short term trips and even send their own missionaries longer term.

With the proliferation of “missionaries” from Missouri Synod congregations and districts, a situation arose where confusion developed regarding who was a missionary from the Missouri Synod and who was not. Foreign partners often see any LCMS group, congregation, pastor, individual as an official Missouri Synod missionary. To alleviate this confusion, the 1983 Synod convention adopted Res. 5–37, which identified the Mission Board “as the only sending agency through which workers and funds are sent to the mission areas of the Synod.” This was done to avoid confusion and competition on the mission field, when Districts and other entities have sent missionaries (clergymen, teachers, etc.) to foreign mission fields at their expense.

Since the 1983 convention resolution, ease of world travel has only increased as has mission zeal among members of the Synod (both congregations and rostered workers, not to mention congregational members). Both of these developments are good for mission work. Con-

gregations and districts are engaged in short-term trips more than ever before. Some are even taking on larger projects. There is no doubt that this has brought blessing to people overseas and to individual people who participate in them. At the same time, it has caused some confusion among Missouri Synod partners, even causing some to question if the Synod’s desire to do mission through the mission board is an antiquated leftover from days gone by. Rather than an obsolete relic, however, the desire to work together as a Synod in mission is perhaps even more important today than it was in the early 1980s.

The Internet has opened global communications and has made it very easy to make connections with various overseas church groups that are willing to change their name from Baptists, or Anglican or Evangelical Faith Temple to “Lutheran” as soon as funds are sent. American pragmatism always has sought ways to minimize expense and enhance cooperation in order to avoid duplication of efforts. If a pan-Christian mission society is performing a good and useful task in a foreign country, pragmatism calls for cooperation. Ever since the dawn of relatively easy commercial travel (end of the 17th century and beginning of the 18th century), this has been the siren call of Protestant missions. Yet the Missouri Synod rightly seeks to avoid heterodox tract and mission societies, choosing instead to do Lutheran missions by planting Lutheran churches.

Many districts and congregations of the synods who display mission zeal become engaged with groups overseas without realizing who is or is not a partner church of the LCMS. In some cases, this leads to cooperation and projects with groups that hold doctrinal positions different than those of the Missouri Synod. The LCMS currently has 35 partner churches (a list of partner churches can be found here: [www.lcms.org/partnerchurches](http://www.lcms.org/partnerchurches)), and a growing number of emerging relationships that, Lord willing, will lead to pulpit and altar fellowship. Some of these emerging relationships even developed due to the efforts of districts and congregations of the Synod. Now more than ever is the need for coordination and working the Synod’s mission effort.

Long-term career missionaries provide invaluable experience and knowledge, as well as stability in the relationship between the Synod and her partners. They also assist in the management of projects with partners. As any congregation that has engaged in short-term mission trips knows, there can be challenges in communication between people, as well as differing expectations. Synod

missions also help provide long-term commitment that is difficult for a congregation or district to maintain much beyond a few years, let alone for decades.

The present day has opened a number of possibilities for mission work and for new partners. Most of these emerging relations are not “mission” work in the sense of a Christian proclaiming the Gospel to a people group who have never heard the Gospel before, but involve working with an existing church (perhaps one that the Missouri Synod has previously had little or no contact with). Such work can be engaged most effectively in a church-to-church relationship, rather than through individual relationships. In fact, a few of the LCMS “new” mission activities have come about when congregations that began a project overseas become fatigued or are no longer able to support it. The church-to-church aspect of contemporary mission work further emphasizes the advantage of Synod mission work.

Short-term mission trips are a reality of the present age. Changes in geopolitics or the strong economic position of America may alter that in the future, but for the present, they are a reality in which we work. Along with the good, challenges emerge too. Those considering foreign mission engagement should keep in mind these realities: stewardship and the purpose of the Synod, “that the diversities of gifts should be for the common profit.” Practically speaking, this means congregations and districts with mission zeal and passion for foreign work should consider supporting the projects of the Synod and the Synod’s missionaries. When a congregation or district engages in short-term or overseas mission work, keep in mind the whole of the church and coordinate with the Synod’s official mission efforts. In the long run, this will help create an enduring and long-term Gospel presence in the foreign mission field.

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*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.*